

Straight James/ Gay James
Poems by James Franco
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Review by Dennis Daly

Some purist reviewers of poetry posit the importance of their responsibility as gatekeepers. I don't see it that way. My critiques tend toward books that I like either in whole or in part. But ... but there are limits. My button gets pushed by elitist practitioners of award winning drivel or wannabe celebrities showcasing their narcissism by caricaturing the artistic tradition they pretend to comprehend. The subject of this review is an example of the latter.

Two for two. James Franco's new collection of poetry, *Straight James/ Gay James*, follows on the heels of his debut disaster in the same genre entitled *Directing Herbert White*. Both books exercise a self-indulgent and presumptuous posture unrivaled by anything this writer has perused since the fourth grade assignments of *Sister Therese Immaculata* were corrected and passed back for peer review. Petulant children of whatever age crave attention.

However, *Straight James / Gay James* goes one step further than its predecessor book in promoting the apotheosis of the sputtering, unapologetic cliché. From the opening poem, *Dumbo*, Franco rehashes long-suffering dead metaphors, blathering on into moments of unintended irony. Franco's *Dumbo* drips down the page in numbingly expected ways. The poet's young persona suffers shyness and alienation (How devastating and singular that must have been!) and then proceeds to associate with metaphoric circus clowns. Did you know that clowns were malevolent persons under their painted merriment? Of course not. Consider these lines in the heart of the piece,

*Isolation followed me
And the only recourse
Was to drink hard with the clowns*

*Pink elephants
Paraded and sloshed
Through my youth
Until I became a sinister clown,*

With a smile painted

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Walt Disney must be cringing in his grave. I'll spare you the poet's last few lines which are gag-inducing.

Franco gushes out a description of his sinister, but well-meaning, self in his poem Custom Hotel. He apparently stays at this hotel, conveniently located near the LAX airport, once a week as he travels to parts unknown in order to quench the demands of inquiring cameras. Accommodating the egotism of this actor/ writer cannot be easy. The hotel provides Franco the same room, numbered 1212 for each stay. Get the binary significance in sync with the collection's title? I thought so. The piece goes on to chronicle Franco's penchant for deflowering sweet little things, all the while instilling in them his own vast acting knowledge and sinister (yet oh so sensitive) overall wisdom. Here the poet cites his beneficence embedded in wickedness,

*And then I step out of the screen
And take them in their petrified awe.
I take the wise ones too,
But they are of my coven.*

*I know my own Satanic strength,
And I check it with good will,
Giving back the charity of my experience,
Growing little actor gardens ...*

In the piece Twenty-Year Chip Franco details the drunken driving accident that caused his turn to temperance. Nothing much here. No drama. No lyrics. No images. No twists. No turns. The poet explains,

*On Middlefield Road, and a car
Slammed into our front,*

*Spinning the Accord
I chose to drive away,*

*First a side street
—letting Beau out—
And then a roundabout way
Back home, where*

The cops were waiting.

Okay, so what? Franco presses forward educating his readers on his bright future, that is, in comparison with his teenage drinking buddies—one of whom killed himself by jumping off a parking garage roof. The poet's use of the phrase, "I chose" in the above selection seems odd. Franco's acceptance of responsibility may ring true at a twelve step program but does nothing to portray the rebellious nature of his persona that he obviously seeks to establish. Quite the contrary. The writer comes across

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as compliant and smug.

Epic and uninteresting self-absorption poses and preens itself throughout Straight James/ Gay James, Franco's title piece. This tedious production, pretending to be an insightful investigation into Franco's selfhood and gender identification, goes on for nine pages. It's structured as an interview with Franco's straight alter-ego interviewing his gay alter-ego and vice versa. It also includes two embedded, very forgettable stanza-poems. Aside from a few sexually-worded quips (even these seem non-subversive and ho-hum), apparently interjected for their shock value, there seems to be no real focus to these dangling passages. One section did momentarily grab my attention because of its group-think generalizations and naiveté. Straight James puts it this way,

Sure. I teach to stop thinking about myself for a bit. But also because I find the classroom to be a very pure place, largely unaffected by the business world. I like people who still dream big, who are consumed by their work. And that's how most students in MFA programs are.

I guess Franco would know. He has five MFAs.

The great critic Yvor Winters argued the importance of the complementary relationship between concept and feeling in poems. Franco borrows his own concepts by utilizing meaningless clichés. Additionally, his stock, off-the-shelf feelings summon only uncharged limp responses from befuddled readers. The sad truth is that Franco's words do not rise to the level of poetry, nor even publishable prose.