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1

Speaking of Us

POETRY IS THE EXPRESSION of individuals, prompted by experience and imagination to record their feelings, their ideas, their fears and desires. It also springs from culture and community. The poet presumes, or at least hopes, that his expression speaks for others, that what he feels and thinks is not merely personal but shared, representative, even universal. And the thoughts and aspirations the poet presents from his individual perspective are not only those of the private and inward self. They may concern his interpersonal and social relations, or his participation in the common, which is established in his address to the reader. How the poet makes use of the first-person plural may tell us a lot about how he imagines his intimate, social, and artistic relations. “We” can be partisan, tribal, authoritarian, and even demagogic. Yet many of our greatest poets have often meant by “we” “not the collective singular We of tradition” but rather an open-ended “You-and-I united by a common truth” or at least together “seeking truth to which we shall both be compelled to assent”; they have said “we” to create community rather than to divide groups or impose majority.¹

As Walt Whitman draws to a close his long poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” he poses a set of rhetorical questions. “We understand then, do we not? / What I promis’d without mentioning it, have you not accepted?”² How many are included in this “we”—one or a multitude? Does Whitman speak as an intimate or as an orator? Is the reader included in this group, or is she overhearing an address to someone else? Is the assent here merely intellectual and emotional, or is it also implicitly political? With Whitman the reader has richly and dialectically imagined the meaning of “we.” It remains interrogative, collaborative, improvisatory, invitational, and above all in the optative mood. As a reader, I meet Whitman’s vision on my own terms, not by the assent of the group or the necessity of logic. Whitman’s closing questions emerge from the acknowledgment of deep paradoxes concerning the one and the many—paradoxes of democracy and of poetry. At the very end of “Crossing Brooklyn

Ferry,” Whitman’s “we” is no longer a potential between a speaker and those he addresses but a congregation, turned to the physical world’s “dumb beautiful ministers”: “We fathom you not—we love you.”³ The collective subject in these lines is not so much presumed as brought about by the poem, and in a way this “we” is the very thing “promised without mentioning it.” This “we,” a relation emerging in the constant shuttle of “I” and “you,” is indeterminate and open, public and yet private, many and few, of the mind and of the body. Whitman’s promise of democratic community is linked to the plurality of readers and is a thing always in the making, not something fixed and imposed. Whitman’s “we” is agglomerated but also individuated; it is reciprocal and engaged, with indefinite edges and continuously varying interlocutors, infinite but not a totality. In speaking of “us,” Whitman foregrounds the nuanced social meanings and varied tonalities of the first-person plural. He also highlights its performative nature. It makes something happen. Whitman opened up a pronominal poetics that has become a hallmark of recent American poetry. However, as Whitman well knew, the relation of this imaginary community and literary-symbolic effect to a realizable social presence is ambiguous and indeterminate.

W. R. Johnson celebrated Whitman as a rare “choral” voice in modern lyric. Even Whitman’s “I,” he argues, is really a “we” since it speaks of a culture’s aspirations. Whitman’s choral lyric, Johnson avers, is not a reflection of the realities of America but a vision of American potential: “What choral poets do is not so much to state the fact of good community as to imagine the possibility of good community.”⁴ Separating the man from the art, and selective in his choice of texts, Johnson finds this drive toward *communitas* even in Pound, whose *Cantos*, he argues, “exists only *in potential*,” as a collaboration with each reader. In the *Pisan Cantos* especially, in his anguish and humility, “muttering only to himself, suddenly and amazingly he begins at last to talk to all of us, for all of us,” “about the survival of *communitas*, in its utter ruin.”⁵ For Johnson, modern choral lyric speaks for a *potentiality* that it also helps realize, at least in the virtual world of reading.

Poetry has its own special language, but it is built up from, and often imitates, ordinary language and draws out implications of our usage, thus helping us reflect on speech in our public and private lives. While this is a study focused entirely on poetry (and the “we” as narrative voice in fiction produces quite different effects), some preliminary reflection on the perils and controversies surrounding common usage of the first-person plural helps frame the discussion. We allow a great deal of license to the literary imagination, but in public speeches, journalism, or politics, for instance, this same invocation of an indeterminate “we” can sound hollow, coercive, or presumptuous. Does the orator or writer presume to speak for *me*? Does “we” have any real antecedent for an unbounded, diverse populace? This is a foundational question in

American history, one that resonates throughout in the struggles of balance or alignment between I and We, Us and Them. Patrick Henry protested in response to the Philadelphia Convention: “What right had they to say ‘we, the People?’ . . . who authorized them to speak the language of We, the People?”⁶ One might argue that here too was *potential*, a community posited rather than represented, something envisioned more than authorized; but our founding documents have real-world consequences fundamentally different from literary contracts with unknown readers. Patrick Henry’s question resounds through American political and social debate, right through to red-hot (and very blue) patriot Molly Ivins, who famously quipped in response to the promiscuous use of “we” in economic journalism: “We is not me or a lot of us.” Ivins is provoked by a reporter’s inclusion of all of us as beneficiaries of financial gain: “Who you callin’ ‘we,’ white man?”⁷ She would be surprised to find any company with Ayn Rand, but radical individualism has its own objections to the first-person plural: “The word ‘We’ is as lime poured over men, which sets and hardens to stone, and crushes all beneath it.”⁸ The point is that even at contrasting poles of political orientation, this pronoun raises hackles. But if the presumed inclusiveness of “we” is inconsiderate, hegemonic, or dystopic in some contexts, it is a democratic imperative in others. President Obama quoted himself and others in Selma when he said, “The single most powerful word in our democracy is the word ‘We.’ We the People. We Shall Overcome. Yes We Can. It is owned by no one. It belongs to everyone.”⁹ A fragmented society, a society of “us” and “them,” turns away, or looks on in disdain, at the suffering of minorities. But if “we” includes all “the people” of America, then the degraded condition of some reflects on everyone. For James Baldwin in 1960, Harlem becomes, not a place apart, but a measure of who we are. He finds rhetorical power in the grammatical ambiguity of the first-person plural through a small modifying clause that closes his essay “Fifth Avenue, Uptown.” Baldwin implicitly calls Americans to honor the promise of inclusiveness: “Walk through the streets of Harlem,” Baldwin invites his reader, “and see what we, this nation, have become.” For better or worse, “we” is a powerful communicative tool, perhaps the quintessential pronoun of oratory, if also of intimacy. Poetry reflects and sometimes seeks to alter the language we use, publicly and privately, and the meanings we form. The study of literature, especially poetry, can raise our awareness of the force and risk of pronouns. Literature does not always want to serve an ameliorative function, nor should it. But some poetry seeks to harness the rhetorical power of the first-person plural to posit and promote community, often where there is social fragmentation. It can also alert us, intentionally or not, to the pronoun’s dangers and exclusions, probing the implications of our usage and making us attentive to what we really mean when we say “we.”

Poetry, more than any other genre, when it wrestles with political and ethical concerns, does so within the arena of *language*. Though linguists seldom venture into the special realm of literature, their questions and insights about the function of pronouns help foreground the opportunities that poets exploit. Whatever the historical setting, “we” is an ambiguous pronoun in English. Just as each of us is connected to many overlapping and conflicting units and communities, so we mean lots of things by “we,” depending on context. “We” is an indexical pronoun, a deictic floater like “here” and “now.” There is of course a referential meaning of sorts—more like a kind of aura around the word. It means the speaker (or a character the speaker is pretending to be) and at least one other. But that formula doesn’t get us very far. Some languages distinguish “we” that includes the listener and “we” that does not, but English is not among them.¹⁰ “We” in English can be bounded or unbounded. First-person plural might better be called first-person plus, where the second term of the equation $I + X = We$ needs to be solved. And the equation would also perhaps involve two forms, $I + X\text{-hearer} = We$, or $I + X + \text{hearer} = We$. “We” is sometimes weighted plural (an assemblage of individuated I’s) and sometimes singular (a collective or corporate unit with a uniform identity or solidity). And perhaps most important for the lyric and its textual subjectivities, the “I” behind the “We” may be strongly present, almost inaudible, or without iteration. But as linguists interested in relevance theory have pointed out, speech is rarely explicit—it depends on the inferences listeners make, based on their expectations. For all the maxims of cooperative efficiency in conversation (quality, quantity, relation, manner) outlined by Paul Grice in “Logic and Conversation,” implication in the use of the first-person plural can be imprecise: we often don’t really know exactly what others are saying when they say “we.” Exclusions and inclusions are often unconscious, as Ivins and Baldwin are pointing out. The boundaries are at times unclear even to the speaker, which is why the ambiguity of deictic words works in a joke or a poem—two places where ambiguity has value. “We” is often hard to disambiguate, and readers and listeners tolerate a large area of confusion or uncertainty about the identity of “we” in a given sentence. Poetry can exploit that ambiguity to show us something about what it means to be or to say “we,” and to stretch and revise that meaning.

“We” can register many different forms of togetherness. It can be royal or communal, universal or parochial, intimate or public, personal or impersonal, inclusive or exclusive, majestic, universal, or corporate, intellectual or social. But ambiguity is a virtue in poetry, if also sometimes a problem. Gertrude Stein in “Poetry and Grammar” preferred pronouns to nouns precisely because they indicate but do not fix identity, eliding past conceptions that attach to names, allowing for more open and immediate thought: “Pronouns

represent some one but they are not its or his name. In not being his or its or her name they already have a greater possibility of being something than if they were as a noun is the name of anything.”¹¹

The freedom that Stein identifies is a central motivation of many poets as they play with pronouns. Poetry is not just an imitation of the world, but in creating its own world of interactions, it sometimes models values and possibilities occluded in social reality. This need not be a didactic project. As Auden himself said, “poetry makes nothing happen.” But he went on in the same poem to say that poetry is “a way of happening, a mouth.”¹² I follow him there in the sense that poetry performs and voices our deepest human relations. Poetry also exploits the oratorical power of “we”—as exhortation, as seduction, as tribal affiliation. My interest is not in presenting poetry as ethically exemplary—the faults of poets are the faults of us all. Rather, I am interested in how the poetry of Auden and others, in their use of the first-person plural, raises rhetorical and ethical problems and possibilities—implicitly and explicitly, inadvertently and deliberately.

Poets may not be the unacknowledged legislators of the world (Auden frequently expressed his disdain for Shelley’s famous declaration), but many are certainly interested in the governance of the tongue. One of the functions of poetry is to play us back to ourselves, and it can test those little function words that shape our thought. Poetry, though we mostly associate it with “I,” speaks often of or as “we,” and not only the “we” (“us,” “our”) of private relations, since poetry’s roots are partly in oratory. Yet criticism about the lyric has mostly overlooked poets’ uses of the first-person plural, attending instead to “I” and “You.” Lyric has been defined primarily as the genre of the individual, and hence of the first-person singular, though contemporary critics have turned to its social dimension in their attention to lyric address.¹³ An I/You address often brings a “we” into being, both grammatically and in a more dramatic sense, and many poets keep the “I” and “You” audible even in speaking for the group. But it would be a mistake, I think, to treat the first-person plural simply as a byproduct of lyric address. For one thing, “we” in poetry often arises without a clear situation of address. And since a collective pronoun exists for that meeting of I and You, it would seem to point to something distinct, something at least potentially more than or different from the sum of its parts.

Wallace Stevens invokes this emergent unit in his “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” which is not final but recurrent in its sense of ultimate arrival, in which “we collect ourselves, / Out of all the indifferences, into one thing” where “we forget each other and ourselves.” Stevens’s pronoun is moving in its ambiguity, linking the private experience of poetic thought (the lovers’ space of a “room” and the narrower individual’s space of “the mind” and

imagination) with the social experience of love and potential community.¹⁴ Is this the usurpation of everything by a single mind, a form of the royal we? Such a reading would link Stevens back to Matthew Arnold's ideal where man's soul is "centered in majestic unity."¹⁵ Or is Stevens suggesting a loss of self in the collective "one thing" that, for the poem, exists externally and potentially in "the evening air" and as an optative "world imagined"? "We say," "out of," and other phrases hover between these meanings and others. This intimate encounter within the space of literature, this textual "we" with its unlocalized "here," would seem to have little to do with actual social relations—might even appear antagonistic toward the social. But it can posit connections that history has restricted, and it can imagine a reality—a future—less fragmented than the one we live in. As Holocaust survivor Paul Celan observed, echoing the persecuted Russian poet Osip Mandelstam's "To the Addressee," a poem "can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense . . . are under way: they are making toward something."¹⁶ The "you" of poetry, then, is propulsive, making its way toward "we," acknowledging a distance from the other but wishing for a union. Poems can make "we" happen in fictive or readerly time, even if it is blocked in history.¹⁷ In Celan's beautiful poem "In Memoriam Paul Eluard," for instance, he recalls the French poet's St. Peter-like ethical failure when he denied his friendship with poet Zavas Kalandra before a Stalinist tribunal. The poem redeems him by looking beyond death to a "stranger" and deeper "blue" of the soul, and by uttering and making us utter what Eluard failed to say: "the one who said Thou to him / will dream with him: We."¹⁸ Poems can be "making toward" a potential alliance, a group, even a community—because poetry deals in possible worlds rather than simply representing history.

The connections that form "we" above are private and intimate, but they are not ultimately separate from the civil impulse of poetry. The paradox of poetry, that it is often a private communication but also often an unrestricted and open-invitational one, not only overheard but also indirectly addressed to many if not all, makes the "we" of poetry peculiarly layered. But as criticism has stressed the "I" and "you" of lyric, it has overlooked the shared, collaborative, or generalized subjectivity that may be confrontational and oppositional but may also create a space for "we" to happen. This flexibility and ambiguity in the referential boundaries of the first-person plural allows "we" in poetry to be at once a singular meditation ("in the mind") and a space of shared, even common experience, and a granulated meeting of I's and You's. Whether directly addressing another person or group or representing that plural subject to outsiders, the poet's "we" conjures a complex and powerful unit of being for the reader.

Poetry thrives on the gaps and imprecisions of natural language and intensifies them even as it seeks clarity. The indexical indeterminacy of pronouns, their dependence on inference, creates a space for new meanings. The “we” of modern lyric evokes, often with deliberate elasticity and ambiguity, and sometimes with tension and contradiction, a range from intimate to public life, often within the same text, and sometimes even simultaneously. Elizabeth Bishop underscores this ambiguity with her quasi-epiphany near the end of “The Moose” when she writes: “why do we feel / (we all feel) this sweet / sensation of joy?”¹⁹ Who is included in this “we”? Is it the passengers on the bus from Nova Scotia to Boston, awakened from the drowsy rhythms of travel to behold this “grand, otherworldly” animal? Nameless, they are still individual voices. Is the reader included as well as the speaker? What about the moose that “looks the bus over”? Bishop’s parenthesis, though it gathers and frames her words, paradoxically highlights the openness of the pronoun’s inclusion and gives it extension beyond any direct reference in the poem. Poetry depicts small communities, those parentheses of our lives. But in using “we,” poetry can also metonymically suggest broader gatherings so that the sense of the general does not withdraw from the particular into impersonal abstraction, or the local hide itself in a false universal. Poetry’s “we” can be highly nuanced and variable, then, marking overlapping and concentric circles.

In celebrating Whitman and Pound, W. R. Johnson called for the renewal of “choral poetry”: “What matters, for literary choral, is that the agent and the object of choral mimesis be present: the universal representative of the community singing for and to the community about the hopes and passion for order, survival, and continuity that they all share.”²⁰ He laments that since classical times the dominant mode has been the solo lyric, emerging from and speaking of alienation and fragmentation: not “*wir und weld*” but “*ich und weld*.”²¹ But for many modern poets that “*wir*” was the mantle for failed social orders and dangerous totalitarian impulses, carrying the presumption of a dominant group. Whitman may claim to speak for the unvoiced, but for much of literary tradition the male covered up the female voice. An inclusive “we” could not be so easily projected. In “Diving into the Wreck,” Adrienne Rich refuses the “assiduous team” and dives alone, though once descended she discovers a faceted “we” within, a Jungian Unconscious, but also a potential social form that bends the first-person plural out of its patriarchal exclusions. “We are, I am, you are // . . . the one who find our way.”²² When Langston Hughes declares, “Let America be America Again,” he begins with a singular voice, “ME,” one that speaks for America’s oppressed minorities. Yet like Baldwin he also exhorts a potential community, “We the people,” and calls it into action to fulfill the nation’s promise of inclusive diversity. The poet must,

to invoke Whitman, be vigilant in creating a voice “differentiated yet a part of the whole.” Modern poetry’s “we” has sometimes been a hiding place for the embarrassed I. Yet if the drive to *communitas* comes and goes in the history of lyric, the desire not only to identify universals, but also to speak of them in the first-person plural, remains strong.

While function words such as pronouns don’t have content in the usual sense, they do convey and perform social arrangements, and their use reflects changes in social awareness. In our age, sensitive to diversity and wary of coercive power structures, speaking for others is difficult. Yet the first-person plural is a troublesome pronoun in any era. In a historical view of lyric subjectivity, the shifts in the first half of the twentieth century are especially marked. The problem of “we” as a functioning pronoun—referring to the group, or the common, or the artist’s relation to the public—was central not only to the political but to the cultural conversation, especially in the years between the Depression and the end of World War II, when artists were drawn to solidarity and yet often horrified by emerging forms of authoritarian statism and collectivism. What did it mean in those years to speak for others, or for many to speak as one? Modernist poetry had formed in small avant-garde circles, but the culture of the arts had shifted in the 1930s, looking beyond itself for its origin and justification. A subsequent age that emphasized collective ideologies, historical process, and public responsibility over aesthetics and individual consciousness put new pressures on the art world and fostered new reflections on voice, audience, and address. As collectivism led to division and debate in the thirties and forties, “we” became contested ground. Diverse thinkers emerged from the thirties—Ortega, Burke, Wilson, Weil, Arendt, Niebuhr, and many others—to express concerns about the voice and spectacle of the masses and the weakening of individual voice and conscience.

The strong demand for poetry to offer “public speech” and invoke “the social muse” put the collective “we” in the foreground.²³ Carl Sandburg confirmed Whitman’s optimism with *The People, Yes*. The critic Cary Nelson has led a major recovery of protest poetry and proletarian poetry, highlighting writers of the thirties such as Kenneth Fearing, Edwin Rolfe, Genevieve Taggard, and Horace Gregory, who eschewed the poetry of aesthetics and interiority in favor of a public voice.²⁴ The anthologies and critical studies of the period identified work in collective terms: Kreymborg’s *A History of American Poetry: Our Singing Strength* (1934); the collective *We Gather Strength* (1933); H. H. Lewis’s *We March Toward the Sun* (1936), Langston Hughes’s *Let America Be America Again* (1938). There was certainly substantial resistance to this idea of poetry’s role as public speech. Archibald MacLeish might declare a new set of imperatives for poetry, but Louise Bogan, writing to Rolfe Humphries on July 8, 1938, objects in capital letters: “I STILL THINK THAT POETRY HAS

SOMETHING TO DO WITH IMAGINATION. . . . I STILL THINK THAT IT IS PRIVATE FEELING, NOT PUBLIC SPEECH.”²⁵ Malcolm Cowley, editor of *The New Republic* from 1929 to 1944, puts the question “who is we?” directly at the beginning of a memoir of the thirties: “Great changes would surely take place and . . .—most of us felt at one time or another—that it was our duty as writers to take part in them, at least by coming forward to bear witness. I say ‘we’ and ‘us’ while conscious of their being treacherous pronouns.”²⁶ But this is written in 1980, looking back at the 1930s.

The first-person plural was not only taken up by a left-leaning subgroup of social-realist writers. Agrarians, objectivists, and classical formalists complicate the account of poetic voice in the thirties. The major American modernists reimagined their art in this environment, altering their style and subject matter. Wallace Stevens, for instance, in “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1936), enters into dialogue with an audience that clamors for that reflexive yet transformative “tune beyond us yet ourselves.”²⁷ The end of World War II and the advent of the Cold War changed the nature of the poetic “we,” in part at least in reaction against the uses that had been made of public speech by fascist and other collectivist movements. Many poets shifted away, at least for a time, from political and social activism and group identity, and moved toward the self as representative figure, the “we,” not of “all of us,” but of “each one of us” in our individual lives of human faults and aspirations. Such evocations of everyman have sometimes seemed normative and presumptive, falling in with Cold War ideology, but they were often more self-conscious and anxious than has been generally acknowledged. Robert Lowell often distances himself not only from the public and patriotic “we” but from the comfortable village conformity of “our Independence Day.”²⁸ But if choral lyric disappeared with the Cold War cultivation of privacy, civil poetry has been perennial, and the first-person plural has maintained its hold on poetic voice. Indeed, it has had a considerable comeback in contemporary poetry, as I will suggest in my conclusion. As we continue the critical project of theorizing and historicizing lyric subjectivity, we might well turn to the fluent and problematic modes of connection registered in modern poetry’s use of this plural pronoun. In what circumstances, and in what terms, might the poet—whose generic default position is I—speak of “we”?

Poetry’s first-person plural often prompts us to pose questions central to modern social thought: For whom does the poet write, and what authority does she have to speak for others? Is there a prior selfhood standing behind the collective, or is the “I” suspended in the voicing of “we”? Is “we” one or many? Can the poet construct a “we” that retains multiplicity within its choral force? When does the poem give assent to this claim of collective identity, and when does it distance itself? Modern poetry often creates a face of “we” that

is volatile in character as well as number and avoids masking a restricted as a universal interest. Modern poetry's "we," exploiting the inherent instability of the pronoun, is especially reflexive, highly sensitive to political and historical circumstance, and often speculative. The pronoun's ambiguity, especially in the abstract realm of poetry, also provides freedom to dislodge labels and imagine potential communities.

While this is the first generic study of "we" in modern poetry, the topic has been richly addressed in modern philosophy, especially in the Continental tradition with its ethical turn and attention to community. Philosophical theories of social phenomenology and ontology do not directly inform my discussion of poetry, but they do indicate how an emphasis on language can foster fresh thinking about social reality. Martin Buber stands at the forefront of a long tradition that looks at ontology, ethics, and society in relation to language, not only with his seminal book *I and Thou* (1920) but also in lectures he gave in Germany (under great controversy) after the war, especially "What Is Common to All" (1951). The question of what it means to say "we" has special pressure in this post-Holocaust context; though Buber's lecture avoids mention of contemporary history, he is clearly arguing against the collectivist and totalitarian models of "we" that had destroyed the public sphere and enabled the genocide and destruction of war. He argues too against an Eastern tradition that finds unity in a mystical "All" which obliterates individual will and consciousness. His praise is for the Western liberal idea of "the common" first articulated by Heraclitus, in which the single voice retains integrity in entering into discourse and harmony with others, either within the polity or more freely in the exchange of ideas and beliefs. "The genuine We," Buber writes, "is to be recognized in its objective existence, through the fact that in whatever of its parts it is regarded, an essential relation between person and person, between I and Thou, is always evident as actually or potentially existing. For the word always arises only between an I and a Thou, and the element from which the We receives its life is speech, the communal speaking that begins in the midst of speaking to one another."²⁹ For Buber this We that takes its life from speech is dynamic and full of risk, akin to fire and water. "All this flowing ever again into a great stream of reciprocal sharing of knowledge—thus came to be and thus is the living We, the genuine We, which, where it fulfills itself, embraces the dead who once took part in colloquy and now take part in it through what they have handed down to posterity." This "we" is not only of the past but also of the future: "As potentiality it lies at the base of all history of spirit and deed; it actualizes itself and is no longer there. It can actualize itself within a group which then consists of just a fiery core and a drossy crust, and it can flare up and burn outside of all collectives. . . . Leaping fire is indeed the right image for the dynamic between persons in We."³⁰ And "the between" is,

for Buber, the difficult and turbulent space of “the common,” the space of discourse and dialogue, where the true meaning of “we” arises. Thus the “genuine we” requires not only gathering but also distinction to maintain that space.

Later Continental thinkers echo and develop these concepts, resisting the premise of classical liberalism that an integral “I” remains existentially prior to the common. Both Emmanuel Levinas’s *Entre Nous* and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Being Singular/Plural*, for instance, explore the ethical implications of the collective pronoun. Recent philosophical attempts to imagine community beyond existing models (Blanchot, Agamben, Nancy) refuse the priority of the individual but prefer, like Buber, *potentiality* to mastery in communal relations. Their ideas of open, flexible discursive communities often manifest in imaginative works and literary community. For Levinas, “we” remains centered in the problem of “*between*,” but he questions Buber’s idea of reciprocity and focuses ethics on the responsibility to the other. In *Being Singular/Plural*, Jean-Luc Nancy, echoing and revising Heidegger, changes the preposition to “*with*”—we must think of being as “being with.”³¹ Like Levinas, Nancy asserts that “there is no meaning if meaning is not shared,”³² and like Levinas his goal is to get beyond horizons, views, or perspectives that objectify the other to “Being” as something at once arising in plural relation and circulating back to individual consciousness, the singular as the site of necessary and limited understanding. Nancy emphasizes the term “*poesis*” in connection with art and community, something that is posed, made, produced, inevitably exposed and disposed. Nancy, like others writing out of Europe’s late twentieth-century stresses, finds that “liberalism is exhausted”; at the same time he is seeking a “we,” a concept of community, that is “no longer a matter of organizing . . . according to the decrees of a sovereign Other, or according to the *telos* of a history.” He avoids “*the we*” (collectivism) and seeks a “we [that] always expresses plurality” and “avoids generality.”³³ Coming out of the postwar and Cold War era (Levinas) and facing globalization (Nancy), their philosophies express as much as they analyze their particular historical context. Roberto Esposito in his recent book *Communitas* offers a different starting point for considering the meaning of community. By emphasizing the etymology of the term he foregrounds the importance of gift and debt bonds (*mundus*), rather than property (*propria*) and belonging, in the forming and experience of community bonds. “We” is not only situational, as Émile Benveniste has said of I-and-you; it is also historical.³⁴

I have been struck, in my readings of the texts mentioned above, by the struggle with words, the strained usages (even allowing for translation), and the pressure not only on etymologies (Nancy finds that *poesis* both ex-poses and dis-poses) but also on pronouns and prepositions to set the analytical terms of relation. There is a sense that the pronoun “we” needs renovation

(etiolated by journalism and constrained in identity politics) and that the available language of commonality and community is inadequate to the ideals these writers seek. But there is also a sense that the habits of language are difficult to bend. Here is where poetry—which often foregrounds, troubles, and renovates language, and which presents possible or virtual worlds more than actual ones—has a special role to play, though it is not its only or necessary role. Buber’s lecture “What Is Common to All,” focused as it is on “the genuine We,” closes with a work of imagination, a quotation from J. C. F. Hölderlin’s poem “Celebration of Peace”:

Man has learned much since morning,
For we are a conversation, and we can listen
To one another. Soon we’ll be song.

Jean-Luc Nancy acknowledges that the obstacles of definition lead him toward the imagination: “At what point must ontology become . . . what? Become conversation? Become lyricism? . . . The strict conceptual rigor of *being-with* exacerbates the discourse of its concept.”³⁵ He turns to Goethe, to Baudelaire, to exemplify poetry’s singular plurality. Nancy’s question, “Who is it that says we?” has long been asked in a lyric voice.³⁶

The philosophical idea of *potentiality* so central to recent discussions of community among these Continental philosophers intersects with the sociolinguistic idea of *performativity* in the Anglo-American tradition, first introduced by J. L. Austin and revised and extended by other speech act theorists and philosophers of language such as Paul Grice, John Searle, and Stanley Cavell. This idea has engaged literary critics in a variety of ways, but its specific implication for poetic pronouns has not been discussed. Speech act theorists are interested in what language *does* in a communicative framework, more than in any prior reality that it retroactively describes or to which it refers. As J. L. Austin long ago argued, language sometimes proposes or establishes rather than represents reality, and it has affective as well as descriptive functions. Poets are intensely aware that language is not just a system of rules but a community of users who shape it in their direct and indirect speech acts. At the same time, poetry’s use of pronouns is complicated by the absence of explicit context.³⁷ Poetry sometimes (1) wants to refer to or speak for a pre-existing group or (2) wants to expose or critique “we” as social performance rather than something natural or given. But (3) it also often tries to bring into being a particular “we” that has been obstructed in history; hence the appeal of poetry in emerging cultures. (4) Finally, though, poetry is not action, its ultimate performance may be abstract; it calls up human feeling without confining it to historical particulars or divisions, perhaps even interrupting these.

This “we” is projective, parabolic, and provisional. It is also historical, and I have located my discussion of poetry’s “we” not only generically but also in the particular, historically inflected example of W. H. Auden. We are now in a rather different historical environment, but it has much in common with Auden’s formative thirties, which may explain the recent resurgence of the first-person plural in poetry.

My subject, then, is the communal possibilities of lyric in general. But the topic is vast and its interest arises in specific examples. In order to follow out the nuanced implications of poetry’s many uses of the first-person plural, I have chosen W. H. Auden as my case study, as a poet singularly concerned with what he called “the human pluralities”—societies, communities, and crowds. I proceed on two fronts, then: what sort of genre does the use of “we” produce under the burden of modern history, and how is Auden’s case a particularly interesting one in this respect? I examine markers of plural voice in relation to lyric theory and practice, ethics and sociolinguistics, though my focus is always on the poetry. I consider “we” from its most constricted and intimate to its fully unbounded forms, while at the same time showing the movement, overlap, and ambiguity within its range. Throughout, I am concerned with how “we” becomes a term absorbing reflections on voice in democracy.

Two broad themes emerge in this wide-ranging analysis. The first is that the first-person plural in poetry is often modulated and palimpsestic, moving between restrictive and inclusive forms within and beyond particular communicative frameworks. The poet tests and stretches the boundaries of his community. “We” remains open and dynamic as it returns to and moves out from various subjectivities and interactions. The second theme is that poetry as an art not only refers and reflects but also imagines and formulates *potential* community.³⁸

In *Must We Mean What We Say?* Stanley Cavell asks: “Who is to say whether a man speaks for all men?”³⁹ “By what right does the philosopher say ‘we’? We speaks of a consent that is not common, that by rights is yours.”⁴⁰ The philosopher is speaking for himself, and yet he knows that the test of his seriousness is the worth of his thought for all men, which is why he writes in the first-person plural. He must dwell in this contradiction and ambivalence. Few would be willing to do away with this plural pronoun in the public sphere. The desire to say “we” and thus to refute the essential atomization of the social reality remains, even if he cannot “‘postulate’ that ‘we,’ you and I and he, say and want and imagine and feel and suffer together.”⁴¹ For Cavell, at least implicitly, the “we” of reason’s presumptive assent touches on ethical and political concerns. Cavell’s aim is not to prohibit the invocation of “we,” only to call our attention

to its indeterminacy and our need to return constantly to conversation, to the fact that we do not know the minds of others and must both acknowledge this fact and the fact that “we,” and meaning itself, is constituted in the continual discourse of you and I. He continues: “Why are we so bullied by such a question [of the right to say we]? Do we imagine that if it has a sound answer the answer must be obvious or immediate? But it is no easier to say who speaks for all men than it is to speak for all men. And why should that be easier than knowing whether a man speaks for me? It is no easier than knowing oneself, and no less subject to distortion and spiritlessness.”⁴² The solution is not silence or a return to privacy or parochialism, or the formation of some special philosophical language that can transcend our limits; the answer is mindfulness about the imprecisions of language and about how ordinary language shapes thought, and how we nevertheless communicate and understand within it. Literature is especially formed to such mindfulness, which is perhaps why Cavell so often turns to it in making his arguments. Cavell aligns philosophy and art in this sense: both invoke a “we” that recognizes the limits of authority and acknowledges an unknowable other, even an unknowable self. Cavell’s remarks make it clear that this question about philosophy is not different from questions about how we speak, practically and without certainty, in ordinary situations—in communities, in marriages. Nor is it fundamentally different from questions about how the poet speaks. One of my aims in this book is to consider how the literary imagination develops this mindfulness about our claim to speak as “we.” Poetry, while it often acknowledges the Other and the limits of our knowing, nevertheless aspires (at times with urgency and great seriousness) to speak for others, for each of us, for a group, even at times for all of us together.

“We” does not always suggest a universal, of course, though poetry’s abstraction can create a boundless implication, a universalized voice if not a platform of universals. Poetry’s universal “we” is built up out of many smaller, overlapping, or contending forms of togetherness. I take a taxonomic approach to my subject, looking broadly at different classes of “we” usage, especially in modern poetry, even as I note slippage and envelopment among these uses. How does the first-person plural function in self-dialogue, in intimate address, in partisan groups? What is the social relation between poet and audience? What “imagined communities,” to borrow from Benedict Anderson, does poetry create? How is a crowd different from a congregation? What is the relationship between the impersonal, the general, and the universal? It might seem that these classes of usage raise separate issues distinct from the problem of universals, of speaking for “us all,” but poetry often reveals how connected and overlapping they are, how the personal can be mistaken for the universal and, on the other hand, how models of intimate

conversation might inform public language. This principled *We* is reimagined as a network of shifting I/Thou relations without completely abandoning the ideal of the impersonal or of clustered communities. Poetry has been called the most intimate art and also the most universal, and it achieves this double function in part by constantly modulating among various “we’s” and checking one against the other.

W. H. Auden seems to try them all. He is perhaps the preeminent modern poet for thinking about groups and group organization, intuitively and in the abstract, but he is rarely fixed to a particular theory or ideology for long.⁴³ He is the poet of “private faces in public places,” and of “private stuff” and “public spirit,” interested in the tensions and continuities between our intimate lives and our historical relations. He loves theories and doctrines, sometimes to the detriment of his verse, and passes through them like pages of a calendar, but the questions remain the same and give coherence to the process. He is a writer not only interesting to think *about* but interesting to think *with*, in part because he is always thinking, always changing position and genre. Auden was always reading, reviewing, and versifying the social, theological, and ethical philosophers of his time (Niebuhr, Buber, Arendt, Weil, Tillich, Rosenstock-Huessy, and many others) who were preoccupied with pronouns as a lens through which to understand human relations in history. Auden moves from coterie writing to public rhetoric but eventually warns against the “chimaera” of the crowd and the false ontology of “the public.” As a poet beginning with English cultural and socialist sentiments, witnessing the rise of fascism, immigrating to the U.S., and, like a latter-day Tocqueville, beginning to explore American democracy, he had a wide experience of the ideologies and embodiments of the notion of “we, the people.” He was deeply engaged in questions pertaining to the poet’s relationship to audience and to the public more broadly, and he thought a lot about marriage and brotherly love. But Auden’s interest in groups was not only conceptual; it was emotional and practical. His attraction to dramatic and dialogic form as a figure of community survives even to his late poems in which he takes counsel with himself, and he explores multiple genres for the possibilities they offer to encompass and express group relations. As a ventriloquizing poet, always playing us back to ourselves so that we may hear what we mean, he is highly sensitive to the many postures and tonalities that can arise in the use of the first-person plural. In the chapters to follow I will be exploring Auden’s use of “we” through its various contexts, from his quarrels with himself and reflections on narcissism, to his didactic and liturgical modes. Auden is the central figure because he is preoccupied throughout his life with the relation between public and private, the artist’s responsibility to the public and to history, the need for community, the dangers of oratory, the connections between aesthetics, politics, and ethics.

Auden's career-long reflection on the differences between crowds, societies, and communities is at the core of this study.⁴⁴

Every writer brings particularity to the problem of saying “we,” and the permutations of poetry’s first-person plural are innumerable. But just as “we” is constituted in the shifting relations of “I” and “You,” so the conversation across poetries of different styles and periods forms a dynamic space for considering what is common to all.

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