



LIKE A DIAMOND: ON THE MANY FACETS OF 'WE' IN POETRY

Costello, Bonnie. *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017, 262 s.

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“Language does not always flatten out reality,”¹ Bonnie Costello wrote in 2011. Indeed, words make its texture varied, more complex, multifaceted, open to interpretation, fascinating. Language clarifies, but it also confuses, inspires and makes us ruminate. It is especially true for poetry. As W.H. Auden suggested in his early essay “Writing” (1932), contrary to prose, poets tend to proceed from the particular to the general, puzzling the reader about the signifieds of their words.² Auden’s own writing elicits such musing very often. I remember the angst when writing on his interwar poetry and trying to unravel the references of pronouns in, for example, “We ride a turning globe, we stand on a star ; / It has thrust us up together; it is stronger than we.”³ The deictic nature of pronouns, as words that change the range of reference depending on contexts, turns this particular word class into a touchstone of the reader’s interpretative and argumentative skills.

Bonnie Costello’s most recent study *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford, 2017) is an audacious attempt to tackle this intricate yet ever-present and vital aspect of poetic language and its interpretation. Costello draws on her commanding close-reading capacity and profound knowledge of modern American poetry displayed in, for example, *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (2003) or *Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still Life and the Turning World* (2008). In *The Plural of Us*, however, she abandons her previous accent on the visual aspects of poetry — the writing of landscape and nature in *Shifting Ground* and the appeal of still-life to American poets in *Planets on Tables*. She does it to attend to, in her own words, “the scope and richness of the speaker’s ‘we’” (211) in order to gauge, acknowledge and illustrate the nuanced and devious nature of the first-person plural in poetry. This may seem like a departure from the spatial focus of her previous criticism, but the questions she asks suggest

1 Bonnie Costello, “The Mail from Tunis, Probably: A Hummingbird Fable of Proximity and Distance,” *The Straddler* (fall 2011). Available at: <http://www.thestraddler.com/20118/piece7.php>.

2 Wystan Hugh Auden, “Writing,” *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden, Vol. I: Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse, 1926–1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 20.

3 Wystan Hugh Auden, “The chimneys are smoking,” *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (1977; London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 118.

that she still thinks spatially. How large and inclusive is the referential horizon of “we”? What do poets mean when they say “us”? Does “we” in a poem address poets, citizens of a particular state or the whole humanity? Am I, the reader, part of “we”? Where are the borders of the community addressed by ‘we’ in a lyrical poem? Who is excluded? Or, do poets conjure collectivities and form imagined communities? Are the poets’ “we’s” too presumptuous or ambitious? Where do they take the right to speak on my behalf?

Costello conducts her search for answers to these ethical and moral aspects of poetry in general through a detailed analysis of W. H. Auden’s poetry. Although her overall subject is “the communal possibilities of lyric in general” (13), she designs the book as a case study, which helps enormously in pinning down her abstract ideas. Her choice of Auden is excellent. Perhaps no other twentieth-century poet thought so profusely and explicitly (especially in his prose) about the social role of poetry, its potential to nurture critical awareness in citizens of democratic societies and the role of poets and their work in society. Auden often thought of poets’ relation to the public and of the relevance of the lyric in love relationships and modern culture. Further, the choice is relevant with respect to Auden’s extraordinary preoccupation with form as well as to the evolution of his intellectual frameworks from Freud and Marx to Kierkegaard, Niebuhr and others.

All these facets of Auden’s work are reflected in the architecture of the study. It progresses chronologically from Auden’s early to later poetry. It opens with a close-reading of a single poem “Law like Love” and then proceeds through the *Orators*, love lyrics, *In Time of War* to Auden’s post-war poetry. Costello’s scope is large enough to trace and define patterns, changes and developments. Moreover, the last chapter expands the focus range to include poets like George Oppen, Nathaniel Mackey and others.

“One of the arguments of this book,” Costello says, is “that ‘we’ is a problematic pronoun as it designates the puzzle of a plural unit” (67). Costello the linguist fully realizes the difficulty of determining the referentiality of the plural first person; yet as a literary critic, she tries to go beyond such uncertainty and delimit the addressee. For example, in the fourth chapter she examines Auden’s love lyrics and suggests that the lover’s voice is exclusive and unique, but also aware of the couple being a part of a community, thus reconciling private romantic love with ethical and social awareness. Marriage vows, for instance, are viewed as an Austinian speech act and private commitment creating “public good” (83).

Although chapters tend to be dedicated to particular poems or volumes of poetry, they always foreground more general issues. “Tribes and Ambiguities” (Chapter Five), for instance, examines the first-person plural in connection with group identity, the idea of inclusion, exclusion and othering. Costello suggests that “poetry’s traditional emphasis on language, place, and identity makes it an important site for the expression of group affiliation, confederacy, and alliances. [...] poetry survives by embedding itself in particular traditions, ideas, language practices, and evocations of place that associate it with a cultural group” (97–98). Yet, she also avers that although “we” in poetry can demarcate borders between the identity of “us” and “them”, it can also collapse such binary opposites. The elasticity of the first-person plural allows its implications to transcend boundaries and unify disparate wholes. This is essential





for Auden and his panoptic “hawk’s vision”, a phrase he used to describe and eulogize Thomas Hardy’s technique, but which can also be evoked to describe his own work. His landscape poems, for example, transcend boundaries because their poetic voice assumes a vantage point atop a hill or a mountain, zooms out of a geographical detail, focuses on links and similarities between different places and so levels out local and cultural differences.

This tendency towards synthesis touches upon another interesting claim Costello makes when she reminds us that unlike prose, where “we” usually refers to a particular subject mentioned earlier, poetry operates with ambiguity, partly because it can keep “we” inclusive and flexible, making it carry a brand-new referent. In Chapter Six, Costello implies that poets can use “we” for conceptualizing large assembled audiences, and so create the feeling of gathering and togetherness within fragmented society. To show this and to address one of Auden’s life-long and most essential dilemmas: ‘what community is to be addressed by a poet?’, she sifts *The Sea and the Mirror*. Her detailed reading brings her to a conclusion that in the 1940s Auden came to promote the potential of poetry to eclipse ‘I’ with ‘we’ and so conjure up a community based on the feeling of gathering, sharing and integration.

Generally, Costello displays her erudition in more than just literary criticism and close reading. Her analyses draw on J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory and Stanley Cavell’s philosophy of language. She quotes from the American psychologist Paul Bloom, philosophers such as Martin Buber, Ted Cohen, Jacques Derrida and many others. Costello needs such support to strengthen her argument. However, in places, the density of references feels distracting and it might make too large claims on the area of shared assumptions between the reader and author.

I am confident that Costello’s statement of pronouns’ referential ambiguity and elasticity accompanied with her relentless effort to delimit the boundaries of their references is of a great informative value, but it also provides moral support. It is so because the book will keep every critic’s head upright in all those moments when they feel they are drowning in uncertainty, confusion and despair about the poets’ “us” and “them”.