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Project Title: The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others

Institution: Boston University

Project Director: Bonnie Costello

Grant Program: Fellowships

"Private Faces in Public Places": Auden and Others

While the topic of this book is one short word, its reach is wide. My subject is the communal possibilities of lyric in general, and as seen specifically in the many uses W.H. Auden makes of the first person plural. I proceed on two fronts: 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?

"We" has always been an ambiguous pronoun in English, as its scope and relation to the addressee can only be interpreted in context. "We" can be royal or communal, universal or parochial, intimate or public, personal or impersonal, inclusive or exclusive. Franz Boas pointed to just one of the paradoxes of the pronoun when he observed, in 1911, that "a true [first-person] plural . . . is impossible, because there can never be more than one self." A later age would emphasize collective ideologies, historical process, and public concern over aesthetics and individual mind. New pressures on art generate changes in both voice and audience, and poetry registers these changes with particular sensitivity. The book I am writing examines markers of plural voice in relation to lyric theory and practice, ethics and socio-linguistics. I focus on a particular time, 1930-1950, when questions of the poet's responsibility to the public were especially urgent. And no poet of this period has more fully explored the feeling of groups, small and large, than W.H. Auden, who moves from coterie writing to public rhetoric, but eventually warns against the "chimera" of the crowd and the undemocratic clamor that says "Law is We." This book studies "we" from its most constricted and intimate to its fully unbounded forms, while at the same time showing the movement and ambiguity within its range. Genre-oriented chapters break the pronoun down and offer theoretical accounts of its use through various examples in modern poetry. Auden case studies, in conversation with Auden criticism, follow in each section. Throughout, I am concerned with how "we" becomes a term absorbing reflections on voice in democracy.

Poetry, especially lyric, was for a long time defined as the genre of the private individual, and hence of the first-person singular, though critics have recently explored the "you" of poetic address (Culler, Waters, Keniston, Vendler, Pollard). While attention has shifted toward social meaning in lyric (Nicholls, Izenberg, Spahr, Shaw), no one has directly studied poetry's frequent and variable first-person plural, the pragmatics and phenomenology of its use, or the ethical and political issues that arise with it during the twentieth century. Poetry's "we" often raises questions central to modern social thought: for whom does the poet write and what authority does he 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? 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 will be the first comprehensive study of "we" in modern poetry, the topic has been richly addressed in recent philosophy. Both Emmanuel Lévinas's *Entre Nous* and Jean Luc Nancy's *Being Singular Plural*, for instance, explore the ethical implications of the collective pronoun; and recent philosophical attempts to imagine community beyond existing models prefer *potentiality* over mastery in communal relations (Blanchot, Agamben, Nancy). Their ideas of open, flexible discursive communities often find example in imaginative works and literary community. I'll also invoke Stanley Cavell's related idea of a "we" that acknowledges an unknowable other. I will be bringing these recent theories into conversation with earlier arguments that influenced Auden, particularly those of Buber, Rosenstock-Huussy, and Niebuhr. Auden's breadth of reading shows his restless search for viable models of community and his desire to convey these models poetically.

Yet critics of Auden have tended to emphasize his ideas (frequently derivative) and his politics over linguistic and formal practices that shape them. This is in contrast to poets, especially a diverse group of American poets (Jarrell, Berryman, Plath, Rich, Bishop, Merrill, Ginsberg, Ashbery among them), who continue to find in Auden's work a voice at once didactic and democratic, civic and individual. While Auden's career-long reflection on the differences between crowds, societies and communities is at the core of this study, I will offer a rhetorical as well as a philosophical analysis of

the communal voice. How does lyric, through its pronouns, express or resist the sense of the group? The philosophical idea of *potentiality* intersects with the socio-linguistic idea of *performativity*, first introduced by J. L. Austin and extended by other speech act theorists. 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. Poetry sometimes 1) wants to refer to or speak for a preexisting 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 makes nothing happen," as Auden famously asserted. 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. While Private Faces in Public Places will fill a major gap in the study of lyric subjectivity and lyric address, it will also examine "we" in a particular environment, providing a fresh, nuanced reading of trans-Atlantic literary culture and imagination in the period between the Depression and the aftermath of World War II. Accounts of this period have typically focused on subject matter and ideology rather than language and rhetoric, and have offered a reductive narrative of the period's literary responses. Rather than setting modernist against populist, elite against proletarian, or lyric against public poetry, I'll explore civic voices from MacLeish and Sandburg to Stevens, Bishop and Oppen. I am interested not only in the adaptation of lyric to the public sphere, but also in how writers brought modernist values forward in this new environment. Auden, as a poet whose career straddles modernist and mid-century poetics, and who witnessed social and political dynamics on several continents, provides an ideal focus for understanding the local and historical pressures around the first person plural.

I expect to complete this manuscript within the fellowship year. Since I began the project in 2011, it has changed shape quite a bit, with greater emphasis on Auden after working in archives at Oxford and NYPL. I have now sketched out the arguments for each of the generic, taxonomic units. I intend to refine these and make them independently useful to those interested broadly in modern poetry. I have already written drafts of all the Auden units and have published part of the introduction. These chapters will need to be polished and documentation completed. I expect to submit the full manuscript to a publisher by summer 2015.

Introduction:

Pronoun Trouble: Poetry in an age of "Public Speech," 1930-1945. How this historical period, with its contending models of "the people," wrestled with what Malcolm Cowley called a "treacherous" pronoun.

Auden focus: "We" as You and I: Auden's relatively neglected "Law Like Love" as a reflection of his doubts about the public speech of "Spain" and "September 1, 1939"; his formation, especially in America, of conversational alternatives for realizing the civic function of poetry. In this way Auden's "Law Like Love" may be seen as Auden's first "American" poem.

I.

Song of Myself: the pluralized self as the beginning of sociality in lyric; the poet's quarrel with himself; the internal plurality that is central to poetry and foundational to imagining other minds. The surprising persistence in poetry of what linguists call "nosism": the use of "we" when "I" is implied.

Auden focus: The Orators; Auden as Narcissus: Auden forming a language of poetry alternative to public rhetoric and oratory, a language that thrives on divisions within the mind and tensions between belief and doubt, civil and orphic impulses. He moves from an inward turning crisis in "letter to a wound" to a choral voice that absorbs modernist tensions and paradoxes while overcoming alienation. The overlooked integrative function of the odes in this volume.

II:

"Private Stuff" and "Public Spirit": love poetry and intimate address haunted by the pressures of contemporary history.

Auden focus: The Arbitrary Circle of a Vow: Auden's love poems and epithalamia in the shadow of wartime. Explores the public/private dynamic of the "vow" as speech act and as poetic figure, extending arguments of Bozorth and Gottlieb on Auden and marriage.

III:

We and They: the consciousness that every "us" is predicated upon an excluded "them." Poetry has supported oppositional group identity, but has sometimes also worked against it, using flexible or unassigned pronouns (what linguists call "shifters") to enter into different subjectivities and to locate a permeable "we" beyond the divides.

Auden focus: "Yes, we are going to suffer now": Auden's "In Time of War" has been criticized as abstract and detached from its "real" Chinese setting. I argue that the sonnet sequence constantly relocates the "we" it addresses or evokes. The sonnets build connection and a sense of universals less through abstract language and generality than through shifts and ambiguities in "we" and "they," "here" and "now" which bring disparate groups into relation.

IV:

Poet and Audience. What is the special social presence of audience and how is it different from or a model for other kinds of human collectivity? Is the audience one or many? What relation does the poet establish with his audience when he says "we"?

Auden focus: Caliban to the Audience/ Auden as Echo: In "The Sea and the Mirror" Auden brings a dramatic model of audience into the world of poetry. He modulates through a range of addressed monologues to a dialogical voice in Chapter III of the poem.

V:

"I am the People, the Mob": This section (taking its title from Carl Sandburg) will consider changing representations of the crowd in modern poetry. And as collectivism led to division and debate, "we" became contested ground. Diverse thinkers emerging from the Thirties- Ortega, Burke, Wilson, Weil, Arendt, Niebuhr--expressed concerns about the voice and spectacle of the masses, concerns that are reflected in the poetry. I will bring to the analysis of poetry the work already done on prose and visual art by Canetti, Schnapp et al., Esteve, Plotz and Wolloch.

Auden focus: Crowds, Publics, and Congregations. Auden's "Horae Canonicae" and "the metaphysics of the crowd." I track Auden's increasing anxiety about crowds and publics and his modeling of community voice on liturgical and congregational forms.

VI:

Rhetorics of Inclusiveness and Transcendence: Distinctions among universal, impersonal, and general meanings of "We" in modern poetry. Connects to critics Cameron and Von Hallberg, and to philosophy of Nagel and Cavell.

Auden focus: Bondage to Clio: Auden's qualified universals: "Memorial for a City," "Homage to Clio." I show Auden's drive toward universals and his acknowledgement of the irreducible particularity of historical truth.

As with all of my books, Private Faces in Public Places aims to reach a wide audience of critics, poets and readers of literature interested in the distinctive way poetry addresses human experience. My 2009 essay on Bishop opened a new direction for my work, with a greater emphasis on the intersections of language and social relations. I have increasingly investigated the links between historical environment and the literary imagination, most recently in terms of landscape (Shifting Ground 2003) and still life (Planets on Tables 2008). With this new book I will complete a trilogy of sorts, having treated places, then things, and now persons, though the human experiences and desires motivating the literary imagination have always been my subject. I have not previously had an NEH fellowship.

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