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“One or a Multitude?”: *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others*

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

By Bonnie Costello

Princeton University Press, 2017, 272 pages, \$45.00

Review by Noah Simon Jampol

Bonnie Costello, Professor Emeritus of English at Boston University, has published extensively and expertly on poetry and poetics. This scholarship is marked by five excellent book-length works published over the last thirty-seven years, which include: *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions* (Harvard University Press, 1981); *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Harvard University Press, 1991); *Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 2003); and *Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still Life and the Turning World* (Cornell University Press, 2008). Most recently, Costello published the 2017 Warren-Brooks Award-winning *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (Princeton University Press, 2017). This most recent volume is a compelling examination of the singular plural pronoun as evoked in poetry. Costello’s text is remarkable for its adept considerations of poetics and poetry. Further, her book is a compelling gesture not only given the reign of the first person singular within the medium but perhaps also striking in our current moment of fragmented groupthink and monomania.

Costello posits that despite the capacity of the first-person plural “we” to divide, our best poets have instead employed the pronoun to not only connect individuals and groups, but also to build community, and even – a nation. Taking the example of Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Costello finds “this ‘we,’ a relation emerging in the constant shuttle of ‘I’ and ‘you,’ is indeterminate and open, public yet private, many and few, of the mind and the body”

(2). As such, Costello observes that Whitman forms the bedrock for this gesture within the democratic American literary tradition. And yet “we” is a wildly powerful and flexible bit of diction. “We” is both a public as well as private pronoun – simultaneously internally bound and externally minded.

In her book, Costello sets out to explore “the communal possibilities of lyric in general” (13). As a means of addressing this potentiality of poetry, Costello turns to Auden and the development of his vision for poetics, “a poet singularly concerned with what he called ‘the human pluralities’ – societies, communities, and crowds” (13). By employing Auden as such, Costello sets about tackling two separate but highly related goals: “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?” (13). The developing and lingering questions which inform Auden’s poetry hence set him apart. He is a dexterous poet, deeply concerned with the relationship between the individual and group both on theoretical as well as profoundly emotional levels, a poet concerned with what exactly constitutes our common share and hence a man with a “we” for all seasons.

Costello argues two main points throughout the book. One: “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” (13). And two: “poetry as an art not only refers and reflects but also imagines and formulates *potential* community” (13).

These arguments are supported by an approach which simultaneously considers historical contexts and deploys a close reading of Auden's work in the service of what Costello identifies as a "taxonomic approach" to understand the variety and variability of the usages of "we" (14). She begins with the small, with laser focus, and from there achieves dramatically descriptive connections and conclusions regarding the lyric tradition. Costello's book is inclusive; the scope of the text reaches beyond Auden to consider the "we" of the American canon: the aforementioned Whitman, T.S. Eliot, Elizabeth Bishop, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens, each considered with the same methodological approach yielding a sound and sweeping vision of the possibilities and perils of this seemingly innocuous pronoun within the largely American poetry scene.

Importantly, Costello offers a final chapter in which she considers where we are headed next – a nuanced and deeply rooted reading of lyric poetry post-9/11, grounded by the works of George Oppen. Again demonstrating her command of poetics and poetry, Costello links the old masters of the canon to a post-9/11 new humanism a, "we" of resistance to inequality, meanness, corporatism which "revitalizes civic poetry and animates the space of the common" (224). As such, the text is one that looks into and through our own age of anxiety.

This work is striking insofar as its scope reaches forward and links back, contrasting and perhaps even unifying a twentieth-century American poetry. But further, the well-reasoned, textually-driven and historically contextualized methodology of Costello's work is a sort of ethical or maybe even new humanistic approach to the business of literary criticism. The texts come first and speak for themselves; it is the job of the critic and her genius to meet the works where they are and build a compelling case from there. Such an approach might even be called

a criticism of humility, all the more striking in an era where individualities and identity politics threaten the sense and body of a shared nation and humanity.

These matters, though contemporary, eternally resound and particularly call to mind the concerns of Auden in 1945:

Our passions pray but to primitive totems

As absurd as they are savage; science or no science,

It is Bacchus or the Great Boyg or Baal-Peor,

Fortune's Ferris-wheel or the physical sound

Of our own names which they

Actually adore as their

Ground and goal.

Ours is an era of easy confluents. Costello's text is anathema to such intellectual and emotional vices. She champions the individual *and* the communal – inclusive and exclusive, wary of groupthink and rooted in tradition.

Reviewed by Noah Simon Jampol, an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at The Bronx Community College. Jampol earned his Ph.D. in English Language and Literature at the Catholic University of America in May 2017, having defended his project: *Science Fiction as Ethical Response to the Holocaust: Philip Roth and Jewish American Fiction*. His work has been presented widely and has appeared in edited collections as well as journals such as *Literary Matters*, *Robert Penn Warren Studies*, *The Shawangunk Review*, *Cognition and Developmental Psychology*.