

# explorations



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## REVIEW

**Bonnie Costello. 2017. *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others*.**

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Although Bonnie Costello's critical monographs have been few and far between, they always prove to be of lasting stature, invariably securing a firm position within English-language literary criticism. After illuminating the work of Marianne Moore (*Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions*, 1981) and Elizabeth Bishop (*Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*, 1991), she turned to the broader subjects of landscape (*Shifting Ground: Reinventing Landscape in Modern American Poetry*, 2003) and still life (*Planets on Tables: Poetry, Still Life and the Turning World*, 2008). Almost a decade after the last book-length study, Costello returns with *The Plural of Us*, which combines the two approaches, making a single poet – W.H. Auden – the subject of her enquiry and simultaneously addressing the larger topic of poetry's communal function. This she found possible to achieve by turning her attention to a subject that could seem rather technical at first glance but proves to be a real treasure trove of ideas: pronouns. Out of an ostensibly narrow category from the area of poetics she conjures an impressive range of issues pertaining to the most general aspects of poetry and its place in today's world, broaching both the internal workings of the lyric and its role in expressing poetry's widely understood engagement with the community. In this way, the scope of this study leaves ample room for both meticulous close readings of individual poems or entire cycles, and wider considerations involving the philosophical, sociological and political dimensions of poetry. This in itself merits the readers' attention and praise, primarily for shedding light on the twin poles of literary activity – a practice that occupies the border between the private and the public, providing us with means of individual expression and a system of social communication that facilitates negotiating the meaning of "We."

It is this plural pronoun that remains the focus of the book, which investigates this form's mutable and paradoxical nature rooted in the fundamental question: How is it possible for the lyrical subject to speak in collective terms? This question is certainly fraught with puzzling dilemmas regarding representation, both in individual, psychological terms (I-We), and in socio-political ones (Us-Them). These two tensions act as coordinates that could be successfully applied, as Costello aptly demonstrates, in a

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critical reading of Auden, taking the role of fundamental parameters useful in dealing with his *oeuvre*, which she convincingly reads as a long creative process driven by the oscillation between personal statement and a search for collective sense of belonging. Auden's body of work constitutes a good case in point due to his lively involvement in debates on the boundaries of poetry's universality and its ability to project collectivities. His long career, marked by significant shifts of attitude and internal quarrels revolving around community, provides sufficient material for an in-depth look at how modernist poetry has been struggling with political partisanship and activism, conflict and solidarity, collectivism and individualism. Given Auden's extensive travels, emigration, and preoccupation with public matters, he does make for a perfect gateway into a galaxy of problems that deserve serious scholarship.

However, it is not merely a question of one man's position on poetry that seems to be crucial here, nor is it an issue specific to modernism, or the era of the world wars. None of the problems that Costello focuses on have become outdated. In fact, they have been exacerbated to an extent that now seems to demand that the humanities turn more attention towards them, reconsidering the role literature and criticism can play in the face of contemporary civilizational challenges. In Trump-era America, for example, where social stratification and political differences are causing the society to be painfully divided right to its very core, questions of community-making seem to warrant prioritized care expressed in both reflection and action. The rampant injustices of globalized capitalism and the looming threat of climate change also call for unprecedented solidarity on a global scale. None of these profound issues seem to be taken seriously enough today by populist politicians or profit-oriented businesses, making it necessary for an appropriate response to emerge at the grassroots communal level if any changes to policy are to be won. At the same time, the community-making function of new technologies, most notably the social media, has fallen short of its expectations despite some achievements in the form of movements that bred the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street. It is evident now that the world's political fate depends on ushering in communities that cut across time and space, demanding that we reclaim the future as livable and sustainable.

Given this urgent present context, it becomes curious how Auden can help us here. Certainly, his proverbial "poetry makes nothing happen" can feel discouraging and disheartening, but reducing his position to this single statement is undoubtedly simplifying and unjust. Luckily, Costello painstakingly retraces Auden's intellectual and poetic path, orienting herself in this journey towards questions of poetry's potential to effect change or at least catalyse the formation of collectivities that could effectively demand change, and towards poetry's role in shaping the imagination necessary to forge new social bonds. Since the American society is, historically-speaking, a product of trans-national forces, it does point towards the possibility of rethinking communality along different lines than those of narrowly nationalistic categories. A source of inspiration for Auden, this context is all the more pertinent today given the ever rising numbers of refugees, both from areas ravaged by military conflicts and the so-called "climate refugees," as well as the growing ranks of the global precariate. In the coming years and decades we are surely going to need all the wisdom developed by those who have experienced the turmoil of the first half of the twentieth century, or at least learn as much as possible from their dilemmas and mistakes.

There is a lot to be learned about that from Costello's book, though it remains dauntingly unclear whether it is Auden that teaches us here, or her own special lens through which she reads his poetry. Testifying to the significance of literary criticism, the author navigates through Auden's rich body of work in a way that foregrounds one of the central struggles in his poetics: the question of "how to find or form a genuine community" (27). This problem, phrased inconspicuously in 1938 in (of all the places!) the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, is related to how we can speak of a "We" and what this ambiguous shifter can actually do in poetry. "In a fragmented society," Costello argues, "poetry becomes a place of *potential* community" because the poetic "We" can, through its indefinite character, offer a position that is "inclusive" yet "never fully formed" (27). As Costello emphasizes, community is for Auden an emergent entity that is always in the process of becoming if it is to avoid turning into a tool for excluding some at the expense of others. In that sense, it is future-oriented and potential rather than embodied in any specific circle, large or small, that keeps policing its borders instead of forming a welcoming space where all members are guaranteed a distinct voice. The problem that arises from such considerations consists in "the ability of the poet to speak for others" (21) in such a way as to avoid appropriating their uniqueness and subsuming them under a totalized vision, which Auden identified with fascism. Translating this into the language of poetry, he attempts to "perform community," which is understood as "especially a formation of imagination rather than society" (32). These conclusions, drawn from a brilliant reading of the poem "Law Like Love," importantly involve the appreciation of "love" in the specific sense of a social bond that acts as a "condition of mutual interest and attachment" (32). Love assumes in this context the crucial function of an affective impulse that gives precedence to the other. It offers a framework in which "[t]he second person precedes the first" insofar as we "respond and obey before we can summon and command" (33).

This idea, which has roots in the ethical reflections of Simone Weil, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas, has been recast in sociological terms by Jean-Luc Nancy, who provides an important theoretical point of reference in Costello's book. Even though his concept of socialization is not thoroughly reconstructed, it does function as the guiding principle in her considerations of the relationship between "I" and "We." Nancy is equally preoccupied with the question of rethinking communality by embracing the fact that community actually facilitates all human experience (1991, 21). Similarly to how Costello reconstructs Auden's position, Nancy sees community not as a stable entity that exists in a state of "communion" but rather as a site where differences are "communicated": "[c]ommunication is a fact that is not in any way added onto human reality, but rather constitutes it" (Nancy 1991, 21). This perspective allows to consider poetry as a viable means of communicating and thus a mode in which community can be kept open and alive, because a "community that becomes a *single* thing (body, mind, fatherland, Leader...) necessarily loses the *in* of being-*in*-common" (Nancy 1991, xxxix). The capacious openness of the poetic "We" provides, in this sense, a space *in* which we can discern – as Costello argues after Charles Altieri – important "possibilities of forging values and engaging community through language" (44). Poetry acquires in this light a transformative character as it can bring together the spheres of the "external" public and the "internal" private life. Auden, as Costello shows, is a model poet in this respect due to his intense "quarrels, external and internal, coexist[ing] in his poetry [...] turning the us vs. them logic of the first into an internal dynamic and pushing the hermetic impulses of

the latter back into social relevance” (45). This reversal seems to be the key mechanism as it achieves two goals at the same time: firstly, it multiplies the “I” by revealing “the capacity of an ‘I’ to thrive in plurality” (36), and secondly, it extrapolates the private love to the social sphere, suggesting it can provide a model for social bonds. Therefore, poetry ultimately offers a site where the lyrical subject can quarrel with herself and simultaneously open up to others, which Auden succinctly calls “expressive gathering” (60).

This is why Costello draws attention to the convention of epithalamium and the performative aspect of vows. “The ‘we’ formed in ‘the arbitrary circle of a vow,’” Costello asserts, “[...] becomes a template for community, a space where ‘private stuff’ might be reconciled to ‘public spirit’, allowing love, and by extension love poetry, a moral or civic function” (70-71). However, apart from invoking “sheer force of feeling” (72) the actual process remains rather cryptic. What is convincing, however, is the more developed argument about love arising from a social order, not the other way round, underscoring once more Nancy’s notion about the “We” actually preceding the “I.” This dovetails with the rejection of Romantic separation of love from “history and strife” and the inspiring assertion that “love takes strength from community and gives back its peace as a resource for hope and survival in historical crisis” (79). It only remains a pity that these reflections are not backed with a more detailed consideration of LGBTQ rights (appropriate in the context of Auden’s sexuality), which are unfortunately still a highly contentious issue – one that this perspective could help regard not just as an emancipatory “demand” on the part of a certain minority, but as an issue that affects the *entire* community in terms of how it accommodates its own internal differences.

Auden’s artistic motivations – “the gathering of a fractured society into community, and the intimate sharing of that vision with another” (145) – are laudable and instructive yet seem to be predicated, as Costello demonstrates, on contradictory assumptions. His desire for communal life is based on a staunchly liberalist conviction (formed most probably under the shadow of fascism) that “‘I precedes we’, though in ethical terms ‘you’ may precede ‘I’” (212). This proves to be hugely problematic when applied to the present times. Surely, for many people this position may seem justified, but the twenty-first-century problems with populism and environmental crises have not been alleviated by liberalism. Costello is deeply aware of this issue as she goes to some length in differentiating between positive and negative aspects of living in a mass society by invoking the category of *poesis* – the “skill and judgment in our interactions with the world, coming from a mature, focused *awareness of the physical reality and a rich knowledge of circumstance and environment*” (149; emphasis added). By aligning *poesis* with poetry in this fashion, Costello confirms that this knowledge is today primarily of ecological character. Latest scientific findings confirm that humanity’s anthropocentric bias, expressed in the dichotomy of nature and culture, needs to be redressed so as to facilitate embracing the fact that humanity is dependent on the flourishing of the natural environment, just as the emergence of any “I” depends on the communal ability to say “We.” Costello does note how Auden tries to embrace our “earthly habitation” (118) and “our earthbound and vulnerable natures” (121). However, in his view these categories do not suggest a reconnection with the natural environment but instead lead him towards a vague dimension of universality apart from nature, because – as Costello summarizes his position – “man’s moral and spiritual life does not belong to nature” (208). Auden openly admits that the “human race” has, in his eyes, access to the kind of freedom that the

animal world cannot know (165). In this, the later Auden, keen on ideas of Christian brotherhood and transcendentalism, prefers allegory as the way out, which to many contemporary poets discussed in the book's conclusion would rather seem a blind alley. There is a fine line, it appears, between the "horizon-less," "projective community" (associated by Costello with Giorgio Agamben's "inessential commonality") (124) and the loss of the earthbound, ecological perspective that we need so much these days. In the Anthropocene, the political and social solidarity necessary to respond to the fundamental "un-ignorable human need" of refugee crisis (appearing in the book in the form of refugees arriving in America during the Second World War, many of them turned back) appears today inextricably bound up with the necessity to respond to the environmental dangers threatening civilization globally. Auden's hunger for "unknowable eternal meaning" (203) risks interfering with the vital, material concerns of today's world. Costello is perfectly right to acknowledge this by saying that "[p]oetic thinking" requires that "generality [be] always inflected with or cognizant of difference and distinctness so that generality does not become inert, etiolated proposition, *a view from nowhere held by nobody*" (187; emphasis added; in a thoughtful note she addresses this idea of Thomas Nagel's, noting that even though the view from nowhere can have its merits, it cannot be fully reconciled with embodied living or poetry-writing). William Carlos Williams is evoked in this context as the perfect counterbalance, providing some healthy relief with "emphasis [...] on the world's diversity and the infinite networks of connection across time and space" (188). Generally speaking, even though Costello does not say this openly, Auden appears entirely anachronistic in his investment in Eliot's doctrine of impersonality, which appears to be founded in a characteristically anthropocentric myopia to the deep entanglement of humanity in the natural environment. Following in the footsteps of Simone Weil, Costello offers a balanced reservation that the personal *must be* reintroduced in the universal, but this does not rescue Auden's theoretical programme from being thoroughly premised on notions that contradict at least some of his claims. In this, Costello does a wonderful job at excavating the self-contradictions of modernism, and demonstrating how its model of the society and the individual ultimately collapses under pressure.

In the chapter "The Future of Us," Costello relates how a broad literary movement she terms "new humanism" has picked up on this in response to the "human disparities, injustices, displacements, indifferences" that constitute not just a "subject matter" but "a physical, economic, social, historical, and political presence" (213). For contemporary poets eager to address these issues, e.g. Forrest Gander and Jorie Graham, "Auden has not been the adequate model for such a revolution of consciousness" (213). George Oppen, she suggests, is the more obvious choice as a landmark for the new "radical poetics." He looms large over this last concluding chapter, as if to suggest that Auden can be regarded rather as a negative reference, not a guiding light. Interestingly, if we are to seriously consider the last chapter as an organic part of the book (it does not talk much about Auden really), the only explanation for this would be that he is a sort of "fallen master" from whom we can learn much but more by way of contemplating how his project falls apart and how he is unfit for the position of poetry's guiding spirit today. His binaristic thinking pulled him out of the long, hard conversation with himself he had in the thirties towards a liturgical and allegorical mode of literature and community-forming. His deeply-seated fear of crowds and social massification is still with us today,

but the solution he has chosen seems to be too regressive to be adapted for the purposes of seriously tackling twenty-first-century problems.

James Merrill – Auden’s “most direct American successor” – is a good case in point, especially when he fantasizes (as Costello reconstructs) about a “we” “dissolved into a sky beyond words, beyond nature and society, blazed by imagination” (214). Such an abstract community of art seems not to have stood the test of time, though Costello avoids admitting this outright. It simply entrenches poetry in a traditionalistic camp that focuses more on securing its unavoidably porous borders, isolating itself from popular culture and other media (like Auden rejecting photography as unfit for rendering history) rather than cultivating the aforementioned idea of an open-ended community. Similarly, firming the opposition between poetry and “soulless, all-knowing computation” that turns “we” into “demoralizing, dehumanizing, and faceless unreality, a pseudopersonhood” (218) seems equally futile, even though cloud computing and social media deserve to be criticized for the influences they have already exerted on the society. For those “concerned especially with environmentalist, feminist, and economic themes” living in an “era of global struggle” (220) – as Costello aptly notes – identification must proceed to include both humans and non-humans, focusing on imagining a “social ecology, not a static collective entity” (220). Nevertheless, how much of this really has roots in Auden seems problematic. Certainly, Costello provides us with an impressive, detailed and well-researched reading of his works, offering plenty of evidence that his struggle with the pronouns and community indeed has a paradigmatic character. However, despite many compelling individual analyses that confirm both Auden’s craft as well as Costello’s ability to present and elucidate it, *The Plural of Us* offers testimony to an informative modernist failure rather than opens a door to the future.

#### REFERENCES

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