

All About ‘I’

IN 1804, WILLIAM WORDSWORTH wrote a poem that begins, “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” and tells a brief tale. A man sees some daffodils “dancing in the breeze/ Continuous as the stars that shine,” and later takes pleasure in the memory. Simple and elegant, the poem is a quintessential lyric—a personal experience narrated in heightened language by an individual voice. This, at least, is a common definition of a lyric poem, but in *Lyric Poetry*, Brown University English professor Mutlu Konuk Blasing challenges our conception of that individual and, thus, of poetry itself.

She reminds us that the “I” in any poem is not necessarily the poet. “The speaker exists,” she writes, “in our reading/speaking his words.” Perhaps it’s not Wordsworth watching those daffodils, but a voice speaking from our collective cultural consciousness, that lyric “I” which, according to Blasing, “makes the communal personality of a people audible.” In this sense, all of us are the “I” in Wordsworth’s poem. We have all seen something that gave us pleasure and that, when recalled, gave us pleasure again. Wordsworth’s poem helps us remember this shared experience.

Blasing bases this notion of communal experience not on what poems mean, but in great part on the sounds they make. Poetry operates differently from regular, discursive language by “stylizing the distinguishing sonic and rhythmic qualities of a language” with, say, rhyme or meter. Consider the repeated “DA” in the final lines of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. To English readers, “da” is simply a phoneme, but to a Russian it is an affirmation; to an aesthete it evokes Dadaism; and so on.

Whether Eliot intended to suggest none (or all) of these meanings, readers’ responses, Blasing argues, will be determined by their “mother tongue,” the sounds and rhythms they came to know in infancy. It is in the way we readers hear “DA” that we become part of the “I” of the poem.

LYRIC POETRY:
The Pain and the
Pleasure of Words.

By Mutlu Konuk Blasing.
Princeton Univ. Press.
216 pp. \$35

This is not to say that poems are just baby talk; the stakes are far higher. According to Blasing, “Communities cohere around linguistic experience, and poetry is the ritualized confirmation of that coherence.”

How, then, do we receive poems written in another language? Despite having translated a number of books by Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet, Blasing makes the surprising claim that poetry “does not translate without a loss of its emotional charge.” Yet her broader argument suggests that translations—even at their lower voltage—may hold the promise of a deep, compassionate connection with other cultures, a promise well worth exploring.

To realize the tantalizing possibilities of Blasing’s argument that “we” are indeed the “I” who speaks in a lyric poem, we must seek out instances of lyric language that matter to us. For some, these will be found in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, and Anne Sexton—all of whose work Blasing examines closely. Others may connect to the rhymes of rapper Snoop Dogg. Wherever we find it, this poetic language—at once “alien” and “unspeakably intimate”—helps us discover the culture and memory that define us.

—Nicholas Hengen

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Lord’s Day, and the NFL’s

SUNDAY WAS NOTHING MORE special than the first day of the week for second-century Romans. They marked time according to a calendar originated by the Babylonians and organized by the

Hellenistic Greeks into seven days named after the sun, the moon, and the five planets closest to the earth. For early Christians, however, Sunday was the Lord’s Day—the day Christ was resurrected. When the Roman emperor Constantine proclaimed Sunday a public holiday in

SUNDAY:

A History of the First
Day From Babylonia
to the Super Bowl.

By Craig Harline.
Doubleday. 464 pp. \$26