

## 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

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### 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

AD 321, Christians faced a question that was debated for the next 2,000 years: Should they observe it in Sabbatarian fashion, as the Jews did their holy day, in keeping with the Fourth Commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy”? Or should Sunday be observed less strictly—as a holiday as well as a holy day?

For roughly a millennium after Constantine’s reign, as Brigham Young University historian Craig Harline recounts in this well-written and informative study, the Church of Rome took a moderate view of Sunday. Church officials often disagreed about the details of Sunday observance—especially about how much to tolerate pagan customs—but they all condemned work (with some exceptions for agricultural laborers).

With the onset of the Reformation, the Sabbatarian question became more important than ever—especially in England, where hundreds of pamphlets were written about Sunday observance. Puritans, who espoused a rigid form of Sabbatarianism, were so angered by King Charles I’s non-Sabbatarian views—and by the monarchy’s presumption to dictate Sunday observance—that many broke with the Anglican Church and left for Holland or the New World.

Sabbatarianism in England waned in the 18th century, but it returned during the Victorian era, owing to the evangelical revival. Continental Europeans (both Protestant and Catholic) complained that an English Sunday was dull and gloomy. A Scottish Sunday was even more severe, Harline writes. “It was supposedly marked by little conversation, much study of the Bible, not a single trifling word, the locking up of swings, sharp rebukes for whistling, and especially long sermons.”

Harline focuses on Sunday observance in five countries during six different periods: 14th-century England, 17th-century Holland, late-19th-century France (mainly Paris), early-20th-century Belgium before and during World War I, England in the interwar years,

and mid-20th-century America. He shapes an immense amount of material into a coherent and readable narrative, and his scholarship is impressive: The 53-page bibliography includes books and articles in German, French, Dutch, and Flemish. We learn how people prayed, what they ate for dinner, and especially what they did for recreation. In 17th-century Holland, for instance, ice skating and dancing were popular; Belgian men and boys before World War I enjoyed dove racing.

In his concluding chapter, Harline argues that most Americans now see no conflict between worshipping on Sunday and playing or watching sports. As the notion took hold that sports, as well as religion, promote good character, Harline says, sports underwent a sacralization. Professional football, which has always been played on Sunday, developed in midwestern cities “where Catholics and more liberal Protestants dominated the population.” Sabbatarianism retained its hold longest in the South; Sunday sports were not legalized there until well into the 20th century.

By then, Sunday baseball and football games were popular everywhere. So too was Sunday stock car racing. And by the end of the century, Sunday was the second most popular shopping day of the week, a sharp change from the era of Closed on Sunday store signs. Harline himself doesn’t regret the decline of Sabbatarianism. The Sunday of his childhood was a “rather sterile day, characterized partly by long hours in church but mostly by a constant, low-grade anxiety over what should be done—or more precisely *not* done.” Yet Sunday is likely to “retain its extraordinary character,” he concludes, if only because of its long history as a day apart.

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—Stephen Miller