

**The You and I of Poetry** by David Alpaugh 6/3/2023

Let us go then, you and I  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized upon a table.

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;  
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):  
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf  
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,  
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.  
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.

I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you – Nobody – too?  
Then there's a pair of us!  
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!  
How public – like a Frog –  
To tell one's name – the livelong June –  
To an admiring Bog!

All poems have a You and I, although they don't always use those pronouns explicitly, as do Eliot, Frost, and Dickinson in the poems I just quoted. In the simplest instance the I is what we call THE POET—a wise, perceptive, linguistically brilliant speaker such as Keats in his Odes or Shakespeare in many of his sonnets. Whatever the subject, the Poet's I is speaking to *you*, and Walt Whitman tells us that great poets need great readers. Poetry is the most intimate of the verbal arts, and it is largely the You and I dynamic that makes it so. When it is working it is the energy source that generates what we might call the electricity of the poem.

But You and I can get complicated. In the persona poem the speaker is *not* the poet, but a fictional character: the religious hypocrite in Burns' "Holy Willie's Prayer," or the entitled, above-the-law, murderous Duke in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," or the defeated, self-deprecating, but honest and oddly sympathetic sad sack in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

Of course, the poet is still there, in the wings, presenting Holy Willie, the Duke, or Prufrock to you, the reader. The persona poem depends upon a secret pact between reader and poet. Together, we observe, listen to, and silently agree on our mutual assessment of the speaker.

Prufrock's "Let us go then, you and I" seems to be directed to us, but we soon realize that there's another you being addressed. Prufrock is talking to himself, to an alter ego or imaginary friend. Still, as we walk with him through London streets and rooms, overhearing his private conversation, we feel that, by talking to himself, Prufrock is talking to us as well.

In Robert Frost's "The Pasture," spring has just sprung. A farmer is inviting his wife or child to explore the farm with him, but we sense that his "You come too" also includes us as readers, that we are being invited to explore and enjoy Frost's poetry. In both cases the speaker's tone is affectionate and considerate. "I sha'n't be gone long" is the farmer's way of explaining that the proposed jaunt will not take too much of his loved one's time; and Frost's way of letting the reader know that his poetry will only take the time necessary to entertain and enlighten (waiting to watch water clarify and to enjoy the infant calf, tottering by its mother). "The Pasture" would eventually become the preface poem for Frost's collected work.

Emily Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" poem has an admission requirement. Are you offended, disgusted, bored, and a wee bit amused by the antics of self-promoting egotists? If so, your you and her I can become best friends and contemplate together, with horror and delight, those who, "public like a Frog," "tell one's name—the livelong June—to an admiring bog." You don't need to be a shut-in to accept the identity Emily has created for you. You may be an extrovert, out and about in the world, but you can still be offended by pompous, phony individuals and stand with the poet in rejecting such slimy behavior.

Alexander Pope has an explicit you and I poem that reminds us that a persona need not be a human being. It's meant to be read, not in a book, but on a piece of jewelry. In 1738, Pope gave a puppy to Frederick, Prince of Wales, whose estate was in the Kew district of London. Pope wrote a poem and had it engraved on a beautiful collar he put around the dog's neck. The idea was that a duke or earl or courtier would notice the collar, kneel down, pet the dog, and read the inscription: "I am his highness's dog at Kew / Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?" A delicious, thought-provoking variation on the You and I of Poetry!

Wallace Stevens says that the poet's goal is "to confer his identity upon the reader." We *confer* positive things—awards, honors, titles, rights—on *deserving* parties. The poet must offer entertainment and enlightenment before the fusion of poet and reader can take place.

Keep in mind that when a poet asks you to go along with an I, you can say, "Hell no! I won't go!" Walt Whitman introduces himself to readers with a rather imperious "I celebrate myself and sing myself / And what I assume you shall assume." In my poem "Crazy Dave Talks with the Poets," I have fun answering him with "Not so fast, Walter! We barely know each other and already you're asking me to sign a *prenup*?" To be fair to Walt, he urges readers not to feel inferior to poets: "We are no better than you. You are not an iota less. What we enclose you enclose; what we enjoy you may enjoy." Whether you stick with a poem or bail out after three or four or ten lines depends on whether you like the I of the poem and whether you are comfortable with the You the I wants you to become.

Poets often condense I and You into a We or Us. It's a way of conferring the poet's identity upon the reader by association. Prufrock uses I forty times in his love song, but he abruptly

shifts to We and Us in his final lines: “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown. / Till human voices wake us and we drown.” Eliot and Prufrock, Prufrock and his imaginary friend, Prufrock and you, Eliot and you have all lingered together in a mesmerizing, imaginary world. Though Prufrock suggests that all of us will wake (in his word “drown”) into reality, fictional entities cannot do so. Only you, the reader, are real; only you can put the poem down, leave its fictional world, and return to one with real human voices, informed or transformed by your imaginative experience.

In Rilke’s poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” you are standing by the poet in a gallery or museum, looking at a fragmentary statue of the god. Although the poem begins with “We cannot know his legendary head,” as it proceeds you both feel that the missing parts of the statue—its loins “where procreation flared,” its head with “eyes like ripening fruit”—are still active. “For here,” the poet says, “there is no place that does not see you.” In what has become one of the most famous lines in poetry, the I of the poet turns to you, the reader, and readers everywhere, with a parting line that rockets us back into reality, left with the challenge we feel after experiencing a perfect work of art: “You must change your life.”

In her poem “The Niagara River,” Kay Ryan needs to include, not just you in her we, but every human being on the planet. Sailing down the Niagara River is her metaphor for life’s journey through time and space and our inability to truly grasp the fact that we are mortal and headed for a fall. “We do know, we do know this is the Niagara River,” she concludes, “but it is hard to remember what that means.”

In “The Emperor of Ice Cream,” Wallace Stevens confers his ID upon the reader by making you co-author of his poem!

Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.  
Let the wench dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.  
Let be be finale of seem.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Stevens is more like MapQuest or GPS than full-fledged poet. He’s just giving directions. *You* call the roller of big cigars, *you* let the wench dawdle, *you* allow the boys to bring the girls flowers. You are the poem’s driving force. You initiate, actualize, allow everything that happens.

You are even more active in the second stanza wherein we shift from spring, youth, life, vibrancy to winter, agedness, decrepitude, and death. *You* take a sheet from a dresser drawer and spread it to cover a dead woman's face. *You* let a lamp shine on her dead body. Stevens has whipped you into the metaphorical ice cream of his poem, conferring its substance upon you.

But how about the naysayer, the poet who says, "I don't care about the reader. I don't have a you in mind when I write. I write for *myself!*" True, we do write for ourselves. But that doesn't mean that only an I remains. As I write a poem, my internal reader, my you, reacts to my work line by line, pleased or displeased by how I am expressing myself.

Writing is a process wherein the poet, not unlike Prufrock, has a conversation with his or her self. If we have nurtured our internal reader with great poetry, if we put egotism aside and listen when our you is not satisfied with a word or line or image or metaphor, we may not end up with a great poem, but at least it will be a more perfect one. It's only when both writer and reader find not even a syllable that makes either wince that we are ready to deliver the poem to outside readers—to rely, as Blanche DuBois would say, "on the kindness of strangers."

Whether you write for your internal or outside reader, or both, don't forget your obligation to *entertain*. T.S. Eliot defines poetry as "a superior amusement," undoubtedly thinking both of the Muse *and* the amusement park. "If it isn't fun," D.H. Lawrence advises us, "don't do it." No tragedy is more serious than *Hamlet*. It is still being performed all over the world, along with *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, because it is profoundly entertaining.

After class, students occasionally complain to me about "those poems in the New Yorker." The phrase "I just don't get it" occurs again and again. I try to explain that, not all, but many New Yorker poems are written, not for the general reader, but for other poets and their graduate students. You and I have become specialized. Millions of intelligent readers who enjoy novels, movies, opera, ballet, live drama, and classical music have given up on poetry because they no longer find it entertaining.

True poetic revolutions are rare, and we are not always fortunate to have one come along in our lifetime. They always involve a profound change in the nature of the You and I of Poetry. The Romantics had sensibilities fundamentally different, both spiritually and aesthetically, from their Neo-classical predecessors. The Modernists were dealt a shattered post World War I reality that their Victorian predecessors could not speak to. In different ways, the Romantics and Modernists connected their I's with new generations of readers, who felt that poets were speaking to *them* once again.

In the middle of the last century poets who became known as Beats or Confessionals revolutionized the You and I of Poetry. They were tired of the generic, biographically reticent poetry of the Modernists. They forged a new "I" eager to share intimate, disturbing, daringly honest personal details that would have been unthinkable for Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, or Wallace Stevens to share.

Their readers were excited to be their confidantes, to listen sympathetically to Robert Lowell explore his troubled family lineage in “Life Studies” and his chaotic marital problems in his sonnet sequences. In Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus,” you become her best friend, listening to the darkest details of her chaotic life, accepting her traumas, her suicidal nature, and, above all, refusing to judge her.

In HOWL, Alan Ginsberg created an encyclopedic portrait of an economically and spiritually alienated generation. Suddenly millions of young men and women felt that a poet was speaking to them, that they had a place, if not in reality, in poetical fiction. Electricity was flowing through the You and I lifeline once again.

Needless to say, Plath, Ginsberg, Lowell, Ferlinghetti and other Beats and Confessionals could not have mesmerized the literary world had their poetry not been extremely entertaining.

Have we had a poetic revolution since the 1950s? Well, we have post-modernism, neo-formalism, post-confessionalism, Language Poetry, Slam poetry and other “schools.” And now that a poet with the pen name AI can turn out a poem as good as your average MFA graduate *in seconds*, it looks like post-human poetry is on its way. If so, it will transform the You and I of Poetry in ways poets and readers never thought possible.

Another revolution will eventually occur, and it will involve yet another dramatic change in poet and reader. As independent poets, I believe we are best positioned to make that revolution happen, to get the electricity flowing again, not from specialist to specialist, not from poet to poet, but from human being to human being via the You and I of Poetry.

I’m going to close with the final poem from my new collection of visual poetry *Seeing the There There*. It’s an You and I poem, wherein those pronouns are condensed, as We reluctantly leave a community of friends and loved ones, or the many voices in a book of poetry.

### **Loneliness Rising**

The pre-partum blues subdue us  
As we loll around the table...  
cups drained... plates empty...  
Conversation stalled.

There’s plenty of coffee in the pot.  
How about another piece of strudel.  
Too bad Bonnie couldn’t be here.

The hush we end up in is holy.  
Each is reluctant to utter words  
that will nudge us into the night.

Until (with a skree-eek that startles)  
A chair is pushed back from the table.  
Loneliness Rising: time to head home  
To our selves once again.