

THE LETTER 'I'

When I think 'I(i),' I think the *pronoun, as writ*.
Tall + capital: 'I(t)' fill(s) the air. 'I(t)' tower(s), upon
Entering space. *Writ*, it looks like #1. One cannot say 'I' is
one + not an *other*. But one can say that 'I' is first + singular

Still there are smaller 'I's, + then there are those 'I's
who deign to stand in for the many, bespeaking our
apparent collective values in the codex of the nation's
institutions, media, the law, the universities. These latter,
if, of late, gathering vague accoutrements of diversity
about their person, still often cannot help performing
as presumptive scriptors for audiences deemed
(sometimes unconsciously) as mostly white, + comfortable
heteronormative middle class, or up. (I read us daily in
the pages of *The Globe + Mail*). Whether this 'I(t)' stands
out clearly on the page or is hidden within the folds of the
text, 'I(t)' is there for us to heed.

Yet, the 'I' posture, + its function, vary widely in different
settings within the frame of nation. And also with respect
to background, gender, regional, economic contexts. To
generalize a little, is not that figure entering the room,
head down a smidgen, lids half-mast, a little smile,
perhaps from North of the 49th. Or does it only seem
that way because she is standing next to an **I** in **Bold**

from further south, speaking with certitude (a mite too loud). *Americans are show-offs*, allows a US poet friend, somewhat embarrassed, as we attempt to discuss how ‘I’ is projected by the various implications of the word ‘citizen’ in the 2 English-language countries—+ their various populations—on the continent of the Americas. She finds my generalizations spurious. (Naturally, I agree.)

Whatever its station or location, it impugns to admit that a well-constituted ‘I’(dentity) is essential to the meaning of the word ‘democracy’. For, in principle, there is no point of voting or writing letters to the editor if one cannot stand up as + hold forth as an individual. But I often think if we, democracy’s scribes, were to design a pronominal function of ‘I’ (subject) as more inclusive in relation to you (objective)—then the ‘I’ of our collective might achieve a comportment somehow less bordered in its singular.

For some time, ‘we’ (that is, *my royal ‘I’* + handful of like-thinking experimental prosaists) have written reams re: poetry’s advantage over prose in breaking down this ‘first’ + singular person via devices like line break + enjambment. It may seem semantics, but who can deny grammar + syntax thyme with social implications? It feels freeing to slice the lyric into verse fragments, *sans* the template of *Subject/Object/Period*—serving up its placeholders of meaning, interpretation, conclusion. Indeed, an aura of moral superiority seems linked to poetic abstraction of the individual (author). Or is it? *White abstraction is the doppelganger of all that is repressed by the effort to contain its own claustrophobic historicizing*, says a leading New York poet.¹ He is speaking of visual art, but a poetic ‘I’, disseminated to the point of blending in the ether, still projects, methinks, a ghostly presence. Thus, ‘I’, Gail, writer + half-guilty cohort of sentencers, in trying to overcome prose’s teleological nature, have sprung a doubt re: the allegedly more democratic, or disseminated, ‘I’ of poetry, with its spacey reader-inclusive scaffolding. Perhaps hidden in its gappiness, ‘I’ remains presumptive.

In writing my last book, *Furniture Music*, a memoir in the company of a group of downtown New York poets of the early Obama era, I addressed the writing ‘I’ (moi!) as ‘you’ all the way through. It allowed my Canadian ‘I’ to appear in downtown Manhattan streets + cafés at the distance of a hologram. With her Canadian moral rightness. But also her sweetness. It allowed my Anglo-Québécois id,

1. Charles Bernstein, “Disfiguring Abstraction,” *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 3 (2013): 486–97, <https://doi.org/10.1086/670042>.

eager to have readers in English who were politicized somewhat similarly (coming from a long line of *left-wing* experimental writers), a certain companionship that 'I'(t) failed to find back home in her mostly French-speaking milieu. But deploying the 2nd person pronoun sometimes felt trite, as if, in objectifying my 'I', she became not a hologram but an ungrounded parody. One could say in standing in for 'I', 'you' became an alibi. I began to wonder if, writing in sentences, there was some formal way to make 'I' reach closer to 'you'; to bring, at the level of the grammar, 'I' closer to its various pronominal relations. In Mohawk, for example, if 'I' understand correctly: to say I love you is to express interconnection with another relation, be it a person, animal, plant, or spirit. The key note being the suffix *inter*. One meaning of konoronkhwa is '**the blood that flows belongs to you**'.² But does not this, in English, require some great formal effort—to make the forward flow of sentence upon reaching 'you' move back again in time over the relevant terrain?

The Canadian poet Sarah Dowling puts it most succinctly: *Traditionally, what prompts the 'I' to speak in a lyric poem is the absence of the 'you'—the lyric's condition of possibility is that someone isn't there. You is social and reciprocal. It serves as a transit between the particularity of a singular life and the scope of life in general.*³

The problem being, methinks, in many types of inscription in our culture, the addressee, the 'you,' is absent. Or too far away.

2.
From the Bear Waters Gathering mission statement, <https://www.bearwatersgathering.ca/about-us>.

3.
Sarah Dowling, "Mass Tragedy," *Chicago Review*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.chicagoreview.org/mass-tragedy>.