

“The Immeasurable Idea, Identity, and Ideology of I”¹

A Foreword² by
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We all live in the world autobiographically.³
- Carl Leggo

The first definition of ideology is “visionary theorizing,” and the last is “integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program.” In-between are two others: “a systematic body of concepts especially about human life or culture” and “a manner or the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture.”⁴ Leggo’s poetry and prose – so expertly assembled by the editors – constitute, clearly enough, “visionary theorizing,” and convey a “systematic body of concepts,” a “manner” and “content of thinking characteristic of an individual,” informed by “culture.” Conveyed by his consistent quoting of Freire and his didactic⁵ assertions concerning teaching, one must conclude that Leggo’s *oeuvre* constitutes a “socio-political program.” These ideas – visionary, systematic, attentive to culture while committed to improving it – are indeed “immeasurable,” yet they characterize the “identity”⁶ of the man in question.

That he is a man in question – constantly questioning - Leggo reminds his readers regularly: “I am my words; I am my fictions.” Being in question positions him lingering⁷ in-between; it is a pedagogical, scholarly, poetic position, immeasurable, calling on us to acknowledge that numbers can’t change the fact that we’re all in the dark.⁸ “I can’t even explain my own pedagogy,” Leggo confides, “I still don’t know what I do.” That is knowledge in itself: “My research is an invitation to listen to the light ... to roll naked in

the light, to smell the light, to know the light is a language.” Leggo’s is a sensory, sensual language: “Now I seek to be open sensuously to the sensate world around me. This is the beginning of a poetics of research.”

Such research is registered poetically, living, as he says of Aoki,⁹ living with “poet’s heart and imagination and longing for language.” That longing positions one as a pupil in its doubled sense: allowing light in the eye, as student: “To engage with poetry is to live in the heart’s way, to acknowledge the truthfulness of emotion and experience as significant teachers.” Leggo is one such significant teacher: “Poetry can inspirit our curriculum studies by opening up innovative ways for paying attention to language, which, in turn, opens up new ways of knowing and becoming, and new ways of researching the experiences of daily, quotidian, human experiences.” From the particular¹⁰ to the universal¹¹ Leggo moves.¹²

The particular includes family,¹³ place¹⁴ and time,¹⁵ now eclipsed by “progress,”¹⁶ our time and place: “In an age of speed, he writes, “we now worship our mastery of time and space, and hence have lost the mystery of time and space,” concluding “we have forgotten how to be.”¹⁷ Like a religious icon, Leggo is attuned to eternity,¹⁸ if through the particular. “We cannot learn to love by attending to the abstract and universal,” he cautions. “We need to begin with small acts of love,”¹⁹ he counsels, adding: “In order to love others, we must first love ourselves.” Love, he teaches, is “to be in communion with another,” including with oneself.

“After sixty-three years of introspection, self-reflection, life writing, and confession, I know little about Carl Leggo,” he confesses. The “little” he knows seems to me a lot, confiding that “I have known much brokenness in my life,” that he “wears

wounds and scars,” not visible on the surface of the man I must add. “I turned to poetry as a young man whose life seemed to be swirling out of control,” adding “I slowly learned that writing poetry can be healing.” Moreover: “All my life I have been searching. I am just never sure if I know what I am searching for.” Leggo does know this: “Poetry is my companion on the journey,” a journey²⁰ he notes, “of being and becoming.”

The journey can be arduous, even desperate: “my writing is/always an SOS/fear of desertion/alone frantic/for rescue/connection human.” His signal sounds in this collection: “Now I want my writing to be a testimony to my commitment to reveal in vulnerability and truth and love.” He admits: “In fact, I almost always look for a happy ending.” Looking isn’t finding; what remains is the journey, and one’s registering²¹ of it: “So, perhaps writing is an effort to inscribe my initials in a rock face, indelibly and deliberately declaring to the world that I have wandered this way.”

Leggo journeys with others, as “autobiography acknowledges how each one of us is written by many others.” Indeed: “Writing autobiographically is entering into a chorus of voices.” Moreover: “In much of my writing I think I am seeking to understand how I am part of the crowd. Most of the time, I feel eccentric, idiosyncratic, unique, alone. What I want is to feel like I am a part of a crowd, a network, a collective, a community,” what he describes as “a network of loners,” disaffiliated “with a particular school or approach.”

“My concern is substantially personal,” Leggo affirms, acknowledging that “the personal cannot be divorced from the professional.” He continues: “A significant part of my ongoing research program is autobiographical remembering and writing about my own experiences of years of study to be a teacher, and years of work as a teacher. And

out of that autobiographical work I invite and encourage students to write autobiographically about their experiences, too.” Why? “I propose that autobiographical writing is writing holes in our lives, surface discontinuities that arrest our attention, holes that are connected to the capacious space of the world.” He emphasizes: “Writing autobiographically is writing artfully and heartfully.” That you have, Professor Leggo: “As I shape language, alchemically language shapes me,/ my poems writing themselves in autobiographical urgency.”

“Poetry connects us with wonder and mystery,” Leggo emphasizes. “Poetry is a way of knowing and being and becoming.” Becoming human? “What does it mean to be human? A poetics of research asks this question, and seeks to answer it.” He knows where to look: “A poetics of research is always seeking the experience of withinness, in words, in work, in the world, in heart, in earth, in body, mind, imagination, and spirit.” No formula, the seeking – the journey – is our actuality.

To reveal and register it honesty is required; Leggo never lets us down. Undisguised, he tell us that “as I grow older I feel like I have less courage than I once had.” Now he is “concerned that I have lost my characteristic commitment to speak truthfully, to engage with prophetic imagination, and to challenge the dominant discourses that shape my lived experiences in both the academy and the community. I wonder if I have grown complacent, compromised, and complicit.” That admission contradicts itself; only a courageous man could say it. Leggo faces journey’s end: “I am growing old, and the past suddenly seems extraordinarily expansive while the future has grown brief and uncertain. I live a life full of privileges, but when I reflect on my past, I am most steadily struck by the memory of wanting something, always something more.”

What? “Above all, I am seeking to live with joy.... But much of my life I have not been joyful.” Perhaps not, but “I have now lived a long time on the planet, and I have not lost my idealistic, even idyllic, commitment to an ideology of love.” That ideology is articulated in this collection. What Leggo wrote about his brother one might write of him: “we are just beginning/ I will not let go,” still swirling in “an eternal present/like a palimpsest,/nothing ever lost, even/ if no longer legible.” Leggo is legible: read him within.

Endnotes

¹ All quoted passages come from this collection; here Leggo is discussing lifewriting: “I celebrate the pronoun ‘I,’ by writing more and more from the experience of the personal, from the location of the pronoun ‘I’ ... overtly personal but conscientiously connected to the ongoing conversation,” e.g. the “curriculum of becoming human.”

² Pinar, William F. 2019. “The Immeasurable Idea, Identity, and Ideology of I.” *Storying the World: The Contributions of Carl Leggo on Language and Poetry*, edited by Rita L. Irwin, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, and Anita Sinner (ix-xii). New York: Routledge.

³ “Writing autobiographically,” he cautions, “is full of danger,” including the risk of self-enclosure: “I so seldom see the world from any perspective not my own. Seem unable to. So stuck in me, on the ‘I’.” Despite the danger Leggo takes the leap of faith, at times directly, at times indirectly, through poetry: “In poetry I am researching autobiography.” But do not expect to discover him there: “I grow more invisible in my poetry,” he cautions. There are moments of visibility, however, as we will see.

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ideology> accessed 2018-08-17.

⁵ “So often I just want to talk, to tell, to explain,” Leggo allows, adding: “So often I just want to be didactic. As a teacher I am typically didactic.” Typically? Wanting to be implies one is not, confirmed by the following: “It is a marvellous privilege to be a teacher—to engage daily with others in reading and writing, talking and listening, making and interpreting.”

⁶ “We each represent multiple subjectivities that we live with always,” Leggo notes, “but generally conceal behind the predictable guises of our public persona.” That public persona is identity; at one point Leggo lists his: “working class, heterosexual, Christian, middle-aged, male, educated, economically advantaged, and physically able.” This certainty seems shredded when he wonders: “Who am I? Who am I in relation to the world? How should I live? What are the responsibilities of a human being in the contemporary world?”

⁷ “Poetry,” Leggo teaches, “invites us to slow down and linger with stories and rhythms and silence and possibilities.” Leggo knows that “learning always begins with lingering.”

⁸ “I want an extract that bears the traces of light emanating from stars that long ago expired,” Leggo writes. “I know I can’t render what I see,/ ...everything seen in a mist.”

⁹ “With Ted I am ambient/moving, surrounding, ever present.”

¹⁰ “Poetry acknowledges the significance of the particular and local,” Leggo affirms, adding: “The poet’s way is to attend to the specific moment, the particular texture, the singular sound, the tantalizing taste, the captivating scents that inscribe the local geography of our daily living.”

¹¹ “We must keep in mind that there are really only a few stories... We all share experiences of desire, fear, relationship, birth and death, pain and fear, joy and sorrow.”

¹² “What writers, story-tellers, and artists of all kinds attempt to do,” he explains, “is frame fragments of experience in order to remind us that there is significance in the moment, in the particular, in the mundane.”

¹³ His father and grandmother shine through his words, his wife and mother too, but especially his brother: “I have written many poems about my brother/ poems about our growing up together.”

¹⁴ The Newfoundlander hails from “steep” Lynch’s Lane in Corner Brook. “I see Lynch’s Lane through my eyes,” he knows. “How does where we are help to make us who we are?” he asks.

¹⁵ “I have grown up in a world of busyness, always running from one thing to another,” he allows. “The only time I know the experience of *long* is when I am writing a poem, when time and space seem boundless.” Lived time can become *adagio*, then, transposing “objective time into subjective time.” As a verb, he notes, “long” means “to have an earnest or strong desire” or “to yearn,” as in “to long for spring” or “to long to return home,” adding: “This is the kind of *long* that I want in my research, a longing for listening to the light, a longing for the lines, a longing for the lines of connection, a longing to embrace the long, a longing for space and time to embrace me.”

¹⁶ Leggo reports that “Lynch’s Lane has been almost erased by urban development, and only a few houses and people remain. Essentially the hill as I knew it is gone, and my poetry is then an effort to store my memories like a box of keepsakes.”

¹⁷ Leggo has not: “I seek to live attentively in the moment, and to know the momentousness of each moment.”

¹⁸ “I believe in eternal life, and I support the perspective that those who have died are still present, still caring for us, still eager for communication.”

¹⁹ “Love is a commitment and a practice,” Leggo teaches. “Love involves a daily devotion.”

²⁰ “We are all pilgrims in a meaning-making venture,” Leggo knows, as his poem “Window Seat” makes plain. That poem also makes plain his humour, the punctuation of his poetry.

²¹ “Long ago, I deliberately chose to live much of my personal experiences in public and pedagogical ways. In my poetry and teaching and living, I seek to weave a text that calls out with love.”