**NASSR SEMINAR: THE FIRST PERSON**

**Seminar leaders: Ian Balfour and Rebecca Comay**

This seminar addresses the complexities of the first person (both singular and plural) in philosophical, political, and literary discourse of the Romantic era.  We want to take the measure of first persons and personae in different kinds of texts, mostly written under the direct or indirect pressure of the French revolution and its aftermath, often grappling with dramaturgical or performative issues of staging, voicing, authenticity and propriety, and raising questions about the limits and measures of the human. We want to think about how these pronouns work, grammatically, rhetorically, politically, and conceptually, and about how these texts engage the ambiguous categories of both “person” (personal identity, personality, personification, impersonation) and “first” (hierarchical, sequential, chronological, genealogical). The seminar leaders will offer brief approaches to a series of selected passages before opening up the session to discussion.

**PASSAGES FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. **Rousseau: On the original assertion of property by an “I”**

The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying *This is mine*, and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows, "Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody. But there is great probability that things had then already come to such a pitch, that they could no longer continue as they were; for the idea of property depends on many prior ideas, which could only be acquired successively, and cannot have been formed all at once in the human mind. Mankind must have made very considerable progress, and acquired considerable knowledge and industry which they must also have transmitted and increased from age to age, before they arrived at this last point of the state of nature. Let us then go farther back, and endeavour to unify under a single point of view that slow succession of events and discoveries in the most natural order.

*-Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*

1. **Kant: sublimity of the person**

*Duty!!* Sublime and mighty name that embraces nothing charming or insinuating but requires submission, and yet does not seek to move the will by threatening anything that would arouse natural aversion or terror in the mind but only holds forth a law that of itself finds entry into the mind and yet gains reluctant reverence (though not always obedience), a law before which all inclinations are dumb, even though they secretly work against it; what origin is there worthy of you, and where is to be found the root of your noble descent which proudly rejects all kinship with the inclinations, descent from which is the indispensable condition of that worth which human beings alone can give themselves? It  can be nothing less than what elevates a human being above himself (as a part of the sensible world), what connects him with an order of things that only the understanding can think and that at the same time has under it the whole sensible world and with it the empirically determinable existence of human beings in time and the whole of all ends (which is alone suitable to such unconditional practical laws as the moral). It is nothing other t*han personality,* that is, freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature, regarded nevertheless as also a capacity of a being subject to special laws - namely pure practical laws given by his own reason, so that a person as belonging to the sensible world is subject to his own personality insofar as he also belongs to the intelhgible world; for, it is then not to be wondered at that a human being, as belonging to both worlds, must regard his own nature in reference to his second and highest vocation only with reverence, and its laws with the highest respect… This respect-inspiring idea of personality which sets before our eyes the sublimity of our nature (in its higher aspect), while at the same time it shows us the want of accord of our conduct with it and thereby strikes down self-conceit, is even natural to the commonest reason and easily observed.

-*Critique of Practical Reason* (trans. Mary Gregor)

1. **Hegel and the speculative-political grammar of modern personhood:** 
   1. **“Legal personality”: On the political grammar of Empire.**

[W]hat counts as absolute, essential being is … the sheer *empty unit* of the person... [T]he spirit that subdued it and held it together in its unity is no longer present. This empty unit of the person is, therefore… a contingent existence that comes to no lasting result… [T]he positive value in the case of legal right… consists in its being *mine …*The actual content of what is mine…is not contained in this empty form…. The content belongs…to an autonomous power… which is arbitrary and capricious. Consciousness… experiences the loss of its reality and its complete inessentiality; and to describe an individual as a 'person' is an expression of contempt… [T]he dispersion …into a sheer multiplicity of personal atoms is… at the same time gathered into a single point, alien to them and soulless... This single point is, on the one hand, like the unyielding rigidity of their personality, a merely single personality; but in contrast to their empty singleness… it is absolute power and actuality. This lord and master of the world holds himself in this way to be the absolute person… the solitary person who stands over against all the rest…. the titanic self-consciousness that thinks of itself as being an actual living god. But since he is only the *formal* self ….his activities and self-enjoyment are equally monstrous excesses.…The lord of the world becomes conscious of what he is… in the destructive power he exercises against the self of his subjects…. They exist… in a merely negative relationship, both to one another and to him who is their bond of connection…. [A]s the continuity of their personality, he destroys this very personality... Legal personality thus learns that it is without substance.... By indulging in this destructive activity in this insubstantial arena, the lord of the world obtains for himself the consciousness of his complete supremacy. However, this self is a mere laying waste of everything and … an abandonment of its own self-consciousness… -*Phenomenology of Spirit* (Miller trans.) *§§479-482*

* 1. **“L’état, c’est moi”: On the political grammar of absolutism:**

This contradiction which being-for-self must resolve, that of the disparity between its *being-for-self* and the state power, is … present in the following form. That renunciation of existence, when it is complete, as it is in death, is simply a renunciation…consciousness does not survive the renunciation*…* but merely passes over into its unreconciled opposite. Consequently, the true sacrifice of *being-for-self* is solely that in which it surrenders itself as completely as in death, yet in this renunciation no less preserves itself….The separated inner Spirit, the self as such, having come forward and renounced itself, the state power is at the same time raised to the position of having a self of its own.… But this alienation takes place solely in *language*…. It is the power of speech, as that which performs what has to be performed..*...*  Language alone expresses the 'I'… The ‘I’ is this particular 'I' but equally the *universal* 'I' ; its manifesting is also at once the externalization and vanishing of *this* particular 'I', and as a result the 'I' remains in its universality. The 'I' that utters itself is *heard* or *perceived;* it is an infection in which it has immediately passed into unity with those for whom it is a real existence… This vanishing is thus itself at once its abiding…as a self that has passed over into another self that …is universal.…The heroism of silent service becomes the heroism of flattery….The result is that the Spirit of this power is now an *unlimited monarch: unlimited,* because the language of flattery raises this power into its purified *universality…*a purified self-identity; a *monarch,* for such language likewise raises individuality to its extreme point; what the noble consciousness divests itself of …is its very 'I'…. [I]t raises individuality… into the existence of its pure form, by giving the monarch his own proper *name…* In the name, the individual *counts* as a pure individual, no longer only in his own consciousness, but in the consciousness of everyone. By his name… the monarch is absolutely separated off from everyone else, exclusive and solitary… a unique atom that cannot impart any of its essential nature…. Conversely, he …knows himself, *this* individual, to be the universal power, knows that the nobles not only are ready and prepared for the service of the state power, but that they group themselves round the throne as an *ornamental setting,* and that they are continually *telling* him who sits on it what he *is.*

-*Phenomenology of* *Spirit* §§507-511

* 1. **“Flat monosyllable”: On the political grammar of Terror :**

Just as the individual self-consciousness does not find itself in this *universal work* of absolute freedom…so little does it find itself in the *deeds* proper and *individual* actions of the will of this freedom. Before the universal can perform a deed it must concentrate itself … into an individual self-consciousness….But thereby all the other individuals are excluded… Universal freedom, therefore, can produce neither a positive work nor a deed; there is left for it only *negative* action; it is merely *the fury* of destruction… But the supreme reality and the reality which stands in the greatest antithesis to universal freedom or rather the sole object that will still exist for that freedom, is the freedom and individuality of actual self-consciousness itself…. And, moreover, by virtue of its own abstraction, it divides itself into extremes equally abstract, into a simple, in flexible cold universality, and into the discrete, absolute hard rigidity and self-willed atomism of actual self-consciousness. Now that it has completed the destruction of the actual organization of the world, and exists now just for itself, this is its sole object, an object that no longer has any content, possession, existence, or outer extension, but is merely this knowledge of itself as an absolutely pure and free individual self. All that remains of the object …is solely its *abstract* existence…. The relation, then, of these two… is one of wholly *unmediated* pure negation…. The sole work and deed of universal freedom is therefore *death,* a death too which has no inner significance or filling, for what is negated is the empty point of the absolutely free self. It is thus the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water. In this flat commonplace monosyllable is contained the wisdom of the government, the abstract intelligence of the universal will …

-*Phenomenology* §§589-591

* 1. **“Dotting the ‘I’”: On the political grammar of constitutional monarchy:**

[I]t is more difficult to grasp this 'I will' as a person, for this [formula] does not imply that the monarch may act arbitrarily: on the contrary… if the constitution is firmly established, he often has nothing more to do than to sign his name. But this name is important: it is the ultimate instance and non plus ultra…. This 'I will' constitutes the great difference between ancient and modern worlds, so that it must have its own distinct existence in the great edifice of the state…A frequent objection to monarchy is that it makes the affairs of the state subject to contingency since the monarch may be ill-educated or unworthy of holding the highest office - and that it is absurd for such a situation to be regarded as rational. But this objection is based on the invalid assumption that the monarch's particular character is of vital importance. In a fully organized state, it is only a question of …formal decision, and all that is required in a monarch is someone to say 'yes' and to dot the 'i'; for the supreme office should be such that the particular character of its occupant is of no significance….In a well-ordered monarchy, the objective aspect is solely the concern of the law, to which the monarch merely has to add his subjective 'I will'.

*-Philosophy of Right,* §§279-280Zus. (trans. Allan Wood)

1. **Edmund Burke: On writing (of) the revolution: he, I, we.**

Having thrown down his first thoughts in the form of a letter, and indeed when he sat down to write, having intended it for a private letter, he found it difficult to change the form of address, when his sentiments had grown into a greater extent, and had received another direction. A different plan, he is sensible, might be more favourable to a commodious division and distribution of the matter …

Indulging myself in the *freedom* of epistolary discourse, I beg leave to throw out my thoughts just as they arise in my mind, with very little attention to formal method …

We fear God; we look up with awe to kings, with affection to Parliaments, with duty to magistrates, with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility. Why? Because, when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is *natural* to be so affected; because all other feelings are false and spurious, and tend to corrupt our minds, to vitiate our primary morals, to render us unfit for rational liberty …

-*Reflections on the Revolution in France*

1. **Wollstonecraft, Responding to Burke’s “I” in the mode of her “I” on the matter of revolution and rights**

I have not yet learned to twist my periods, nor, in the equivocal idiom of politeness, to disguise my sentiments, and imply what I should be afraid to utter: if, therefore, in the course of this epistle, I chance to express contempt, and even indignation, with some emphasis, I beseech you to believe that it is not a flight of fancy; for truth, in morals, has ever appeared to me the essence of the sublime; and, in taste, simplicity the only criterion of the beautiful. But I war not with an individual when I contend for the rights of men and the liberty of reason. You see I do not condescend to cull my words to avoid the invidious phrase, nor shall I be prevented from giving a manly definition of it, by the flimsy ridicule which a lively fancy has interwoven with the present acceptation of the term. Reverencing the rights of humanity, I shall dare to assert them …

*--A Vindication of the Rights of Men*

1. **Wollstonecraft: On the nation as personified subject**

It is perhaps necessary for an observer of mankind, to guard as carefully the remembrance of the first impression made by a nation, as by a countenance; because we imperceptibly lose sight of the national character, when we become more intimate with individuals. It is not useless or presumptuous to note that, when I first entered Paris, the striking contrast of riches and poverty, elegance and slovenliness, urbanity and deceit, everywhere caught my eye, and saddened my soul; and these impressions are still the foundation of my remarks on the manners, which flatter the sense, more than they interest the heart, and yet excite more interest than esteem.

- “Letter on the Present Character of the French Nation”

1. **Mary Shelley: On the young girl and young woman coming forward in print, issuing in a novel in the voices of three men.**

It is true that I am very averse to bringing myself forward in print; …

As a child I scribbled; and my favourite pastime, during the hours given me for recreation, was to "write stories."

I did not make myself the heroine of my tales. Life appeared to me too common-place an affair as regarded myself. I could not figure to myself that romantic woes or wonderful events would ever be my lot; but I was not confined to my own identity, and I could people the hours with creations far more interesting to me at that age, than my own sensations.

I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations.

-- “Introduction,” *Frankenstein*, 1831 edition

1. **John Clare: A (meta-)assertion of the lyric “I”**

I am—yet what I am none cares or knows;

My friends forsake me like a memory lost:

I am the self-consumer of my woes—

They rise and vanish in oblivious host,

Like shadows in love’s frenzied stifled throes

And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,

Into the living sea of waking dreams,

Where there is neither sense of life or joys,

But the vast shipwreck of my life’s esteems;

Even the dearest that I loved the best

Are strange—nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man hath never trod

A place where woman never smiled or wept

There to abide with my Creator, God,

And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,

Untroubling and untroubled where I lie

The grass below—above the vaulted sky.

1. **Coleridge: affirmation of the (originary) I AM:**

... the first great truth ... conveyed in the words -- *I am, that I am*, or to give the literal sense to the Hebrew words I shall be that I shall be'; and of Moses's absolute I AM, and its grammatical correspondent [the] VERB SUBSTANTIVE'.  (*Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. IV, 4644,

… the title "I AM" attributed to the Supreme Being by the Hebrew legislator. (*Logic, CW* XIII, 82.

But if we elevate our conception of the absolute self, the great eternal I AM, then the principle of being, and of knowledge, of idea, and of reality; the ground of existence, and the ground of the knowledge of existence, are absolutely identical, Sum quia sum. I am, because I affirm myself to be; I affirm myself to be, because I am. (*Biographia Literaria, CW* VII, 275)

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and Prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. (*BL,* 304).