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John M. Gill

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(RE) VALUING "ANYONE" _____

John M. Gill

When I first saw Norman Friedman's *(Re)Valuing Cummings*, even before I read that inspiring volume, I thought how appropriate the concept of revaluing E. E. Cummings is to my own experience. I came to the poet late. Some years ago a group of us, instructors at New York University, decided to enhance the ambiance of the campus by holding literary debates. I, alas, took the negative on Cummings. My attack was as savage as it was uninformed; I took the easy path of mocking the typographical eccentricities. I am ashamed to report that my "reading" of Cummings' grasshopper poem brought down the house.

I did, however, listen to my opponent, and, realizing the shallowness of my arguments, I began my own revaluing of Cummings. Happily, after that dismal start, I discovered Friedman's *E.E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry*. The book soon became my *vade mecum*: I could not have found a better introduction to the poet. A bit later, Friedman's *The Growth of a Writer* became another significant guide.

Recently it has been a delight to find in *(Re)Valuing Cummings: Further Essays on the Poet, 1962-1993* some previous articles which have helped to keep Cummings studies keenly alive for thirty years and some new essays with the same telling acumen.

In this analysis of "anyone lived in a pretty how town" (CP 515), I will use a few of Friedman's rich insights which have deepened my own revaluing, such as his elucidation of Cummings' limitations as well as achievements, his analysis of the poet's sometimes distressing polarity of you and i versus mostpeople, and his clarification of the positive transcending out of the negative in Cummings' poetry.

In *(Re) Valuing*, Friedman insists like a candid friend remaining essentially appreciative that we can learn as much from the one as from the other, and presents what he terms a "sympathetic awareness of a poet's limitations as well as of his strengths" (171). A case in point is his balanced analysis of the you and i ver-

sus mostpeople strain in Cummings. Finding in the poet an "unresolved anxiety about his identity" (171), Friedman notes that he "didn't seem to realize how contradictory it was to focus so insistently on themes of authenticity and openness while at the same time keeping half of his true self hidden" (53). He writes, "[t]he result, then, of Cummings' decision not to integrate the negative way more fully into his art . . . was that characteristic polarization: the you-and-me-against-mostpeople stance" (171). Consequently, he concludes that Cummings "sometimes projects a feeling of us-against-them that offends many and that gainsays his own view of life" (80).

Yet, balancing the poet's achievements against his limitations, Friedman finds that there is a diminution of the you and i versus mostpeople theme in the later volumes. In addition, he indicates that some poems (his example is "love is more thicker than forget" from *50 Poems*) "although they do include negatives to contrast with and reinforce the positives, do it . . . without the me-against-them polarity or the need for personal self-justification" (56).

I find that "anyone lived in a pretty how town," another of the *50 Poems* (CP 515), also fits into this category. Though vigorously anti-mostpeople, sharply contrasting the lovers, anyone and noone, with the conformists, "Women and men," this poem avoids the excesses of the you-and-i versus them theme through its narrative techniques and rhetorical contrasts.

Like other poems with this polarizing theme, "anyone lived in a pretty how town" has a first-person narrator. There is, however, a crucial difference: "I" here is not a lover who boasts that he and his idealized lady are exceptionally different from and better than mostpeople who do not love or live in his fashion. Remote and aloof ("one day anyone died i guess"), "I" is an observer and commentator, not a participant. Consequently, the contrasts in the poem are not those between you and i and mostpeople. The glorification of anyone and noone along with the disparagement of Women and men thus avoids the excesses of that you and i against mostpeople strain. With the "i guess" narrative technique our "small eye poet" (*Selected Letters* 109) glimpses his characters and drama from a con-

siderable distance; this externalizes and objectifies the conflict between the familiar two ways of love, two ways of life.

Some critics, neglecting its precise narrative techniques, have put too large a burden on "anyone lived." Richard Kennedy, for example, using the poem as something of an introduction to his biography *Dreams in the Mirror*, notes about Cummings that "even the mask of gaiety among close friends gave no hint of a secret self expressed only in his poetry or in his love letters. The sign of this private self was the lower case 'i,' which he used to refer to the speaker in many of his poems" (5-6). Kennedy asserts that "anyone lived" is "One mythic presentation which reveals [Cummings'] private self most clearly. . . ." (5-6). After quoting the last stanzas of the poem, Kennedy refers to it as "the central myth of Cummings' life," and he concludes, "How far away from all this seems the general career of E.E. Cummings. . . . And how infinitely far seems the E. E. Cummings of the final years, the curmudgeon of Patchin Place . . . the irrational grumbler . . . the cantankerous naysayer. . ." (5-6). Later, in *E.E. Cummings Revisited*, Kennedy writes that anyone "is alienated from other people whom he considers negative in their activities and standardized in their behavior. . . . As the story goes on, his beloved 'noone' joins him in his response to life no matter whether good or bad events befall. . . . Her name allows Cummings to express both the isolation that anyone feels and the love that she offers" He concludes, "This same doubleness (with a touch of paranoia) applies to the response to the death of anyone: 'noone stooped to kiss his face'" (109 - 10).

I suggest that Kennedy is conflating anyone, I, and Cummings. anyone "considers" the other people negative? anyone "feels" isolation? We know precious little about anyone: we know "anyone lived in a pretty how town"; we know "he sang his didn't he danced his did"; we know that "noone loved him"; we know that "one day anyone died"; and we know that he was buried side by side with noone and that "they dream their sleep." We do not know what anyone "considers" about mostpeople or that he "feels" isolation. Kennedy, ignoring the precise narrative strategy, is merely speculating. Remembering the you and i versus mostpeople poems,

one could speculate just as well that anyone revels in his isolation from mostpeople.

Kennedy, finding a doubleness in noone's name, notes "a touch of paranoia" (110). Does he mean anyone is paranoiac or noone or i or Cummings? He supports his charge of paranoia only with the line "noone stooped to kiss his face." I can imagine isolating this line from the totality of the poem and discovering that doubleness in noone's name. But there are at least two reasons to question this contention. First, doubling from noone (the individual) to no one (that is, nobody at all) ignores the poem:

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried *them* side by side . . .
and more by more *they* dream their sleep
(italics mine)

The *them* and *they* can refer only to noone and anyone. I find no doubleness here, no "touch of paranoia," but only the movement of these two lovers to their transcending triumph.

The second reason to question this doubleness concerns noone's love for anyone; the love of this individual lady is sharpened by vigorous contrast with the feelings of Women and men who "cared for anyone not at all."

Contrasts are prevalent in Cummings' work, and often definitions are achieved by distinguishing between opposites. In his persuasive analysis of Cummings' play *Him*, Friedman, for example, writes that the character Him "is trying to find out who he is by discovering who he is not" (*Growth* 69). Distinctions, contrasts, opposites, polarities, and dichotomies abound in Cummings' poetry, for example, in "the greedy the people" (801) and in "yes is a pleasant country" (578). Few poems, however, have more contrasts than "anyone lived." Resonating through the poem, spurring rhythm, enhancing the precision and intensity, carrying theme, are such contrasts as in "up so floating many bells down" and "down they forgot as up they grew" and "apt to forget to remember." But it is the decisive contrasts of anyone and noone as opposed to mostpeople that

convey the thrust of the poem. Borrowing one of Cummings' "five simple facts," we might summarize these contrasts as "unbeingdead isn't beingalive" (803).

noone, an individual, has her role, distinctive and crucial, in these contrasts with mostpeople. Loving anyone, "she laughed his joy she cried his grief"; that is, noone expressed what she felt. someones and everyones, in contrast, "laughed their cryings," that is, they did not express their deepest feelings truly. noone, sharing with anyone whatever happened "bird by snow and stir by still," is true to her feelings. noone is natural, is yes.

anyone is also sharply contrasted with Women and men. The one line about anyone's feelings and activities is "he sang his didn't he danced his did." The first clause is often interpreted as anyone singing of his "failure" or "defeat" (Marks 40, 43) or of things "unpleasant" (Kidder 144). But the poem indicates nothing beyond that he sang about the things he didn't do. This does not necessarily indicate failure; at times, refraining from action is courageous, loving, life-giving. One might well sing about such restraint. Moreover, "he sang his didn't" is similar to Gatsby's comment concerning his initial courtship of Daisy: "Well, there I was, way off my ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute, and all of a sudden I didn't care. What was the use of doing great things if I could have a better time telling her what I was going to do?" (Fitzgerald 117). Gatsby, too, sang his didn't.

Sang and *danced* reflect anyone's exuberant aliveness. Women and men, on the contrary, "*said* their nevers" and "*did* their dance" (emphasis added). anyone's *sang* as compared to their *said* reflects Cummings' characteristic say/sing dichotomy; in "if seventy were young," for example, attacking "dogooding folk," he denies that "to say would be to sing" (798), and in "who sharpens every dull" he applauds the knife grinder who "sharpens say to sing" (624). Likewise, contrasted to anyone who "danced his did," Women and men "did their dance": how deadly and dull and dutiful! Then too with another similar reversal encapsulating contrasting lives, these "slept their dream" while anyone and noone "dream their sleep." "Dream," Friedman writes, "is the world of transcendence . . ." (*Art*

24). While Women and men "went their came," anyone and noone achieve their love-shaped transcendence.

These contrasts of anyone and noone with Women and men help refute some of the criticism leveled at the poem. For example, in a vigorous letter published in *Spring*, volume 9, Jon Grossman acknowledges that "for donkey's years" he had found "anyone lived" to be "one of the most beautiful love poems of our time, if not of all times." However, a rereading "with my critical sense unblunted by cummings's [*sic*] bluff" has led him to conclude that "in fact it's one of the most glaring literary examples of male chauvinist piggery since Adam tried (with some success) to put all the blame on Eve." Grossman's argument is that "the poem is perfectly explicit how noone felt about anyone," but about anyone's feeling towards her "Not. One. Word." Grossman adds, "There [anyone] is, singing his didn't and dancing his did and calling noone to come here and change my typewriter ribbon for me. And presumably rolling off her when he's done, without caring one little bit about whether she's had her orgasm or not. This is love?" (4).

It is true that the poem does not state that anyone loves noone, but that does not mean that he didn't. While anyone's love for noone is not specifically recorded, Grossman's criticism does not take into account that it is lucidly implicit in the penultimate stanza in that memorable paean to their transcendence: "noone and anyone earth by april / wish by spirit and if by yes." In addition, this point is corroborated by the contrasts in the poem. "Women and men (both little and small) / cared for anyone not at all." However, there is an individual who, in contrast, *did* care for anyone: "noone loved him more by more / when by now and tree by leaf." Further, Women and men "cared for anyone *not at all*"; this contrasts with "anyone's any was *all* to her" (*italics mine*). Since there is nothing amid all these contrasts about Women and men not caring for noone, there is no need for any contrasting statement about anyone loving noone. Consequently, consideration of the contrasts in the poem leads me to deny Grossman's charge of "male chauvinist piggery."

I turn now to the third of Friedman's illuminating themes which I am using in my revaluing of "anyone lived." Friedman

writes that in his later work Cummings "was coming to acknowledge the negative more and learning how to incorporate it into the fabric of his affirmative vision. But what is happening here ["enter no(silence is the blood whose flesh," 73 *Poems* #67)] is that the speaker is going into the negative, and by virtue of its acceptance it becomes part of the affirmation" (31). In "anyone lived" Cummings's use of *how* and *by* illustrates his method of doing so.

Most readers of this poem wonder about the description "pretty how town." A few puzzled critics have wanted to transpose the opening line into "anyone lived in how pretty a town" (Kidder 143-44). Some, linking that *how* to mostpeople, discuss what they regard as the sterility, sameness, decorum, triteness of that "pretty how town" (Lane 32, 99-100; Wegner 51). While *how* is pejorative in "the greedy the people" with its "they when and they how" (801), Cummings also uses it in an honorific way in a lovely synoptic poem: "in time of daffodils(who know / the goal of living is to grow) / forgetting why,remember how" (688). *How*, then, can apply to anyone and noone just as well as to mostpeople. I suggest that "anyone lived" is a *how* poem in the sense that it not only advocates transcending out of the unbeingdeadness of mostpeople to the beingaliveness of the lovers, but it shows *how* through its use of the word *by*.

Through these *by*'s, as in "if by yes," Cummings is not so much denying the negative, like if, as accepting it and moving past it to his affirmations, like yes. This is not to say that all the uses of *by* in "anyone lived" have this negative to positive linkage: there is none, for example, in

busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was
all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep (688)

or in noone's love for anyone "bird by snow and stir by still." These *by* phrases amplify the way of life and of love of anyone and noone. In contrast, other *by* phrases in the poem prescribe the *how* directly.

In the phrase "when by now" describing noone's love for

anyone, and in the last singing phrases in the poem about the lovers "noone and anyone earth by april / wish by spirit and if by yes," the negative first words *when*, *earth*, *wish*, and *if* are linked through *by* to the positive third words *now*, *april*, *spirit*, and *yes*. Through *by* the positives are integrated with the negatives which then create, as it were, a kind of launching pad from which those positives arise. The phrase "earth by april" illustrates the process. Earth alone, without the potentiality of April, would be dismal indeed. On the other hand, there could be no April without an earth for it to accept, as it were, and flower through. April is not the cruelest month for Cummings; rather, with spring, it is one of the more beautiful and bountiful notions in his poetry: "-- it's april(yes,april;my darling)it's spring!" (665) and

love is a deeper season
 than reason;
 my sweet one
 (and april's where we're) (578)

In short, in these *by* phrases, such as "earth by april," one must accept and go through the first to reach the second. In this way, in "when by now," *now* comes out of and transcends *when*: or as Cummings contends, "beauty is more now than dying's when" (592). Since *when* and *now*, and the other words in these succinct phrases, have attained an accumulated meaning for those familiar with Cummings' vocabulary, they resonate. In "wish by spirit," to wish is not enough: one who wants to be alive, to be a verb, an IS, must push through wish to spirit, must move beyond mere velleity to drive and determination. Or, as Cummings puts it as another of his "five simple facts," "Only The Game Fish Swims Upstream" (803). Finally, "if by yes" is the consummate Cummings affirmation in lines such as "forgetting if, remember yes" (688) and "yes is a pleasant country: / if's wintry" (578). Those who live *if* lives have never transcended its negativity; they have never achieved the transcendent *yes* of anyone and noone.

This transcendence has engaged Friedman from first to last. It culminates in his *(Re)Valuing Cummings* where he concludes, "What [Cummings] *did* manage to enlarge and deepen—and this is

my particular emphasis, what survives all the doubts, what seems most of permanent value—is his vision of transcendence. I believe I have done much to help clarify what this is about and I do hope that it has had and will have a salutary effect upon his reception and reputation" [172].

Students of E.E.Cummings all agree: it has and it will.

As I revalue "anyone lived in a pretty how town," I have attempted to demonstrate how anyone and noone achieve their own transcendence. I remember my old debating partner who moved me at least to *if* and I acknowledge my enduring debt to Norman Friedman who has labored indefatigably and brilliantly over many years to move us all to savor Cummings' transcendent yes.

Palo Alto, CA

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