

Learning to Live in "a pretty how town"

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Since writing my dissertation on Cummings (admittedly a good "autumn, winter, spring, summer" ago) I have shared the E. E. Cummings' Society's commitment to examining the enduring depth and complexity of Estlin Cummings' poetry, prose, and drama (CP 515). Since Cummings' work first appeared while he was still a Harvard student, he has been admired and admonished for his trickery or the originality of his diction, syntax, and punctuation. Add to that his fascination with the bawdy escapades of amorous enlisted men, and we can understand why it has been difficult for established literary critics, let alone sophomore students, to intuit that the unconventional elements of Cummings' work are not mere surface embellishments designed to send bourgeois poet-tasters in search of smelling salts. Cummings' innovations are not chicanery but literary master strokes.

I've had the luxury of teaching Cummings' stylistic devices in depth in a poetics course, but I usually lead discussions about him, as probably most of us do, in an hour-long survey class where we have grown complacent if not fond of saying that we present "a canon of methods instead of a canon of texts." Cummings' work demands that we help students read it both playfully and respectfully; it requires not necessarily specialized skills, but special attention to the reading methods students are practicing. So for the purposes of this Cummings in the classroom feature, I will describe a one-course lesson in Cummings appreciation based upon commonly anthologized texts.

I can count on the students to have a pretty good understanding of "my sweet old etcetera," "may i feel" and "she being brand." In fact, I can usually elicit knowing laughter by simply reciting, "dreaming . . . of your etcetera" (CP 275), or "Come?! hmmm" (CP 399). But we might spend a few minutes surmising why Cummings would encode his sexy messages in pun or schematic tricks. Even people born in the 1990s realize that one hundred years ago no one watched *Sex in the City* on television, and that is as good a place as any to begin a brief lesson on Cummings: with the recognition that in spite of their poverty of media and modesty of expression, our ancestors did enjoy the procreation that brought us all to life and hence to our understanding of E. E. Cummings' poetry on the page. Cummings' fascination with the erotic is easily illustrated with

reproductions of a few of his nude couples paintings as these provide the most concrete comparison between his twin careers as poet and painter.

While I'm on the subject of Cummings' paintings, I introduce a few of his "Noise" paintings because their synaesthetic attempts to communicate sound help illustrate visually how we are to see more than read most of Cummings' experiments with punctuation and blank space (Cohen, Plates 1, 2, 5). Of course, they are invaluable in teaching the verbal synaesthetics in the phrase "my father will be(deep like a rose/tall like a rose" [in "if there are any heavens my mother" (CP 353)] or in the phrase "your eyes have their silence" and "the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses" [in "somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond" (CP 367)]. Most college literature students will vaguely recall the coinage of "mud-luscious" (27) from their early education and already know that when the letters l, e, a, f, fall down the page, the answer to the equation is "loneliness" (673) and the fate that all mortals must mourn for.

Students will also have some recognition that "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is a universal narrative about the innate goodness of individuals versus the negativity of society. So I like to begin to delve into Cummings' use of language with the first line of that poem, asking readers to move a single word to make an archaic yet grammatical arrangement of "anyone lived in a pretty how town." Their first guess is invariably "how anyone lived in a pretty town?" so I press them further. Which word could be a verb? Which ones could be the sentence's subject? How could this be used to make a sentence that sounds like something one's grandmother would utter in glee? Together we produce the dated exclamation: "Anyone lived in how pretty a town!" And from that, the "up so floating many bells down" (CP 515) invite "bettyandisbel" (CP 27) to run over from their poem and populate an indistinct water-color Currier and Ives print of Boston/New Haven/Muncie Indiana "for God, for country, and for Yale" (CP 272) with its various church steeples and campus campaniles.

We talk about why "anyone" is the best pronoun/name for "everyman" because it invites every reader to insert him or herself into the poem as protagonist. After all, most of us like to think that we are optimists who "sing our didn't" and "dance our did," who believe in possibilities and ideal love—in contrast with the masses surrounding us who sow and reap negativity (CP 515). And "noone" is a good name for anyone's companion because in the duality and ambiguity present in the best literature, our protagonist/hero both finds a partner and lives the Romantic American

dream, and he is a rugged individualist because his partner is simultaneously a person named “noone” and literally no one at all. The wished for or realized enmeshment of our protagonist and his partner is rendered complete when the empathy of “she laughed his joy and cried his grief” turns into a state where “anyone’s any” is “all to her.”

Is there a better, more succinct description of a wedding recorded anywhere in Christendom than “they laughed their cryings and did their dance”? (If you don’t think so, you’ve never been to a wedding with my mother who laughs at her own sentimental tears or had each of my uncles bruise your toes in the Texas two-step.) And has anyone more truthfully summarized the vows that lovers exchange both publicly and privately than to say, “They said their nevers”? (E.g. I will never stop loving you, love anyone as much as you, cheat on you, leave you.) The exceptional nature that sets anyone and noone apart from society is most apparent when “anyone [dies] (I guess)” and “noone stooped to kiss his face.” He (or they) have lived a life apart from “Women and men, (both little and small or dong and ding),” and even from innocent children because “down they forgot as up they grew.” Theirs has been such a complete happiness or loneliness that even the poem’s attentive narrator does not know when anyone died.

Because anyone could be anyone but cannot be everyone, the union of anyone and noone can represent Love itself, eternal, as reflected in its duration “sun, moon, stars, rain” as opposed to the temporal, material, limited lives of the petty characters who make up society. Everyone’s existence is measured in fruitless (“sowing their isn’t and reaping their same”) years of “summer, autumn, winter, spring.” Eternal, love surpasses this lifetime, perhaps literally in heaven or figuratively in myth when “wish” becomes “spirit,” and the great “if” of existence is confirmed by “yes,” the realization of eternal consciousness.

His or their physical burial, represented as “earth by April” alludes to an earlier iconoclastic Cummings’ poem, “when god lets my body be,” Cummings’ satirical response to Joyce Kilmer’s saccharine, “Trees.” In “when god lets my body be,” life springs eternal, fed from the corpse of its speaker whose heart retains the motion of carnal love through “the bulge and nuzzle of the sea” (CP 19). Like the characters in relief on Keat’s Grecian Urn, anyone lives in the eternity of “sun, moon, stars, rain” because that is how Love endures (CP 515). The poem, which begins with the imagery of a quaint American town broadens out to the classical theme

of Love transcending mortality.

Cummings' 1923 "when god lets my body be," can provide a lesson in poetic values if students examine it as a parody of Kilmer's 1914 "Trees." With the poems projected side by side, most will see that both are written in rhymed couplets and repeat some imagery (e.g. trees, breasts, birds, snow). Cummings revises Kilmer's imagery with more modern, edgy descriptions; for example, while Kilmer says of the tree, "Upon whose bosom snow has lain" (18), Cummings writes of his body's "strong fingers beneath the snow" (CP 19). Kilmer relies on a sing-song iambic tetrameter throughout, while Cummings varies his iambic tetrameter with several seven-syllable lines. Cummings' poem improves on Kilmer's use of rhyme; for example, Kilmer rhymes the archaic "prest" with "breast," while Cummings reaches for the near rhyme between "breasts" and "wastes." Kilmer's poem is six couplets, and Cummings' is seven, making it more recognizable as a quasi-sonnet. But where Cummings' poem really supersedes Kilmer's is in its theme. While Kilmer writes about the beauty of nature, Cummings incorporates the same theme into a larger vision of nature as the seat of eternity where soul and earth regenerate one another.

From there, we are usually ready to compare the torture and murder of Olaf with epic recitations about Greek heroes. The poem's narrator "sings" of Olaf because he is invoking the muse to help him recount his valiant history. It is clear to most that Cummings splits the word "objector" after its root, "object" to demonstrate that Olaf's fellow soldiers and commanding officers fail to perceive his humanity (CP 340). But the poem's many metonymies may have escaped student readers, so it is worth asking them to identify the larger bodies referenced by Olaf's "heart," his compatriot's "kindred intellects," the "rag" of life to which Olaf clings, his country represented by its "flag," Colonel Trig named by his decoration of "the silver bird," and American nationalism connoted by "blue-eyed" and "blond" characteristics.

My students are quick to note that Olaf uses the words "shit" and "fucking," which are not typical poetic diction, yet they understand that these are the word choices of a poet who is both passionate and objective about the story he relates. Although Olaf is careful to "respond without getting annoyed" because he is the perfect "passive" example of a spite-less "conscientious object-or," he is nonetheless a real man in exigent circumstances.

I also ask my students to consider Cummings' usual conglomeration of

natural and contrived end rhymes and to see how those advance and reiterate the key points in his narrative. For example, the way the pun in “gave,” “grave,” and “shave” helps the poem pivot on the point of Olaf’s impending death, both caused and disregarded by his vain colonel.

Students will frequently confess that, although they caught the drift of torture in “I sing of Olaf glad and big,” they did not divine the whole story, and that furthermore, they are clueless when it comes to “my father moved through dooms of love” (CP 520-521).

I introduce “my father moved . . .” by telling the students the salient facts of Edward Cummings’ life, courtesy of Richard Kennedy’s biography, and ask the students to take a stab at Cummings’ relationship with his father as evidenced by their initial reading of the poem. In spite of the difficulties the poem presents in terms of diction, syntax, paradox (contradictory facts that are nonetheless true) and oxymoron (yoking of contradictory terms to form a new concept), the speaker’s admiration for his subject comes shining through.

I then assign each of the poem’s 17 stanzas to individual students to puzzle over for 5-10 minutes, asking them to write a straightforward prose translation of the point that quatrain makes. At the conclusion of that time, we read our paraphrase of the poem aloud, taking each student voice in order. We then discuss the examples Cummings has used to sketch the character and compassion of his father. After that, I ask the same students to read their stanza as Cummings wrote it, so that we might perform the poem with as much understanding and clarity of expression as possible. Then I give silence its say. The lesson teaches itself, and I suppress the desire to say, “you are mine,” hoping the students will respond with, “it’s divine” (CP 399).

In teaching Cummings I strive to convey, not just old chestnut texts, but to build on students’ previous experience and amusement derived from those chestnuts to convey a broader lesson about the uniqueness of the poetic genre. Close reading of Cummings leads to the epiphany that poetic devices are rhetorical as well as decorative or clever. After the students have gained at least a modicum or admiration for the purpose behind Cummings’ typographical and rhetorical flourishes, I ask them to swear that they will thereafter capitalize the poet’s name. They might as well get used to it; they’ll have to remember it when they join the E. E. Cummings Society later in their careers.

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