

Doveglion – The E. E. Cummings and José Garcia Villa Connection

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The late Philippine-American poet, José Garcia Villa once said: “When my first volume of poems was published in Manila, I adopted the pen name, ‘Doveglion’—acronym for dove-eagle-lion to present a portrait of the poet: “gentle as a dove, free as an eagle, and fierce as a lion.” E. E. Cummings chose this pseudonym for the title of a poem written about Villa, one of his closest friends for two decades. This paper will refer to Cummings’ poem, “Doveglion,” as well as to unpublished letters and other writings to illustrate the mutual respect and loyalty of these two unlikely comrades, who nevertheless shared many likenesses and values, including their poetry, art, wit, privacy and criticism.

Shortly after Villa was expelled from the University of the Philippines for publishing a sensuous poem deemed to be “obscene,” his short story, “Mir-i-nisa” was awarded first prize by the Free Press, and with his prize money, he emigrated to America in 1930 to attend the University of New Mexico. Soon after, Villa launched his highly acclaimed literary magazine, *Clay*, and in 1933, the renowned critic, Edward J. O’Brien, wrote in the introduction to Villa’s first American publication, *Footnote to Youth* (1933) that this body of work “places him among the half dozen short story writers in America who count.”

Nevertheless, in 1938 after Villa read Cummings’ *Collected Poems*, he completely abandoned the short story as his literary medium. Thereafter, according to Villa, he dedicated himself entirely to lyric poetry for good. In 1941, the Philippine Writers’ League published *Poems by Doveglion*. When I asked Villa why he didn’t use his real name, he explained, “I was angry with my father for not supporting me in America, and, therefore, I refused to honor him by using my surname, so I chose the pseudonym—Doveglion—which I created myself.” Quite frankly, Villa never had a positive relationship with his embittered father, former Chief-of-Staff to General Aquinaldo in the Philippine Revolution against Spain.

1941 was a high water mark in Villa’s literary career as well as his personal life, for it was the year that he finally met Cummings, his literary (non)hero, and the two would remain close friends until Cummings died in 1962. On a copy of an unpublished letter written by Cummings, dated May 31, 1941, with the salutation: “Dear Mr. Doveglion—” Villa has written the following note, apparently to the Harvard University Houghton Library curator: “Doveglion was a pseudonym I had given myself. (In *Adventures in Value* there is a poem by Cummings on Doveglion.) Cummings’ *Collected Poems* of 1938 excited me very much, turned my interest to poetry completely and instigated me to write poems. I wrote to him expressing my great admiration for his work—a letter a year—but he never replied until the letter above—and probably because I threatened never to write to him again if he didn’t reply to my latest letter!” The letter to which Villa alludes was written from Silver Lake,

New Hampshire, in which Cummings writes: “thanks kindly for your good letter of May 27. I hope to, some day, deserve its praise. If you’ll mail me your copies of my books (address above) I’ll inscribe them gladly; and if you should be in New York at the end of October, please let me know (4 Patchin Place). Here’s wishing you good luck—sincerely EEC.” On June 7, 1941, Villa responded: “Dear Mr. Cummings, I am grateful to you for your very kind reply to my letter. I hope indeed to see you when you return to New York in the fall. . . . My true name is José Garcia Villa—Doveglion is a pseudonym, a literary pseudonym I use. Perhaps I should apologize for having used it in my letter—but you see, it is also my ‘official’ pseudonym. —I have written a book of prose—short stories—published by Scribners several years ago: *Footnote to Youth*. I was very young then & was interested in the short story—but now I know & feel that poetry is the final, essential writing. Again, I thank you for your kind letter. Yours faithfully, José Garcia Villa.”

No doubt Cummings was amused by Villa’s confession and apology for using his pseudonym—Doveglion—so much so, that shortly before Cummings died, he chose this *nom de plume* as the title of his poem which appears opposite Marion Morehouse’s dramatic black and white photograph of Villa’s chiseled, chieftain-like profile—the background, pitch black—his chin raised, his eye transfixed, the only light—seeming to emanate from his mystical, knowing, transcendental trance. “Doveglion”—Cummings’ poem and Morehouse’s photograph—first appeared in *Adventures in Value* in 1962 and was later published in Liveright’s *Complete Poems 1904-1962*, edited by George Firmage (1994).

Noteworthy is the fact that “Doveglion” is one of only two poems Cummings ever wrote about a contemporary serious poet. (The other was written for Marianne Moore, which also appears in the above mentioned book, containing fifty photographs by Morehouse and text by Cummings.) These two poems were the last Cummings would ever see to publication because he died shortly before this volume was released. Cummings’ respect for these two poets was genuinely felt; he believed in their poetry, their craftsmanship, their technique, their dedication to the word, and he respected Moore and Villa as *rare, honest, creative, courageous, noble, human beings*. Such were the virtues Cummings admired “in an epoch of UNself—to be ONEself” (*Adventures* IV 3; CP 903). The poem “Doveglion” describes Villa as a seer, one who, like Socrates, knows himself; implicit in the fact that Doveglion (the poet) is seeing “himself” (“not something outside himself / not anything inside himself”) “but [elementally] himself”—the “real” individualist; and, therefore, to Cummings, Villa was one of the rare human beings who truly mattered:

DOVEGLION

he isn't looking at anything
he isn't looking for something
he isn't looking
he is seeing

what

not something outside himself
not anything inside himself
but himself

himself how

not as some anyone
not as any someone

only as a noone (who is everyone) (*Adventures* IV 5; CP 904)

It is evident from this poem how much Cummings respected Villa as a person as well as a poet. Cummings' lines, "he isn't looking / he is seeing" describe what the best poets are capable of—perceiving, sensing, or in Villa's own terminology, seeing by "EYE 3." Cummings also knew that Villa was not a self-promoter (perhaps even to a fault), and that may explain why writers like E. San Juan Jr. say that "José Garcia Villa . . . is probably the most neglected twentieth-century writer on the planet" (191). Cummings pays his greatest homage to Villa in the final three lines of "Doveglion"—"not as some anyone / not as any someone"—because to Cummings Doveglion is not like "most" people! In fact, Cummings' perception of his close friend is that: he is selfless; he is "a noone." Yet, quite mysteriously, he is "everyone" much as we discover in Villa's mystical and *divine* poems. Perhaps Villa transcends normalcy (mostpeople); his humanity is the humanity we must all search for in ourselves, which is: *possibility*. But real poets are more than real people, aren't they? As Villa once said, "I am a freak. I am part male, part female and part child—the freakish me is the essence of me—the artist aloof and at play." Or, on another occasion quipped: "Poetry is queer, that's why poets are queer!"

To this point, Norman Friedman writes: "The poet, for Cummings, is merely the type of the true man, and all true men are poets: men who can see with clear eyes, feel with unconditioned emotions, and love without fear; men who are whole, entire, and alive As the world goes, he and such like are 'anyones' and 'noones' as opposed to the important 'someones' and 'everyones'" (*Art* 10, 12). In "Doveglion,"



Figure 1: Doveglion (photo Marion Morehouse)

the poet is not just “any someone” or “anyone” but a “someone.” The “noone,” in this context, is used by Cummings to contrast Doveglion with the ‘best’ of all ‘possibilities’—“everyone.” As Friedman clarifies later, it is typical of Cummings to use various combinations of comparative and superlative adjectives “for an effect of constant choosing, preferring, discriminating, of overtopping the best and the worst, and of the transcendence of extremes” (*Art* 70). In the last line, therefore, apropos of Cummings’ form or voice, he is consistent in “varying to the *right* of this norm (‘everyone’) [to produce] a purely serious, archaic, reverential, and formal style, while varying to the *left* (‘noone’) creates a purely vulgar, violent, burlesque, and mock style,

and it is clear, each of these extremes has its special utility for glorifying and ridiculing, respectively” (Friedman, *Art* 71). Cummings, therefore, is treating his friend with reverence and is thus glorifying the poet (Doveglion) and the man (Villa). The juxtaposition of “someone” with “everyone” provides an intensification, or “mutual blending of extremes wherein the lesser absorbs the greater, which is one chief kind of paradox or reconciliation of opposites that Cummings practices,” such as, “here less than nothing’s more than everything” (*Art* 71).

Villa’s poetry is often compared to William Blake’s—for its spirituality and child-like vision—and although Villa’s religious, mystical context is quite different from Cummings’ more joyful themes, both poets are distinctly transcendental romantics. Yet people who knew Villa witnessed that he could say the most hurtful, mean things; he was a curmudgeon at times, and like Cummings, notorious for his crankiness. (Only Villa did not have Marion to intercede for him.) Cummings would be the first to agree with Villa’s statement, that “I don’t like losing a friend, but I must maintain a standard for friendship.” It was this standard that Villa held in highest esteem for friendship and especially for poetry, which was often mistaken for mere arrogance. Villa has also said: “Only in art may you be mean, but never in friendship.” Such high moral standards often dictated Villa’s temperament. And if you didn’t like to hear what he had to say, he might retort: “If you are ordinary, you find me outrageous. If you’re civilized, you find me beautiful.” I believe that the two things Villa respected most were “Intelligence” and “Imagination.” Therefore, his personality as an individual and as a poet was energized by these two qualities. Above all, Villa admired and respected Cummings, and until his good friend died, he referred to him as “Master.” Of course, Villa tells the story that when Cummings first read a sheaf of his poems, on the next visit he greeted him by asking Marion to “Please give the Master a chair.”

I believe the poem “Doveglion” is a reconfirmation of Cummings’ respect for Villa as a friend, but also as a poet. In his correspondence with Cummings there are several such affirmations, including Cummings’ cryptic but beautiful recommendation of Villa’s first book of poetry, *Have Come, Am Here*, to Viking Publishers in 1942: “Dear Mr Huebsch—it appears through a letter from Mr Mark Van Doren that you’d like my confidential opinion of a certain manuscript. I very privately do not doubt that Vikings are blueeyed fools if they pass up José Garcia Villa’s cargo...”

On September 5, 1942, upon the publication of *Have Come, Am Here*, Cummings wrote a congratulatory note to his friend: “and I am alive to find that a brave man rediscovers the sky —Xairete.” This comment appears on the back cover of Villa’s 1979 publication, *Appassionata: Poems in Praise of Love*, but in a somewhat altered text. As the co-publisher of this book (King and Cowen, 1979), I recall that Villa could not locate his friend’s note and from memory wrote it as: “and i am alive to see a man against the sky.” By “brave man rediscovers the sky” I believe Cummings was referring to Villa’s innovative, experimental poetic style, which included Villa’s “reversed consonance” innovation. It may also be alluding to Villa’s “dove-eagle-lion” quality; that is, his “lion” (bravery) and “dove-eagle” (soaring) poetry, that had met with

resounding acclaim by most critics of the day, including Marianne Moore, Mark Van Doren, Conrad Aiken, Richard Eberhart, David Daiches, Babette Deutsch, Peter Monroe Jack, Horace Gregory and others. Dame Edith Sitwell would champion Villa, writing in her introduction to *Selected Poems and New* (1958): “The best of these poems are amongst the most beautiful written in our time.”

Cummings’ recommendation of Villa for his first Guggenheim Fellowship, written in his own illimitable style, states: “Mr Villa is, in my proud & humble opinion, a Poet: this, believe it or not, is a little more than everything else the undersigned could say for him.” The use of the capital “P” for poet is the highest tribute Cummings could bestow upon his friend; Villa also was awarded a Guggenheim in 1942, and his book was the recipient of the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award that year as well.

Out of devotion and loyalty to his friend, Villa, who was co-editing the *Harvard Wake* with Seymour Lawrence, decided to serve as the guest editor of a special “Cummings Number” in the Spring of 1946. Prior to this date, Cummings’ reputation was growing but was limited to some extent to a relatively small coterie of enthusiastic readers. Friedman also writes that the New Critics were not enamored of Cummings’ recurring themes of joy, spring and love, which they believed to be juvenile and anti-intellectual [Friedman, *(Re)Valuing* 72-73]. After *Wake*’s “Cummings Number” appeared in 1946, however, Cummings’ popularity as a poet began to grow, particularly on college campuses, and according to Friedman, “By 1950, Cummings’ career was beginning perceptibly to rise. *Xaipe* appeared, and he was at last beginning to win prestigious grants and prizes” [(*Re)Valuing* 135]. Cummings was well-aware that Villa’s *Wake* edition was the major catalyst for this new acceptance of his poetry, and he was forever grateful though somewhat humbled by his friend’s noble effort, which he confides in a letter to Ezra Pound, dated April 4, 1946: “glad you enjoyed ‘Wake’—for which a Philippine-American poet named José Garcia Villa was entirely responsible: he announced (one afternoon) that I should & would be ‘honoured’; & all protests proved unavailing. Am myself still dazed by the generosity of nearly everyone concerned—should hate to be called on for an equivalent job” (Ahearn 177). The “everyone concerned” to whom Cummings refers is a contributors’ list that reads like a “Who’s Who” of poets, authors, and critics of the 1930’s and 40’s, described in detail in my article “E. E. Cummings’ Lyricism Today.”

Cummings and Villa shared much in common, particularly their belief in creating a modern, lyrical form of poetry, that they knew could not be fully understood nor appreciated by “most critics” nor most other non-poets, for that matter, or “PEOTS”—as Villa preferred with his coinage. In describing another Guggenheim project he was to apply for in 1951, Villa writes: “. . . Although I would rather write poems instead, the project somehow pleases me for it is about our kind of poetry, which is the True Poetry—though everybody else be to the contrary. . .” (unpublished letter to Cummings).

Villa, like his master, wrote and read poetry “technically.” Villa often mentioned how he had read a poem of Cummings and immediately knew that Cummings had

created a very special, very innovative versification and rhyme scheme. He confided to me that “I wrote to Cummings the moment I read that poem, and he was surprised how readily I had discovered it. . . I once mentioned to Babette Deutsch, at a party, that I intended to write about Cummings’ new rhyme-scheme, and she pleaded with me to tell her which poem it was. But I refused to tell her, and to this day, I have only shared my discovery with Cummings.” Only after Villa’s death, reading his correspondence with Cummings, was I able to uncover the “mystery” poem that had excited him so much. On October 28, 1952, Villa wrote a congratulatory letter to Cummings: “Dearest Master—I have just now read your very beautiful poem in the Oct Poetry [magazine] . . . And what an admirable rhyme-scheme you have devised (first two lines of each stanza)—it is most wonderful and difficult and could come only from a Poem-master. I bow, sir, at your beautiful achievement, and how humbly and yet most joyfully.” On November 9th Cummings acknowledges his friend’s prowess, beginning notably with the dignified salutation—”Sir— I bow to your bow:adding the well known proverb ‘set a thief to catch a thief’ yes, Marion & I are now (temporarily!) Cantabridgians; & we should be delighted if circumstances permitted us to share a lapsang with the Komma King. . .”. Cummings deflects Villa’s generous praise by praising him as a poetry super-sleuth, and furthermore, by referring to him as the “Komma King,” acknowledges his own contribution to poetry, perhaps sensitive to the fact that Villa was not being treated kindly by the anti-modernist critics who believed Villa’s comma poem innovation to be facile and not as germane to poetic movement, or *modulation*, as he believed it to be.

What Villa probably never knew was that several years later Cummings gave a sheaf of 175 worksheets to Norman Friedman, a young Harvard graduate who had already written his honor’s thesis on Cummings and was in the process of writing the first full-length book of criticism on Cummings’ poetry. Friedman proceeded to write a forty-page-chapter—a brilliant, precise, scholarly, analytic study—on this very poem Villa had discovered in *Poetry* in 1952 (*Art* 126-158). The poem, in question, of course, is “rosetree, rosetree” (CP 763) which reappeared in *95 Poems*. Marion Morehouse—who rescued the poet’s worksheets from oblivion—told Friedman that the “rosetree” variants had been worked on over a period of ten years (*Art* 138). Richard Kennedy writes of Friedman’s accomplishment: “His critical study still stands as the best treatment of Cummings’ poetry that has ever been done” (Kennedy 466).

Villa remained devoted to Cummings and his wife, Marion. Shortly after Cummings died, Villa wrote a touching letter of condolence to Marion, expressing how painful the loss was to him, dated, September 22, 1962: “Dear Marion, I have intentionally delayed writing to you, knowing that you would be flooded with messages. Also, it might have been very difficult for me to write then — I was so shaken by the news (I heard it over the radio — I was breakfasting & suddenly I was in tears. It is not easy to say this — I, who have been priding myself on having gotten ‘harder.’ But E E was my Master — I would never have written poetry but for his example. My mother died last year & I had no tears. Now you see that the Master was Loved.) Please bear well. My Master was a great poet & a great human being. But you shine

also, & with your own grace & you must continue to shine. With love, José V.”

Cummings died on my 22nd birthday, September 3, 1962; two years later I began studying poetry with Villa. And the kind of poetry he taught was Cummings’ and Doveglion’s kind: “[their] kind of poetry — the True Poetry.” And I believe this to be the *true poetry* to this day.

My name is José, my name is Villa
My true name is Doveglion.
Doveglion is the author of José Garcia Villa.

—from “A Composition,” José Garcia Villa (1908-1997)

—Teaneck, New Jersey

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