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The Pragmatism of "anyone"

Paul Headrick

I

"anyone lived in a pretty how town" is one of the most discussed E. E. Cummings poems. At least two critics have also claimed that it is one of his most important, because of the close relation between what it expresses and the entire body of Cummings' work and thought. Writing in 1964, Barry Marks notes that the poem "presents Cummings' whole metaphysic" (38). Thirty years later, Richard Kennedy states that it "contains the central myth of Cummings' life" (6). The various literary analyses of the poem, including those of Marks and Kennedy, do a good job of showing the subtle ways in which it engages individualism, nonconformity, transcendentalism, romanticism, and other important elements of Cummings' "myth" or "metaphysic." Curiously, a number of the responses, including some not from literary critics but from linguists, form an interesting narrative that reenacts a conflict within the poem, drawing attention to another element in Cummings' work: pragmatism. "anyone lived in a pretty how town" connects Cummings to the American tradition of pragmatism through the position it takes against a certain kind of conformity, the idea of human identity it establishes, the nature of the love it dramatizes, and, less directly, the conception it develops of the nature of human understanding.

The linguists who have studied the poem have focused their attention on the difficulties it poses, as Tanya Reinhart explains:

The puzzling fact about this collection of deviant expressions is that in the context of the poem as a whole they make sense, and readers of the poem can easily give it an interpretation (at least a partial one). This fact has naturally intrigued several linguists (86).

Reinhart refers to many studies by linguists dealing directly or indirectly with "anyone lived in a pretty how town." The single passage from the poem that draws much scrutiny (taking the lead from the first in the series of articles, by Samuel R. Levin) is "he danced his did." In 1980, Richard Cureton reviewed the importance for linguists of that single clause:

In the last twenty years, Cummings' line "he danced his did" has been at the center of almost every major discussion of the deviant language of literature. In the last two decades, hundreds of pages and scores of articles have been written which have attempted to assess and motivate its linguistic status and aesthetic success. Without question, "he danced his did" has been more closely scrutinized and extensively analyzed than any other single phrase in English literature. (245)

The articles to which Cureton refers investigate just how our grammar could generate such a sentence. One of the most interesting suggestions, proposed by James Peter Thorne, is to think of the poem as having been written in another language, or at least a different dialect (51). Collectively, the linguists' efforts produce many worthwhile observations, but they do not seem to succeed in explaining what Reinhart says puzzles them all: how it is that readers can make sense of the poem.

The question of how the poem can be understood is taken up indirectly in a comment by Stanley Fish, in his essay in a somewhat controversial collection titled *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*. A portion of that essay needs to be summarized in order to for the intriguing connections among Fish's comment, linguistic analyses, an earlier criticism by R. P. Blackmur, and the poem itself to become clear.

Fish uses Chomskian linguistics as an analogy for the sort of literary theory against which all the contributors to the collection argue. He accepts the definition of "theory" given in the title essay by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels: it is "a special project in literary criticism: the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general" (11). Fish describes Chomskian linguistics as involving

a turn from an empirical activity—the deriving of grammatical rules from a finite body of observed sentences—to a rational activity—the discovery of a set of constraints which, rather than being generalizations from observed behavior, are explanatory of that behavior in the sense that they are what make it possible. (108)

A complete description of these constraints would act like a machine into which a sentence could be plugged. The machine would produce a description of the sentence identical to that which would be produced by, in Chomsky's words, "an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly" (quoted in Fish 109). Fish isolates two goals of theory's project, whether the project involves descriptions of sentences or interpretations of literary texts, or any other activity: the first is to "*guide* practice from a position above or outside it," and the second is to

reform practice by neutralizing interest, by substituting for the parochial perspective of some local or partisan point of view the perspective of a general rationality to which the individual subordinates his contextually conditioned opinions and beliefs." (110)

Fish, a pragmatist, asserts that theory will never succeed, because "the primary data and formal laws necessary to its success will always be spied or picked out from within

the contextual circumstances of which they are supposedly independent” (110). Theory can never guide practice, because it, like everything else, is embedded in practice.

Less explicitly, Fish suggests that the goals of theory are not only unrealizable, but also undesirable. He explains this undesirability in several ways, among them with a passing reference in his discussion of Chomsky’s “ideal speaker-listener.” Such a speaker-listener, Fish says, would fail to come up with descriptions of some sentences, would reject them as “ungrammatical or irregular or deviant” (109). He offers an example of a sentence that would be thus rejected, one we are familiar with: “He danced his did” (109). This reference, however, is a hint at the undesirability of the goals of theory only if we agree that a reader who can’t come up with a meaningful description of “He danced his did” is not the kind of reader we would like to be.

Fish’s unattributed quotation alludes not only to Cummings’ poem, but also to the analyses by linguists, and the rest of his essay, though it makes no other reference to the Cummings discussion, nevertheless clearly shows that he believes such analyses fail because they all take grammar to be generative. Linguists, however, are not the only ones who have difficulty with the issue of understanding Cummings.

In an important early essay of Cummings criticism, R. P. Blackmur rejects much of Cummings’ poetry on the grounds that it is, simply, unintelligible, although it needs to be noted that the article was written before the publication of *50 Poems*, in which “anyone lived in a pretty how town” appears (poem number 19). Importantly, Blackmur’s essay, “Notes on E. E. Cummings’ Language,” rejects Cummings’ poetry for reasons that are different from the ones that Fish surmises would underlie such a rejection, given a neutral application of Chomsky’s competence model. Blackmur’s argument with respect to Cummings’ poetry, however, is still connected to Fish’s argument about theory.

Blackmur’s essay implies an understanding of the way meaning is generated that is very different from Chomsky’s (as Fish summarizes it), relying as it does not on ahistorical rules, but on practice and history. Blackmur says that a word’s possible meaning “is increased with each use” (111).¹ Rather than saying that some of Cummings’ poetry is unintelligible because it breaks rules, he claims that it cannot be understood because its language is “so far distorted from convention” (109). When Blackmur does accept a line of Cummings’ poetry, it is because he finds that Cummings “did not . . . attempt the impossible, he merely stretched the probable” (122). He stretches convention, but not to the point where it becomes “invention” and, thus, incomprehensible (117).

Considered together, Blackmur’s lengthy and forceful response to Cummings, Fish’s argument (including the passing reference to “anyone lived in a pretty how town”), and various linguistic studies point to ways in which intelligibility becomes a

problem, ways that constitute polarized attitudes, not only to the nature of language but to much more. Intelligibility is a problem for the hypothetical speaker-listener who operates by theory, and who will fail to adjust to shifts in practice, or (to use Blackmur's words somewhat out of context) will fail to "negotiate the miracle of meaning" (114). Intelligibility is also a problem for a writer-speaker who, while feeling free to break rules, fails to recognize the nature of the necessary tie to convention, and whose language, then, to quote Blackmur again, "is so far distorted from convention as to be inapprehensible except by lucky guess" (109). In the first instance we can say the fault lies with the audience, in the second with the speaker.

To summarize, Fish refers to a line from "anyone lived in a pretty how town" as an example of what a certain kind of reader could not understand, while Blackmur criticizes Cummings as representative of an anti-culture, anti-intellect group whose words cannot be understood by anyone. Ironically, the opposition that comes to light here, and the attitudes behind it, are central to "anyone lived in a pretty how town."

II

In "anyone lived in a pretty how town," Cummings opposes theory as Fish understands it, opposes it, importantly, not only as it would work in linguistics or literary interpretation, but in all human activity. But the poem also opposes the anti-intellectual position that Blackmur, writing before *50 Poems* was published, accuses Cummings of taking, a position that can usefully be understood as subjectivist. A reading which seeks to demonstrate this opposition and show how the poem expresses its pragmatism is consistent with much of what earlier critics have said about the poem but different perhaps in its emphasis. What I am offering is not a complete reading but a look at some key lines in light of the issues that Fish and Blackmur raise.

A reading that emphasizes the poem's expression of pragmatism begins with the point made independently by Rushworth Kidder (144) and S. John Macksoud (73), regarding its critique of conformity. Kidder puts it very clearly, observing that the first line suggests that the town is "focused on the 'how,' the method and rule, of things" (144). The people of the town, in other words, are theoretically inclined; they look for rules to govern practice. With respect to all of life, they are in the same position as are, with respect to understanding language, the readers imagined by the linguists. The theoretician, in the manner Fish describes, seeks to eliminate difference with a prescriptive method. It is this attitude that is behind the conformity the poem condemns in the line "they sowed their isn't they reaped their same." Difference is one of the things theory attempts to subdue, and subduing difference by adherence to a method is an important goal for the residents of the "pretty how town."

The negativity of the people of the town has deservedly drawn the attention of critics, in contrast with the celebratory anyone, who "sang his didn't" and "danced his did." The townspeople, however, also dance. What is uncelebratory in those who

“did their dance” is the quality suggested by “did” as the verb, a quality John M. Gill describes as “deadly dull” and, even more accurately, as “dutiful” (82). The dance that the townspeople do fulfills something prescribed and is uncelebratory because of this dutiful sense of fulfillment of prescription. Dance is celebratory only when it involves individual expression within its conventions, not when it is the mere following of rules.

In contrast to the townspeople, “anyone” “danced his did.” While the townspeople reduce what should be expressive and celebratory to rote rule following, all of existence has something improvisational and expressive about it for “anyone.” He dances his existence. To put this idea in terms borrowed from Fish and Blackmur, conventions never harden into rules for “anyone” but are stretched by individual practice.

If we were to use the terms of Cummings’ poem to describe the mistake that Blackmur thinks Cummings makes generally, we might say that his movement is unrecognizable as dance. You can improvise, you can stretch convention, and you can change our very concept of dance in this manner, but if you go so far as to ignore conventions, which are established historically through relations between people, through practice, we won’t be able to tell that you are dancing. This objection is at the center of the argument pragmatism offers against the polar opposite of the theoretical position: subjectivism. Contrary to the theoretical view that meaning derives from rules (and which cannot cope with or understand “deviant” expressions), the subjectivist views meaning as an entirely rule-free, convention-free, individual matter. This view has difficulty producing understandable expressions because the “individual” here is abstracted from relations with others. We could restate Blackmur’s criticism as saying that Cummings’ poetry is subjectivist. Rather than placing the blame for unintelligibility on the audience for being unable to do anything other than follow rules, erroneously thinking that rules govern practice, he places the blame on the poet for ignoring convention and thinking that he can stand outside practice yet still communicate.

Blackmur’s essay was published in 1931, before the publication of “anyone lived in a pretty how town” in *50 Poems*. In a later review of *50 Poems*, Blackmur says Cummings has improved, but still exhibits some of the same flaws. Of the fifty poems, Blackmur likes ten without reservation, which, from him, is high praise (204). We do not know if “anyone lived in a pretty how town” is one of those about which he has no reservations, but in that poem it is not subjectivism that is offered in response to theory. Something quite different is articulated in the nature of the love shared by “anyone” and “noone” and in the way that love suggests a certain conception of human identity.

III

One conception of identity linked to theory in modern culture is that it is an elaboration of an essential human nature. Reference is sometimes made to this essential nature in efforts to provide that “set of constraints” that will guide behavior and eliminate difference. Pragmatism opposes the idea of an essential human nature. The pragmatist notion of identity is that it is shaped through practice, hence dialogically, as practice is always social. One’s identity, then, depends on relations with others.

The townspeople “cared for anyone not at all.” They do not care for the individual “anyone,” and, following the pun, they are not capable of caring for any person. Their inability to care is consistent with the rule-following or theoretical ethos of the town. They mistake the nature of their own identities, taking them as fixed, and thus mistake the nature of their relations to others as being governed by a set of constraints derived from such a fixed nature. These relations are represented in the line “someones married their everyones,” the utterly dismissive tone of which suggests that they enter into their relationships in the same spirit in which they “did their dance.” Kidder points out that it is significant that “anyone” and “noone,” in contrast, never marry (145). Marriage is an example of a constraint on behavior that, at least in certain contemporary discourses, is grounded on an idea of essential human nature; it is a convention hardened into a rule.

The relationship between “anyone” and “noone” involves a love that contrasts with the limited connections among the townspeople and their resistance to the power of relations to shape identity, the resistance that produces their inability to care. The fourth stanza establishes the mutual reliance of “anyone” and “noone.” Describing their love, the narrator says, “she laughed his joy she cried his grief.” Their emotional lives are inseparable. The first and third lines of the stanza, “when by now and tree by leaf,” and “bird by snow and stir by still,” present two sets of juxtaposed pairs of elements which cannot be separated, whether conceptually or in nature. These pairs act in the stanza as adverbs, describing the way in which “anyone” and “noone” relate to each other, as do those of the eighth stanza, which describes them in death: “earth by april / wish by spirit and if by yes.”

While the relationship, however, between “anyone” and “noone” contrasts with those of the townspeople in being constitutive of their identities, it also contrasts with the subjectivist’s conception of relations, again because of a difference over the nature of identity. Against the theoretical or essentialist conception of human nature is the subjectivist idea of identity being an entirely individual matter, derived from a unique individual nature, ungoverned by any essentialism and existing prior to any social constructions. The only ethical value derived from such a position is negative freedom, derisively characterized by Cummings in *i: six nonlectures* as “mere freedom from” (30).

Charles Taylor, in *The Malaise of Modernity*, explains how, in contemporary western culture, this subjectivist notion of absolute individualism produces an attitude to relationships that is purely instrumental and contingent. The attitude takes its popular expression in much self-help literature. In one well-known work of the genre, which Taylor cites, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*, Gail Sheehy describes the maturity into which we emerge after the mid-life passage. We then realize that “Though loved ones move in and out of our lives, the capacity to love remains” (quoted in Taylor 44). This notion of individual authenticity and a kind of self-contained love is not what is attacked by “anyone lived in a pretty how town,” but it is also certainly not what is offered in opposition to the relations of the townspeople. When one beloved dies, the other does too, rather than continuing on with an enlarged capacity to love the self.

The subjectivist conception of identity is also connected to a debased romanticism, expressed in clichéd formulas that leave the romantic ego unthreatened by any suggestion of a potentially defining other. These formulas include love at first sight, in which the “love” precedes any real exchange or process, and unrequited love, in which the distance of one precludes any defining exchange with the other. “anyone lived in a pretty how town,” however, carefully builds into the relationship between “anyone” and “noone” the idea of growth. John Lord points out that the quality of growth is suggested with the use of “by” as the linking word in the pairs of terms that describe the relationship, creating the impression of “a continuous increment towards a remote whole” (68). This impression is most emphatic in the first line that describes the love between “anyone” and “noone”: “noone loved him more by more.”

Directly, then, the poem expresses Cummings’ dislike for systems and rules and his valuing of growth and love, about which many have commented. Less directly, it links these values and a pragmatist conception of human understanding, different from the one that the linguists who have studied the poem have employed.² The link is made through the readers who enjoy and “understand” the poem and thus establish their difference from the “someones” and “everyones.” In making sense of the deviant expressions, they join Cummings, “anyone,” and “noone” in their convention-stretching dance.

IV

It is not new to say that such things as growth, love, and nonconformity are important in “anyone lived in a pretty how town,” nor is it new to say that they are important for Cummings generally. Cummings himself says it this way in the conclusion to *i: six nonlectures*:

I am someone who proudly and humbly affirms that love is the mystery-of-mysteries, and that nothing measurable matters “a very good God damn”:

that “an artist, a man, a failure” is no mere whenfully accreting mechanism, but a givingly eternal complexity—neither some soulless and heartless ultrapredatory infra-animal nor any un-understandingly knowing and believing and thinking automation, but a naturally and miraculously whole human being—a feelingly illimitable individual; whose only happiness is to transcend himself, whose every agony is to grow. (110-111)

It is not new to say these things are important, but it may be useful to consider how, together, they show Cummings’ attitudes to be consistent with the American pragmatist tradition. That tradition has always struggled to establish a ground on which both subjectivism and the position represented by the “theory” that Fish attacks can be opposed, or at the very least can be seen not to exhaust the possible ways of understanding the world.

Pragmatism has been getting renewed attention over recent decades in the writing of Fish and others, most notably Richard Rorty, who refer back to its beginnings, during the time of Cummings’ youth and just before. During that time, Cummings tells us in *i: six nonlectures*, his father was friends with several colleagues at Harvard, but was closest to one of them. He recalls:

The neighbor whom my father unquestioningly preferred was William James; and it’s odd that I should have forgotten to mention so true a friend and so great a human being. Not only is it odd: it’s ungrateful—since I may be said to owe my existence to professor James, who introduced my father to my mother. (9)

This admiring reference to the most influential of pragmatists is a further suggestion that when we think of Cummings’ myth or metaphysic, we should consider its connection to pragmatism.³

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Notes

1 Blackmur’s understanding of meaning is closer to that expressed by Wittgenstein in his famous definition: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (43). For a thorough consideration of the implications of the definition see Cayford, Jerrell Curtis, *The Radical Reading of Wittgenstein*,” Diss. Northwestern U, 1997.

2 This is not to say that some of those same linguists have not arrived at their own happy understanding of the poem; their difficulty is in explaining how they or

others have done so. As to that mystery, I discussed the poem and some of these issues with an audience of street people at an outreach program in Vancouver's notorious Downtown Eastside. One of them aptly commented, "all it takes is a little imagination."

3 Cummings' personal library contains not one, but two heavily-annotated copies of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Houghton Library call numbers *AC9.C9125.Zz174 and *AC9.C9125.Zz175). [Editor's note]

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