

Two “No-Name” Poems

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THE FOLLOWING COMMENTARY is intended to supplement Weldon N. Niva’s interesting article on “no-names” in literature (*Names*, 12, 89–97, 1964). Mr. Niva begins by saying that he will discuss only the paradoxical quality of the no-name (“the denial of existence to any such-named person or place”) rather than its secondary meaning (“a person or place of no importance”); and he is probably right to limit his discussion in this way. It is submitted here, however, that in certain instances one meaning cannot be separated from the other. Through the paradoxical denial of a character’s existence, an author sometimes emphasizes that character’s lack of importance; or, a character’s lack of importance is sometimes so great that he may as well be called nonexistent. Examples in point are the two following no-name poems.¹

The theme of the first, by Emily Dickinson, is consistent with her personal reclusion, as well as with her habit of hiding away her manuscript verses without plans for their publication, and is thus often interpreted as an expression of her own reticence:

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there’s a pair of us!
Don’t tell! they’d banish us – you know!

¹ Appropriate to the spirit of no-naming, neither author gave his poem a title, so it is usually designated by first line or number. The texts used here are from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, 1955), “J. 288,” pp. 206–207, where the poem is printed as nearly as possible as it was written; and *Poetry*, LVI (1940), 233–234, where E. E. Cummings’ poem appears for the first time, as the first of “Five Poems.” While the punctuation and capitalization in Miss Dickinson’s poem are often “regularized” by editors, Cummings’ poem is usually reprinted without change.

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
 How public – like a Frog –
 To tell your name – the livelong June –
 to an admiring Bog!

Here Miss Dickinson makes the same contrast as the one cited by Mr. Niva in the anonymous Elizabethan social satire *Nobody and Somebody*; but, in so doing, she emphasizes the idea of inconsequence rather than non-existence. Indeed, the word “Nobody” seems so clearly a pronoun signifying “nobody of importance” that its consideration as a no-name might be questionable were it not for Miss Dickinson’s identification (in line 7) of the opposing “Somebody” as a name, albeit in the most general sense.² At the same time, though, the idea of non-existence is inherent in the literal meaning of the word “Nobody,” which heightens the contrast she is making.

While Miss Dickinson does not further exploit the paradoxical quality of the no-name, her handling of it introduces a paradox of a different kind. As soon as she calls herself “Nobody,” she invites the reader to share her name and thus indicates that she herself does not expect to remain without admirers. To judge from her merry exclamatory tone, she takes a good deal of pleasure in her separation from the dreary and repetitiously self-important Somebodies, and in the company of the happy few that are immediately attracted by her articulation of this position. From her own point of view, she is not really a Nobody at all but quite an exclusive Somebody; and her name “Nobody” only reflects the lack of regard for her by the self-preoccupied world at large. But, since the opposing Somebodies remain unheeding, and in the majority, the idea of nonexistence is still applicable to her from their point of view. The names “Nobody” and “Somebody” are interchangeable, then, depending on who assigns the values.

In the second poem, by E. E. Cummings, the no-name represents a central character in the life story of anyone:

anyone lived in a pretty how town
 (with up so floating many bells down)

² In the poem to which Miss Dickinson probably owes a part of her inspiration, Charles Mackay’s “Little Nobody” (Johnson, p. 207), the pronoun is used more clearly as a proper name; and capitalization, which is not confined to proper names, at least gives “Nobody” the appearance of one.

spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men (both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed (but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then) they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
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
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men (both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain³

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Again, in its application to the sweetheart, wife and widow of anyone, the no-name emphasizes the bearer's inconsequence, which is consistent here with traditional womanly passivity. But in this poem, as in Miss Dickinson's, there is also a reversal of values, as has been suggested by other commentators. The statement has been made that, "if society thinks of lovers as unimportant, and if Cummings apparently accepts that judgment in his naming of characters, it is nevertheless implied that he really thinks of the lovers as more important. In this case, then, the real sense of the word ['anyone'] is in opposition to its apparent sense."⁴ This comment also applies to "noone," for, like Miss Dickinson, Cummings makes a distinction between the no-name character and a larger group that considers her unimportant – or, rather, does not consider her at all.⁵ In the poem, it is just the children who bother to notice noone's feelings, "but only a few / and down they forgot as up they grew." When Cummings says that "someones married their everyones" and "busy folk buried them side by side," he, too, suggests the insensitivity of the self-preoccupied someones.

But, when "noone" is considered in conjunction with anyone, its other, paradoxical meaning takes on full force.⁶ After saying that the townspeople "cared for anyone not at all," Cummings extends this idea by giving a no-name to the one person who does care for him, especially in the lines "noone loved him more by more" and "noone stooped to kiss his face." Literally, anyone remains unloved and alone and dies unmourned; his isolation remains unrelieved, for his companion is nonexistent. Fortunately, though, neither the literal nor the non-literal meaning of the no-name represents his own point of view, and he is able to feel as important as any one of the someones do. It is only the poet who uses these names to reflect the deplorable lack of regard for man by his fellows – which is so perva-

⁴ Norman Friedman and Charles A. McLaughlin, *Poetry* (New York, 1963), p. 25.

⁵ Similarly, Herbert C. Barrows, Jr. and William R. Steinhoff say that the paradoxical meaning of the word is used as a "pun" to "make statements about the isolation of the two people in a world full of selfish 'someones.'" *The Explicator*, IX (1950), item 1.

⁶ Somewhat like Barrows and Steinhoff, George Haines IV mentions "noone" in showing how Cummings uses abstract words to denote a general and a particular meaning at once; "noone" preserves its "conventional meaning," he says, at the same time that it serves as the antecedent for a particular "she." *The Sewanee Review*, LIX (1951), 216–217.

sive as to have affected the poet himself by the time he writes: "one day anyone died i guess." From an external point of view, he has dropped out of existence even before his death, and the poet's supposition that he is dead depends on his knowledge that death is the end for everyone.

In this poem, then, the contrast between the nobodies and the somebodies is not binding, as it is in the Dickinson poem. In Cummings, anyone and noone are singled out to represent the someones and not, finally, to oppose them. Against the endless cyclic background of the poem, the feelings and lives of all individuals are inconsequential and, practically speaking, nonexistent: an idea whose essence is caught in the no-name.

Since each no-name embodies these two meanings and also represents an ironic reversal of the poet's own values, it is necessary that each poem provide an atmosphere suitable for contradictions and, if it is to make one central point, for their ultimate resolution. Most superficially but most noticeably, this is done by the use of graphics that will not restrict meaning. There is, for example, a tentative quality deriving from Miss Dickinson's many dashes (nine in her two quatrains), if indeed this mark is a dash;⁷ and there is a constant qualification, or suggestion of reconsideration, in Cummings's many parentheses (seven sets in his nine quatrains). Similarly, the shift away from conventional capitalization, with Miss Dickinson capitalizing many of her substantives and Cummings capitalizing only the two words that divide his poem's beginning, middle and end, is conducive to shifts from conventional meaning. More important is the rhythmically or formally balanced juxtaposition of opposites that also helps to keep the reader alive to the possibility of paradox. In Miss Dickinson, there are the opposing "I" and "you" of her first line, the sense of intimacy and the threat of banishment in her fourth, the opposing ideas of Nobody and Somebody between the two quatrains. In Cummings, in addition to the contrasting pronouns, there are such pairings of opposites as "he sang his 'didn't he danced his did," "she laughed his joy she

⁷ The most elaborate interpretation of these marks is by Edith Perry Stamm in "Emily Dickinson: Poetry and Punctuation," *Saturday Review*, XLVI (30 March 1963), pp. 26-27, 74. She divides them into five kinds, which she equates with the "rhetorical or elocutionary symbols meant to direct oral reading" in "almost any popular midnineteenth-century reader."

cried his grief," "forget to remember," "Women and men (both dong and ding)," "went their came," the three couplings of "up" and "down," the youth and death of the two principal characters. This frequent yoking together of extremes widens the scope of each poem's meaning to make it the sum of division and conflict: an absolute made up of paradox. The central meaning of both poems lies in a disparity between regard for oneself and indifference shown one by society. The chief difference is that Miss Dickinson celebrates her own unnoticed consequence while Cummings lightly deplors the ultimate inconsequence of all lives – or at least of average lives, for Cummings, too, is aware of his own superiority.

Mr. Niva points out that Shakespeare calls his Ariel "the picture of No-body" and concludes that "no-names allow creatures such as Ariel both to be *and* not to be" – a statement that can apply to Miss Dickinson's characterization of herself in poem and person; and it may reflect an impulse common to poets generally. In this case, it is interesting to note that Miss Dickinson's antithesis, the frog-like Somebody admired by the bog, resembles Ariel's antithesis, Caliban, a "most ridiculous monster" of the earth attended by drunkards and clowns. If Ariel can be called an allegorical representation of Prospero's highest powers, or of those of the poet himself, then Shakespeare, too, uses the no-name to reflect the evanescence of the poetic spirit, which necessarily dwells apart from what Cummings has elsewhere called "mostpeople." In his poem discussed here, which describes the lives of mostpeople, Cummings suggests this feeling of aloofness by remaining in the position of the detached storyteller gifted with deeper insights and wider perspectives than his characters. While there is an immediacy about the poem, it is, as in Miss Dickinson's, between poet and reader; it is not between Cummings and his characters or between his characters and the reader. As noted above, his single intrusion into the story is extremely off-handed; and his unconventional use of the lowercase "i" to represent himself sets him further apart from the conventions of mostpeople in the same way that his frequent use of lowercase initials in writing his name set him apart from what he might have considered "mostpoets." While Cummings' no-name does not represent himself in his no-name poem, as Miss Dickinson's does, it is significant that he gives it to the character with whom he is most sympathetic.

The most general difference between these poems and the works discussed by Mr. Niva is that these are both short poems: one lyric and one narrative, but with the melodic and perhaps the emotional traits of the lyric; while Mr. Niva's are long works of narrative or drama. In addition, the authors he treats are writing in a largely conservative tradition while both Miss Dickinson and Cummings are more radical. These differences may explain why the no-names discussed here are more complicated than those discussed by Mr. Niva, since the language of the short lyric is usually intense, and the meaning of modern poetry complex.

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NOTE

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