

A CATHOLIC CRITICISM OF E. E. CUMMINGS

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A Study of Form, Technique and Content
in one of the Controversial Poets of Our Time
from the Traditional Christian Viewpoint.

By Stephen Breen



Thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts
of the University of Ottawa through the
Department of English as partial fulfill-
ment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy.

Degree conferred
April 6, 1959

E. H. [unclear]

Ottawa, Canada, 1958

Secretary of the Graduate
Division

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis topic was selected under the guidance of the Chairman of the English Department, Professor Emmett O'Grady, and executed under the guidance of Dr. Paul Marcotte in its initial stages, with Dr. Brian Robinson directing its organization and conclusion. Mr. E. E. Cummings, the subject of the dissertation, kindly consented to a visit at his home where some obscure points of background and principle were cleared up, and these are noted in the thesis where they have been used to chart the course of study and analysis. The Librarian's office of the New York Public Library in New York City helped in providing through the Rare Book Department original editions, manuscripts and other material of great value. Finally, the Institute for Philosophical Research at 1998 Pacific Avenue, San Francisco, California, furnished a report on Liberalism which helped in preparing the section on that subject. The University of Wisconsin furnished on loan an original manuscript of Maurer's critical study of E. E. Cummings; the other two structural and prosodic studies were obtained on microfilm from University Microfilms in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The same agency furnished

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

several other microfilmed dissertations of use and these along with other original manuscripts from university libraries were studied, which, though they did not bear directly on the topic, nevertheless did serve to gain more exact insight into the cross currents of general poetic influences of the period and the dominant philosophic ideas which determine its main outlook. The annotated bibliography, though it necessarily reflects only a small part of what went into the present study, will serve to implement and detail these remarks.

Perhaps the greatest asset to a real understanding of the essay which follows and its particular orientation is the assimilation and foundation of the regular six-year seminary course in philosophy, theology, Scripture, exegesis and allied courses which are a prerequisite to ordination to the priesthood. They compose the light to which the work of L. E. Cummings is held up, to form this Catholic criticism of his art. Without this training or its equivalent such a presentation could not at once be comprehensive and authoritative.

The Gotham Book Mart in New York City, well known to bibliophiles and researchers, provided its usual tireless energies in tracking rare and out-of-print volumes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gratitude is here expressed to the above mentioned persons, institutions, and all who helped in preparing the present work.

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INTRODUCTION

Our problem in the present investigation is to understand the poet and his work against the background of the modern, mid-century literary and cultural scene; and after this primary orientation to consider the man and his message with regard to Christian thought and tradition. It involves a literary and cultural evaluation of the poet as an artist contributing to the enrichment of the Christian life with a supporting exposition of his doctrine in relation to traditional Catholic thought.

Although Cummings is becoming more and more a topic of dissertation and report, no attempt has been made as yet to evaluate his work in the light of traditional Christian principles. In 1955 there appeared the first three doctoral dissertations on Cummings. At the University of Wisconsin Robert E. Maurer was the author of E. E. Cummings: A Critical Study. Mr. Maurer's work is a purely literary critique and attempts quite successfully to defend Mr. Cummings against the attacks of his enemies. In its literary criticism, this study coincides with the present work in a few places, and wherever a parallel treatment occurs it is noted by means of footnotes or in the body of the thesis. Maurer's conclusions

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are used to buttress statements in the present work at a few points and have served to make more detailed support of these points unnecessary.

The other two studies, Structural Ambiguity in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings, by Louis C. Rus, at the University of Michigan, and E. E. Cummings: the Prosodic Shape of His Poems, by Robert L. Beloof, at Northwestern University, are both technical in nature and concern themselves solely with the intricacies of form, idiom, diction, technical devices and elements of structure. The present study makes use in Part II of their analyses, lists and tables to aid in an understanding of Cummings' technique and its development. Once again, credit is given by way of footnote wherever their investigations are employed to sustain the present argument. Their work aids immeasurably in coming to a thorough understanding of the style and craftsmanship of the subject.

The present study endeavours to look at the subject from more than a mechanical, literary or even an artistic point of view. Important as literature, poetry and art are in their own right, it is nonetheless essential to understand their philosophical and theological implications if they are to be truly evaluated. This is not to say that such an estimate is to take the form of narrow sectarian criticism or

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to require that poetry has to be didactic, "conformist", or "dedicated" before it can merit Catholic acceptance and praise. On the contrary, the position taken in this present work is that art is universal in its approach to life and has its roots in Truth itself; and that "bad" art fails either because of imperfection by its own standards or because its formal element is in conflict with some more basic principle. This is entirely in accord with the teaching of St. Thomas, as will be shown. As Newman applies it to the field of letters:

...by "Catholic Literature" is not to be understood a literature which treats exclusively or primarily of Catholic matters, of Catholic doctrine, controversy, history, persons, or politics; but it includes all subjects of literature whatever, treated as a Catholic would treat them, and as he only can treat them.¹

To analyze a poet's art in such fashion will be a difficult task. There is no formal body of Catholic doctrine treating of the essentials of Christian art or poetry. Maritain devotes an entire volume to synthesizing a Catholic concept of art, poetry and literature, from which the following passage is quoted:

¹. Newman, John Henry, Idea of a University, London, New York, Toronto, 1929, Longmans, Green & Co., 296 p.

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The Schoolmen composed no special treatise with the title "Philosophy of Art."...There is, nevertheless a far-reaching theory of Art to be found in their writings, but it is to be sought in austere dissertations on some problem of logic: "Is Logic a Liberal Art?"--or moral theology: "How does Prudence, at once an intellectual and moral virtue, differ from Art, a merely intellectual virtue?"²

Maritain's search of scholastic doctrine for a theory of art and poetry evolves what has been referred to above as the "universal" approach to the subject and will constitute a norm of the present work. He characterizes this idea in another connection as follows:

Consider also that wherever art, Egyptian, Greek, or Chinese, has attained a certain degree of grandeur and purity, it is already Christian...because every spiritual splendour is a promise and a symbol of the divine harmony of the Gospel.³

Far from looking for what is comfortably sectarian in Cummings, the adoption of such a norm as indicated by Newman and Maritain will rather encompass most of Cummings' poetic expression. It will enable conclusions to be formulated which will view most of Cummings' poetry as substantially in harmony with a Catholic view of life.

2.

Maritain, Jacques, Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays, "The Schoolmen and the Theory of Art", New York 1943, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1 p., emphasis in original.

3.

Ibid., "Christian Art", 69 p.

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At the same time, such a "universal" attitude will not assume or grant any absolute autonomy to art (in this case poetry) in its own right. Some poems will have to be stigmatized not only because of failure to achieve high poetic merit and effect, but because they clash seriously with the moral law. When this occurs, a poem will have to be proscribed because it runs counter to divine injunction. Maritain again, searching St. Thomas and the scholastics for their theory of art, puts it best: "Art has no right against God. There is no good opposed to God or the ultimate good of human life."⁴ In still another work, writing to Jean Cocteau, the same philosopher recognizes the burred problems imbedded in reconciling the claims of art and morality when he exclaims, "...without the higher light of wisdom, prudence looks upon art as an enemy."⁵ It takes a special insight of the Holy Spirit to reconcile art and morality to understand that the Renaissance was not so much an overemphasis of beauty as an under-emphasis of grace. As Christians we ought to love the one and not neglect the other. Puritanism and other heresies have shown that the Devil can paint himself as a moralist to condemn the beautiful gifts of God in the name

4.

Ibid., "Art and Morality", 75 p.

5.

Maritain, Jacques, Art and Faith, New York, 1948, Philosophical Library, 103 p.

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of scotching human lusts and revenging the disorders of sin. The rising fame of Cummings the poet and all he stands for on the one hand, and the deepening reappraisals of Catholic as well as secular education on the other, give the present investigation an importance and timeliness which are unique. Since the unique turn taken by poetic art at the hands of Mr. Cummings has inspired opposition which persists unabated despite his obvious fame and reputation, a look at what the controversy is all about is at the very least timely; and since both radical form and bold thought content in this poet are bound to have some impact on the vast complex of Catholic education and culture (and, indeed, already have had such effect) it is important that some comprehensive and authentic survey be made in the light of Christian tradition and education while the Catholic cultural atmosphere is still relatively free of hopeless confusion and irrelevant debate. This is the main attempt of the following chapters.

In the execution of this thesis, a beginning is made with "The New Perspective" both to apprise the reader of the newer trends in Cummings' thought and work, and to orient him to the subject in general before beginning a discussion which might otherwise leave him bewildered; for even to the initiated and the scholar the realm of Cummingsean verse is often a strange and baffling world.

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Following this in Part II, the plan of the report considers the individuating notes of Cummings' poetry that have been most widely noted by friend and foe alike, i.e., the novel verse forms, the lack of punctuation and capitalization, the distorted syntax, the complex forms of diction and imagery, word fracturing, etc, what has been called "The Personal Convention" in Cummings, his development of an imagery of abstraction, his use of surrealist technique in nature and other poems, the influences of Cubism, Futurism, and nihilistic movements in his work.

Once this appreciation is attained, the student is in a position to go to the higher refinements of Cummings' poems--his social satires, the love lyrics, the doctrine of self-fulfillment, his forays into sexual love and imagery. These aspects of his art form make up Parts III and IV.

Part V carries the study on into its deepest deliberations and judgments. It is, as its designation states, "An Analysis of Content with an Eye to Philosophic Content and Moral Values". The influence of subjective systems of thought and modern liberalism are traced in the subject and some preliminary conclusions are essayed.

In Part VI the imponderable problems of God and the spiritual, of death and immortality, of the eternal verities and the nature of man are grappled with, and an attempt is made to juxtapose the entire subject against their inevitable

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demands. A brief afterthought is added, which provides a fitting close to the entire inquiry.

The methods, sources, tools, etc., engaged to complete this investigation were the usual ones employed in research. Wherever possible, original sources and manuscripts were consulted. The process of compilation, analysis and synthesis included the scrutiny and use of all the lists of published doctoral dissertations in the field of literature and poetry, the Cumulative Book Index, the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, the New York Times Index, the card catalogues of the New York Public Library and the Congressional Library in Washington, D. C., and other lesser reference tools of research.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NEW PERSPECTIVE

In the Charles Eliot Norton lecture series of 1952, Cummings pays the highest tribute to both his parents. This is important to note. It is the core of a whole new attitude toward things and constitutes a more or less complete break with his early iconoclasm and revolt. This reverential side of his character is something recent; nevertheless it is the key to his new orientation and places his life's work in new perspective. Though the new perspective leaves his earlier work unchanged in meaning, it does alter its significance. The Harvard lectures, a far cry from his early poetry, and his work since their publication, bears out the idea that he is at last ready to admit that there are some things in life which are sacred after all. In his early sixties, Cummings, like Toynbee and Eliot, has grown more deeply meditative and reserved. At mid-century in the Cambridge series he looks back with nostalgia and admiration upon the society he once bitterly attacked and lampooned. Though he will still insult his audience and flout convention, the new note predominates. Its ascendancy over a lifetime of intransigence is still insecure, but the tendency to reckon with a destiny of

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uncompromising truth and justice has become a trend. A visit with the Cummings in their small Greenwich Village apartment in New York definitely confirms this view.

It is necessary to pay close attention to the Norton lectures for they establish the newest and probably the final phase of Cummings' view of life, art and his own place in the scheme of things. His recollections of home and his praise of early life contrast sharply with his bitter satirizing of that way of life in his early verse and prose--or as close as Cummings ever gets to prose. At his most outspoken and defiant, Cummings has been a modern successor to Byron, Shelley and the first rumblings of revolt in Blake and Donne. He has gone to extremes of contempt in pillorying certain aspects of the modern mind. In his treatment of the mass-man and his collective worship of the false gods of security and cradle-to-the-grave thinking, more especially in his acrostic at the Roosevelt version of social security, invective and vehemence reached a high water mark. In Cummings the I-have-not-loved-the-world-nor-the-world-me theme goes about as far as it can. He will not only refuse to flatter its rank breath nor bow the knee to its idolatries, but he will smash it to pieces, even though later he may lament the chaos which he and the other axe-swinging moderns may make of the human scene--vociferous

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moderns who cannot agree among themselves as to what exactly should replace the scorched ideological earth that remains after orthodoxy and tradition have been bulldozed into a great pile and destroyed. As a result, as some spokesman of this age has well said, there is nothing for the iconoclasts to do anymore; at least in the early twentieth century there was a system of morality and there were values to rebel against: now there is nothing to attack, since all systematized philosophy, theology and moral codes are in ruins. Exception must be made of course for the ancient orthodoxies (badly battered) and the terror of their antithesis in Communism, all very much alive and functioning. The modern at mid-century will have none of these, and is thus left alone to survey a barren field, with others like himself scanning the debris and not quite knowing what to make of it all. They huffed and they puffed and they blew the house in, and things just seem to get bafflingly worse than ever.

So, although for nearly two score years he could scarcely find a good word to say for the "Forces of Organization", and any amount was open season for attacking society in the bitterest of terms, the same is not true today. In 1954 Cummings could write:

there's a time for laughter and there's
a time for crying for hoping for despair

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for peace for longing--a time for
growing and a time for dying a night
for silence and a day for singing 1

This for Cummings nearly borders on the cliché, and is something like Byron taking Southey's place and writing paens to royalty as laureate to the king. But for the nonce we shall confine our scrutiny to the new attitude of reverence in Cummings as it comes to light at Harvard in the Norton lectures before the quatrain above took shape.

At the beginning of the third lecture, Cummings has a cavalier nod for the world he grew up in:

As it was my miraculous fortune to have a true father and a true mother, and a home which the truth of their love made joyous, so--in reaching outward from this love and this joy--I was marvellously lucky to touch and seize a rising and striving world; a reckless world, filled with the curiosity of life herself; a vivid and violent world welcoming every challenge; a world worth hating and adoring and fighting and forgiving: in brief, a world which was a world. This inwardly immortal world of my adolescence recoils to its very roots whenever, now-adays, I see people who've been endowed with legs crawling on their chins after quote security unquote. 2

¹ Identified by the poet from his portfolio of unpublished poems, Jan. 24, 1957, in a visit with the author. The same lines appear in the doctoral dissertation of Robert E. Maurer at the University of Wisconsin, 1955, with a similar remark.

² Cummings, E.E., i SIX NONLECTURES, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1954, 43 p.

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"Nonlecture Two" is full of the same kind of nostalgia for the old order of things and attack upon the newer social environment with its organizational men as archtypes of the species. There is brilliant satire on modern ideas and modern living, but even that lacks the no-quarter-asked-nor-given of the old days. Its excellence is perhaps heightened by the fact that it is characteristic of the little work of Cummings done in purely conventional prose style, with only slight deviations. The SIX NON-LECTURES series has unique interest in that it was spoken to an audience, and is, therefore, the only opportunity we really have of equating Cummings with conventional-minded people on their own ground; and it must be admitted that he does not suffer by the comparison.

As Cummings mounts the lecture platform at Harvard in 1952 he is much changed. Instead of a mere firebrand wreaking havoc on all about him, he has become a man with a different kind of message; his message now is more concerned with the necessity for the individual not to merely exist, but to be alive and responsive to life, to burn with the hard, gem-like flame of the artist, and is almost entirely devoid of the older iconoclastic, nihilistic spirit.

He begins this series by philosophizing in the lines of Wordsworth's Ode on the Intimations of Immortality,

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and although he is not the author of these lines, he makes their thoughts his own. The lines of the prologue--"The Child is father of the Man;/ And I could wish my days to be / bound each to each by natural piety"--are a revelation. In mid-course he confirms his intimations of immortality by finding God: "i thank You God for most this amazing / day: "³ and these lines as well as their sentiments are his own. The themes of justice, charity and freedom emerge from his selections, among which are included works of his own and something of Shakespeare, Dante, Catullus, Horace, Sappho, Burns, Donne, Keats, Shelley and the Gospel of St. John. He concludes with the Ode on a Grecian Urn and the closing stanzas of Prometheus Unbound.

Cummings is advancing more and more to synthesis; he is emerging finally as the spostle of the individual. There are deeper implications here; they shall be considered at length in later chapters.

Early Background

The Harvard lectures, comprehensive as they are, take the audience back to the earliest stages of Cummings' life, which began in Cambridge, Massachusetts, October 14,

³Ibid., 91p.

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1894. He tells us that Cummings is an old Scotch name: "...it used to be Comyn. A Scotchman named The Red Comyn was killed by Robert Bruce in a church. He was my ancestor and a very well-known man."⁴ His father, Edward Cummings (Harvard '83) was a professor at Harvard who taught English, political economy and sociology at different times, and later became Rev. Edward Cummings, a Unitarian minister. The elder Cummings' best friend was William James, to whom Cummings says he owes his existence, since it was Professor James "who introduced my father to my mother." His second name derives from Professor Estlin Carpenter, a professor at Oxford, where Cummings, Sr., studied and to whom he apparently became quite attached.

Cummings attended four Cambridge schools "en route" to Harvard: "the first, private--where everybody was extraordinarily kind; and where (in addition to learning nothing) I burst into tears and nosebleeds--the other three, public, where I flourished like the wicked and learned what the wicked learn," etc. At the same time, the ever-present contradictory balance in Cummings comes to the rescue: he has the highest praise for some among his teachers, which convinces the reader upon reflection that he learned much more than he admits. He also learned what the good learn

⁴Cummings, E.E., The Enormous Room, New York, Random House (Modern Library edition), 1934, 14p.

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at least intellectually, whatever his early moral judgments may have been and he says as much in introducing his Greek and Latin poetry readings. The Cummings lived in the kind of mansion on the kind of grounds you would expect of a socially prominent family of his time and place, well set back and well hedged in from the incursions of the boisterous outside world. Cummings frankly admits and even treasures his Brahmin origin, and even when he is most flagrantly flouting the taboos of his social background, he is nevertheless unwilling even for a moment to compromise his heritage. This is an enigmatical kind of statement and needs much clarification, which will be made in due course, what is important at this point is to emphasize that Cummings is an aristocrat among aristocrats for all his fraternizing with proletarians, and he never forgets it.

But again--what is privacy? You probably never heard of it. Even supposing that (from time to time) walls exist around you, those walls are no longer walls; they are merest pseudosolidities, perpetually penetrated by the perfectly predatory collective organs of sight and sound. Any apparent somewhere which you may inhabit is always at the mercy of a ruthless and omniverous everywhere. The notion of a house, as one single definite particular and unique place to come into, from the anywhereish and everywhereish world outside--that

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notion must strike you as fantastic, You have been brought up to believe that a house, or a universe, or a you or any other object, is only seemingly solid: really (and you are realists, whom nobody and nothing can deceive) each seeming solidity is a collection of large holes--and in the case of a house, the larger the holes the better; since the principal function of a modern house is to admit whatever might otherwise remain outside....

As for being yourself--why on earth should you be yourself; when instead of being yourself you can be a hundred, or a thousand, or a hundred thousand thousand, other people? The very thought of being oneself in an epoch of interchangeable selves must appear supremely ridiculous.⁵

"The Artist's Responsibility" and His Revolt

After a brief treatment of his philosophy of personality, which is the apotheosis of Emersonian self-reliance coming alive in truth and in spirit Cummings brings the transcendental lesson of the second "non-lecture" to its climax with the words:

Nobody else can be alive for you;
nor can you be alive for anybody else.
Toms can be Dicks and Dicks can be
Harrys, but none of them can ever be
you. There's the artist's responsibility;
and the most awful responsibility

⁵ Cummings, E.E., i SIX NONLECTURES, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1954, 23-24 pp.

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on earth. If you can take it,
take it--and be. If you can't
cheer up and go about other
people's business; and do (or
undo) till you drop.⁶

The mystical implications of such a doctrine are of course endless. And Cummings does develop his creed into a full-blown mystique from The Enormous Room, through Him and Eimi to the end of his collected Poems 1923-1954. It sets the stage at the outset for his point of view and renders almost inscrutable the mystery of his revolt against all that Cambridge meant to him. He ponders his case as that of a professor's and clergyman's son, who would almost surely "accept these conventional distinctions without cavil" and follow the family and social pattern with only accidental deviations "yet for some unreason I didn't."⁷

Adjoining Cambridge is Somerville, Massachusetts. There Cummings learned the life of tavern and burlesque, which he was to come to love so dearly. There also did he learn the ways of citified jungles, where fist hit below the belt and snowballs concealed small rocks. He turned against civilized conventions in Somerville as he had turned against their archtypes in Cambridge. The difference between

⁶

Ibid., 32p.

⁷

Ibid., 31p.

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Cambridge and Somerville was not an essential one, very trivial in fact, and Cummings came to conclude that all groups, "gangs and collectivities" are viciously alike. No one "by turning Somerville into Cambridge or Cambridge into Somerville or both into neither" can make the world any better. Better worlds come about only through the effects of better individuals, and here we strike the keynote of Cummings' life's development. "Let us pray always for individuals; never for worlds."⁸ Without being aware of it Cummings had stumbled upon a very Christian principal here, although he was not necessarily interpreting it in a Christian way. The only way man can come by a better world is by the perfection of individuals, each perfecting himself; and this is the essence of Cummings' doctrine. Perfection to him means self-discovery of the artistic kind without any conscious reference to God or morality.

Cummings' adventure in self-discovery led on from Cambridge schools inevitably to Harvard, where he learned languages and sciences; he also had a little more than the usual undergraduate's exposure to Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Dante and Shakespeare. His first

⁸Ibid., 32p.

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real independence came during senior year when he had the honor of residing with the other seniors in "the Yard". With this first year away from home he could wander in a greater orbit and range the surrounding world with much ease and freedom. His contacts shed much light on why he didn't accept tradition as it was handed to him. For if sinful Somerville used its feet for kicking as well as walking, there were other aspects of its sinfulness which were less disagreeable. Boston succeeded Somerville with a consequent expansion of extra-curricular and off-campus activities, which were also off limits in the code of the Cummings and the Clarkes. Nevertheless, Edward Estlin waded in. His acquaintance with the world and the flesh, if not yet on a full time basis, had gone far enough beyond Somerville's mere samplings to leave a dominant strain in his character to this day. In the first nonlecture, "i & my parents", he described himself as a "burlesk addict of long standing" and one who has "never expected freedom to be anything less than indecent."⁹ His reversion to the metaphor of the "burleskhouse" is fairly frequent, and there is the implication that there is no such thing as obscenity. His freedom for individual development or fulfillment goes

⁹
Ibid., 3p.

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infinitely beyond mere "freedom from" anything; hence freedom from any restraint of expression in "Freudian" themes (for want of a better term) is taken for granted.

The War Years

Cummings took his Bachelor's degree in 1915 and his Master's in 1916. Armed with a letter of introduction from Amy Lowell, he made the rounds of the publishers' offices with no lasting effects. New York was a disappointment to Cummings; it "reduced mankind to a tribe of pygmies," but he was not to remain there long. The itinerary that began in Cambridge and led first to Somerville, then to Boston and New York was to make Paris its Mecca. Distant rumblings of "some madness called La Guerre" had reached Harvard and young graduates were enlisting in the services. Cummings, like many of his confreres, joined an ambulance corps, the Norton-Harjes outfit (not Charles Eliot Norton).

First came Paris and Cummings' last fling before the great shock. Paris life was to him the great desiderata, in the holy city of desire. "Everywhere I sensed a miraculous presenceimperishable communion....love rose in my heart like a sun and beauty blossomed in my life like a star." The hunter was home from the hill, but only

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momentarily. For a brief moment before the maelstrom, Cummings found himself: "I was myself: a temporal citizen of eternity; one with all human beings born and unborn."¹⁰

His Paris, regrettably, is not the Paris of Notre Dame and the Louvre (though he has the artist's interest in painting); his mystical Communion is rather with the world of senses and Montmartre. There is a further regression from the world of Rev. Edward Cummings and his heroic wife. Cummings is attaining now to a kind of prayer of quiet in a sensual and purely naturalistic realm. He has left the chapel and the banquet hall for the bistro and the bar.

From Paris Cummings went into battle. A young man and without the stark experiences in "realism" which war provides, his reaction was that of any young man of genius and sensitivity. The blood and gore, the peculiar terror of masses of average, peaceful men bent on savagely killing one another, the trumped-up slogans and "propaganda" that went along with the scientific butchery all brought Cummings up short with a horrifying new look at the reality he could hardly acknowledge. Acknowledge it he did, and his reaction went into a verse that is the antithesis of the mad kind of

¹⁰

Ibid., 53 p.

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pean that Alan Seeger embodied in praise of Mars and his "orchestra of battle". Seegar was a babe in the woods; Cummings is a creature of intelligence and apprehension, at once suffering and involved, in spite of his off-handed manner:

you know what i mean when
 the first guy drops you know
 everybody feels sick or
 when they throw in a few gas
 and the oh baby shrapnel
 or my feet getting dim freezing or
 up to your you know what in water or
 with the bugs crawling right all up
 all everywhere over you all me everyone
 that's been there knows what
 i mean ll

From such a general viewpoint he focuses on a particular case:

look at this)
 a 75 done
 this nobody would
 have believed
 would they no
 kidding this was my particular

pal
 funny aint
 it we was
 buddies
 i used to be

know
 him lift the
 poor cuss
 tenderly this side up handle

 ll

Cummings, E.E., Poems 1923-1954, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1954, 195 p.

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with care
fragile
and send him home

to his mother in
a nice new pine box

(collect 12

The Enormous Room

Hardly adjusted to the first stunning blows of war, Cummings was to encounter a yet more numbing one, one which he almost failed to survive.

Half way through his six months engagement as an ambulance driver of the Conducteurs Volontaires, Section Sanitaire Vingt-et-Un, Ambulance Norton Harjes, Croix Rouge Americane, Cummings was arrested with a friend, Slater Brown. He and Brown had become fast friends on the ship bound for France and had "done" Paris together. Their "crime", according to the letter on the subject addressed by Edward Cummings, Sr., to Woodrow Wilson, then President of the United States:

Against Cummings both private and official advices from Paris state that there is no charge whatever. He has been subjected to this outrageous treatment solely because of his intimate friendship with young B--, whose letters to friends in America were misinter-

12

Ibid., 194p.

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preted by an over-zealous French
censor. 13

Cummings and Brown were taken to La Ferté Mace, an intermediate detention camp where prisoners awaited a hearing of their individual cases by a commission. They were imprisoned for three months, a circumstance which Cummings calls "one of the luckiest things in my life."¹⁴ There is truth as well as irony in this statement. For in the "Enormous Room" of La Ferté Mace Cummings came to grips with an external world which brandished guns instead of snowballs with stones inside, and not only hit below the belt but maimed and killed and tried to crush the spirit. Though not so devilish as the "more enormous room" of the Soviet later on, nor even as fearful as the unnamed terrors of Précigné where unfortunate men and women without intercessors were sent pour la durée de la guerre, its effect on men like Cummings and Brown was much the same.

It is interesting to note how Cummings, an enthusiastic volunteer for the cause of France, found himself incarcerated. At the preliminary hearing after prolonged questioning, Cummings had made such a successful case for himself that he was on the point of being dismissed

13

Cummings, E.E., The Enormous Room, New York, Random House (Modern Library edition), 1934, XII p. (Foreword)

14

Ibid., 264 p.

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and sent back to the ambulance unit. He had convinced Monsieur le Ministre of his sincere conviction that the French were the best people on earth, and the "trial" was just about over. As a kind of epilogue he was asked: "Est-ce-que vous detestez les boches?"¹⁵

He had only to answer "Oui" to re-enter the world as a free man. His interrogators were sure of his answer likewise, and were amazed when, again for some reason, he didn't. He replied with deliberation:

"Non. J'aime beaucoup les Francais."¹⁶

Cummings went to prison with all the pride of the redundant novice. "I was never so excited and proud. I was, to be sure, a criminal!....no more section sanitaire for me!"¹⁷ He was to come out a few months later somewhat changed--more mature, more appreciative of freedom and with a deeper grasp of what hard realities could work in a man. The sufferings of La Ferte had tempered his individuality and cooled his fever for unrestrained expression, at least temporarily. In France as in Cambridge the novice was to find that deep communion with humanity had its harsher side.

¹⁵
Ibid., 19 p.

¹⁶
Ibid.

¹⁷
Ibid., 9 p.

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and that man left to himself was as likely to kill as to love his neighbor. The change was crystallized in his view of New York coming home; no longer was it a place of stuffy ideas and cramping congestion: after "La Misère" it was a haven and a symbol of human freedom.

The Enormous Room follows a Pilgrim's Progress convention throughout. From the first chapter, "I Begin a Pilgrimage", to the last, "I Say Good-Bye to La Misère", Cummings in enacting the journey of Christian from the City of Destruction (in this case catastrophe of war) to the Celestial City of Freedom (New York). The last sentence of the book reads:

"The tall, incomparably tall, city shoulderingly upward into hard sunlight leaned a little through the octaves of its parallel edges, leaningly strode upward into firm, hard, snowy sunlight; the noises of America nearingly throbbed with smokes and hurrying dots which are men and which are women and which are things new and curious and hard and strange and vibrant and immense, lifting with a great ondulous stride firmly into immortal sunlight...." 18

Throughout the allegory Cummings climbs the Hill of Difficulty, is offered the House Beautiful for a price (which he refuses, out of a sense of communion with and

18

Ibid., 332 p.

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loyalty to the other prisoners), comes to grips with Apollyon in the chapter of the same name, basks in the Delectable Mountains and suffers the martyrdom of Faithful (Slater Brown) as the latter is separated from him to go to the unspeakable dungeons of Précigné'. Brown, however, was later released and followed Cummings to New York and a happy reunion. The Giant Despair is never very distant; but at one point in his pilgrimage Cummings comes face to face with Christ on the Cross in the form of a roadside shrine coming up on his sight in the night; it is a stirring passage. The time of La Ferte' is a time of real penance, and its purifying effects on Cummings' spirit as well as its psychological shock are evident in his formation as a poet.

The pilgrimage through The Enormous Room is indeed a passage from carefree, cocksure, irresponsible youth to a more reflective maturity. One incident that deserves special notice as a touchstone to the entire life of La Ferte' (or "unlife") as it was "unlived":

I spoke with both balayeurs that night. They told me, independently, the same story: the four incorrigibles had been locked in the cabinot ensemble. They made so much noise, particularly Lily, that the plantons were afraid the Directeur would be disturbed. Accordingly the plantons got together and stuffed the

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contents of a pailasse in the cracks around the door, and particularly in the crack under the door wherein cigarettes were commonly inserted by friends of the entombed. This process made the cabinot air-tight. But the plantons were not taking any chances on disturbing Monsieur le Directeur. They carefully lighted the pailasse at a number of points and stood back to see the result of their efforts. So soon as the smoke found its way inward the singing was supplanted by coughing; then the coughing stopped. Then nothing was heard. Then Celina began crying out within -- 'Open the door, Lily and Renee are dead' -- and the plantons were frightened. After some debate they decided to open the door -- out poured the smoke, and in it Celina, whose voice in a fraction of a second roused everyone in the building. The Black Holster wrestled with her and tried to knock her down by a blow on the mouth; but she escaped, bleeding a little to the foot of the stairs -- simultaneously with the advent of the Directeur, who for once had found someone beyond the power of his weapon -- Fear, someone in contact with whose indescribable Youth the puny threats of death withered between his lips, someone finally completely and unutterably Alive whom the Lie upon his slaver's tongue could not kill. ¹⁹

These are other like incidents. There is nothing of the expose or mudraking schools in the communication of these events and conditions of life in a detention camp

¹⁹

Ibid. 171-172 pp.

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during the first World War; the spiritual convention is adhered to, in modern diction, and the style in its power and simplicity rises at times to a plane and an intensity that provides it with all the splendor and terror of a Biblical narration. As well as a record of Cummings' development it is a testimony of his power in conventional prose when he resorts to a style that is familiar in syntax and gives logical development of thought.

Not a novel as it was mistakenly called by some critics when it appeared, The Enormous Room progresses from the pits of purgatory to the human eminences of The Delectable Mountains. Cummings is beginning to appreciate human natures in se; he is beginning to contemplate the personality with whom he comes in contact as if it were the only one that mattered; he is beginning to see man and men (one at a time) in terms of divine simplicity. His estimation of ideas and their counterparts in reality is undergoing analagous development, too, and we see an example, clear and perspicacious in its impression, as he talks to Mexique, a young Mexican named Philippe Burgos who had missed his American ship on which he was a stoker and thus became fair quarry for The Enormous Room. Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite have become a mockery, and he is frankly

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cynical. Incidents of the French Camp which have involved him and his Delectable Mountains, along with les femmes, have estranged him so from the spirit of Browning and Kipling that we wonder what he thought of his enlisting as a volunteer in the first place.

One finishes The Enormous Room with the feeling that something significant and perennial has been added to the literature of the language. While Hemingway and Dos Passos (also alumni of the ambulance driving units) were painting vast panoramas of war like artists filling in a great landscape with more or less what everyone expected, Cummings was hammering away at The Enormous Room to pinpoint what it was like in psychological and spiritual terms. Cummings' piece did not gain immediate success but its later acceptance by the Modern Library as a work worthy of re-publication is an indication of its re-appraisal. It has something unique. It is not mere narration nor mere description, nor again does it make its point wholly by characterization. Rather it is a book that lives and breathes its message.

Crystalization

What is to be said of the world to which Cummings and the other young artists returned after the devastating experience of war?

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"The war was a blast that blew out all the Diogenes' lanterns."²⁰

Much as we may regret the treatment of prisoners by "our side" in war, we must nevertheless understand in this case the tremendous impact that incarceration at La Ferte Mace had on the life and work of Edward Estlin Cummings. Passages in The Enormous Room fairly drip with bitter irony; in Him where Cummings seems to be arguing out the problems of life with himself in the form of a dramatic dialogue between Him and Me, the bitterness is slowly vaporizing off, but it is still much of the substance. By the time the author gets to Eimi in the nineteen-thirties, the bitterness has almost disappeared but the irony is all the stronger--but more merited, it would seem, since the subject of the satirization is the "non-life" of the Soviet Union. Had not the war blown out the inner lantern of the young artist, he might well have found himself more truly in balance by the time Eimi took shape, as his formation as an artist and a man had jelled by that time (1933); and when Santa Claus appeared in 1946 the crystallization is unmistakable. were it not for the vagaries of the artistic temperament and the inscrutable nature of free will, one

20

Dos Passos, John, *Nineteen-Nineteen*, New York, Random House, 1937, 15p.

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might have foretold the new reverence of the six "non-lectures" at Harvard in 1953 after the triumph of traditional values in Santa Claus and the indentification of their opposites in Death.

The long delay in final self-realization in Cummings, the more prolonged and desperate search for the inner, honest man, so to speak, was augmented by the excruciating experience of war and military imprisonment. We might go so far as to say that Cummings and the young men who went overseas in those years were bent beyond their elastic limits by the unbearable weight of the war; that it not only threw them into personal chaos for a score of years and left them wallowing in moral disintegration during the twenties, but that they bore the indelible mark which earned for them the label of the "Lost Generation" for all time. Like dazed survivors of shipwreck in a strange and hostile country from which return was made impossible, the Lost Generation never really found itself. It petered out in the turmoil of the thirties. It is true, Cummings showed divergent tendencies before embarking overseas--for some reason he didn't conform--and these would no doubt have left their permanent influence in his development as a man and as a poet;

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but how far the war and his incarceration at La Ferte Macé affected his swinging to the extremes of revolt can only be conjectured. After reading The Enormous Room one thing is certain: the impact of war was a major influence.

Cummings was successful in overcoming the shattering pressures of the second fifteen years of the twentieth century and in avoiding the follies of its third decade; nevertheless he was shipwrecked with his generation and he is only now beginning to discern the horizons of the Celestial City.

The Background of the Twenties

The "Lost Generation" was a singular comet in the modern literary firmament. What gives it more than literary interest is that it was not just a phenomenon of letters: it was more a flash of fire from a social volcano that was erupting intellectually and going to pieces far beneath the surface. It was a rumbling and explosion of ideas that shot out like smoke and larva from an ailing society rocked to its very foundations by the disillusion of war. In the great material prosperity of the twenties ethical values tended to stagnate with the new worldly vision. This vision was one of bread alone, and hardly had the artists, writers and scholars licked their war wounds when they were plunged into the new devastation of the great depression, and in the following years the Lost

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Generation seemed to break up like the infantry and artillery divisions in 1919. Some like Hart Crane committed suicide; others like F. Scott Fitzgerald merely died suddenly and unexpectedly; a few like Hemingway and Archibald MacLeish joined the big money publishers or sought eminence in other fields; most of the fraternity simply disappeared beneath the waves of time and events or went off into the distance behind the pied pipers of Soviet socialist Utopias; a few, including E.E. Cummings, are still vital and still around

Development

There are aspects of Cummings and his work which are contradictory in this pattern of Development. They appear widely spaced and for that reason are exceptional enough not to destroy the pattern itself. Exemplary of this are poems in which he is iconoclastic and anarchistic, such as the piece he quotes from his own Collected Poems (1938) in the Harvard, i SIX NONLECTURES:

come (all you mischief-
hatchers hatch
mischief) all you

guilty
scamper....throw dynamite)²¹

and another in which he calls upon Christ in a rough-hewn idiom as Saviour:

²¹

Cummings, E.E., Collected Poems, "No Thanks", New York, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1938, No. 286 (unpaged)

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King Christ, this world is all aleak;
 and lifepreservers there are none:
 and waves which only He may walk
 Who dares to call Himself a man.²²

The capitalization in this almost perfectly conventional stanza and the stanza form itself is most significant in a poet who scorned both, and in whom both are subject to the highest degree of nuance of meaning. At the end of this poem in which deepest values of life are briefly probed, the implication is clear: there were times when Cummings, appalled at what he saw of delinquency and enslavement about him in the world, fell back upon the faith of his fathers to the full. There are other confirmations of this in The Enormous Room and elsewhere; spots where he hovers, vacillating, in the dim borders between faith and reason in Him and Santa Claus.

He is approaching the new and more balanced frame of mind in No. 254 of the 1938 Collected Poems:

little man
 (in a hurry
 full of an
 important worry)
 halt stop forget relax

wait

(little child
 who have tried
 who have failed
 who have cried)
 lie bravely down

²² Ibid., No. 258

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sleep

big rain
big snow
big sun
big moon
(enter

us)

Here Cummings in mid-course is taking his own advice, stopping, waiting, relaxing, paving the way for a growing attitude that is to struggle with defiance and unconventionality in the Harvard lectures.

Eimi

Shortly before this poem was written Covici-Friede brought out Cummings' longest single work which reflected the philosophic approach of this settled, inner calm. It was Eimi (in Greek, the first person singular; equals: I am). As its subtitle on the yellow jacket of the William Sloane Associates (New York) edition indicates, it was "The Journal of a Trip to Russia". The title epitomizes the book and Cummings' judgment on the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. "I am" is denotive of individual life; Soviet Russia is the antithesis of all that this implies. Sovietism is the death of life, the extinction of the individual, the hell of freedom, the negation of the nature of man. Unlike most of the brave darlings of the bright

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new world who trekked to Moscow during the thirties for the glory of Marx and the good of souls, Cummings always abhorred the noble experiment. While starry-eyed American men of letters were "engaging" themselves at the "Writer's Club" in the Russian Capital, Cummings was putting Eimi together, his chronicle of the "more enormous room" of Communism, a continental concentration camp where the "non-life" of the Soviet Union tried to negate all that was human in man. In Moscow Cummings was to join the host of Americans "converted" to the cause of Communism. Among them was Eugene Lyons, one of the most fervent Marxists, the first newsman to spend two hours interviewing Stalin. He was later to write the account of his disillusion in Assignment in Utopia and to strike out savagely in the nature of an expose in The Red Decade. It was a sad time. In large numbers from literature, the arts, journalism, education, the entertainment fields, labor organizations, etc., the great and the near great went along with Red propaganda proclaiming that at last the long-awaited liberation of mankind was at hand; the saviour of the world was incarnate in the party; Communism was the new faith; Marxism was the bread of life.

During the "Red Decade" of the thirties, when

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Lyons was on his Assignment in Utopia, when Drieser Looks at Russia was an invitation to join in, and Walter Duranty, perhaps most ironic of all, was proclaiming, I Write as I Please, Cummings was publishing Eimi. Though the Red sorcery seemed veritably irresistible, Cummings was not taken in. Considering the ideological climate of the time, the nature of its pressures and the way they were exerted upon the individual, Cummings' resistance bears all the earmarks of a great man. A few weeks of observing the great Experiment of experiments (Cummings' term) and he muses:

I feel that whatever's been hitherto told or sung in song or story concerning Russia's revolution equals bunk. I feel that Russia was not once upon a time, and what a time! any number of cringing peasants ruled by an autocratic puppet--Russia was any number of kings, so perfectly so immanently and so naturally royal that (with a single negligible exception or "Czar") they did royally disguise themselves as humblest slaves, lest the light of their royalty dazzle a foolish world. But a foolish world is more foolish than royalty can suppose. And what has been mis-called the Russian revolution surely is a more foolish than supposable world's attempt upon natural and upon immanent and upon perfect and upon kingdom; and attempt motivated by baseness and by jealousy and by hate and a slave's wish to substitute for the royal incognito of humility the ignoble affectation of equality....²³

Whenever Cummings refers to "the system" it is in terms of ridicule, satire, irony. He is particularly

²³

Cummings, E.E., Eimi, New York, William Sloan Associates, no date, 247p

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vexing to the party representatives and his native countrymen-gone-Red who try to "convert" him: he replies to one who urges that "religion imprisons the human mind, whereas science makes people free", that, "I'd just as soon be imprisoned in freedom as free in a jail";²⁴ another time he is subjected to "180 minuteless minutes of 'materialist dialectic' which (among other miracles) makes sun while the hay shines, opens the key of life with the lock of science, juggles (without dropping) the unworld the unflesh and the undevil, and justifies from soup to nuts the ways of Marx to man."²⁵ Comrade Kem-min-kz (as the Russians usually call him) goes away unconvinced.

Incidentally, a distinction of Eimi is that it is less amenable to description, analysis or classification than any other book a reader is likely to see. It is not prose; it is certainly not poetry, though there are mixtures of both. It is something unique in literature. It is a hybrid work that can make a claim upon literature only as a curiosity, but as a curiosity it is interesting. Any would-be analyst or critic must be amazed upon reflection to realize that it is possible to open this book at random to almost any page whatever and find material and format which does not resemble nor even immediately suggest any other.

²⁴ Ibid., 52p

²⁵ Ibid., 83p

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This statement is in itself a bit of hyperbole; but it is impossible to adequately convey the impression that deep study of Eimi leaves on the mind of the student in any other fashion. To understate the case, it is extremely different.

To return to the pattern of Cummings' maturing as an individual, nowhere is it more emphasized than in his reaction to the rigidities of Soviet rule. The dust jacket of the Sloan edition of Eimi provides a good sample of conversation, typical of the enigmatical way in which Cummings always answers party propagandists (this repartee is in response to a toast):

"tell him I drink....to the individual."

A pause "he says that's nonsense."

"Tell him I love nonsense and I drink to nonsense." Pause

"he's very angry. He says you are afraid."

"tell him I am afraid to be afraid"

noisemusic, a waiter's glaring. "He believes you are mad."

"Tell him: a madman named noone says, that someone is and anyone isn't; and all the believing universe cannot transform anyone who isn't into someone who is 26

The Perfection of the Individual

Here occurs a clue to Cummings' idea of the "is": that which is alive, animated, breathing, spontaneous, free, is. That which is throttled by artificial rules and formulae; intellectual stagnation, sham and pretense, "never

26

Cummings, E.E., Eimi, New York, William Sloan Associates, no date, 101p

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feeling;/ never for a moment relaxing, laughing, wondering
 --everybody solemnly forever focusing upon some laughless
 idiotic unwonderful materially non-existent impermanence,/ which everybody apparently has been robotically instructed tovarich to welcome"27-- this is a species designated by the poet as non-being, or is not.

In the language of scholasticism this idea would be stated as a predeliction for that which passes or is passing from potency to act; and a corresponding prejudice in the extreme against what is reverting to potency, i.e., descending in the scale of being toward non-entity or death. Cummings insists that life be ever fulfilling itself in the individual, and repression of such vital growth and becomingness is the greatest of all evils, i.e., death. This means spiritual death, not merely physical death.

This striving always against aesthetic death for the perfection of "is", i.e., the most complete fulfillment possible of all the powers of the individual soul, is Cummings' idea of perfection for the individual. To put it scholastically, perfection in any individual is proportionate to his realization in acta of all the powers he possesses in potentia. In its application it is partly Christian, partly pagan. Santa Claus, for example, is a

 27

Ibid., 197p

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venture into the field of the morality, and in its brief action of eighteen pages it is a delightful work in praise of the spirit of giving. Tom, also, is an extension of this moral theme in the form of a ballet, the theme of which is taken from the Harriet Beecher Stowe novel. The idea of a Christian basis for the virtue of charity never enters formally, however, into the work. It is implicit rather than expressed. We might say from a Christian point of view that Cummings is charitable from natural motives rather than supernatural ones, and that his love of freedom is derived from the nature of man rather than as an article of faith in his divine creation to the image and likeness of God. This is said not to disparage natural virtue or demean the nobility of man derived from merely natural considerations; Cummings' innate charity and love of freedom are nonetheless noble and genuine, and the distinction is made merely for the sake of clarity of understanding in the present approach to his work. The completeness of the poet's love and devotion to the ideals of charity and freedom leads one to wonder at times if he has not borrowed substantially from his Christian background without being conscious of it. At times the divine origin of all human well-being bursts through to the conscious level. The high water mark in this new Cummings trend to synthesis is reached in No.

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65 of Xiape, a volume published in 1950

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died and am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing-any lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

The Contrast of Three Decades of Growth

This new Cummings of today can be seen clearly
and in vivid contrast to the Cummings of three decades ago
by juxtaposing his most recently published poem with one
on the same theme published in the second issue of Secession,
one of the revolutionary little magazines of the "Lost
Generation," for July, 1922. The older one bears no title,
only the designation "XII", and has the amorphous form of
the poet's verse of this and later periods. It is an ir-
reverent treatment of Christmas in the characteristic
attitude of insolence which stamps the thought and work of
that period, speaking typically of how "the messiah tumbled
successfully into the world" as "the animals continued eat-
ing." It first appeared in book form with other pieces

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collected in the original edition of is 5 in 1926.

Exactly thirty years later we find Cummings in a sense making reparation for his impudences of the past, including a splendid tribute to The Blessed Virgin Mary at the very climax of the poem. Considering her position in Christian theology and tradition, this poem could well mean the poet's salvation, especially since its sentiments and sympathies, and more deeply, its thought and ideas, place its author among those whom Pope Pius XII says in his Encyclical Mysticis Corporis Christi pertain to the Mystical Body, even if they are not formally and actually among its members.²⁸ This poem has the identical theme of the earlier one, it has a title, Cummings' name appears with conventional capitalization, and the verse form has the balance and regularity that have come to be associated with his later works. It retains the inventions and some of the concepts and devices (which remain to be delineated in the present work) associated with Cummings, and in this poetic expression of modern man he lives at his best:

28

Pope Pius XII, Mystici Corporis, Washington, D.C., National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1943, 39p., Section 103, especially lines 12-15: "For even though by an unconscious desire and longing they have a certain relationship with the Mystical Body of the Redeemer, they still remain deprived of those many heavenly gifts and helps which can only be enjoyed in the Catholic Church." (Emphasis added. The Pope is speaking in this section of those outside the Church, non-Catholics of good will.)

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CHRISTMAS POEM

by E. E. Cummings

from spiralling ecstatically this

proud nowhere of earth's most prodigious night
 blossoms a newborn babe: around him, eyes
 --gifted with ever keener appetite
 than mere unmiracle can quite appease --
 humbly in their imagined bodies kneel
 (over time space doom dream while floats the whole
 perhapsless mystery of paradise)

mind without soul may blast some universe
 to might have been, and stop ten thousand stars
 but not one heartbeat of this child: nor shall
 even prevail a million questionings
 against the silence of his mother's smile.

--whose only secret all creation sings.²⁹

This "new" Cummings is sharply highlighted in the evolution of his character and outlook by an event noted in Harper's during the fall season of 1957. In June the Boston Arts Festival featured the appearance of Cummings in readings from his collected poems, introduced by Archibald MacLeish, the winner of the Festival award the previous year. MacLeish presented the medal and the accompanying prize to Cummings and launched him on his performance in the presence of over 7,000 people who had come exclusively to hear him and applaud his work.

They clapped each poem, and they would not let him

²⁹
The Atlantic Monthly, December, 1956, Vol. 198,
 No. 6, 55p

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go without an encore. Even the tough items--like "Thanksgiving, 1956," appropos of Hungary and what MacLeish called our "un-State Department"-- they took in stride. One of Cummings' several satires, a take-off on phony Fourth-of-July orations, he read in a voice wholly unlike his normal tone; and a woman next to me said to her companion, "Why, that sounds just like Jim Curley!"

After forty years of waiting, a bard had been discovered by his townspeople. I hope Mr. Kelly will therefore not be too hard on the Boston Arts Festival, which made this possible.³⁰

The prodigal had returned. He had not compromised his honesty nor spared his enemies, but he was friendly, reasonable and good-natured about it all. He was satirical and even ironical but he spoke without rancour or ill feeling. The Cambridge ladies had taken him to their unfurnished hearts and he was glad to fill the emptiness of their lives with something of his own fire and art.

Cummings had joined humanity. No longer the fierce outsider of Colin Wilson's world, he is now, with whatever reservations, part of it all and glad to be aboard. For this change of heart both on his part and the part of his readers and listeners, Cummings and humanity are the more abundantly enriched.

Conclusion

The life of E.E. Cummings has coincided roughly

³⁰
Harper's Magazine, September, 1957, Vol. 215, No. 1288, "After Hours", 86-87pp.

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with that of the twentieth century. Like the century itself, Cummings struck out as a brash youth flexing his muscles in the world of poetry, philosophy and art, and declined to admit of any law superior to the norms of his own personal judgment. His own world he conceived of in the most grandiose of terms and he glorified it even to a point beyond the merely natural. Again, like the story of his century, Cummings was plunged into disillusionment and almost complete disaster by the impact and the intimate experience of war. Recovering somewhat from this, he came for a time to share the nihilistic and iconoclastic spirit which characterized the hectic decade of the twenties. Unlike most of the embryonic poets and philosophers of those years, he survived the next crucible of the great depression and avoided its aftermath, the ideological blunders of the thirties. It was in this maelstrom of confusion and misguided zeal that his purity of doctrine centering upon the freedom, the dignity and even the sanctity of the individual began to stand out against all the vacillation and empty sloganizing of the period. With a few unfortunate applications and understandable inconsistencies, this championing of the integrity of self underwent a complete metamorphosis from iconoclasm and revolt for its own sake to a refined philosophy of tolerance and good will toward the integrity

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of others. This is a quality notably lacking in his earlier work but which is the basis of his belated acceptance and triumphal recognition on the American literary scene today. This is not to say that the poet has compromised his principles to any extent, but only that he has recognized that there are other interpretations of life in the arena; and while he is as insistent as ever upon a hearing for his own views of life, he will likewise grant the same privilege to other contenders. What this amounts to in Christian terms is an insistence upon freedom of conscience and of expression, which is something that has always been acknowledged in theory but less often accorded in practice. In a pluralistic society such as exists in most of North America today it is a practical and happy necessity. It is something which the poet as well as his detractors has had to learn through the years. In practice it means, for example, that, although Cummings will fraternize with the sponsors of the Boston Arts Festival, he does not necessarily agree with them. But his disagreement, for all its acerbity and wit, has ceased to be insulting and intolerant.

This new attitude towards things places his work in new perspective. While it does not change the meaning of much of his earlier work, it does allow for a modified

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interpretation of their ideas in view of his new-found reverence; and it is in this light that the following chapters will consider his work.

PART II

A STUDY OF FORM, STRUCTURE, TECHNIQUE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

CHAPTER TWO

TYPOGRAPHICAL ONOMATOPOEIA; STRUCTURAL INNOVATION,
NEW VERSE FORMS AND THEIR USE; DEFINITION OF TERMS

The scholar and the new reader alike are struck first of all in Cummings' poems by their unusual form and appearance. The main features of his prosodic irregularities are a distorted and unorthodox syntax, disregard of the ordinary rules of grammar, a novel use (or lack) of punctuation and capital letters and innovations in the arrangement of words and syllables. These innovations control the speed, imagery or visual aspects of a poem, usually in combination to produce some dramatic, visual or other predetermined effect. Sometimes the results are admirable, excellent or spectacular; sometimes, as is inevitable in experiment, there is only let-down, anti-climax or chagrin. These characteristics of the poet are stressed in one way or another by every critic. That Cummings has evolved unique forms of free verse is just about the only point of agreement among his many commentators; various reviews and evaluations which have appeared since Tulips and Chimneys in 1923 range all the way from Max Eastman's satiric condemnation, "The Cult of Unintelligibility" in The Literary Mind, to Paul Rosenfeld's almost unqualified praise in Men Seen. Lloyd Frankenburg states: "On the whole, opinion has tended to

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parallel the variety of the poetry itself."¹ Eastman is the most violent of the conscientious objectors to Cummings' novelties; Rosenfeld, friend of the poet, has been his most unreserved admirer, not hesitating to place him on a par with Marlowe, Keats and Swinburne.²

Eastman's Charge of Unintelligibility

Eastman says:

Practical and downright people can hardly help suspecting that there is something of a hoax about this whole cult of uncommunicative writing. And the suspicion is not confined to those remote from it either. I have heard two personal friends of E.E. Cummings debating as to whether his prosodical and punctuational gymnastics have not been a joke at the expense of the critics of poetry.³

Again

If you pick up a book by Hart Crane, E.E. Cummings, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Edith Sitwell, or any of the "modernists", and read a page innocently, I think the first feeling you will have is that the author isn't telling you anything. It may be he isn't telling you anything because he doesn't know anything. Or it may be he knows something all right, but he won't tell. In any case he is uncommunicative. He is unfriendly. He seems to be playing by himself, and offering you somewhat incidentally the opportunity to look on.⁴

Eastman goes on for pages in this vein, saying

¹
Frankenburg, Lloyd, Pleasure Dome, Cambridge, Mass., The Riverside Press, 1949, 164p

²
Rosenfeld, Paul, Men Seen, New York, The Dial Press, 1925, 200p

³
Eastman, Max, The Literary Mind, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931, 103p

⁴
Ibid., 57p.

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that there seems to be a conspiracy between poets and critics, the one mouthing strange sayings which mean nothing, the other pretending to understand and inducing a trumped-up enthusiasm. Thus they "share" a modern poetic experience which amounts to "exactly nothing". He inveighs sharply against "cross breeding of commas with plus signs," as well as "free typesetting" and "free photo-engraving." These are foreseen as a logical extension of experimental adventures in free verse. "From free verse it was a short step to free punctuation. I mean the habit of turning loose a handful of punctuation marks like a flock of bacteria to browse all over the page, and even eat their way into the insides of apparently healthy words."⁵ Cummings, he concludes, will have to be exhibited in a projection room, since his poetry is made to be seen and not heard.

There is much criticism of this type, and not all confined to Cummings' poetry. "Incidentally," says Eugene Lyons, "what I understood of the book, Eimi, was so good, so penetrating, that I still wish he had not written it in puzzlewords."⁶

5

Ibid., 59p

6.

Lyons, Eugene, Assignment in Utopia, New York, Harcourt Brace, and Co., 1937, 418p.

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Rosenfeld's Praise of Meaninglessness

Rosenfeld, at the other extreme, is less forthright and definitive and given to speaking his praises of the poet in metaphors. Citing The Enormous Room, he says:

The narrative sets forth a surprising utter illogicality. Cummings' world is a complex of startling and atrocious sudden comic arrivals of the unforeseen. Events careen eccentrically from each other like blocks that refuse to fall end against end, and follow incomprehensible patterns. Unsuspected edges of flint lead 'round corners to equally unsuspected surfaces of silk, and queer little lovelinesses sprout from damp stones. Objects behave like monkey-men abrupt and ridiculous of movement, and men appear whirring mechanisms and terrible toys. The irregular rhythm of a clown-god is apparent: his majesty of unreason, the white moon himself, dizzily zigzagging through the universe and shedding in marvelous dislocation delight, brickbats and death.⁷

This is a rather esoteric and subjective reaction to the poet and no doubt the kind of criticism Eastman has in mind as being for the inner circle of the elect in the mystical literary kingdom. It is very difficult or impossible for "downright, practical people" to translate into real meaning for themselves, and necessitates here and now that there be some definition of what is meant by "unintelligibility", since that term means very different

⁷
Rosenfeld, Paul, Men Seen, New York, The Dial Press, 1925 191p.

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things to Rosenfeld, Sitwell, Graves, Riding and Eastman, and, indeed, to everyone who meets Cummings half way. By unintelligible (since some of Cummings' work will have to be so categorized) we shall mean, not merely that which means absolutely nothing in terms of communication between poet and reader (or listener), but pieces of such obscure, hidden or confused references of meaning that they are not understood by a majority of readers possessed of intelligence, education and culture, after expending a reasonable degree of effort to comprehend them. This will include pieces which have been referred to Cummings himself for some clue as to meaning, without appreciable success, and those which are coherent in themselves but convey no definite impression, examples of which are given below.

Rosenfeld admits the difficulty, but defends Cummings against one of the charges of Eastman, Sitwell and their company:

Of conscious trickery there is indeed no question; one merely feels at instances that the poet has disappeared, and a prodigious frigid mechanism come to take his place.⁸

He says further:

8

Ibid., 198p

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....the typographical display exists upon his pages never in the intention of picture writing, and always for the purpose of marking the accelerations and hesitations of the rapid, capricious melodic line, and reinforcing the sense.⁹

Analysis of Two "Unintelligible" Poems

There is an implication here that poetry to be poetry must have something of melody, music, rhythm: it must be capable of recitation as well as readable. This conviction was published in 1925, ten years before the publication of the "grasshopper" poem (No. 13 of No Thanks), and the "bright" piece (No. 70 of No Thanks). At least twenty-one of Cummings' collected poems are now purely "pictorial", with no possibility of reading them aloud. On the other hand, the success of Cummings' recitations on records is proof against Eastman's projection room epithet. The "pictograms" are original with Cummings and constitute his unique contribution to the free verse form. He is frankly an experimenter in this medium, and thus the variety of opinion as to his success or failure is inevitable. The "grasshopper" poem is one of his most noted, quoted, and successful, and for that reason we may well begin our examination with that piece:

⁹
Ibid., 199p

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1. r-p-o-p-h-e-s-a-g-r
2. who
3. a)sw(e loo)k
4. upnowgath
5. PPEGORHRASS
6. eringt(o-
7. aThe):l
8. eA
9. !p:
10. S a
11. (r
12. rIvInG .gRrEaPsPhOs)
13. to
14. rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
15. ,grasshopper; 10

First impressions in the case of these pictograms need not be lasting ones. Upon looking into Cummings' pictorial images the first impression is likely to be one of bewilderment. The expenditure of a little effort in analysis, however, shows that, as usual in Cummings, there is far more than meets the eye. For the sake of convenience in analysis the lines are numbered, which, of course, is not done in the original. Our analysis, differing somewhat in method from others', is, nevertheless, in substantial agreement with all the others on this subject.

Line one: an object is brought to the reader's attention. The mind is focused on this indistinct object in nature, not sure of what it is, gaining some confused notion as examination is continued and concentrated.

10

Cummings, E.E., No. 13, No Thanks

TYPOGRAPHICAL ONOMATOPOEIA; STRUCTURAL INNOVATION,
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Line two: scrutiny demonstrates that it is a "who", i.e., something alive, deduced probably from some sound or motion, conveyed in confuso by dwelling a bit on the vowels and consonants in line one.

Line three: "as we look" brings attention back upon ourselves. The separation of a from s in as synchronize our internal and external powers of observation for what is about to register on them. The separation of w and e in we in like manner concentrates the power of attention as one necessarily decodes the phrase. The facing of the first and third parenthesis "pushes" attention back upon ourselves, as it were, away from the living, moving object. The facing of the second parenthesis must be as it is, or there would be too much redirection of attention by the typographical device. The third before the k leaves it standing alone, a bridge for our transition to the next line, back to the object.

Line four: "up now gath" --; the object is now gathering itself up, pulling itself together for something.

Line five: it is seen now more erectly and distinctly than in line one, and one is almost able at this moment to identify it for what it actually is. This impression forms as "we" watch it "gath-ering" itself up. The

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double "P" and the double "S" at the beginning and end of the line could be said to symbolize the fore and hind feet, but this is pressing the analogy a bit far.

Line six: the gathering is completed and the object goes on to the next phase. The separation of t and o by the parenthesis serves to intensify suspense and concentration.

Line seven: the object is poised to do something, something indefinite; the indefinite article a indicates this. The capital T sets off the definite article; this is not only a leap, but "The" leap "we" are concentrating on. The colon sets off the action, much as it would set off a list or a quotation. The l starts the action. The poet is saying, here it comes!

Lines eight, nine and ten: here is the climax of the poem. The arrangement of the type with the internal exclamation, with its connotation of excitement within the "leap" recreates the experience the poet is sharing with the reader and brings it to an abrupt halt, or "landing" with the short stop of the colon. The "A" heightens the "lift" sensation or "leap".

Line ten: the grasshopper is in mid-air, outstretched, indicated by the capital letter, "S" winging

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across the space to distant points, small "a".

Line eleven: the purpose of this line seems to be to slow up the reader and stop him momentarily to symbolize the "landing" or poise for landing of the grasshopper. The reason for the parenthesis is not clear. It does provide a kind of "backing" for the "r".

Line twelve: the ruffled appearance of the completion of "a/(r/rIvInG" suggests the ruffled appearance of the grasshopper upon striking the ground, or leaf or branch or whatever he is landing on. The blank space leading to the period brings us to a complete halt. The action is over, except for the rearrangement of the grasshopper, hunched, straightening out, resuming his normal position and appearance.

Line thirteen: this is another abrupt transitional line.

Line fourteen: this line overtly states the rearrangement process going on if the parenthetical elements are abstracted; they in turn and in the midst of the final settling of the insect, state what is happening, he has "become" his original self again.

Line fifteen: this is the key to the poem, from which we take our cue, where the grasshopper is seen

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and recognized in one word as he is. The preceding comma suggests a pause after he has become his normal self again, while the semi-colon suggests that the pause is only momentary; he is about to repeat the action.

This is the type of poem best suited to the projection room "audition" of Eastman's critique, and it is doubtful that anyone would maintain that it could be read aloud. The poem doesn't speak of or tell about something; it "does" something, as Sam Hynes points out in another analysis of it in The Explicator of November, 1951.

It does not take The Explicator, however, to decipher it and pass the word on; the poem is not unintelligible either absolutely or relatively. Anyone familiar with poetry and its technique will "catch on" after devoting a little time and concentrated effort in examining and synthesizing its elements. There will be those who do not like the originality of this evolution of a new species of free verse nor its products; to them it may be more of a puzzle than a poem. Nevertheless, the poem is entirely intelligible and achieves its objective. It is something new in poetry, at once an object and an experience, designed like "Cinerama" to "take you there." Cummings says in his Foreword to Is 5, that he has "made" his poems to compete

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"with roses and locomotives". This type of poetic "pictogram" is his original contribution to the lore of verse.

Another example of such a representation, much simpler, and one in which the technique is not quite the same, is the "starburst" poem, or the "shooting star", as some would see it, which begins, "i was considering how", etc., in "Impressions III" of Tulips and Chimneys. It is perhaps significant as well as interesting to note that this was published twelve years earlier than the grasshopper poem.

into

Eternity. when over my head a
shooting
star
Bur s

(t
 into a stale shriek
like an alarm-clock)

The appeal to sight and sound inherent in this poem is obvious to anyone who has become acquainted with the more complex method of the previous one. Here we are beginning to encounter variations and nuances of technique, and before proceeding further it will be expedient to classify the poems collected in the edition of 1954, since there can be no question of minutely examining any great number of

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them individually on the basis of the prosodic elements which make them up.

Beloff's Classification System

Such a task would be a formidable one, had it not already been simplified by Dr. Robert L. Beloff of the University of California at Berkeley, in his study of E.E. Cummings; The Prosodic Shape of His Poems.¹¹ Dr. Beloff separates Cummings' collected poetry into eight categories, which show his work to be made up of traditional elements in much greater proportion than one would surmise from the impression given by many critics. *(See Table)

Further sorting according to the works in which they appear gives us this bird's-eye view of prosodic form.

There is an appendix of eleven pages in which each poem is classified by book and number according to these designations. Poems 1923-1954 indexes 610 pieces; Beloff eliminates nine for one reason or another and totals 601. As would be expected, there are twilight zones in these species of verse, and opinion will differ at times as to which quality will predominate in a given case.

¹¹

Beloff, Robert Lawrence, E.E. Cummings: The Prosodic Shape of His Poems, Ann Arbor, Mich., University Microfilms, 1954, Doctoral Dissertation Series, Publication No. 10,287; Doctoral Dissertation completed at Northwestern University, 1954.

TABLE I

Beloof's Classification

Foot Prosody206
Free Verse in Dramatic Form150
Free Verse in Metaphysical Form	8
Oral Verse in Visual Form118
Pictograms	23
Syllabic Prosody	41
Stress Prosody	3
Anomalous	52
 Total Poems Studied601

TABLE II

Detail of Beloof's Classification System

	<u>Foot</u>	<u>ma-</u>	<u>Free</u>	<u>Free</u>	<u>Oral</u>	<u>Syl-</u>	<u>Stress</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>To-</u>
	<u>ody</u>	<u>tic</u>	<u>Verse</u>	<u>in</u>	<u>Verse</u>	<u>labic</u>	<u>ody</u>	<u>ody</u>	<u>tal</u>
		<u>Form</u>	<u>Form</u>	<u>Form</u>	<u>grams</u>	<u>ody</u>	<u>ody</u>	<u>lous</u>	<u>tal</u>
Tulips and Chim- neys	50	70	3	5		1		21	150
&	12	14	1					9	36
Is 5	15	35		19			2	7	78
Viva	22	26	1	10	3			8	70
No Thanks	26	5	2	18	12	3	1	3	70
Col- lected Poems (22 New Poems)	6			14	2				22
50 Poems	24		1	19	2	3		1	50
1 x 1	24			8	3	16		3	54
KAIPE	27			25	1	18			71
Total	206	150	8	118	23	41	3	52	601

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Belooof has employed neologisms in his tabulation of Cummings' work to solve the knotty problems encountered in any effort to categorize the unpredictable forms his verses are wont to take. "Foot prosody", the most common designation, is applied by Belooof to the usual form of English verse, the regular rhythmic accent and meter which came into English from the long and short syllable stresses of the ancient Latin and Greek. It is made up of iambs, anapests, etc., in tetrameter, pentameter, etc., lines. It will come as a surprise to readers acquainted with Cummings only in the anthologies and reviews to learn that nearly half his verse scans as well, or nearly as well, as any major or minor poet in the language. (This includes much that appears under other headings.) Thus, considered by this norm, Cummings is being analyzed by the "universal" or "monistic" principle which has until our century been the standard one for judging all verse. It is only when we consider Cummings' peculiar point of departure and come to grips with his experimental innovations that we pass on to Free Verse in Dramatic Form, Pictograms, and the rest. "Free Verse in Dramatic Form", which accounts for about a quarter of Cummings' collected poetry, is a variety of free verse dis-

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tinguished by its separation and indentation of lines and words or phrases so as to control the speed of reading, to cause abrupt halts, to mark units of thought, to set off key words and ideas, or otherwise "to give aid and instruction to the ear". Its use in any piece does not exclude a combination of foot prosody, stress prosody or syllabic lines.

"Oral Verse in Visual Form", the next most common form of Cummings' verse, designates 118 out of 601 poems. Once again, this does not exclude the incorporation of regular accent and meter, or dramatic lines, but merely means that the visual characteristic predominates. This form has something in common with the "grasshopper" poem in that there is no definite line or word pattern, but it differs from the pictogram in that it can be read. Its formal element seems to be that, while it is audible and readable, the primary appeal of the poem on the page is to the sense of sight, or to the creation of sound effects through the appearance of the words on the page. This is exemplified by the appearance of the word "ccocoucoughcoughcoughi / ng" in No. II of 50 Poems. Because of the unconventional pattern of words, lines and fragments it is in this form especially that the charge of "unintelligibility" is levelled at Mr. Cummings. These poems have to be "decoded" like a military message before they can

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appreciated or their ingenuity appraised. Often this is as laborious as the code-breaker's method of beginning with the most common vowel, "e", working to "a" and "i", and then to the formation of definite and indefinite articles. The example given immediately above is a good instance of one species of the "typographical onomatopoeia" in which Cummings has pioneered and is still unique.

Another group, closely related to the "Oral Verse in Visual Form", is the "Pictogram", of which the "grass-hopper" poem is the best example. The sense appeal of the poem is almost entirely to sight, but there is something of sound evocation present, too; The "star-burst" poem, also quoted above in part, is a case of the oral-visual technique overlapping the pictogram. Beloof classifies it with the former, no doubt because the poem is cast in words of normal appearance, except for the "Bur s / (t" lines, where pictogram technique dominates momentarily. Sound evocation also enters into this one. There are twenty-three pictograms, or roughly a proportion of three and one-half percent of all Cummings' work where this method is dominant. It is Cummings' most distinctive medium and the one in which he is most original.

Pictogram pieces are of their very nature anomalous as to versification. No. I of 50 Poems stands in the

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twilight zone between the two technical arrangements, leaning rather to the former because of the final image:

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The dead leaf, black against the white sky like the trees from which it drops, whirls down to the ground and a dead stop. The second half of the poem simulates this downward, spinning motion. There is little to add, except that the punctuation indicates the uneven speed of the "whirling" fall and the colon serves to bring it to a brief halt; and the use of the capital "I" twice in the "whirling"

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is a clue to the poet's identification of himself with the leaf.

"Free Verse in Metaphysical Form" is merely the method first found in the "Metaphysical Poets" of the seventeenth century who cast stanzaic forms in the shape of objects associated with the poem, e.g., Robert Herrick's This Cross Tree where the lines form a cross, or George Herbert's Easter Wings. Cummings' metaphysical forms are not readily recognizable in most cases; and for that reason the association with definite forms in the poetic tradition of the past is not entirely satisfactory. However, the classification is adequate. Eight poems are placed in this group. No. I of "Songs" in Xli Poems is probably the best illustration of free verse in "metaphysical form". It purports to configurate a column of smoke rising and billowing from the stack of a steam engine:

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 sky
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 minous
 edible
 spry
 pinks shy
 lemons
 greens coo l choc
 olate
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Aside from this one, fairly clear, "metophysical" forms are excessively vague in Cummings, and have to be looked for. One notable exception is a clever dedication to fourteen publishers in the collected edition of No Thanks. It has the unmistakable figure of a festive drinking cup and the title would indicate that the intent is ironic, or even sardonic.

"Syllabic Prosody" indicates those poems in which regularity of syllable count seems the primary formal factor. The length of line is governed by the number of syllables. This does not differ greatly from "foot prosody", and there is much overlapping, but in the latter the metrical characteristic is the dominant one, while the lines may be of irregular length according to syllable count; whereas in "syllabic prosody" the count of syllables remains constant per line while the meter may be mixed or non-existent. There are forty-one of these pieces, or, roughly, a proportion of six to seven percent.

"Stress Prosody" accounts for only three of the Poems 1923-1954. Though the least in quantity in Cummings'

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compositions, the "stress" rule is rigidly observed. In this category the lines are of mixed meter but there is a regular recurrence of heavy stresses in each line, or in each corresponding line of alternate stanzas, e.g., "All in green went my love riding." There are four stresses in this line, with no regular meter or rhythm. The last word, "riding", is naturally trochaic in beat, or accent, but it has only one stress, along with "all", "green", and "love". The emphasis is upon stresses rather than upon feet per line. The following line, "on a great horse of gold", contains one anapest, one spondee and one iamb -- quite a mixed line for such a short one -- but it has three beats, or stresses. Through stanzas of seven tercets alternating with seven couplets Cummings never once varies this "stress prosody" from a rigid pattern, though the meter is quite mixed. There is also a strong syllabic pattern from which deviation is made only in two lines.

This is one of Cummings' most interesting works, as well as a rare combination of stress and syllabic prosodies. The poem is No. IV of Tulips and Chimneys, under "Songs":

All in green went my love riding
on a great horse of gold
into the silver dawn.

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four lean hounds crouched low and smiling
the merry deer ran before.

Fleeter be they than dappled dreams
the swift sweet deer
the red rare deer.

Four red roebuck at a white water
the cruel bugle sang before

Horn at hip went my love riding
riding the echo down
into the silver dawn.

four lean hounds crouched low and smiling
the level meadows ran before.

Softer be they than slippered sleep
the lean lighe deer
the fleet flown deer.

Four fleet does at a gold valley
the famished arrow sang before

Bow at belt went my love riding
riding the mountain down
into the silver dawn.

four lean hounds crouched low and smiling
the sheer peaks ran before.

Paler be they than daunting death
the sleek slim deer
the tall tense deer.

Four tall stags at a green mountain
the lucky hunter sang before.

All in green went my love riding
on a great horse of gold
into the silver dawn.

Four lean hounds crouched low and smiling
my heart fell dead before.

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The orderly prosody of this poem according to syllables and stresses is at once evident, as well as in its stanzaic pattern of seven tercets and couplets. The stress pattern is 4-3-3--5-4, 4-3-3--5-4, throughout. There is not a single variation. Syllabically the pattern is alternating; 8-6-6 and 8-4-4 for the tercets, and 8-8 for the couplets, with the exception of the first, which is one syllable short in the second line, and the last, which is two syllables short in the same line.

All well and good, some of Cummings' critics may say, the prosody is fine and regular; but what does it all mean? What is the poem all about, anyway? This is a love story told in the metaphor of a hunt. The woman is the narrator. She sees her beloved as the noblest creature in nature (symbolized by the "green"), mounted, as it were, on all the richness of youth and energy as a mighty conqueror. The silver dawn seems to figure the delicate beauty and loveliness of her own ripening womanhood. The four lean hounds are lesser suitors, who attain to the same gifts as the lover has mastered and risen above, but they are on the same level as the horse the lover is riding. He surpasses them as man surpasses the lesser animals. The rest of the poem relates the exciting chase, the "tense" contest, and

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finally her being dead as far as the other suitors are concerned, as the action completes its cycle, returning to the figure of the lovers' unity. Not a word is lost in this carefully controlled poem: the "dappled dreams", "red roebuck", green mountain, tall stags and the golden valley, etc., are all rich in significance, and there are various symbols placed at strategic points to convey definite meanings in this lyric. The ratio of capitalization is not clear, although it no doubt has some experimental function.

To return to Beloof's classifications, there remains the "Anomalous" form to be defined. Poems are thus categorized when they will not fit into any other classification because of conflicting forms or some other essential difficulty, or when there are two or more prosodies combined in approximately equal measure and/or equal importance.

For example, a certain visual quality attaches to much of Cummings' verse which is neither pictogram nor metaphysical. Unlike the pictogram it can be read with pleasure and is not definite enough in outline to be metaphysical. It is done by running words together, or by association of images or in some other manner. The best example of this type of structure is No. I of "Chansons Innocentes" in Tulips and Chimneys:

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in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's
spring
and

The appeal to sense of sound and sight, the treatment of eddieandbill and bettyandisbel as a unit and the other mechanical details of the poem will be manifest from what has gone before. There is a richness of image with connotations of closeness and distance that make this a kind of three-dimensional poem.

No. II of No Thanks is a good example of an anomalous verse form:

moon over gai
-té.a
sharp crone dodders be-
tween taxis swirl hues crowds mov
-ing ing ing
among who dreams whom mutterings dream &

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:the moon over death over edgar the
moon

and so on. Further on the verse appears:

oon over juillet moon over s
-unday

O:
m
o
o
n
(ver no(w ove(r all;

Visual Patterns

Another poem, No. 70 of No Thanks, deserves particular attention because it raised problems no one was able to solve with regard to the visual pattern and the arrangement of the words on the page:

brIght

bRight s???: big
(soft)

soft near calm
(Bright)
calm st?? holy

(soft briGht deep)
yeS near sta? calm star big yeS
alone
(wHo

Yes
near deep wh0 big alone soft near
deep calm deep
????Ht ?????T)
Who(holy alone)holy(alone holy)alone

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As it stands this piece is not at all clear, either in thought or structure. A pattern of stanza progression from one to five lines and vaguely lengthening lines is apparent. Casting about for association of ideas, a person familiar with liturgical art would get the idea that this might be a pictogram or form of dramatic free verse endeavoring to represent the seeing-eye-within-a-triangle with emanating rays which is liturgically symbolic of the "eye of God", or, more accurately, the omniscience of God, from which nothing may be hidden. The last two lines uphold this speculation. The words grouped about this idea are stream-of-consciousness attributes occurring to the mind of the beholder.

But why the particular arrangement?

This same question occurred to Robert L. Beloof in writing his study of Cummings' prosody. Giving no seeing-eye hypothesis, since he is confining this examination to structure, Beloof says:

within that larger frame there is a minor visual pattern created by the capital letters. No metaphysical or semantic meaning is intended by the visual pattern. Though the capitals have a way of making the letters in bright blink on and off, the poet once described the capitals as simply a way of breaking up the "fall" of

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the poem on the page into a more interesting visual experience.²

Is bright and its explication justified? It is not possible to answer such a question. There will be some who will support either contention. Do the capitals really "blink on and off", and does the poem "fall" on the page "into a more interesting visual experience"? One's answer will invariably depend upon what view one takes of Cummings' work generally. It must be admitted that if the words and the dawning image are dwelt on for the time necessary for them to assume some sort of intelligibility, there is a kind of abstract imagism here, substituting sensory impressions and abstract ideas for the usual imagery of a poem. Cummings is here in a realm we might call "abstract imagery", wherein words and ideas not normally associated may be drawn together for the creation of a composite image.

Dramatic Free Verse

One of Cummings' best efforts, which may be reckoned as dramatic free verse, as well as anomalous verse form, is widely cited, and is the poem about which Max Eastman builds his case for unintelligibility. For this reason,

2

Beloff, Robert L., E.E. Cummings, the Prosodic Shape of His Poems, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mich., 67p., Doctoral Dissertation Series, Publication No. 10,287, completed at Northwestern University, 1954.)

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because it is one of Cummings' truly great poems, and because of the way it causes the charge of unintelligibility to boomerang, it is worthy of special attention. This is No. 11 of section "Three in Is 5:

Among
 these
 red pieces of
 day(against which and
 quite silently hills
 made of blueandgreen paper
 scorchbend ingthem
 -selves-U
 pcurv E,into:
 anguish(clim
 b)ing
 s-p-i-r-a-
 l
 and,disappear)
 Satanic and blase
 a black goat lookingly wanders
 There is nothing of the world but
 into this noth
 ing il treno per
 Roma si-gnori?
 jerk.
 ilyr,ushes

The poem, of course, is not unintelligible, and Eastman himself gives the best explication this analyst has observed. It is merely a matter of whether one is favorably disposed to such verse forms and is willing to "read" along as the poet writes to get the effect he intends. The poem expresses the feeling of a passenger in an Italian train at

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sunset, musing upon the beauty of the dying day and the silent hills through which he is riding, which "upcurve like scorched blueandgreen paper" in the heat of the Italian day, spiraling upward and out of sight. He sees a goat grazing as the day fades into darkness and the train rushes toward Rome. The devices, considered from a dramatic point of view, are very effective.

A typical work of foot prosody, abounding in these other characteristics, is the poet's eulogy of his father which makes up No. 34 of 50 Poems:

my father moved through dooms of love
through sames of am through haves of give,
singing each morning out of each night
my father moved through depths of heights

There are seventeen quatrains of this iambic tetrameter, all but two with a variant line or two. The meter is well established and suited to the subject, which is a tribute to Edward Cummings, Sr. The meaning of the abstractions, "dooms", "haves", "Depths", etc., dawn on the reader after he has imbibed enough of Cummings' personalized use of abstractions to cultivate an intuition or "sense" of them.

As Allen Tate says of Cummings' "personal convention":

"Now in addition to the typographical mechanism there is another that grows out of it -- the mechanism of emotionally

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charged private words that are constantly overcharged into pseudo-symbols."³

This sequence and the poem beginning "All in green went my love riding" are good examples. Thus in "my father moved through dooms of love", the reader initiated into Cummings' world of meaning understands him to say that his father was a man who elected to be true to love (in the broad sense) no matter what the consequences. Being true to love, or to justice, or any ideal, necessarily brings sacrifice in its way. Sacrifice means to give up something very desirable; it is painful. To Cummings this brings death into the equation of life, and in this aspect of things his father becomes involved in the "dooms" through which he "moves"; that is, in his love, and in his life, which is an ever progressing fulfillment of love, he evolves constantly as a man of fealty and steadfastness to being, as it were, an incarnation of this love. "Moves" is to be understood more in the philosophical sense, in the scholastic idea of "moving" from potency to act, and thus toward fulfillment. The subject of this poem through his perfect generosity of spirit realized his love by endless giving of his "haves" to make a morning out of each night; he has risen to the heights of love, which implies his ascent from the depths of doom.

3

Tate, Allen, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas, New York and London, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936,

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As the ascetical man would say, he has died to self and now has risen to live by love. He has passed out of the depths of purification, in the parlance of the mystic, and risen now to the heights of union with his ideal.

The last stanza brings this out after the poet develops the theme through many figurative lines, with words "emotionally charged" and "overcharged into pseudo-symbols":

and nothing quite so least as truth
-- i say though hate were why men breathe --
because my father lived his soul
love is the whole and more than all

There is also a factor of syllabic prosody in these lines, but the iambic tetrameter is dominant. Another example of prosody by syllables is to be seen in No. V of Xiape:

swim so now million many worlds in each
least less than particle of perfect dark --
how should a loudness called mankind unteach
whole infinite the who of life's life (hark!

There are ten syllables to the line in this social satire of "overcharged ...pseudo-symbols" and they cannot be classified in any other way. No. III preceding it is another case in point:

purier than purest pure
whisper of a whisper

There are elements of dramatic free verse in

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these lines, but the syllabic measurement is stronger. It differs also from pure pictogram in that it can be read aloud. A better example of free verse in dramatic form is No. I of "Impressions", Tulips and Chimneys:

the sky a silver
dissonance by the correct
fingers of april
resolved

into a clutter of trite jewels

or No. I of "Post Impressions", Tulips and Chimneys:

beyond the brittle towns asleep
i look where stealing needles of foam
in the last light

thread creeping shores

Verse Form Used for Emphasis, Impression, Imagery

In each case the lines and spaces tend to isolate an idea. "Into a clutter of trite jewels" tends to be read at greater speed because of the indentation of the line and thus to make its impression as a collective unit, as the poet intends. The "thread of creeping" shores set off in an expanse of white marginal space tends to suggest the white margin of beach where the form of the waves is threading the edge of the creeping tide in the last light of day.

Another use of dramatic free verse is seen in No. 17 of No Thanks:

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o
sure)but
nobody underst(no
but Rully yes i
know)but what it comes

to(listen you don't have to

i mean Reely)but(no listen don't
be sil why sure)i mean the(o
well ughhuh sure why not yuh course yeh well
naturally i und certain i o posi but

i know sure that's)but listen here's

(correct you said it yeah)but
listen but(it's Rilly yeh)but
ughhuh yuh)i know

(o sure i

know yes
of

course)but what i mean is Nobody Understands Her RERLY

To anyone who has been a commuter for years or spent considerable periods in waiting rooms of doctors' offices, airports, etc., or eavesdropped on restaurant conversations, this is a masterpiece. The self-conscious mannerisms, the affectations of aggressive colloquialisms, the clipped thoughts, broken ideas and half-a-dialogue in collision with the other half, the final desperate assertion, must recall to many readers distant memories of half-heard babble drifting over the top of a newspaper in a subway train. It is even more likely to be one side of a telephone conversation

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overheard while the listener is waiting his turn to use the telephone in a crowded hotel lobby. It is excellent social satire. There is a visual pattern of the verse on the page, but it is not definite enough to place it in the "meta-physical" division. As it stands it seems to build up the line-length to a climax in which the speaker is endeavoring to "get a word in edge-wise"; then, realizing the futility of the attempt, it lags; again, under pressure of renewed and unrelieved attack, the speaker explodes in impatience and a little anger in the last line. The techniques of punctuation, capitalization, spacing, metropolitan dialect and the visual aspects of this modern commonplace monologue are integrated in a perfect work of art.

Further Visual Refinements

Free verse is used to dramatize the thought of the poem in a great many ways in Cummings. Worthy of note is "Orientale" No. IV in Tulips and Chimneys, which sets off a dramatic monologue of a lover to his beloved by a system of imperative address ("listen beloved", etc.) and indentation of the lines of address, of uneven length and internal spacing to emphasize and color the speech. There is much intensity of passion in these lines, but the piece is too long for quotation. This lyric has what might be described as "tone color".

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Another dramatic device of verse form is evident
in No. V of "Amores" in the same volume Tulips and Chimneys:

the glory is fallen out of
the sky the last immortal
leaf
is

dead and the gold
year
a formal spasm
in the

dust
this is the passing of all shiny things
therefore we also
blandly

into receptive
earth, O let
us
descend

The subject of the poem is death, inspired by thoughts of late autumn and the end of the year, a common enough theme in poetry. But in this case there is the added factor of the shape of each verse, which shortens its lines consecutively, leading the eye down and down the page to a narrowing and abrupt stop; the combined effect, abetted by the visual aspect of the verses is to simulate descent into a grave: "into receptive / earth, O let / us / descend". The sad atmosphere of death is first created, the glory gone from the sky, the dead leaves, the spasm and dust. There follows an ending, each word and phrase of which must be

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weighed and registered if the full effect of the poem is to
be realized:

this is the passing of all shining things
no lingering no backward-
wondering be unto
us 0

soul, but straight
glad feet fearruining
and glorygirded
faces

lead us
into the
serious
steep

darkness

This is a stirring piece and the dramatic technique here is in one of its most telling forms. Cummings reaches a high water mark of artistic originality in this live-form and its effect.

Another variety crops up in No. VIII of the same sequence:

your little voice
and i felt suddenly
dizzy

Over the wires came leaping

Enough has been said to make the dramatic technique here transparent. One final example to illustrate another version of the "prose poem", which, as indicated

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earlier, is classed as a dramatic technique. Thus No. XXXII of "One" in Is 5:

Will i ever forget that precarious moment?

As i was standing on the third rail waiting for the next train to grind me into lifeless atoms various absurd thoughts slyly crept into my highly sexed mind.

It seemed to me that i had first of all really made quite a mistake in being at all born, seeing that i was correctly dressed, cleanshaven

etc. The theme of the piece is concerned with reflections upon life and death in a certain type of metropolitan youth. This is a prose poem and the lines are cast in this form to better mirror the particular mind at work.

A Composite Example

The following has been reserved until now because it illustrates a variety of Cummings' techniques, and in addition serves as a rather extreme example of original "Cummingsesque" art.

This is the "floating" poem, No. 48 in No Thanks. It is an ambiguous pictogram, up to a point.

floatfloafloflf
lloloa
tatoatloatf loat fl oat
f loatIngl

y

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&fris
klispin
glyT
 w
 irlErec

,

t
;d
;:a:
nC.eda:Nci;ddaanncciinn

(GLY)

Up to the first "y" this pictogram might be a typographical verbal re-creation of a cloud, a graceful bird gliding on air currents, or anything that floats. Or it could be a helicopter or an airplane in turbulent air which the poet is simulating in his structure. The end of this section suggests the possibility of a dancer or a dancing couple. No doubt many other speculations will occur to the fecund imagination. The latter half of the page eliminates all these probings, as a "saint" of the dance emerges from a plethora of images (the words are as nearly superimposed or co-incidental as they can be) and his movements settle out. Through spinning and flashing his name comes clear: Paul Draper. The name of the artist unfolds thus:

P
 aul D-as-in-tip-toe r
rapeR

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Critics' reactions to Cummings' innovations of form and structure have ranged from the extremes of Eastman's bitter attacks upon his verse as "unintelligible" to the constant praise of Rosenfeld and Lloyd Frankenburg. A close look at some unintelligible poems reveals that they are not at all devoid of meaning or cast in hopelessly confused and confusing form, but that the poet is rather experimenting with new concepts in prosody and structure. From examples analyzed and cited above, it is safe to say that Cummings is not often unintelligible, though at times he does seem to lapse into obscurity. For the most part an appreciation of his art is a matter of how much effort and study the reader is willing to expend to understand him and share his creations. Like all literature and all art, it is necessary to bring something to Cummings in order to find in his lines a source of enjoyment or aesthetic development. In this poet the rewards for such investment of aesthetic capital are usually satisfactory, at times extraordinarily high, and rather often truly great.

The greatness which the poet at times achieves is rooted in his experimentation with the elements of prosody, from which he has evolved radical verse forms which

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produce certain effects never before attained in poetic experience. The "grasshopper" poem, the "shooting star" piece, the falling leaf pictogram, the poetic meditation in amorphous form beginning, "Among these red pieces of day", the uncanny satirical effects attained by the combined techniques in "Oh sure, but nobody understands her, really," the splendor of image heightened by the "descending" prosodic form of "the glory is fallen out of the sky," and "This is the passing of all shining things"; these are a few examples of major poetic achievement in which Cummings has created something great in the poetic art form, unique expressions of mind and heart that are worthy of joining the immortal heritage of art as treasured touchstones of the modern period.

Cummings' experiments in the art of poetry are almost a necessary complement to the dynamic quests of modern man to broaden and deepen his capacity for knowledge, experience and aspiration. In an age when man has discovered that even the atom is no longer the ultimate component of matter, but has given up fantastic secrets of its own unimaginable make-up, there was a need to break up words and sentences to discover whatever semantical power they possessed untapped. In an environment where systems of thought pondering the nature of matter and the depth of the

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universe have outmoded the figures and symbols of the past, the need of poetry for some genius of form to discover deeper, fuller and more realistic metaphorical vehicles of poetic expression was acute. Out of the often discouraging attempts that litter the horizons of modern art forms, Cummings is more and more being recognized as the landmark of a fresh and vigorous approach to the problems of creative poetic expression in the present era.

For the really Christian mind and especially the truly Catholic personality, with all the development of mind and heart that term implies, this new approach should not be the occasion of breast-beating and hand-wringing that it has so often touched off among conservatives in the past. If we are to be truly contemplative, will we not rejoice in the fortunes of one who has released new powers of expressing the eternal considerations of man; ought we not to find renewed satisfaction at the discovery of new powers of communicating the noble aspirations of humanity in poetry as pouring forth the utmost in the language of the heart?

This is not to say that the poet is infallible, or impeccable, but if the Catholic critic is not to pale like the accusers of Galileo and Copernicus he must be ready to entertain departures from the conventional thoughts and ways of the past, however revered, at least in the

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natural order. Where such departures are really at variance with sound and tested spirituality they must, of course, be tempered with wisdom and experience; but to countermand the new and the radically different merely because it is novel is to deny to the Creator the free use His instruments and to ally oneself stubbornly with the mistaken intolerance of the past.

CHAPTER THREE

FURTHER ANALYSIS OF FORM:
EXPERIMENT IN DICTION AND SYNTAX

An understanding, study and appreciation of Cummings is often made difficult by further ambiguities inherent in the structure of his verse and the use of language itself, i.e., the syntactical irregularities, the unorthodox use of grammar and the occurrence of novel word sequences, which have already been encountered. A somewhat detailed analysis of grammar, syntax and diction, then, would be in order to aid in an understanding of his meaning and technique.

Perhaps the simplest example with which to commence a study of diction and syntax is No. 104 of the 1938 Collected Poems:

little tree
 little silent Christmas tree
 you are so little
 you are more like a flower

who found you in the green forest
 and were you very sorry to come away?
 see i will comfort you
 because you smell so sweetly

i will kiss your cool bark
 and hug you safe and tight
 just as your mother would,
 only don't be afraid

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The poem goes on thus for four more stanzas,
ending,

and my little sister and i will take hands
and looking up at our beautiful tree
we'll dance and sing
"Noel Noel"

Normal Use of Language

No. 104 is worth remembering because it has what is very rare in Cummings: simplicity. Though it border on the nursery rhyme it is an admirable starting point to take note of the elements of Cummings' grammatical structure; this is the poet of innovation in his simplest manner. Every line is a unit; it contains a thought, though not complete with subject and predicate, which is complete in itself. It doesn't seem to need punctuation as it stands, except for the question mark, and some element of mystery accompanies the comma after "would" since there seems to be no particular reason for it. It stands alone. The line separations (and space separation after the word "see" in the second quatrain) serve adequately for punctuation according to the style of the author. Grammar and syntax are so regular and normal as to be obvious; no comment is necessary. Far from being a nursery rhyme, the more this poem is studied the more it seems to be a poetic metaphor, the Christmas

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tree being Cummings' symbol for a woman, despite the slight problem introduced in the last stanza. The unquoted stanzas confirm such a view.

Diction and Grammar

Another sample goes from simplicity into an experiment with a poem of symbols which disregards conventional grammar and diction. This is No. 230 of the same volume:

lady will you come with me into
the extremely little house of
my mind. clocks strike. The

moon's round, through the window

as you see and really i have no
servants. we could almost live

at the top of these stairs, there's a free
room. we almost could go (you
and i) into a together whitely big
there is but if so or so

slowly i opened the window a
most tinyness, the moon (with white wig
and polished buttons) would take you away

--and all the clocks would run down the next/day.

The poem is an invitation from a lover to his beloved. It begins simply enough. He is asking her to share with him a perfect unity. He is inviting her into the inmost recesses of his thoughts, into his heart of hearts. He is full of expectancy and has waited anxiously for her

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acceptance ("Clocks strike"). He is conscious of passing time. There will be no other distractions, no other consideration than their love (the meaning of no servants -- no intrusions). There is a "free room", i.e., an empty place, an emotional vacuum here, which is hers. There is a reiteration of this intimacy in the third stanza, and up to the period in line two all goes grammatically well. Beginning with "we almost could go", interpretation becomes less easy. The sentence taken literally is a jumble: "we almost could go (you / and i) into a together whitely big / there is but if so or so / slowly i opened the window a / most tinyness, the moon (with white wig / and polished buttons) would take you away / -- and all the clocks would run down the next day."

Obviously, there is extraordinary use of words here which requires some deciphering. The subject of the sentence seems to be the noun, "We". Its predicate is, "could go". The parenthetical "you and i" is in apposition to the subject, "We". The adverbial phrase "into a together" completes the thought, allowing the adverb "together" to be used as a noun, equivalent to "togetherness". This means that the union of these two persons in love would be so close that distinctions would be lost. After this point, more trouble commences. Is "big" an adjective, modifying

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"together", and is "whitely" an improvised adjectival adverb modifying the predicate, and does the clumsy, confusing sentence end with the third line: There seems to be no other interpretation. The sentence thus reads: "we could almost go you and I whitely into a big together(ness)."

This is considerably distorted language. However, it is possible to impute real meaning to this statement: these two people are going to form a unity (pending its fulfillment) which will be perfect and monumental, at least from the poet's viewpoint.

With the line "there is but if so or so" a new sentence begins. A predicate complement appears in the verb "is" and "the moon", because the other two nouns, "window" and "you" are objects of "open" and "take" respectively.

So far, "there is a most tininess, the moon with white wig and polished buttons." Here there occurs structural ambiguity. Does "a most tininess" refer to the opening of the window or to the moon? Line units in this case do not make it clear. Is this an adverbial phrase modifying "opened"; or is it an appositive of "the moon"? Neither the division of lines nor the comma helps to determine this. Considering the indeterminate nature of the phrase itself and its lack of definite reference, this may be considered a fault.

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Finishing the thought, the moon with white wig and polished buttons "would take you away". This would happen, according to the awkwardly inserted conditional clause, "if...so slowly I opened the window". The word "if" introduces both "so's", so that the first "so" becomes "if so", meaning that if she accepts his invitation, they will be doomed, notwithstanding; and the second "so" refers to "slowly", modifying it as an adverb of degree, so that "so slowly" described how the window will be opened. If she accepts, and if he opens the window slowly, the moon with its white wig and polished buttons will come and take her away, "--and all the clocks would run down the next day." All would end in tragedy.

Patently this is a poem of symbols, and its diction must be viewed in this light. The moon, usually a symbol of solitude, independence, individualism or sex in many of Cummings' poems, is here a bit out of character. It might stand in this instance for social convention, civil authority, or another woman to whom the speaker is already allied. It could also be another, perhaps conflicting facet of the poet's personality. The white wig and polished buttons fit into any of these possibilities. They have the connotation of law and formality.

This last seems to be the key to the poet's agony,

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and the opening of the window a key to his telling her -- or her discovery -- of his new consuming desire.

From such an analysis a situation seems to emerge. The speaker wants his beloved to share his love in his heart of hearts. He is impatient, conscious of the fleeing of time, but is thwarted by something inimical to this love, represented by the moon. He ruminates on the promised ecstasy of his new affection, and "almost" can conceive of its consummation. But there is the moon... If the window of communication or discovery were opened, the counterpart of the moon-symbol "would take you away", and the subject would be left in total, timeless desolation.

While this poem, therefore, is not unintelligible, its use of words, i.e., diction is certainly obscure and rather esoteric. In his "Introduction" to this volume, the Collected Poems of 1938, the author says plainly that he is not writing for "mostpeople", but "for you and for me". All well and good. But there are times when he leaves even "you and me" in doubt and uncertainty as to his deeper and esoteric meaning, and this is the bone of contention even among sympathetic critics.

Further Novelties of Diction

Another piece, widely noted, is one of Cummings'

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shortest and most interesting. It is extraordinary because it makes its point completely without grammar or diction, as normally understood. It functions entirely by phonetic ambiguity. This is No. VIII of l x l. An unpredictable piece, it stands alone: there is nothing else quite like it, even in Cummings, although there are variations of the same technique.

applaws

"fell
ow
sit
isn'ts"

(a paw s

These few words are compressed social satire in capsule form. They are like a curtain drawn momentarily to expose a political meeting, after which the author, as if dealing with something obscene (characteristic of Cummings on politics) says in effect, "Now there. You've seen enough."

Transliterated and clarified, this is the first line of the satirist's script on the working of the political meeting, and it says, as the meeting is opened:

Applause.
"Fellow citizens:...."
A pause.

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The phonetic quality of the "fell / ow / sit / isn't's" is an ingenious intensification of this. "Fell" has about it the feeling of a descent, in this case, abysmal, from normal intellectual standards. The next, "ow" has the connotations of sudden pain, here with mortal overtones. "Sit" by itself in the fifth line, considering the tone of the poem, has all kinds of epithetical involvements besides the obvious passive one, for the reader familiar with some of Cummings' other fulminations against sham, hypocrisy and pretense. The next line, "isn't's", carries condemnation to its philosophical apex: in Cummings this is branding a person with the negation of the verb "to be". In other words, nothing: annihilation. This is a crowd of nothings!

Vitriol flows more freely in the closing line. The parenthesis sets it off. There is "a paw" prominent in the gesture of the speaker. There are "paw s" on all his listeners. The extremity of satire is obvious.

The same association occurs in Eimi at the visit to Lenin's tomb. Cummings thinks in print, epitomizing his encounter with the crowd:

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facefacefaceface

hand-

fin-

claw

foot-

hoof

(tovarich)

-smiling)¹ es to number of numberlessness(un

In a Christian view of man, his nature and destiny, this may seem to be carrying satire a bit far. Nevertheless, the actions of man beyond the call of duty in war time, and other incalculable manifestations of man's animal (as distinguished from his rational) nature seem to justify it.

Syntax

Another type of ambiguity is made the subject of a doctoral dissertation. In this study, Structural Ambiguity in the Poetry of E.E. Cummings, Dr. Louis C. Rus notes seventy-four distinct varieties of ambiguity in the syntactical structure of Cummings' verse. He divides these into four sections, where they are subdivided like the Dewey decimal system of book classification. For the sake of a convenient frame of reference he first divides all parts of speech into four categories: class one, a key word or subject of a sentence; class two, a verb or predicate; class

¹
Cummings, E.E., Eimi, New York 19 William Sloane Associates, 240p.

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three, predicate nominatives, objects, transitive or intransitive, and predicate complements generally; class four, modifiers of whatever kind. Each of the four sections is concerned with a type of ambiguity hinging upon the corresponding class of word or word fragment.

Thus, "Section one considers the class one words which signal two or more structural meanings.....Section two considers the class two words.....Section three considers all the ambiguities which are involved exclusively in modification.....section four considers the remaining ambiguities."²

In each subdivision Dr. Rus lists all the types of structural ambiguity which occur in that type, and gives it a decimal equivalent in his system of classification. Thus in section one:

- 1.111 A class 1 word patterned as the subject of two or more class 2 words.
- 1.112 A class 1 word patterned as subject and as in apposition to the subject.
- 1.12 A class 1 word patterned as subject and predicate noun.
- 1.31 A class 1 word patterned as subject of one class 2 word and object of another.

2

Rus, Louis C., Structural Ambiguity in the Poetry of L.E. Cummings, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1955, Doctoral Dissertation Series, Publication No. 11,350, completed at University of Michigan, 1955, 30-34pp.)

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There are twenty such classifications for class one words in section one. In section two:

- 2.11 A class 2 word signalling both a command and a statement.
- 2.12 A class 2 word patterned with several subjects.
- 2.21 A class 2 word patterned with and without an object.

And so on. There are fifteen possibilities of structural ambiguity in section two. How complex the system can become in making sense of some of Cummings' jumbled verses is indicated by

- 2.33 A class 2 word patterned with both a predicate noun and a class 3 word referring back to the subject.
A class 2 word patterned with both an object and a class three word referring back to the subject.
A class 2 word patterned with both an object and a predicate noun.

Section three is the most numerous group of possibilities, with twenty-one types of ambiguity, such as

- 3.11 A class 3 word modifying two or more class one words.

Etc.

Section four contains eighteen cases of ambiguous constructions not previously typed.

*ibid.

*ibid.

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With seventy-four models of ambiguity occurring in Cummings' poems many times each, some idea can be gained of the assiduity required to achieve an understanding of the ideas and images in which he is dealing. Rus adds up 865 individual instances of duplex and multiple references. There are 208, 122, 344, and 191 in sections one, two, three and four respectively. These figures are incomplete, since Dr. Rus combed only the poems included in the Collected Poems of 1938, and those published since then in 50 Poems and Kiape. This makes for a proportion of 436 to the total of 610 in the Poems 1923-1954, or roughly, three quarters of the whole for a basis of computation. Dr. Rus states that percentagewise his study of 436 poems is proportionally accurate, so that the approximate incidence of ambiguity of whatever kind in all of Cummings from a structural point of view is about twice per poem on the average, or well over a thousand for the entire collected editions. It is not possible to reckon this exactly, owing to the plethora of borderline cases and ambiguities which often become merely a matter of opinion on the part of different readers. This information demonstrates the widespread use of ambiguous syntax and word structure in Cummings' style to obtain certain effects.

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To gain additional perspective and comprehension of Cummings' syntax or lack of it, one of Rus' explications will serve well. The poem is No. 52 from No Thanks:

Spring(side

walks are)is
most(window where blaze

naLOVEme
crazily
ships

bulge hearts by
darts pierced lazily writhe
lurch faceflowers stutter
treebodies wobbly-

ing thing
-birds)sing-
u
(cities are houses
people are flies who

buzz on)-lar(window called sidewalks
of houses called cities)spring
most singular-
ly(cities are houses are)is(are owned

by a m- by
a -n by a
-oo-

is old as
the jews are a moon is

as round as)Death

Dr. Rus' comments:

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Parenthesis divide this poem into sections: outside the parenthesis are generalizations concerning spring; inside the parenthesis are specific details which illustrate the generalizations. The section outside parenthesis contains the statements: Spring is most singular spring most singularly is Death. These sentences are unambiguous except for a possible double function of the word spring. If a cut for immediate constituents is made after this word, the first sentence reads: "Spring is most singularly spring," meaning that this spring is the most singular of all springs by virtue of the fact that it exists now. Thus, each spring is the most singular as it occurs. If, however, a cut is made before the second spring, this class 1 word is the subject of the sentence which is dealt with throughout this explication: "spring most singularly is Death." In both cases, singular is a class 3 word; it modifies, if the first cut is made, the second spring, and if the second cut is made, the first spring.

These generalizations are connected with the details in the parenthesis by several ambiguities which symbolize the close relationship between the two parts of the poem. The initial word spring is not only the subject of is, but line division also points to it as a class 1 modifier of sidewalks. In line 12, -birds)sing- forms a subject-predicate relationship in a sentence which tells of a typical occurrence in spring. Within their own portions of the poem, however, birds is in apposition to treebodies, and sing is a part of the word singular. The last, culminating word of the poem, Death, is also ambiguous, patterned as a predicate noun outside parenthesis and as a class 1 word following a function word which is inside the parenthesis. The two sections of the poem are further united by the singular-plural contrast in the present of the class 2 word to be, so important in this and in all of Cummings' poems. In line 2 stands are)is and in line 18, are)is(are).

The sentences and their connecting structural ambiguities within parenthesis may be further divided into three sections. Lines 1-12, preceded by the word, Spring, list some of the phenomena which occur in the spring. Lines 14-22, preceded by the diphthong u, a homophone for the second personal pronoun, place man within these phenomena. And lines 20-25, connected to the generalizations by the double grammatical function of the final word Death, relate the preceding details to the generalization outside the parenthesis. All of these details within parenthesis attain

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a unity in time (spring) and place (the sidewalks): through the pictures and scribblings of the children on the sidewalks we see the activities which occur in spring, for "sidewalks are windows".

Especially the first section of the poem within parenthesis is loaded with ambiguities. Crazily, a class 4 word, modifies the class 2 words, blazen and bulge, separated from both by line division. Lazily, also a class 4 word, modifies the two class 2 words pierced and writes. The class 2 word blazen is followed by two subjects, aLOVEme and ships. Bulge is in a subject-predicate relationship with two subjects, ships and hearts; and writes and lurch are class 2 words which are tied to the subjects, hearts and faceflowers. Similarly, stutter is a predicate of both faceflowers and treebodies. On the other hand, ships is patterned as the subject of both blazen and bulge; hearts of both bulge and writes; faceflowers of both lurch and stutter; and treebodies of both stutter and sing. Birds is both the subject of sing and in apposition with the subject treebodies. All the included sentences introduced by the function word where are structurally united by the preceding ambiguities. The unity symbolizes the unity of all things in the spring through the renewal of love and life. But the ambiguities also make for a feeling of confusion. Class 1, 2 and 4 words are brought together without the focus of separate sentences, and the effect on the reader may well be one of confusion. Perhaps a child, without perspective and previous experience, views these phenomena in this aimless way.³

The remaining four pages of Dr. Rus' explication need not be quoted nor summarized, since this is sufficient to give an idea of his method and to indicate the thoroughness with which many of Cummings' poems must be scrutinized for both syntax and diction if any meaning is to be deduced from them.

3.

Ibid., 140-143pp.

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Diction, Syntax & "Unintelligibility"

Such a detailed analysis will show that charges like that of R.P. Blackmur that "the poems of Mr. Cummings are unintelligible and that no amount of effort on the part of the reader can make them less so"⁴ are not really true. With effort and study some meaning can always be worked out. Nevertheless, it may be successfully maintained that many are relatively unintelligible. Dr. Rus says at the beginning of his treatise,

Since the discovery of meaning is, it seems to me, the basic and most important step in a criticism of Cummings or any other poet, I will view the structural ambiguities in the poetry of E.E. Cummings in relation to their function within the meaning of the poems. By using the ambiguities to explain the poems, I hope to destroy, at least partially, the popular notion that Cummings is an unintelligible poet.⁵

Dr. Rus succeeds, "partially", as he intends. But he also proves that Cummings is also, at least "partially" unintelligible, and that is evidence in his own explication of Spring, quoted above. Any poem which needs some seven

4.
Ibid., 1p., quoted by Rus

5.
Ibid., 3-4pp.

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pages of this kind of professional analysis of its grammatical make-up to make it clear can hardly be said to be normally "intelligible" to the majority of readers of even high intelligence and cultural advantage who will pick up a copy of Poems 1923-1954. To say this, of course, is not to go to the opposite extreme. Rather much of Cummings is quite clear as it stands, granting his lack of conventional grammar and punctuation; and much is not comprehensible without considerable working over with literary tools. Since the standard of intelligence and clarity will vary greatly from reader to reader, it is not feasible to set up a table of intelligibility or relative unintelligibility with percentages or designations of each. Suffice it to say that the poet is both accepted and controversial; his place is assured but the debate is not over yet.

Reviewing Maize in the New York Times "Book Review" of April 2, 1950, Lloyd Frankenburg contributes to the debate:

His unique use of words recreates them by liberating their full meanings.....His faith in life goes beyond reasons and assignable causes; an eternally youthful sense of wonder; a consciousness of the incalculable and unpredictable.

His poems are all concerned with "the great advantage of being alive." We have only to open our eyes; to perceive that

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there is more to what we see than what we see. Each poem is such an opening; a particular revelation. Its technical devices are the loving strategies by which he surprises us into awareness.

Frankenburg is one of two or three critics who are always favorable to Cummings. Though there is considerable floweriness and vagueness in these words, there is a good deal of truth in them which bear application to Cummings' poems, especially in Naïve, the work Frankenburg is reviewing.

Conclusion

Frankenburg's use of the terms "incalculable and unpredictable" may be aptly applied to Cummings' experiments. Examples cited above show that he has often evolved novel effects and discovered new ways of "liberating" unique meanings in his verse through radical experimentation in diction and syntax. His syntax must be studied to gain an understanding of just what he is actually and literally saying. In his diction, word fracturing, running together, phonetic qualities, letters and punctuation marks on the page all play their part in the development of a style that has been charged with being unintelligible from the aspects of diction and syntax particularly, so far does it depart from conventional media to produce its effect. Beloof and

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Rus in their studies of prosody and structural ambiguity in Cummings demonstrate that he is not an unintelligible poet, but the lengthy analyses and explications of Rus especially indicate that his grammatical irregularities do tend to become unintelligible at times to the majority of readers of intelligence, education and cultural background.

The net effect of his work produced by such experimentation is such as to justify his permanent place in American letters, though the verdict is not unanimous. The praise of Frankenburg is in large measure justly merited, and the results of Cummings' lifetime of poetic creativity and invention have reached the level of fame and excellence that is more than sufficient to warrant the extensive examination of his work in the light of Christian principles which forms the body of the present thesis.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ABSTRACT IMAGE, ITS TECHNIQUE AND USE

Out of the imagist movement grew a more profound imagism. Today, we still find the precise image, but the image is put to a use that transcends the function of a simple description. Recent poets have discovered that the use of a series of rapid, often dissociated, images may suggest a final meaning, a meaning which cannot be directly expressed in an image of its own. The surrealist poets are the obvious practitioners of this new imagism, though we need not search far to find it used consciously and with discrimination by others.¹

Cummings has developed something new in poetic imagery, a surrealistic or cubistic image, which might well be designated by means of a neologism, "abstract imagery". The abstract image may be said to be an association of ideas not commonly associated, a compound of abstraction and definition (in a loose sense of the word) used to convey a unique concept or intellectual "image".

In all the wide range of effort among modern poets to develop something worthwhile and original (excluding Eliot, who has achieved for himself a peerage above all the other moderns), none has succeeded so well as Cummings in the development of this "abstract imagery".

¹. Hoffman, Allen and Ulrich, The Little Magazine, Princeton, N.J., 1947 The Princeton University Press, 40p.

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From the precise, emotionless intellectuality of Marianne Moore to the vague obscurity and subjective sententiousness of Dylan Thomas, nothing so unique, understandable or successful has been harvested from the conscious experimental wastes of the early twentieth century as this striking technique. Though not entirely surrealist, or imagistic (for Cummings never consciously followed any formal method or "school"), it shows most, or rather reflects most, their influence. There is nothing of "futuristic" or "cubistic" technique in it, except that which went into surrealism in the exploration of the subconscious for symbols and ideas thus far unformulated. But, though Cummings has become celebrated, unfortunately, as the poet of erratic typography and strange stanzas, it is perhaps in this "abstract imagery" that he has his greatest and most enduring achievement.

The Poem of Abstraction

Take for instance No. LII of l x l, which is one of the most successful uses of this technique to convey one of his most persistent postulates: the superiority of emotion to reason. No. LII is cast in the mould of a sonnet, and, because of its extensive use of this technique, as well as incorporating in its meaning the main dogma of Cummings' credo, is worth quoting in full:

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life is more true than reason will deceive
 (more secret or than madness did reveal)
 deeper is life than lose: higher than have
 --but beauty is more each than living's all

multiplied with infinity sans if
 the mightiest meditations of mankind
 cancelled are by one merely opening leaf
 (beyond whose nearness there is no beyond)

or does some littler bird than eyes can learn
 look up to silence and completely sing?
 futures are obsolete; pasts are unborn
 (here less than nothing's more than everything)

death, as men call him, ends what they call men
 --but beauty is more now than dying's when

This is a hymn to beauty in the present moment, a hymn because beauty is deified above all else, and the present moment is the stuff of life by which this living beauty is informed as a vital principle. There is more than a little of Aristotelean, and even Thomistic, orientation in this poem. It is entirely implicit, and the poet himself need not have been aware of it. The two dominant pillars of reality upon which the stanzas rest, beauty and life in the present moment, are the subject of praise and adulation. It might almost be said, "adoration", but this would multiply difficulties by going too far. The third element equated with them as a predicate complement is truth: life and beauty are true. Thus a third primary concept is added and forms a Keatsian trinity: truth, life and beauty.

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A life lived by this faith will "have" a great deal of "life" or "living" that it would "lose" if it were to admit the "deceits" or restraints of reason or ethical systems. "--but beauty is more each than living's all"-- that is, even all of living at its best and "having" at its most are inferior to the "each", or the least, of beauty. Beauty is the desideratum of life and living. All must serve her.

All human thought--philosophy, theology, science and what have you--even if "multiplied by infinity", and if there were no doubt of their validity ("sans if", which the poet does not admit, but he is willing to waive this in the magnanimity of his plenitude of truth), "the mightiest meditations of mankind" are "cancelled" by "one merely opening leaf". This is what the poet is saying, and he says it often in many beautiful ways. He seems to take no account of a mystery which enters his own mighty meditation at this point, the mystery that is behind every "merely opening leaf", and indeed behind all nature and beauty itself. This is "The awful shadow of some unseen Power" that

Floats tho' unseen among us,---
 visiting
 This various world with as inconstant
 wing
 As summer winds that creep from flower
 to flower,---
 Like moonbeams that behind some piny
 mountain shower,

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It visits with inconstant glance
 Each human heart and countenance;
 Like hues of harmony and evening,---
 Like clouds in starlight widely spread,---
 Like memory of music fled,---
 Like aught that for its grace may be
 Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.²

In No. LII this "mystery", is perceived, but not in its infinite depth. No. LII lacks this divine spirit, for beyond the nearness of the opening leaf, "there is no beyond". This is materialism begging the question; No. LII has great beauty of expression, but as a didactic poem it is hardly convincing. The rest of it is anti-climactic. Cummings has caught the "awful shadow of some unseen Power"; but he who would teach us perception has failed to perceive the overriding "Spirit of Beauty" and loveliness in the divine when writing of beauty, truth and reason. To him reason is less than madness! Reason, of which Shakespeare writes, "how noble...! how infinite in faculty...! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!"³ How reasonably, how ingeniously and how beautifully he goes about condemning reason! How clever he is extolling madness! What can be said of such intellectual suicide? There is no answer to nihilism in any form. Like the principle of contradiction it is self-evident, its nature must be perceived intuitively; and when it is not, there is no recourse to

2.

Shelley: Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

3. Hamlet, Act. II, scene 2, lines 323-7

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other than prayer.

But just as Shelley by crying out to the "Spirit of Beauty" casts serious doubts on the genuineness of his atheism, so Cummings by his conduct and his brilliance is made unreasonable only in the perversity of his hatred of reason. This is an inconsistency.

The disturbing thought of death intrudes, despite the poet's prohibition, and "ends what they call men". But this future calamity is dismissed in accordance with the code of madness, because beauty in the present outweighs it; beauty now must be enjoyed and since this is the business of life, it cannot brook dissipation by something destructive and remote. Thus, "beauty is more now than dying's when". This is a poem of abstract imagery, with symbols reduced to the simplest possible terms. As such it is beautifully done.

The Anti-Intellectual Element

As a didactic poem, of course, this is sheer insanity. Reason obviously cannot be dispensed with. Furthermore, to be worthy of true human dignity reason must be coupled with faith and charity. Without these twin engines of faith and reason to raise man to the level Cummings expects of him, the human being is capable of systematic acts of barbarity, bestiality and sadism. Cummings has been impressed by this, and it is in this savage ground that his anti-intellectuality takes root.

But who has not been so impressed by man's inhumanity to man? Like Karl Marx, Cummings is so angry with

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human cruelty, chicacanery and rapine that he has turned in wrath upon ratiocination and tradition as the dual author of all evil. Again, like every good materialist, he does not see far enough beneath the surface of life, nor does he penetrate deeply enough into the nature of man, the theodicy of nature and the meaning of suffering. The fault lies not with reason itself, but with its wild, unharnessed vagaries. Like fire, it can serve or destroy. In the service of the infinite God and His love, reason, as Shakespeare writes, is a kind of infinite faculty of illimitable potential good.

These things may mean nothing, or less than nothing, to Cummings. But the necessity of faith and love, a healthy respect for the convictions of others and a less intransigent view of tradition seem to be growing in the soul of the poet.

But as for beauty of form and expression, his symbol and imagery are unsurpassed in modern verse. It is in this poem a body of beauty and loveliness without a soul. In its spirit of nihilism, it reaches the page still-born. What a pity its beauty of concept and expression is not informed with the creative "Spirit of Beauty" which vitalized the soul of Shelley! What a pity Cummings' genius is not more cognitive of the Spirit of God!

Application in Ultra-Romantic Themes

A good deal can be learned from No. 53 of Xaipe, both of the technique called "abstract imagery" and

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Cummings' use of it. This is a "yes" poem, a type in Cummings. It is not only dogmatic nihilism, but does a step in the direction of actual disintegration by reversing relationships -- "lies are laws". Thus No. 53 in full:

mighty guest of merely me

--traveller from eternity;
in a single wish, receive
all i am and dream and have.

Be thou gay by dark and day:
gay as only truth is gay
(nothing false, in earth in air
in water and in fire, but fear--

mind's a coward; lies are laws)
laugh, and make each no thy yes:
love; and give because the why

--gracious wanderer, be thou gay

This poem pin-points Cummings' spiritual hedonism as few others do. He is less of a wanderer than he would have us believe. This poem is anything but what a "wanderer" would conceive or execute. It is philosophically systematic to the point of perfect thoroughness; it is a concentrated gem of social rebuttal and more: it is Sartian logical inversion. It gains a great deal by its inversion: it is much more dramatic and forceful to say "lies are laws" than "laws are lies". "Laws are lies," is merely rebellious; "lies are laws" imputes to society the calm and premeditated enactment of falsehoods as the enforced norms of law. It

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presumes the guilt of society prior to the statement. No social satirist has ever proclaimed such a deep indictment before!

Spiritual Hedonism

The poem as a whole, of course, is a restatement of the poet's confirmed dogma of living by unrepressed instinct as a way of life. Rousseau was never more Rousseauan in his advocacy of the noble human beast than Cummings in "mighty guest of merely me". There is humility and absolute independence at once in this first line, which sets the tone for the poem. The poet is a self-contained "I Am who Am", who holds himself responsible to no higher power than himself, and who is at once host and guest to himself. Like the Jehovah of Genesis, he is the traveller from eternity unto eternity, and he exists beatifically in a single act of all-embracing will: "in a single wish, receive / all i am and dream and have." "Be thou gay" is not merely a reflexive bidding to self-enjoyment; it is a happy inner peace engendered by an omnipotent sense of self-sufficiency. The use of the second person singular in its ancient, biblical form is also significant. This is not merely a hedonistic affirmation, but a theological definition. Cummings' is no ordinary hedonism; he is a spiritual hedonist. This is the heavenly joy of the saints; but this saint is self-canonized and has his joy wholly in

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himself and the contemplation of his own perfections. There is no hint of an unpleasant ending in death in this poem, but Cummings' preoccupation with death elsewhere almost leads the familiar Cummings' scholar to believe that in the last line he is really trying, at least subconsciously, to convince or renew himself.

Self Renewal: the Indwelling Guest of Self

The "Be thou gay by dark and day" has conventional poetic connotations as well as an ambiguity of meaning in Cummings' personal convention. It means not only gathering rosebuds while the sun shines, eating, drinking and loving by day and night; it means to preserve sang froid during the dark nights of the soul that come to pagan and Christian, sinner and saint alike. Being "gay as only truth is gay" has the same meaning of truth as that attributed to the previous poem discussed: a complete subjective meaning, derived from instinct alone, accorded only those articles of truth assented to by the mighty indwelling guest of merely me.

The last three lines contain Cummings' article of faith de fide definitiva: "laugh, and make each no thy yes". Again the diction has the force of dogmatic pronouncement. And that is exactly what the poet does in the face of all moral and ethical law: he laughs. Sometimes the laugh is strained and forced, sometimes it is bitter and empty; but

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nevertheless, laugh! All social, moral and ethical restraint is symbolized in Cummings by the word "no". "Yes" is his denial of all constraining authority, his affirmation of infallibility of self. The line, "laugh, and give each no thy yes" now has an obvious meaning. It is the cornerstone of this poet's affirmation of a philosophy of negation of traditional values and beliefs.

"Love": this is the supreme lex animarum in Cummings, the hackneyed "free love" of the twenties; as free, at least, as the lover is to exercise his love. It also embraces love of those one likes. To "give because the why" is the inversion of exterior thought. The poet at once denies custom, reason and more. This is abstract imagery at its deepest. It means not only to negate moral or social thought, but to anticipate it with a confirmed negation in advance of its expression. It is an aggressive and militant negation which has its defensive system of denial ready in anticipation of any claim that may be made. This is the poets' strongest use of the abstract image.

An Affirmation

No. XVI of l x l is of particular interest because it embodies a key to the poet's system of affirmation in his own subjective thought. It has the sonnet form, with an enigmatic sentence tacked on like a donkey's tail, which

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serves only to confuse. For, accepted with reservations, No. XVI is really a great poem in its way:

one's not half two. It's two are halves of one:
 which halves reintegrating, shall occur
 no death and any quantity; but than
 all numerable mosts the actual more

minds ignorant of stern miraculous
 this every truth--beware of heartless them
 (given the scalpel, they dissect a kiss;
 or, sold the reason, they undream a dream)

one is the song which fiends and angels sing:
 all murdering lies by mortals told make two.
 Let liars wilt, repaying life they're loaned;
 we (by a gift called dying born) must grow

deep in dark least ourselves remembering
 love only rides his year.

All lose, whole find

In this poem there is a denunciation of measurement and an embracing of an abstract infinity as its basis, a reversal of analysis in favor of a new kind of synthesis, a synthesization which begins after all "good" and "bad" thought has run its way to exhaustion: "one is the song which fiends and angels sing". Conventional norms which constitute the sum total of social and moral custom are "murdering lies by mortals told" which add up to a pitiful total of two. The Cummings' formula, however, "one times one", of which two is only the half, is a symbol, or an intellectual image of unity, i.e., perfection. Love, the only "rider" of the time, is discovered in the depths of the human spirit, where "we"

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are "least ourselves" until our own reality is discovered; and by embracing it progressively, the personalities attain growth and fulfillment together. Life for lying mortals (slaves of reason, morals or ethical norms) is merely a "loan"; for "us" it is "miraculous", "truth", the "whole" which "we" "find", having banished the "heartless", "ignorance" and "numerable mosts", in favor of the ever-growing infinite, "more".

In its craftsmanship, symbolism, intellectual imagery, poetic diction and plain energy of ideation, this is a remarkable bit of verse.

One more example will suffice to illustrate the technique in all its phases as a vehicle of thought or anti-thought. It serves for both. No. 50 of 50 Poems, chosen almost at random, is an excellent example, and it is one chosen as only one of many possible choices; this use of words not normally associated or used together is a common device in Cummings:

what freedom's not some under's mere above
but breathing yes which fear will never no
measureless our pure living love
whose doom is beauty and its fate to grow

shall hate confound the wise?doubt blind the brave?
does mask wear face?have singings gone to say?
here youngest selves yet younger selves conceive
here's music's music and the day of day

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are worlds collapsing?any was a glove
 but i'm and you are actual either hand
 is when for sale?forever is to give
 and on forever's very now we stand

nor a first rose explodes but shall increase
 whole truthful infinite immediate us

In the poem above, the poet mixes older poetic conventions with his innovations in order to be understood. Iconoclastic as to content and meaning, he speaks in familiar metaphors underlying his new imagery of the mind. In the first line, the "under" and "above" are figures of relative values as old as Scripture. That which is "above" or "higher" is so designated to make it understood as more desirable, greater in worth, than that which is "lower", "under" or "below". The heavens are "above"; the earth is "below". These are the same meanings intended in this first line: to be "under" is not so noble as to be "above". This enables us to understand that "what freedom's not some under's mere above" can be translated literally as "What freedom is there that is not attained by rising above submission of whatever kind?" Conformity puts one "under"; and another interpretation of the same line might be: "All freedom is above whatever is under law or restraint". The "mere" signifies that in this higher realm approaching infinity, this "freedom" is "mere"; that is, not very noteworthy, taken for granted. This freedom is "breathing yes which fear will

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never no", i.e., the very life of it is affirmation of pleasant instinct, which may never be inhibited by fear of ethical; moral or legal sanction. This is a very powerful metaphor. It is the kind of "imagery" that the imagists strove for in nature, applied to intangibles, vivid and clear.

The next two lines carry the philosophizing on toward infinity: "measureless our pure living complete love whose doom is beauty and its fate to grow". The "measurelessness" of pure life in "complete" love is strongly suggestive of the scholastic idea of God as "Pure Act"; and this is in character, for Cummings' position logically and inevitably leads to a deification of self. There is hardly any escaping this; for according to the scholastic idea, measurelessness plus pure life and complete love equal Pure Act. This makes for the fate of the reflexive deification, "to grow" towards infinity. The expression "doom is beauty" is ambiguous; it confuses the issue according to normal habits of thought. Here its meaning is that everything is sacrificed for the sake of beauty in the soul of the poet; and this leads to his "fate" -- "to grow". This growth of course is aesthetic.

The next quatrain could be an abstract adaptation of Browning -- though of course it is not. It has an echo of the poetic symphony of indomitability,

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Irks care the crop-full bird? Frets doubt the maw-crammed
beast?

Rejoice we are allied
To that which doth provide
And not partake, effect and not receive!
A spark disturbs our clod;
Nearer we hold of God
Who gives, than of his tribes that take, I must believe.⁴

But Cummings and Browning are not on the same side
of the argument. When Cummings asks,

shall hate confound the wise?doubt blind the brave?
does mask wear face?have singings gone to say?
here youngest selves yet younger selves conceive
here's music's music and the day of day

his thoughts are couched in similar idiom and his aspirations
are the same up to a point; but in the end he is saying, in
effect, the direct opposite of Ben Ezra. Rather than growing
old graciously to find the best that is to be, with trust in
God, this poet seeks "youngest selves" which "younger selves
conceive". He assumes divine attributes in man himself,
advancing from freedom to freedom to "music's music and the
day of day".

Cummings has taken something from Browning as well
as from Keats, Shelley, Byron and Swinburne. He develops,

⁴.

Rabbi Ben Ezra, lines 24-30

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he transposes, he mimics, he emulates. This is not to say that he does so consciously, except in his earliest work, perhaps, but that there are traces of his learning poetic technique at the feet of the masters. And, naturally, there are resemblances in his work of those from whom he has learned.

In "what freedom's not some under's mere above" Cummings truly develops great power in breaking through old poetic diction, though still confining himself to the mould of the sonnet. In a piece like this the look of superfluity and "out-of-placeness" attaches to his stylistic oddities, which in other places achieves an effect and contributes to the forcefulness of the whole.

The third quatrain is a superb accomplishment in metaphor and symbol. Worlds may collapse; but that is a small matter. With a fundamental Christian orientation this might well be a spiritually didactic poem, and much of Cummings' philosophic poetry is susceptible of such qualification. With Christian underpinnings Cummings could well qualify as a poet of married love. This would be well, for one is needed; Patmore, for all his sensitiveness and feeling, is overly sententious, and fails to satisfy the "red-blooded" instinct for virility and "realism" that is so much the demand of our time.

The concluding couplet is a final example of this

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technique of abstract symbols or imagery; and in the last line, especially, is a recapitulation of the whole poem. The exploding rose is the one discordant element; it intrudes affection and preciousity. It is an incongruous defect in the otherwise magnificent form and diction of a poem beautifully done.

Surrealistic Wording and Phrasing

Scattered throughout Cummings' poetry are sprinklings of abstract, or compounded images, words or ideas not normally associated, but used to obtain a unique effect. For the most part it is done very successfully. In No. 20 of 50 Poems, there is a "mindscream" in reaction to the horrors and decadence of extreme old age. In No. 21, same volume, there is "dancesing" and "singdance". In LXII of Viva, "a tear is darker than a mile". No. 61 of No Thanks begins, "love's function is to fabricate unknownness". No. 27 of 50 Poems says, "early to better is wiser for worse"; "a / hole in the ocean will never be missed"; and "under the wonder is over the why", with a meaning already discussed. No. 28, same volume, says, "The number of times a wheel turns doesn't determine its roundness". The same poem is a mine of proverbs for our time: "nobody ever earns anything" and "everything little looks big in a mist". In No. 25 of 50 Poems the poet says with Shakespearian wisdom, "--long

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enough and just so long / will being pay the rent of seem";
and "deeds cannot dream what dreams can do".

No. XXXVIII of l x l is an entire poem cast in
these images, a "yes" poem of symbols. It is short and
deserves quotation as a perfect specimen of abstract imagism:

yes is a pleasant country:
if's wintry
(my lovely)
let's open the year

both is the very weather
(not either)
my treasure,
when violets appear

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

The poem can be adequately appreciated from what
has been said so far. Glenn Hughes, scholar of imagist tech-
nique, calls imagism "modern classicism".⁵ He maintains that
it is an effort to break away from the rust of nineteenth
century convention which was eroding poetic originality at the
turn of the century. The four canons of imagist credo cer-
tainly support this claim to imagism's purity of intent,
although much of it became mundane and moribund. They were:
(1) direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or

5.

Hughes, Glenn, Imagism and the Imagists, Stanford
University, Calif., 1931 Stanford University Press, 156p

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objective; (a) economy, precision and exactitude of word;
 (3) phrased rhythm; (4) the "doctrine of the image".

Cummings contrives something of this nature in the abstract. Amy Lowell, arch-priestess of imagism, paved the way for this when she decreed that

One characteristic of Imagist verse which was not mentioned in the preface is: Suggestion--the implication of something rather than the stating of it, implying it under a metaphor, perhaps in an even less obvious way.⁶

This is Cummings' "abstract imagism", the implication or the suggestion of an idea, a mood, an effect, by something more subtle at times, even, than "implying it under a metaphor". He uses words with kindred connotations on an abstract level to create an impression that is unique and pointed. No. 42 of 50 Poems, in which the technique is at its most isolated and perhaps its purest, praises the rarity and excellence of love, and by the use of suggestion on an abstract level, highlights a sense of infinity:

love is more thicker than forget
 more thinner than recall
 more seldom than a wave is wet
 more frequent than to fail

6.

Lowell, Amy, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, Cambridge, Mass., 1917, Riverside Press, 247p.

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it is most mad and moonly
and less it shall unbecome
than all the sea which only
is deeper than the sea

love is less always than to win
less never than alive
less bigger than the least begin
less littler than forgive

it is most sunly
and more it cannot die
than all the sky which only
is higher than the sky

This is the realm in which Cummings is distinctly original, unequalled and unsurpassed. It is his particular outstanding contribution to the long and splendid pageant of verse, a species for which he will live on in poets' annals among the great. This is great art in its truest sense.

Conclusion

Out of a welter of experiment in verse, Cummings has developed and perfected a technique which is an advanced form of what the imagists sought to contrive in the early twentieth century. His use of the technique in terms of abstraction lends it particularly suitable to the designation of "abstract imagery" or imagism. His use of the technique is principally threefold and by its very nature it becomes an intellectual amalgam with its subject. These principal uses are as media for his philosophic tenet of the

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superiority of instinct and emotion to reason, the absolute sovereignty of the individual and the deification of self-indulgence and romantic love. The first of these is unsound because of its anti-intellectuality. The second can be accepted if it is made relative to the authority of God and the demands of the social order. The third has much excellence which may be baptized into a Christian system by its moderation in accord with the dictates of Christian conscience and the moral law.

The technique itself extends from simple words and phrases to entire poems as such, and may be considered a major contribution to modern poetry.

CHAPTER FIVE

INFLUENCES OF SURREALISM:
CUBISM, FUTURISM AND THEIR NIHILISTIC BACKGROUND

In one of his futuristic poems Cummings asks:

what's become of (if you please)
all the glory that or which was Greece
and the granja
that was dada?¹

Complete with question mark, this was published in 1926. The answer might have been glimpsed in a brief, succinct account that caught the spirit as well as the letter of the new dada and its attempted revival:

Dada, the yeasty nihilistic movement of post-World War I days, seemed tired and tattered, its once-youthful stars well past middle age. Even the exhibits had lost most of their punch--Man Ray's ticking metronome with a staring eye impaled on the blade, entitled Object to Destroy; Marcel Duchamp's bearded and mustachioed version of the Mona Lisa; a mirror into which visitors peered until they saw the title, Portrait of an Imbecile.

But the show was less than a week old when something like the excitement of the 20's erupted. Storming the gallery, a band of young, self-styled "reactionary intellectuals" who called themselves the Jarivistes flung handbills riotously into the gallery. "The Jarivistes advise the Dadaists, surrealists and consorts that the reign of minus is over....Long

¹.
No. IV, "One", Is 5

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live poetry!" Then grabbing Object to Destroy, they were gone--but with Dadaist Man Ray puffing after them, crying: "They're stealing my painting!" Not far from the gallery, the Jaravistes stopped and set down the one-eyed metronome. One of them hauled out a pistol, took aim and fired, destroying Object to Destroy. At that point the police appeared, late but ardent.

The Jaravistes readily announced that they "are not surrealists but sure realists, "not a movement but "motion itself, perpetual motion." To their objections to Dada, Man Ray wearily noted: "These things were done 40 years ago. You are demonstrating against history." A police official mused: "Why shoot it?" But last week, as visitors flocked to the show, Tristan Tzara, the grand old man of Dada, was delighted. "Isn't it wonderful?" he murmured nostalgically.²

Cummings has had his part in four nihilistic movements: futurism, dadaism, surrealism and cubism. Futurism was the progenitor of these movements (and a host of minor tributaries), dadaism was the most widely noted, surrealism succeeded to the main currents of futurist thought, and cubism is the label most often applied to Cummings' radical experiments.

Futurism

The intoxicating air of Italy, Switzerland and France bred the new movement, which spread with all the

².
Time, "Battle of the Nihilists", April 8, 1957,
Vol. LXXIX, No. 14, 77p.

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mystery and speed of a summer squall. Futurism predated the war of 1914-18, and was not especially irrational, though it was radical in departing from traditional sources of poetic inspiration. All the handwringing of Ruskin and the pre-Raphaelites anent the new machine culture brought on by the onslaughts of the Industrial Revolution, all the despair of poets and philosophers at the steadily advancing mechanization of life were cast aside by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of Futurism, as he dedicated the new movement in literature and the arts to the new age of social action, the inexorable machine, and nervous speed.

On the eve of war, symbolically perhaps, Marinetti's "New Futurist Manifesto" appeared in September, 1913, issue of Poetry and Drama. Apparently forgetting the functional nature of language, and that words of their very nature are in the service of meaning, i.e., representing ideas, the "New Futurist Manifesto" said that futurism intended to set imagination and words "at liberty"; in other words, "free" them from all meaning, making of all language an idiotic babble. Later on, in "dada" (so well named), this state of affairs was actually to come to pass. Up to 1909 the artists, writers and poets were content that their works should have beauty and meaning; for the future the big movements were determined to make all communication "free" of both. Thus

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began a certain cult of insanity, carrying in its baggage cars a good deal of ideological freight worth noting:

Marinetti listed some fifteen ways in which our sensibilities have been affected by scientific discoveries. They have led to an "acceleration of life" and have made us despise the old and welcome "the new and the unforeseen". We now scorn the prospect of a quiet life; we are attracted toward danger. Further, we no longer subscribe to a theory of personal immortality and are therefore much more interested in ourselves and in increased possibilities for a "full life". Human desires have correspondingly been multiplied, and we no longer regard them sentimentally. Romantic love has disappeared and the sex life has become enormously more important because of the "greater erotic facility and liberty of women." Man's capacities have been multiplied by the machine, and he is by way of developing a "New mechanical sense, fusion of instinct with horse-power and with chained forces."³

Cummings is mentioned by Hoffman in connection with the futuristic experiments in typography and syntax, though he contradicts Shapiro in pointing out that this is superficial rather than as an exponent of a credo. But, superficially or no, the first rumblings of the typographical and syntactical upheaval to come, most notably in Cummings, come out in the "New Futurist Manifesto", sent crashing

³.

Hoffman, Frederick J., The Twenties, New York, 1955, The Viking Press, 253p.

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abroad by Marinetti himself: "Disregarding syntax, he will waste no time in constructing sentences. Chucking adjectives and punctuation overboard, he will despise all mannerism or precocity of style, and will seek to stir you by hurling a confused medley of sensations and impressions at your head."⁴ This is certainly accurate and to the point! Some futurist, cubist and surrealist poetry has never been more aptly described.

Dada

The war brought in the second phase in the methodical madness of Dadaism, in which formless idiocy was brought to its zenith. The revolt against reason, fanned to frenzy by the lethal breath of war, spawned this monster of conscious universal negation. It began in 1916 with Tristan Tzara and had a history incredible as it was brief (1916-1921). An international movement in poetry and art, it

attacked all conventional standards of aesthetics and behavior and spat in the eye of the world." Dadaism was a doctrine of utter formlessness; words, or even syllables, were used without regard to meaning, as in the speech of a small child. The movement was not long-lasting, but it did have a jarring effect on contemporary aesthetic and had a significant result in encouraging surrealism and other radical movements.⁵

⁴.

Ibid.

⁵.

The Columbia Encyclopedia, second edition, New York, 1956 Columbia University Press, 499p.

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Dada, of course, in keeping with radical convention, brought out another feverish manifesto. In it Tzara gives a more direct insight into the nature of dada and its aims. Amid the imbecilities of errant words, diagrams and numbers of his book, one finds real, intelligible sentences, like:

Dada travaille avec toutes ses forces
à l'instauration de l'idiot partout.⁶

Even Tzara's worst enemy couldn't have put it better or more precisely than this! The conservative, impartial critic would have hesitated to go so far. Tzara goes on to claim:

N'étant pas imperialiste, je ne partage
pas leur opinion--je crois plutôt que dada
n'est qu'une divinité de second ordre,
qu'il faut placer tout simplement à côté
des autres formes du nouveau mécanisme
à religions d'interrigne.⁷

Maritain was later to make charges of a similar nature against modern art. As a dadaist exponent himself put it:

6.
Tzara, Tristan, 7 Manifestes dada de Tristan
Tzara, Paris, 1918 Jean Budry & Co., (éditions du diorama)
82p.

7.
Ibid., 95p.

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Francis Picabia making this speech in "explanation" of dada in February, 1920, (said): "You do not understand, of course, what we are doing! Well, my dear friends, we understand still less. How wonderful it is, isn't it, that you are right!... You don't understand? Neither do I; how sad!"⁸

But here Picabia is being unfair in his presentation of dada, for he represents it under the aspect of personal charm. Actually, dada has no aspect. It is pure formlessness. In justice it can only be represented in some manner such as:

---; ---;-----o----0
!!!! tsi--:--:--I
--et sam--et sam--sam-- saM

This is actually the beginning of a dadaist "poem".⁹

Cummings dabbled in dadaism. His whole untitled volume is dadaist. It is like the irrational talk of a patient etherized upon a table. There are outcroppings of this influence in his verse, but never to the degree of complete unintelligibility, for Cummings works too brilliantly at his obsession, as Shapiro says, ever to be a dadaist at heart. Thus

⁸.
Hoffman, Frederick J., The Twenties, New York, 1955, The Viking Press, 208p.

⁹.
Ibid.

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what above did was
always fall
(yes but behind yes)
without or until¹⁰

or

you which could grin three smiles into a dead
house clutch between eyes emptiness toss one¹¹

or

a-

float on some
?
i call twilight you

'll see

an in
--ch
of an if

&

who
is
the

)

more
dream than become
more

am than imagine¹²

appear puzzling at first, but familiarity with the "personal convention" of Cummings makes them quite clear. Still they

10.

No. 36, Xaipe

11.

No. 35, 50 Poems

12.

XXXI, 1 x 1

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do reflect--and more than reflect--the dadaist and futurist influence. They must be "decoded". Again and again, too, Cummings is guilty of the Picabian maladie, "Toute conviction est une maladie."

mind's a coward; lies are laws)
laugh, and make each no thy yes:
love; and give because the why¹³

This is in essence a negation of all reason.

Dada to Surrealism

Despite the plethora of discouraging evidence to the contrary, man is not by nature irrational, and dada had to die. But before it went out in an orgy of riot and pandemonium, it gave birth to an heir which has survived. André Breton, founder of surrealism, was already working on its aesthetic when he joined forces with Tzara upon the latter's coming to Paris in 1920. Breton outlawed all rational approach to knowledge in his first Manifesto, and turned to the new theories of Freud as a source to discovery of the "strange forces" hidden in the depths of the unconscious. Surrealism therefore from the very beginning linked its destiny to psychoanalysis and the mania for knowledge of the subconscious and the unconscious. Whereas, dada was utter

^{13.}

No. 53, Xaipe

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formlessness, surrealism superimposed an artificial form by force upon the aimless wanderings of the imagination set free from all rational control. Thus it set about organizing its new system of irrationality. Instead of intelligence and development of thought, it sought the primacy of the dream, and made a fetish of symbols and images for representing its dredgings from the unconscious. Like dada, surrealism inveighed against convention and attacked existing norms; finally, in 1929 it allied itself with Communism. In 1930 the surrealist magazine, Le Surrealisme au service de la revolution, indicated its Communist subservience in its title as well as in its contents. Since the artistic mind in surrealist guise was as independent as in any other, the Communists were never really enthusiastic or appreciative of the unasked-for alliance. In its essence surrealism is not Communistic, but in its application it leads ultimately to some a-moral system. The surrealists in sensing this showed sharper perception in their promotion of such a union than did the reluctant Communists.

In Cummings there is much surrealism. No. LX of Viva is woven of surrealist image and symbol:

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because i love you)last night

clothed in sealace
appeared to me
your mind drifting
with chuckling rubbish
of pearl weed coral and stones;

lifted, and (before my
eyes sinking) inward, fled; softly
your face smile breasts gargled
by death: drowned only

again carefully through deepness to rise
these your wrists
thighs feet hands

poising
to again utterly disappear;
rushing gently swiftly creeping
through my dreams last
night, all of your
body with its spirit floated
(clothed only in

the tide's acute weaving murmur

Granting the aesthetic principal upon which this poem is worked, it is beautifully done. The poem is susceptible of no formal or moral application, but is merely a series of symbols and images which the poet ascribed to a one-ness of love which he experiences with his beloved in a dream. His love has suffered death by drowning and its mood is one of numb agony.

Another aspect of surrealist technique is apparent in the imagery and the psychology of No. 4 of 50 Poems, though the latter suggests more the psychology of Adler than Freud:

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nobody loved this
he(with its
of eye stuck
into a rock of

forehead.No
body

loved
big that quick
sharp
thick snake of a

voice these

root
like legs
or
feethands;

nobody
ever could ever

had love loved whose his
climbing shoulders queerly twilight

:never,no
(body.

Nothing

The disrupted imagery, itself of the type associated with surrealist painting, the confused metaphor, the conscious lack of vital spirit, all unite in communicating a feeling of aged ugliness in the wasting away of senility, itself a kind of surrealist decay. The control of speed and emphasis by the punctuation and word blocking, and the visual pattern of the poem, too, ending in a forlorn, lonely "Nothing," reaches a nadir of mental anguish. This poem is

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a masterpiece of form and feeling. It is organic and has creative vitality.

Cubistic Influence

The "nobody loved" poem also shows to a degree the influence of cubism, but it does not exhibit it nearly as much as No. 57 of Kaïpe:

1	(im)c-a-t(mo b,i;l:e
	FallleA ps!fl
5	OattumbllI
	sh?dr lftwhirlF (U1)(1Y) &&&
10	away wanders:exact ly;as if not hing had,ever happ ene
15	D

This is a delightful poem! Stripped of technique of "cubism" it might have been written out: "The cat got up and slowly walked away." Cubism's distinctive contribution to the abstract movements in art and poetry was to add a third dimension in poetry, or, in painting, "it tended to reduce painting to design in space based on three-dimensional

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geometry."¹⁴

The "c-a-t" poem, quoted in full above, like the "grasshopper" and other Cummings poems, essays to get off the page and move about in space. The first suggestion of the action to come (again, like the grasshopper) is the cat immobile in the first and second lines. But as well as being at rest, this is also a "catmobile". The words are as nearly compenetrated as possible, with the punctuation marks in the second line (,;:), preparing for action: which comes in the third line, as the capital F begins the stanza. The cat falls, floats and tumbles; the typography and punctuation, with the exclamatory O, incorporates all the excitement and suggested mechanics of the actions. The next three-line stanza continues the hectic action as the cat drifts and whirls uncertainly, comes to a stop, hesitates, as if wondering if it has had enough, then hesitates and wanders away "as if nothing had ever happened." From line ten on the word blocking and sound effects slow down the action to a dead stop in the definite consonantal D. The "not", "hing", "happ", the cat-like sound of "ene" and the words separated from all suggestion of movement, as in "exact" / "ly" all

^{14.}

Columbia-Viking Desk Encyclopedia, New York, 1953, Viking Press, 307p.

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supply typographical braking power to bring the "catmobile"
to its halting exit.

The cubists wished to forget perspective, to take their glance at three-dimensional nature, then break it up, and finally rearrange the elements into a world of two dimensional planes expressive of a formal and harmonious relationship. There was little cubistic literature, but the movement did strengthen the ideal of self-expression.¹⁵

Cummings was the only successful cubist in English. He projects a three-dimensional poem on a two-dimensional page in a different way in his "Thunder and Lightning" poem, No. 221 of the 1938 Collected Poems:

n(o)w
 the
 how dis(appeared cleverly)world
 is Slapped:with;liGhtning
 !
 at
 which(shal)lpounceupcrackw(ill)jumps
 of
 THuNdeRb
 loSSo!M IN
 -visiblya mongban(gedfrag-
 ment ssky?

^{15.}
 Hoffman, Allen, Ulrich, The Little Magazine,
 Princeton, N.J., 1947, Princeton University Press, 58p.

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the moon liiked into my window
it touched me with its small hands

Cubism and Futurism

Cummings abounds in futuristic technique and the movements of surrealist tendency that reached a climax in cubism. He has become best known as their exponent. Shapiro philosophizes thus:

520 Preoccupation with the look of words
 Is a naive and primitive delight.
 Before the age of presses and type-faces,
 When Romans wrote from left to right or both,
 Words were sometimes as much designs as names.
 Monks in their gold illuminations spelled
 Fables in single letters; nor was it held
 Absurd by poets three hundred years ago
 To shape a poem into a crucifix,
 An altar or a pair of wings. To show
 The inherent self-consciousness of modern style
530 In this connection, look at the extreme
 Of Cubism first and Cummings its exponent.¹⁷

Cubism and the rest reached the public through the "little magazine", of which more than 600 lived and died during the pre-war and post-war period, beginning with 1912. Nearly all were distinguished by their dedication to literary revolution, their contempt for convention or tradition of any kind, an insulting approach to the world at large, a certain

17.

Shapiro, Karl, Essay on Rime, Cornwall, New York, 1945, Cornwall Press, lines indicated.

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rampageous crudity in dealing with each other, and a savage zeal for the destruction of western culture. There was no clear idea of systematic replacement, except by a vaguely a-moral, irreligious and anarchic society. With such an approach to world problems in the realm of literature, art and poetry, they hoped, with characteristic thoughtlessness, to be taken seriously by the public, and of course they were not. People regarded them with an air of amused disturbance and shook their heads as they sprang up like weeds and fell of their own weight after a few months or a few years, only to be replaced by more bizarre specimens. Most of these which survived the hectic months or years of launching and becoming accepted, went in the heavy financial seas of the end of the decade; a few of the better and more reserved, notably Poetry, The Hound and the Horn, The Symposium, The British Criterion, survived for a decade or a score of years and made substantial contributions to the cause of American letters.

The Little Magazine

In the little magazines of the early twentieth century, a negative principle was at work. No other culture has ever tried so consciously and so vehemently to destroy

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itself. Hence, with scattered exceptions, they set about developing a canon of social suicide. They had names like Secession, Arson, The Enemy, Laughing Horse, transition, Dynamo, a Journal of Revolutionary Poetry, Broom, The Fugitive, S 4 N, The Double Dealer, The Liberator, Rhythm, The Blue Review, The New Freewoman, The Egoist, The Pagan, Smoke, Blast, The Anvil, Bruno's Bohemia, Bruno's Review of Life, Love, and Letters, etc. It was quite a collection! They printed everything that was new, radical, revolutionary. They accounted, say Hoffman, Allen and Ulrich in The Little Magazine, for 80% of the famous writers who were to move into the conservative magazine field and "the big money".

Significantly, perhaps, nearly all of the little magazine alumni and alumnae were quick to move out of the artistic squalor of Greenwich Village up to Park Avenue, the Suburbs of nearby Connecticut as soon as they could afford it. They included Eliot, Hemingway, Faulkner, Lawrence, Pound, Wallace Stevens, Dos Passos, Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and many others, with E. E. Cummings' contributions spread out over twenty four of these publications.

The contents of these magazines is all but incredible. They were worthwhile contributions, to be sure, from time to

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time, but they were the exception. Setting a tone was the cover of Broom featuring a grotesque figure thumbing its nose at the world (and the reader), Blast advertising itself as "Diabolic", and Ernest Hemingway's first published work in The Double Dealer, a blasphemous parody on the Book of Genesis. (Hemingway, like the others who had an eye for the wealth they so deplored, was later to trim his sails to the public whim, at least to a marked degree.) The overriding ideas seemed to be defiance, anarchy, uninhibited sex, unbridled egoism, hatred of institutions and tradition of every hue and kind.

Cummings had many redeeming features. Not the least of these was his ability, like a dual personality, to see the absurdity of his own position. One wonders sometimes whether he really took the cult of individuality as seriously as his poetry contends; and one is forced to admit that there is real conflict in his soul. Hence, it seems that his parents' sensible training never entirely left him; for in the midst of all the little magazine madness he is able to satirize the Hemingway and Lawrence type of thing in lines like the following:

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but who is this pale softish almost round
young man to whom headwaiters bow so?
hush--the author of Women by Night whose latest Seeds
of Evil sold 69 carloads before
publication the girl who goes wrong you

know (whereas when i lie down i cough too
much).¹⁸

This is satire in the highest degree. There is
another piece, more to the point of the little magazine, with
its futurism, dadaism, surrealism and pan-sexualism:

"let's start a magazine

to hell with literature
we want something redblooded

lousy with pure
reeking with stark
and fearlessly obscene

but really clean
get what I mean
let's not spoil it
Let's make it serious

something authentic and delirious
you know something genuine like a mark
in a toilet

graced with guts and gutted
with grace"¹⁹

18.
XVI, "One", Is 5

19.
No. 24, No Thanks

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Shapiro's words are appropos of these movements:

The eye

Appraised the man as beast, the beast as man,
Sometimes with preference for the lower form.
There is a passage in the Descent of Man,
Which matches in distemper Whitman's cry
1589 I think I could turn and live with animals.²⁰

Cummings also sees the absurdity of the neo-Freudian mania that inundated all literature during the twenties. Yet Cummings is as Freudian as any when he gets down to it, and there are no more vivid Laurentian verses in the language than those in &. Nevertheless, in the lucid moments of his clearer vision, Cummings could satirize the Freudian obsession in bits like VII of "One", Is 5:

listen my children and you
shall hear the true

story of Mr. Do
-nothing the wellknown parvenu
who

(having dreamed of a corkscrew)
studied with Freud a year or two
and when Freud got through
with Do-

nothing Do
-nothing could do
nothing

20.

Essay on Rime, lines indicated

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etc. The technique in the poem, simple as they are, make it a work of genius, and show, along with other evidence, that there is definitely a thesis and anti-thesis at war within the poet. The upper hand is had by the one or the other at varying times. The only consistency is the uncompromising credo of absolute individual autonomy, which is never satirized or compromised.

Cummings entered completely into the spirit of the rioting revolutionaries in the "wrecking poem", already cited, No. 67 of No Thanks: "come(all you mischief- / hatchers hatch / mischief)all you / guilty", etc. This is his most nihilistic piece, and apparently still close to his heart, as it was incorporated into the Harvard Lectures. Thus he is still, to some degree, a man with a divided heart.

The best of the little magazines and the most enduring Poetry, serves as a touchstone to the best that was done in the early twentieth century toward a revitalization of a literature that was becoming moribund. The magazine survived from its founding in 1912 in Chicago until well into the nineteen-fifties, going on after the death of its founder, Harriet Monroe, in 1936 to carry on her apostolate in poetic experiment. Due to her intelligence, her professional

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integrity and her sound judgment--in turn due, no doubt, to her convent-school background and good family--the magazine not only became the most influential and respected as well as one of the most durable of the crop of advance guard publications, but through its sponsorship of free verse, imagism and less noted "movements" dedicating themselves to the revolutionizing of modern poetry, Poetry had the most lasting effect on modern verse. T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost, together with nearly every name that has since become famous, were among the early contributors.

At the other extreme, and far more representative of the madness of the times, were Blast and Broom. It is impossible to give any account of their "policy", for they had none. Their attitude, as Ezra Pound said in connection with Wyndham Lewis' Tarr, was that if the man in the street could not understand, then "Damn the man in the street, once and for all....."²¹

^{21.}

Hoffman, Allen and Ulrich, The Little Magazine, Princeton, N. J., 1947, Princeton University Press, 23 p.

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Lewis' Blast, which began in June of 1914 and published two issues, was designed as a "death warrant" for the guardians of the past. In place of them it offered "the Vortex, a sort of typographical vacuum sweeper. "Long live the Vortex." We need the Unconsciousness of Humanity--their stupidity, animalism and dreams."²²

A plethora of such vagrant verbiage certainly justifies the term "idiocy" in application to the six hundred, most of which lost no time in riding swiftly into the valley of death.

Broom advertised Cummings as a contributor, with Slater Brown of The Enormous Room, and Malcolm Cowley as associate editors, later editors. In an account of an emergency editorial meeting to decide the future of Broom, Cowley gives the best insight into what went on behind the scenes of the little magazines:

I tried to start a general discussion of our problems; nobody would listen. Jimmy Light, fresh from a cocktail party, had a thesis of his own, which he expounded in a passionate low voice to his neighbor. "They're treading us under their heels," he said. "They're stamping us down. They're pressing us into the dirt. They're walking on us." Hart Crane, shaking his finger like an

22.

Ibid.

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angry lawyer, was exploding into argument with Josephson on the subject of Munson's letter. Bottles appeared; somebody spilled a glass of red wine on the table cloth. Burke was telling a hilarious story about a neighbor's dog. Hanna Josephson rapped vainly for order. "We've come here to talk business," she murmured hopelessly. Somebody told Jimmy Light to change his tune. The general hubbub increased. Isador Schneider, the most amiable and prolific of revolutionary poets, sat overwhelmed by the thought that people could be so disagreeable to one another. Glenway Wescott rose from the table, very pale and Wisconsin-fragile. "How can you people expect to accomplish anything," he said precisely, "when you can't even preserve parlor decorum?" He swept out of the restaurant with the air of one gathering an invincible cloak about him. I was too depressed to laugh at him; indeed I was tempted to follow his example. For the first time I realized the pathos and absurdity of the fierce individualism preserved by American writers in the midst of the most unified civilization now existing....Hart Crane, completely beside himself, stamped up and down the room, repeating, "Parlor, hell, parlor." More bottles appeared on the table. "They're pressing us into the dirt," Jimmy Light said with conviction.

"Aw, shut up," yelled half a dozen apprentice gangsters, natives of Prince Street, emerging suddenly from the rear door that led into a dirt paved bowling alley. A moment later they reappeared at the front door and cried more loudly, "Aw, shut up."

Our long table grew quiet, not in obedience or fear, but simply from the consciousness that its proceedings were being watched by people from another world. Hart Crane poured himself a glass of wine and drank it rapidly. "The question,"

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Josephine said, "is what are we going to print in the next issue of Broom?" We discussed the question dispiritedly, having received a tacit answer to the other question of whether we should engage in more flamboyant activities. Somebody recited a limerick. About half-past eleven the meeting dispersed.²³

Pure Self Expression

One can imagine Cummings, after a meeting like this, going back to his little room and writing "let's start a magazine."

The last word was to be said, and truly, by Margaret Anderson. No one was better qualified to say it than she. A woman of beauty and intelligence, she was consumed with the idea of evangelizing society with the new art. She was editor of The Little Review, the Chicago contemporary of Harriet Monroe's Poetry, and its antithesis in policy and method. It was to The Little Review that James Joyce first sent the manuscript of Ulysses, after Pound had made it known in Europe. The Post Office had condemned it as obscene and burned the whole issue. This incident almost caused the magazine's collapse. Miss Anderson called her autobiography My Thirty Years War, which was the admiration of Harriet

23.

Cowley, Malcolm, Exile's Return, New York, 1934, W. W. Norton Co., 191-192 pp.

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Monroe. The Little Review's editor for the fifteen years of its existence (1914-1929) was the marvel of Chicago and New York. She was the most colorful and exciting of the lot of madcaps that traipsed about the country and across the Atlantic in search of "creativity". Cause after cause came and went: futurism, dadaism, imagism, symbolism, impressionism, expressionism, and finally surrealism. Wherever Margaret Anderson went the fur flew and sparks tingled in the atmosphere as her volatile personality ground into the hard rock of conservative and hare-brained worlds on either side of her. She put out issue after issue of her magazine not knowing or caring how it would be paid for. Often the staff went without food and did its own wrapping and mailing, along with its own haircutting and other chores; and once Margaret, out of funds and unable to pay her rent, took her rugs down to the shore of Lake Michigan where she pitched a tent and lived through the warm months into the following winter. She had one change of clothing which she washed nightly in the lake. In New York, out of money again, she picked out the tallest skyscraper, took the elevator to the top, and then spent the rest of the day coming down stairs, begging funds for her magazine on every floor along the way. Neither lawsuits, arrests, threats from printers, nor any of the terrors

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of publishing life ever phased her. Hence, when she finally passes judgment on the disintegrating world of poetic nihilism, one is inclined to listen and nod a final assent. Weary of surrealism, Miss Anderson said in the final issue of her magazine in 1929:

"...As this number will show, even the artist doesn't know what he is talking about. And I can no longer go on publishing a magazine in which no one really knows what he is talking about...."²⁴

Sampson of the arts, his strength sapped by being cut off from the true founts of art which spring from faith and love of the divine, blinded by lust and senseless introversion, had tried to shake down the temple of society about him and had almost succeeded. Some of the ruins are still about us today in the sterile and depraved state of letters, which is so often the theme of sing-song, critical complaint.

Jane Heap, an associate editor, put the whole matter of radical publishing in more Thomistic terms. She said in the same issue of The Little Review:

24.

Hoffman, Allen and Ulrich, The Little Magazine, Princeton, N. J., 1947, Princeton University Press, 64 p.

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"Self expression is not enough; experiment is not enough; the recording of special movements or cases is not enough. All of the arts have broken faith or lost connection with their origin and function. They have ceased to be concerned with the legitimate and permanent material of art."²⁵

Conclusion

The nihilistic movements of the early twentieth century which grew out of the Futurism of Tomaso Marinetti profoundly influenced the poetry, literature and arts of the period. Dadaism, Surrealism and Cubism were the main currents of innumerable nihilistic movements, most of which splintered off into an early and deserved oblivion. Their rise and fall can be traced in the explosive "Little Magazine" which mushroomed as a phenomenon of the Nineteen-Twenties, an ephemeral institution which served as a proving ground for the radical new poets and writers who were to survive the stormy vicissitudes of the period and attain to historic eminence in the world of poetry and art. Dadaism, which influenced Cummings only a little, was inherently irrational and died of this essential defect, but it left a durable offspring in Surrealist poetry, in which Cummings rose to lasting

^{25.}

Ibid. 65 p.

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excellence of originality and merit. Further, basic elements of his verse structure are cubistic in form, and he is known as a poet of both Surrealism and Cubism.

Despite the perfection of much of his surrealist work, Cummings retains in some of his poetry certain of the inherent failures of nihilist irrationality. These inconsistencies of thought content introduce problems of a philosophic nature from the Christian standpoint which necessarily demand extended consideration and analysis; and as far as possible, the problems thus raised must be resolved. An attempt to make such a resolution and draw appropriate conclusions will form the subject matter of concluding chapters to follow.

CHAPTER SIX

THE PERSONAL CONVENTION

In days of old, when man thought of himself in the biblical figure of a great flock in the keeping of the Good Shepherd, it was only natural that poets should have developed the pastoral convention. Today, when subjectivism has nearly reached its limit, with every man his own logician, philosopher and theologian, it is just as natural that the most representative poets of the time should have developed what Allen Tate calls a "Personal Convention".¹

Cummings is among the "most representative" poets of the time because he is the most "progressive" and the most "advanced" in an advanced and progressive age of poets who have pushed beyond the frontiers of the past and carried poetry and communication itself to the limits of its flexibility. A whole pattern of prosodic definition and poetic diction has polarized about the philosophy of poetry inherent in his work; and here again the lack of any form or "style" is in itself a theory of poetic diction, whatever

¹. Tate, Allen, "Personal Convention", Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, March 1932, Vol. XXXIX, No. VI, 332 p.

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partisans may say to the contrary. As Tate states it, "He (Cummings) has a great many styles, and having these he has none at all--a defect concealed by his famous mechanism of distorted word and line."² This is the same as to say that his style is to be without formal style, for "style" itself, in Tate's own words which immediately follow, is "that indestructible quality of a piece of writing which may be distinguished from its communicable content but which in no sense can be subtracted from it."³

After saying this, it seems contradictory for Tate to go on, as he does, "...the typography is distinct from style, something superimposed and external to the poem"⁴ for in a great many Cummings poems, like the "grasshopper" poem, No. 276 of the 1938 Collected Poems, or in the "falling leaf", the first of 50 Poems, the typography is essential to the structure of the imagery and to its purpose; change it and the amorphous verse form disintegrate into meaningless signs and letters. It would be correct to say that in some poems the typography is unimportant; capitalize and punctuate them

2.
Ibid., 334 p.

3.
Ibid.

4.
Ibid.

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conventionally and the piece is substantially the same. Nevertheless, in the public and in the literary mind Cummings' "style" involves his typography as well as his imagery, diction and other stylistic qualities, and thus it seems that Tate here has become ambiguous.

It may be objected to the designation of Cummings as perhaps "most representative" of the age that Eliot, or even Joyce, is considered to be more so than Cummings by many critics and commentators on the contemporary scene; and this is a valid objection, except that Joyce and Eliot represent polarizations of thought of an entirely different spirit from Cummings--Eliot the return to tradition up to a decisive point, and Joyce the demoniacal rejection of it. Cummings as the poet of eclectic subjectivism, carried to the last outpost of intelligibility, is the archtype of his time. He is an ultra-romanticist, who goes as deeply into the question of personal feeling as language can carry him. One has to learn the language of the Cummings world. The reader has to get to know what this poet means when he speaks in terms of personification about the moon, when he uses abstract figures like the sacred witchery of almostness, or when he uses the noun April as a verb and the verb as a noun, etc. Williams

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states this fancifully: "cummings has come from english to another province, having escaped across a well defended border; he has remained, largely, a fugitive ever since."⁵

R. P. Blackmur says he goes even farther than the limits of communication afford and blames him for this. He calls it finally "the heresy of unintelligence" and says, "So long as he (Cummings) is content to remain in his private mind, he is unknowable, impenetrable, and sentimental."⁶

The Romanticism of Self

This particular breed of romanticism was brought to its previous zenith in Whitman. Song of Myself and the whole of the Leaves of Grass are a bible of inspired revelation vouchsafed to the world, speaking authentically of the inner life of the poet. There is a division of opinion as to whether Whitman and Cummings are "poets" in the true sense and meaning of the word. Rosenfeld and Frankenburg would answer in the affirmative; Blackmur and Eastman in the negative, and so opinion would be divided. The viewpoint of the present work is to accept the affirmative, holding that

5.
Williams, William Carlos, "Lower Case Cummings", Wake, No. 5, Spring, 1946, 20 p.

6.
Quoted in Tate, Allen, "Personal Convention", Poetry, March, 1932, Vol. XXXIX, No. VI, 335 p.

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Cummings is sufficiently accepted as a modern poet to make it unnecessary to join more contendingly in the debate on what the nature of poetry is and how he does or does not qualify.

Whitman and Cummings have more in common than personal limitation of subject matter; in the chain of prosodic development (or decay, for those who insist on an anti-Cummings rationale), Mr. Cummings' experiments begin where Whitman left off. Saintsbury says:

Whitman could and did write more or less regular metre, and his actual medium is often a plum-pudding-stone or conglomerate of metrical fragments. Still the form which he mainly adopts, though hybrid between poetry and prose, is a genuine thing as far as it goes--a true hybrid, and not a mere Waterstonian cobbling together of unrelated elements.⁷

What would Saintsbury say of Cummings? Reasoning from his principles a guess likely to be as good as any other would be that he would continue development of this thought begun on Whitman and end in fairly general agreement with Blackmur, Tate and Shapiro. This is not to point comparisons, but merely to chart direction. In the preface of his first

7.

Saintsbury, George, History of English Prosody, London, 1910, Macmillan & Co., Ltd., Vol. III, 490-91 pp.

volume, Saintsbury lays down the principle, "...the Rule comes from the Work, not the Work from the Rule."⁸ Near the end of his work in "Later Prosodists", he speaks of "the go-as-you-please prosody of Symonds; the thought-rhythms and attention-stresses of Liddell, and many others."⁹ He gets as close to a major aspect of Cummings as his lifetime permitted when he takes up "Phonology, or phonetics", which prosody-wise, "may seem to have an intimate connection: they are certainly within speaking distance of each other; but so were Abraham and Dives."¹⁰

He continues,

It is possible that the principles of this science or sciences--I wish their exponents were a little more at one about them and about their results--may have had at some remote period in the order of our creation, something to do with the raw material of prosody.¹¹

The experiments and innovations of "Later Prosodists" had not proceeded to the point where any valid speculation can be made as to what judgment the great Master of prosodic

8.
Ibid., Vol. I, 1906, Preface, vi p.

9.
Ibid., Vol. III, 472 p.

10.
Ibid.

11.
Ibid.

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form would have passed on Cummings-esque preoccupation with the look of letters to produce an effect. He abominated the attempts of the Sidney Lanier school (of which there are strains in Cummings) to get music out of poetry and emotion out of word sounds: "For my part, I can only close my visor, put my lance in rest, and loosen sword in scabbard. On no terms can I accept Mr. Lanier here."¹² The Science of English Verse of Lanier, which has been referred to in analysis of E. E. Cummings, has no respect from Mr. Saintsbury.

But there is more to Cummings, of course, than all of this. Karl Shapiro comes closest to the only basis of evaluation that can be utilized in putting the yardstick to his verses: the personal convention breeds a personal reaction. Cummings in sharing the recesses of his soul with the reader in clever, artful ways is either rewarding or he repels. One accepts him or does not. Shapiro says:

This poet is most concerned with the component
Integers of the word, the curve of "e",
Rhythm of "m", astonishment of "o"
And their arranged derangement. In Rimbaud
The vowels appear as colors on occasion,
In Sitwell motions. A school of prosody
Threatens to dwell on hidden properties

^{12.}

Ibid., 494 p.

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In diphthongs, semi-colons and italics
 One may or may not challenge this esthetic,
 But Cummings is no frivolous poet, no fool
 At rime. A studious and ascetic mind,
 He works at his obsession brilliantly,
 Continues to delight, amuse and anger
 The anthologist and advanced practitioner,
 And even the humorless critic can afford
 To say that Cummings has his own reward.¹³

The Personal Convention extends to subject matter.

In XXXIII of "One", Is 5, Cummings says of scientists and
 thought systems in general,

(While you and i have lips and voices which
 are for kissing and to sing with
 who cares if some oneeyed son of a bitch
 invents an instrument to measure Spring with?)

The scientist in general would hardly enjoy reading
 thus about himself. Neither in the age of new moons and
 artificial satellites is such a regard for scientists apt to
 receive sympathetic agreement from readers generally.

There are such times as these when Cummings hardly
 ever has a nice word to say about anything or anybody. In
 No. 46 of Xiape he says:

13.

Shapiro, Karl, Essay on Rime, Cornwall, N.Y.,
 1945, Cornwall Press, Lines 531-546.

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a kike is the most dangerous machine
 as yet invented
 by even yankee ingenu
 ity(out of jew a few
 dead dollars and some twisted laws)
 it comes both prigged and canted

These lines make one wince. The ingenious use of assonance, dissonance, internal rhyme, the withering reductio ad machinam device, the expert diction in all but the first line, just the right dash of alliteration, the subtle metaphor of birth, the rich connotative value of the broken word "ingenu" coinciding with "yankee ingenuity"; all combine to produce an effect worthy of a nobler sentiment. The poem as a work of art is vitiated first of all by the evident ill will fairly oozing out of its voweled appeal to race hatreds, its illogical scorn of ancient biblical tradition, the dragging in of all the crackpot vituperation which centers about racial "monopoly" and money, the overt contempt for sacred beliefs and customs--this is a hate "poem" and who can abide it? Shapiro chastizes Cummings sharply for this in his otherwise generally favorable contribution to the "Cummings number" of Wake, quoted elsewhere in this work. How can this vituperation be accounted for? Cummings' background and training were not to blame. As he admits, they were of the best. As he also admits, it was strictly on his

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own account that he turned away from it all and decided to make something of a career out of going around smashing things and calling people names.

Of course, there is Cummings' side of it, too. Living as he has for the most part in a hostile environment where he never could abide the way things were run, where people thought he was crazy or insincere and said so, and where he paid for his convictions a price asked of few, the temptation to be an iconoclast and a nihilist was bound to be strong. Nevertheless, the experience of man from the Roman persecutions to the Korean war is that nothing good ever comes of violence as a cause, but only in spite of it when there is no other course. "It is...madness to misal and rave against the times, or think to recal men to reason by a fit of passion."¹⁴ The way of martyrdom, for those who can bear it, is the only real victory, and in many ways Cummings has paid such a price for his integrity.

To compensate somewhat, there are, to be sure, some laudatory pieces. There is No. 7, for instance, in Xiape:

14.

Browne, Sir Thomas, Religio Medici, New York, 1943, Random House, Modern Library, edition, 389 p.

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we miss you, jack--tactfully you (with one cocked
eyebrow) subtracting clichés un by un
till the god's truth stands art-naked: you and the
fact

that rotgut never was brewed
which could knock you down

(while scotch was your breakfast every night all day
a threeringbrain you had and a circusheart
and we miss them more than any bright word may cry

.....

here's, wherever you aren't or are, good luck!
aberdeen plato-rabelais peter jack

There are other poems to Jimmy Savo, Paul Draper,
Ford Maddox Ford, and a few other celebrities of Cummings'
time.

The entire collection of all Cummings' poems is
dedicated "To Marion", the beautiful and charming Mrs.
Cummings.

That E. E. Cummings has paid dearly and suffered
much to become the symbol of a modernistic, romantic, per-
sonal freedom is evident from his occasional cries of despair.
"Most people" have a way of striking back. Ultimately, this
is what makes for martyrdom, and Cummings is in some respects
a kind of martyr to his cause. In No. 3 of 50 Poems there is
all the pathos of penury and destitution:

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If you can't eat you got to
 smoke and we aint got
 nothing to smoke:come on kid

 let's got to sleep
 if you can't smoke you got to

 Sing and we aint got

 nothing to sing;come on kid
 let's go to sleep

 if you cant sing you got to
 die and we aint got

 Nothing to die, come on kid

 let's go to sleep
 if you cant die you got to

 dream and we aint got
 nothing to dream(come on kid

 Let's go to sleep)

In other poems the sounds of martyrdom are even more poignant. There are cries of persecution and protracted loneliness, the worst of all human sufferings. Cummings was the man whose specialty was living, who refused to sell his head to earn his bread. In such a plight it is not difficult to understand the vehemence which often accompanies the poet's outbursts.

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Conclusion

Allen Tate's designation of "The Personal Convention" summarizes the characteristics which may be considered as constituting Cummings' "style", an understanding of which is essential to any evaluation of a poet. If one is to appreciate Cummings, he must accustom himself to the poet's use of language and the particular symbolism he employs, a whole system of which is peculiar to the poet himself. Whether or not this is "true" poetry is considered beyond the scope of A Catholic Criticism of E. E. Cummings. The fact that it is sufficiently accepted as "poetry" generally, with pertinent critical observations, is deemed sufficient grounding for the present discussion. This shares Shapiro's conclusion that, despite some marked inconsistencies, this poet works brilliantly at his craft, and, further, that even Catholic critics can afford to say that Cummings has his own reward.

The "Personal Convention" must be appraised and appreciated both in its form, its matter and its background, if the critic is to see this poet in perspective with relation to his own bearings in the religious and cultural world.

PART III
SOCIAL SATIRE

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WAR BETWEEN US AND MOSTPEOPLE:

....as the nineteenth century advanced, the satirical element in English poetry grew smaller and smaller, It has not yet recovered its place therein, for the satirist needs both irreverence and strong moral convictions, and the Victorian age had the second without the first, while the modern period has the first without the second.¹

In Cummings' view of man as a gregarious creature, there remains a tenacious insistence upon the widest freedom for the individual as such, dealing ferociously with any kind of philosophic, moral or religious restraint. His social satires directed against institutionalized mores, together with personal satires attacking individuals as presidents, "politicians", generals or other public figures, are his bitterest works. In his new-found natural reverence, referred to in Chapter I, he seems to be approaching a quasi-understanding of social problems centering about the deeper problems of liberty and law. To some extent at least he is

1.
Laver, James, Editor, Poems of Charles Churchill, New York, 1933, Viking Press, quoted by Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska in "E. E. Cummings, American Poet of the Comedia Dell'Arte", in The Harvard Wake, No. 5, Spring, 1946, 65 p.

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at last reckoning with the necessity of individual and group-to-group adjustments in a nation like the United States, whose founders and followers were the dispossessed peoples of the earth in another age. But even yet his understanding of tolerance on the ideological level is only subliminal. His older satires are laden with Seneca's odium pro vulgus profanum, and some of his later satires are not without a certain disconcerting frenzy. They are alien to the niceties of classical wit and flourish; they land on all fours. They are Swiftean without Gulliver's symbolism, like Dryden's scalpel without his subtlety and polish. Cummings attacks like a tiger, red in tooth and claw.

The Bitter Years

Karl Shapiro writes:

During the Twenties Bohemia went underground and Cummings took to guerilla poetries. Eimi, a four hundred page garland of bad fruit thrown at the Soviet Union, missed the mark entirely. His small shot he expended on various wops, kikes, niggers, colonels, and professors, evidently on behalf of all les puteins in New York and Paris, plus the balloonman and various "poets, yeggs and thirsties".²

2.

Shapiro, Karl, "The Bohemian", in The Harvard Wake, No. 5, Spring, 1946, 45 p.

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176.

Shapiro's words, appearing as an island of severe criticism in the flood of praise in this "Cumings' number" of Wake, stood out. Though his inclusion of Eimi as "bad fruit" is at variance with other cultured comment, his words carried the right amount of sting in behalf of those hit hardest by Cumings' bludgeon. They struck back at the poet where he is most vulnerable.

There is an enigma in this: the poet seems in all humility to consider himself superior to no one; yet he looks with an almost savage contempt on all (i.e., "mostpeople") who do not share his dogmatic individualism with its corollary of institutional disdain. He is friendly enough to Everyman: The Enormous Room, Eimi, Santa Claus and Tom are monuments to human fellowship and good will. Cumings is entirely without prejudice of any kind until points of dogmatic and doctrinal difference arise.

He may deny all dogmatic and doctrinal conviction; but that is only to say that his code is to have no code, for there is no such thing as an intellectual vacuum, a complete absence of all belief and conviction, in a sane man. Cumings has definite convictions and beliefs and they are often put forth with all the subtlety of a flame thrower. He speaks ex cathedra in many poems and passages and his

dogmatic definitions are not to be trifled with. Part nihilist, part hedonist, and part aristocratic authoritarian, he is as strict and uncompromising about his romantic eclecticism as St. Francis of Assisi was about his love of the Lady Poverty. Cummings is a kind of Rousseauan saint who has passed through his dark night of the soul and emerged as a romantic apostle-at-large. He has gathered no mean following of other like-minded syncretists, and it was mainly their contributions to The Harvard Wake in the Spring of 1946 that made it the "Cummings number". As one of them puts this idea: "This quality of being an individual is no indiscriminate, generalized conception."³

In the "Introduction" to the Collected Poems of 1938, Cummings says of this concept:

The poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople.--it's no use trying to pretend that mostpeople and ourselves are alike. Mostpeople have less in common with ourselves than the squarerootofminusone. You and I are human beings;mostpeople are snobs.

³. Frankenburg, Lloyd, "nothing as something as one", The Harvard Wake, No. 5, Spring, 1946, 47 p.

As Frankenburg says of this Introduction, "There is a cozy tone to this. You and I are specially privileged characters."⁴ It is easy for the reader to be won over to the ivory tower poet who is flattering him. Accept his fundamental principle of absolute individual sovereignty and the catechumen becomes an "Is", that is an individual worthy of the master's commendation. Deny it for whatever reason (or in the name of reason itself) and there is no limit to the abuse, invective and vitriol that may come as a result.

Attacks on the Great

No Thanks, as its title indicates, abounds in satires of this type. One of the most noted is that directed against Ernest Hemingway. In a wider sense, it is a shaft aimed at the existential realism which he symbolizes in the fiction which has inherited the place of eminence formerly occupied by F. Scott Fitzgerald and his school. No. 26 is short, composed of only four lines:

what does little Ernest croon
in his death at afternoon?
(kow dow r 2 bul retoinis
wus de woids uf lil Oinis

4.

Ibid.

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Everyone, no doubt, will think this a remarkably clever little ditty--except Hemingway.

As a satire on the exaggeration of the animal nature of man, the overtone of the jungle is effective: the "croon"; the suggestion of hunter and hunted in the survival of the more ruthless in the forest. The inset of the bull fight with its identification of the man of letters as mate to the bull, the implication of instinct as the basis of their proximity, the combination of solemnity connoted by the idiom of the last lines with the language of the rowdy fighter: here we have a personal satire which succeeds in being scathing, and perhaps admirably questionable.

In a later volume, l x l, we find a similar quatrain, No. XI, also widely noted, directed against Louis Untermeyer, who, in one of his anthologies balanced a laudatory judgment of Cummings with a qualification that some of his verse failed of its mark:

mr u will not be missed
 who as an anthologist
 sold the many on the few
 not excluding mr u

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180.

These are as mild as they are brief. Sir Thomas Browne says,

Scholars are men of Peace, they bear no Arms, but their tongues are sharper than Actius his razor; their Pens carry farther, and give a louder report than Thunder: I had rather stand the shock of a Basilico, than the fury of a merciless Pen.⁵

Longer and in the ascending crescendo of invective, feared by men of reason and charity, is No. 27 of No Thanks, whose target is Joe Gould, a celebrity and literary character of the twenties, known as "difficult". He once challenged the editor of BROOM to a duel.

little joe gould has lost his teeth and doesn't know where to find them (and found a secondhand set which clock) little joe gould used to amputate his appetite with bad brittle candy but just (nude eel) now little joe lives on air

Harvard Brevis Est for Handkerchief read Papernapkin and no laundry bills likes People preferring Negroes Indians Youse n.b. ye twang of little joe (yankee) gould irketh sundry who are trying to find their minds (but never had any to lose)

5.
Browne, Sir Thomas, Religio Medici, N. Y., 1943, Random House, Modern Library ed., 388 p.

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181.

and a myth is as good as a smile but
 little joe gould's quote oral history
 unquote might (publishers note) be entitled
 a wraith's progress or mainly awash while
 chiefly submerged or an amoral morality
 sort-of-aliveing by innumerable kinds-of-deaths

(Amerique Je T'Aime and it may be fun
 to be fooled but it's more fun to be
 little joe gould)

No. 27, for all its ingenuity, seems to mark a
 boundary line of quotability and common sense. No. 28 in
 the same volume, beginning,

that famous fatheads find that each
 and every thing must have an end
 (the sill cause of trivial which
 thinkless unwishing doth depend

gets a little out of hand.

Likewise, No. 47, "meet mr universe", of Xaipe, has
 its illochosen metaphor. Again, Cummings grows angry at "Gay",
 the "captivating cognomen of a Young Woman of cambridge, mass",
 in No. XVIII of Viva, for no other reason than that she wants
 to remain a virgin, at least until she is married.

Along with the "flotsam and jetsam" of "gentlemen
 poeds", in No. 6 of 50 Poems there is another dose of bitters
 in XIII of Viva:

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182.

remarked Robinson Jefferson

to Injustice Taughed
your story is so interested

but you make me laft
welates wouldwoe Washington
to Lydia E. McKinley

and so on. The form is ingenious, but of intellectual content there is none. This is a mere jingle.

Closer to his own field, Cummings amuses himself with the foibles of the literati in XXXII of "One", Is 5:

Meanwhile the tea regressed.

Kipling again H. G. Wells, and Anatole France shook hands again and yet again shook again hands again, the former coachman with a pipewrench of the again later then opening a box of newly without exaggeration shot with some difficulty sardines. Mr. Wiggin took Wrs. Miggin's harm in is, extinguishing the spittoon by a candle furnished by the courtesy of the management on Thursdays, opposite which a church stood perfectly upright but not piano item: a watermelon causes indigestion to William Cullen Longfellow's small negro son, Henry Wadsworth Bryant.

Provincialisms are used, sometimes imported to advantageous, humorous-ironic effect; thus No. IV of "Two", Is 5:

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183.

it's jolly
 odd what pops into
 your jolly tete when the
 jolly shells begin dropping jolly fast
 hear the rrmp and
 then nearerandnearerandNEARER
 and before
 you can
 !
 & we're

NOT
 (oh--
 --i say

that's jolly odd
 old thin, jolly
 odd, jolly
 jolly odd isn't
 it jolly odd.

Another type of satirical characterization lets representatives of mostpeople speak for themselves, or takes the form of a dramatic monologue addressed to someone, as in II, "Chimneys", of Tulips and Chimneys:

goodby Betty, don't remember me
 pencil your eyes dear and have a good time

There is a kind of impish charm in these sentiments, and innocent mockery.

A different, colder technique follows in No. V of the same series:

"kitty". sixteen, 5'1", white, prostitute.

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No. VIII of "One", Is 5, has a certain merit in the portrayal of character in the dialect of the American seaboard city of the East:

some

guys talks big

about Lundun Burlin an gay Paree an
 some guys claims der never was
 nutn like Nooer Leans Shikahgo Sain
 Looey Noo York an San Fran dictaphones
 wireless subways vacuum
 cleaners pianolas funnygraphs skyscrapers an
 safetyrazors

sall right in its way kiddo
 but as fer i gimme de good ole daze....

On another level but with much the same sentiment is No. VIII, "Two", Is 5, in which Cummings combines a blow at the youthful enthusiasm that boomeranged in his own life with the Harvard man's delight in heaving a free brickbat at the great competing center of American culture at New Haven:

come, gaze with me upon this dome
 of many coloured glass, and see
 his mother's pride, his father's joy,
 unto whom duty whispers low

"thou must! and who replies "I can!"
 --you clean upstanding well dressed boy
 that with his peers full oft hath quaffed
 the wine of life and found it sweet--"

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a tear within his stern blue eye
 upon his firm white lips a smile,
 one thought alone: to do or die
 for God for country and for Yale

above his blond determined head
 the sacred flag of truth unfurled,
 in the bright heyday of his youth
 the upper class American

As a companion piece, there is Cummings on co-eds in No. V, of "One", Is 5: "yonder deadfromtheneckup graduate of a/somewhat obscure to be sure university".

Attacks on the Masses

There is much cynicism in Cummings. Recalling another aspect of Swift, he works a metamorphosis of mostpeople into a combination of Yahoos and Houyhnhnms as he invites his lady to walk in the night "after all white horses are in bed".⁶ There is in No. 15, too, of 50 Poems, the unmistakable blight of misanthropy.

This Mostpeople is a monster! And this monstrous "unanimal"⁷ deserves no pity in its deformity. No. XIV of

6.
 No. I of "Five", Is 5
 7.
 No. 22, Xaipe

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187.

l x l begins with the clever satirical epithet, "pity this busy monster, manunkind, / not." Going to the extreme in this direction, No. 67 of No Thanks marks the low point in Cummings for nihilistic foolishness:

come(all you mischief-
hatchers hatch
mischief)all you

guilty
scamper(you bastards throw dynamite
let knowings magic
with bright credos each divisible fool

and so on. It is true that the ending of this piece makes tiny reparation as a form of self defense for the author, but it is, nonetheless, childish perverseness as a whole.

Continuing the ascent to truth at the expense of mostpeople is No. IV, l x l, Here mankind, or most of it, is charged with being a "collective pseudobeast".

Huge this collective pseudobeast
(sans either pain or joy)
does nothing except preexist
its hoi in its polloi

.....
that strictly(and how)scienti
fic land of supernod
where freedom is compulsory
and only man is god.

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Without a heart the animal
 is very very kind
 so kind it wouldn't like a soul
 and couldn't use a mind

Cummings loses his sense of perspective physically as well as philosophically when he is among mostpeople. He is truly lost in a big city. In IX of "Portraits", Xli Poems, he says,

at the ferocious phenomenon of 5 o'clock i find
 myself gently decomposing in the mouth of New
 York. Between its supple financial teeth
 deliriously sprouting from complacent gums, a
 morsel prettily wanders buoyed on the murderous
 saliva of industry. the morsel is i.

Vast cheeks enclose me.

This prose poem is successful in conveying by both word and image the sensitive poet's feeling of being swallowed up in the maw of a city alive with business, industry and finance. This impression is experienced by everyone in New York at some time, but to a man whose spirit lives on the religion of art the experience is multiplied in its intensity. In XIII, "Sonnets", Xli Poems, Cummings is more intimately at home: "when i am in Boston, i do not speak. / and i sit in the click of ivory balls..." This goes on to connotations of sin. Cummings is better in New York,

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189.

where "the well-fed L's immaculate roar looped / straightens, into neatest distance....",⁸ and where he charms the weary reader with his songs of innocence, songs of experience, and songs of spring.

Apparently, mostpeople react no more kindly to the poet than he does to them. No. VI of Viva, hints that his clash with society at large has brought him into abject penury,

down
to
smoking
found
Butts

No. 56 of No Thanks makes it even more forceful.

In No. 29 of No Thanks the fight comes right out into the open between the poet who acts with the freedom of ars gratia artis and the convention-bound mob, who want only "freedom from freedom"⁹ Again, No. 29 of No Thanks complements the "Introduction" to the 1938 Collected Poems:

8.
XV, Xli Poems
9.
Xaipe, No. 37

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most(people
 simply
 can't
 won't(most
 parent people mustn't
 shouldn't)most dar en't
 (sortof people well
 youknow kindof)
 aint
 &
 even
 (not having
 most ever lived
 people always)don't
 die(becoming most
 buried unbecomingly
 very
 by
 most)people

The supine, lackadaisical lack of purpose which dominates the lives of so many people nowadays is communicated by the rambling, haphazard stanza form, with its expert arrangement of words and diction. Thrown about like belongings littered in a disorderly room, they embody desultory thoughts and aimless wanderings of mind. The poem is a masterpiece in relation to its purpose. Mostpeople are

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"(sortof well / youknow kindof) / aint". Cummings and the aristocracy of "us" (as opposed to mostpeople) are definitely "Is". One is positive, the other negative. One lives life to the full, the other flees life as a fearful escapist. Frankenburg puts it:

To be "one", an IS, a Yes, is for Cummings a form of aristocracy. The individual is "quality." This aristocracy is more potent than that implied in ruling, making money, depriving others of same, possessing social position, family or any other fortuitous advantage.¹⁰

To be an "Is" means acceptance by the master. To be an "un", an "isn't", an "it", or as above, to be "aint", means utter rejection and consigned to the darkness and gnashing of teeth with mostpeople outside.

The Happy Few

To become an "Is", one has to be "born-again", in something like the sense of Christian baptism. But this birth, or rebirth, is to cast off all idea of systematic thought and live entirely by feeling, preference and instinct.

This idea is capsuled in one of Cummings' very sensuous pieces in which he is meditating on the bodily

^{10.}

Frankenburg, Lloyd, Pleasure Dome, Cambridge, Mass., 1949, The Riverside Press, 184 p.

aspects of a lover and concludes,

(mingled in whispering thickly smooth thighs
thinkingly)
remind me of Woman and

how between
her hips India is¹¹

These lines and figures are quite revealing. The embodiment of India in this teeming metaphor is more than a little appropriate; for here and elsewhere from a few lines, a whole scheme of life can be traced. The idea of birth and rebirth so important to Cummings is inherent in the Indian philosophic terms bhava, the will to be born, and jata, the concept of a greater birth or rebirth. From this Cummings' growth in terms of the thought of India goes on to vedana, or sense experience. This in turn leads to a certain trsna, or thirst for increasing sense enjoyment, confirming a certain upadana, or clinging to this enjoyment. Indian seers and sages would go on to speak of Cummings in the sense of nama-rupa, or the operation of a psycho-physical organism.¹²

11.

VII, "Post Impressions", &

12.

Sharma, Chandradhar, Indian Philosophy,
Banaras (India), 1952, Nand Kishore & Bros., 91 p.

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193.

It is possible to delineate a whole psychology of personality in terms of these concepts, which would fit Cummings to perfection as he represents himself in many sensual poems and the hedonistic orientation to which they lead, and to which he does not fail to commit himself.

The "Introduction" to the 1938 Collected Poems is important to note in some detail, for it contains the key to much that follows, which is otherwise incomprehensible. It says on the matter of "being born":

Take the matter of being born. What does being born mean to mostpeople? Catastrophe unmitigated. Socialrevolution....Mostpeople fancy a guaranteed birthproof safety-suit of nondestructible selflessness. If mostpeople were to be born twice they'd improbably call it dying --

you and I are not snobs. We can never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing: the mystery which happens only and when-ever we are faithful to ourselves. You and I wear the dangerous looseness of doom and find it becoming. Life, for eternal us, is now; and now is much too busy being a little more than everything to seem anything, catastrophic included.

Life, for mostpeople, simply isn't.

And so on. For a final farewell, mostpeople, fade into the distance with the salute of No. 26 of 50 Poems as

wherelings whenlings
 (daughters of ifbut offspring of hopefear
 sons of unless and children of almost)
 never shall guess the dimension of

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194.

him whose
each
foot likes the
here of this earth

whose both
eyes
love
this now of the sky

and so on. Cummings of course is "him" of the poem, definitely an ardent earthling.

In contrast to the masses of mostpeople, there aren't many of "us". No. 28 of the same volume furnishes an index or rule of averages:

there are possibly $2\frac{1}{2}$ or impossibly 3
individuals every several fat
thousand years. Expecting more would be
neither fantastic nor pathological but
dumb.

In a Christian scheme of things mostpeople fare somewhat better. They are regarded as children of God, objects of the Redemption, subjects of divine grace and heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven. To be sure their lives are teeming with evil and failure, but in the sacramental system of the Church there is opportunity to rise again and again to pursue the divine goal.

The Perfection of the Individual

Is it possible to be an "Is" and a good Christian at the same time?

The saint is the most rugged of all individualists. The difference between the saint and the mediocre is that the latter feels himself constrained by virtue and divine law to act in a certain manner; the saint has already adopted divinity as the indwelling guest in his soul and established a moral unity with Him. His will has therefore become one and indistinguishable from the divine will. The difference lies in this: that whereas "mostpeople" of Christian faith act in accord with their first principles because of fear of the consequences of sin, or out of a certain moral constraint, the saint does God's will because he wants to! His will and God's will have become synonymous, so that there is no longer any real divergence between the two. He has therefore become the greatest type of "Is", since he acts in unity with God without restraint. His fulness of expression is to choose voluntarily to express his will in unity with God's and to live the life of grace. Cummings pays tribute to this idea when he speaks with the highest praise of Christ, as he does several times.

Conclusion

The Christian way is not Cummings' way, except at times by coincidence. His way is his own. His satires which cover a wide range show that he may be described as a saint of romantic egoism. In this role he takes a kind of messianic character as the saviour of the individual from conventional bondage, as Christ took on the Character of the Redeemer from sin. In this conception, too, lies the key to Cummings' rejection of his ultra-aristocratic Harvard and Cambridge background, as well as the codes and prejudices that went with it, in a grand gesture of transcendence to a kind of priestly, supernatural vocation of art. For Cummings is not merely a poet and an artist; he is the prophet of the individual with an apotheosis of subjectivism against the encircling totalitarianisms emanating from Rome, Moscow, London, Paris, New York, New Haven and Harvard. Before the divine spirit of the individual can be born again within one's soul, the devils of convention and morality must be driven out by his exorcisms of bitter satire. The ground must be cleared for an aesthetic baptism into the life of the human spirit before it can flower into a beautiful Is. Ritual and its idols of the supernatural must be overthrown to make the world safe for romantic egoism, in the great

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197.

kingdom of human love, where Cummings is priest, prophet and king.

This is not, to be sure, a perfectly consistent pattern in Cummings, but it is an emergent one. To develop it more fully requires scouting another field in which Cummings holds court, and this development will form the substance of the following chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WASTELAND: DELUGE OF MATERIALISM

"infinity pleased our parents
 .one inch looks good to us"¹

In America Cummings' voice falls like thunder among the bric a brac. The thousand sordid images of which its soul consists are flayed brilliantly in satire after satire. The empty shibboleths one so often finds as camouflage for mindless drifting with senseless trends, the thin veneer of altruism thrown like a tarpaulin over crass materialistic opportunism, the outward show of glad-handed fellowship concealing ulterior designs for gouging and rapine--Cummings sits impartially in judgment on all. Hypocrisy is done to death. Affectation is fed to the lions. Commercialism, industrialism, nationalism and just about every other ism one can imagine is excoriated with a vehemence which recalls an Old Testament prophet. Exception must always be made for absolute individualism as such and the pansexuality which pervades so much of Cummings' work. The sanctity of sex and individual freedom in all matters are the twin engines by

1.
 Cummings, No. 4, New Poems

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which his personal eclecticism is kept in flight. Any conflicting tendency receives no mercy.

America is "Ever-Ever Land" in

(of Ever-Ever Land i speak
sweet morons gather roun^t
who does not dare to stand or sit
may take it lying down)

down with the human soul
and anything else uncanned
for everyone carries canopeners
in Ever-Ever Land

(for Ever-Ever Land is a place
that's as simple as simple can be
and was built that way on purpose
by simple people like we)

down with hell and heaven
and all the religious fuss
infinity pleased our parents
one inch looks good to us²

And so on. This is about normal for Cummings' feelings on the topic of his native culture. It has much in common with T. S. Eliot's feeling for modern times, but whereas until recently Eliot had an antidote, Cummings is inconsistent. He vacillates between being part of the Ever-Ever scene at some times and castigating it at others. Implicit in this piece of satire are references to materialism, commercialism,

2.

No. 4, New Poems

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religion and men in general. Materialistic America is the butt of many satirists and of much domestic soul-searching in the press and popular media. Rootlessness, drifting, a lack of spiritual grounding is the source of most confusion in American thought and life. Much of it is serious and good willed; most of it is ludicrous and seems to be done for profit. People do what is expedient rather than what is in accord with final ends or ultimate purposes, principally because they do not think about final purposes very much-- they have been made suspicious of their validity by the carefully nurtured fetish of questioning everything without distinction. Material values are too stubborn to tolerate doubt, and for that reason they are accepted unquestioningly, while higher things normally are not equal to the strain of doubt systematically placed upon them. The result is a submersion of religious and aesthetic values in favor of comfortable, worldly, materialistic points of view. Persons, places and things are the objects of love rather than truth, principle and God. Science becomes a norm of life rather than religion; business takes the place of culture. Of course all this is true only in a relative sense, for truth, principle and God receive a great deal of attention and respect; but the materialistic culture is prevalent and receives its advantage because of the traditional separation

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201.

of secular and religious life in America.

These ideas are implicit in one of Cummings' most effective satires in the form of an empty political speech:

"next to of course God america i
love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh
say can you see by the dawn's early my
country 'tis of centuries come and go
and are no more what of it we should worry
in every language even deafanddumb
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry
by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-
iful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voices of liberty be mute?"

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water³

Everything from the national anthem to the colloquial emptiness of "by gosh, by gum", etc., is summed up symbolically in the glass of water, as easily assimilated as the jingoism of much of American life. This poem is subtle in its form, ingenious in its content. The more it is studied the more effectively it is seen to render its message.

Americans, practical above all else, live in "the age of dollars and no sense".⁴ America is a land where "freedom

3.

No. III, "Two", Is 5

4.

No. I, "Two", Is 5

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is a breakfastfood" and "truth can live with right and wrong", where "molehills are from mountains made", where "the impure think all things pure / and hornets wail by children stung", where "the seeing are the blind", and so on.⁵

In the Christian scheme truth is necessarily absolute and uncompromising; al right and wrong takes this absolute norm for its standards. The seeing and the blind, the pure and the impure, likewise, take their origin from one's conviction of truth. This is a different system of values from that of Cummings or the liberals, who believe that truth is relative to the individual's beliefs. Nevertheless, from a Christian point of view, the sallies of this poem make an excellent satire with a different intent, perhaps, from that originally intended.

Somewhat the same but very much more coincident with a Christian standard of values is one of Cummings' greatest works, and probably his greatest satire. It is another of those brilliant insights of his, unsurpassed in the poetry or other literature of the current period. In view of its conclusion it is an entirely Christian poem and, moreover, a great religious poem. This is No. 54 of No Thanks. It

5.

No. 25, 50 Poems

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deserves quotation in full:

Jehovah buried, Satan dead
do fearers worship Much and Quick;
badness not being felt as bad,
itself thinks goodness what is meek;
obey says toe, submit says tic,
Eternity's a Five Year Plan:
if Joy with Pain shall hang in hook
who dares to call himself a man?

go dreamless knaves on Shadows fed,
your Harry's Tom, your Tom is Dick;
while Gadgets murder squawk and add,
the cult of Same is all the chic;
by instruments, both span and spic
are justly measured Spic and Span:
to kiss the mike if Jew turn kike
who dares to call himself a man?

loudly for Truth have liars pled,
their heels for Freedom slaves will click;
where Boobs are holy, poets mad,
illustrious punks of Progress shriek;
when Souls are outlawed, Hearts are sick,
Hearts being sick, Minds nothing can:
if Hate's a game and Love's a
who dares to call himself a man?

King Christ, this world is all aleak;
and lifepreservers there are none:
and waves which only He may walk
Who dares to call Himself a man.

A poem like this argues that Cummings has more in common with orthodox Christians than he perhaps knows. The mal de siècle of our age is the lack of absolute values underlying our mushrooming systems of "isms" and miasmatic stop-gap cure-alls. The world smothers in panaceas, while the ancient unities for want of which our culture decays are

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ignored as if they never existed, or worse, as if their previous effectiveness were an evil from which men must escape. As the same poet says in Santa Claus, we adore knowledge but perish for lack of wisdom and understanding.

The first line of the second stanza uses the word "shadows" in its traditional poetic sense as something hollow and lifeless, something which has lost its vitality, a "shadow" of its former self. It is also effective in the sense in which Jung designates the first of the archtypes as the "shadow". In Jung's Integration of the Personality it is the evil in a man, the anti-self, which he has overcome, or which may overcome him; e.g., a tendency or weakness for alcoholism, kleptomania, lust, etc. Men without vision are usually fed on such "shadows" or illusions as they sink deeper and perish in the mire of failure.

The deplorable stereotyping of persons in a mass production economy bears the brunt of the remaining lines of this stanza. Men tending a belt line or performing an office function are replaceable like part of the machine or system itself. Fitting into the same mould they develop a certain sameness which obliterates the personal prerogative and individual development that Cummings prizes above all things, and which has a high place in a Christian scheme of society.

Moral Indignation

The third paragraph reaches a high water mark of moral anger and indignation. Once a man begins to plead for truth he establishes an absolute value for himself, whether he considers it relative or not. When he proclaims dedication to "truth", "justice", "charity", etc., he is establishing something sacred. Liberalists themselves, for whom truth is relative, regard their prerogative of so acting as sacred and their liberalism an absolute value which is inalienable. In establishing "Truth" and "Freedom" in such juxtaposition, Cummings has arrived at an understanding of Christian values through his own concepts without their formal Christian elements. The third line tells hard against the price of democracy: anyone, no matter how mad his doctrine, can attract a following. Southern California has a horde of nomadic messiahs who have trekked from the more severe climates of weather and morals to the West in order to found their own religions amid the setting sun and balmy Pacific breezes. Their flocks come and go, but as long as there is enough in the collections to keep the charcoal burner and swimming pool warm they are as unconcerned as the lillies of the field. "Progress is a comfortable disease",

says Cummings in another poem.⁶ "--electrons deify one razorblade / into a mountainrange". The "shrieking" of "Progress" has about it the odor of advertising, which, of course, in the religion of Progress must be taken on faith. Otherwise, there is the dire fate of doubting the necessity of the smoke that relaxes, the real value of that fine liquor which will make real men of us, or falling into the heresy of believing that one car is as good as another. Souls are outlawed when the political party that spends the most money will win the election, and hearts are truly sick when men are willing to take full advantage of the blessings that have come through Christianity without, however, being willing to assume the obligations that came in the same package. Minds then become a prey to every whim of materialism and lose their potency for originality. Love and hate in such a society become a matter of convenience and mutual advantage, as virtues degenerate into lying platitudes.

The last quatrain is one of the most beautiful and inspiring tributes to Christ in modern letters. It speaks for itself and it speaks eloquently.

A similar social and religious reference appears in No. 63 of Xiape. It begins,

6.
No. XIV, 1 x 1

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honor corruption villainy holiness
 riding in fragrance of sunlight(side by side
 all in a singing wonder of blossoming yes
 riding)to him who died that death should be dead

To appreciate the panoramic thought content of this quatrain a daily newspaper will serve as chronicled evidence. Christ is "him who died that death should be dead" and from His Redemptive act the stanza draws its inspiration. It is a vignette of the pageant of life in which men and women of every kind and variety pass to their eternal destiny. The flavor is deepened again in the third quatrain with the dimension of time, as the whole piece is enriched with Chaucerian color and antiquity, adding a note of historical perspective to the work which suggests the setting of a Biblical lesson:

knight and ploughman pardoner wife and nun
 merchant frere clerk somnour miller and reve
 and geoffrey and all)come up from the never of when
 come into the now of forever come riding alive

After such a preparation on a grand scale one anticipates a memorable conclusion: but it is disappointing. There is no great wisdom here to take away for future reference in life, but only a casting back of the mind into the void of the first two lines. Ashes to ashes, the poet says in his surrealist way, and this is about all:

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down while crylessly drifting through vast most
nothing's own nothing children go of dust

It is all very true, but it is a letdown after the exalted
build-up.

The Acquisitive Instinct

In similar vein, but with more of a satiric sting in place of religious thought, is No. XVIII of Viva. It begins with the ironic first line, "FULL SPEED ASTERN", and has the bankrupt economy of 1929 and the early thirties as its subject. It is full of intricate ambiguities lambasting the time, and making of it a worthy subject of ridicule. Its inference is that the American economy of that time was like a giant, clumsy ocean liner out of control and foundering; hence the introductory line: "FULL SPEED ASTERN". The economy is going backwards at full speed. This is Cummings' considered judgment on the acquisitive instinct uncontrolled, and it is an appropriate one. It has the same sharp bite of the "oDE" on "the sweet & aged people who rule this world".⁷

A truly great satire on the babel of economic, political and social discord in a democracy which is a great work of art, is No. 22 of Xaipe. It centers on the

7.
No. 7, No Thanks

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psychology of strife in business and industry. It is not anti-this or anti-that, but rather a psychological satire of method. Without taking any stand in labor-capital relations, or inter-labor adjustments, it is possible to see in No. 22 the criticism of greatness upon decadence.

when serpents bargain for the right to squirm
and the sun strikes to gain a living wage--
when thorns regard their roses with alarm
and rainbows are insured against old age

when every thrush may sing no new moon in
if all screech-owls have not okayed his voice
--and any wave signs on the dotted line
or else an ocean is compelled to close

when the oak begs permission of the birch
to make an acorn--valleys accuse their
mountains of having altitude--and march
denounces april as a saboteur

then we'll believe in that incredible
unanimal mankind(and not until)

It would be impossible, would it not, for the common man to protect himself against the deprivations of large industrial combines without the institution of collective bargaining. At the same time, as the record shows, collective bargaining, when large aggregations of power are concerned, can itself become tyrannical, uncompromising and wanton.

The Dull and the Damned

Cummings takes the same dim view of present day worship of science. His impatient challenge to the Communist propagandist is fundamental when he says: "For crying out loud, my dear professor! do you seriously believe that a measurable universe made of electrons and lightyears is one electron more serious or one lightyear less imprisoning than an unmeasurable universe made of cherubim and seraphim?..... Did they ask, seriously, for bread and did you seriously give them Einstein? O Millikan, O Marx!"⁸ In "proud of his scientific attitude"⁹ published in a later volume, a portrait of a scientist which is symbolic of all science ends with the line, "the godless are the dull and the dull are the damned".

In No. 16 of New Poems the sing-song attitude of a child is adopted toward science. The child, of course, is symbolic of simplicity and innocence in the presence of complicated contrivance, and the attempt of the poem is to show the absurdity of preoccupation with material laws rather than the unaffected innocence of those who make up the kingdom of heaven:

8.

Eimi, 52 p.

9.

No. 13, 50 Poems

beware beware beware
 because because because
 equals(transparent or

science must
 bait laws with
 stars to catch telescopes

The trouble with scientific America is that "truth is confused with fact, fish boast of fishing".¹⁰ Scientists do not decree natural laws, they simply discover natural laws already in operation. Too often the man who formulates facts assumes the attitude of the teacher of truth. This is possible only in a system which deifies comfort, security, and materialism; it is an essential defect. The ultimate truth resides not in science, business or philosophy, but in "him who died that death should be dead". This idea is forced home in "Space being....Curved" with a caustic wit of the kind which almost kept St. Jerome from his place of eminence in the Church.

Space being(don't forget to remember)Curved
 (and that reminds me who said o yes Frost
 Something there is which isn't fond of walls)

an electromagnetic(now I've lost
 the)Einstein expanded Newton's law preserved
 continuum(but we read that before)

^{10.}

No. 61, No Thanks

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212.

of Course life being just a Reflex you
know since Everything is Relative or

to sum it All Up God being Dead(not to
mention inTerred)

LONG LIVE that Upwardlooking
Serene Illustrious and Beatific
Lord of Creation, MAN:¹¹

The dethronement of spiritual values and their replacement in our world by mere material norms has never been more bitterly lampooned. The curve of space compounded with Frost's walls smothers the spirit. Life is no longer the precious gift of God through which He beckons men to share His infinity, but only a reflex which ends, like faith, "inTerred", that is, in material earth. There is left only that "Upwardlooking", fatuous side of man, enthroning himself in the place of God, re-enacting the essence of Original Sin. Again Cummings is being enigmatic, since he himself lampoons Original Sin in another piece,¹² but as it stands this satire is superb. He pushes his anti-scientific attitude all the way to a "colossal hoax of clocks and calendars".¹³ However free a spirit one may be, clocks and calendars can be very useful.

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11.
No. VII, Viva
12.
No. XXI, 1 x 1
13.
No. 61, Xaipe

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213.

Church and State

Again, in the piece deriding Original Sin, the state itself is sneered at:

dead every enormous piece
of nonsense which itself must call
a state submicroscopic¹⁴

In his passion this poet forgets that states and institutions are necessary in human life, however cruelly and ineptly they may be administered. Derision ill-becomes the poet in the presence of history.

Likewise he is merciless toward religious attitudes not in agreement with his own. There is nothing sacred outside of his own eclectic system.

now dis "daughter" uv eve(who aint precisely slim)sim
ply don't know duh meanin uv duh woid sin in
not disagreeable contras tuh dat not exaely fat

"father"(adjustin his robe)who now puts on his flat hat¹⁵

The implications of this caricature are rather insidious and go beyond the bounds of legitimate satire. That the "father" really "knows" sin in contrast to the

14.

No. XXI, 1 x 1

15.

No. XI, "One", Is 5

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woman is not something the poet could possibly know, the nature of moral guilt and innocence being what it is; and in making such a moral judgment Cummings is violating one of his own first principles of freedom for the individual. Poetic license, it seems, is without limit.

Outside of "organized religion", as the liberalistic term expresses orthodoxy, the poet is no less unsympathetic. Women evangelists have long been an anomaly in American streets. Pitiful figures as they plead with men and other women to "change their ways and be saved", they usually follow the playing of a martial or sacred air by a brass band. They have much the same effect on the populace as the Children's Crusade had on the Turks, except of course, that current law allows no violence. This situation is grist for Cummings' satirical mill and he responds like the hound to the horn. The situation in itself is not a pretty one, nor is the poet's rather realistic portrayal of it.

the skinny voice
of the leatherfaced
woman with the crimson
nose and coquettishly--
cocked bonnet
having ceased the

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215.

captain
announces that as three
dimes seven nickels and ten
pennies have been deposited upon

the drum there is need

of just twenty five cents
dear friends
to make it an even
dollar whereupon

the Divine Average who was

attracted by the inspired
sister's howling moves
off
will anyone tell him why he should

blow two bits for the coming of Christ Jesus¹⁶

The common man in America comes off as badly as
everyone else in Cummings' satires.

these people socalled were not given hearts
how should they be?their socalled hearts would think
these socalled people have no minds but if
they had their minds socalled would not exist¹⁷

and

as for souls why souls are wholes not parts
but all these hundreds upon thousands of
people socalled if multiplied by twice
infinity could never equal one)¹⁸

16.

No. IV, "Portraits", XLI Poems

17.

No. 24, 50 Poems

18.

Ibid.

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216.

The "one" of course is any distinctly alive individual who thinks, feels and judges for himself without benefit of other men or institutions, if such there may possibly be. The American

does not have to feel because he thinks
(the thoughts of others, be it understood)
he does not have to think because he knows
(that anything is bad which you think good)¹⁹

It's "freedom from freedom / the common man wants".²⁰ All in all, Cummings cannot abide the land of the free and the home of the brave. In desperation he turns away in disgust from it all. Man is

a hopeless case if--listen:there's a hell
of a good universe next door;let's go²¹

Frustrated even in this he cries out, "--tomorrow is our permanent address".²² How true this is! It is a quasi-successful philisophical and spiritual poem which attempts to attain to a vague kind of personal immortality. But it is

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19.
No. 23, No Thanks
20.
No. 37, Xaipe
21.
No. XIV, 1 x 1
22.
No. XXXIX, 1 x 1

THE WASTELAND: DELUGE OF MATERIALISM 217.

boot-strap immortality and the poet seems to be aware of his failure: "we'll move away still further: into now". For this poet there is no ending of the world with a bang or a whimper; for him life is turned off with the last twist of the knife.

Conclusion

This social satire of Cummings has added much that is original and rich to the modern period. His innovations of form and structure contribute a novel element which heightens the satirical effect. He is the merciless foe of materialism in all its forms, and inveighs bitterly and effectively against commercialism, hypocrisy and strict attitudes in religion. Sometimes he goes too far in this direction, neglecting to show for the faith of others the same respect he demands for his own principles. Again, he fails by generalization in condemning whole categories of persons, such as scientists and labor leaders. Also, he shows no appreciation of social problems, the necessity of institutions or the perspectives of history. Nevertheless, his satire for the most part is keen, vital and worthwhile. It often coincides with a deeply Christian viewpoint, even to the point of bringing in the Person of Christ and invoking Him as the indispensable Redeemer. His laments anent the suffocating secularism of the day and his fierce attacks upon crass,

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unthinking materialism may be accepted almost in toto as militant Christian Crusades in verse. However, this is not his central idea, which is the liberal tenet of Truth as something relative to the belief rather than an objective norm of absolute reality. As always, his main thesis is the freedom of the individual championed against all institutional restraint.

CHAPTER NINE

THE GENUS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC SATIRE:
CUMMINGS' MAN IN THE EARL AND WILSON COLLAR

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit is a relief from the depraved state of so much in the modern novel, pervaded with crime, cynicism and evil for its own sake as it so often is. The reading public sensed The Man's deep reverence for sacred principles, as well as its uncompromising portrayal of the truth in its presentation and literary technique: The Man went through nine editions with Simon & Schuster, a literary Guild edition in 1955, two Cardinal editions in 1956 and was made into a Twentieth Century-Fox film the same year which swept the nation. The total effect was to make one speculate that despite the present state of art, literature, politics and world tensions, there may be much to salvage in this human situation after all. Cummings' man in the Earl and Wilson collar mines another vein. Let us take a sampling:

IKEY(GOLDBERG)'S WORTH I'M
TOLD \$ SEVERAL MILLION
FINKELSTEIN(FRITZ)LIVES
AT THE RITZ WEAR
earl & wilson COLLARS¹

1.
XV, "One", Is 5

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As so often happens in this poet, here is the unmistakable handiwork of genius prowling in the cellar. One thing four of these lines does demonstrate is that the subject is not exclusively "Lower Case Cummings".² The brand name in lower case serves its belittling purpose and is only one of several devices contrived as engines of ridicule. The uniform capitals suggest blatant advertising, even at "the Ritz". "I'm told several million (times) about all this money", the set-off dollar sign indicates, and the familiar first name connotes both a lowly origin and the insincere use made of first names by friends and enemies indiscriminately in big business. The "gold" in the first line surname is not without its connotative value. "I'm told" also brings in the hush-hush comedy which surrounds business "secrets" which everybody knows but nobody talks about (except "confidentially"). Finkelstein is a lower-bracket character, otherwise he should not be called like an office boy by his last name without deference or relief. Parenthetical use of his first name places him on a level with his partner in one sense, but excludes equality by the

2.

The title of an article by William Carlos Williams in The Harvard Wake, No. 5, Spring 1946

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hypocritical, debased norms of the collar business, or any other "game". The last line points up the irony of advertising subterfuge, with the "Wear" dangling from the previous line. "Wear" has phonetic and syntactical ambiguity, serving also as an adverb of place, leading the lines down with additional thought. Line separation indicates that these chaps are worth millions of others, and that even the lowlier of them "really lives", as the saying goes. There is an extra dividend in the functional ambiguity of the last line, which does triple duty along with the word "wear" from the preceding line: as a "commercial"--i.e., an advertising imperative; as a dangling and slightly distorted adverbial clause (with the phonetic interpretation of "where" for "wear"); and as a predicate complement, completing the sentence with the compound subject made up of the two proper names in the first and third lines.

Another piece which is widely referred to and well thought of is No. II of the same volume, which the author has enriched with the extravagant endowment of a title:

"POEM, OR BEAUTY HURTS MR. VINAL":

take it from me kiddo
believe me
my country, 'tis of

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you, land of the Cluett
 Shirt Boston Garter and Spearmint
 Girl With The Wriggley Eyes(of you
 land of the Arrow Ide
 and Earl &
 Wilson
 10 Collars) of you i
 sing:land of Abraham Lincoln and Lydia E. Pinkham,
 land above all of Just Add Hot Water And Serve--
 from every B. V. D.

let freedom ring

20 amen. i do however protest, anent the un
 -spontaneous and otherwise scented merde which
 greets one (Everywhere Why) as divine poesy per
 that and this radically defunct periodical. i would
 suggest that certain ideas gestures
 rhymes, like Gillette Razor Blades
 having been used and reused
 to the mystical moment of dullness emphatically are
 Not To Be Resharpended. (Case in point

if we are to believe these gently O sweetly
 melancholy trillers amid the thrillers
 these crepuscular violinists among my and your
 skyscrapers--Helen and Cleopatra were Just Too Lovely
 The Snail's On The Thorn enter Morn and God's
 in His andsoforth

30 do you get me? (according
 to such supposedly indigenous
 throstles Art is O World O Life
 a formula:example, Turn Your Shirttails Into
 Drawers and If It Isn't An Eastman It Isn't A
 Kodak therefore my friends let
 us now sing each and all fortissimo A-
 mer
 i

40 ca, I
 love,
 You.

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And the poem goes on.

This is an excellent satire, free as it is from any patent ill will, and making fun, as it does, of the absurdities of advertising. The poem makes an auspicious beginning, getting immediately into character like the pitchmen it satirizes, taking the reader forcibly aside by the coat lapel, and launching into the kind of low vaudeville act that "sells patriotism" and sells itself by getting the audience to applaud the flag. Laugh and the world laughs with you; Praise the Lord, motherhood, dead heroes and freedom, and the public will lay its money on the line. Up to a certain point, that is. Poets like Cummings have made their mark upon society to a degree, for the public is now somewhat wary of the smiling pitchman who will sell you America cheap. But there is still obviously enough credulity left in the crowd to pay wartime prices for spit and polish in a cellophane wrapping--especially in automobiles, cigarettes and cosmetics. The Spearmint Girl With The Wriggley Eyes made people chew gum they didn't need or want for any conceivable reason, except the steady goad of the outdoor signs: enough, in fact, to erect one of the nation's greatest skyscrapers which will probably stand as long as the city of Chicago in which it is a landmark.

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But The Girl no longer has any vitality. Succeeding generations (if they take any note at all) will ask, "Who or what in the name of common sense is the Spearmint girl with the Wriggley eyes?" And the answer will soon be: "She has passed out of this world with her maker of the same name, and with Aldous Huxley, Sinclair Lewis, H. G. Wells, E. E. Cummings and the rest of her enemies, who tortured her to death on their typewriters."

Precious as this type of satire is, it is already dying line by line with its subject. Helen and Cleopatra no longer stir up even memories of cosmetics which promised their users the immortality of history and classical art. Today advertisers are more bent on peddling moon drops, living petals and midnights in Paris for milady's pulchritude. No doubt time to come will bring even greater advances in the cosmetic science of astral mysticism to enhance the tensions of sex appeal in the human male.

A poem like this, for all its wit in rhyming Abraham Lincoln with Lydia E. Pinkham, may not long endure. For Lincoln will outlive Pinkham in the memory of man (it is safe to say); poor Lydia has already long since abdicated her rule of the slick pages in women's magazines to the rising generation, guaranteed to do twice the job in half

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the time and cut expense besides.

The compounding of advertising slogan with national hymns, ingenious as it may be, is not a perennial poetic investment. Even an Earl & Wilson collar is lost to mind as the mark of aristocracy and wealth; Sloan Wilson assures us that he is well aware that gray flannel suits will not again be in vogue next season. The maxims of Madison Avenue, used and reused to the moment of mystical dullness, become as dead as any radically defunct periodical--and so do poems and satires which incorporate them as a vital principle.

One more economic satire will adequately complete a survey of representative types of this genre in E. E. Cummings. This is "--the substantial dollarbringing virgins" piece of "One", Is 5, which has both a number and a title: No. XXVII; title: "Memorabilia":

stop look &

listen Venezia: incline thine
ear you glassworks
of Murano;
pause
elevator nel
mezzo del cammin' that means half-
way up the Campanile, believe

thou me cocodrillo--
the glory of

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the coming of
the Americans particularly the
brand of marriageable nymph which is
armed with large legs rancid
voices Baedekers Mothers and kodaks
--by night upon the Riva Schiavoni or in
the felicitous vicinity of the de l'Eruope

Grand and Royal
Danielli their numbers

are like unto the stars of Heaven....

And so on. The ending is interesting:

--O Education:O

thos cook & son

(O to be a metope
now that triglyph's here)

Like Burbank with a Baedeker and Bliestein with a cigar, much sport is made of American tourists in the old countries by everyone who has ever considered himself literary enough to keep a diary abroad. In Him Cummings has some hilarious scenes in Paris and aboard ship. In this poem he has his share of fun with the little girls from the social register who go to the mouldy mansions of the bankrupt nobility to marry the big titles of the fortune hunters among them. But who is to say that real love does not at least at times play its part, future apouses meeting in all manner of ways as they are wont to do? Cummings is taking a

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great deal for granted. Henry James gives a much truer picture on a much deeper level of analysis, character and otherwise, in Daisy Miller. Daisy is a "marriageable nymph" to be sure, and has her mother along. In the comparison she fares better than Cummings' fellow countrywomen in these verses.

But here times have changed again, leaving the poet with dated bric-a-brac on his hands. Since the post-war boom has sent the salaries of the Americans to levels more in keeping with their tastes, and since Trans-World Airlines rocked the trans-Atlantic trade with its low air-tourist fares, the glory of their coming down from the western skies has surpassed all understanding. Not only on TWA, but now on every trans-ocean airline, plane-loads of secretaries, sales-girls and stenographers take off every day from eastern airports, sans mothers and baedekers, for the grand tours once reserved for the daughters of senators and captains of industry. For the most part they have never heard of E. E. Cummings, but if they read and understood him they would probably join in the laugh on themselves and consider it part of the Cook courtesy en route. They are the same who are succeeding to the Jamesian grandeur of the noble "Hotel du Golf...that notable structure / or ideal edifice...

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situated or established / ... far from the noise of waters" which Cummings satirizes in No. XI of Viva.

Enough has been said about Cummings' techniques to make the many satirical nuances of this free verse clear without further explication. The whole poem (including the lines not quoted) is a masterpiece of craftsmanship, once Cummings' innovations of workmanship have been granted.

So much for the Babbitt species of satire. Its achilles' heel was touched upon recently in the review of a book on Babbitt's creator and author, Sinclair Lewis. It bore the satirical title, With Love from Gracie, and was written by Lewis' first wife. She concluded by remarking that the stuffy, stereotyped life her husband lampooned so mercilessly and hated with such savage scrupulosity had left its mark on him. The character which was so anathema to him, he had not succeeded in really escaping. He was something of a Babbitt himself.

Conclusion

Social satire in Cummings is often superb, employing, as it does, all his stylistic inventions to place ridiculous human traits in sharp contrast to the reality he sees violated by their inane pretensions. His "Man in the Earl

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and Wilson Collar" is a kind of standard type, akin to Lewis-Babbitt, who exhibits all the worst traits of the world of business and pseudo-culture. As such it attains a level of excellence in modern satire. This satire is heightened by the poet's use of dialect appropriate to the subject being treated and the satirical effect is augmented by the way in which the characters speak for their environment or themselves.

All of Cummings' socio-economic satires are aimed at the absurdities of an exaggerated materialist culture--low business ethics, money as a universal norm and an end in itself, the absurdities of advertising, etc.

There is one Achilles' heel in all this. It is dated. Since Cummings' satires of this genre speak in terms of their subjects, their effectiveness will die with knowledge of the types he uses as symbols, e.g., the Wrigley Girl, the Earl and Wilson Collar, already fading from memory. Nevertheless, his best verse in this field will retain its sting for another generation or more.

CHAPTER TEN

CHARACTERIZATION: THE NAME-TAG AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS

Throughout all of Cummings' satire a proper name hardly ever appears! Of only one of the characters in The Enormous Room, Philip Burgos, do we learn the proper name--and, of course, Cummings himself. The others come and go by the names bestowed on them by the narrator: Jean le Negre, Mexique (Burgos), the Black Holster (a guard), The Fencer, le Surveillant, The Fiend Apollyon Prince of Hell Satan, Monsieur le Directeur du Camp, (one man), B. (Slater Brown), Monsieur Pet-airs, the secretaire, The Machine-Fixer, the Washing Machine Man, Bathouse John, The Fighting Sheeney, The Trick Raincoat, Pete, Haree, The Three Wise Men (the board of commissioners), The Norwegian, The Hat, The Zulu, The Young Pole, The Messenger Boy, The Baby-Snatcher, Emile the Bum, The Clever Man, the Holland Skipper, etc. The effect is one of commonality in which the men assume less of human personality than some personalized human trait. They are like characters in a play who do the expected rather than act like free human persons in their own right. Hence, despite an air of delightful humor permeating the stark tragedies of the enormous room, there is lacking a trace of humanity. Or

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perhaps it is that there is an overload of merely human sentiment and a lack of the sense of man as a divine creation.

The same is true of Eimi. Here are over four hundred pages with only Jack London's daughter, Joan, and her husband positively identified, and they only once. Throughout the many other references to them they are Turk, Turkess or Harem, and the rest of the real-life cast are treated as Chinesey, Vergil, GE (a representative of General Electric), martyr, the Sibyl, the Jehu, the marionette, the Little Girl With A Big Heart, Carybdis and Scylla, T.S. Waistline and the Eliot, the sombrero, Dum, Sunshine, Queen Mab, pop, lunchless, etc. Gene Tunney and Walter Duranty are mentioned in passing and there is a man named Wood involved at times; this seems to be his right name. In Eugene Lyons' book on Communist Russia we stumble upon the identity of a few of these people, but the rest are mere entries in a cast of dramatis personae of real life.

Charles Malmuth occupied our space while we were away and upheld its record for hospitality. His wife, Joan London (daughter of Jack London) had joined him in Moscow. Later E. E. Cummings, American poet, moved in for a while. Other Americans, among them the Gene Tunneys, had been entertained in the style which a foreign food shop and Shura's cookery made possible. Shura and her glowering ways were attaining international fame of a sort....Shura figured in Cummings'

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book about his Russian sojourn as "ogress"; Dr. Hammer appears as "Chinesey", Charlie as "Turk" or "Assyrian", Joan as "Turkess" or "Harem". Incidentally, what I understood of that book, Eimi, was so good, so penetrating, that I still wish he had not written it in puzzlewords.¹

The Trend to Anonymity

This namelessness fits into a pattern with other trends of depersonalization in modern life. Hence, while Cummings is forever preaching and teaching of the sacred individuality of all men, in this anonymity there seems to be something dehumanizing and ulterior. Although it cleverly pin-points a dominant trait or impression, it is much like giving a prisoner a number, a uniform and a function, making of him henceforth just another face and body. This is precisely the technique, or what it amounts to, in The Enormous Room and Eimi. There is a whole literature of revolt against the mechanizing tendencies of modern machine culture and our mass-production economy, and this is one of Cummings' favorite scapegoats. But, aside from the cleverness of the technique, it contradicts his central doctrine and blends with the trend he condemns. Not only is there anonymity of

1.
Lyons, Eugene, Assignment in Utopia, Harcourt Brace, and Co., 1937, 418 p.

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character; his poems are always numbered, never named, except in a few instances. This same modern statistical trend occurs in the most unlikely places: Emily Dickinson also numbers her collection of poems, as does Conrad Aiken; and there is a limited use of numbered designations rather than titles in T. S. Eliot as subdivision, and others.

The Submersion of Personality

What is the significance of this mysterious submersion of personal identity in poets who have the individual rather than society at heart? It is impossible to say, unless it is an identification of themselves, consciously or unconsciously, with the newer tendency in society itself, especially in the large cities and their sophisticated followings, to depart from traditional custom and form. The very magnitude of metropolitan centers and their culture of expedience promotes this trend to uniform standardization of personal types, as does the peculiar psychological orientation which flourishes in urban areas. Streets no longer commemorate the names of national or local heroes, saints, sages or pioneers; like everything else they are numbered from First Street and First Avenue into the hundreds. Or else they are like Cummings' entities, dubbed "Railroad Avenue", "Airport Road", "River Terrace", "Main

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Street" or "Northern Boulevard". Instead of Independence Square or Columbus Circle, such places become known as "The Circle" or "The Square". Hotels and apartments have "guests" and "tenants"--never families or friends. You live not in the family homestead on the old property out in the country, nor even in the Johnson suite of the General Howe Inn; but in Room 1426 of the Beverly Hills Hotel, or in apartment H on the eighteenth floor of an apartment dwelling with a Cummingsean name like "The Shoreham". You do not know your neighbors nor do you care to know them. Familiarity leads only to embarrassment, because neighbors just do not believe in the same things anymore. There are a few trains left with romantic names like "The Orient Express", "The Fast Mail" and the "Twentieth Century Limited"; but masses of men go "home" to prefabricated or mass-produced dwellings on the 5:14 local or take the "A" train uptown to an apartment hotel. When they take to the air they are as likely to leave town on Flight 943 as any other. In the telephone book His Excellency, the Governor of the State or the Bishop of the Diocese becomes merely Parkway 4-0325. In our day the Queen of the Skies is called the DC 7 and will soon be the jet liner, DC 8; the fire-breathing and pulsating engine of billowing steam and glinting steel, with the mournful voice that thrilled and saddened is replaced by the blaring, more

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efficient, sputtering, noxious-fuming Diesel. On every side, as Cummings shouts, we are levelled, straightened and fitted to the common mould. And then he joins the mob of anonymity himself and becomes one more among the faces that you meet! His voice is that of the prophet, but he speaks from the crowd.

In other days the sign "Rue Ste. Sulpice" or "Via Stephano" or the "Place des Carmelites" meant more than the designation of a strip of earth. It had tradition, song and story behind it. It was more than a place; it was an idea or an ideal that was embodied in space and time. The "Cuidad de Nos Senora de Los Angeles" meant far more to a people than the "City of Los Angeles".

The Shattering of Tradition

In all this namelessness there seems to be method. Whether this is the purpose or not, it has this as its effect: it is a breaking with the past. It is an attempted abolition of tradition by severance of the ties of nomenclature. It is one phase of a whole new way of life which is becoming ubiquitous. It is not Communism, but it is an evolving communism. In art, in science, in poetry, in literature, in economics and in sociology, even in philosophy and a newly evolving, purely empiric theology, man is purifying himself of everything divine and traditionally religious. To

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Cummings this cleavage is only a break with a past of horrors which included war, superstition, outworn creeds, irksome and unnecessary codes; and this is more or less the whole view of the partisans of the New Order. By casting off the chains of the Church and religion, men have nothing to lose but their souls.

There is an attempt in the secularist world to neutralize the faith of the fathers and the Spirit of Christ. In an essentially pagan world such as fulfills the vision of Ibsen and Shaw, Dewey and Russell, Cummings and Whitman, Christianity would at best be tolerated. The prophets of paganism have not been able to contend with the problem of Communism and the survival of man in the nuclear age without divine faith, but no doubt this fits somehow into their plans. To say that the Church, too, has failed, is no answer, and is mouthing foolishness; for until the sixteenth century the means of assuring world unity were at hand in the Hildebrandine papacy and the machinery was in working order. No one can deny the lesson of history: the more that individual freedom has been exaggerated at the expense of Christian moral norms, the more man has lost his freedom. What Cummings seems to want is the heritage of freedom that comes from the Christian concept of the individual without

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the restraints and obligations that go with it. This, of course, is a tempting thought, but an impossible one.

Law and Freedom

Practically speaking, Cummings is for the most part a poet of the new paganism, and this cannot be gainsaid. The anonymous aristocrat of individualism is best seen in No. 29 of 50 Poems:

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

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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

There are two more verses. In the main this is a lovely lyric of life, a sad paen of two lovers who were in the world but not of it. They were dead to the rush and hurry of mere mundane life and lived only for each other. At the same time there is satire here, gentle in its statement, sharp in its connotation. There is harsh, uncompromising independence of spirit, intransigent of social attitudes beyond mere normal individuality. Anyone is the poet himself. He is the same man who speaks of himself in No. 11 of New Poems, in the Collected Poems, 1938:

my specialty is living said
 a man(who could not earn his bread
 because he would not sell his head)

Here again the individual is in conflict with his environment, the artist at war with society. The "how town" is another Zenith, Ohio; the artist defies the Babbits who rule and run it by playing the grasshopper 'mid its millions of ants while time goes by. They are the "someones", people of importance and self-importance, in contrast to the humble connotation of "anyone", who specializes in the joy of living. The "someones" are on a baser level. They marry

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the "everyones" who fit nicely into the mortal scheme of things, living a life familiar to us all. In contrast to their stereotyped sameness is "noone", another happiness-hunter of whom the unworthy crowd takes no account. But she, too, is one of nature's noble caste and the love of "anyone" and "noone" is the chief beauty of the poem.

Lloyd Frankenburg delineates the other side of the poem when he writes:

The quality of being an individual is no indiscriminate, generalized conception. "Anyone" is not "everyone". Because he has put it so lucidly it has been frequently misunderstood. "The poems to come," he wrote in the introduction to Collected Poems, are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople."

There is a cozy tone to this. You and I are specially privileged characters. Possibly because of his being a Harvard man, readers have sometimes taken the snobbery for granted and missed the irony.²

And: Frankenburg apparently missed the greater irony in the last sentence quoted. And: the crowning irony is that the poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is so exquisitely woven of diction, metaphor and prosody that its satire and bitter irony are so subdued by the beauty of its

².
Wake, Spring 1946, No. 5, "nothing as something as one", 47 p.

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portrayal of life and love that all the rancour is dissipated by the loveliness and charm of the poem. Satire and irony are in these lines; but one has to mine them out. The poet who is a prophet and more than a prophet is there, too, but he is overshadowed by the enchantment of his parable. Anyone and noone in their romance and their joy of love are not markedly different from "mostpeople". Their lives are made up of the joys and sorrows, the happiness and pain, the triumphs and tragedies that go into the make-up of every life. They live and love, perhaps, on a higher scale of understanding and sensitivity than "someone" and "everyone", but their individuation is not of genera but of degree. Their problems of adjustment and "finding themselves" are more involved, but that is all.

Thus, very often Cummings fails to acknowledge the need of social organization and even denies it in his bitter attacks on crowds, institutions, organizations, "politicians", and the like. What he has failed to comprehend through the years is that mostpeople live as they do, not because they are so stupid that they do not understand the freedom of which the poet speaks nor so insensitive that they have no desire for such noble independence. To be sure, they are on occasion stupid, insensitive and cruel; and business, science

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and government are often as bad as Cummings makes them out to be. But there is more to it than that! Most people simply have different sets of values, desires, convictions and beliefs. They fail often and seriously in living them out; but the pattern is there and it ought to be recognized for what it is, not derided and ridiculed as methodical madness. In brief, the poets and satirists ought not to deny the same independence, freedom and integrity of motive to most people that they claim for themselves. When they grant the same prerogative to others as a common human denominator, the rancour and bitterness invariably dissolve in the beauties and harmonies of art, as they do in "anyone lived in a pretty how town".³

As the years have passed, Cummings has tended to recognize this and acknowledges the rights of others to

3.

A realization of this in late years has apparently come to the poet with the new leaven of natural reverence. In a visit with the author in January of 1957, he spoke of a lecture tour on which he had addressed audiences in Catholic colleges. In conversation with another non-Catholic, Cummings remarked on the peace of mind and soul that seemed to characterize the Catholics he had met, and his friend expostulated in words to this effect: "Where do they get it? What have they got? Nothing!" Cummings, with the wisdom that comes of tolerance and true love of mankind, showed a depth of charity and understanding not evident in much of his satire, as he answered the man's questioning of "What have they got?" with one word: "Heaven."

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freedom and even organization. Thus the ironies of which Frankenburg speaks seem to have canceled out. Cummings for all his satire and aristocratic nature, is more democratic than he perhaps suspects and than appeared at first examination. His humble assumption of self-effacing anonymity has saved him from the snobbishness of which he is so often accused.

Conclusion

At first thought Cummings' device of proper-namelessness seems to be a depersonalization of man, at variance with his gospel of glorifying the individual. On second thought, however, it has great value in extending satire to caricature. Nevertheless, there is an effect of submersion of personality in this technique, and it ends in losing to the dignity of the individual what it gains in satirical effect. The net result is to erect a barrier with tradition and the past, which, while it has certain advantages in condemning war, tyranny and the like, also incurs the liability of dispensing with the rich heritage of man's dignity as an individual which is part of Christian faith, philosophy and custom. Hence the ideal of freedom underlying the material considered in this chapter is a pagan one. Also, the pitfall of every discussion of liberty and law, i.e., the fallacy of demanding, even implicitly, more freedom for oneself and one's thoughts

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than one is willing to grant to divergent views, is not avoided. Cummings' humility, however, saves him from condemnation on this score.

The ideal from a Christian standpoint would be to secure the advantages of anonymity as a satirical device without sacrificing the Christian ideals of justice and charity which accrue to Christian culture from the past. Cummings' namelessness has strong satirical value, but it falls short of this ideal.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE LOVE LYRIC AND ITS DOCTRINE

"Love has her priests in the poets", writes Soren Kierkegaard, "and sometimes you will hear a voice which knows how to hold her in honour: but not a word will you hear about faith."¹

Cummings is a high priest of physical, emotional and romantic love in the modern secular tradition; and he knows how to be pious and ritualistic about his erotic craft. With Cummings sex is the matter, and romanticism the form, of the sacrament of human love. Romance is sacred; and as Wordsworth can be said to be a nature mystic and Keats the apostle of beauty, Cummings with the trappings of surrealism and cubism has succeeded to the chair of Swinburne in the pontificate of mystic voluptuity.

The "Woman Image" and the Virgin Mary

There is a duality of theme which runs through Cummings' love poetry. One is an ideal of human love, the

¹.

Kierkegaard, Soren, Fear and Trembling, London, 1939, Oxford University Press, 38 p., quoted in Drew, Elizabeth, New York, 1949, Charles Scribner's Sons, 98 p., T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry

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other frankly carnal. The present chapter will deal mainly with the former; the following chapter will take up the latter. In the psychology of Jung the term anima is used to represent the "archtype" of "the woman image", a kind of idealization of instinct. Its Latin term must not confuse it with "soul" or "life" or any such spiritual entity, for it has nothing to do with these. It is like a rationalization of Catholic devotion to Mary as the ideal woman, the most perfect of God's creatures, except that in Jung the idea has no such personal antecedent, but is purely abstract as a designation of psychological truth. The wisdom, and indeed the necessity of Catholic devotion to Mary can be seen in the parallel with Jung's "woman image"; for, whereas the person left to psychology alone has only an abstract "archtype" to which he turns in imaginary conversation for understanding, solace and help, the Christian with his devotion to the Christian-Woman-prototype has the ideal woman set above all others by God offered him in faith as a real person transcending a mere archtypal image to whom real and efficacious prayer may be directed. This type of prayer is called hyperdulia.

This woman will be a far different "ideal" woman from any the non-Catholic can conceive, for the idealization is on the highest spiritual plane, abstracted from all that

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is merely temporal. In one view the woman image of Jung may be said to have an aspect of the predisposition in the soul of man by God in His fashioning of it for the reception not only of ideal human love, but of what St. Louis de Montfort called "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary."

An element of the supernatural always adheres to the anima. This must be so, since she is an entity living almost entirely in the "other world" of the unconscious.²

In this and in other facets of his treatment, Jung comes psychologically to the threshold of Catholic Marian devotion. And it is a pity that someone has not taken up this line of thought and correlated it with St. Thomas Aquinas' axiom that grace builds up nature. Such a work, well done, could easily allay the accusations of an unsavory calibre so often leveled at Catholics by outsiders who are entirely ignorant of the nature of Marian devotion and the sound bases upon which it rests, both natural and supernatural.

T. S. Eliot actually makes the leap of faith from the merely psychological to the supernatural in Ash Wednesday.

2.

Jung, Carl G., Integration of the Personality, New York, 1939, Farrar and Rinehart, 22 p., quoted in Drew, Elizabeth, New York, 1949, Charles Scribner's Sons, 102 p., T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry

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His "Lady", who appears in the first line of the second section, is the equivalent of a psychological archetype, much the same as Dante's Beatrice:

More particularly the figure of the Lady inevitably recalls that of Beatrice. Eliot's own remarks on the Vita Nuova suggest strongly that he sees in the story of the relationship of Dante to Beatrice a mixture of the personal and the imaginative which parallels something in his own life, something which also had its root in a childhood memory. He sees it as a fundamental human experience which can be understood only 'by accustoming ourselves to find meaning in final causes rather than in origins.' The origins may appear physical and sexual, but 'the final cause is attraction towards God.'³

And Eliot, very aware of final causes, is able to find his way from the woman image to the Woman of the Apocalypse, the object of Marian devotion.

Because of the goodness of this Lady
And because of her loveliness, and because
She honors the Virgin in meditation,⁴

Eliot, too, honors the Virgin in meditation. He ends Canto I of Ash Wednesday with the conclusion of the Angelic Salutation, "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death".

3.

Drew, Elizabeth, T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry, New York, 1949, Charles Scribners Sons, 101 p.

4. Ash Wednesday, Canto II

The Ideal Woman

Cummings never goes this far. Once or twice he partly succeeds in an invocation to "our lady"⁵ or "Marie Vierge"⁶, but this is spasmodic and uncharacteristic. For this reason they cannot be regarded in the same light as Eliot's Lady of Ash Wednesday. For Cummings, the Virgin Mary is historical or cultural rather than religious; he has only natural piety. Cummings' ideal woman is not of the supernatural order--at most she is the Cytherea of pagan myth. Consequently, without faith or sublimation, unlike Dante's Beatrice, this woman does not lead Cummings to God. She teaches him only the joys of human love and the ecstasies of the flesh. This ideal woman is an end in herself. There are times when we can conclude that Cummings is addressing a definite idealized person in his lyrics, but always his love aspires to the realization of a Jungian ideal. The idealized woman of Jung may appear in pagan myth-making as Venus or Aphrodite, and in poetry as Astarte or La Belle Dame sans Merci. In Cummings, she appears as Venus, Aphrodite, Cytherea, receiving the homage of adoration and

5.

No. III, "Three", Is 5

6.

No. XII, "Portraits", "A" &

dedication--he is a perfectionist. At the same time, in the first fervor of his poetic life, he addresses his "ideal woman":

O Distinct
Lady of my unkempt adoration⁷

Here we have a supernaturalizing of human love, with an acknowledgement of unworthiness on the part of the lover. It appears from later references in the poem that the "Distinct Lady" of No. VII, despite her prerogative of capitalization, is a lady distinct from the goddess to whom Cummings has vowed his life and love. It is as if the gods have rewarded him for his whole-hearted dedication with an ideal human love, as happens in mythology. However, unlike Dante's Beatrice, Cummings' love and service lead him not to the joys of the eternal Paradiso, but to stark conflicts and cosmic fears relating to age, decline and death. As he grows older there is more and more the tendency to settle his vague idealism upon a specific human person, as is so often the case. There is an enforced resignation and an indomitable show of hope, which, when it settles out, seems to be more

⁷.
No. VII, "Amores", "Tulips", Tulips and Chimneys

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show than hope; but this is not the fault of the definite woman of his love. It is rather that he finds himself unable to reconcile his human love with God as life nears its end; and the older he grows the more he seems obsessed with the idea of God. This thought must always be qualified with the conflict that appears between the concept of God which appears in No. 65 of Xaipe and the gauntlet hurled down to believers from the Harvard lecture platform in the closing stanzas of Shelley's Prometheus. There is a basis for this conflict in Cummings' choice of a love of adoration, which he rightly feels must conflict with God, and the craving of every soul for union with the "final cause" which lies beyond all origins and attractions in the Godhead Itself. The confusion of the finite with the infinite in love is fundamental in Cummings and the cause of extended agonies.

Death the Intruder

The conflict appears frequently. Its earliest manifestation with an attempted, wished-for solution occurs in No. IV of the same section and volume. This clash and its desired resolution apparently take place on the psychological plane, despite the ending. It is impossible to say definitely whether the poem transcends the psychological and enters the spiritual realm or not, because the poet's

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and when
 i have offered up each fragrant
 night, when all my days
 shall have before a certain

face become
 white
 perfume
 only,

from the ashes
 then
 thou wilt rise and thou
 wilt come to her and brush

the mischief from her eyes and fold
 her
 mouth the new
 flower with

thy unimaginable
 wings, where dwells the breath
 of all persisting stars

There is definite confusion of widely-accepted ideas on death, love, immortality and divinity in these lines. The poignancy of love threatened with death in time, a frequent enough theme in Cummings, is the thought. As is so often the case, the poet's awareness of the impress of beauty on the soul and the heightening of his spiritual sense have been greatly enhanced by his love. This integrated love has taken the place of generalized love and concentrated the emotion in one overwhelming passion. The living of it coincident with the realization of death form the rest of the poem, with the vague and confused notion of immortalization at the end.

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Maintaining a spiritual elan, No. 38 of 50 Poems, says that "love is the every only god", and this idea crops out periodically, that love is the only value of infinite worth. This is of course true when it is carried far enough, i.e., to love of God. But, unfortunately, Cummings rarely carries it quite that far. Love for him is the love of man for woman and woman for man, and it is from this romantic fruition that true happiness and joy emanate. Love, "the every only god", at the end of this poem "completes its brightness with your eyes / any illimitable star" in rather beautiful symbolic imagery. There is a Sapphic sweetness mingled with a certain vague, indefinable sadness in "if being morticed with a dream"⁸ where the poet ponders himself as "deaths" kneeling at the shrine of his lady, the deaths being the "innumerable lives he has not lived." It is a lovely thought and its expression is filled with the mystery of romance which invests the love of the happily married with something of the allure of infinity. This, of course, is always the aim of Cummings. "Let's live like the light that kills."⁹ The attempt to reach the infinite is sometimes

8.

No. I, "Four", Is 5

9.

No. IX, "Sonnets-Actualities", "D", &

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mixed with a violent recoil from death, which is itself made to partake to a degree of the very glory of the beloved, as the two are fancied in mortal combat, an unequal struggle which seems to leave the mind of the poet faint and in confusion. He sees himself as the one exhausted by contemplation of the fearful conflict, as in the hymn

O Thou to whom the musical white spring
 offers her lily inextinguishable,
 taught by thy tremulous grace bravely to fling
 Implacable death's mysteriously sable
 robe from her redolent shoulders,
 Thou from whose
 feet reincarnate song suddenly leaping
 flameflung, mounts, inimitably to lose
 herself where the wet stars softly are keeping
 their exquisite dreams--O Love! upon thy dim
 shrine of intangible commemoration
 (from whose faint close as some grave languorous hymn
 pledged to illimitable dissipation
 unhurried clouds of incense fleetly roll)
 i spill my bright incalculable soul.¹⁰

Is this a deification of love, or love of the Deity?
 It is ambiguous enough to lend itself to both interpretations.
 In the former case it would be a fantasy. In the latter

^{10.}

No. II, "Sonnets", XLI Poems

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(which seems the more likely one, considering the devotional diction, the instruments of liturgical prayer and the use of nature as a mirror of divine immortality) it is a hymn such as might have been sung in a strange vernacular by St. John of the Cross. The tragedy of Cummings' estrangement from God (if indeed it can be termed that) is that when he scars in spirit to Pure Being he has the "feel" of Divine proximity that Francis Thompson had. Hopkins has the personal love of Love Incarnate associated with the prayer of the monk; Thompson's is more the love of awe from a distance. Cummings, who, like Thompson, cannot seem to evade Infinity, has something of the sense of Yaweh which made Moses tremble in the presence of the burning bush.

The other alternative excludes divinity in No. 65 of No Thanks as the "air is throbbing with prayers" and the poet contemplates his love with "kneeling eyes". Her "more than beauty" entrances him, "while behind death's death whenless voices sing / everywhere your selves himself recognize)".

Since love is the grace of the human sacrament, No. 68 of No Thanks gives the instruction,

be of love(a little
More careful
Than of everything

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This is another deification-of-love poem with built-in philosophy, which is different enough from others of its type to merit quotation in full. Its symbolism and imagery are striking in view of its message of love, which may be accepted with the usual reservations of divine faith:

guard her perhaps only
 A trifle less
 (merely beyond how very)
 closely than
 Nothing, remember love by frequent
 anguish (imagine
 Her least never with most
 memory) give entirely each
 Forever its freedom
 (Dare until a flower,
 understanding sizelessly sunlight
 Open what thousandth why and
 discover laughing)

Human Love: The Ideal

Guarding the gift of love a little less closely than "Nothing" is an instance of Cummings' fault of introducing a discordant note into a theme for the sake of inversion. Sometimes it makes the point of irony, satire or strategic exaggeration; but in this poem, device though it may be to gain an effect, it fails; it fails because the ordinary understanding of "Nothing" is stronger than its esoteric meaning in the personal convention of Cummings by inversion.

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Nevertheless, the poem as a whole is a pleasing one and a true one with the reservation of transcending faith. The discovery of a new laughter in love and the releasing of a certain vital freedom of life, which is indefinite in time, quality and intensity is an interpretation of human love that Christian apologists are endeavoring to restore.

The indefinite, though it is not infinite, approaches infinity and the term may be used to designate what is beyond measurement by its very nature. Too often the divinely given aspect of the gift of love is missed by a puritanical treatment of it. Christians, and particularly Catholics, ought to see a great deal more in human love than they customarily do. In many instances they have tended to deprecate God's gifts in the natural order in order to flatter their spiritual egos with a false humility and with the illusion that the elect, of which they are illustrious specimens, have risen above such things as mere human love. Such an affectation of superiority is something quite the opposite of virtue and has its source in a subtle pride that puts a disguised self-will in personal matters above the legitimate needs of self and others. Misguided asceticism has been the bane of charity and the deformity of family life to an extent that is hardly credible when we read the clinical statistics. There is much of value which a poet like Cummings can teach

even philosophers and Theologians of the potentia of the natural order for the balancing of personality by integrating the natural elements of love with a living faith. We shall know the truth, says St. John, and the truth shall make us free. This Joanine conception of freedom is not inconsistent with the freedom Cummings lauds in "be of love", and in this spirit it ought not only to be accepted, but embraced joyfully as a gift of God in this life and a foretaste of the joys to come.

"True Love"

Cummings' lyrics come closer to reality as his collected works progress toward the specific idealized woman in l x l where there abound such simple expressions of loveliness in abstract imagery as "we love each other very dearly / ,more / than raindrops need sunbeams or snowflakes make / possible mayflowers".¹¹ The loveliness is marred by a strained metaphor: "before God wished Himself into a rose". The figure is unnecessary, and jarring in any sense in which it can be construed; but the poem as a whole is a pleasing one. More abstract and open to qualification is No. XXXVI, l x l which begins,

11.
No. XXXVII

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true lovers in each happening of their hearts
live longer than all which and every who;
despite what fear denies, what hope asserts
what falsest both disprove by proving true

Supplying the same qualification of Christian values
makes a beautiful lyric of No. XL, same volume, which begins,

darling! because my blood can sing
and dance (and does with each your least
your any most very amazing now
or here)

After an incomparable paen to the beloved, the poem ends by
asserting that because of her, "death is killed dead." This
is the plain talk of a simple child mouthing hyperbole; but
is it not the language and the charm of love? The same mood
is sustained in No. XLVI, same volume:

open your heart:
i'll give you a treasure
of tiniest world
a piece of forever with

summitless younger than
angels are mountains

etc. Shortly after, in XLIX, Cummings puts forth a typical
metaphor of love with philosophical overtones: "you gave
gave darling".

Cummings sings like a gleeman in love in his
original idiom:

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which is the very
 (in sad this havingest
 world) most merry
 most fair most rare
 --the livingest givingest
 girl on this whirlingest
 earth?

 why you're
 by far the darlingest¹²

etc. He sings like this charmingly and interminably,
 fascinating whoever has not become alien to the moods and
 the spirit of love.

The Love Lament

But this poet also falls upon the thorns of love and
 bleeds, even on the merely human plane. "i am a beggar
 always / who begs in your mind"¹³ is a lament of unrequited
 love. He pleads with his love like a suitor of Atalanta in
 the jazz age:

yes i

am this person of whom somehow
 you are never wholly rid (and who

does not ask for more than
 just enough dreams to
 live on)

 after all, kid

12.

No. I, 1 x 1

13.

No. XV, "Four", Is 5

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you might as well
toss him a few thoughts¹⁴

The love song without response is a rare one in Cummings, but it does occur. Even in the embrace of love the dread of separation is sometimes an amalgam to passion. It takes a peculiar form in "it may not always be so", as the poet foresees himself turning his face and hearing a bird "sing terribly afar in the lost lands".¹⁵

Dread of separation is not an unfamiliar emotion in love. Little endearments seem often enough to have a vaguely felt sense of insecurity underlying them. Perhaps out of this sense of insecurity, perhaps out of the pure desire for more perfect unity in love, the wish is often felt for closer union and even compenetration of spirits. An approach to this is the ideal of perfect love in marriage, though a good many among the married do not seem to be aware of it. At the same time, many more attempt it outside of marriage, failing to recognize the necessity of social, legal and religious sanctions. Of the two it is difficult to determine who are the more foolish. In any case, the desire of the lover and

14.

No. XV, "Four", Is 5

15.

No. I, "Sonnets-Unrealities", "Chimneys",
Tulips and Chimneys

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beloved to be one spirit is one that may normally be expected to accompany true love. Having greater sensitivity than "mostpeople", the idea of compenetration of being occurs with considerable force in this poet: "darling....if I sing you are my voice."¹⁶ In "when my love comes to me it's / just a little like music" he goes on to suggest the same idea through the blending of music and color, silence and darkness, sex symbols and transformation, until "then we are I and She". A re-echoing of this occurs in "the great advantage of being alive":

that mind no more can disprove than prove
 what heart may prove and soul may touch
 --the great(my darling)happens to be
 that love are in we,that love are in we

and here is a secret they never will share
 for whom create is less than have
 or one times one than when times where--
 that we are in love,that we are in love:
 with us they have nothing times nothing to do
 (for love are in we am in i are in you)¹⁷

This idea advances towards infinity in something of a mathematical or geometrical progression as the poet in surrealist fashion seems to make the attempt with all the

16.
 No. 43, 50 Poems
 17.
 No. 66, Xaipe

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certainty of mathematics. In LIV, of IXI of this volume, the first stanza is like the first term of a simultaneous equation:

if everything happens that can't be done
 (and anything's righter
 than books
 could plan)
 the stupidest teacher will almost guess
 (with a run
 skip
 around we go yes
 there's nothing as something as one

In a flight of imagery and symbolism through such philosophic aphorisms as "forever was never till now", and "there's somebody calling who's we", there is an ending in which infinity is attained by squaring unity indefinitely until

we're anything brighter than even the sun
 (we're everything greater
 than books
 might mean)
 we're everyanything more than believe
 (with a spin
 leap
 alive we're alive)
 we're wonderful one times one

Jacques Maritain develops the idea in Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry that the modern poet, having left faith and rational philosophy, endeavors to become his own divinity and attain his own destiny. This is very evident

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here, where the lovers, as it were, call each other into being and through their growth in "creating" one other endlessly attain to a kind of perfection of beatitude in love. The only element which is a serious threat to this system is the end of it all in death. This is the foreboding problem which the poet never solves, despite numerous heroic attempts at stating immortality as a gratuitous fact, an assumption which is contradicted by other pieces, as noted above.

Love's Nemesis

The love in which Cummings finds his solace, his sustenance and his joy is not eternally durable stuff, nor is it infinite. It endeavours to multiply and square itself into infinity as numbers on a page or in a computer, thereby reaching out for something that exists only in God. Bootstrap spirituality cannot raise us to infinity; we have to accept the help God offers us in the form of Revelation through the machinery of the Church. This Cummings seems to realize in moments of cold, sober reflection. Near the end of the l x l volume, which takes its title from the "square of love" idea, multiplying itself by itself. There are the lines:

along the brittle treacherous bright streets
of memory comes my heart, singing like
an idiot, whispering like a drunken man

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who(at a certain corner,suddenly)meets
the tall policeman of my mind.

awake

being not asleep,elsewhere our dreams began
which now are folded:but the year completes
his life as a forgotten prisoner

--"Ici?"--"Ah non, mon cheri;il fait trop froid"--
they are gone:along these gardens moves a wind
bringing rain and leaves,filling the air with fear¹⁸

It would be cruel and not entirely objective to analyze these lines and make application of them to the intricate beauties and exquisite loveliness which Cummings weaves into the texture, the imagery, the symbolism and the effects of his love poetry. For his contention is not wholly illusory: something of the infinite has been infused by God into the mystery of human love, and this is why it so intrigues man above all other mysteries, except God Himself. Cummings has more than a grain of truth in his love, but in his enthusiasm he multiplies the gift beyond the Giver; his love building a building overshadows the Architect who created the very idea of the building.

Human love in all its beauty, splendor and magnificence has only one fault. It is finite. It is incomplete. The fruition of its fulness can be had only

^{18.}

No. III, "Five", Is 5

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from its Source.

Conclusion

Cummings attains heights of excellence in his love lyrics. These are two kinds, one in which he addresses a kind of divinized "ideal woman", following the spirit of his pagan dedication to the goddess of love; the other in which he sings of or to a real woman who has his love. In the first instance there seems to be underlying his devotion something of the "woman image" of Jung. In a personality of divine Catholic faith this phase of the poet might well have taken the form of devotion to the Virgin Mary, or even a lesser type akin to the Beatrice of Dante or the Lady of Eliot. But as it stands, it is unmistakably pagan. Endowing this pagan ideal with attributes of the infinite leads the poet into a deification of human love. In the second instance there is a beauty and charm about his delicate handling of the theme of human love which is able to teach the ultra-ascetically-minded the neglected value of this great gift of God, and which ought to be incorporated into the Christian life to a degree as yet untried.

At the same time, the method of Cummings in "squaring" or multiplying love into infinity fails to achieve its goal, which is ultimately the beatification of the gift of love, which in turn can be had only in God.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PERSONAL CONVENTION IN SEXUAL THEMES AND IMAGERY

Maritain maintains in his monumental work that the cult of Venus occupies a growing place in the process of compensation in modern life. He blames the Surrealists for the "dismissal of beauty" in art and the deadening influence of technological society on man's aesthetic sense:

In one respect especially the Surrealists were prophets of the modern world--namely with regard to the repudiation of beauty. But they dismissed beauty for the sake of magical knowledge, whereas the modern world, with infinitely greater success, dismisses beauty for the sake of nothing except hard labor. Let us consider this fact. The dismissal of beauty is quite a dangerous thing--if not for art, which cannot in reality divorce beauty, at least for humanity. For, as Thomas Aquinas puts it, man cannot live without delectation, and when the spiritual delectations are lacking, he passes to the carnal ones.¹

A great deal of Cummings' poetry is saturated with sex and loaded with sex symbols. He carries Swinburnian sensualism to its consumation. No poet has surpassed him in

¹.
Maritain, Jacques, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, New York, Pantheon Books, Inc., 1953, 190 p.

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his knowledge of sexual experiences and the complexities of emotional love, even in a sex-obsessed milieu. While he satirizes the amateur psychoanalysts who preach "the gospel according to St. Freud", he is much like D. H. Lawrence in the inspiration of what might be called a devotional literature of sex.

The Approach to the Old Taboos: Pagan Dedication

His approach to the subject is not that of the depraved man nor that of a man utterly without moral restraint. There is an essential difference; the former being a person of pathological tendencies, acting under a form of neurosis, the latter a man whose sexual immorality is part of a pattern of which the chief trait is a disposition to general lawlessness. One is essentially psychotic; the other criminal. Cummings is neither of these types. He is a normal man of extraordinary intelligence and talent who, like Lawrence, has rejected traditional values in the matter of sexual conduct and expression. His approach, as always, is that of the individual who is a law unto himself, who accepts no restraints except those which may be self-imposed, and who is free to do as he wills within the sole limits of opportunity and choice. Sex with Cummings, however, is not a mere matter of practical thought and exercise; he develops it into a

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mystique. He is not merely promiscuous like Edna Millay; in the same manner that a man such as Louis Grignon de Montfort vows himself to a life of dedication to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Cummings at the very beginning of his public life in Tulips and Chimneys consecrates himself to the goddess of love. In briefer forms these thoughts and sentiments are found in the vixis puellis among the odes of Horace. Cummings studied the classics at Harvard; he shows their influence, especially Horace, Lucretius and Ovid; they share a common pagan tradition. In the last of twenty-one octets he addresses his pagan goddess:

imperial Cytherea, from frail foam
sprung with irrevocable nakedness
to strike the young world into smoking song--
as the first star perfects the sensual dome
of darkness, and the sweet strong final bird
transcends the sight, O thou to whom belong
the hearts of lovers! I beseech thee bless
thy suppliant singer and his wandering word.²

The sheer beauty and dedication of this verse is more than a song, and more, even, than a prayer: it is a hymn. Recast in Christian sentiment and figures it might well have rivaled the tributes to the Virgin Mary of Wordsworth,

2.

"Epithalamion", Tulips & Chimneys

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Browning, Poe and others. Cummings was to sing the praise of Mary in his Christmas poem, already quoted, but this is very recent and marks a departure from the solemn consecration of his life and love to Cytherea which governs much of his lyricism.

Cytherea, identified also as Venus and Aphrodite, goddess of beauty and love, is addressed at the climax of this dramatic poem as the "Lady" of Cummings' heart, his "queen", to whom he makes his unqualified commitment. The title, "Epithalamion", is indicative of the solemnity of his vow:

Lady at whose imperishable smile
 the amazed doves flicker upon sunny wings
 as if in terror of eternity,
 (or seeming that they would mistrust a while
 the moving of beauteous dead mouths throughout
 that very proud transparent company
 of quivering ghosts-of-love which scarcely sings
 drifting in a slow diaphanous faint rout),

queen in the inconceivable embrace
 of whose tremendous hair that blossom stands
 whereof is most desire, yet less than those
 twain perfect roses whose ambrosial grace,
 goddess, thy crippled thunder-forging groom
 or the loud lord of skipping maenads knows,--
 having Discordia's apple in they hands,
 which the scared shepherd gave thee for his doom--

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O thou within the chancel of whose charms
 the tall boy god of everlasting war
 received the shuddering sacrament of sleep,
 betwixt whose cool incorrigible arms
 impaled upon delicious mystery,
 with gaunt limbs reeking of the whispered deep,
 deliberate groping ocean fondled o'er
 the warm long flower of unchastity,³

Freighted as they are with classical references, to Vulcan, Adonis and the winning of Helen by Paris, permeated with a sensuousness in classical theme and figure which recalls Keats, these four stanzas are Cummings' baptism into the faith of the gods, his confirmation in unchastity, his mystical marriage to mythology as a way of life. His vestal offering is complete. In the foregoing stanzas he addresses the goddess of "Love", imploring her to lead him to her altar, a bed "curtained with wordless worship absolute", for the completion of his oblation, "the perfumed paraphrase of death". This constitutes the third section of the poem.

The second is a paen to spring which suggests the choruses from Atalanta in Calydon in its beauty of language and metaphor; at the same time it has about it a loamy earthiness in which it borders on a fertility rite. But this, of course, is more than the welcoming of spring. This is the

3.
Ibid.

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spring of life, adorned by the gods in supernal warmth and loveliness for the wedding of youth and love. This is the spring of springs when the novice takes his vows, and all nature is summoned by the gods to assist in celebrating the nuptials. Like Milton at Horton, Cummings is now confirmed in his vocation; the "Epithalamion" of Tulips and Chimneys is his L'Allegro. Its iambic pentameter lines march along with all the seriousness of Paradise Lost, and the sense of wonder combined with gravity of line and meter evoke thoughts of the Garden of Eden before the Fall.

The Piety of the Erotic

Part one of the song makes its appropriate beginning of the sacred rites in a setting of exotic piety which encompasses all earth and pagan heaven. The "aged unreluctant earth" is enfigured with the charms of woman and there are references which will surely incur someone's censure. A note of suspense and sharp excitement is introduced with the recall of Pan and Syrinx in her flight as the "shrieking dryad" who "sought her leafy goal". The mood is now wholly created as stanza three speaks of the erotic wind, in a pungent figure which Cummings could have borrowed from Whitman or Venus and Adonis. The novice is fittingly prepared for his sacred vow to such a peerless divinity. With Olympian Zeus himself

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presiding, an important note is struck for Cummings' later affirmations of the supremacy of art; Zeus, lord of all divinities, is the "sceptered colossus of the Pheidian soul whose eagle affrights creation, in whose palm" is Nike with the crown about to be decreed upon the suppliant artist. Zeus is "chryselephantine", ivory and gold, all the highest achievement of Phidian, Greek art. Nike, one of man's oldest symbols of beauty and triumph in the Winged Victory of Samothrace, "presents the crown sweetest to man, / whose lillied robe the sun's white hands emboss", amid full-blown Olympian splendours. They culminate in a sunburst of sensuousness, rhetorical invocation of the legend of Zeus and Danae.

"Orientale V" demonstrates how far into the soul of the poet the adoration of physical, emotional and psycho-physical love penetrates:

unto thee i burn
incense, over the dim smoke
straining my lips are vague with
ecstasy my palpitating breasts inhale the

slow
supple
flower
of thy beauty, my heart discovers thee

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unto
whom i
burn
olbanum⁴

There can be nothing more Aphrodisian than this. It raises the cultus of the flesh to the level of latria, the degree of worship in Christianity reserved for the Holy Trinity alone. The votary of Venus has passed beyond the prayer of quiet to ecstasies and visions; such is the body of "Orientale VI".

Much of Tulips and Chimneys is forged at the same fire as the "Epithalamion" and one wonders why critics, commentators and anthologists have made so little of this strain in Cummings, while chorousing to a man on distorted syntax, grammar, capitalization, et al. There are passing references to Keats and Swinburne at rare intervals, but that is all. Edmund Wilson comes closest in an article written in 1924, the year after the publication of the original Tulips and Chimneys. With just a little more than the cursory glance at Cummings' classical side he says:

4.
Normally spelled olibanum, a fragrant gum resin used for making frankincense.

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A poet with a real gift for language, for a melting music a little like Shelley's which rhapsodizes and sighs in soft vowels dis-embarrassed of their baggage of consonants, he strikes often on ethereal measures of a singular purity and charm--his best poems seem to dissolve on the mind like the flakes of a lyric dew; but he never seems to know when he is writing badly and when he is writing well.⁵

Aside from the last thought, which applies to any poet, Wilson was quick to appreciate something of the depth of Cummings which was lacking in other observers. Granting that the stress and strain of the artisan with genius not yet "broken in" shows through some of the imagery and structure of these lines, they are nevertheless of surpassing excellence in the poetic tradition they emulate. They are especially remarkable in their emanation from one who was to depart consciously from this promise of greatness to venture aloft on the uncertain winds of radical experimentation.

After the solemn recessional from the throne of Zeus as prophet and priest of Aphrodite he turned his virgin powers to a lyric, "Of Nicolette". In the same blank verse of four octets there is just a touch of the Eve of St. Agnes,

^{5.}
Wilson, Edmund, The Shores of Light, New York, Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952, 50 p.

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as Nicolette "gently draws apart/her curtains, and lays bare her trembling heart, / with beads of dew made jewels by the sun," and goes into the darkness. It recalls the mood and setting of one of Keats' masterpieces. It is just a vignette, for it has not the scope, the pitch nor the intensity of poetry's high priest of Beauty. There is the germ of greatness in the last stanza "Of Nicolette", where the deft touch of this young, eager poet suggests all the delicacy of Rosetti's House of Life:

shunning the sudden moonbeam's treacherous snare
 she sought the harbouring dark, and (catching up
 her delicate silk) all white, with shining feet,
 went forth into the dew: right wildly beat
 her heart at every kiss of daisy-cup,
 and from her cheek the beauteous colour went
 with every bough that reverently bent
 to touch the yellow wonder of her hair.

In view of stanzas like this, one can understand how Paul Rosenfeld seems to let his friendship for Cummings overcome his critical faculty as he rhapsodizes over his subject. At the end of his review he seems also to have seen deeper into Cummings' capabilities as a poet who "begins" to take his place with Keats and Swinburne. Cummings, of course, did not follow through; he was more fascinated by the lure of strange forms and subjects not yet scouted; he was to develop more the idea of doctrinaire individualism and the

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"Personal Convention." His classical side, though brief and fleeting, overshadows a great deal of what he was later to do.

The Earthy Love Lyric

After Nicolette, Tulips and Chimneys goes on to its "Songs". The first is a love lyric in which the pioneer Cummings begins to wade into abstract imagery, which he was to bring to such perfection later in "love is more thicker than forget / more thinner than recall", "yes is a pleasant country", and poems like "life is more true than reason will deceive".⁶

There are traces of Keats' "Ode to Psyche" in the first "Songs" of Tulips and Chimneys, and it is interesting to read them side by side. They are roughly parallel, considering their subject and vague references to the "shadowy sheep", the "courseless waters" and the "unshapeful hour". He is not yet over the honeymoon stage of his sacred love and had this been a song of marriage, without the element of sin, it might well be hailed as a true song of love.

The second "Song" as a lyric is not so successful in craftsmanship. The poet is overconfident now and he becomes

6.
No. 42, 50 Poems; XXXVIII, LII, 1 x 1, respectively.

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more practical in speaking to an apparently more material love. It also becomes ridiculous at times, as when "my heart smote in trembling thirds / of anguish quivers to your words, / As to a flight of thirty birds"....!! The rest of this particular stanza follows through the note of absurdity as the flight of thirty birds "shakes with a thickening fright / the sudden fooled light." Song II is better left unsung. It is reminiscent of a scene in Thomas Merton's Seven Story Mountain where Merton is overcome by the beauty of a sophisticated college girl on a trans-Atlantic liner and blurts out his confession of love in much the same terms as Song II. Merton looks back upon the experience in later years with a kind of amused horror. Cummings might well do this today. It must have been of songs like this that Wilson was thinking when he wrote: "Cummings' style is an eternal adolescent, as fresh and often as winning but as half-baked as boyhood."⁷ The first line of Song II begins with promise: "Always before your voice my soul"; but it is the only good line in the song. After agonizing through eight quintets it wheezes to a dead end in a wreckage of twisted metaphors and cacography in these last ten lines:

7.

Wilson, Edmund, The Shores of Light, New York, Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952, 50 p.

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while in an earthless hour my fond
 soul seriously yearns beyond
 this fern of sunset frond on frond
 opening in a rare
 Slowness of gloried air...

The flute of morning stilled in noon--
 noon the implacable basoon--
 now Twilight seeks the thrill of moon,
 washed with a wild and thin
 despair of violin

And so Cummings' first rank failure came to an end.

Song III says in effect what Rosetti said so often,
 "Think thou and act; tomorrow thou shalt die."⁸ Herrick
 seems to have said this first and best in "To the Virgins,
 to Make Much of Time". Cummings says it often. Song III is
 an exercise in scales. It was a mistake to publish it.

"Puella Mea" is in much the same vein, with a
 peculiar twist. Its 300-odd lines can be summed up in the
 first four:

Harun Omar and Master Hafiz
 keep your dead beautiful ladies.
 Mine is a little lovelier
 than any of your ladies were.

Rather juvenile in theme, it is the Boy With The
 Talent out exercising it again. There is little in

8.

Rosetti's House of Life, Sonnet III

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Puella Mea to note, except that a long passage of description marks Cummings' advance in concrete sensuousness of physical detail which he is to carry forward to the limit. The title, too, is unusual, and one can only account for it in that the Latin title lends a certain air of elegance, which would be lacking if it bore the colloquial designation, "My Girl".

Oriente IV introduces a different note. We might classify it as poetry of the subconscious. It takes advantage of the psychology of the situation to indulge in lurid metaphorical figures.

singing and i came
 riding upon a scarlet sunset
 trampling the night easily
 from the shocked impossible
 tower i caught
 you strained you
 broke you upon my blood

The poet is apparently caught up in a violent, incomprehensible emotion, and in this vehement, furious manifestation of love is compelled to seek verbal outlet for what appears to be an irresistible urge to force the penetration of his being with that of his beloved. His mood of violence and unrestrained passion is mirrored in strong, flaming images such as: "...into the / waters i rode down the red / horse shrieking from splintering / foam caught you clutched you upon my mouth", etc.

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Concrete expressions in the earthiest of love lyrics abound most in the "D" section of & (And), under the heading of "Sonnets-Realities". At the end of this section Cummings says in the last poem, No. XXIV,

i like my body when it is with your
body.

The remainder of the sonnet goes into ecstatic detail on certain delights of the phenomena of coitus. This is one of the mildest of its genre in Cummings, who carries his Aphrodisian dedication through to perfection in the mysticism of sensuality. "Supreme sex"⁹ rears its poetic head in sufficient volume and with enough frequency in Cummings to be called characteristic. In the vivid use of sex symbols and the tendency to cumulative impact of meaning and feeling in their association he is unsurpassed in the language. Even Lawrence does not manage to pack more evocative imagery and expression into any of his works than Cummings distills line by line into the pieces just quoted. More than a score of these poems are concentrated in this volume, with a greater number sprinkled throughout the remaining six hundred or so

⁹.
Sonnet No. I, "Sonnets-Realities", section
"D", & (And)

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pieces in the most recent collected poems. Whether they occur in a pure ore of sexual thought and feeling for its own sake, or whether they are interwoven with philosophic implications, love lyrics or nature poems, they argue that this poet is likely to remain one of the foremost exponent of cultivated eroticism in modern poetry.

Necessary Caution

So strong and so dynamic is the sex instinct in man that the Church erects certain safeguards about the mind and senses. One of these is the avoidance of unnecessary exposure to persons, places, things or circumstances which definitely arouse the sex instinct in a normal unmarried person, or such as will incite the married to act adulterously. The avoidance of these "occasions of sin" is not only enjoined in sexual matters, but in any morally dangerous situation, e.g., a man of alcoholic tendencies, prone to drunkenness, is forbidden to expose himself to the danger of alcoholic indulgence; a person of kleptomaniacal bent is warned not to become employed as a bank clerk, etc. The teaching of modern theologians on "proximate" and "unnecessary" occasions of sin is only a matter of applied common sense. In this connection there is no question of intellectual tyranny or "thought control". The restriction

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is accepted by the faithful voluntarily as part of the Christian moral law. It follows naturally from Catholic faith in the divinity of Christ, who condemned all enjoyment of sex outside of marriage.

The Negative Attitude

Before closing the matter it is necessary to defend this position against very likely misinterpretation. Unfortunately, the negative, condemnatory attitude of many pious people within and without the Church had done the cause of chastity much harm. They affect a certain abhorrence of the phenomenon of sex, as if it were unwholesome or degrading in itself and the human body indecent or obscene. Their conduct implies that the whole thing is disturbing to their peace of mind and integrity of spirit, and that perhaps humanity would be a great deal better off if the Creator had found some other way of propagating mankind. Implicit in this error is the heresy that sex itself is evil rather than the abuse of it, and at times there has been much concern both within and without the Church caused by this appearance of Manichaeism as a characteristic Christian attitude. This was the facet of Victorianism which bred a whole reaction in the art of Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde, and it was considered such an essential property of

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established polite society that the revolt of the twenties trained its heaviest artillery on this aberration of social respectability. So serious did this abnormality of thinking become that it has been made the subject of a study by Father John L. Thomas, S.J. The case is well stated in his section, "Restoring the Catholic Concept of Sex":

The mistake has been made of extending the character of sinfulness from the prohibited act to the physical phenomenon. This is to say, because the conscious, deliberate consent to venereal pleasure under circumstances when this is prohibited constitutes sin, the error has been made of attributing the quality of sinfulness to the venereal pleasure itself and to the physical organs which give rise to it. As a result, there is a tendency to look upon the physical manifestations of the reproductive drive as sinful and to lose sight of the fact that the sinfulness of unchaste acts is a quality of the act of consent, not of the venereal pleasure involved....Hence, when the quality of sinfulness is attributed to the physical manifestations of sex, Catholic doctrine concerning sins against chastity is perverted and the essentially un-Catholic attitude that bodily or physical phenomena are evil is promoted.¹⁰

A Balanced Perspective

Since, as Father Thomas says in another place, "All Christians are under obligation to mould contemporary

^{10.}

Thomas, S.J., John L., The American Catholic Family, Edgewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1956, 393-394 pp.

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institutions and behavioral patterns according to the laws of God",¹¹ a somewhat detailed consideration of Cummings' poems of this genre is in order.

In the case of "Orientale VI", its subject is an eastern harem. The language is inflammatory of the sex instinct, and the image evoked as the poem comes to its climax are of themselves sufficient to cause sexual arousal in a normal person, with the consequent danger of consent. Cummings' very excellence in this lurid drama of sex increases this.

No. 14 of 50 Poems poses a special problem. It is one of the cleverest satires of modern verse. It lampoons the depraved and frankly immoral in art, and every line is replete with teeth that bite into obnoxious abuses with telling and lethal effect. From art it goes on to superficial thought in general, the hypocrisies of noblesse oblige going hand in hand with race prejudice and cynical dishonesty in politics. It has humor, wit and polish. It lashes out at vices especially abhorrent to Christian principle. But the whole poem is couched in a figure of bestiality. The repulsive figure, reiterated as it is, vitiates the otherwise

^{11.}

Ibid., 409 p.

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brilliant poem. It is not likely to be an occasion of sin to anyone in the senses spoken of above, for it is merely repugnant to a Christian moral sense in general. Perhaps, it would be wisest to pass it by as being merely disgusting and in poor taste. In any case it is unfortunate that the poet felt obliged to resort to the lowest moral level to make his point. No. 14 of 50 Poems is the only one of its type, dealing in such a metaphor, but it is only one of many which can hardly escape the stigma of disgusting, debasing or both.

No. XVII of Is 5 has a disgusting simile, which is a case of irreverence toward certain exigencies of the human male.

No. VI of Is 5 can be best described as a tongue-lolling outburst of adolescent lust. The married might find it amusing. The single should not read it at all, but if they do it is more likely to prove tiresome than harmful.

In No. 18 of No Thanks the thought is not just purile and sickening, but morally objectionable. This is not primarily because of the erotic element, for there is little of that: the offense here is more serious, contingent as it is upon the crime of abortion.

Likewise, No. 16 of No Thanks. Here the formal element of the poem is an act of adultery.

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No. 27 of 50 Poems seems to be a song of fornication with orgiastic overtones.

Another curbstone scene provides a transition stage. Here the ingredient of prostitution is stirred into a stark drama of spiritual wreckage. Cummings is fond of these scenes, it seems; there are more than a few of them. The brothel is a rather frequent setting for many of his poems as well as for his paintings. He would seem to have outgrown this by now, but in his earlier books the subject becomes depressing. There are series of portraits of prostitutes, gangsters and other such folk, with accounts of their lives and times in what used to be known as "the underworld". In these efforts, Cummings enters a bit too much into the spirit of things for comfort. Someone should have impressed him with Amy Lowell's warning:

If we admit that the degraded are degraded,
there is not much danger of our losing our
perspective; if we bring them to our hearts
and turn a cold shoulder to the sober and
successful of the world, then we are running
fast toward chaos, and our mental processes
may fairly be considered a trifle askew.¹²

12.

Lowell, Amy, Poetry and Poets, Boston and New York, The Riverside Press and Houghton Mifflin, 1939, 152 p.

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Another remark from the same work is also apropos of much in this phase of Cummings:

It is high time that the poets and the audiences grew up. It is high time that the young poets took themselves seriously and learned their art so that they may practice it with the utmost freedom and originality, and without making absurd blunders such as believing indecency to be a new thing in the world. It is high time, too, that audiences should love poetry enough to gain some measure of criticism of it, in order that they may at least learn the false from the true.¹³

Exemplary of the merely disgusting is No. V of l x l.

squints a blond
job at her
diamond
solitaire

while guesswho nibbles his ton of torse

squirms a pool
of pink fat
screams a hole
in it

that birth was wicked and life is worse

squats a big
dove on g
w's wig
so that he

is much too busy sitting the horse

^{13.}

Ibid., 140 p.

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This is probably the most loathsome depiction of a golden-haired girl receiving her engagement ring and kissing her fiance in English. The scene is in a restaurant of the more expensive class, which gives the artist the opportunity of highlighting the end of each long fifth line with the technical rhymes he employs. The repetition of the three "sq" words at the beginning of each stanzaic division compound the unpleasant effect, together with the other elements, until the reader turns away more from the poem and its figures.

A slightly different shade of disgust is aroused by a piece like No. 4 of No Thanks. A multiplication of this type of thing, which fortunately has not taken place, could well earn for its author the dubious distinction of association of his work with the gutter and the urinal. It is neither obscene nor sexual, but very revolting, dealing as it does with gluttony, drunkenness and regurgitation. Cummings will not limit his scope by any consideration. He insists on sampling all of life, even those doses which people normally attend to with dispatch and from which eyes are quickly averted. No. XXI of Viva is another effusion of drunkenness and gutter-rolling, this time involving a woman.

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The Problem Poem

In Cummings' "poetry" of burlesk, the combination of nudity and depravity hovers over its subject like a miry fog. Cummings himself in his more lucid moments seems to realize this. In No. III of Tulips and Chimneys he writes:

between the nose-red gross
walls sprawling with tipsy
tables the abominable
floor belches smoky

laughter into the filigree
framed of a microscopic
stage whose jouncing curtain, , rises
upon one startling doll

undressed in unripe green with
nauseous spiderlegs
and excremental
hair and the eyes of the mother of

god who spits seeds of dead
song about home and love from her
transfigured face a queer
pulp of ecstasy

while in the battered
bodies the odd unlovely
souls struggle slowly and writhe
like caught.brave:flies;

Never has a poet written more vividly of the misery of spirit which plagues burlesque performers and their audiences. The walls and tipsy tables suggest a night club setting rather than a stage and theatre, but this is an accidental difference; the spirit of this combination of lust,

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depravity and debased love in the same. The poet has caught the conflict between the sordid state of the girl and her divine endowment of beauty, which somehow cannot be eradicated, showing in her "eyes of the mother of God." She "spits seeds of dead song about home and love." The line separation suggests that she, too, has become dead refuse from her Creator, of whose image she in her beauty and "pulp of ecstasy" still retains a vestige. The last line describes the old men with unlovely souls who struggle like caught flies in the sticky lusts of their spent bodies, writhing in the throes of encroaching death.

A different sentiment underlies No. 60 of No Thanks. This is a field day for the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes and the pride of life.

There is another, more sombre poem which echoes the previous quoted lines. Again the poet's sympathy and "worship" focus on the girl, whom he calls "mine also, little painted poem of god". Here he tries to rise above the squalid moral level of the audience to love of her as he says:

when thou hast taken they last applause, and when
the final curtain strikes the world away,
leaving to shadowy silence and dismay
that stage which shall not know thy smile again,
lingering a little while i see thee then
ponder the tinsel part they let thee play;

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i see the large lips vivid, the face grey,
 and silent smileless eyes of Magdalen.
 The lights have laughed their last; without, the street
 darkling awaiteth her whose feet have trod
 the silly souls of men to golden dust:
 she pauses on the lintel of defeat,
 her heart breaks in a smile -- and she is Lust....

And then the last line. It is plain that there is not the same degree of detachment in these thoughts, but an adequate degree of objectivity obtains to make them compelling and true reflections.

Conclusion

Many of Cummings' love poems are frankly carnal and devoted to the praise of the flesh and its enjoyment. This category of verse ranges from mild and commonplace reference to vivid and forceful portrayal. In most cases these poems are an enrichment of legitimate human experience and consistent with the dignity of human nature. Some uncertainty develops, however.

The formation of an honest and true judgment of conscience on the poems of "Sonnets-Realities" and the other poetry of Cummings which hinges on graphic portrayals and enjoyment of sexual pleasure is a delicate problem.

To come to grips with it: these poems may not be permitted to unmarried persons, nor should they be placed

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where adolescents have easy access to them. But there is nothing in them that is not permitted to those in the married state, and for that reason any unqualified ban on their reading would be gratuitous and irresponsible. Those which are vitiated by a formal element of sin are singled out in this chapter for that reason.

Finally, according to the principles formulated by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office for the censorship of books, there is no need to attack Cummings as a pernicious influence in Christian society. None of the poems is particularly immoral in nature, except a very few which are pointedly declared so above. They are a very few and not characteristic of the poet's work as a whole.

PART FIVE

AN ANALYSIS OF CONTENT WITH AN EYE
TO PHILOSOPHIC CONTENT AND MORAL VALUES

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NATURE AND THE MODERNS

The most neglected attribute of Divinity is God's beauty. So great is the beauty of God that all created beauty, as St. Thomas assures us, is closer to ugliness than to the infinite beauty God contemplates in Himself. All the beauty that man beholds in nature is but a shadow casting the dark outlines of Beauty itself.

"And God saw all the things that He had made, and they were very good." (Gen., 1:31) Every spring embodies a protest of nature against the prudery which believes that only evil is clothed attractively, and the perversity which sees only reason for gloom and existential despair in so many of the circumstances of life. Beauty, God's natural cloak, first conceived in the Intellect of the Divine Artificer, and then lavished upon man to hold him in awe-struck wonder and admiration of the Creator, is the exclusive invention of the Deity. Its endless effusion in the world is an index to the Infinite variety and power of God. No two leaves are ever exactly alike, every snowflake is a unique pattern, and this has been true back through myriad aeons of time; the equator always divides a sun-drenched

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summer in one half of the globe from chaste, white winter on the other--or the gorgeous refreshment of spring in one hemisphere from breath-taking autumnal grandeur in the other. Nature never repeats herself, from the brash, crimson glory of the eternally lengthening sunset, to the scintillating surfaces of waves unfurling every moment on a million shores.

Nature, source of inspiration in the past, is the neglected inspiration of today. "Where is the literature of nature?" asks Shapiro of the moderns.¹ His question does not have the Popean meaning of "nature" but is asked in the Wordsworthian sense. There is hardly a modern poet who is not or has not been in revolt against "nature" in one form or another, or man's accommodation to it. Prufrock prowls among imaginary mermaids in despair, Sandburg sings a song of steel sinews and the smokey breath of cities. Shapiro himself, a poet's poet, waxes lyrical over a Buick, and mourns sorrowfully beneath the potted plants upon the window ledge. Nature poetry as we have known it traditionally, with a few imagist exceptions, has long been in eclipse. The mighty ocean, no longer a path of whales or ships, nor the deep, dark blue ocean of Childe Harold, nor even the subject

1.

Shapiro, Karl, Essay on Rime, lines 1884-5, Cornwall, N. Y., 1945, Cornwall Press.

of dreamy Masfield romance, has become in our century merely an obstacle, the barricade of continents, a hump of water on the earth over which jabbering transmitters send their wireless messages under the moon.²

Through a Glass Darkly

Nature, the handiwork of God, through which as St. Paul says, His power is contemplated, His beauty and goodness seen as through a glass darkly, has come to share the unpopularity of its Creator. Instead of seeing into the heart of things through nature, the modern poet more often sees only an implacable enemy bent on destroying him. Missing entirely the balance of harmony of things, he is concerned rather with what is denied him than with the joys appointed to every life; the happiness of the children of God is lost sight of through preoccupation with the consequences of sin. This is only natural to a spirit which regards death as the end of all good things, rather than as the price of admission to the Kingdom of God. Instead of love in spring, the distant sea, pounding breakers or quiet lakes, the poet today is more likely to write painfully about illicit love in a hall

².
Louis McNiece in The Kingdom, toys with this idea.

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bedroom after office hours, or create a rhapsody of despair by moonlight in a deserted brickyard. The spirit of truth and beauty seems to have departed from an ice age of materialism. There are, to be sure, moist oases in Yeats or snowy mountain fastnesses in Frost; Emily Dickinson set the scene for thrilling sights with her locomotive which lapped the miles and licked the valleys up, to be followed by other exciting spectacles of steam, steel and speed with Spender, Sandburg and minor poets like Joyce Kilmer. But this is a narrow corner.

Man is not only a body in search of an orgasm as Lawrence would have us believe, nor can we bear long with the sustained angelism of Marianne Moore. There is need today for a Wordsworth who thinks, feels, reflects; a Browning who considers, learns and then raises his mind and heart in the ecstasy that lives in his quivering soul! It is not machinery nor the routine of industry, that has robbed modern life of its savour. Stephen Spender shows us that. Rather it is that poets have lost their faith and there is no longer the soul of divinity in the life of man to bring joy into nature and art. Verse, as Shapiro infers, is moribund in mere sensuality and irreligion.

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The Hollow Men

When faith is lost, hope and charity soon pale, and poets in our day, bereft of their spiritual heritage, have become hollow men in a twilight kingdom from which there seems to be no redemption. Their work is therefore sterile and without the warmth of life.

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the shadow³

With justice, it seems that the poetry most likely to go down to posterity with this century's authorship bears such title headings as The Waste Land and The Hollow Men. The world is no longer charged with the grandeur of God for the poet and thus retains only its crushing, oppressive material shell. As science has caused man to face an inglorious future cringing before the massive power of the littlest thing in the universe, the atom, so poets, at their present rate, seem only to evolve an ever more decadent verse of schizoid tendency, ending in the dirge of the spiritless atomic man.

³.
Eliot, T. S., "The Hollow Men", Collected Poems, 1909-1935, N. Y., 1936, Harcourt Bruce & Co., 104 p.

Nature Poetry

In Cummings, nature poetry takes the turn of his futuristic, surrealist character. Its range is wide and often it is woven into the service of preachy, doctrinaire individualism. But often, too, it breaks out of the modern shroud prepared for the interment of beauty and truth, and makes up in excellence for what it lacks in breadth. There are scenes like Wordsworth's fields of daffodils, where the natural environment is impregnated with exquisite nuances of personal feeling. However, as if to honor a modern application of the pathetic fallacy, the scene is hardly ever a bright and sunny one. The man of his age is mirrored in No. IV of "Post Impressions", under "A" of &. With an appropriate matter-of-fact beginning which adds immensely to the setting of the scene, as if a guide were pointing it out, Cummings goes on to identify himself with the nocturnal gloom of Paris in a midnight rain, and in a deft poetic metamorphosis of feeling becomes himself a mystical unity with the rain:

Take for example this:

if to the colour of midnight
to a more than darkness(which
is myself and Paris and all
things) the bright
rain
occurs deeply, beautifully

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before whose upward lean magnificent face
the streets turn young with rain,

This magnificent image, too, quarrels with a discordant ending, where its spirit of beauty and splendor is impaired by the injection of "the lithe indolent prostitute" and "certain houses". This is an unfortunate trait which occurs rather often in Cummings, who suffers at times for smashing the glory and wonder of so many of his poems with a morbid preoccupation with the middle third of the body. A bracketing of such matter renders these poems superb.

Sometimes it cannot be bracketed. No. VI, begins, "I remark this beach". It would have been better if Mr. Cummings had not remarked it. Does it have the tangy flavor of dashing breakers and invigorating salt spray? Are there lots of sky and sun, romping children and happy parents lolling in the summer sand?

No. Not at all. This is a holiday in the rubbish pile. The ninth line, "my Nose puts on sharp robes of uncouth odour", is quite appropriate; for the rest of the thing warrants it. If the author of these choice lines is trying to achieve a sense appeal to smell, he has succeeded. It may be considered a successful "poem" in that it achieves what the author wanted to achieve, but is this sort of thing worth achieving?

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In No. X of Xli Poems the poet is in a happier frame of mind as he sings,

the hills
like poets put on
purple thought against
the

magnificent clamor of
day

tortured
in gold, which presently

crumpled
collapses.

There are philosophical overtones in the delightful and mixed metaphor of thought and light. The break-up of words and phrases in the lines has value, too, which is not at first apparent, but it becomes so as the poem is read slowly and with thought for the setting off of phrase-impressions.

The Snow Poems

Cummings, like other New England poets, writes of the snow. Four different attempts at re-creating snow, or a "snow-feeling", or the experience of it by a surrealist technique can be traced in as many poems. First there is "SNO / a white idea".⁴ Then there is No. 34 of No Thanks,

4.
No. X, "A", &

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which seems to be purely an experiment in cubism, handling a subject of which the poet is fond, and which is quite successful as a piece of surrealist impressionism:

snow)says!Says
 over un
 graves
 der, speaking

(says.word
 Less)ly(goes

folds?folds)cold
 stones(o-l-d)names
 aren'ts

)L
 iv
 es(c
 omeS

says)s;n;o;(says

And so on. This is obviously a poem of letters and dissociated suggestions, taking words and language apart for the sake of new impressions. When poetry was a matter of memorization of sounds and words to be reproduced by bards and gleemen, there were experiments in oral presentation, as the choruses of older ballads indicate. It is not surprising, therefore, that present day poets should experiment with the appearance of words, lines, letters and punctuation on the printed page. In a conversation with Robert L. Beloff, a Cummings scholar, in the spring of 1952, he discussed the

"bright" poem, No. 70 of No Thanks. Explaining a typographical arrangement for which Beloof could not account, Cummings "described the capitals as simply a way of breaking up the 'fall' of the poem on the page into a more interesting visual experience."⁵ This is perhaps the most widely discussed characteristic of Cummings' work.

Of course such experiment is nothing really new; it is new only quoad modum, since up to the present century no artist or poet has gone so far in breaking up form and language into component elements. Saintsbury says, speaking of a passage in Milton's Samson:

Inversions of stress, exchanges of accustomed rhythm for unaccustomed--all sorts of tricks, as fantastical, but not as dainty--seem to suggest themselves to those who will not accept the plain doctrine--the same yesterday, today, and forever--of English prosody, since English was English. It is perfectly certain that Milton is playing his part as the Abdiel of the classical-metre craze. I would give something, little as I care for biographical details, to know whether he had read Campion--but it does not much matter. The note on the verse in Paradise Lost, and the observation on the Pyrrha, give one quite sufficient information.

5.

Beloof, Robert L., E. E. Cummings: The Prosodic Shape of His Poems, Chicago, 1954, Northwestern University, 67 p., published by University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mich.

In these chorouses he is evidently making his last and boldest experiment, to see if he cannot merely enlarge but change the bounds of English metre.⁶

The same may be said of Cummings' "snow)says!" In the "grasshopper" poem, so often alluded to, and the "starburst",⁷ he is most successful, and they are noteworthy achievements in modern verse.

What is the poet attempting in "snow)says!"? The snow is obviously falling in a cemetery, obscuring the names on the headstones, and this in a way symbolizes all nature's obliterating the "old names" of the "arent's", who are cold as well as old, like the snow. The snow itself, symbol of quiet timelessness enveloping all things, is silently obliterating graves, stones, memories and identities alike. The more one studies the technique and its application to its subject, the more it achieves, or tends to achieve, its objective. The remainder of the poem augments this impressionism in surrealist fashion as the snow

6.
Saintsbury, George, History of English Prosody, London, 1908, MacMillan & Co., Ltd., II Vol., 255 p.

7.
No. III, "Impressions" of "Tulips" in Tulips and Chimneys

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W
I

elds)
un
forgetting un.
der(theys)the

:se!crumbs things?Its
noyesiyou
he-she
(Weres

The gently swirling snow and the ideas of the poem circle into a pictogram, or what Beloof might have called dramatic use of vers libre.

Whether one accepts the piece as successful or not depends upon his whole orientation toward modern verse. As such it is quite successful. It is clear from this example how far Cummings has gone as a pioneer in word and line smashing, in analogous fashion to the way atomic scientists go about breaking up matter in smashing atoms into what used to be called the "ultimate" constituents of matter.

Shapiro says of such forms, "Visual art / In them subsumes the entire act of rime."⁸ Figuring out what the poet is doing or attempting has never been part of reading poetry before; verse as puzzle-working or message-decoding is something novel. But could it not be argued that Milton's

⁸.
Shapiro, Karl, Essay on Rime, lines 510-11,
Cornwall, N. Y., 1945, Cornwall Press

experiments could be looked at in the same light? And even Browning's crammed phrasings? Yes, but not Milton nor anyone else before Cummings ever went so far radically as to work at "arranged derangement"⁹ in rime, and to work "at his obsession brilliantly".¹⁰ And while agreeing in principle with Saintsbury on Milton's experiments, there is some basis for Shapiro's apprehension, as he expresses it:

But morally considered, is it not a danger
To atomize the language, construe its forms
As ions, and in the process to beget
Brain-poems of such a nature? Let us look twice
Before we adulate the alphabet.¹¹

History cannot yet know whether it was a good or bad day for mankind when scientists first began to split atoms and tamper with nuclear fission. Likewise, it is hard to reassure ourselves that ionization of words and phrases is worth the enjoyment it brings in "Brain-poems of such a nature". Once applied, can language-fission be controlled? Is it likely to become stable enough not to atomize completely into Gertrude Stein-like babblings of senselessness, or even into primitive howls and barks? The history of man and his use of dangerous discoveries is not a comforting one, and the

9.

Ibid., line 534

10.

Ibid., line 542

11. Ibid., lines 547-551

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parallel with nuclear physics seems a useful and apt one, despite its obvious shortcomings. On other occasions, Cummings' tirades against reason, intellect and thought offer no reassurances.

On the other side of the ledger, in "snow)says!" E. E. Cummings has something entirely new in nature poetry of thought and feeling. There is nothing else quite like it. Even the unfriendly critic must admit that the results of this experiment are brilliant.

The third snow poem, No. 38 of No Thanks, is much looser in texture than the previous one considered, but otherwise not very different in genre. It is more the pictogram type of verse:

SNOW

cru
 is
 ingw Hi
 sperf
 ul
 lydesc

BYS FLUTTERFULLY IF

(endbegi ndesginb escend)tang

and so on. No. 38 succeeds in etching out an impression of drifting snowflakes fluttering down, descending like butterflies, but it is dull and blunt-edged. It lacks the brilliance of the other poem.

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A final snow poem, No. 30 of Xaipe, is not really a nature poem, but an embodiment of thought in a personal portrait which uses a sparkling image of one of nature's rare delights for its dominant effect: the twinkling sheen of sun on newly fallen crystals of snow:

snow means that
 life is a black cannonadin
 g into silenc
 e go
 lliw
 og-dog)life
 ?
 tree3ghosts
 are Is A eyes
 Strange
 known
 Face
 (why!laughing!among:skydiamonds

Again, there is here such a mixture of surrealistic or cubistic technique with nature, life and portraiture that the poem becomes, perhaps, too esoteric. But, as illustrative of a complex method it is a good example, and a fuller appreciation of its subtleties must wait upon a more detailed analysis of all the elements which make it up.

The Technique Applied to the Animal Kingdom

Several animal poems may be included under the heading of nature poetry in Cummings. It is all marked by delicate feeling and sentiment. No. 14 of No Thanks, "mouse)Won", very definitely is of the spirit of Robert Burns, a poet of common ancestry with Cummings, and one who is strikingly of kindred spirit. Cummings has turned no nest up with a plough, but he regards the "sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie" with the same tenderness in "the incredible soft)ness / (his ears(eyes". Even more like Burns is

here's a little mouse)and
 what does he think about,i
 wonder as over this
 floor(quietly with

bright eyes)drifts(nobody
 can tell because
 Nobody knows, or why
 jerks Here &, here,
 gr(oo)ving the room's Silence)this like
 a littlest
 poem
 (with wee ears and see?

tail frisks)
 (gonE)12

Then, as so often happens, nature takes on a didactic tone and the poet compares himself with little creatures. In

12.

III, "Four", Is 5

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"here's a little mouse" there is another prime example of the Cummings' type of mixture of form with content to produce an exquisite whole of novel impression.

There is a poem to "the little horse" who "is Newly

Born)he knows nothing,and feels
everything;all around whom is

perfectly a strange
ness Of sun
light and of fragrance and of

Singing)is ev
erywhere(a welcom
ing dream:is amazing)
a world. and in

this world lies:smoothbeautiful
ly folded;a(brea
thing and a gro

Wing)silence,who;
is:somE

oNe13

Such delicacy of perception for the animal world has never been surpassed. A similar "c-a-t" poem, of equal insight, will be discussed below in another connection. No. 30 of 50 Poems is a filagreed paen to the "little blue elephant at the zoo" which is outclassed only by the charm of many of the "Chansons Innocentes", of which examples have been cited.

13.

No. 59, Xaipe

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Personification

Often Cummings mixes sexual thought or imagery with nature or death or some other theme. Personification of this type in nature often appears as in No. III of "A" in &:

the wind is a Lady with
bright slender eyes(who
moves)at sunset
and who--touches--the
hills without any reason

There is a point of doctrine embedded here as the personification is elaborated into apostrophe:

(i have spoken with this
indubitable and green person "Are
You the wind?" "Yes" "why do you touch flowers
as if they were unalive, as

if They were ideas?" "because,sir
things which in my mind blossom will
stumble beneath a clumsiest disguise, appear
capable of fragility and indecision

--do not suppose these
without any reason and otherwise
roses and mountains
different from the i am who wanders

imminently across the renewed world"
to me said the)wind being A lady in a green
dress, who; touches: the fields
(at sunset)¹⁴

¹⁴.
III, "A", &

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The doctrine is Cummings' belief in the individual's living for the present moment. The flowers are people, who will be converted by the wind, the breath of Life (in the Cummings' sense of the term) who will touch them and renew the face of the world. There is a great deal of this evangelizing in nature, sex, philosophical and personal poetry. The lesson, whether accepted in whole or in part, is done beautifully.

The "Moon" Poems

Another novel effect is obtained in a "moon poem" by mere potluck experimentation with the sound, the shape and the suggestion of motion in the repeated use of the letter o; this is another phase of Cummings on nature. This is No. 1 of No Thanks:

mOOn Over tOwns mOOn
whisper
less creature huge grO
pingness

whO perfectly whO
f10at
newly alOne is
dreamest

ONLY THE MOON o
VER TOWNS
SLOWLY SPROUTING SPIR
IT

This is a work of mastercraftmanship in novel poetic

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idiom. The combination of the spondaic "oo" sound, almost constituting a subliminal owl hoot as an undertone, the roundness emphasized again and again symmetrically in pairs and singly, the o-stopped lines, the air of mystery injected by the ghostly sounds, the "dreamest" and the last word, broken as it is, and finally the suggestion of the fulness of the m00n in the beginning, dominating its quiet motion across the sky of night ("whispering"), its "gr^o / pingness" in the surrounding darkness, to a small Moon, dwarfed by the night in setting and finally disappearing. Here is a masterpiece of typographical suggestion woven into poetic diction. Again, Cummings has struck something unique in the portrayal of nature in verse. The more it is read, the deeper insight one gets into the ingenuity which contrived it and its simulation of the mystic beauty it attempts to represent.

The moon is more than a mere satellite of earth in Cummings. It is figured in many ways. In XVIII, "Four", Is 5, the poet sees "the new moon / thinner than a hair". Another thin moon appears in XIV, of Viva, "thinner than a watch spring". It is also a symbol of surfeit, the poet's joy in sensual love suspended, as it were, in a "thin" state. In XXIX of the same volume, "the moon swims out of a cloud", a figure of delirium of mind in a suicide scene. "moon's utmost magic" is a characteristic use of symbolism in

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Cummings, this from LXVIII of Viva. In II, "Five", Is 5, the poet continues:

i say

"along this particular road the moon if you'll
notice follows us like a big yellow dog. You
don't believe? look back. (Along the sand
behind us, a big yellow dog that's....now it's red
a big red dog that may be owned by who
knows)
only turn a little your. so. And
there's the moon, there is something faithful and
mad"

This is an imagists' desideratum. It distinctly recalls a metaphor from T. E. Hulme's Autumn, so widely looked upon as an archetype of imagist verse:

I walked abroad,
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak but nodded

There is a hint "along this particular road" of something that progresses in Cummings: the last line turns the metaphor into a symbol--the moon is a symbol of the poet himself in this love lyric. Somewhat similar in import, a little more advanced, is the beginning of No. II of "Post Impressions", "Tulips", Tulips and Chimneys:

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the moon is hiding in
her hair.
The
lily
of heaven
full of dreams
draws down.

A compenetration of souls (and, as far as possible, of bodies) is symbolized here, and, as the poem progresses this idea is carried in subtle and delicate fashion in what might be described as a pure metaphor poem:

cover her briefness in singing
close her with intricate faint birds
by daisies and twilights
Deepen her,

Recite
upon her
flesh
the rain's

pearls singly-whispering

This theme grows and grows through Cummings' love poems until it achieves a kind of apotheosis in the poet's mysticism of love in the last poem of the new collected works.

Remotely akin to this is the "moon fantasy", which begins:

who knows if the moon's
a balloon, coming out of a keen city
in the sky--filled with pretty people?
(and if you and i should

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get into it, if they
 should take me and take you into their balloon,
 why then
 we'd go up higher with all the pretty people¹⁵

There is much more in this verse than meets the eye; it is a vision of the poet and his love transcending the mundane world and entering an ideal dream world, "a keen / city which nobody's ever visited, where / always / it's / Spring) and everyone's / in love and flowers pick themselves".¹⁶

Moon symbolism goes very deep in Cummings, even to the point of total self-identification. In No. X, "Sonnets" of Xli Poems his unrequited love is symbolized in the concluding couplet as "The moon is like a floating silver hell / a song of adolescent ivory." As the conclusion to his lament of pain and thwarted passion the identification by inference in this simile is striking and successful.

This moon symbolism as an identification with self can be seen in the personification embodied in No. I of "Four", Is 5. Here the moon is personified in a rather grotesque way as a human lover in sexual imagery:

15.
 No. VII, "Seven Poems", "N", &
 16.
Ibid.

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the moon looked into my window
 it touched me with its small hands
 and with curling infantile
 fingers it understood my eyes cheeks mouth
 its hands(slipping)felt of my necktie wandered
 against my shirt and into my body the
 sharp things fingered tinily my heart life

In XLVI of Viva the usual imagery is reversed as "Nobody came slowly over the town". Nobody, it is evident from the text of the verse, is the poet, as elsewhere; and here the term sacred to self is conferred on the moon. No. 37 of No Thanks where the poet says he "took bedfellows for moons mountains for friends" is a clue, inconclusive to be sure, that these sentiments might have developed from a condition of loneliness which seems at times to become pathological.

No. 68 of Xaipe has the moon standing for both the poet implicitly and his love explicitly, where "moon, she is you". This is a symbol of their perfect unity in love.

In No. 1 of Xaipe, the "livingest the imaginable moon" is a symbol of the poet's return to consciousness of self and reflection upon his own identity after being in a kind of ecstatic joy in love on a "(let's remember) day".

Spring as a Symbol

As Cummings mixes a number of moonlight combinations in modern verse, so he uses spring as a fecund symbol. The

most important function of the spring-symbol is to represent a fullness of life, a certain infinitude of love. This is to say that love for this poet is a value without limitation, and spring is often its fertile symbol. This idea is skirted in No. II, "Five", Is 5, a poem of symbols. It is the poem of the moon imagery under the figure of a yellow dog already quoted in part, and begins,

touching you i say (it being Spring
and night) "let us go a very little beyond
the last road--there's something to be found"

The capitalization of "Spring" is a clue to its use as a symbol of illimitable vitality and love. The moon imagery and symbol augment this. Somewhat in the same vein but more of a song, as lyrics of one type appear in Cummings, is LI of l x l, which begins,

"sweet spring is your
time is my time is our
time for springtime is lovetime
and viva sweet love"

The love-life-spring compound of infinite vitality appears seriously but songfully in No. 67 of Xaipe. Here "faces called flowers float out of the ground", "the mountains are dancing together", "wishing is having and having is giving" and "--alive;we're alive, dear:it's(kiss me now)spring!" Again, XLIII of l x l ends, "we are spring".

PART FOUR

THE THEMES OF LOVE AND SEX
AS ENDS OF HUMAN ACTIVITY

In XL of the same volume, spring and all it symbolizes is exalted above all philosophy, theology and what-have-you. Spring's the thing! It makes the blood of the poet sing and conquers all, even death: "death is killed dead." Spring symbolizes a way of life, the pagan way. In another piece characterizing spring, Cummings refers to it in its opening line as "omnipotent goddess".¹⁷

There are several descriptive "spring" poems which deal with the city. There seems to be very little beauty in them. The "spring slattern of seasons you / have dirty legs and a muddy petticoat, drowsy is your / mouth", of Tulips and Chimneys¹⁸ is very representative. In No. 57 of No Thanks, spring is "Always lewd & shy". No. VI of "Post Impressions" in the "Tulips" section of Tulips and Chimneys is a prose poem beginning, "at the head of this street a gasping organ is waving moth- / eaten tunes."

April, the cruellest month for Eliot, is the month desired above all others by Cummings. Under "spring" there is a special subsection for April. The best of April imagery occurs in an impressionistic-imagistic piece, in which

17.
No. IX, "Portraits", "Tulips", Tulips and Chimneys

18.
No. IX, "Portraits", "Tulips", Tulips and Chimneys

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the sky a silver
 dissonance by the correct
 fingers of April
 resolved

into a
 clutter of trite jewels¹⁹

Personification of April occurs again in No. V of "Five", Is 5, as "the sweet small clumsy feet of April / came / into the ragged meadow of my soul." In XI of l x l the noun April is used as a verb: "if a look should april me". For Cummings, after April there is no excuse for May.

Personification of Spring takes a familiar form in "Spring is like a perhaps hand / (which comes carefully / out of Nowhere)". The wind, the rain, the moon, are all equipped at different times with hands by Cummings, a poet delicately attuned to the sense of touch. In No. 62 of Xaipe,

Spring comes(no
 one
 asks his name)

 a mender
 of things

 with eager fingers(with
 patient
 eyes(re

 -new-

¹⁹.
 No. I, "Impressions", "Tulips", Tulips and
 Chimneys

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ing remaking what
 other
 -wise we should
 have
 thrown a-

 way

Word blocking is important to catching all the nuances of this verse; e.g., spring comes in and no one is very interested, but "one" (the poet) does ask his name. And the wise, with their systems of "should" and "ought", are dead to spring, have thrown it away. Familiarity with "the personal convention" of Cummings makes one alive to all kinds of added meanings lent to his words by line and word blocking.

An Answer to the Critics

One of Cummings' best, and a really worthwhile achievement in modern poetry, is No. II of "Three", Is 5, already quoted. It is the piece beginning, "Among / these / red pieces of / day", the theme of which is sunset and evening in the Italian hills, as the poet sees it from the train window bound for Rome. This is the piece that Max Eastman chose as an example for his criticism of the unintelligibility of modern poetry--or much of it--and in doing so defeated in large measure the contention of his position. Although his points were well taken in many respects, his case was weakened by this poem because it is

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such a beautiful and sensitive achievement in poetry that the reader was more likely to take its impression away as the lasting one of Eastman's article, rather than the defect of unintelligibility Eastman alleged. Had he picked another example he might have established his case; but "Among / these / red pieces of / day" subtly stole the march and left the reader more impressed by Cummings than by Eastman.

Also worthy of special mention as a nature poem of unique effect, something for which Cummings never ceases to strive, often with astonishing success, is No. 29 of Xaipe. At once impressionistic, imagistic, futuristic and cubistic, this is a fine example of complexity of technique appearing in such simplicity as seems to indicate that Cummings followed no particular school consciously, but blazed a trail of his own to accomplish by a kind of instinctive genius an experience which was aimed at in varying ways by these groups. In No. 29 the sharp-etched scene comes to life, as it were, in three dimensions. There is the control of speed, strategic break-up of words and lines for emphasis, the machine-tooled terms as precise in operation as the movement of a complex but efficient engine, as the poet gets off the ground with

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nine birds(rising
 through a gold moment)climb:
 ing i
 -nto
 wintry
 twi-
 light
 (all together a
 manying
 one
 -ness)nine
 souls
 only alive with a single mys-
 tery(liftingly
 caught upon falling)silent!
 ly living the dying of glory²⁰

This is a superb achievement, unsurpassed in modern verse. Personal convention or no, Cummings has successfully achieved the creation of something vital and beautiful entirely apart from ordinary versifying. For the imagists there is not a wasted word or letter; futurists will find the word-blocking to their liking in regulating speed and altitude in the "climb: / ing i / -nto / wintry twi- / light", and the "liftingly", "silent! / ly / living" etc.; as will the cubists rejoice in the adding of the "third dimension"

20.

No. 29, Xaipe

by the vivid imagery of the poem, which appeals to experience by its appeal to sense. Gone is the monotony of threadbare clichés, the familiar metaphors of flight and routine similies. Here is something fresh, vivid, ingenious and alive. It is typical of Cummings at his best and highlights the vital element in his work which will in all likelihood take root in the literature of the present period which is destined to live on when many of the objections of critics will either seem amusing or no longer be remembered.

Conclusion

Surrealist technique as a logical development of the abstract image provides Mr. Cummings with a medium which unveils new vistas in the poetry of nature. Despite some notable lapses into the mire of cynicism and despair which characterizes the moderns, Cummings is generally refreshing and full of a delicate charm in his contemplation and recreation of nature. He brings the full capacity of his genius for invention and creation to this form, composing it from all the elements of style for which he is famous. His medium may be called "experiential" as well as experimental, for his use of symbolism, surrealism and other techniques aims at discovering heretofore unperceived aspects of the essence of things. This is done by an appeal to the senses

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and the intellect simultaneously with striking images which are made vivid by these novelties of form and technique. Special use of symbols, such as "spring", and "moon" poems have to be studied and understood to fully appreciate their effectiveness.

The entire range of nature in the Wordsworthian sense comes in for treatment in unique fashion in Cummings, from sunset in the city, through glowing landscapes, winter scenes, spring, the moon, the sea and the animal kingdom. By controlling the speed of reading and idea association through line and word fracturing, with punctuation as an added element, the poet is able to re-create impressions in a way which is original with him. This is likely to be remembered as another of his principal contributions to the modern period.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE LIBERAL BACKGROUND OF THE SUBJECT

Liberalism with its dogma of individual inspiration championed against the claims of orthodoxy forms such a functional framework for the thought of Cummings that a brief survey of its character and development will not be out of order.

As doctrinaire Liberalism comes more and more to challenge "the Churches" it realizes that to meet them on anything like even terms it must anoint its convictions to an office above mere philosophical and cultural tenets. No one sees this more clearly than Laski.

They are wholly right, I believe, who urge that without a renovation of faith there can be no restoration of confidence in the values we seek to establish....The faith we have to build is a faith in the values of this world, not in the values of another. The claim that we have to establish is that of man upon the brother that he sees, not the claim of the unseen God upon man.¹

1.
Laski, Harold J. Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time, Woking, England, 1943, Unwin Bros., Ltd., 176-177 p.

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Liberalism in its final analysis and by its own assertion is a counter-faith, and its inevitable coming of age finds it facing up to the reality that in its conflict with the Christian Religion, it is assuming the character of a counter-Church.

It aspires even beyond this vaulting ambition to become the faith and metaphysic of an entire world culture. As the apostle of the individual, Cummings is among the topmost of the new creed's exponents.

Laski's Doctrine

Laski says something very significant in Faith, Reason and Civilization:

Given the fact of victory by the United Nations, it seems to me inescapable that the Russian idea will play the same part as the principles of 1789 in reconstructing the outlook of the next age. Unless we claim that the Churches will renew their hold on men's allegiance--and there is no serious evidence for the validity of such a claim--the Russian idea seems likely to be the pivotal one from which all values will find the means to renewal.²

2.

Laski, Harold J., Faith, Reason and Civilization, London, 1944, Victor Gollancz, 69 p.

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This appraisal is made after the mutual rejection of Liberalism and Sovietism by one another, after a courtship as superficial as it was brief. What Laski is saying, however, is that the Russian ideal--minus the purge trials and Party tyranny--is the closest to the heart of the Liberal ideal that man has as yet achieved, and that with certain mutations it will be the cultural and spiritual model of the future for the entire world. Liberalism, therefore, is more than a doctrinal body of facts, more than a philosophical system, more, even, than a mere habit of mind, or theoretical way of life. It is a total view of life with an ideal faith.

Admitting the "faith" of the Liberal, in still another work, Laski gives the Liberal's rule of faith: "The real root of faith is not the possession of an infallible dogma, but the arriving honestly at the dogma in which you happen to believe."³

How one happens to believe in a dogma before he arrives at it, is difficult to imagine. But in this instance the individual is obviously intent on revealing truth to himself, and the meaning of such a sentence reduces itself

³.
Laski, Harold J., Political Thought in England from Locke to Bentham, New York, 1920, Henry Holt & Co., 112-113 pp.

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to the man in simple honesty arriving at a conclusion he intends to believe in, said conclusion being deduced from a first principle to which the man is already committed. As it stands, this "real root of faith" has about it something of the mystery of faith; but since every religion has its mysteries, Liberalism, once its religious nature is admitted, may claim its share. The important thing is that once it makes such a claim it has entered the realm of religion.

As it stands, the Laski doctrine (common to all subjectivist thought and belief) makes sincerity the measure of truth. It thus substitutes the Reformationist dogma of infallibility of private judgment or private reasoning, "arriving honestly at the dogma in which you happen to believe"; above the infallibility claimed by the Christian Church. In the Catholic Church this is the dogma of the Infallibility of the Pope. It is the old conflict between private judgment and the promise of Christ to His Church that She would abide all days, even to the end of the world, the infallible teacher of Truth, guided by the Spirit of Truth, against which the gates of hell should never prevail.

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Sincerity as a Norm of Truth

It is difficult to see how such an intellect as Laski's should ever have espoused sincerity as the norm of truth, for he must have observed that men sincerely believe in error, religious and irreligious men alike. Men once believed sincerely that the earth was flat. Laski's "truth", then, becomes a relative thing, and this must be rejected as an absurdity. For if truth is relative to the thinker, then what is true for one man is not necessarily true for another. The absurdity of this can be seen in the case of two scientists, one of whom believes in the hypothesis of anti-matter and another who does not. Both cannot be in possession of "truth", however sincere they may be. One is in error, though he may be even more sincere than the other.

The Norm of the Church

Against this purely private and subjective norm of truth, stands the Church's dogma of Papal Infallibility--of course only under the essential conditions, i.e., when the Pope acts in his official capacity as teacher of the whole Universal Church, "ex cathedra", defining a dogma of faith or morals intended to bind the conscience of all Christians. Between the Christian--that is the Catholic--conviction and the other there can be no compromise. Truth for the believer

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is something objective, revealed as such, and does not change. It can never be relative or subject to the disposition or judgment of the private individual.

The Poet's World

Having made this clarification and plumbed through to bedrock, there comes into view the link between Cummings and Liberal idealism in the quality of sincerity. Cummings is completely honest and sincere. His norm to the discovery of truth is the Laskian one of sincerity. He is in possession of honest beliefs, openly arrived at. He goes to the full length of the Liberal's innate right to pick and choose as he pleases among "truths", for Cummings rejects "science", philosophy, institutions of whatever kind, "professors", education, government, politics, national defense--just about everything except poetry and art, and a great deal of that, too. He does so with verve, gusto and sometimes venom.

Liberal Manners and Morals

Everywhere in Cummings the axe swings liberally, uncovering some hidden embarrassments and uprooting pretty euphemisms as it plies. There is little worth saving from the whole mess of life, except one thing: love. The great advantage of being alive is that there is youth and beauty in the world, which, for a few years, at least, can be

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enjoyed. Without the moral restraints and social conventions from which the rise of liberalism is so happily freeing society, the limits of pleasure and enjoyment are marked only by opportunity and the endurance of the individual. Thus, "kisses are a better fate / than wisdom",⁴ "feeling is first",⁵ and "let's live suddenly without thinking".⁶ Cummings is most at home in the realms of human love and consequently he achieves here some of his finest poetry.

The Liberal and the Orthodox

Coming inevitably to the subject of religion, the central one in any discussion of thought or conduct, Cummings is the liberal par excellence. In No. III of l x l he has composed what may be the most perfect poetic expression of the Liberal's view of organized and traditional religion. He is speaking of faith, dogma, the certainty of revealed truth, the promises of another, happier, future life in exchange for the gift of self in this world:

4.
No. VII, "Four", Is 5
5.
Ibid.
6.
No. IX, "Sonnets-Actualities", "D", &

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it's over a (see just
 over this) wall
 the apples are (yes
 they're gravensteins) all
 as red as to lose
 and as round as to find

The truths of faith are just out of reach, just over a wall, they are not quite attainable. The poem itself breathes this atmosphere--it is just beyond grasp. The same is true of the future life: it is just beyond the wall of death, unable to be seized or possessed. Locke the sensist, and Hume, the skeptic, are in these lines. Here is capsuled the entire questioning outlook of modern minds. There is the figure of the apples, suggestive of the old Adam and Eve story, at which skeptics unaware of the "Literary Genre" interpretation of the first eleven books of Genesis still laugh.⁷ The word "gravensteins" incorporates a bit of ingenious irony, since it combines the suggestion of "grave-stone" with the name of a species of apple. The effectiveness

7.

The essence of this interpretation, sanctioned by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, is that the lesson of these books is that God created the whole world out of nothing in the beginning of time for His own glory, that man was the chief creature of this creative action, that God endowed him with freedom of choice, and gave Him a commandment which, under the influence of an evil spirit, he transgressed. The figures under which the story unfolds, e.g., the tree, the "fruit", may be considered as metaphors on the part of the inspired author and not essential to the meaning of the narrative.

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of the Cummingsean parentheses as marking off a kind of confidential aside is self evident. Finally, the "red as to lose / and as round as to find" has its own unique meaning in the personal convention of this poet. The ulterior meaning is that the pungent, "red" reality of life, as vital as the blood which warms the poetic heart, is sacrificed or lost, to gain or "find", a certain roundness, i.e., nothing.

The second stanza emphasizes an empty conformity, a stunted growth the result of blind obedience. The poet's explicit rejection begins to be felt in the third stanza, and these thoughts are deepened in the remaining stanzas, which come to an artistically perfect conclusion as the "pretensions" of institutionalized religion are literally obliterated in the last lines:

what must(whispers)be must
 be(the wise fool)
 if living's to give
 so breathing's to steal--
 five wishes are five
 and one hand is a mind

then over our thief goes
 (you go and i)
 has pulled(for he's we)
 such fruit from what bough
 that someone called they
 made him pay with his now.

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But over a (see just
 over this) wall
 the red and the round
 (they're gravensteins) fall
 with kind of a blind
 big sound on the ground⁸

The poem is without equal as a modern expression of the liberal viewpoint on religion: the "wise fool" attribution made of the faithful who accept dogma unquestioningly, the impression of confusion conveyed by the parentheses, the "blind", empty sound with which all authority falls to the ground for the liberal. There is also his unwillingness to sacrifice any of the joys or pleasures obtainable by pragmatic means in this life to observe divine or Church law as a condition of obtaining a vague, undefined after-life. Because of the prevalence of religious faith and its impact on public opinion and convention, the liberal is in endless and bitter revolt against conventional moral restraints, and in this freedom he is like a thief who steals the stuff of happiness in this life by grasping at forbidden joys. A vague "they" would make "him pay with his now." This is a spirited liberal rejection of the claims of the Churches.

8.
 No. III, l x l

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Another Cummings' view of organized religion is not so subtle or so nice. It is Spinozan in its criticism and a typical liberal reaction to the Christian custom of expressing devotion through the liturgy of a procession:

candles and

Here Comes a glass box
 which the exhumed
 hand of Saint Ignatz miraculously
 inhabits. (people tumble
 down. people crumble to their
 knees. people
 begin crossing people)and

hErE cOmEs a glass box:
 surrounded by priests
 moving in fifty colours
 ,sensously

(the crowd
 howls faintly
 blubbering pointing

see
 yes)
 It
 here
 comes

A Glass
 Box and incense with

and oh sunlight--
 the crash of the
 colours(of the oh
 silently
 striding)priests-and-
 slowly,al,ways;procession:and

Enters

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this
church.⁹

Again the unique artistry of the poet triumphs. The crumbling and tumbling before the Glass Box, the blubbering, howling crowd and the silently, striding priests are done to perfection in an ironical portrait. The one thing the artist forgets is that his shaft, as far as faith and dogma go, is misdirected. He might just as well satirize spaghetti or fish for breakfast; for processions and relics are not essential to Christian life, doctrine or practice. They are, like statues and indulgences, supererogatory, aides suited to the devotional expression of people who find them inspirational or useful. The irony is thus reversible. Despite the genius and the satire, there remains in this poem something of the subtle puzzlement of the unbeliever in the presence of external manifestations of the mystery of faith.

Another aspect of the same spirit, differently directed, appears in No. XI, "One", Is 5:

⁹.
No. IV, "Three", Is 5

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now dis "daughter" uv eve(who aint precisely slim)sim
 ply don't know duh meanin uv duh woid sin in
 not disagreeable contras tuh dat not exacly fat
 "father"(adjustin his robe)who now puts on his flat hat

Here the poet does well to write in untutored dialect, for he proves himself more innocuous than "dis 'daughter' uv eve". He makes gratuitous assumptions when he presumes to judge the conscience of the penitent. The jibe is clever but it is ineffective.

Cummings Position

Cummings the skeptic, with a dash of Kant and Swinburne combined, make up the first stanza of No. 66,

Xaipe:

the great advantage of being alive
 (instead of undying)is not so much
 that mind no more can disprove than prove
 what heart may feel and soul may touch
 --the great(my darling)happens to be
 that love are in we, that love are in we

In the next stanza the mathematical method of Descartes is applied not only to philosophy, but to love as well:

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and here is a secret they never will share
 for whom create is less than have
 or one times one than when times where--
 that we are in love, that we are in love:
 with us they've nothing times nothing to do
 (for love are in we am in i are in you)¹⁰

Spinozan Pantheism concludes the piece: "by the
 sizeless truth of a dream / whose sleep is the sky and the
 earth and the sea", and so on.

A more absolute commitment to complete subjective
 isolation, which paves the way for the adjective
 "existentialist" in its modern sense is contained in a
 single line:

the mind is its own beautiful prisoner.¹¹

Always sincere and often objective, Cummings is not
 blind to the deprivations of materialism and the impli-
 cations of liberalism on the human spirit. Its inroads on
 humanity's aspirations toward the infinite are superlatively
 brought out in a later volume:

10.

No. 66, Xaipe

11.

No. XIX, "Sonnets-Actualities", "D", &

THE LIBERAL BACKGROUND OF THE SUBJECT

down with hell and heaven
and all the religious fuss
infinity pleased our parents
one inch looks good to us¹²

No. 54 of No Thanks, treated elsewhere, is not less strong in the same vein:

Jehovah buried, Satan dead,
do fearers worship Much and Quick;

badness not being felt as bad,
itself thinks goodness what is meek;
obey says too, submit says tic,
Eternity's a Five Year Plan:
if Joy with Pain shall hang in hock
who dares to call himself a man?

Finally, Cummings with the inconsistency that comes naturally to the eclectic liberal mind, perceives with a true Christian insight what the implications are in a society or system which rejects the Truth as an absolute, immutable attribute of Deity in

that strictly (and how) scienti-
fic land of supernod
where freedom is compulsory
and only man is god.¹³

12.

No. 4, New Poems

13.

No. IV, 1 x 1

THE LIBERAL BACKGROUND OF THE SUBJECT

This in the Christian view is the essential flaw in a subjectivist system. It deifies the individual and makes of him his own god, which is a corruption of the whole idea of any religious view of life.

Conclusion

Cummings' outlook on Christianity, and, indeed, all religion, is that of the modern doctrinaire liberal. His supreme norm of truth and its discovery is the intuitive principle of Descartes as it has been developed and refined by later subjectivist thinkers, i.e., Bacon, Locke, Hume, Spinoza, Kant, Comte, Bergson, Sartre and Laski. Against the objective norms of Christian thought in Scripture and Tradition, Cummings in common with liberal writers breaks completely with traditional and orthodox institutions, replacing their codes and dogmas with a purely personal system of eclecticism, arrived at simply by instinctive goodness and sincerity of thought. God becomes an impersonal force, when He is not entirely absorbed in the world of beauty, sense and ideas; and the rites of religious worship devolve into vacuous symbols or ritualistic cant. In Cummings the impact of science on life and religion is minimized in inimical satire, and sublimation takes the form of a deep devotion to art, free thought and human love.

THE LIBERAL BACKGROUND OF THE SUBJECT

Thus in Cummings there is little of a purely spiritual nature for the Christian, but there is much in the realm of art and human love which can be pruned and studied in his work to the great enrichment of Christian life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE PROBLEM OF GOD IN CUMMINGS

"The outsider", says a newcomer to the world of books, "tends to express himself in Existentialist terms. He is not very concerned with the distinction between body and spirit, or man and nature; these ideas produce theological thinking and philosophy; he rejects both. For him the only important distinction is between being and nothingness."¹

What are these Existentialist terms in which, as Wilson correctly observes, "outsiders" tend to think?

What Sarte does in his system of "Being and Nothingness" is to completely invert the idea of transcendence into "Nothingness" and to substitute "facticity" for truth. In that way, as he says in various places, any dualism of matter and spirit is carefully avoided. The effect is to rule out on an absolute basis any possibility of God and to admit as existent only such facts or experience as are evident to the senses and immediately present to the mind. What it does finally is this; it denies the existence of

¹.
Wilson, Colin, The Outsider, Cambridge, Mass., The Riverside Press, 1956, 27 p.

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God and installs man in God's place. But far from glorifying this Promethean protagonist, atheistic existentialism ends in despair. Here is the "conclusion":

Each human reality is at the same time a direct project to metamorphose its own For-itself into an In-itself-For-itself and a project of the appropriation of the world as a totality of being-in-itself, in the form of a fundamental quality. Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the Ens causa sui, which religions call God. Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion.²

These are Sarte's own words and they show in brief what Sheen, Garigou-Lagrange and Maritain mean when they say that in this alternative God is absorbed in the world and thereby denied.

Cummings, the outsider, thinking in existentialist terms, is carried along in this vortex, however much he may be an individual purist. In fact his position is the more

².
Sarte, Jean-Paul, Being and Nothingness,
New York, 1956, Philosophical Library, 615 p.

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stationary. Without theological faith, the more he refines his purity of subject, the more he becomes a pure existentialist. This accounts for his anti-intellectuality, his supremely and uncompromisingly personal standard of judgment on God, theology, philosophy, science, art, politics, economics, history, literature, love, sex, morality, et al. The complete existentialist is essentially an "outsider" who has incorporated into himself the idea of the absolute: he is his own god. In the plethora of assumptions and dialectics of Sarte lies the essence of the atheistic existentialist; it is an isolated subjectivism, in-itself and for-itself. Sarte begins with the "I am", and he means it in the absolute sense, the same sense in which Moses heard the term of Existence Itself from Yaweh. He can hardly complete the redundancy of God since he realizes he is not infinite nor from eternity, but he makes up for this by going on as best he can from his own starting point: I am; therefore I think, I desire, I will, I accept, I reject, etc. Starting as his own absolute he develops his "existentialism" into a full blown theology of atheism.

Cummings' Existentialism

Despite Cummings' inconsistencies, this is his central position. It was verified by the present author in

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the meeting of January 24, 1957, with the poet, already alluded to. Because of the varying ideas of God and Existence to be found in different pieces, this point of view on divinity was made the subject of special query, and the poet's answer was a directive to consult the Harvard lecture series published in SIX NONLECTURES.

The nonlectures concluded with the recitation of the concluding stanzas of Prometheus Unbound. In leading up to this hymn par excellence of the existentialist creed, Cummings appropriately opened up the subject with the age-old reflexive interrogation of saints, mystics, scholars and philosophers: Who am I?

Now our ignoramus faces the nonanswerable question "who, as a writer, am I?" with which his nonlecturing career began; and finds himself deluged by multitudinous answers. What would these multitudinous answers say if they could speak as a single answer? Possibly or impossibly this--

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.

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Ecstasy and anguish, being and becoming;
 the immortality of the creative imagination
 and the indomitability of the human spirit--
 these are the subjects of my final poetry
 reading³

etc.

The philosophy of the remainder of these words is amazingly in accord with the thinking of "the outsider" as Wilson characterizes him. Cummings asks the question: Who am I, and answers: I am someone who loves, who feels, who transcends himself. He is an "illimitable individual", to use his own words, lacking only Sartre's despair. Instead of despair he ends in some confusion, for though he believes in some vague kind of immortality in some poems, he loses it in the final Promethean code of the "indomitable human spirit" which goes on in succeeding generations; so there is apparently no personal salvation for the "illimitable individual", at least in the Christian sense. Every human individual is limited by death, to say the least. The human spirit is "indomitable" only in a relative or figurative sense.

Cummings here veers into something of a Laurentian pose, with eyes upraised awaiting the fatal blow, expecting

3.

Cummings, E. E., 1 SIX NONLECTURES, Cambridge, Mass., 1954, Harvard University Press, 110-111 pp.

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something, not sure quite what it will be. He is an absolute subjectivist; yet his experience and his instinct, like Wordsworth's, for immortality have prepared him to subtly doubt his first principles deep below the level of consciousness, or so it would seem. He is "someone who proudly and humbly affirms that love is the mystery-of-mysteries"; and the love of which he speaks is the same which D. H. Lawrence divinizes. His early Freudian pieces, the strongest sexual meat in modern poetry, leave no doubt of this, and correspond in poetry to what Lawrence did in the *Lady Chatterly* novel. Love is the thing! Both Lawrence and Cummings are on common ground here, and not surprisingly so because as St. Thomas observes, man cannot live without delectation, and when he is deprived of the spiritual, he turns inevitably to the carnal. Cummings and Lawrence find their transcendence in the same species of love. It cannot be otherwise because they have no divine, theological faith. They have precluded this and insured themselves against the calamity of faith by an anti-intellectuality, of which examples abound in Cummings and have been cited. "In destroying Intelligence and Reason and natural Truth, one destroys the foundations of Faith."⁴

4.

Maritain, Jacques, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, New York, 1955, Philosophical Library, 179 p.

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The Mystique of the Flesh and the Idea of God

Cummings' mystery-of-mysteries was developed into a theology and a mysticism by Lawrence. Whether the influence is conscious or not is not important; it is unmistakable. What Graham Hough writes in his study of D. H. Lawrence is equally true, or almost equally true, of Cummings:

For Christianity the life of the flesh receives its sanction and purpose from a life of the spirit which is eternal and transcendent. For Lawrence the life of the spirit has its justification in enriching and glorifying the life of the flesh of which it is in any case an epiphenomenon.⁵

The god of the flesh, as indicated in a previous chapter, is strong in Cummings. "God gloats upon Her stunning flesh",⁶ where God is spelled with both a small g and a capital G, contains some thought-provoking overtones. God can be conceived as both interior and exterior to the flesh, without, however, the Thomistic distinctions. The flesh is universalized, as in Lawrence, and, as in Sartre,

5.
Hough, Graham, The Dark Sun, New York, 1957, The MacMillan Company, 253 p.

6.
No. II, "Sonnets-Unrealities", "Chimneys", Tulips and Chimneys

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the creature absorbs the absolute. There are a good many poems, especially in Tulips and Chimneys and in & where this is taken for granted. In another poem this idea is gainsaid, as the sea is said to be marvelous, "from God's / hands which sent her forth / to sleep upon the world".⁷ This is more of a Christian concept. The same idea occurs again as God sends the morning.⁸ In the poem immediately following, sex is divinized again as the poet's own adoration of the flesh.⁹ Another Christian view of "God's terrible face", seen as judge and something of an avenger has already been noted.¹⁰ A curious notion of God occurs, loaded with anti-intellectual overtones, in

when God decided to invent
everything he took one
breath bigger than a circustent
and everything began

when man determined to destroy
himself he picked the was
of shall and finding only why
smashed it into because¹¹

7.
No. III, "Amores", "Tulips", Tulips and
Chimneys

8.
No. I, "Sonnets", XLI Poems

9.
No. II, "Sonnets", XLI Poems

10.
LI, W, Viva

11.
No. XXVI, l x l

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Here the Book of Genesis is parodied in the first stanza and scholastic theology of it pilloried in the second. Another curious commentary, vacillating between Scripture and Existentialism, occurs in the same volume where love was born "before God wished Himself into a rose".¹² Near the end of his latest collected poems, Cummings thinks kindly of God and His Providence, and well he might. Here he speaks in the kindest terms of the Deity, towards Whom he often manifests the tender, personal love of the saint:

maybe God

is a child
's hand)very carefully
bring
-ing
to you and to
me(and quite with
out crushing)the

papery weightless diminutive

world
with a hole in
it out
of which demons with wings would be streaming if
something had(maybe they couldn't
agree)not happened(and floating-
ly into

o13

12.

No. XXXVII, 1 x 1

13.

No. 54, Xaipe

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But the meditation which begins with Divine Providence, touches upon Original Sin and recalls Sartre's difficulties with the "hole" in being, ends pretty much with a Sartian zero. This is about what the idea of Pure Being amounts to in both. For despite his Christian errance on occasion, and his glorious "i thank you God for most this amazing / day", Cummings' statements in i SIX NONLECTURES puts him beyond the pale of Christian belief. In his direction for the resolution of these uncertainties to the Harvard lectures, so often alluded to, the conclusion can hardly be gainsaid that this poet is something between an Agnostic and a Deist with something of an inconsistent love for the Almighty. But God will not mix with Cytherea; Christ and Prometheus will not share the same altar. Cummings' song, or hymn, is

To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
 To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
 This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
 This is alone life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.¹⁴

Orientated in a Christian tradition these sentiments would be as fine a poetic tribute to the glorious destiny of

^{14.}

Prometheus Unbound

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man as there is in English. But they are intended otherwise, and Cummings makes that intention his own. Hence, in an absolute sense this is all beautiful nonsense. It is a noble mirage, an heroic image in a cloud, something like its author's epitaph, a great name writ in water. Apart from God, reality, as Sartre correctly observes, is an absurdity. Apart from the Christian Dogma of the Resurrection, the great moral of the Phoenix is a child's fairy tale. This is what comes of the divorce of faith from life, the separation of religion from the business of everyday life.

The Problem Left Unresolved

The whole Cummings, with all his complexities, seems to speak out best in two poems of his way of life, each of which is in its way complementary of the other. All the strains of this complicated genius are gathered into a more or less coherent strain as he sings,

voices to voices, lip to lip
 i swear(to noone everyone) constitutes
 undying; or whatever this and that petal confutes...
 to exist being a peculiar form of sleep

what's beyond logic happens beneath will;
 nor can these moments be translated: i say
 that even after April
 by God there is no excuse for May

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--bring forth your flowers and machinery:
 sculpture and prose
 flowers guess and miss
 machinery is the more accurate, yes
 it delivers the goods, Heaven knows

(yet are we mindful, though not as yet awake,
 of ourselves which shout and cling, being
 for a little while and which easily break
 in spite of the best overseeing)

i mean that the blond absence of any program
 except last and always and first to live
 makes unimportant what i and you believe;
 not for philosophy does this rose give a damn...

bring on your fireworks, which are a mixed
 splendor of piston and of pistil; very well
 provided an instant may be fixed
 so that it will not rub, like any other pastel.

(While you and i have lips and voices which
 are for kissing and to sing with
 who cares if some oneeyed son of a bitch
 invents an instrument to measure Spring with?)

each dream nascitur, is not made...)
 why then to Hell with that: the other; this,
 since the thing perhaps is
 to eat flowers and not to be afraid.¹⁵

Here is the "mystery-of-mysteries", the "petal", of
 which this poet is so fond, the odd epistemology and psy-
 chology--existence being a "peculiar form of sleep" and
 "what's beyond logic happens beneath will" with its Freudian
 implications. Here on dress parade are the romantic

^{15.}

No. XXXIII, "One", Is 5

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immaturity, the social and personal satire, the violent reaction to science and philosophy, the resolution of life into a vital theory of hedonism and heroism. This is Cummings in full panoply, sprung full-armed from the head of modernism.

And the second is like unto this. It complements the thought and carries it to the inevitable ultimate. Whatever else Cummings may be, he is an intelligent man of honesty, with a fatal weakness for intimations of truth.

since feeling is first
 who pays any attention
 to the syntax of things
 will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
 while Spring is in the world
 my blood approves,
 and kisses are a better fate
 than wisdom
 lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
 --the best gesture of my brain is less than
 your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other: then
 laugh, leaning back in my arms
 for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis¹⁶

This is Cummings at home, relaxed and comforted by love and fire. This is a piece of his mind. After his

16.

No. VII, "Four", Is 5

THE PROBLEM OF GOD IN CUMMINGS

little soliloquy, he puts down his drink and reflects back upon himself in his own mind. His gaze falls downward and he is deep in cosmic thought as he sets off the last line. It is a little inconsistent with the rest of his philosophizing and it leaves traces of uneasiness.

And well it might. It raises problems which from the modernist viewpoint are terrifying and insoluble. They will be the subject matter of a final chapter.

Conclusion

The problem of God admits of no easy solution in Cummings. In his poetry the treatment of God ranges from the loving regard of the potential saint to a complete pagan dedication and deification of the merely natural. He himself refers to his Harvard lectures as an index of his position, but here again we find the same inconsistencies. Although, he expresses kindly dispositions toward the Deity, he tends to think in existentialist terms, condemning the philosophical and theological, and ending the lectures with a Promethian peroration. For a resolution of the problem, it seems best to take him at his word and classify him as an Agnostic, who has conceived of God as absorbed in the world, devoted to a fleshy mystique, and one who sees human salvation in Shellian terms of the supremacy of man and human nature.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE PROBLEM OF DEATH AND IMMORTALITY IN CUMMINGS

"In the living of life," writes Walter Farrell, O.P., "every human heart must see problems awful with finality." Father Farrell says dramatically:

The road that stretches before the feet of a man is a challenge to his heart long before it tests the strength of his legs. Our destiny is to run to the edge of the world and beyond, off into the darkness: sure for all our blindness, secure for all our helplessness, strong for all our weakness, gaily in love for all the pressure on our hearts.

In that darkness beyond the world, we can begin to know the world and ourselves, though we see through the eyes of Another. We begin to understand that a man was not made to pace out his life behind the prison walls of nature, but to walk into the arms of God on a road that nature could never build.¹

There enters into every life the problem of God, the problem of love, of marriage, education, vocation, making one's way in life, and innumerable others. Most awful of all is the problem of death. Related as it is to the claims

¹. Farrell, Walter, My Way of Life, Brooklyn, N. Y., 1952, Confraternity of the Precious Blood, 1 p.

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of the Church and Christian theology, it is a problem no man can ignore for long. All things about him remind every man ceaselessly of the passage of time bringing with it the end of life; indeed, the flight of youth and vigor seems to accelerate as one grows older.

Man has ever stood in awe of the phenomenon of death. "Shall not the fewness of my days be ended shortly? Suffer me, therefore, that I may lament my sorrow a little, / Before I go and return no more: to a land that is dark and covered with the mist of death: / A land of misery and darkness, where the shadow of death, and no order, but everlasting horror dwelleth."²

The great difficulty with any non-Christian view of death is this: there can never be any real assurance, any practical certainty of what lies beyond the hour of death. This is evident in the De Anima of Aristotle, where he discusses the wide variations of belief among the ancients and their ideas of the nature of God. Even the best concepts of immortality are totally without the clarity and certitude of faith. It might be fairer, in view of the firm convictions of Plato and Socrates, to say that the certitude of

2.
Job X:20-22

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immortality arrived at through reason or a system of theodicy is different from the certitude of supernatural faith, because the latter is perfect in its nature, whereas the former is susceptible of human fallibility, as is illustrated by the evidence in De Anima and the contradictions prevalent among modern non-Christian thinkers. With Socrates himself, in whom pagan philosophy reaches a peak of conviction on the subject, there is the noblest thought mixed with fears of this latent fallibility:

For I am quite ready to admit, Simias and Cebes, that I ought to be grieved at death, if I were not persuaded in the first place that I am going to other gods who are wise and good (of which I am as certain as I can be of any such matters), and secondly (though I am not so sure of this last) to men departed, better than those whom I leave behind; and have good hope that there is yet something remaining for the dead, and as has been said of old, some far better thing for the good than for the evil.³

The Sense of Immortality

Cummings often mirrors a Socratic view of death. At times there is evidence of confusion of two or more types of belief, and there are those rare breakthroughs of truly

³.
Jowett, Benjamin, The Dialogues of Plato,
Chicago, 1952, William Benton for the Encyclopedia
Brittanica, Inc., 223 p.

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Christian thought, which might well have crystallized into living faith. They seem vital enough in several poems to give rise to considerable inner strife and turmoil.

No. VI of "Sonnets-Unrealities" in Tulips and Chimneys, where Cummings reaches a peak of lyricism and thought extremely rare, is one of his best works. It makes an excellent starting point for his meditation on death:

a connotation of infinity
sharpens the temporal splendor of this night

when souls which have forgot frivolity
in lowliness, noting the fatal flight
of worlds whereto this earth's a hurled dream

down eager avenues of lifelessness

consider for how much themselves shall gleam,
in the poised radiance of perpetualness.
When what's in velvet beyond doomed thought

is like a woman amorous to be known;
and man, whose here is always worse than naught,
feels the tremendous yonder for his own--

on such a night the sea through her blind miles
of crumbling silence seriously smiles

Another excellent example is No. V, "Sonnets-Unrealities", of Tulips and Chimneys:

a wind has blown the rain away and blown
the sky away and all the leaves away,
and the trees stand. I think i too have known
autumn too long

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(and what have you to say,
wind wind wind -- did you love somebody
and have you the petal of somewhere in your heart
pinched from dumb summer?

O crazy daddy
of death dance cruelly for us and start

the last leaf whirling in the final brain
of air!) Let us as we have seen see
doom's integration.....a wind has blown the rain

away and the leaves and the sky and the
trees stand:

the trees stand. The trees,
suddenly wait against the moon's face.

Here is a sobbing dirge of unrelieved desolation.

It is a dirge of the poet singing his own funeral song, in the advanced autumn of life, waiting only in ever encircling sorrow for "doom's integration", an ironic figure which reverses the disintegration of death and assumes the development of decay, so to speak. The spirit of the poem and its said metaphors have something in common with lines of Shakespeare's Sonnets LXXIII peerless in their rendering of the desuetude of age and the encroachments of death's vengeful canker.

At this early stage of Cummings' life and his career, cynical and dedicated to pagan ideals as he was, these dirges of self have a stark note of resigned despair, an air of stoic endurance in an impossible situation, the conscious exhaustion that is born of complete recognition of an

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inimical infinity. There is nothing to relieve the weight of the dark sea, the oppressive ghostliness of the bare trees standing against the moon, the dead end of "serious / steep / darkness". Here there is an irrevocable finality which is lacking in other, more hopeful poets, for example in Bryant, where the lesson of Thanatopsis, despite its sepulchral atmosphere, is to "...approach thy grave / Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch / About him and lies down to pleasant dreams." There is as yet no crossing of the bar in Cummings; the sea of his night lies far beyond Dover Beach, and there is no one to sing his requiem. At a later date he was to break through this encircling shroud into more positive expressions of hope; but that was far from him in this era.

An entirely different facet appears with No. V of "N" in &. This is a combination of portraiture in verse, necrophily, and local color. Local color and dialect, incidentally, are of frequent occurrence in the early eras of Cummings as devices of character portrayal, and their origin no doubt is in the Greenwich Village life of the twenties in which Cummings figured so prominently. No. V, "N", is a prose poem and contains some startling figures of speech and weird ideas on the subject of death:

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gee i like to think of dead it means nearer because deeper
 firmer since darker than little round water at one end of
 the well it's too cool to be crooked and it's too firm
 to be hard but it's sharp and thick and it loves, every
 old thing falls in rosebugs and jacknives and kittens and
 pennies they all sit there looking at each other having the
 fastest time because they've never met before

dead's more even than how many ways of sitting on
 your head your unnatural hair in the morning

dead's clever too like POF goes the alarm off and the
 little striker having the best time tickling away every-
 body's brain so everybody just puts out their finger
 and they stuff the poor thing all full of fingers

dead has a smile like the nicest man you've ever met
 who maybe winks at you in a streetcar and you pretend
 you don't but really you do see and you are My how
 glad he winked and hope he'll do it again

This is about half the prose poem. The ending has much
 pathos:

and you say Sure you
 say (like that) sure i'll come with you you say for i
 like kittens i do and jacknives i do and pennies i do
 rosebugs i do

This prose poem excels in its purity of language.
 The poet assumes the view of death which the character
 portrays, and since she is speaking purely in the language of
 the heart it is properly a poem rather than poetic prose.
 The effect is such as to share the speaker's view of death
 with a unity of thought which makes for one mind.

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The Relentless Seriousness of Death

Sometimes the mood of the frightened thought is evoked cryptically and with a start, as in XLVIII, Viva:

come a little further--why be afraid--
here's the earliest star(have you a wish?)
touch me,
before we perish

No. 6 of Xaipe is the best exponent of Cummings' reactions in collision, for one reason because it is recent, and for another because it serves as an index to his reflections upon approaching that last bitter hour. Its range includes components of religion, philosophy, social satire and subjective personal reaction, the essence of Cummings. In addition, it is cast in what is an amorphous verse form, made up of the prosodic elements which have become the hallmarks of Cummings' work:

dying is fine)but Death

?o
baby
i

wouldn't like
Death if Death
were good:for

when(instead of stopping to think)you

begin to feel of it,dying
's miraculous
why?be

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cause dying is

perfectly natural; perfectly
putting
it mildly lively (but

Death

is strictly
scientific
& artificial &

evil & legal)

we thank thee
God
almighty for dying

(forgive us, o life! the sin of Death

From what has gone before, it will be easy to probe many of the implications of this poem. Between the first parenthetical element and the last, an entire cycle of thoughts has been run through. "Dying is fine", but "forgive us....the sin of Death". Contradictions mark the passage: dying is "miraculous", "perfectly natural" and even "lively"; yet death is "scientific", "artificial", "evil & legal". And "I wouldn't like Death if Death were good"; death is a sin. The whole poem is an enigma, something in which Cummings delights when pondering imponderables like Life, Death, Love, etc. It doesn't solve any eschatological problems, but it does conjure up a good many thoughts upon the subject. Is the gratitude rendered Almighty God for

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dying perhaps the key to the enigmatical thoughts? It may be, but if it is, the poem does not make it clear, but only suggests its possibility. Necrophily is strong when death is called miraculous, natural and lively, as will appear from the significance of these terms in philosophic poems. When Cummings calls death artificial, scientific and legal, on the other hand, he is almost at the point of necrophobia.

Soteriology

The reference to the Redemption in the last tercet is truly Christian and of great profundity. A few other similar recurrences of this genre establish something of a trend, a trend which in the latter-day Cummings, combined with certain other recurring values, has assumed significance. This is not dominant, but it bears observation.

Looking at the piece as a whole, taking into account the progression of thoughts, the poet after first thinking of death as merely another incident of life, then instinctively recoils from it. Reverting to his emotional orientation and with the intuition of immortality that is part of nearly every spiritual man, he has here a very Christian point of view. The only escape from the evil of death is some form of redemption, and the poet falls back upon the Christian idea of the hypostatic union and its unique function in the

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economy of salvation. The last line then becomes an after-thought, confirming the soteriology expressed in the preceding tercet.

This is the most reasonable interpretation of Xaipe No. 6. No other interpretation would seem admissible without resorting to the vaguely improbable or the unwonted introduction of the bizarre.

In No. XXX of Viva soteriology reaches its high water mark, as Cummings says unequivocally: "Christ(of His mercy infinite) / i pray to see;" and the trend of which we have spoken crops out so much in this vein that there is reason to believe that Cummings, whether formally aware of it or not, has been, spasmodically at least, a sharer in real, Christological, divine faith.

No. VI of "Portraits" in Xli Poems shows that in other days he felt differently:

it's just like a coffin's
inside when you die,

Here horror predominates, and though the following stanza introduces ironic social satire, the first lines overshadow it.

Cummings does not always grow old gracefully even after he sings of the reality of immortality. This, however,

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is not due to any doubt of a hereafter, but rather because of greater certainty of it, together with the conflict which arises from that certainty. In maturity and post-maturity, approaching the fog in his throat and the mist in his face, the poet is at times frankly in panic. In No. 41 of No Thanks, where he devotes a stanza each to the conflict, the aging poet, his panic, and a negative reference to God, he cries,

here's to opening and upward, to leaf and to sap
and to your (in my arms flowering so new)
self whose eyes smell of the sound of rain

This is a clutching at love and life, still within the poet's grasp, more precious because with the passing of time it is slipping away. The second stanza:

and here's to silent certainly mountains; and to
a disappearing poet of always, snow
and to morning; and to morning's beautiful friend
twilight (and a first dream called ocean) and

The poet continues his toast to nature which he has loved so well, and to himself, "disappearing", but continuing to celebrate beauty and "always". Morning and evening are undercurrents, buttressing the feeling of expiration which now gets the upper hand in stanza three:

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let must or if be damned with whomever's afraid
 down with ought with because with every brain
 which thinks it thinks, nor dares to feel (but up
 with joy; and up with laughing and drunkenness)

The feeling of panic brings on a tirade against moral restraint and the philosophical systems which underlie them. Like the rest of men, Cummings is not above these occasional outbursts of temper. "Must or if", together with "ought" and "because", are symbols of speculative or systematic thought and the moral sanctions implied by ethical codes. The poet consigns them to damnation as well as all philosophers and moralists who urge that conduct be regulated by thought as against feeling. The rest is obvious. No consideration is given in the heat of anger to the possibility of integrating thought and feeling with joy and laughter into a well balanced personality.

The last tercet:

here's to one undiscoverable guess
 of whose mad skill each world of blood is made
 (whose fatal songs are moving in the moon

is an irreverent reference to the Deity, not without its hidden tribute. The moon in Cummings is most often a symbol of himself, his freedom, independence and personal integrity. What he is saying in these closing lines is that he is aware, only too aware, of the power of God and His justice, Whose

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grace and power are at work in his soul. The "fatal songs moving in the moon" embody a figure of the poet's awareness of encroaching death.

The approach to this pitiable state is likewise disquieting. A little sooner in his career, he lapsed into horror in No. L of Viva:

when hair falls off and eyes blue And
 thighs forget(when clocks whisper
 and night shouts)When minds
 shrivel and hearts grow brittle every
 Instant(when of a morning Memory stands,
 with clumsily wilted fingers
 emptying youth colour and what was
 into a dirtied glass)Pills for Ills
 (a recipe against Laughing Virginity Death)

and so on, to some

numbered face capable of a largest nonglance the
 least unsmile
 or whatever weeds feel and fish think of)

Eschatological confusion runs through Cummings. In conversation with Mr. Cummings, the author sought to gain some clarification of these conflicting and contradictory theological ideas.⁴ Now it is admittedly difficult to address any query of religious or eschatological belief to a

4.
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poet; it is his own personal business and no one else's, except as it can be gleaned and deduced from his published work. Circumspectly, the attempt was made in general terms, essaying to break gently into the matter. The poet disallowed the question, but in doing so definitely settled the matter by referring the writer to the published volume of his Harvard lectures of the 1953-54 season, from which extensive quotation has already been made. From this source, therefore, it is with some degree of confidence and certainty that the clash of many viewpoints in Cummings can be at least partially resolved. They range from those of the ancients to Blake and Bacon. There is more than a touch of Christianity in some of his poems especially where there is reference to Christ. Nevertheless, in view of the poet's explicit reference, his position must be identified as a pagan one.

Significantly, he began the poetry readings at Harvard which supplemented the lectures themselves with Wordsworth's Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood. Well and good; this confirms the judgment of a new era of reverence on the part of the poet, but it cannot be made out to be more than a purely natural reverence. The readings supplementing the other lectures follow through this motif fairly consistently, with some exceptions. The rendition from Cummings' own Santa Claus is especially

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beautiful. At the end of the last lecture the heart of the matter is reached as Cummings says:

Ecstasy and anguish, being and becoming; the immortality of the creative imagination and the indomitability of the human spirit--these are the subjects of my final poetry reading: which (I devoutly hope) may not wrong a most marvelous ode by Keats, and the magnificent closing stanzas of Shelley's Prometheus Unbound.⁵

The pagan mystique is confirmed, as is the poet's accompanying dedication, by the antecedent "magically luminous invocation" of Sappho to Aphrodite in the original Greek. At the same time there is the "Lugete, o Veneres Cupidinesque / et quantumst hominum venustiorum" of Catullus and other quotations of like import. Finally, he speaks of his boyish "escape from moralism".⁶

All of which is leading up to the climactic reading of Prometheus. In the unequalled proclamation of this neo-pagan creed and its representation of the poet's own view, these are the lines Cummings made his own in the final words he spoke from the Harvard platform, and which recapitulate all that goes before in an unmistakable crystallization of his viewpoint:

5.
Cummings, E. E., i SIX NONLECTURES, Cambridge, 1954, Harvard University Press, 111 p.

6.
Ibid.

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This is the day, which down the void abysm
 At the Earth-born's spell yawns for Heaven's despotism.
 And Conquest is dragged captive through the deep:
 Love, from its awful throne of patient power
 In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour
 Of dread endurance, from the slippery, steep,
 And narrow verge of crag-like agony, springs,
 And folds over the world its healing wings.

Gentleness, virtue, wisdom and Endurance,
 These are the seals of that most firm assurance
 Which bars the pit over Destruction's strength;
 And if, with inform hand, Eternity
 Mother of many acts and hours, would free
 The serpent that would clasp her with his length;
 These are the spells by which to reassume
 An empire o'er the disentangled doom.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
 To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
 To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
 To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor to repent;
 This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
 This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.⁷

Cummings' position is thus a neo-pagan one. His God is not the Christian God, nor again the Jehovah of the Jews. When he thanks God for a beautiful day it is the impersonal God of Cicero and the ancients. His notion of immortality is confined to the primordial human instinct and lacks the substance of faith in the great Christian promise.

⁷.

Ibid., 114 p.

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An Afterthought

The Christian heritage that came to Cummings through his parents and the pagan ideology which he espoused come into conflict in the most frightening of his poems, No. LI in Viva. Here the poet is growing old, and he can salvage only one thing worthwhile from life: his love. She is his all now, unworthy though he be; he is obsessed by a growing awareness of God, too, and the irresistible love that comes with growing appreciation of the divine. These two loves are tearing him to pieces, since in this poem he is consciously at war with God and what seems to be the demand God makes upon his purely human love. His bitter lamentation of this state in the decline of age and the onset of death is more tragic, even, than Job's lament, because Job had an underlying hope.

Cummings begins with the shock of recognition of bodily decay in the ugliness of age:

a clown's smirk in the skull of a baboon
 (where once good lips stalked or eyes firmly stirred)
 my mirror gives me, on this afternoon;

But this has become the least misfortune of his out-cast state. His anguish of spirit is worse. He continues in the third stanza:

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God's terrible face, brighter than a spoon,
 collects the image of one fatal word;
 so that my life (which liked the sun and the moon)
 resembles something that has not occurred:
 i am a birdcage without any bird
 a collar looking for a dog, a kiss
 without lips; a prayer lacking any knees
 but something beats within my shirt to prove
 he is undead who, living, no one is.
 I have never loved you dear as now i love.

Even this is not the worst. He concludes:

Hell (by most humble me which shall increase)
 open thy fire! for i have had some bliss
 of one small lady upon earth above;
 to whom i cry, remembering her face,
 i have never loved you dear as now i love

As a sentiment of commitment in love, this statement cannot be surpassed. As a conscious acknowledgment of damnation to one schooled in the theology of the damnati, it is quite terrifying. Especially is this so because the poet has no particular relish of condemnation for itself, but elsewhere speaks kindly of God and would belong to Him. But for some strange, demonic reason he regards his eternal perdition as somehow inevitable. The frightfulness of such a plight can be equalled by only the folly of accepting it, for Hell is never a necessary consequence for any love or any sin or any crime, since God is so disposed toward His rational creatures that He can always be had for the asking. It may be that the poet is overcome by his memory of blasphemies

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and transgressions of the past, or by fear of divine rejection of the love of which he speaks and which he is determined to retain in spite of hell and all. If this be so the tragic misfortune of his position is not lessened, because according to Christian faith there is no "unforgivable" sin, save final impenitence; and the salvific will of God is so inclusive and so extensive that any human love can be brought into harmony with it. God's mercy is above all his works. Usually all that is necessary to accomplish such an adjustment is a little sacrifice; and who, most of all the poet, will say or act as if God be not worthy of any sacrifice?

In the preceding stanzas, moved by a real spiritual insight which elevates his poetic genius again to the plane of true greatness, Cummings cries out in anguish like Job: "I will say to God: Do not condemn me. Tell me why thou judgest me so.....I should have been as if I were not, carried from the womb to the grave."⁸ In modern idiom the words of Cummings in the third stanza are equally climactic. The likening of God's face to a spoon is the only defect in the poem.

⁸.
Job, X:2 and X:19

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The juxtaposition of "God's terrible face" and the poet's love in this stanza is an awful one. He is overcome by the idea that God is against him in this love, and he cannot, he will not, relinquish it. Of such power is his love that it is greater than he himself; it now overshadows his very being. He does not seem to know that love is no barrier to Love; God does not want our wives or children or friends or lovers as such, nor even our own bodies. He wants our spirit, our soul, our love. Under the misconception that he cannot have both, the poet is not incognizant of the Omnipotent Power he faces; hence his agony. For who will argue with God? "He doth things great and incomprehensible and wonderful: of which there is no number....If he examine on a sudden, who shall answer him? Or, who can say: Why dost thou so? God, whose wrath no man can resist, and under whom they stoop that bear up the world."⁹

Poor Cummings seems to realize this. The whole poem is like a cry for mercy in an admission of defeat; but there is no appeal from advancing age, and the longer man lives the more mercilessly does he see himself as he is in the sight of God.

⁹.
Job, IX:10-13

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Humility becometh the mortal. Cummings has this humility. On occasion it has brought him close to God. Caught like all humanity in the jaws of time, sinking steadily deeper into the throes of death, it may bring him the clearer insight that there is in reality no conflict between real love and real Love. This realization in turn may prove a means of reconciling his two great loves.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In his six-decade odyssey from Cambridge to New York, from the old genteel tradition through war, depression and social turmoil to liberalism, humanitarianism and a new view of life, E. E. Cummings' career sketches in miniature a biography of his age. Bearing at different times the afflictions of poverty, humiliations and the dark night of the poet, he has at last attained the position of accepted and triumphant symbol of his time in the mainstream of American poetry. Although a letter over the signature of Upton Sinclair in The Atlantic of February, 1957, indicates that he is not yet beyond the stage of controversy, there is hardly an anthology which does not praise and reprint him, scarcely a critic who does not make up for the old ridicule with kind words and generous bouquets, not a course in literature which does not accord him a unique place in its studies. There are seemingly endless awards, citations and lecture tours, and just ten years after T. S. Eliot, Cummings occupies the Charles Eliot Norton chair at Harvard.

His fame rests chiefly on successful experimentation with verse forms, and novelty in the presentation of content: rearranging the traditional elements of verse--line units,

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punctuation and phrasing; unconventional "visual patterns" of a poem on a page; disregard of conventional grammar, diction and syntax, inventing unique forms of his own; the use of "cubistic", surrealist and other distinctly modern techniques; in short, a systematized attempt to develop an entirely new concept in communication between poet and reader. Other, perhaps more important, characteristics of his poetry have not been so widely noted. A list of the ten predominating attributes of the man and his work may be formulated as follows:

1. First, there is his central doctrine of the unfettered freedom of the individual, free to work out his own salvation as he will, untrammled by social, ideological or religious restraints.
2. A predilection towards a Freudian and Laurentian orientation in relationships between the sexes.
3. A certain anti-intellectuality which remains as a heritage from the nihilistic movement of the twenties.
4. A laudable, and sometimes disturbing intrepidity in experimenting with form and structure in his verse.
5. Skepticism and inconsistency in matters of religion.
6. A demand for utter sincerity and complete reliance on intuition.

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7. An impatience and antipathy towards institutional controls, advertising, sloganizing, pressures for uniformity, and the deadening influence of the machine age.
8. Evidence of insecurity in his own beliefs and dissatisfaction with those of others.
9. Inconsistency in alternate condemnation and affirmation of man.
10. A changing view of life-after-death, from one extreme to another, no doubt arising out of the condition tabulated in number five.

Philosophically, the position of the poet is unsound. He is not essentially a thinker or a philosopher; hence his poetry on the more profound aspects of life tends to the striking of attitudes rather than deep, poetic commentary. The problem arising out of the endless attempts of man to solve the dilemmas of law and liberty never seem to occur to him, nor does he seem to have any considerable appreciation of the necessity for regulation of human conduct according to the accepted norms of any social order. At worst, he may be said to tend toward anarchy, though to press such a charge would not be fair. His anti-intellectuality is a corollary of this.

All of this makes for inconsistency and confusion in the field of eschatology, an area of vital concern from any

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religious standpoint, and here the poet must be said to fall short of truly Christian demands. His views are at different times in collision, ranging from the Agnostic to the Christian. Despite the outcropping from time to time of truly Christian sentiment, he holds for the most part to a neo-pagan position.

Despite these obvious underlying defects, Cummings' work adds much to America's poetic heritage. Except in a few places, the Catholic scholar, student and man of culture can find in him much to reward his search for spiritual beauty and the kind of intellectual activity by which God is glorified, as St. Paul says, in all things.

One recommendation suggests itself: as the opening chapter of the preceding essay states, there has been a marked change in Cummings' approach and attitudes towards life in its manifold phases and facets since the rough and tumble days of the nineteen-twenties. He is still writing poetry and reported to have another volume in the making for publication during the next year or two. A very worthwhile dissertation might be prepared on its complementary character or its contrast with what has gone before.

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Some months after the completion of the present dissertation, Mr. Cummings published a new collection, 95 Poems. Happily, it emphasizes, if anything, the characteristics and judgments of the preceding pages, and introduces no new elements in charting direction or forming either specific or general conclusions. Form and structure, diction and subject matter fall readily into the same patterns as heretofore, with the new trend towards reverence and conservatism prevailing. At the same time, the old problems relating to the nature of life and of man remain nearly the same as before. Cummings still believes in love and life on the human level, he goes on castigating the stupidities of "mostpeople" and the inconsistencies of the social, political and economic worlds. As always, he saves his precious ointments and incensations for his life's love, persisting in a vague, pagan kind of belief in a nebulous immortality which leaves the ultimate questions of eschatology unanswered.

The new volume, 95 Poems, finds Cummings growing old gracefully and resignedly, with both confidence and a subdued alarm, as he

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feels a world crylaughingly float away
 leaving just this strolling ghostly doll
 of an almost vanished me (for whom
 the departure of everything real is the
 arrival of everything true)¹

Death has lost much of its terror, perhaps because fear and empty defiance yield more and more to a reverence and respect for the mysteries of life and death, as "Self adventures deathlessness".² Approaching God Himself and the Church, No. 77 of this volume is a surprise! Reverence and respect have come to the brink of faith and repentance. No more of the processions of foolish priests and silly people following a glass box and falling down before St. Ignatz; no more fat padres and diffident ladies, or doctrines of emptiness falling like gravensteins just over a wall. Because of the radical progress of the poet along lines of spiritual integrity and religious recognition, No. 77 deserves quotation in part. The poet is speaking for a small village church:

1.
 E. E. Cummings, 95 Poems, No. 48, New York, 1958, Harcourt, Brace and Co.

2.
Ibid., No. 49

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around me surges a miracle of unceasing
 birth and glory and death and resurrection:
 over my sleeping self float flaming symbols
 of hope, and i wake to a perfect patience of mountains

Finally, a climax and high water mark is reached in the last stanza:

winter by spring, i lift my diminutive spire to
 merciful Him Whose only now is forever
 standing erect in the deathless truth of His presence
 (welcoming humbly His light and proudly His darkness)

As a sign of Cummings' deepening reverence and fundamental religious nature, this, in view of some of his earlier iconoclasm and sneering disbelief, is almost incredible; but there it is! The Christmas poem, previously alluded to in respect of this "new" attitude, appears in further evidence in this new collection as No. 42. Everywhere, it seems, the poet's view of life has become more religious, and at times it is quite Christian. He has indeed come a long way from the mad Twenties.

It would be gratifying to leave E. E. Cummings on this edifying note, with a prayer for his future progress, but such a disposition of the latest miscellany would be incomplete. A balanced intellectual view of life does not wholly follow in this train of religious sentiment. A bit of the old unconditioned skepticism and anti-intellectuality

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crops out in No. 88, as

overs of known descend through depths of guess,
 shadows are substances and wings are birds;
 unders of dream adventure truths of skies--

Are kisses still a better fate than wisdom? Cummings' bent of human love has been called spiritual hedonism in a preceding chapter; it reaches its fullest measure in the new offering in "dive for dreams", No. 60, much less vehemently than in previous poems. It takes precedence over the intellectual in "dreamtree, truthtree", a comparatively mild meditation in No. 90. Again, love's dream rises to a high degree of emotional intensity in No. 91, taking the form of an "April" poem, which begins with a profound line: "unlove's the heavenless hell and homeless home".

As of yore, this idea recurs in poem after poem: love is the great compensation of life; it is to be wrung dry of experience. Cummings' tributes to the love of his life reaches another high water mark in No. 92 of this series: "i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)". No. 45 is especially notable in this respect for its beauty of language and expression.

Hand in hand with the poet's enshrining of human love on a par with the divine went a kind of worship of sex, dealt with in detail in an early chapter. This is now

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greatly toned down. Although there is some rollicking Rabelaisian verse and a few inuendoes in symbolism (notably Nos. 27, 29, 35) they are comparatively rare, and in a Sunday School picnic class compared to most of And (1925). Incidentally, the collection easily passes the moral tests imposed on literature generally by Harold C. Gardiner, the noted Jesuit book editor and writer in Norms for the Novel, which the present author has adopted as a check and guide.

Love for mankind goes along with the poet's personal love, and largely seems to grow out of it. Though at times he has taken strange ways of showing an all-embracing love for humanity, with notable exceptions, this is definitely a major strain in all his work. The ironic zeal of the America-I-love-you and Mr. Vinal poems find their peer in 95 Poems. No. 39 of this group is the most vehement excoriation of American foreign unpolicy so far. We encouraged the Hungarian freedom fighters to use their fists against Communist tanks and guns; and then we left them only the jammed Voice of America to cushion their flesh against fire-belching steel. When it came to a show-down, once again Uncle Shylock was not interested. Our shameful and dilatory playing with lives and spiritual values gets its full desert in this piece, the only one with a title, "THANKSGIVING (1956)" (sic). This poem rings with greatness, and even at

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the risk of over-quotation, it cries out to be heard. Two quatrains will suffice to indicate the poet's just indignation:

"be quiet little hungary
and do as you are bid
a good kind bear is angary
we fear for the quo pro quid"

And finally:

so rah-rah-rah for democracy
let's all be as thankful as hell
and bury the statue of liberty
(because it begins to smell)

Cummings has lost none of his fire-power. His increasing familiarity with reverence and religion, let us be thankful, has not fostered anything of comfortable acquiescence in the face of international outrage and what could be made out as a strong case for betrayal. Cummings is not going to seed. He is still fiercely alive, as ever, and if he shocks with his ironic hyperbole it is a good thing. Some such shock is needed to cure us of the disease of moral indifference which dictates a policy of passive appeasement on the basis of just-let-it-go-as-long-as-they-don't-touch-our-hides. The world and its leaders have long lost the ability to realize the true nature of today's problems -- if, indeed, they ever had the courage to face the

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real issues.

The same force is evident, too, in the old Cummingsean stronghold of economic, political and social satire. The venerable old Hotel du Golf is now overrun with business men discussing "parity"; les putains get a brief come-uppance; people without hearts clash with people with no brains; poets, yeggs and thirsties are around, but in barely vestigial numbers; and at a somewhat obscure to be sure university joe Gould says that the only reason every woman should go to college is that she can never say, "o / if i / 'd / OH / n / lygawntueco / llege"!³

In Cummings' new miscellany things have changed, but only to heighten the new attitude. There are a few additional chansons innocentes, as lovely as ever, and the charm of spring is sung again in several "spring poems". "Snow poems" also recur with a frequency which testifies that the poet's love of nature in this sphere is as operative as ever. The surrealist horse, the playful cat and the frisky mouse are joined by the singing whippoorwill, the chiming thrush, the floating hummingbird and the sentinell robins. Shapiro, looking for the modern nature poet, should not overlook

³.
Ibid., No. 28

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Cummings, breathing in the stillness of some autumnal afternoon, hiding his talents under radical typography and erratic vers libre. Here April is feted extravagantly, the rain bounces up from the hard, parched earth, the dusk sky is primeval with flaming stars and the rOund mOOOn Over tOWns, rOunder now than ever. No. 84, a superb canticle to the sun, cannot be passed without mention.

Appropos of Cummings' fame for spilling words and letters profusely and allegedly askew on the page, the first of 95 Poems deserves to be singled out. It is a "leaf poem" and compounds his experimental techniques into what he now offers, apparently, as a full-blown specimen:

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All that has been said form-wise in the opening chapters of this treatment makes further comment, analysis or exclamation superfluous. This is unique as a mutant of modern verse by Cummings; it is well placed at the threshold

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of his latest offering.

To return to the business of general principles and summing-up, 95 Poems may be said to signal the crystallization of Cummings' art along the lines delineated in the foregoing chapters. This little collection shows him passing into history as a great humanitarian, a fearless champion of individual rights and freedoms, a man perennially delighting in Wordsworth's nature, to whom love is the very only god, and who is finding this love a basis from which to approach the One True God through the ultimate mysteries of life.

At the same time his excesses in these things continue to weigh down the gold with slag. There is a little venom left, a bit too much gutter-rolling from which to avert one's eyes, a residue of anti-intellectuality. Cummings still likes to live suddenly without thinking. He would still rather give because the why than undergo the pain of serious thought. Fools and sages are still lumped together in the next-to-last of 95 Poems. Nature and love are fully as wonderful as he sings, but unless one penetrates deeper than smiles and rosetrees, both life and liberty as well as the pursuit of beauty, which is the poet's inspiration, are likely to vanish in an orgy of explosive fire and pointed steel. We need look no further than Boris

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Pasternak to understand that we cannot turn our backs on alien ideas and practicalities to revel in transports of love and ecstasy. Cummings at times speaks irresponsibly and looks a little too much like a spokesman for The Best Generation or The Angry Young Men. At times he reminds one of Edmund Fuller's withering annihilation of Kerouac's glorification of irresponsibility in On the Road. There are other moments when he escapes the label (borrowed from Norman Mailer) of the "philosophical psychopath"⁴ only because of his acknowledgment of the spiritual and his deep sense of the dignity of man.

But these times have become increasingly rare. The practical nihilism of even a decade ago has all but disappeared.

One can only wish this poet well. Full-souled artist that he is, sensitive--and so beautifully sensitive--to so much that has been lost to the heritage of western man, he is alive, vibrant and responsive to life in a way most Christians need to re-learn. And now, having arrived so close to the borders of basic Christian concepts, the truly Catholic heart cannot but go out to him with a prayer for the eventual and final resolution of his remaining unsolved philosophical and moral problems.

Fuller, Edmund, Man in Modern Fiction, New York, 1958, 154 p.

ABSTRACT

The rise of E. E. Cummings to prominence in the cultural world of today and the assurance of a permanent place for him in American letters poses a problem for Catholic scholarship, education and culture in general. Controversial as he has been over the years and continues to be, just what is his position in the light of Catholic principles? There is a growing need for some thoroughgoing and authoritative guidance in his evaluation as a poet and as a cultural influence.

A Catholic Criticism of E. E. Cummings endeavours to fill this need. It begins with a general view of the subject, emphasizing "the new perspective" in which Cummings has appeared of late, that is, a departure from his old attitude of ferocity towards all convention and human organization in favor of a genuine respect and at times even a degree of reverence for traditional values and established institutions. The author attempts to maintain a steady viewpoint of profound Catholic orientation, aloof from what might be branded as narrow sectarianism or the prejudices of partisan groups within the Catholic community at various times.

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Maritain and Newman are selected as guides to classical and scholastic norms of artistic virtue and excellence, with the idea of holding to the universal taste and outlook which has earned for the Church the title of mother and patroness of the arts. At the same time realizing that her office is for all times and peoples, the work has tended to beware of rejecting the novel and experimental merely because it is new, and, in a sense, on trial; and here Eliot's theory of criticism which sees in literature something progressive as well as cumulative, is heavily relied upon. Consequently, this thesis inclines towards welcoming the stimulus of Cummings' radical approach to the poetic art, and considers it as such against the background of Christian tradition and belief.

Following the brief look at Cummings in his latest aspects, the present essay enters upon a detached analysis of form and structure in Cummings' verse, with special attention to prosodic innovations for which he is most famous. Other researchers in the field are cited and their conclusions tabulated. Terms are defined. An appreciation of Cummings' techniques is assayed as is his ability as a craftsman.

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The third chapter centers upon his experiments in diction and syntax, surveying his development of a unique system all his own. Following this, a neologism is employed to investigate and describe one of his characteristic modes in verse, "the abstract image". This is an association of words and images not usually associated, to obtain a new conceptual effect akin to what the imagist school did in other fields. This leads the investigation logically into some of Cummings' most complicated techniques: surrealism, cubism, futurism, etc. These elements are worked into an intricate, eclectic, characteristically personal style called by Allan Tate, "The Personal Convention", an excellent term for Cummings' style, and one used as a chapter heading in delineating Cummings' style. The inquiry is buttressed with historical reference to the literary movements of the early twentieth century by which Cummings was most deeply influenced.

They led in no small measure to Cummings' cultivation of satirical poetry, which is the topic of the next section. In social satire, Cummings' pieces may be conceived of as political, economic, institutional, cultural and religious. Each receives attention from the Christian standpoint: the political, economic and cultural satires as satires are generally quite consistent with Catholic principles, since

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they infer the necessity for just, intelligent and above all, honest facing and solving of well known problems which affect every community. Economic pieces are seen as often tinged with laissez-faire prejudice. Religious verse in Cummings is concluded to be for the most part superficial and of little merit. There is also a group of personal satires which receives attention, at times ridiculous and offensive to Christian charity, at others having little more than comic value. Some of Cummings' social satires are declared to have achieved true greatness of stature, particularly those satirizing America's obsessions with sex, security, hypocrisy and smug materialism.

Cummings' work, too, seems at times obsessed with sex and its corollaries. This side of the poet receives due attention, along with his attitudes towards human love and the beauty of woman in Part IV, where one chapter is devoted to each of these two themes, respectively. Here the poet is viewed as a modern successor to the romantics of the last century, as well as Rossetti and Swinburne. Sex and love are considered as ends of human activity, and from the Christian viewpoint; and where the poet offends against basic Christian norms of the moral law in a few instances, the pieces are cited and the reasons given. On the whole, Cummings is seen to sing constructively, appreciatively, and even

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inspirationally of married love. He has thoughts and feelings of excellence for the perfection of the sacrament of marriage.

Part V begins with a consideration of this plethora of Cummings' output in its context of modern, liberal thought and custom. It is, as its heading indicates, "An Analysis of Content with an eye to Philosophic Content and Moral Values". The poet's contribution in his original style to "nature" poetry in its modern guise is surveyed, with special attention to its place in the modern period, where nature seems to be in disrepute; some analysis of this malaise is entered upon, with its deeper philosophical and theological implications. Then the whole liberal background of the subject is studied, with appropriate correlation of exemplary poems with the poet's thought. This leads to difficulties, since Cummings, as someone has well put it, is more "a bundle of attitudes" than a consistent philosophical thinker in verse or the poet of any profound sequence of thought.

These difficulties and the logical dilemmas they lead to, form the substance of the concluding section. They consist of tracing Cummings involvement with the problem of God and the claims of morality. The result is admitted to be inconclusive, and the poet's inconsistencies are cited in

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reaching this position. As might be anticipated, the same may be said of the final chapter, in which Cummings' grappling with the problems of death and immortality is closely examined. The poet is at last identified with a non-Christian position, despite conflicting reasons, because of the inclination of the weightier evidence to the Agnostic side. An appropriate afterthought finishes the essay, which might be thought of as a very brief meditation upon the poet's plight today in view of his unsolved eschatological problems and the onslaughts of old age, death and eternity.

The conclusions of the study, in addition to those incorporated above, are that Cummings, despite his sometimes serious moral and philosophical defects, his occasional artistic failures and lapses into relative unintelligibility, has made a major contribution to modern poetry. From the Catholic point of view he can be said to have greatly enriched the cultural heritage, particularly as a poet of nature, social satire and emotional love. Abstracting from his lack of consistent Christian principles, and mindful of the Thomistic teaching in regard to art and virtue, the work of Cummings on the aesthetic and cultural plane is among the most rewarding experiences of the current period which contribute to the enrichment of human life.