

E. E. Cummings, Revisited

by

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Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	4
Modernism: <i>Ars Poetica</i>	17
I: 'Newness'	20
II: 'Difficulty'	23
III: 'Immediacy'	29
Modern Cummings	31
Critical Reception	42
The (Mode)rn (of) Language	56
Sonnet (& Experiment) Form(alism)	78
" <i>so many selves</i> "	84
The Se(.e.)lf: A Modern Heteroglot	85
Ont(illogical) Multiplicity	90
" <i>suppose</i> "	102
Death & Satire	103
" <i>your little voice</i> "	117
Love & The Inter-Subjective	118
Toward a Conclusion	130
Works Cited	136

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Sanam, “our fearful trip is done;/The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won;/The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting...,” except for the ominous part about Abe Lincoln dying at the end.

Is it fair to thank Cummings as well, as a study of this magnitude was all the more enjoyable in that I was grappling with the poetry I have always held most dear.

Once again, I cannot thank enough the registrar for enabling me to have a schedule consisting of no classes before two in the afternoon, generously accommodating my month-long practice of working into the surprisingly bright, sunny mornings of March and April.

Introduction

I remember sitting at my bedside, awaiting school in the morning. I was in my first year of high school at the time and had recently turned fourteen. It was September, a hot, muggy Autumn afternoon in Arizona. My family had just come in from the pool in our backyard and I caught the spattering sounds of my brothers' flopping wet feet and the dripping towels carried in by my parents in vigorous pursuit. It was then that my father came in to my room, as he often did to show me an article or introduce me to a new writer, and handed me my first book of Cummings poetry. In the old, brittle pages of these selected poems I discovered the poet I would come to love. Opening the book at random, I happened upon "in Just-" and returned (rather was whirled) for a moment to the springtime of my own childhood. For good measure, I quote the poem here in full:

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 bettyandisabel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's
spring
and
 the

 goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee (CP 27)¹

For me, the ‘balloonman’ was instead a tattered ice-cream truck that used to pass through our neighborhood each Tuesday afternoon. In ‘eddieandbill’, I heard my two younger brothers and thought of how often we would chase down that truck and come sprinting back to the house covered in chocolate and grass stains, muddying the floor with our grimy shoes. For the first time in my life I had connected with a poem, it brought me to reverie of the cherished, sentimental moments of my youth. Over the next few years I developed an insatiable thirst for his poetry. Each new poem taught me to see the world anew, and each line’s melodic whistle rang in my head for days on end. Reading Cummings, I felt as if I was uncovering the greatest mysteries of the world.

I imagine this to be a typical response to first reading a Cummings poem: bewilderment, emotional welling, pathos. Perhaps a reader might be equally caught by the sexual delinquency in his thrillingly erotic language. Maybe the musicality of his poetry or the eloquent descriptions of love would leave an impression. Or one might be comforted by his resistance to grandiloquent language, his insistence on the language of the ‘everyman’. Cummings’ poetry is personal, it intends to grab the reader and shake him about, to provoke thoughtful response and arouse those deeply tucked-away memories. This is what had made him such a popular poet in his time,

¹ For the purposes of clarity and concise denotation, each time we quote a Cummings poem, it is from the version of his *Complete Poems*, from 1904-1962 edited by George Firmage. The acronym CP will be used to reference this volume throughout this thesis. Cummings, E. E., and George James. Firmage. *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*. New York: Liveright, 1991.

and to this day we find that despite the virulent critics, his poetry endures. I am amazed at how often I encounter a classmate buried in a thick anthology of modernist poetry only to be flipping about the pages of the section on Cummings, and more than once I have noticed a stranger on the bus or subway engrossed in a copy of his *Selected Poems*. The poetry of E. E. Cummings has not faded from the public, it is as alive as ever.² It has, however, conspicuously vanished from the classroom. In my four years at Wesleyan, throughout multiple classes on modernism and even more on poetry, I have yet to find his name on any syllabus. At times when he does arise, it is only anecdotally, within a rather brief discussion filled with generic comments regarding linguistic fragmentation and spacing on the page. I propose this to be an alarming situation, that without Cummings the student abandons the perspective of a seminal influence upon twentieth century theory, aesthetic, and poetics. This thesis is an attempt to bring Cummings back to the fore of poetic thought and criticism, to demonstrate his substantial affiliation with the modernist tradition, and to resurrect his work in the twenty-first century. This is, of course, the very poet that had been dubbed by Ezra Pound “Whitman’s one living descendant.”³ He counted among his friends some of the most influential artists of his time: Ezra Pound, John Dos Passos, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas, Allen Tate, Marianne Moore, Kenneth Burke, Malcom Cowley, Edmund Wilson, the list goes on.⁴ Why, then, does

² On the capitalization of E. E. Cummings’ name, Christopher Sawyer-Laucanno writes that “Indeed, in most of his personal correspondence, he signed his name in capitals. To publishers, too, he asked that his name be capitalized on the title page.” Sawyer-Laucanno, Christopher. *E.E. Cummings: A Biography*. (Naperville, IL: Source, 2004): ix.

³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, xii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

a poet of such artistic esteem remain at the margin of both poetic criticism and modernist theory?

Edward Estlin Cummings was born on October 14th, 1894. His father, Edward Cummings, was a Harvard professor of sociology (a newly developing field, Cummings had taught the first sociology course offered at Harvard). He also took a post as an associate minister at the South Congregational Church, yet his sermons were ‘distinctly non-liturgical’,⁵ focusing on philosophical speculation and inventing novel ways to formulate tales of morality. Throughout his childhood, Cummings would learn by experience from his father, and at this time religion was not the primary mode of thought in the household, “it was simply one more strand in the complex fabric of life.”⁶ His mother, Rebecca Cummings, also had an enormous influence on her son, teaching him until he was eight and always setting an example for the young prodigy. He wrote fondly of his childhood: “I was welcomed as no son of any king or queen was ever welcomed. Here my joyous fate and my supreme fortune.”⁷ His upbringing allowed him to be indulgent, frolicking through the backyards of Harvard professors and roaming about nature. His house at 104 Irving Street in Cambridge sat under the lofty shadow of Harvard University, in close proximity to other professors, placing him from a young age in the company of eminent scholars in the Harvard circle:

Our nearest neighbor, dwelling (at a distance) behind us, was Roland Thaxter; primarily the father of my loveliest playmate and ultimately the professor of cryptogramic [sic] botany. To our right, on Irving Street, occurred professors [William] James and [Josiah] Royce and [H. Langford] Warren; to our left on Scott Street, transpired professor of economics [Frank] Taussig. Somewhat back of the

⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁷ Quoted in Ibid., 5.

Taussig House happened professor [Charles] Lanman...the celebrated Sanskrit scholar.⁸

He too attended Harvard, living at his parents' home for the first three years. It was here that he met several influential writers of the age, began to explore more in poetry and translation (his apprenticeship, more appropriately his friendship, with professor Theodore Miller compelled him to render a series of magnificently translated episodes from Ovid), and developed his own style of writing. He was a Classics major, surprisingly, fluent in Greek and Latin, and his earliest poems testify to this (see the formalism in "Puella Mea" and "Epithalamion"). By his final year, he had moved out of his house, disappointed in the constrictive guide of his conservatively austere family. He assumed graduate study thereafter at Harvard. A few years later, the young artist would volunteer to serve in the First World War as an ambulance driver, and was briefly imprisoned in France at La Ferté-Macé detention camp (this would become the topic of his autobiographical novel, *The Enormous Room*). He also spent time traveling through the Soviet Union (the account is novelized in *Eimi*). A brilliant conversationalist, his mere entrance into a room was enough to immediately shift the dynamic. Of equal importance was his loving relationship with his wife, Marion Morehouse. The two were inseparable throughout their marriage, and this might key us in on Cummings' focus on the power of love in his poetry. Cummings' life, much like his poetry, "was rich, fascinating, complex and unconventional."⁹ When he died on September 3rd, 1962 at the age of sixty-seven, the world mourned the loss of an American original, a poet whose extensive, forty-

⁸ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

five year literary career had left a vivid impression on American poetics. We¹⁰ know that he was a prolific poet, publishing eight volumes of poetry, two novels, two plays, and orating two lectures at his alma mater (the first in the form of a commencement speech at his graduation, and the second in *i:SIX NONLECTURES*, his acclaimed investigation of selfhood and thematics within his art). As his longer works have actually received a wealth of attention,¹¹ this thesis will focus particularly on the poetry, on the various ways he contributes to modernism through his poems.

The project of this thesis is to reframe the basis for understanding Cummings. Haines and Friedman in particular have resounded that Cummings' work attests to a transcendental logic, that in his timelessness we achieve a critical leap of existence.¹² However, it seems that Cummings does not propose any metaphysical apparatus in his poetry. Though this is the un-world, the world remains right here, and the leap of existence rather occurs as a submission to inter-subjective truth.¹³ It is important to

¹⁰ This thesis will assert the plural pronoun 'we' consistently. The intent is to instantiate the terms of Cummings' poetry within the analysis. By 'we', we contend first to accomplish Cummings' delineation of the self, of multivalent, shifting perspectives that all engage in the process of the self, and second, to suggest the personal tone of his poetry, always intimating the reader into the project of the poem alongside the poet.

¹¹ For *Eimi*, see Allan Metcalf's reading of it in relation to Dante's *Divina Comedia*, or Rosenfeld. For *The Enormous Room*, David Smith and Marilyn Gaull. For *Him*, Grossman and Maurer in particular.

¹² This is the transcendental logic we attempt to overcome in this thesis:

"In his "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens writes: "It must be abstract..." So indeed it must, for on the level of the concrete no resolutions are possible. Man and woman, men and women, must never remain separate and distinguishable creatures in the concrete world. The best that can be attained on that level is the incomplete resolution of addition: one plus one equals two, which assures us that the resolution is ultimately false. Only in the abstract world of the imagination, the world of love, does the equation one times one equals one hold possible implications of truth." Haines IV, George. *The World and E. E. Cummings*. *The Sewanee Review*, Vol, 59, No. 2 (Spring, 1951): 227.

This thesis proposes that for Cummings, love is not abstracted. No transcendence involved, love is here to be attained in the world around us. The following footnote delineates the intersubjective realm in which we find love.

¹³ Intersubjectivity involves the dialogic nature of both speech and language, it is the truth produced between two subjectivities when they, through discourse, meet. This is the crux of Cummings' poetics, the resolution of intersubjectivity in mediating what is also heteroglot fragmentation. Anne Cunliffe addresses the role of the intersubjective theorist, and her explanation allows for an understanding of the type of meaning-making that Cummings' poetry participates in:

rid Cummings' criticism of the transcendent vision insofar as a reading without this obstruction could then situate his work to take its rightful place in the modernist tradition. Cummings' poetry is too visceral to seek out the transcendental. He is ever modern in his deconstruction of any two-world theory. This is, after all, the age after which Nietzsche had declared the death of God, and the declaration was meant as much to deconstruct metaphysical, noumenal theorizing as it was to disengage us from religious ascendancy. Essentially, the modern world found little room for this mode of heightened scholasticizing. Wallace Stevens had similarly denied the traditional, Romantic synthesizing into the sublime, and Eliot saw the world as too deadened to submit to the categorical imperatives of a transcendental order. Both of these poets attempted to replace conventional metaphysical paradigms, Stevens with his own "first idea" and Eliot with the Christian aesthetic. Cummings, on the other hand, saw 'transcendence' right before us (though we are frequently blind to these phenomena), that through succumbing to the irrational logic of love and intersubjective valuation we can become fully 'human', fully sublime within this world and within our very selves. Cummings transcends nothing, rather he implores us to accept the world as it is, to find the sublime right here around us. He hopes that in an age of widespread dehumanization, we can become as human as ever, if not more. To accomplish this, our relationship to the world, to fragmentation, difficulty, and war, must be healed. This is the underlying spirit of modernist art: to see the world in heaps and put it back together. Early criticism distinctly saw Cummings as a

"Let us assume that meaning-making is not just a conceptual activity but a dialogical one, taking place in unmediated speech communication. Meaning-making becomes an intersubjective process occurring between us as we talk and listen to the voice of others and of the self." Cunliffe, Ann L. *Intersubjective Voices: The Role of the Theorist*. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, Vol. 25, No. 4, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., (Dec., 2003): 481.

modernist, and what is under review in these analyses is not Cummings but instead modernism itself, “a nascent and revolutionary modernism which [was] just beginning to make its way in the American popular press.”¹⁴ Detractors lambast Cummings for his experimental techniques of language, while others claim that he is so consistent in form that his poetry approaches stale monotony. Imagine had Wordsworth tried to avail himself of his distinct form and adapted radically his form over the course of his career. Such a revision would have remade the entirety of his work, stricken him of his poetic voice. Thus, his individual form is as inextricably tied to his poetry as is Cummings’, who could no more speak his own language without his formal deviance. Though other poets are never asked to relinquish their formal consistencies, Cummings is hounded for retaining his approach to poetic form. Critics strain to assume his poetry is static just because his form remains constant. There is no greater deficiency in modernist criticism than this, to remove Cummings from the modern corpus because of a distaste for his form. We will find that other modern poets wholly admired Cummings: both Williams and Moore wrote reviews in approbation of his poetry. In addition, his poetry left its influence on later writers. Take the “Personalism” of Frank O’Hara, his idiosyncratically brash, queer language (see his poem “Lana Turner has collapsed!”), or the immediacy and charm of James Schuyler for instance, saluting the various field of literary brethren and predecessors while admitting that the “past is past” and that his poetry pushes forward (“Salute”), and you will find a New York School highly indebted to the aesthetic

¹⁴ Friedman, Norman. “Cummings’ *Uneasy Mask and the Divided Audience*.” Repr. in Friedman, Norman. *(Re)valuing Cummings: Further Essays on the Poet, 1962-1993*. (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1996): 85.

experimentation of Cummings.¹⁵ John Logan astutely notes how close his poetry is to the American beat generation that followed:

The beat generation is closer to the Village mode of Cummings than to the farming of Robert Frost, the insurance selling of Stevens, the librarianship of Marianne Moore, the doctoring of W. C. Williams, the banking and editing of Eliot, and whatever it was he did, of Pound.¹⁶

His poetry, his stylizations of language, rhetoric and form, left a profound influence on later generations of poets. Whether or not they explicitly profess this direct literary trajectory, it is clear that he (along with probably Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy) opened new avenues of poetic possibility in language, form and content for future generations of writers. He is indeed a modernist, a poet who inspired a serious following and whose work presents a wealth of discursive appeal and opportunity. In arguing Cummings back into the modern tradition, this thesis intends to align him with the movement, examine the critics, and then to analyze his work thematically, isolating four particular areas of study: language, the self, death and satire, and love.

The opening chapter on Modernism observes three archetypal characteristics: newness, difficulty and immediacy. By ‘newness’, we mean that the modern poet was expected to be radically original, and that modern poetry grappled tirelessly with free verse (*vers libre*), insisting that it retain a degree of musicality, of precision, and of freshness. ‘Difficulty’ is the condition of the world that the poet must incorporate in his work, a fragmented, international system of polyglot forces that convene upon

¹⁵ Schuyler’s poetics of immediacy draws attention, negotiating a sublime transparency in which words and things become one in the confines of a poem. His personality also shines through his work, instigating a dialogic discourse between the poet and reader, his “Morning of the Poem” awakens us to experience. Moreover, O’Hara’s language is as vibrant as Cummings’, and the referenced poem is a subtle but biting satire about the drunkenness of Lana Turner. We will find that Cummings employs immediacy and satire often. O’Hara, Frank, and Mark Ford. *Selected Poems*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008): 234. Schuyler, James. *Selected Poems*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988): 3, 186-234.

¹⁶ Logan, John. “*The Organ-Grinder and the Cockatoo: An Introduction to E. E. Cummings.*” Repr. in Mazzaro, Jerome. *Modern American Poetry: Essays In Criticism*. (New York: David McKay Company, 1970): 269.

the writer. This pushed poetic language to be violently deconstructive (through semantic variance), allusive, and, at times, irrational. With ‘immediacy’, the modern poet hoped to capture thought in its essence, so that through methods such as ‘stream of consciousness’ writing he could engender a poetry that acclimates to the flux of reality. We will then examine those instances where Cummings diverges from this tradition: his renunciation of war poetics, the ironic positioning of the modern tragic dilemma, and the lack of an iconic long-form poem. This is not to strike him from a modern classification, but rather to be fair to his dynamic body of work. Moreover, we will claim that no modernist subscribes to every single condition proposed by modernism, that they each have moments of departure that individuate them. Then we examine how he fits the bill of a prototypical modernist poet: through a handling of complexity and multiplicity, anti-intellectualism, immediacy, abstraction of language, and inter-artistic influences. We will conclude that Cummings was unequivocally modernist, that to silence Cummings is in fact to silence modernism.

The following chapter on his critical reception goes periodically through the decades, discussing those supporters and detractors whose analyses have been fundamental in Cummings criticism. We rebut some of the harshest critics, but mostly we chronicle the history of criticism surrounding Cummings, arguing that it has recently stagnated despite the fact that it remains a field of knowledge largely undiscovered.

Then we will move toward his actual poetry, first examining the poetic language. The extent to which E. E. Cummings’ poetry manipulates language, using additive prefixes and suffixes, conflating words, employing radical punctuation, and

deviating from regulations of English syntax, is a critical undertaking of the modernist tradition. At the level of the word and at the level of syntax, Cummings fragments and deconstructs language. With language, Cummings took the modern prescription of ‘newness’ to heart, forcing language to become more real, more representational, and less indoctrinated. Cummings also manipulates received forms, adopting his own formal system of stanzaic mirroring and critically establishing new approaches to the lineation, rhyme scheme, and organization of the sonnet form. Cummings is, as we will observe, a vehement proponent of fragmentary language, form, and poetics.

“The Se.(e.)lf as Heteroglot,” is an evaluation of Cummings’ construction of selfhood in his poetry. This chapter accounts for the growing skepticism regarding objectivity at the turn of the twentieth century, and the emerging belief that literature, and poetry for that matter, necessitated the examination and representation of the individual, subjective experience. The centered subject of the nineteenth century was now becoming the obscure, irrational, un-knowable subject of the twentieth century. Using Mikhail Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel”, we will propose that Cummings creates dialogic discourse within the self, as well as heteroglossia. Bakhtin suggests that it is the that novel performs heteroglossia, but we will argue that Cummings’ poetry incorporates Bakhtinian thought by constructing a poetic self composite of poly-vocal utterances. His self is ordered according to a series of contesting perspectives and discourses, represented by his use of the fragmentary, little “i”.

The subsequent chapter undergoes a study of satire in Cummings’ poetry, focusing on his use of obscenity in the burlesque form, his satiric personification of

death, and his ironic qualification of political and religious indoctrination. For Cummings, the difficulties presented by the modern world were to be the subject of irreverent lampoonery. He mocks conformity, reviles pretentiousness, indicts the ineffectual political system, and obscenely invites the overtly sexual into his poetics. Satire, for Cummings, is a critical method of combating the world.

Finally, we will turn to Cummings' positioning of love in his thematics. Love solves the fragmentation of the individual and the tragedy of the modern world by making things whole again in the inter-subjective realm. Cummings' poetry testifies to love's ability to persevere between the cracks and cogs of 'unhuman' systems. According to Cummings, in a post-Enlightenment world composed of the strictures of rational order, the most human choice we can make is a submission to the irrationality of boundless love. Cummings does not use anti-intellectualism to ultimately disavow us of all rational tendencies, rather he tells us that there are ways in which a strict adherence to the 'rational' precludes us from accessing our most human selves. Love is a timeless conquest for Cummings; it does not obliterate all rationality, it grounds the effete intellectual in the inter-subjective truth of his emotional character.

This thesis is an attempt to re-invigorate interest in Cummings, placing him alongside a direct line of modernist thinkers and etching him into the rigid body of the modernist tradition. Cummings, we will find, is invariably modern, wearing on his lapel the emblems of modernism (newness, difficulty, and immediacy) and representing an ideal figurehead in the study of modernist poetics. We propose that the academic must redress the curious reservation toward accepting Cummings'

poetry by re-opening his anthologies and writing back into academic history the story of this great American poet and modernist.

Modernism: *Ars Poetica*

Poetic modernism is too widespread a movement to summarily approach and analyze. Certainly there remain the iconic figureheads of Modernism, Pound and Eliot and H.D., who might readily subscribe to the basic tenets of New Criticism,¹⁷ but what of the many other poets, and what of the varied internal movements within Modernism? In fact, it is the very vastness of Modernism that serves as its characteristic principle: from Imagism to Vorticism, innovators of language including Stein and Williams, those emphasizing a poetics of immediacy to the proponents of a philosophical irrationalism, to the sardonic centrists like Frost. It is difficult enough to determine where the movement begins, if that which is “modern” is constituted solely by the period of the first half of the twentieth century or whether we ought to consider these poets as disciples of a significant tradition of American poets (though several French as well) that preceded them, largely Whitman, Hopkins and Dickinson. Any poet is subject to the “anxiety of influence” of literary history, as Harold Bloom aptly notes, but the shadows of these particular figures stand closer to the heart of the modernist project.¹⁸ And then there was Yeats, his insistence on Symbolism and his close correspondence with Pound and Amy Lowell. Pound had, in fact, come to Europe seeking Yeats, whom he considered the best living English poet, but Yeats found an equal in the younger poet, discovering and learning of new

¹⁷ New Criticism was a vital movement in poetic analysis in the mid-20th century. Essentially, the movement attempted to remove the reader and author from the text in the performance of a ‘close’ analysis of poems. Despite holding prestige in this age, the movement has waned in recent years, see: Krieger, Murray. *After the New Criticism*. *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Autumn, 1962): 183-205.

¹⁸ In this book, Bloom takes issue with Eliot’s atemporal field of art and his acceptance of New Criticism, Bloom contends that each “poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of *other selves*,” through what he calls ‘poetic misprision’. Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1973): 26.

movements in twentieth century poetry. In addition the French Symbolists served as a chief example to moderns like Eliot. In the dirtier language of Baudelaire, his ‘unreal city’ echoed in “The Waste Land,”¹⁹ the typographical stylizations of Apollinaire, and the ontological dilemmas of Rimbaud,²⁰ we encounter true predecessors, if almost active participants, in the making of the ‘modern’ poem.

When Whitman wrote “The Modern Man I sing” in “Song of Myself,” this would be as large of a leap from Virgil as the Roman poet himself had taken in placing man before the classic veneration to the Muses (“Of arms and a man I sing”). After Whitman, the self would move toward the center of poetic preoccupation, a self subjected to the expanse of the modern world and concurrently constituted by the condition of flux. And how could this self choose to be rendered in response to the multiplicity of modernity, nature and man if not in the poetic form of *vers libre*? The break from regulated conventions of poetry was a foundational innovation of modernism, one that Pound and the Imagists would later utilize. The Romantics as well issued a break from established forms, revolting against neo-classical aesthetics by utilizing the variant possibilities of the ode form. Keats’ odes in particular come to mind as they are odal hymns, retaining the fundamental characteristic of the ode: formal openness and flexibility.²¹ In essence, the Romantic movement offers a

¹⁹ The end of the first section of “The Waste Land” directly quotes the closing line of the first poem in Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*: “You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!”

²⁰ In suggesting that “I is an other,” Rimbaud proposes to radically alter the essence of writing of the self: if the ‘I’ is not its own center (this ‘I’ now being an ‘other’), then it cannot cohere as a whole. Its center being elsewhere, the totality of the ‘self’ collapses, dispersing outwards as fragments of an immaterial other. His account in *A Season in Hell* verges on being biographical, exhibiting close ties to his embattled love life. Rimbaud, Aurthur. *A Season in Hell*. (New York, New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation): 1962.

²¹ Keats’ odes are also characterized, as is the ode itself, by formal openness and flexibility. Having no rigid structure and no rhythm or line number requirements, the ode was a perfect form for Keats to experiment with new formal conceptions of writing. His odes are of varied length, almost all are written in *décima* and iambic

skillful manipulation of perceived forms, generally opposing hierarchical, neo-classical presuppositions of genre and opting to mix all forms. They also emphasize a shift from objectivity to subjectivity, and Coleridge's fragmentary "Kubla Khan",²² with its open form and broken meter, and Keats' "Why did I laugh tonight?" are both examples. In Norton's footnotes to the poem, we discover that in a letter to his brother and sister-in law, Keats discusses his method of composition of "Why did I laugh tonight?": "Though the first steps of it were through my human passions, they went away, and I wrote with my Mind."²³ The modern man of the Romantic period was largely this subjective, internalizing figure, as these poems by Coleridge and Keats suggest. Ironically, moderns would shun from the aestheticizing of the Romantics, Eliot directly warning against Wordsworth's notion of "emotion recollected in tranquility."²⁴ The modern, from Yeats to Williams to Crane, would rather name Whitman a seminal influence. Earlier figures like Whitman and Hopkins (especially the latter's use of sprung rhythm through widely varying unstressed syllables)²⁵ were ever modern in their thinking and writing, without fully taking part

pentameter (with the exception of "To Autumn", having stanzas of 11 lines), yet each employs its own nuanced rhyme scheme.

²² In "Kubla Khan", the Romantic shift toward subjectivity is in the intentional use of fragmentation. The fragmentary nature of the poem first arises in its subtitle, explicitly framing the poem as "A Fragment". Coleridge himself is understood to have forgot the last part, as he was distracted from the surge of inspiration that motivated the poem, and upon return was unable to resume his work. Even the meter of the poem is oddly broken, shifting quickly from iambic tetrameter to trimeter (in the 5th line), and then to much longer lines. The schemata of the first seven lines is paralleled by the first seven lines of the following stanza, yet no rigid and prevailing rhyme scheme seems to characterize the work as a whole, and its shifts are noticeably abrupt.

²³ Stillinger, Jack, Deidre Lynch, Stephen Greenblatt, and M. H. Abrams. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 8th ed. Vol. D (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2006): 898.

²⁴ . Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003): 946.

²⁵ Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "Sprung Rhythm." Repr in *Ibid.*, 874-876.

in modernism.²⁶ The varied principles of modernism can be articulated through their relational tendency toward all of these earlier poets, especially in the methods “moderns” employ to expand these initial theories of poetics in the twentieth century.

I: ‘Newness’

“Make it new.” Pound proudly proclaimed this statement, setting the tone for what was to come in modernist poetry. Interestingly, Pound had seen this mantra written on the bathtub of an ancient Chinese emperor. Therefore the claim is necessarily derivative. Yet this is exactly what Pound intended, to take that which had already been posited and recapitulate it in the modern era. Both with his re-writings of Greek cosmogony and literature (in “Canto I” of Andreas Divus’ translation of a specific Homeric episode in which Odysseus and his companions sail to Hades) and through his practice of translation (multilayered renderings in *Cathay* of the Chinese poet Li Po through the translations of Ernest Fenellosa), the intent of the “modern” poet was, according to Pound, to re-invent the nature of the poem, to liberate it from the dominance of tradition and form that had until then conditioned all poetic license. In this sense, Pound was advocating the language Whitman had foregrounded, that of *vers libre*. Still Pound had intended to take language much further than Whitman could have imagined. One of the major principles of the newness of the modern poem is its insistence on new properties of musicality without a necessary adherence to metric regularity or classic prescriptions of enjambment and

²⁶ Friedman makes the direct connection between the stylistics of Cummings and Hopkins in his essay, *Hopkins, Cummings, and the Struggle of the Modern*, in many ways foregrounding the work at hand in this thesis. Friedman, Norman. *(Re)valuing Cummings: Further Essays on the Poet, 1962-1993*. (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1996): 39-45.

caesura:

Don't chop your stuff into separate *iamb*s. Don't make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin every next line with a heave. Let the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a definite longish pause.²⁷

This new movement would emphasize new rules for poetic language, including the use of direct, musically cadenced, image-grounded verse. It was not a warrant to entirely free language, as it necessitated the development of a tenable musicality: “one should write *vers libre* only when one “must”, that is to say, only when the “thing” builds up a rhythm more beautiful than that of set metres”.²⁸ Eliot would similarly write: “no *vers* is *libre* for the man who wants to do a good job.”²⁹ This newly liberated language was conditioned according to three major categories: *melopoeia*, *phanopoeia*, and *logopoeia*.³⁰ With *melopoeia*, Pound suggests that words are inherently charged with a musical property (his recorded readings of his poetry are bombastic performances, incorporating drums and symbols, they attest to his appeal to the musical cadences of language). *Phanopoeia* is the rendering of images through absolutely direct language, avoiding inexact terms or superfluous adjectives. *Logopoeia*, ‘the dance of the intellect among words’, is the general understanding that words are products of habit. Thereby the poet must understand the infinite play of languages that pre-informs the intellect in order to politicize this situation, manipulating inherited meanings and subtly charging them with new nuances and ironies. These principles of language were the principles of early Imagism. The goal of Imagism was to remove art as far as possible from rhetoric.

²⁷ Pound, Ezra. “A Retrospect.” Repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003): 931-932.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 936.

²⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 937.

³⁰ The following explanations all derive from Pounds’ essay, “How To Read”, repr. in *Ibid.*, 939-941.

The image must contribute a subjective art, not submitting to predicated interpretations or mimetic necessity of representation; the work is first creative.³¹ In 1914, Pound edited an anthology of influential Imagist figures entitled *Des Imagistes*, containing the work of H.D., Richard Aldington, and Pound himself. The movement became a point of contention, as other writers began contributing to and being part of Imagism. Pound, less content with the subsequent direction of the movement, publicly withdrew from it in favor of Vorticism.³² In his stead, Amy Lowell took the helm of Imagism, editing and publishing her own volume of Imagist poetry, *Some Imagist Poets*. Lowell was to become the spokeswoman for Imagism, challenging Pound's compilation and presenting newer poets. This was to cause a rift between her and Pound, ending in the latter denouncing Imagism and labeling the movement 'Amygism'. Lowell's Imagism, though, was still focused on precision, hardness of language, clarity and a withdrawal from the exactitudes of metric regulation:

To create new rhythms—as the expression of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon “free verse” as the only method of writing poetry. We fight for it as a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free-verse than in conventional forms. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.³³

“Make it new” was not limited to only those proponents of Imagism. D. H. Lawrence had long been advocating a move away from clichéd, conventional language and the invention of a new poetics of immediacy and fresh language. William Carlos Williams (though his assertion of the poem as a field of action does not align with the

³¹ Pound, Ezra. *A Few Don't's by an Imagiste*. *Poetry*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (Mar., 1913): 200-206.

³² Delineated by Pound in his piece “The Vortex” and printed in the magazine *Blast*, Vorticism offered a much more dynamic model for poetry than the inert Image. In the *Vortex*, every concept, every emotion presents itself to the vivid consciousness in some primary form, it belongs to the art of this form. The Vorticist also proposed that one desires the most intense experience in art, and preferred art before it has spread itself into flaccidity, into elaboration and secondary applications.

³³ Lowell, Amy. “*Preface to Some Imagist Poets*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 927.

rigid categories of Imagism)³⁴ would contend that “Nothing is good save the new.”³⁵ Or again, Wallace Stevens: “Newness (not novelty) may be the highest individual value in poetry. Even in the meretricious sense of newness a new poetry has value.”³⁶ The situation of ‘newness’ was particularly modern, and we should approach the intentions of most modernists with an understanding of the poem as radically ‘new’.

II: ‘Difficulty’

In addition to newness, the modern poet saw the proliferation of networks of contact and inter-relationships, the complicated expansiveness of the artistic tradition that preceded him, and the highly industrialized, political, social, and economic factors that all contributed to the polyglot situation of the world. The world was ordered by ‘difficulty’, and poetry would serve as a conduit for internalizing these complexities. The use of the ‘difficult’ in modern writing was therefore due to a relationship with the complexity of the world, insofar as this reality presented the difficulties of war and internationalism. Wilfred Owen, who had tragically been killed on the French front just a week before the First World War ended, made clear that his poetic emphasis was on war: “My subject is War, and the pity of War.”³⁷ Wallace Stevens, after the devastation of the First World War and in the midst of the Second, would counter allegations of escapism in his poetry, instead claiming that the consciousness of the world had long been focused on news of war. In *The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words* he argues that wars, as well as our relation to them,

³⁴ Williams had considered the poem as its own field of action, a contained ‘real’ wherein language actually creates reality. See his lecture entitled “The Poem as a Field of Action.”

³⁵ Williams, William Carlos. “*Prologue to Kora in Hell*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 958.

³⁶ Stevens, Wallace. “*Adagia*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 975.

³⁷ Owen, Wilfred. “*Preface*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 928.

have no historical precedent: “It is not possible to look backward and to see the same thing that was true in the past.”³⁸ In regards to his understanding of earlier poets and their poetic relation to war, he blithely asserts their poetry as largely distanced from the realities of their times, overlooking the influence that the Napoleonic wars had on early Romantics (undoubtedly along with the Hundred Years War which would claim both France and England). It is undeniable that Wordsworth had been invested in these issues; in his *Prelude* the central books (those regarding his time spent in France and with his sister Dorothy) are entirely focused on the effects that the French Revolution had on the poetic Imagination.³⁹ Nonetheless, Stevens contends that individual consciousness comports itself to that which is external, to reality. War poetry played a serious role in the modern era, writers like Pound spent much time abroad broadcasting on the war and what he believed to be an ineffectual American political apparatus. Still, Pound’s political preferences are extreme to say the least. He was an avid supporter of Mussolini’s fascism, polemically politicizing his support for the Fascist agenda through radio broadcasts. Consequently, he was consigned to an interment camp by the Italian Partigiani before being ‘admitted’ to St. Elizabeth’s (a mental asylum in the United States) for twelve years.⁴⁰ More than war, the modern poet witnessed a widespread internationalism that the twentieth century made possible. It was not just Pound who spent time abroad, Eliot, Frost, Cummings, Stein, Lowell, and many other moderns took residence in Europe for several years. Since the situation of multi-dependent internationalism had begun to take hold, it also began

³⁸ Stevens, Wallace. “*The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 976-977.

³⁹ Wordsworth, William, Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Charles. Gill. *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*. New York: Norton, 1979.

⁴⁰ Outraged poets would gather to protest and rescue Pound from here, begetting his release in 1958.

to inform the works of these poets, as they found the need to account for the vast complexity of these various relations in their own poetry. The incorporation of heteroglot languages and interactions was made manifest in Pound's "Cantos" and Eliot's "The Waste Land", as their vast use of other languages established a range of poly-vocalism in their poetry. Eliot had studied Sanskrit during his time at Harvard, and utilized this along with other Eastern languages and religions to frame his Orientalism in the final section of "The Waste Land", the final lines of which resolve with 'Shantih Shantih Shantih'.

In addition, these writers were interested in poetry as a referentiality, each making wide use of literary allusion and developing profound systems of footnotes to attach to their poetry. So while Pound had argued for the anterior qualities of language, Eliot articulated the multiform ways through which the world of art situates itself as an atemporal category. His conception of literary tradition is one that amasses and amalgamates into an eternal, conglomerate entity, amendable further by the introduction of new writers into the system. For Eliot, the artist can never circumvent the symbolic influence of earlier writers. He is necessarily derivative. This remains an entire system of multiform thought, always in flux and contending with itself: the very 'difficulty' presented by heteroglossia. So when we say that the modern poet is difficult in style, we mean that he is dependent upon an intricate relation to the difficulties of the world, those of new languages and those that tradition imposes. Turning to Eliot might better qualify our understanding of modern 'difficulty':

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must

produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.⁴¹

The modern poet cannot ignore the complexities of the world, he cannot attempt to re-frame them in simplistic terms, for this would neglect and undermine the modern conditions of radically multiplicity, complexity and difficulty. Poets adopted various mechanisms to sufficiently approach this reality. Gertrude Stein responded linguistically, proffering a language-system to accompany the multitudinous complexities of reality. In *A Transatlantic Interview*, she makes the claim that her writing developed under a historical-linguistic framework in which she slowly discovered that she “had to recapture the value of the individual word.”⁴² Her manipulation of language goes as far as to individuate the words of a sentence: “I had thought this thing out [the sentence] and felt a need of breaking it down and forcing it into little pieces.”⁴³ What resulted was an incredibly complex word-system that intended to isolate the individual word, to harness that word, and then to re-contextualize it within the bounds of adjacent words, each of which carries a similarly expansive possibility for complexity. Stein’s play with language was simultaneously typified by her understanding that no individual can stand above another. Therefore she works to resolve the multiplicity of individuals in the totality of the whole, in the complexity of the whole poem. Her experiments with language propose new semantic structures that account for the tenuous relationship between the individual and the whole, for example the writing style that she adopted in *Three Lives*:

⁴¹ Eliot, T. S. “*The Metaphysical Poets*.” Repr. in Repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, 952.

⁴² Stein, Gertrude. “*A Transatlantic Interview*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 988.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 989.

At this time I threw away punctuation. My real objection to it was that it threw away this balance that I was trying to get, this evenness of everybody having a vote, and that is the reason I am impatient with punctuation. Finally, I got obsessed with these enormously long sentences and long paragraphs.⁴⁴

While Stein was interested in making sense of the varied associations that words create in combination and context, how they must incessantly make sense of themselves, Williams was concurrently interested in how dissociating language from its natural tendencies might actually re-invigorate our understanding of language. His poetry critically distances the subject-object relationship inherently inscribed upon English and Latinate languages in the syntactic logic of the predicate. Through rigid enjambment, Williams hoped to re-frame the poem itself as the modality through which we create movement and action, that in placing the verb and the modifier on a separate line from the noun clause, we could immediately render a divide between the two (i.e. “The Red Wheelbarrow”).⁴⁵ Other modern poets took different approaches to complexity, with some delineating their focus on irrationality as a response to the present world situation. Wallace Stevens, for example, was an ardent advocate of ‘meaningless’ truth in poetry. In his *Aphorisms*, which are comprised of selections from his personal notebooks, Stevens makes consistent reference to irrationality as a general condition of poetry. The following aphorisms support this interpretation, each positing the maxim of the ‘irrational’:

Poetry must be irrational.

As the reason destroys, the poet must create.

Poetry is a search for the inexplicable.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 988.

⁴⁵ Williams, William Carlos, A. Walton Litz, and Christopher J. MacGowan. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*. Vol. 1. (New York: New Directions, 1986): 224.

A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have.⁴⁶

For Stevens, the poem resolves itself in a philosophic illogic, in the “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (“The Snow Man”, Stevens, 247). When Hart Crane submitted the elegy “At Melville’s Tomb” to the magazine *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe (the magazine’s editor and a close correspondent with Pound) requested that he compose an addendum to the poem explicating its difficulty. Crane reluctantly replied to this request in a letter, explaining the element of irrationality that inheres within the very nature of any poem. For him, there was no way to accurately summarize or reproduce the discourse of the poem outside of its very text; the text itself must forge an independent relationship with the reader, re-informing the poem with new meanings and interpretations. Crane was resolute in his belief that poetry exploits the inefficiencies of scientific rationalism by countering with the actuality of illogic:

It all comes to the recognition that emotional dynamics are not to be confused with any absolute order of rationalized definitions; ergo, in poetry the rationale of metaphor belongs to another order of experience than science, and is not to be limited by a scientific and arbitrary code of relationships either in verbal inflections or concepts.⁴⁷

Whether it was Stevens and Crane contending for an irrational order in poetry, Williams and Stein deconstructing the standards of linguistic formulations, or Pound and Eliot constructing the heteroglossic text through the heavy use of allusion and multiple languages, the modern poet was highly invested in the mechanisms that enable us to deal with difficulty and complexity.

⁴⁶ Stevens, Wallace. “Adagia.” Repr. in Repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, 972, 973, 974, and 975.

⁴⁷ Crane, Hart. “A Letter to Harriet Monroe.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 970.

III: 'Immediacy'

Anticipating the nuances that open form might add to poetry, D. H. Lawrence regulated *vers libre* through a poetics of immediacy. When we say immediacy, we mean that poetry finds its permanence only in transit, subjected to the flux of life but also relegated to the instantaneous writings that surface in response to the position of a distinct sense of temporality. Poetic language, according to Lawrence, should acclimate to the frame of reference of an immediate consciousness, one that is constantly undergoing shifts in both thought and perspective, but still leaps out to embolden itself in existence at specific moments. The language of poetry ought to beholden to its moment of utterance, an inherent 'presencing', as Lawrence notes in

The Poetry of the Present:

But there is another kind of poetry: the poetry of that which is at hand: the immediate present. In the immediate present there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished. The strands are all flying, quivering, inter-mingling into the web, the waters are shaking the moon.⁴⁸

There is an extent to which Imagism is also framed under this notion of the immediate, as Pound intended to utter the image directly, from a momentary scene. In defining poetic technique in his essay, *A Retrospect*, Pound lays out the critical importance of rendering the impulse in poetry:

Technique.—I believe in technique as the test of a man's sincerity; in law when it is ascertainable; in the trampling down of every convention that impedes or obscures the determination of the law, or the precise rendering of the impulse.⁴⁹

For Pound, the image might immediately be seen, but it then goes on to follow a paradigmatic ordering of meaning (having discourses layered 'vertically' as opposed to horizontal, syntagmatic meaning), so the immediacy of the image quickly jumps to

⁴⁸ Lawrence, D. H. "The Poetry of the Present." Repr. in *Ibid.*, 960.

⁴⁹ Pound, Ezra. "A Retrospect." Repr. in *Ibid.*, 934.

the symbolic realm of discourse and signification as new meanings immediately replace old ones via metaphor: this is the integrational level of description.⁵⁰ Roland Barthes later would argue that poetry is ordered in this paradigmatic manner as it immediately signifies elsewhere, yet quite a few modernists would take issue with this summation of poetry. Nevertheless, Pound's analysis of poetic technique, his emphasis on newness and his trampling poetic convention, require the immediacy of the impulse, of a 'presencing' of the moment in an atemporal field of logic constituted by the poem. This interpretation is solicited by Lawrence as well, though he provides more reasoning as to why this is necessary in poetry, arguing that it parallels the general conditions of life:

There must be mutation, swifter than iridescence, haste, not rest, come-and-go, not fixity, inconclusiveness, immediacy, the quality of life itself, without dénouement or close. There must be the rapid, momentaneous association of things which meet and pass on the forever incalculable journey of creation: everything left in its own rapid, fluid relationship with the rest of things.⁵¹

In order to accomplish the concomitant structure of the poem and life, Lawrence follows in Whitman's enormous shadow by positioning the self, the individual self, at the center of poetry, immediacy, and language. The individual is the medium by which all poetry arrives, thus poetry must accede to the demands and conditions of the individual consciousness. This complicated self, which was found earlier in Eliot's fragmented, compartmentalized consciousness in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," projects its actuality through a series of momentary utterances, each of which is subsumed by the ever-flowing, totalizing project of the self. It is Lawrence who notices "The most superb mystery we have hardly recognized: the immediate,

⁵⁰ Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 86.

⁵¹ Lawrence, D. H. "The Poetry of the Present." Repr. in Repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, 962.

instant self. The quick of all time is the instant. The quick of all the universe, of all creation, is the incarnate, carnal self.”⁵² Therefore, we understand the “modern” poem to be as characterized by the position of the self as by assertions of immediacy. But let us pause here, before the dense and winding road of modernism ensnares us, from Marinetti’s Futurism to Stein’s Realism, from key players in the movement of Negritude, like Césaire and Hughes in the Harlem Renaissance all the way to Objectivism and later movements such as the early New York School poets. We ought turn our attention to the matter at hand: the work of E. E. Cummings and its currently tenuous relationship with modernism.

Modern Cummings

E. E. Cummings, in my opinion unfortunately and unfairly, remains conspicuously absent from the modern academic corpus, his poems receiving mere passing interest in the widespread movement of poetic modernism. The reticence toward accepting him as a foundational shaker is thoroughly addressed by scholars of his work, yet there seems an equivalent disconnect in re-establishing the grounds upon which we can consider him “modern”, as Cummings criticism often focuses too extensively on his deviant semiological tactics to position him alongside his contemporaries. Since we understand Ezra Pound to be the focal point of early American and British modernism because of his lengthy anthologies and correspondences with other writers, it seems important to note that Cummings was also closely tied to Pound. In fact, the two of them had first met on the streets of

⁵² Ibid., 963.

Paris in 1921.⁵³ On this occasion, Scofield Thayer, the editor of *The Dial* and a close friend of Cummings since their days at Harvard, had introduced them to each other. This is not to suggest that the two of them were previously unaware of each other, as they had both been published in the same *Dial* magazine the year before (Pound's fourth Canto and Cummings' approving review of T. S. Eliot's *Poems*). Cummings had known of Pound long before even this. He was nine years younger and had already developed an appreciation for Pound's earlier work, including *Rispostes* and *Cathay*. The meeting between the two writers initiated a lifelong correspondence (Pound is famously known for the many letters he wrote to contemporary writers) and a considerable number of letters exchanged from the early twenties until Cummings' death in 1962. Pound's influential role in shaping Cummings' approach to poetry, however, goes relatively unrecognized in analyses of his poetry, being mentioned rather in biographical accounts as a short aside or footnote. Nonetheless, Pound set a precedent for Cummings, particularly through his poem "The Return", which Cummings had read in 1915 and thereafter consistently acknowledged as a starting point for his experiments in poetry. It might be helpful now to quote the poem in full since Cummings acknowledged its great influence on him, writing in a letter to his dear friend Ezra: "nor shall I ever forget the thrill I experienced on first reading 'The Return'."⁵⁴

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
Movements, and the slow feet,
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
Wavering!

⁵³ Barry Ahearn has thoroughly treated this point, compiling the entirety of these letters in his book *Pound/Cummings*. Ahearn, Barry. *Pound/Cummings: The Correspondence of Ezra Pound and E.E. Cummings*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996): 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

clear that he took the poem to heart: “EP[‘s “The Return”] gave me (the rudiments) of my writing style.”⁵⁶ As Cummings’ literary career developed, Pound tended to turn to the more political writings as examples of important contributions to modern poetic thought. In his anthology *From Confucius to Cummings*, Pound included Cummings’ poem “plato told”, an incendiary condemnation of the United States’ selling of scrap metals to Japan in the time leading up to World War II.⁵⁷ Pound frequently referenced this antiwar poem, being equally interested in the overwhelming greed of armament manufacturers and standing wholeheartedly against the malice entailed by war. He also enjoyed Cummings’ “i sing of Olaf glad and big”, a poem about Olaf, a conscientious objector who is ridiculed by his fellow soldiers but remains insistently opposed to their principles of patriotism. In this fashion, Pound had decidedly urged Cummings to write a book-form indictment of American politics in a similar vein of *Eimi*, Cummings’ free-language, free form novelistic attempt to describe his descent into the corruption of the Soviet Union (paralleling Dante’s descent into Hell in the *Inferno*). The language of the novel is akin to what Joyce had been doing with language in *Finnegan’s Wake*, a complete break from regulated rules of syntax in prose. Cummings would never write an American counterpart to the novel, for his political drives in poetry were different than those of Pound (with Cummings generally issuing sardonic indictments of political formations and practices as opposed to generating a method of improving them). So while Pound was interested in the social, political, and economic forces that drove the twentieth century,

⁵⁶ Sawyer-Lauçanno, 72.

⁵⁷ Pound, Ezra. *From Confucius to Cummings: An Anthology of Poetry*. (New York: New Directions Publ., 1964): 316-317.

Cummings seemed much more invested in taking his poetry elsewhere, away from materialist reality.

Before we begin to ascribe the title of eminent “modernist” to Cummings, we must understand the various ways in which he diverges from the basic tenets of the movement. This is not meant to differentiate him from the movement, taking into account that most “modern” poets exhibited multiple deviatory practices that isolated them from the general practices of modernism. Rather it is to understand why so many are reluctant to place him within the same category. This chapter’s analysis can only comprise a rudimentary examination of Cummings; his crucial themes will be more closely examined in the chapters that follow.

The first moment of divergence can be seen in his continual disavowal of an exclusive poetics of war found in Owen; Cummings, like Stevens, was criticized for what was termed an escapist poetics, one that ignored the conditions of modernity and the totalizing destruction of war. Though he does have moments at which he ventures to take up the subject, Cummings generally ignores the malaise produced by war, diverting his attention rather to those things which make us human and petitioning for the beauty of man. His ironies contort the tragic dilemma of the modern, proposing instead a response of laughter. Moreover, while the “modern” poet was developing a poetics of difficulty to respond to the difficulty of the world, Cummings was situating simplicity under complex terms:

In one sense, then, Cummings’ problem is the reverse of the modernist’s: rather than framing a complex mirror to reflect a complex reality, he is treating simple subjects and attitudes in a complicated way. And the complication is an attempt to freshen what might otherwise be taken as an ordinary idea and to wake it up for us.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Friedman, Norman. “E. E. Cummings and the Modernist Movement.” Repr. in Rotella, Guy L. *Critical Essays on E.E. Cummings*. (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984): 167.

Cummings was interested in popular language,⁵⁹ perhaps more akin to the Romantics, especially Wordsworth who had praised the use of a rustic, common language in his poetry. He held no concern as to whether or not this language conformed to the directness that Imagism hoped to achieve. Alternatively, he wanted to extol the innocent joy of the common man and of love. These things might appear simple, but for him they were inextricably complex, as his poems attest. His poetry grapples with the possibility of direct language in the modern age, proffering as the most direct language that which is abstracted upon the page (picture-poem). The suggestion is that language is always an immediate abstraction. Serving its purpose through a series metaphors and metonymies, language is always distanced from any reality or directness. Cummings' language is intended not to reach an exactness, but instead to multiply the layers of irony and meaning. Finally, the sticking point of the modern American poet was the use of the long-form poem. For Eliot it was "The Waste Land", with Mina Loy "The Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose", Crane "The Bridge" and Pound the "Cantos", and with Williams it was "Paterson" he hoped would "find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world around [him]."⁶⁰ Cummings did write several novels and plays, but he never felt the need to write the ambitiously comprehensive poem that many other modern writers did. In these ways, E. E. Cummings was separate from modernist tendencies.

Let us not take this as an outright concession on his part, since the rest of his

⁵⁹ For an analysis on his full connection to popular culture, see: Mullen, Patrick. B. "E. E. Cummings and Popular Culture." Repr. in *Ibid.*, 202-214.

⁶⁰ Quoted in the prefatory material to his poem. Like Cummings, Williams experimented with his own type of formalism, utilizing the lineation of the 'triad' in this and other poems. Quoted in Grigsby, Gordon K. *The Genesis of Paterson*. *College English*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Jan., 1962): 277.

work seems to fit the modernist mold quite well. Cummings expands upon modern principles from linguistics to difficulty to newness, offering them a new range of thought and technique that if overlooked would diminish the widest perspective appropriate for any study of modernist trends. In the various ways in which he is similar to and identifies with the modernist movement, we will find a poet who does more to inform modern thought than diminish it. First, he conceives of the world and all of poetry, for that matter, under the same terms of multiplicity and unity that substantiated the modernist perspective (alongside Eliot and Pound). He does this particularly in his construction of the self, a modern self that is subject to the flux of life. Freud's division of the consciousness into parts would set a precedent of selfhood for Cummings, as his self was as fragmented as his language. Moreover, his opposition to scientific rationalism positions him aside Stevens and Crane. This anti-intellectualism can be most succinctly shown through examples from his poetry:

O sweet spontaneous
earth how often have
the
doting

fingers of
prurient philosophers pinched
and
poked

thee
, has the naughty thumb
of science prodded
thy

beauty . how
often have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and

buffeting thee that thou mightiest conceive
gods
(but
true

to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover

thou answerest

them only with

spring) (CP 58)

Notice the similarity in “O sweet spontaneous” to “The Return”, the movement of language along the page. It is evident that Cummings took the tools of Pound’s poem to heart, expanding upon them more than Pound himself could have imagined. The poem speaks volumes to his hesitance toward rationality, celebrating here the spontaneous nature of the earth. The intent is to disengage poetry from appeals to objectivism, rigid philosophical thought and totalizing religious narratives, from “the naughty thumb of science.” It is an attempt to dislocate truth and place it in a sphere of meaning that responds only with the beauty and complexity of spring. He advocates the irrational choice often, for instance when he titles his third book of poems *is 5*, hinting at the illogical truth that two and two can equal five and the necessary implications of such a statement. Once more, in his *Introduction to New Poems*, he denigrates systematic logic:

Never the murdered finalities of wherewhen and yesno, impotent nongames of
wrongright and rightwrong;never to gain or pause,never the soft adventure of
undoom,greedy anguishes and cringing ecstasies of inexistence;never to rest and
never to have:only to grow. (CP 462)

By mercilessly combining words subject to dialectical tension, “yesno” and “wrongright,” he participates in a very modern project of deconstructing accepted meanings, expectations and logicalities. Never will he participate in these finalities of thought. Since language has already been freed from metered form, it must also be

freed from the impotent preclusions of meaning-based valuations, which are pre-constructed discursive projects that reject new freedoms in thought. He implores us to examine the connotative, rather than denotative meanings of words. But Cummings was interested in more than just making thought ‘new’, he would repeatedly illustrate that language needed to be released from the inherent regulation of syntax. Although the following poem does little to formally elucidate his break from syntactic devices, it takes up this project discursively, suggesting that a focus on formal conventions of language does little to enlighten how we think and, more importantly, love:

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 far 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 eachother: then
laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis (CP 291)

Here, being a fool is not valuable in that it illuminates a blind society of its failings, but rather being a fool is to be in love, and to be wholly alive. In “since feeling is first,” the response of the liveliest man is laughter, denying any gesture that the brain might impose and instead allowing oneself to live happily. Here we find the poetics of immediacy for which Lawrence was so strong an advocate, with language arriving as purely as thought. This will be one of Cummings’ great innovations, to render

poetry on the page that mimetically approaches the immediacy of thought, its multiple and shifting perspectives, its layered ironies. If it is the case that one thinks and lives in a world not ordered by syntax, and if poetry is truly about humanity and life, then should it not attempt to approach this style of thought-writing beyond even what Eliot's flow of consciousness proposes? In Cummings' poetry, the self interrupts itself consistently, moves from image to image, and thinks in an illogic that only it can fully appreciate. While others' work focuses on the imagination, Cummings actually replicates the process of imagination on the page. More than any other modern, more than H. D. and Pound and even Williams, Cummings invests in 'making language new', attune to true thought and consciousness. This is where the whole of his syntactic innovation rests. It will allow him to incorporate multiform uses of irony and connotation and align with moderns like Frost, whose poems take what may seem simple and provide it with all the complexity that modernism seeks.

Still critical, though, is Cummings' connection to other forms of art. Stein had herself exclaimed that painters were some of her greatest influences (from post-Impressionists like Cézanne to Cubists like Picasso),⁶¹ and many moderns would cultivate interests in a wide variety of artistic disciplines (so decisively that later, poets of the New York School would work at museums and produce art critiques). Cummings was a painter, and had initially considered himself first a painter, then a poet. When his art received little attention, and his poetry began to gain recognition, he did not give up on painting, continuing at it well through his later years. The inter-relation of several art forms was an important trope of the modern era, Pound was

⁶¹ Stein, 987-988.

incorporating translation and music, Hughes had an enormous infatuation with jazz and blues music leading him to write *The Weary Blues* in the form of sheet music, performing and recording a reading backed by Charles Mingus, and Cummings also played a critical role in this development. It is no surprise, then, to see his poems on the page with the understanding that his knowledge of art influenced his appreciation of the poem visually, and perhaps spurred his development of the picture-poem. To silence Cummings is to deny modernism the fullest extent of possibility and thought. All of these writers would, to an extent, disagree upon some principle of modernism; it is the weaving together of all these perspectives that generates a sense of poetic modernism. Cummings in many ways diverged from modern principles, but his divergence, like his acquiescence, was always fundamentally contingent upon newness, difficulty and immediacy. Yeats, in *The Symbolism of Poetry*, tells perhaps the most compelling tale of the modernist poet:

The form of sincere poetry, unlike the form of popular poetry, may indeed be sometimes obscure, or ungrammatical as in some of the best of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*,⁶² but it must have the perfections the escape analysis, the subtleties that have a new meaning every day, and it must have all this whether it be but a little song made of a moment of dreamy indolence, or some great epic made out of the dreams of one poet and of a generations whose hands were never weary of the sword.⁶³

⁶² Williams Blake's famous book of poetry, *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*, in which he illustrated a corresponding picture for each poem.

⁶³ Yeats, William Butler. "The Symbolism of Poetry." Repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003): 883.

Critical Reception

Let us now take into consideration how those critics have viewed Cummings, how their opinions have varied and finally how they have evolved over time. The case against Cummings as a modernist, as an experimentalist, and as a poet of canonical significance has been continually charged. This project attempts to place Cummings alongside the tradition of seminal, modern poetic influences. We will contend a discursive system of connotation produced by his deviant morphology. Cummings was also, though reluctantly, a politically litigious figure, lampooning abuses of power and issuing reprimands to religious indoctrination. We will discover that Cummings is in many ways a hyper-modernist, so far ahead of the times in his deconstructive poetics that his analyses suffered from deficient terminology, both symbolically and ontologically. This chapter analyzes the critics, finding that their views of the poet frequently say as much about themselves as critics, revealing the purposes and drives of twentieth century criticism and scholarship, its various strengths and weaknesses. The evident problem is that every time a critic takes up the task of resurrecting Cummings in a new light, he must first defend his choice of the poet, as if there were some omnipotent scorn that constantly chastises such an un-academic choice. Each critical undertaking begins with a justificatory claim, dismissing the skeptics and affirming a serious place in literary history for Cummings. Of the moderns, only Cummings was met with such contentious opinions; brazenly censured by his detractors and unabashedly praised by his supporters, each side was fervently involved. There is no hesitation in Cummings' criticism, the dividing lines are always clearly drawn. Surprisingly, more often than

not, critical reception stands on the side of admiration, waving high the flag of Cummings. Friedman's study of Cummings' criticism already sees this tendency toward approval as early as 1964:

I have read and analyzed roughly 325 essays and reviews concerning Cummings and his books, of varying length and quality, covering just forty years, and I want to report frankly that I was amazed and pleased to find that his supporters far outnumber his detractors...⁶⁴

Friedman finds that out of these 325 pieces of criticism, there are almost six times as many supporters as there are detractors. However, he keenly adds that we may not leave the subject at that. Oftentimes, his supporters are as misinformed as those that admonish his poetry, while many of those of the latter category formulate important analyses of Cummings' work. This is no clear-cut debate, the truth being that the majority of critics approach Cummings from either a limited or pre-conceived perspective, thus tacitly ignoring the real work at hand in Cummings' poetry. This is not to say that there does not exist a sizeable quantity of published books pertaining to the author. Friedman had noted twenty-one separate volumes published by the eighties.⁶⁵ However, no true luminary critics have taken the time to devote a lengthy analysis of his poetry, with famous critics like Richard Ellmann deliberating over the works of Joyce and Yeats instead. This formal undertaking awaits a serious commitment, and this thesis proposes to do just that. In recent years, the volumes of information available to us regarding Cummings and his work has increased slightly, enabling the more thorough and comprehensive analysis that his work deserves.

⁶⁴ Friedman's essays on the critical reception of Cummings are pivotal for categorizing and understanding the periodic approaches to Cummings' poetry, and this book contains four such articles. Friedman, Norman. "E. E. Cummings and His Critics." Repr. in Friedman, Norman. *(Re)valuing Cummings: Further Essays on the Poet, 1962-1993*. (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1996): 66.

⁶⁵ Friedman, Norman. "Further Developments in Cummings Criticism, 1976-1979." Repr. in *Ibid.*, 100.

Most significant to us is the availability of a couple of biographies,⁶⁶ a collection of his selected letters, as well as his assorted notes archived at the Houghton Library, each of which contributes to a fuller understanding of the poet at hand. Cummings was not just a poet, he was an artist, a New York socialite, and a real person whose biographical accounts add unforeseen depth to his poetry. We will begin periodically, organizing the critics chronologically, and subsequently enumerating their points of focalization and their major faults. Although scholarship tends toward the ineffectual side, we will find there has been a substantial amount of criticism produced in response to Cummings, and that this interest did not wane until after the eighties. Between the fifties and eighties, Cummings' criticism reached a peak, especially as more inclusive editions of his *Collected Poems* were released, giving critics the ability to gather and assess all his poetry at once.

The reviews of his poetry in the twenties are mixed, largely focusing upon his experimental language either as a distracting aspect or a praiseworthy one in its ushering in a new linguistic mode of poetics. It was in this decade that Cummings had published *Tulips & Chimneys*, *is 5*, *The Enormous Room*, and *Him*. The concern of critics, generally given in the form of a book review, is of a technical variety. Cummings was seen as a bohemian modernist, an experimentalist, a "conspicuous member of the avant-garde."⁶⁷ John Hyde Preston notices his overpowering care for and attention to words, calling him a grandchild of the French Symbolists. His review of *Him*, Cummings' play, is callous, calling to attention a maudlin

⁶⁶ That to which I refer, Sawyer-Lauçanno's biography, was published in 2004. Norman's *E. E. Cummings: The Magic Maker* came much earlier, in 1972.

⁶⁷ Friedman, Norman. "Beyond Villains and Heroes?" Repr. in *Ibid.*, 72.

sentimentality, and a lack of play-writing knowledge that makes his stage directions almost unintelligible.⁶⁸ S. Foster Damon counters this analysis of *Him*, contending instead that it falls in line with a long list of modern plays, including Strindberg's "Dream Play" later remodeled by Joyce and then Dos Passos in "Garbage Man".⁶⁹ Cummings' artistic language was deemed immature by the likes of Edmund Wilson, who argued his over-punctuation only distracts from the poem, that "his poems are hideous on the page".⁷⁰ John Peale Bishop applauds Cummings' abilities with language, but also argues that at times his phrases break from control and result in a "verbal Bedlam".⁷¹ Some critics, like the acclaimed editor of *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe, went as far as to remove all instances of linguistic irregularity in re-printing Cummings:

(Right here is due a parenthetical apology. Mr. Cummings has an eccentric system of typography which, in our opinion, has nothing to do with the poem, but intrudes itself irritatingly, like scratched or blurred spectacles, between it and the reader's mind. In quoting him, therefore, we are trying the experiment of printing him almost like anybody else, with the usual quantity of periods, commas, capital letters, and other generally accepted conventions of the printer's art.)⁷²

Thirty years later, Cummings would receive the Harriet Monroe Prize from her magazine.⁷³ The problem with critics from this era was their resistance toward accepting the fragmented and the difficult, and understanding that there stands ground to be gained from this technique. John Dos Passos, in perhaps the most modern fashion of any critic, commends the fragmentary nature of his writing in *The Enormous Room*, comparing the rhythms of American speech in his work to those of

⁶⁸ Preston, John Hyde. "Drama in Extremis." Repr. in Rotella, Guy L. *Critical Essays on E.E. Cummings*. (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984): 52-54.

⁶⁹ Damon, S. Foster. "Cummings' *Him*." Repr. in *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁰ Wilson, Edmund. "Wallace Stevens and E. E. Cummings." Repr. in *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷¹ Bishop, John Peale. "Incorrect English." Repr. in *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷² Monroe, Harriet. "Flare and Blare." Repr. in *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷³ Sawyer-Lauçanno, 477.

Carl Sandburg and Sherwood Anderson. His criticism accurately foregrounds the various aspects of modernism that gelled in the upcoming decade:

The Enormous Room seems to me to be the book that has nearest approached the mood of reckless adventure in which men will reach the white heat of imagination needed to fuse the soggy disjointed complexity of the industrial life about us into seething fluid of creation.⁷⁴

This is what we will come to find so clear in Cummings, the disjointed reality of the world and the self, and the necessary constructions of imagination that deal with our flux world. The two had been friends in college, working together on the *Monthly*, and so his admiration of Cummings is no surprise (they had in fact just recently published a compilation together entitled *Eight Harvard Poets*).⁷⁵ Maurice Lesemann identifies the modern stream of consciousness in Cummings, relating it to Joyce. He ultimately condemns Cummings for what he finds to be a lyrical fascination, a Romantic, Elizabethan embroidery of sound to his work, and concludes that Cummings is not inclined to comment on the present situation of the world.⁷⁶ Slater Brown, who had accompanied Cummings during his imprisonment in France, interestingly notes his knowledge of Cummings as a painter, suggesting that his pictorial grasp of the poetic page makes words “like planes in an abstract painting.”⁷⁷ This will be an important development in Cummings scholarship, as later theorists will go further in establishing the connection between Cummings’ poetry and his expressionist, cubist, and Dadaist influences. The poets, like Marianne Moore, generally resound with praise and appreciation of his poetry. She contends that he

⁷⁴ Dos Passos, John. “*Off the Shoals*.” Repr. in Rotella., 34.

⁷⁵ The compilation, *Eight Harvard Poets*, was printed in August of 1917. It included Cummings, John Dos Passos, S. Foster Damon, Robert Hillyer, Dudley Poore, Cuthbert Wright, and William Norris and R. S. Mitchell. All their names were printed in typical modernist fashion (with the first condensed into a single, bold letter). Sawyer-Lauçanno, 92-100.

⁷⁶ Lesemann, Maurice. “*The Poetry of E. E. Cummings*.” Repr. in Rotella, 49-52.

⁷⁷ Brown, Slater. “*Review of Tulips & Chimneys*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 38.

shapes the very progress of his poems, that “Cummings is fanciful, yet faithful to that verisimilitude of eye and of rhetoric which is so important in poetry.”⁷⁸ Overall, the twenties were littered with scattered, brief critiques of Cummings and his poetic project. Generally, these are simplistic, short encounters with his work that do little to cement a theory of critical reception, rather opening up Cummings into further decades for analysis and expansion of these initial forays into his language.

The thirties saw the publication of *Viva, Eimi, No Thanks*, and *Collected Poems*. The critics of this decade had more time to understand Cummings, and were around for the first completion of a *Collected Poems* in 1938, though the selection of poetry is remiss in disorganizing his poetry and omitting a wealth of critical poems. In this period, criticism became more politically focused, as critics acknowledged his anti-rational and anti-intellectual tenets. Also on trial was his sense of individualism, with some critics warning of his derivation from earlier poets, and others noticing the individualist principles suggested by his poetry. Allen Tate faulted Cummings for not showing any growth as a writer, remaining a distant personality that never reveals his emotional stance, a wholly internalizing poet who resides in the machinations of his own mind. According to Tate, Cummings’ emotion is feigned by a mechanized system of typography that superimposes an external formula of surprise onto the poem when this is not always the poem’s criterion.⁷⁹ He also criticizes Cummings for not distinguishing himself from the influence of poets like Keats and Swinburne. Horton and Mangan propose a similar critique, claiming that Cummings shows no intellectual development or improvement over the course of fifteen years. His satires

⁷⁸ Moore, Marianne. “*People Stare Carefully*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁹ Tate, Allen. “*Personal Convention*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 56.

are, to them, only minor tributaries of cheap burlesque techniques, and making spring, love and death the basis for his universal discourse is viewed as a lack of imagination and courage.⁸⁰ Kenneth Burke comes to similar conclusions regarding his sentimental, and abrasively sexualized, poetics: “much of his wider scope is devoted to cryptic naughtiness of an immature sort, a somewhat infantile delight in the sexual parts, alembicated confessions that seem unnecessarily shy and coy.”⁸¹ This would become a charge repeatedly leveled against Cummings: that his poetry is of the innocence of a child, holding no informative or instrumental, logical qualities of a typical writer. While Burke likes some of Cummings’ work, he has no affinity for his political and economic tirades. These are not qualified with a decent historical and social texture enough to affirm them, and they are seen as the indiscriminate ridiculing of instantaneous fancy. Though there are those who write in favor of Cummings, even politically (we already know Pound to be of this category). Francis Fergusson cites *Eimi* as a critical work in the destabilization of the totalitarian state, while retaining a value for the wonderful people and cities of Russia.⁸² He witnesses the poet making a composition out of the fragmentary responses of his sensibility in a very modern fashion. William Troy, he notices, was of the first to begin to formulate a poetics of immediacy in analyzing Cummings. But it is R. P. Blackmur who sets the standard in this era for the critical reception of Cummings. Blackmur groups Cummings in the anti-culture tradition, of the “assertion that the unintelligible is the

⁸⁰ Horton, Phillip and Sherry Mangan. “*Two Views of Cummings.*” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸¹ Burke, Kenneth. “*Two Kinds of Against.*” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸² Fergusson, Francis. “*When We Were Very Young.*” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 58.

only object of significant experience.”⁸³ He debases Cummings for his immediacy and his tawdry realism, saying that he forgets that poetry can be no private musing grounded in the style of he who experiences an emotion. Yet his most threatening critique is in charging Cummings with an evasive vocabulary, “a vagueness of image and a constant recurrence of words.”⁸⁴ He suggests that the meaning of a word is anterior to its uses, but that Cummings ignores these strictures of language and instead deadens a word into a nebulous image each time he re-uses it in his poetry. The basic cavil is that there is no consistent apparatus for his imagery, that his key words are never concrete but always abstract, and that in Cummings’ deconstructive approach to language he only substitutes one set of conventions for another and masks this maneuver with the “snag of novelty”. As these arguments are referred to voluminously in reprimanding Cummings for his ‘frivolous’ applications of words, let us take a moment to refute them and expostulate a history of scornful criticism that ensued after Blackmur.⁸⁵ What an impossible to imperative to heave at any poet, for could we imagine that each time a poet scribbled a word he intended the same exact set of meanings as every other instance of the word in his poetry. Blackmur demands a precision of language that Cummings sees as no longer possible in the poem. These precisions force language into a pre-constructed, denotative framework that Cummings is perpetually trying to avoid. His poetry prefers the possibility of connotative meaning, of informing the word contextually. While words arrive at our

⁸³ Blackmur, R. P. “Notes on E. E. Cummings’ Language.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 107.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁸⁵ In his review of *[Viva]*, William Carlos Williams retorts the arguments of Blackmur, addressing what he sees as “not uniformity of style,” but as an aggregate of an image of Cummings’ personality. Williams, William Carlos. *E. E. Cummings [Viva]*. Repr. in Friedman, Norman. *E. E. Cummings: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972): 72.

doorstep muddled by a plethora of inherited meanings, Cummings would rather re-arrange these words situationally; each Cummings poem is a new investigation of each word used. Even Blackmur is willing to admit that other poets, the likes of “Surrey, Crashaw, Marvell, Burns, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Swinburne,”⁸⁶ have faltered in this regard. So while we admit Blackmur’s contentions with Cummings, we also notice that there is a serious lack of sufficient terminology to frame this debate in the early thirties, preventing Blackmur from understanding the potency of a fundamentally deconstructive language (considering that deconstruction as a philosophical principle would not even be coined until Derrida in the late sixties, though tentatively existing in some of Heideggerian thought).⁸⁷ This does not simply replace a system with another, but rather obliterates that system through a process of inversion, and is the curious case of Cummings’ deviant linguistics. Altogether, the thirties pushed Cummings forward, contesting his political positions and questioning again his uses of language. His reception in this period is twofold: an appreciation for the social commentaries and technical innovations, yet an equal condemnation of the anti-intellectualism, the inability to render concrete poetry, and the lack of a thematic and technical development.

In the forties, his plays *Anthropos* and *Santa Claus* received sparse interest, but his two collections of poetry, *50 Poems* and *1 x 1*, garnered serious attention from many critics. In Blackmur’s review of *50 Poems*, he begins to yield to the power of Cummings’ poetry. He actually asserts that he has been a fan of Cummings from the

⁸⁶ Blackmur, 113.

⁸⁷ By deconstructive, we mean a language that systematically inverts, manipulates, and overcomes orthodoxy. It is interesting that Blackmur retracts his statement about Cummings in a later essay in the forties, just after Césaire had written “*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*,” and as other poets were adopting the tools of deconstructive poetics.

onset, and that Cummings is now allowing his poetic lexicon to ossify in ways that he had been unable to see in 1931 with his first review of the poet. He believes that there remains a distinct possibility that Cummings' system of private notation might attain a tenable precision.⁸⁸ He does not, however, completely unshackle Cummings from any criticism. Where Blackmur's review is balanced, other critics, such as Bogan, Nemerov, and Weiss, would harshly rebuke Cummings for his inability to develop poetically. F. O. Matthiessen is of concern here, insisting that there is a static quality to Cummings' poetry, that the work is all of the same innovation and monotonous.⁸⁹ Detractors are adverse to Cummings' inability to offer any alternative to the decimated 'unworld' he creates. On the other hand, his admirers proclaim the poet's maturity and growth. Peter DeVries takes a critical step forward in Cummings' analysis in his essay "To Be". Addressing the ontological nature of Cummings' poetry, DeVries finds that the manipulation of nouns into verbs delineates a sense of ontological becoming.⁹⁰ He apprises the novelty of each poem, recognizes the significance of love in his poetics, and glosses over moments of bitter satire. This work will play a decisive role in shaping the Cummings' scholarship of the future, and serves as a simplistic realization of the project of this thesis.

The fifties began a period of much more intensely focused scholarship on Cummings. The amount of criticism nearly doubled and remained so for the following two decades. Cummings published *Xaipe, i:SIX NONLECTURES*, *95 Poems*, and most importantly a set of *Collected Poems* up to 1954 that served as the

⁸⁸ Blackmur, R. P. "Review of 50 Poems." Repr. in Rotella, 70.

⁸⁹ Matthiessen, F. O. "Review of 1 x 1." Repr. in Ibid., 77.

⁹⁰ DeVries, Peter. "To Be." Repr. in Ibid., 74.

basis for an holistic approach to his poetry. This decade was defined by an overwhelming investigation of the moralizing qualities of Cummings. Randall Jarrell notes that his poems will be popular for a long time for their sentimentality and humor, though he also finds a suspicious lack of a tragic element. He says that the reader must lower the demands of art to incorporate Cummings, that his poetry leaves a moral vacuum and his childish tone forces his anger to seem like petulance.⁹¹ In Edward M. Hood, there is a total revulsion against the “vapidity of language” in Cummings. He notes that distorting language is not quite enough to create language anew. More importantly, he contends the “impenetrable visual complexity of the surface” strikes only the eye, but not the ear, that his recalcitrance of experience through fragmentation is mere “drab conventionality”. For Hood, Cummings in no way avoids the cliché in his poetry, only concealing it in his language and rendering Cummings a statically “aging but incorrigible Child of the Twenties”.⁹² John Berryman is also confounded by the inability to develop in *95 Poems*, according to him the deepest feelings scarcely emerge.⁹³ He interestingly notes that there is little mention in this book of aging, of becoming older, and Cummings clearly resists grappling with its reality. There is an increase in this period in essays that perform a close analysis of individual poems, most likely resultant of the pressures of New Criticism. We also find here the first publication of a biography of Cummings in Charles Norman’s *The Magic-Maker: E. E. Cummings*. The work is appreciative of Cummings, but also provides insight into the poet himself, his life and relationships.

⁹¹ Jarrell, Randall. “Review of *Xaipe*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 81.

⁹² Hood, Edward M. “Review of *95 Poems*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 92-95.

⁹³ Berryman, John. “Review of *95 Poems*.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 91.

George Haines IV, Barbara Watson, and Ralph J. Mills all make significant contributions in this era, the first criticizing Cummings for his easy placement within satiric and lyric categories, and the other two approaching Cummings as a political, social poet.⁹⁴ S. V. Baum contends that Cummings' sense of immediacy derives from the devices of his presentation and his destabilizing syntax.⁹⁵ Other critics like Von Abele produce pivotal analyses of the semiological functions of Cummings' linguistics, finally adopting the formal processes of a philological approach.⁹⁶ This paved the way for his language to be functionally admitted into serious discourses. John Logan determined a new method of investigating the poetry, focusing on his links to the visual arts and contending that his non-representational, visual abstractions are only ornamental where the reader fails to see their value.⁹⁷ Some critics return to earlier works and begin to develop legitimate analyses of these works that had heretofore been discussed within the confines of a few solemn, hasty pages.⁹⁸ Altogether, however, this period saw less attention paid to Cummings than other moderns, as his personal and un-allusive poetry was seen in contrast to the impersonal, hyper-analytic critical and literary fashion of the period.

The fifties then gave way the sixties and the seventies, and a better awareness of Cummings' poetic project began to develop. Horace Gregory sees this critical shift and notes that Cummings' scholarship has been more approving in the last ten years.

⁹⁴ Haines and Mills will arise again in this thesis, but Watson's essay is only mentioned here. She makes the argument that Cummings rebels against modernization, commending Cummings and placing his poetry in the modernist tradition. Watson, Barbara. "E. E. Cummings' *Revolt Against the Future*." Repr. in Friedman, Norman. "E. E. Cummings: A Collection of Critical Essays." (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972): 31-45.

⁹⁵ Baum, S. V. "E. E. Cummings: *The Technique of Immediacy*." Repr. in *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹⁶ Von Abele, Rudolph. "Only to Grow": *Change in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings*. *PMLA*, Vol. 70, No. 5 (Dec., 1955): 913-933.

⁹⁷ Logan, John. "Six of One and Six Hundred of the Other." Repr. in Rotella, 81-85.

⁹⁸ Rotella, Guy L. *Critical Essays on E.E. Cummings*. (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984): 5-6.

His focus is on the process of ‘becoming’ in Cummings’ poetry.⁹⁹ Critics like Norman Friedman, the pre-eminent Cummings scholar, solidified their stance on Cummings’ transcendental vision, and started to propose Cummings alongside modern tendencies. There is more focus on linguistic analyses of Cummings, likely because his tools of violating traditional syntax made him a perfect subject for the newly developing theories of linguistics analysis (see Cureton and Gaull). Tal-Mason Cline proposes to synthesize Cummings, allowing his poetry to grow into a whole, totalizing outlook.¹⁰⁰ There is also a deeper focus on his use of humor and satire, as critics such as Clendenning, Schroeder, and Ray outline the comedic and satiric effects of his poetry.¹⁰¹ With the publication of a biography, many critics become focused on how Cummings’ life contributed to his work, as Kennedy who gives a portrait of his father and suggests the influence he had on Cummings. Or, in the case of Robert V. Shaw, the collected letters of Cummings enable a nuanced take on the poet, as they are trickily filled with the same language used in his poetry; they are, in fact, poetic products.¹⁰² The work of this period exhibits a relatively more positive response to Cummings. However, there remain detractors such as Carl Bode and Clive James.¹⁰³ The former questions the novelty in his poetry and suggests that this restricts his poetry, while the latter fears the actuality of utilizing Cummings’ poetry. Helen Vendler calls him an indignant voice, one that does not grow over his career in

⁹⁹ Gregory, Horace. “E. E. Cummings.” Repr. in *Ibid.*, 95-97.

¹⁰⁰ Tal-Mason Cline, Patricia Buchanan. *The Whole E. E. Cummings. Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (July, 1968): 90-97.

¹⁰¹ We will discuss Schroeder and Ray in the chapter on satire, but Clendenning makes a serious contention about Cummings as a satirist as well, see: Clendenning, John. *Cummings, Comedy, and Criticism. Colorado Quarterly*, Vo. 12 (1968): 44-53.

¹⁰² Shaw, Robert B. “Review of *Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings.*” Repr. in Rotella, 98-99.

¹⁰³ Clive, James. *An Instrument to Measure Spring With. The Review*, No. 2 (1969): 38-48.

his refusal to be acknowledged by the intelligentsia through the murderous devaluation of the intellect.¹⁰⁴ On the whole, this period saw an overwhelming excitement over Cummings, a renewed interest in his work, especially with the developments of post-modern thought, linguistic and anti-structuralist, that shed new light on his poetry.

After this period of heavy criticism, Cummings criticism has stagnated, leaving academic discourses and ossifying under the terms pronounced by Friedman. There have been few contemporary investigations of Cummings' poetry, with each stint only resulting in hurried generalizations of dense poems and a concordant synthesis affirming Friedman's transcendent vision. These new analyses do little to broaden the scope of Cummings, limiting him within a system out-dated discourse and thereby denying him access to the poetic pantheon of modernism. How conspicuous it is that a writer whose stature was just beginning to cement itself in the canon with the fervent support of the critics of the sixties and seventies would lose considerable steam in the following decades as his poetry became viewed as overtly simplistic, popular, and already entirely understood by previous critics. Though later stints in analysis exist, there is Heusser's fundamental investigation of selfhood, they are few and far between. The question is whether we ought return to Cummings, especially in light of the tepid connection established between him and modernism, in order to refurbish our understanding of this seminal poet. Even critics who had earlier lambasted Cummings would later qualify their contentious claims with a modicum of respect (those that come to mind are Winfield Towley Scott and R. P.

¹⁰⁴ Vendler, Helen. "Review of *Complete Poems 1913-1962*." Repr. in *Ibid.*, 99-105.

Blackmur). What we must notice is that Cummings' poetry is to be taken seriously, that although his poems might take traditional subjects, like death or love or a flower, they systematically remake these subjects. This could not be more modern, as Friedman intuitively observes "Pound and Eliot also present traditional subjects in experimental forms."¹⁰⁵ Again, he is modern in the very experiences he had, as "he had vividly recorded at first hand two of the most significant events of our century—the beginnings in World War I of concentration-camp existence, and the subsequent rise of the Soviet state."¹⁰⁶ The truth is, that after all this criticism, we are still blind to the totality of Cummings' project. He is no more than a modernist afterthought, a secondary poet to provide at best one or two poems that briefly present some of his linguistic capabilities and none of his discursive ones. In tying Cummings to the modernist tradition, John Logan accurately summarizes the power of Cummings' poetry, his humor and gusto, and the apparent discrepancy between the thorough analyses of other moderns and the reticent reluctance toward fully embracing Cummings:

Stevens is more genteel and gorgeous, Eliot more reflective and more religious, W. C. Williams more perfect in ear and cadence, Marianne Moore more academic and more precious, Pound more versatile and more outrageous, Frost more violent and more pastoral. But Cummings is the most provocative, the most sentimental, the funniest, the least understood.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Friedman, Norman. "Beyond Villains and Heroes?" Repr. in Friedman, Norman. *(Re)valuing Cummings: Further Essays on the Poet, 1962-1993*. (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1996): 84.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 84.

¹⁰⁷ Logan, John. "The Organ-Grinder and the Cockatoo: An Introduction to E. E. Cummings." Repr. in Mazzaro, 270.

The (Mode)rn (of) Language

The emphasis on re-inventing language was not new to modernism, though it became a sticking point of the movement. One can go much further into the past and find several examples of poets who saw the written language as an enabling force, one that placed emphasis on more than just the sonorous aspects of poetry. What came to be discovered was that the actual layout of the page had a sincere influence on the reader, that one approaches a poem by first engaging with it visually, upon the page. The pictorial element of written poetry took hold notably so in John Keats' poetry, of the second generation of Romantic poets. His odes are masterfully crafted pieces, carefully arranging stylized systems of indentation that propose new interrelations of lines, spreading the ode out along the page. Gerard Manley Hopkins would follow his example. Many of his sonnets were beautifully orchestrated across the page, highlighting the aesthetic value of the pictorial representation of the poem. That formally, poetry had yet to fully embrace the visual aspects of form was seen as an impetus to begin to experiment with this method of poetic artistry. While both of these poets began to formally construct poetic specimen that were intricately layered affronts to standard indentation and traditional conceptions of caesura, they both also did so systematically, fashioning line indentations that adhered to an overall system. This formal rigidity could only do so much to challenge a formal tradition that paid little respect to visual aesthetic of the poem. What Apollinaire, the French Surrealist poet, did to enhance the visual effects of poetry was astounding, laying the groundwork for a liberal pictorial vision that Cummings and other modernists would embrace. In *Calligrammes*, his specialized use of concrete poetry, or poetry that pays

attention to the typography and layout in constructing the overall effect of the poem, expanded the range of freedom of formal poetic thought. Poems such as “Heart”, which reads “my heart like a flame turned upside down”, and arranges the letters of the French words according to the design of a heart, literally illustrate the visual effect of a sentence by creating a picture of a heart, which, if turned upside down, looks much alike a flame. Once again, in “It’s Raining” he manipulates the sentences to stream sideways down the page in an approximation of the rain itself. In “The Carnation”, the words form the image of a flower with thorns or leaves protruding from the stem. The best example of this rendering of the poetic image, though, is in “The Mirror”, in which Apollinaire places himself inside of his own linguistic mirror:

DANS
 FELTS CE
 RE MI
 LES ROIR
 SONT JE
 ME SUIS
 COM Guillaume EN
 NON CLOS
 ET Apollinaire VI
 GES VANT
 AN ET
 LES VRAI
 NE COM
 GI ME
 MA ON
 I

*MIRROR

In this mirror I am enclosed living and true as one imagines angels not as reflections are
 Guillaume Apollinaire¹⁰⁸

The influence of a poem like this on language in modern poetry is apparent, as the intent of the visual structure goes beyond merely enclosing the poet within his own

¹⁰⁸ Apollinaire, Guillaume, and Roger Shattuck. *Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire*. (New York: New Directions Pub., 1971): 166-167.

visual mirror of words. The words themselves must be fragmented in order to create the image, confounding any approach to reading this poem according to a logical, line-by-line process of caesura. This reading would only obscure the poem more, forcing awkward sounds and pauses that retain no significance in the analytic consideration of this poem. Instead, the sentence is meant to be read as a whole, once it has been completed, and the fragmentary nature of words must be glossed over in order to appreciate the totality of the poem. Here we find the tension between unity and multiplicity, between centripetal and centrifugal forces. It was alongside this preoccupation with language, with the picture-poem, that Cummings would undertake his modern project: the formation of a 'new' linguistic poetics to radically alter the status quo and open up new possibilities of form and meaning. Cummings, then, more than any other modern innovator of language (except perhaps Joyce), more than Williams' contained, generative, and wildly deconstructive language, more than Stein's and Loy's conditionings of syntactic dislocation and polysemous neologisms (the modern notion that the individual sign proliferates to new meanings and situates an internally, as well as contextually, based system of logic), would take language to new heights in his poetry. When critics contend that his writing positions itself for the eye alone (Korg and Blackmur), they misinterpret the crux of his linguistic project, which is to escape being "the victim of a debilitating intellectual determinism, reduced to interpreting his environment and experience passively according to the predisposition of an inherited language."¹⁰⁹ It is a discursive project,

¹⁰⁹ Cummings' project is in restoring value to a benumbed language. In many ways, he aligns with the semanticists, in particular "Korzybski, Richards, Sapir and Hayawaka," who retaliated against the orthodoxy of words:

and a deconstructive one at that, entirely dismantling and manipulating language at will to achieve the desired effects of immediacy, variability, and connotative multiplicity.

The extent to which E. E. Cummings' poetry manipulates the English language, his additive prefixes and suffixes, the confluences of words, the radical use of punctuation, and his deviant morphological approach to grammar, is of great importance to the development of modern thought and writing. Never again would the language of poetry be the same (especially considering Eliot's notion of an atemporal field of art). The poem as picture is a tactic thoroughly analyzed, though it does not encompass the full depth to which his manipulation of language strives. Before we dive directly into the individual poems that display his linguistic maneuvers, it is important to begin with his production of new combinations of words and modifiers to semantically dislocate the sense from any conditioned logic.¹¹⁰ In his nuanced and unique style, Cummings creates word combinations that challenge both our conception of English as a language as well as the reader's ability to reconcile these new linguistic formulations. Richard Cureton, in a wonderful analysis of Cummings as a deviant morphologist, systematically categorizes the various permutations of language in his work. We will take three of his groupings, the use of

"But the semanticists, rejecting any necessary correspondence between words and their referents, claimed that symbols acquire meaning or value according to the way they are used. This functional approach to language implied for the individual a means of interpreting experience creatively, on the basis of what he knew as opposed to what language allowed him to believe. By extension, then, the functional approach to language could assure the survival of the personality or identity during a period of shifting values, incoherent events, and, most ominously, rising mechanization." Gaull, Marilyn. *Language and Identity: A Study of E. E. Cummings' 'The Enormous Room'*. *American Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 4, (Winter, 1967), 647.

¹¹⁰ Semes can be considered the base-unit of semantics, of a meaning-based epistemology. For Barthes, this is one of the five major codes under which all textual signifiers can be grouped, being determined by connotation, especially in the agglomerative space of a nebulae of signifieds. Barthes, Roland, Honoré De Balzac, Richard Miller, and Richard Howard. *S/Z*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974): 8.

‘un-’, ‘-ingly’, and ‘fully’, in order to initially enter into the neo-logistic orderings of Cummings’ poetry.¹¹¹ Consistently in Cummings’ work, we find the prefix ‘un-’ used in front of either a nominal, adjectival, or verbal clause. In the case of the combination of ‘un-’ and a nominal clause (‘unworld’, ‘unearth’, ‘unlife’, ‘ungod’), Cummings produces semantic deviance by exploiting the inherent gap in the English language that there are no nouns substantiated by the prefix ‘un-’. The strategy here is clear, the coining of these words is meant to dislodge the logic of the nominal base, ascribing it an oppositional characteristic that otherwise cannot exist. What, in fact, is an ‘unworld’? Cummings seems to use the word in a deconstructive sense, inverting the nominal base and instantiating a new point from which to depart. He creates a poetic ‘unworld’ filled with ‘unthings’ in order to suggest that while English cannot bear these meanings naturally, they are still inherently dichotomized nouns. There is at once life and ‘unlife’, man and ‘unman’, the world and the ‘unworld’. When added to a verbal base, ‘un-’ works as either a reversitive or negative prefix. In this sense, the combination retracts the process that the verbal clause entails, forcing things to ‘ungrow’. And how else to properly induce the effect of the oppositional sense of growing? One can regress, or perhaps diminish, but how exactly could Cummings have incorporated the precise opposite of all that entails the process of growth aside from negating it with a prefix that does not function according to traditional syntax? With these clauses, he also uses the prefix to challenge the possibility of stative verbs. By writing ‘unbe’ and ‘unexist’, Cummings is creating a world in which these tasks

¹¹¹ The following section is thoroughly indebted to Cureton’s analysis of Cummings’ morphological manipulations. Cureton, Richard D. E. E. *Cummings: A Study of the Poetic Use of Deviant Morphology*. *Poetics Today* Vo. 1, No. 1/2 (Autumn, 1979): 213-44.

(being and existing), generally not consciously performative tasks, can be viewed as reversible actions. Finally, with adjectival-bases, the use of ‘un-‘ reads much more fluently in a grammatical sense. Combined with the prefix, the adjectival clause charges the word with the meaning attributed to its pre-existent antonym. These inversions of language re-invent the original seme in a whole new system of oppositional meaning that the English language would otherwise restrict. Cureton also makes the argument that Cummings issues a direct challenge to the reader by forcing him to make gradable (answering to conditions of how, why and so) adjectives that are otherwise not so. By using the suffix ‘-ingly’ with a large variety of verbal stems (‘climbingly’, ‘kneelingly’, ‘liftingly’), he creates new ‘manner’ adverbs that bring the position of the reader out from the text. In this way, “Cummings exploits a morphological selectional restriction for an otherwise unobtainable poetic effect”¹¹²:

Because the grammatical system of English demands that manner adverbs be formed from gradable adjective bases, each time Cummings coins an adverb from a non-gradable base he forces the reader to grade the adjective involved. (That is, the reader must create a world in which phrases such as the very kneeling dusk are possible.) In the process, the reader must extend, fragment, and differentiate the base concept until he can produce a concept of sufficient complexity that it can be graded.¹¹³

So too with his inclusion of the suffix ‘-fully’ does Cummings challenge the system of language. Generally, this suffix would only correspond to states-of-mind types of adjectives (thoughtfully, carefully, hopefully), but Cummings uses the suffix with adjectives and nouns that are clearly not states-of-mind (‘flutterfully’, ‘childfully’, ‘mistfully’). The effect of this linguistic manipulation is that it evinces

¹¹² Ibid., 228.

¹¹³ Ibid., 228.

personification and animate characteristics in inanimate words, forcing the reader to reify them in the field of action that is the poem. This project is wholly modern, to make even the most individual word ‘new’, and to create a textual relationship between the poet and the reader that informs the word with a new set of meanings. It would be unwise to go any further without delving into Cummings’ peculiar linguistic manipulations, his deviant morphology, his syntactic re-structuring of standard English. The problem with Cureton’s rigorous and systematic analysis of Cummings’ semantic deviance is that each instance of Cummings’ poetry ought be taken individually, as a unique poetic moment, re-framing the language of the world and superimposing a new logic of language upon it. The poems quoted in this section are taken largely from his book, [*Viva*], and attest to a veritable intentionality in Cummings’ experimental linguistics.

By using compound words and phrases, Cummings hopes to propose new hybridities of language, doubled meanings that can multiply the possibility of the individual morpheme. Often resulting in ‘portmanteau’ words, or combinations like smog (smoke and fog) that conflate two separate morphemes or words into a single semantic construction, they appropriately connote both meanings at once. Words like “greyrockfaces” or “he-shes” serve this purpose, but also create semantic irregularities by conflating oppositional meanings in the latter, or in the former creating a single object out of multiple descriptors. The end of the poem “the surely” accurately presents these linguistic combinations:

uPDownwardishly
find everywheres noisecoloured
curvecorners gush silently perpetuating solids(More
fluid Than gas (CP 313)

With language, Cummings is actually creating what he believes to be solids that are more fluid than gas. Combining up with down and curve with corner, the movement in this poem is contained within a system of duality compressed upon itself; earlier in the poem phrases such as “Forwardflung backwardSpinning” take a violent movement and assure its static position: both flung and spinning, backward and forward. The wild possibilities of movement in the poem suggest the creative possibilities of new combinations and hybridities of language. When the reader comes across ‘noisecoloured’, he actually generates the coloring of sound by reading these two words as one, allowing for a composite word and meaning altogether. His language goes as far as to presuppose our understanding of words, so in other poems when he mentions “helves surling out of eakspeasies per(reel)hapsingly” (CP 331), we can understand relatively what he means despite his mingling of letters that should dislocate our complete sense of these words. The rest of this sonnet practices the joining of words into hybrid constructions, discussing people “curselaughgroping” and the action “squirmwrithed”. Combining words, adding new prefixes and suffixes, are the manners by which Cummings renders English in a ‘new’ fashion, creating his own system of logic through which to approach poetry.

In addition to combining words to form his language, Cummings also employs the fragmentation of the individual word in order to create new meanings, emphasizing particular senses of the word that would otherwise be ignored. His split of the word occurs both at the level of lineation for syllabic accentuation and at that of isolating individual letters to add depth or meaning to a word. He does this

magnificently in “i was considering how”, by fragmenting a word through lineation to the point at which it instantiates the very meaning of the word rhythmically:

nibbling in-

fin

-i-

tes-

i

-mal-

ly devours

darkness the

hungry star

which

will e

-ven

tu-

al

-ly jiggle (CP 65)

The words ‘in/fin/i/tes/i/mal/ly’ and ‘e/ven/tu/al/ly’ are both so broken down that one must read them slowly, pronounce (even if silently, in one’s own head) every syllable, creating the metric effect of paralleling the painful wait of eventuality: we feel and read ‘eventually’ happening right before us. We must read our way through to the end of the word, when we are finally allowed to discover that which we have been waiting for, the ‘jiggle’. With infinitesimally, we slowly read and are made aware of how truly small the nibbling of the star is. By isolating two different ‘i’s’ in the word, we can see on the page exactly how small the individual is in relation to everything else in the poem. In the first case this comes as a constrictive realization, partitioning off the individual ‘i’ between two dashes. In the second case, the smallness takes on a new possibility of liberating the ‘i’ from the dashes. These new meanings are found internal to the word, made possible only through its

fragmentation. The poem “a/mong crum/bling people(a)” visually mimics its own process of fragmentation:

a
 mong crum
 bling people(a
long ruined streets
hither and)softly

thither between(tumb
ling)
 houses(as
the kno

wing spirit prowls, (CP 321)

The words themselves crumble as they are broken up between lines, just as the image being created with the words is ‘crumbling’ and ‘tumbling’. The split of the words, without the use of any punctuation (a dash, for example), indicates a clean break between the words. Just as Eliot had been interested in the modern situation of ‘a heap of broken images’, we find Cummings enthralled with the process of reorganizing these images visually on the page to set a new standard by which we can frame this ‘heap’. The next broken word, ‘kno/wing’, reinforces Cummings’ rejection of scientific objectivism by fragmenting the process of knowledge, of ‘knowing’. Like crumbling, knowing is susceptible to being dislodged from cohesion, and the formation of new words through fragmentation ensues. In the second line of the word, ‘wing’ is separated from the full ‘knowing’, as if to superimpose the logic of flight on the word. Here, Cummings intuits the metaphysical aspect of ‘knowing’ and knowledge by literally forcing the process of flight into the word, permitting it to subscribe to the two-world theory and contending that this noumenal/phenomenal division fragments the process of knowledge as much as ‘crumbling’ fragments the people mentioned earlier in the poem.

As we observed in the combination of words in the earlier section, there exists a lack of spacing between words in his poetry. Often this quickens the pace of a phrase,¹¹⁴ as in “Buffalo Bill ‘s” when the counting of pigeons is condensed to a single utterance: “and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat” (CP 90). The effect of the lack of spacing is much better expressed by the poem “thethe” from *[Viva]*:

a soft eyes syriansang asong tohim self
all
about the desertbyIt self
while) nextto
Mesmoked eleven camels
! (CP 320)

The poem ends with a series of lines that completely re-arrange traditional spacing between words, “thepinkisht artskiDs...//with thema Tiss eeyeb Rowspeeach es/a soft desert smoked bad me whilepin Kishcam elcasta?netsits/Elf/allaBout.” Von Abele call this the use of permutation, in which “whole words are broken apart and redistributed in the interstices of other sentences.”¹¹⁵ Were one to transliterate the line in more proper English, it would read like this: ‘The pinkish tarts kids with the Matisse eyebrows peaches a soft desert smoked bad me while pinkish camel castanets itself all about’. The spacing forms new combinations of words and sounds as words begin to blend together, matching the natural inflections of perhaps a foreigner or someone who might not speak with common intonation. Furthermore, the combinations themselves actually produce new possibilities of meaning in the poem, especially in the above quoted section where we find the conflation of the image of

¹¹⁴ Baum, 110.

¹¹⁵ Von Abele, 913-933.

the desert and ‘itself’, though the self is still fragmented by the poet both here and a couple of lines above by the phrase ‘tohim self’ (the fragmentary nature of the self will be the topic of the following chapter). He also mobilizes the cigarettes with a sense of agency; perhaps the line could be read as ‘while next to me smoked eleven camels’. This obfuscated sense of agency is common in Cummings’ poetry, because through his language ‘objects’ become animate. The phrase “nextto” is operative in the poem, approximating physical distance by pushing the two words themselves together in an appositional gesture. The typographical closeness forces together the discursive proximity of the words and assimilates a spatial proximity. In the jumps from line to line, when lines are placed at a distance from the left-hand margin, it is always in order to continue from the position at which the previous line had stopped. Like the tumbling action we saw before, these lines pick up from the place at which the previous line ended, just a line below it, jumping down to the next line without the conventional return to the beginning so familiar to reading poetry. Indentation and spacing expand the caesura of his poetry, the blank space serving as something akin to a musical pause or rest. So when one reads “in Just-“ and the balloonman whistles “far and wee” (CP 27), one is supposed to understand that the word “wee” is a substitute for ‘wide’, and as the line extends out along the page what results is that ‘wide’ trails off in the distant ringing whistle and subsequently forms ‘wee’.¹¹⁶ Breaking up language, for Cummings, had the power to add new, exciting qualities of sound and meaning to language. These individual cases of fragmentation set a standard for the fragmentary nature of the poem. The intent of the poem as

¹¹⁶ Baum, 108.

fragmentary is to dispel our will to cleanly organize meanings through coherent synthesizing. It is preferable now that rather than to try to explain exactly what Cummings does with each manipulation of language, we examine an exemplary poem of fragmentation. Reading the poem “n(o)w” should be sufficient to witness the profound extent to which Cummings reformulated poetic language:

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?wha tm)eani ngl(essNessUn
rolli)ingl yS troll s(who leO v erd)oma insCol
Lide.!high
n , o ; w :
theraIncomIng
o all the roofs roar
drownInsound(
&
(we(are like)dead
)Whoshout(Ghost)atOne(voiceless)O
ther or im)
pos
sib)ly as
leap)
But !look—
s
U
n:start birds(leap)Openi ng
t hing ; s(
—sing
)all are aLl(cry aLl See)o(ver All)Th(e grEEen
?earth)N,ew (CP 348)

*now the how disappeared cleverly world is slapped with lightning at which shall pounce up crack will jumps of thunder blossom invisibly among banged fragments sky? what meaninglessness unrolling strolls whole over domains collide! high now: the rain coming o all the roofs roar drown in sound & (we are like dead who shout ghost at one voiceless other or impossibly asleep) but look! sun start birds leap opening things—sing all are all cry all see over all the green earth new

This is the language Cummings is most often derided for, his ‘cult of unintelligibility’. The poem, though incredibly fragmented by the repeated use of punctuation, surprisingly follows along with a general logic as the punctuation and fragmentation serve an important poetic purpose. Through oddly arranged capitalization, words like lightning and thunder jump right out from the page. It is as if the poem is creating these phenomena, or at least mimicking their boisterous natures with language. As the rain begins to fall, the capitalization re-creates this effect, so that the capital “I’s” in “theraIncomIng” are meant to represent the falling of rain. The line almost forms the phrase, ‘the era incoming’, a subtle indication of the newness of language, the pushing forth of modernist language. Even the word “now” is spread out over time in the poem, suggesting a sense of development always at play in the present. The parenthetical use is inventively progressive in this poem. In the fourth line, the world disappears if read as a whole and cleverly appears within the context of the parenthetical statement alone. By the end of the poem, the rain has begun to subside, and beautifully so Cummings crafts the last two lines as the sun breaking out into the landscape. This is first connoted through the fracture of the word ‘opening’, physically placing an opening within the very word. It becomes much more clear, though, in the final two lines, with their mixture of verse and parentheticals signifying the actual sun breaking through a sky full of scattered clouds. As if streams of light are shining down between each parenthetical cloud, the

typography constructs the actual image of the poem in conjunction with the text. When the poem ends with “new”, we feel the newness of modernism taking hold, the grip of tradition slowly slipping away. The poem is the very site of immediacy and action, and constitutes the field of logic within which the text operates. This is the immediacy that Lawrence advocated, but it is perhaps Yeats who best frames the project of Cummings’ linguistic manipulation. Yeats had argued for poetry to become a highly subjective art, that through manipulation of language into numberless meanings and readings, the ‘modern’ might escape from too conscious an arrangement on the page.¹¹⁷ This is the bedrock of modernism and exactly what Cummings perpetuates with his language.

The inverted use of parentheses is not an isolated incident in Cummings’ work. His poems are replete with eccentric punctuation, casting an enormous effect on his aesthetic. As in the last poem, its cordoning off of the word ‘(Ghost)’ in parentheses, Cummings frequently uses parenthesis to present a separate reality that exists outside of the world of the text of the poem. We will now focus on two pivotal poems to understand some of the reasoning behind his use of parenthesis. In the poem following “n(o)w” from *[Viva]*, “An(fragrance)Of”, Cummings uses parentheses to introduce an ulterior, or at least alternative logic within the poem. The final lines of this poem are:

Stood(apparition.)
WITH(THE ROUND AIR IS FILLED)OPENING (CP 349)

¹¹⁷ Yeats, William Butler. “*The Symbolism of Poetry.*” Repr. in Repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, 877-883.

There is a separation between things that can and cannot exist within the realm of the poem, as ‘apparition’ is partitioned off by the parentheses that surround it. The rest of the poem seems to divide itself between two developments, one occurring within verse, the other exclusively within those words isolated by parentheses. Stringing each parenthetical statement together, we get ‘fragrance begins and grows slowly into an apparition, the round air is filled’. The differentiation actually creates another poem within the poem, a system of logic that paratactically operates, developing within, around, and at the same time as the logic of the rest of the poem. This is the poetic technique of intercalation, or the use of two different voices at the same time.¹¹⁸ This practice challenges the temporal order of the poem. While this may still be the poetry of immediacy, it is now subject to the possibility that thoughts interrupt each other, begin again from different places and do not submit to the rationality of order that we consistently attempt to inscribe on any work. The parentheses serve this purpose in a couple of ways, first issuing as extra-temporal asides and second connoting a knowledge outside of the poem itself.¹¹⁹ As an aside, parentheses can be the whispers of secondary thoughts, a *sotto voce* that sardonically mocks the poem at various interludes as well as constructs a separate voice that contends with the primary voice of the text. In other cases, poems are opened or closed by parenthetical phrases in which the parentheses are never closed off. This intimates that the phrase may continue elsewhere, perhaps that the poem does not ever close, instead opening up to the world and interpretation. At the very least, his use of parentheses often

¹¹⁸ For a more in-depth study of this effect in his poetry, see: Fairley, Irene R. *E.E. Cummings and Ungrammar: A Study of Syntactic Deviance in His Poems*. Searingtown, NY: Watermill, 1975.

¹¹⁹ See Baum for a closer examination of the use of parenthetical statements as extra-temporal asides. Baum, 112-114.

instantiates meaning elsewhere, positing that the text alone is not all there is to know, and that a singular approach to a poem might preclude a fuller understanding of its meaning. His poems take the parenthetical statement to new obscurities of understanding through indirect and inexact utterances that prevent knowledge from ever taking hold:

But next door nobody
seems to live at present(l'on
parle de repapering;i
don't think so. Maybe:somebody?)or, bedbugs (CP 314)

There is no certainty as to who exactly is next door, so in this case the aside that the parenthesis offers presents no solution to the dilemma, only confounding more the problem with inchoate speculations. In conjunction with a fragmentary perspective of poetry, punctuation and parentheses can frame new words within individual words and double their meanings. In “i sing of Olaf glad and big”, the use of a simple dash multiplies meanings immediately, as we learn that Olaf is “a conscientious object-or” (CP 340). Of course he is objecting to the use of war and patriotism, but the dash also divides the word ‘object-or’, forcing the appreciation of his status as an object in war. The ‘or’ can be read as a logical disjunction, wholly splitting from the word and leading to the next line of the poem. With the use of a mere dash, Cummings invites a host of interpretive possibility to his poetry. His deviant constructions of punctuation multiply the meanings of the poem, adding asides and new frames of reference from which the poem can be approached.

We know Cummings to be equally concerned with multiplying the perspectives of his poems by utilizing different speech-types in his poetry. E. E. Cummings often took on different voices in his poems, sometimes sounding like a

religious zealot, other times a common man, or even a conniving politician. The multiplicity of languages available at his command is the very form of heteroglossia at work in his text: the suggestion that the poet does not present a singular voice, but is rather a conglomerate of competing and contending voices that comprise the heterogeneous individual. Thus, we might discover a poem in which Cummings mimics a young child that carries a lisp, as in “(one fine day)”:

(i'm tho thcared
giggling lithped now
we muthn't pleathe... (CP 318)

Cummings undertakes in writing poetry in different dialects of the English language. One might find the pomp of a New England Harvard student speaking with a thick Boston accent, just the same one could find the colloquial language of a Southerner imitated through clever constructions of idiomatic language. The following poetry selections from *[Viva]* offer a glimpse into his New Yorkese dialect¹²⁰ and the appropriation of speech-types within poetic language:

oil tel duh woil doi sez dooyah unnurs tanmih eesez pullih nizmus tash,oi dough un giv uh shid oi sez. (CP 312)	buncha hardboil guys from duh A.C. fulla hooch kiddin eachudder bout duh clap an talkin big how dey could kill (CP 333)
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‘I’ll tell the world they says/do you understand me he says pulling his mustache, I don’t give a shit he says,’ reads the poem on the left, while the other poem is more easily decipherable. Each encapsulates a colloquial speech-type, and Cummings time and again provides insight into these perspectives by preserving the particular sounds of an individual dialect. However, his project goes even further than rendering

¹²⁰ Norman Friedman cites this dialect as the most prominent in Cummings’ poetry, and argues that “Much of this diction resembles the speech of Herriman’s Krazy Kat...speaking the language of the gutter modified by the locutions of a love crazy cat of ambiguous gender who speaks like a gentle New York Jewish fruit peddler [sic].” For a more detailed account of this voice, see Friedman, Norman. *Diction, Voice and Tone: The Poetic Language of E. Cummings*. *PMLA*, Vol. 72, No. 5 (Dec., 1957): 1053.

sings his poems to us by using the space on the page. Other poems create the act of motion, as his famously anthologized poem, “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” (CP 396):

```

                                r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r
                                who
a)s w(e loo)k
upnowgath
                                PPEHORHRASS
                                eringint(o-
aThe):l
                                eA
                                !p:
S
                                (r
rIvInG                                gRrEaPsPhOs)
                                to
rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
,grasshopper;

```

The poem moves around the page as would a grasshopper, and can be re-written (though this does in some sense disturb the purpose of the poem and its language) as such: ‘(grasshopper), who as we look upon now gath (grasshopper) ering into [a the] leaps, arriving (grasshopper) to re-arrangingly become grasshopper’. The language shows the power the mind has in composing a simile for the external world, in creating movement entirely internal to the poem that demonstrates the real life “l/eA/!p:/S” of a grasshopper:

Cummings’ poem about the grasshopper, which hops about the page in imitation of its subject, does not create a sense of the grasshopper’s presence, but makes us aware, as perhaps no other poem does, of the actuality of letters and the dimensions of the page. It does not demonstrate at all that language can enter the extensional world, but rather renews our sense of its autonomous power to embody our perceptions of it.¹²²

The poem serves to challenge the reader, mimicking his process of understanding as a poem develops, as well as the viewer, who might at first be unaware of the grasshopper and slowly come to realize exactly what it is. The misspelled phrase is

¹²² Korg, Jacob. *Language in Modern Literature: Innovation and Experiment*. (Hassocks [Eng.: Harvester, 1979]: 73.

almost unintelligible at first, yet as the poem develops we learn more about the movement, and the clouded image of the grasshopper becomes clearer until finally it ‘rearranges’ itself, until the poem as well as the posited grasshopper both ‘become’. These two words are interspliced in the penultimate line because they occur simultaneously: the figure ‘becomes’ only as it is slowly ‘re-arranged’. This is the process of understanding that any reader encounters, and this is part of Cummings project, to take language and allow it to resemble many aspects of thought and life that had previously been ignored, to enable visual language to take part in the very act of becoming, and to provide the poem with a new set of tools through which it can engender thought and provoke interest. Cummings too leaps around his books like a grasshopper, coming into vision here and there, but not letting any impasse restrict his linguistic developments, his movements. It might be wise to consider Cummings as actually taking part in this process, being part of the poem on the page with us, there to guide us. It is Cummings who, like the “little i” which typographically resembles a child peering out over a window, peers out at us from the very language of his poetry:

who are you, little i

(five or six years old)
peering from some high

window; at the gold

of November sunset

(and feeling: that if day
has to become night

this is a beautiful way) (CP 824)

Sonnet (& Experiment) Form(alism)

While it is important to recognize and address the various ways in which Cummings abstracts conventional language and traditional form, it is equally important to focus on the widespread use of innovative form in his poetry. Cummings, though often viewed under the guise of a ‘deviant linguist or a ‘poet of visual fragmentation’, is also a poet that employs form in a variety of manners to strategically condition his own sense of formalism: he revives form, makes it ‘new’. Many modern poets saw rigid poetic structures as constrictive forces, but Cummings chose to co-opt form and coordinate it according to his own purposes. We will find that he shakes ‘form’ not only by debilitating and excising it from his work, but also through a considerable predilection for formal techniques and their expansive ‘modern’ possibilities.

The following table illustrates the depth of formalism, here specifically the use of rhyme, in Cummings’ poetry:

Slant and split rimes¹²³ in Cummings’ poetry¹²⁴

Period	I	II	III	Totals
Number of poems	264	141	197	602
Rimed poems	116	55	112	283
Poems with slant rimes predominant	4	10	69	83
Instances of split rime	25	5	23	53

The three periods are ordered accordingly: the first comprised of the books written in the twenties (*Tulips & Chimneys*, & *[AND]*, and *is 5*), the second of those composed

¹²³ Split rhyme, also known as broken rhyme, is the use of splitting a word at the end of a line to force it to rhyme with another.

¹²⁴ Von Abele, 921.

in the thirties (*[Viva]* and *No Thanks*), and the third and final consisting of his later works up to, but not including *95 Poems* and *73 Poems*. In each period, there is a predominance of rhymed poetry, the emphasis dwindling somewhat in the thirties (those books exhibiting his greatest experiments in language). His poetry is more than just “silence beyond the mystery of rhyme” (CP 143), as almost half of his poems utilize rhyme. Musicality had always been a poetic preoccupation of his, thus rhyme schemes allowed Cummings to charge his poems with inherently musical qualities. He stretches rhyme to encompass slant and split rhymes as well as internal rhymes that bring the music of the poem beyond the regularity of the individual line. The exclusion of his final two books in von Abele’s table is puzzling, especially considering that these two books helped to push his experiments in form even further. At that point, he began to incorporate a very structured system of lineation. Many of these later poems display a ‘mirroring’ effect in their lineation, retaining the same typographical deviancy, but formally exhibiting a parallel structure wherein the stanzas are ordered according to a numeric pattern. The purpose is to re-work formalism into each individual poem that must adhere to its own strict formal system of stanzaic separation. This is an entirely innovative approach to form, not entirely denying it but rather instantiating it individually within each poem. The lack of attention to this development is astounding, as it entirely re-writes the place of form in poetry, arguing that each poem can propose an entirely original formal approach. The following poem, the opening piece in *73 Poems*, illustrates this, as well as a keen focus on musicality:

O the sun comes up-up-up in the opening
sky(the all the

any merry every pretty each

bird sings birds sing
gay-be-gay because today's today)the
romp cries I and the me purrs

you and the gentle
who-horns says-does moo-woo
(the prance with the
three white stimpstamps)

the grintgrunt wugglewigggle
champychumpchomps yes
the speckled strut begins to stretch and
scratch-scrutch

and scritch(while
the no-she-yes-he fluffies tittle
tattle did-he-does-she)& the

ree ray rye roh
rowster shouts

rawrOO

In addition to proposing new mechanisms for formal poetry, Cummings also inverts old forms, especially the sonnet. Cummings, more than any other modern poet (many of whom denounced the sonnet as an archaic stricture), was a proponent of the sonnet, having written hundreds of different sonnets over his career. His prolific use of the sonnet “stretch[es] the boundaries of the form beyond anything Frost or Stevens, or anyone, had ever tried.”¹²⁵ His sonnets allow for objects and subjects to switch places in a devaluation of the subject position that dominated sonnet writing; they incorporate separate thoughts that concurrently coordinate the poem, suspending the syntactical hierarchies of main and subordinate clauses; they also reinvigorate line division and classic meter by exhibiting irregular line breaks:

But Cummings wanted to refurbish the form, not to abandon it, and the first thing he did was to knock out any sense of Cambridge's satisfied closure by abandoning

¹²⁵ Howarth, Peter, “The Modern Sonnet.” In Cousin A. D. and Peter Howarth. *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 233.

octaves, sestets, full metres, predictable rhymes, and any formal pressure to begin at the beginning, or come to rest at the end of a line.¹²⁶

Cummings was attempting to make the sonnet as ungentle as possible, opening up the possibility of the mutability of the sonnet. What, exactly, is a sonnet? There is certainly the rhyme scheme, the use of fourteen lines, a basic meter, and the division into the Petrarchan octet and sestet or along Shakespearean lines. Now, let us examine an example what Cummings proposes as a sonnet:

and what were roses. Perfume?for i do
forget...or mere Music mounting unsurely

twilight
but here were something more maturely
childish,more beautiful than almost you.

yet if not flower,tell me softly who

be these haunters of dreams always demurely
halfsmiling from cool faces,moving purely
with muted step,yet somewhat proudly too—

are they not ladies,ladies of my dream
justly touching roses their fingers whitely
live by?
or better,
queens,queens laughing tightly
crowned with far colours,

thinking very much
of nothing and whom dawn loves most to touch

wishing by willows,bending upon streams? (CP 136)

This early sonnet, from Cummings' *Tulips & Chimneys*, is a perfect example of how he subverts and re-invents the sonnet form. At first glance, the poem seems like a poem of *vers libre*, however a closer read will find that, by grouping the lines that cascade down the page into single lines, there are actually fourteen lines as well as a rhyme scheme (ABBAABBACDDEEC). The sonnets, then, are an attempt to make

¹²⁶ Howarth, 233.

the formal appear free and irregular. “And what were roses” deviates from traditional stylistics by its first word, ‘and’, indicating a *media res* stylistic in Cummings’ sonnets. The sonnet form, intended to be a tightly regulated, whole construction of a thought or emotion, does not even begin at the inception of the text. Then, there is of course the exaggerated pause in the first line, displacing the poem from traditional stylistics further. Finally, the sonnet ends with a question, and unresolved questions are not uncommon in Cummings’ sonnets. They represent a critical development in which the sonnet cannot achieve the precision and clarity it demands in the final couplet. Furthermore, the line breaks highlight the play with internal rhyme, as ‘twilight’, ‘better’, and ‘colours’ each produce an additional slant rhyme, corresponding to another line the overall scheme. Carl Bode poignantly surveys Cummings’ use of rhyme in his sonnets, concluding that “He takes masculine rhyme, feminine rhyme, internal rhyme, and assonance, and mixes them all loosely together. His rhyme effects are sometimes vivid and sometimes not, but they are never restrained.”¹²⁷ The syntax, through which the poet orders his words in a prosodic line, is deliberately unnatural, as in many of his other poems. Even flowers exhibit agency as Cummings shakes the entire artifice of the traditional sonnet by devaluing the subjective position. Most of his sonnets do not adhere to the commonly recognized indicators of the sonnet form, as in “next to of course god america i” (CP 267) and “(ponder,darling,these busted statutes” (CP 258), the latter symbolically

¹²⁷ Bode, Carl. *E. E. Cummings: The World of ‘Un’*. *Poetry*, Vol. 86, No. 6 (Sep., 1955):360.

proposing to revise the busted structures of the formal sonnet.¹²⁸ Moreover, in [Viva] “he anticipates the post-modern hyper-sonnet by spacing sonnets every seven poems and then finishing with a sequence of seven.”¹²⁹ His work manipulates the sonnet form in an immense way, allowing for twentieth century poets to adapt the sonnet according to their grievances with its rigid form. Peter Howarth, in an evocative and insightful study of the modern sonnet, writes passionately of Cummings:

In Cummings’s hands, the sonnet itself squirms, stretching and shrinking its lines, hopping over line endings with rhymes on unstressed words (‘suddenly’, ‘I’m’) and fiercely gripping others with those erased spaces and panting commas.¹³⁰

The many sonnets attest to his undeniable concern for form—modern form—something that is unique and original enough to allow each poem to be true to itself. Cummings, then, is as much a part of the tradition of modernists interested in formal poetics as he is a part of their break from these categories.

¹²⁸ This is not true of all of his sonnets, however. “It is at moments after i have dreamed” (CP 145) follows a typical Shakespearean division, though the line spacing words to disguise the sense of structure in the quatrains. The same goes for “all ignorance toboggans into know” (CP 579).

¹²⁹ Howarth, 235.

¹³⁰ Howarth, 234.

so many selves(so many fiends and gods
each greedier than every)is a man
(so easily one in another hides;
yet man can,being all,escape from none)

so huge a tumult is the simplest wish:
so pitiless a massacre the hope
most innocent(so deep's the mind of flesh
and so awake what waking calls asleep)

so never is most lonely man alone
(his briefest breathing lives some planet's year,
his longest life's a heartbeat of some sun;
his least unmotion roams the youngest star)

—how should a fool that calls him 'I' presume
to comprehend not numerable whom?

The Se(.e.)lf: A Modern Heteroglot

The self has been a topic of poetic preoccupation for some time, so Cummings is surely no pioneer in the field. Nonetheless, so few critics pay close attention to the play of identity politics in his poetry, from his earlier writings that structure the self as frivolous and innocent to subsequent works like *Eimi* (in Greek literally the first-person present indicative singular form of “to be”, the title means ‘I am’), *The Enormous Room* and its close examination of individuality and Being in the form of a trip to the Soviet Union, and *i:SIX NONLECTURES*, which is comprised of the transcription of a series of lectures Cummings delivered at Harvard between 1952 and 1953 focusing primarily on his construction of selfhood (both biographically and poetically). His deviant use of capitalization, specifically his renderings of the first person pronoun “i” (which the aforementioned lectures expound upon in great detail), has gathered interest from many critics. It is astonishing, then, that this attention has failed to cohere around a fundamental understanding of selfhood in the discourse surrounding his poetry. Martin Heusser aptly notes that the casual reader is often too distracted by Cummings’ linguistic permutations, attributing to him a passing interest, a mere “penchant for the lowercase ‘i.’”¹³¹ What repeatedly avoid further investigation are the methods by which this simple inversion of language is a critical pillar in Cummings’ postulations of selfhood and identity. He remains throughout his career a consistent proponent of the search for the ossified self, what he will deem the elusive and duplicitous capital “I”. One reason for featuring selfhood in his work is

¹³¹ Heusser, Martin. *I Am My Writing: The Poetry of E. E. Cummings*. (Tübingen: Stauffenburg-Verl., 1997): 1.

to gain hold of the self through writing, to attain the true wisdom of self-knowledge that traditional Greek philosophy had promoted:

In his copy of this first volume of R. H. Blyth's *Haiku*, Cummings marked the following passage with a particularly conspicuous mark in the margin and underlined the core of the sentence: "the secret of life is in the understanding of what the self is" (4). About eighty pages later, he wrote in the margin, next to a similar passage, "γνώθι σεαυτόν" (83), "know yourself".¹³²

"Know yourself," inscribed Cummings in his copy of this book, published in 1949 and received by him as a gift the following year. The margins of his copy are replete with notes, witticisms and allusions. A quick skim through these pages begets an investigation as to what type of self might Cummings ascribe to the modern man, what is modern about this positioning, and how might it differentiate itself from other studies of selfhood? Perhaps it is Cummings who, in the face of war, fascism and modern industrialization, proposes that man's greatest obstacle lies rather in self-discovery; that we have been supplanted from our very selves, and the quest for determinacy does not resolve itself, instead only offering a radically heterogeneous and elusive self. In this sense Cummings proposes a noticeable divergence from a Platonic rendition of this aphorism, asserting the self as a knowledge center that is remarkably obscured, much more remote than Greek philosophy may have imagined.

The work of Cummings positions itself for a Bakhtinian approach, in which multiform languages contend with each other to produce dialogism.¹³³ His poetic project consists of producing multivalence. Cummings does more than merely fulfill these categories of linguistic dialogism, following along with their descriptive model, he proscriptively produces and exploits heteroglossic discourse. This thesis cannot

¹³² Ibid., 1.

¹³³ Bakhtin, M. M., and Michael Holquist. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. (Austin: University of Texas, 1981): 263.

produce an analysis matching the scope of Bakhtin, so will instead focus primarily on the use of dialogism, its purpose in the discourse of Cummings' poetics. To identify an utterance or phrase as dialogic is to infer that it is immediately subject to "the pre-existence of the language world relative to any of its current inhabitants, insur[ing] that there can be no actual monologue," and that under this framework "dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia."¹³⁴ Heteroglossia is "the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance" insofar as it is necessarily a function "of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve."¹³⁵ This means that the text, and thereby the poem in this particular analysis, is the locus at which the centrifugal (or divergent and poly-vocal discourses) and the centripetal (a totalizing unity) forces convene. It would be a gross misunderstanding to claim that Cummings is the lone proponent of a heteroglossic poetics. In fact, Eliot remains one of the great players in the move toward heteroglossic poetry, but where he maintains a trans-historical (thereby a cross-chronological) movement upon which to frame his interanimate hybridities of language and poetry, Cummings inserts the perpetually flux system of the self (similar to the consciousness of Prufrock). Brian Crews argues that "The Waste Land" serves as a seminal example of heteroglot discourse, linking the movements of poetic language to the "compositional-stylistic unities" that categorize Bakhtin's heterogeneous system of the novel:

«Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants)» is perhaps what we might call the voice of the poet or his single persona; the «stylization of the various forms of everyday narration (skaz)» would correspond to the modernist tendency towards the introduction of everyday speech and rhythms and even

¹³⁴ Ibid., 426.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 428.

characters who speak in this way; the «stylization of the various forms of semi-literary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.)» would correspond to adopting particular forms in poetry that are not necessarily poetical, which we begin to find much more notably from the poetry of Browning onwards; «[v]arious forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth)» might possibly take us into another realm of intertextuality which Bakhtin does not expressly mention, but which forms part of *The Waste Land* in its continual references to other sources; the «stylistically individualized speech of characters (other voices)» could correspond to the dramatized personae of the dramatic monologue, the characters we find in *The Waste Land*, as well as to intertextuality.¹³⁶

This seems to be an over-simplification of the relationship between poetry and Bakhtinian thought, as it merely isolates these preliminary elements of heterogeneous, novelistic prose and finds a mode of poetic discourse to accommodate for each. Bakhtin discusses a tenuous connection between novelistic prose and poetic stylization (which, according to him, renders itself under the singular ‘voice’ of the poet).¹³⁷ Cummings’ work seems to expand the role of poetry, producing double-voiced discourse and morphologically deviant syntax that immediately attempt to amend the first category of direct authorial literary-artistic narration by proposing that these “diverse variants” do constitute a single persona, but only in the sense that this entity is a polyglot collection of utterances and discourses. For Cummings does not focus his writing on intertextuality insofar as his poetics resists direct conversation with previous writers and their work (though he is, as most any poet, extensively allusive). While Pound and Eliot were preparing dense sections of footnotes to detail the exacting, allusive nature of their poetry, Cummings was becoming interested in writing a socio-linguistic movement focused on paralleling the heteroglot social discourses that contentiously inform the public square (the field of inter-subjectivity).

¹³⁶ Crews, Brian. *Tradition, Heteroglossia and T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’*. *Atlantis*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Dec., 1998): 23.

¹³⁷ Bakhtin claims the poetic language is always “oriented toward single-languaged and single-styled genres.” Bakhtin, 266.

There is a remnant influence of the Romantics demonstrated in his expansion of Wordsworth's adoption of rustic language into a whole system of the languages of social life (the ironic, the politician, the musician, the child, the list goes on). Though "The Waste Land" does offer a critical modern example (and even more strong is the connection between Bakhtin and Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent")¹³⁸ of poetry appropriating the novelistic techniques of heteroglossia, this is not the way in which Cummings approaches it. The aim of this thesis is to allow, unlike Bakhtin, poetic stylistics to propound beyond their rather narrow sense, to remove them from single-linguaged and single-styled discursive approaches, and more narrowly within the conspicuously unaddressed case of Cummings. Where Bakhtin asserts the dominance of novelistic prose in conditioning heteroglot discourse, Cummings situates the self (his own language) as this very site of "a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized."¹³⁹ The consciousness undergoes this stratification of polyvocal language and discourse, and in Cummings' work these contesting dialects, ones that Bakhtin suggests lie exclusively within the novel, represent precisely the form of a structured artistic system of dialogism:

The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific

¹³⁸ In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot argues for the relational appeal of poets to the literary field: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism." Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Repr. in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003): 942.

¹³⁹ Bakhtin, 262.

sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases)...¹⁴⁰

Cummings' poems incorporate these multiform languages, but even further they proliferate the semantic layers of the word, always leaning away from the narrowest, autotelic approaches. Just as novelistic discourse does, these poems situate utterances that are inherently, contextually charged with value alongside socio-ideological languages (the dialogic stratification of professional and generational discourses). The texts are meant to play with the fragile relationship between centripetal and centrifugal forces—the constant tension of discourses that are at once generative, hybrid utterances belonging to a plurality of semantic connotations and ideological belief systems, and also an enclosed totality, seeking some sort of “orientation toward unity.”¹⁴¹ This is the field of logic that the self operates within Cummings' work: multivalence, radical hybridity, social heteroglossia. As we saw in the language chapter, Cummings makes considerable use of different voices and speech-types in his poetry, and these are the points from which he accesses his heteroglossia; the self, however, produces its own dialogic discourse.

Ont(illogical) Multiplicity

so many selves(so many fiends and gods
each greedier than every)is a man
(so easily one in another hides;
yet man can,being all,escape from none)

so huge a tumult is the simplest wish:
so pitiless a massacre the hope
most innocent(so deep's the mind of flesh
and so awake what waking calls asleep)

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 263.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 274.

so never is most lonely man alone
(his briefest breathing lives some planet's year,
his longest life's a heartbeat of some sun;
his least unmotion roams the youngest star)

—how should a fool that calls him 'I' presume
to comprehend not numerable whom?

‘So many selves...is a man,’ Cummings issues. Here, late in his career, occurs the most critical poem in his conditioning of selfhood. Though Cummings does much to formally elucidate his aesthetic of selfhood, he seldom connotes these meanings through plain discourse (this poem being an example of the latter). Several other poems of *Xaipe* enter into discreet discussion with selfhood, describing “queries of self” (CP 612), or in ‘nine birds’ coordinating a relationship between plurality and singularity: “(all together a/manying/one//-ness)nine/souls/only alive with a single mys-/tery” (CP 627). The poems “blossoming are people” and “now all the fingers of this tree” also consider the multi-layered weave of selfhood, the former assimilating ‘everyone’ and ‘noone’ and the latter refiguring the individual under the terms of unity and division of a tree:

and i am you are i am we
(pretty twinkle merry bells)

Someone has been born
everyone is noone (CP 630)

now all the fingers of this tree(darling)have
hands,and all the hands have people;and
more each particular person is(my love)
alive than every world can understand

and now you are and i am now and we're (CP 667)

The pivotal poem, to which we should turn our attention, is “so many selves”. The poem adheres to the form of a traditional sonnet, following iambic pentameter and formal stanzaic constructions, having three quatrains followed by a couplet revealing the volta of the poem, etc. But Cummings always surreptitiously distorts the rhyme scheme with covertly worded slant rhymes, each leading toward the ultimate

congruence of true rhyme in the couplet. Before regressing back into Cummings' play with sonnets, though, let us return to the discourse at hand in the poem, which posits the real significance of the piece regarding selfhood. We know, beyond our first read, man to be so many selves, yet as soon as man, the oddly inverted subject, can even enter the poem he is delayed further by the insertion of a long parenthetical statement. In "so many selves" these breaks constitute a majority of the actual text of the poem. Within the first stanza, the only text not marked off by parentheticals reads 'so many selves...is a man', a quite short portion of the full quatrain of verse. Cummings use of parentheses often serves to disturb a strict sense of temporal order, displacing the poem between different spheres of thought or different textual occurrences. Cummings knowingly ruptures any distinct unity of the poem by, in this particular case, inserting extra-temporal asides that break the chronology of the poem with a contemporaneous *sotto voce*. In Italian literally meaning 'under the voice', *sotto voce* is the use of an utterance given in lowered tone (here the parenthesis demarcates the aside) in order to create emphasis. It applies to sarcastic utterances, having the effect of countering a preceding sentence or declaration. The subversive nature of *sotto voce* issues as a secondary voice, differentiated. Though the separate tones read similarly, they also serve to equivocate without conflating two separate perspectives in the poem. This is the heteroglossic text at work, displaying several voices at once contesting for the same language, multiform perspectives and countervailing ironies pulling from all sides at the supposed totality of the self. It is the basis for Cummings' construction of the self, that of many selves contesting over the same voice. A man is "so many selves", and Cummings has determined these

selves to be radically heterogeneous. The discourse of this poem accounts for the structure of the self. Man is at once many ‘fiends’ and many ‘gods’. The conflation of opposing forces streams through the first two stanzas: ‘hope’ is modified by ‘pitiless’ and ‘massacre’, there are ‘minds of flesh’, and duality is strewn together once more as consciousness cannot distinguish itself and deems “awake what waking calls asleep.” Man is constructed of many separate selves, and this manifests poetically through a parallel positioning of opposites. This economy of duality suggests that man himself is composed of a system of constitutive tensions, each performatively rearranging and coordinating the multivalent nature of the self. The fluidity of selfhood extends outward as one self moves to others in which to hide. Yet this does not escape the ultimate situation of the self, wholly comprised of ‘being all’: experiencing the various currents of influence and interaction that constitute Being. Man can ‘escape from none’, his selfhood never amalgamates into wholeness but rather resigns to complexity, to shadows and elusive tendencies. Behind each self lies myriad other selves along a network of identifications and perspectives. This allows us to say that “never is most lonely man alone,” that among his own self there exist several ‘other’ components. The third stanza reinforces the vastness of the question regarding selfhood: in a single breath he encompasses the eternity of a year, the beat of his heart might be considered alongside the sun, and even his subtlest motions shake the surface of the stars. The question of the self proliferates to metaphysical importance in this section. Then the final couplet reveals the enigma of the poem and interrupts the metaphysical enlightenment due in the couplet, “—how should a fool that calls him ‘I’ presume/to comprehend not numerable whom?” How

indeed can the individual reconcile the infinite play of selves, their internal flux, Cummings rhetorically asks. And how might we approach the rather liberal use of competing pronouns that correspond to a singular subject?

The poet's repeated substitution of one sign for the self by the next ("him", "whom", "me") [...] raises the suspicion that one word (or "sign") may serve its purpose as well as another. However, since these signs obviously do not signify the same thing, they are not true signs of the self.¹⁴²

Cummings is experiencing the dilemma that one cannot reconcile oneself, immediately witnessing a 'him' and ascribing it the singularity implicit to an 'I'. The fault lies in the associative tendency to assume an 'other's' completeness through assessing its coherent, conforming traits as opposed to its individuating qualities (those that tend to be couched in a heavy interplay of tradition and social context, those that are often duplicitous as well). Perhaps this explains the hesitant punctuation surrounding the capital 'I', the ideal, cohered self. The Houghton Library at Harvard is in possession of a vast amount of notes and revisions Cummings performed on his work. In the notes on "so many selves," there are around twenty variants of the final couplet. Each rendition places an equal emphasis on the representation of the "i" in terms of multiplicity. His final choice was 'not numerable', but earlier versions replace this description with "infinite", "illimitable" and "multitudinous".¹⁴³ Cummings breaches logic by situating the self as a divisible entity, one composed of infinite parts. The rhetorical question of the couplet must be answered with a negative response, taking into consideration the fool's presumptuous declaration of his own unity. The nominalizations of him and whom, each of which

¹⁴² Heusser, 29.

¹⁴³ Heusser's work closely examines the Houghton notes, explaining the many variations of this final couplet and claiming that this shows a rigid attention to detail in Cummings' poetry. *Ibid.*, 20-24.

syntactically serves as a noun, only confuse the sense of selfhood, as these do not morphologically become nouns but rather remain a personal pronoun and a question particle.¹⁴⁴ The words themselves do not change, even ‘him’ is distanced from complete nominalization by the deliberate stripping away of self that would render a more intelligible sentence: “how should a fool that calls himself “I” presume to comprehend not numerable whom?” The poem is a vital characterization of the modern self that surfaced throughout Cummings’ poetry. The forfeiting or supplanting of the self to or by the other occurs vividly in lines such as “my selves go with you, only i remain” (CP 812). Other lines, as in “her murdered selves” (CP 818) reinforce ontological fragmentation. Cummings’ self consistently manifests in the multivalent languages and signifiers that constitute heteroglossic text. It is made problematic foremost in the syntactic construction of the ‘I’, the oscillation between the ossified, capital ‘I’ that asserts the subject’s coherence and the fractured little ‘i’ whose destabilizing presence serves as a force of deconstruction toward the unity of selfhood. To relegate the self that Cummings forms to the tension between the totalizing “I” and the fractured “i” would be an over-simplification of an incredibly complicated conception of selfhood that develops throughout Cummings’ career.¹⁴⁵

From his poetry, letters, and lectures, it is clear Cummings holds a preference for the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴⁵ The difference between my ontological approach to Cummings and Heusser’s is that he predicates selfhood upon the tension between the capital “I” and the fragmentary little “i”, oddly calling on a Nietzschean dialectic. However, Nietzsche explains his position on art, arguing in “On the Case of Wagner” that the modern aesthetic is decadence, and that sound (especially when it is infused with language) does not transcend the human intellect, that the Romantic obsession with Absolute music creates the illusion of depth or profundity through the spectacle. Nietzsche is not trying to transcend the individual, in finding a coherent, metaphysical self. Rather, he prefers the fragmentary little “i”, the multiple and shifting perspectives; this is no duality, it is heterogeneity. Nietzsche, Friedrich. “*The Case of Wagner*.” Repr. in Nietzsche, Friedrich, and Walter Arnold Kaufmann. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. (New York: Modern Library, 2000): 611-653.

small “i”, the self that succumbs to a continual dismantling of wholeness. Cummings writes of his personal preference for the little “i”, considering it an affront to the presumptuous capitalization of the self in the English language:

concerning the “small ‘i’”: did it never strike you as significant that, of all God’s children, only English & Americans apotheosize their egos by capitalizing a pronoun whose equivalent is in French “je”, in German “ich”, & in Italian “io”?¹⁴⁶

His preference for the lowercase ‘i’ is detailed by his developmental use of it in his later poetry. In the mid-forties with the publication of the volume *I x I*, Cummings declares his partiality to the small “i” as it dominates his poetry. “Among more than 120 occurrences of the first person singular in the last three collections (*XAIPE*, *95 Poems* and *73 Poems*) we find only two uppercase versions, one of them in this poem [“so many selves”].”¹⁴⁷ Cummings’ “i” is the site of a multiplicity of selves, subject to the heterogeneous play of poly-vocal stratification in Bakhtin’s heteroglossia. This is reinforced by the fragmentation of the actual poem, marking a shift in emphasis from the whole to each individual part that is essential to the complexity of the whole. Sentences lose their boundaries as individuated parts become more pronounced, and the deviant use of words undercuts any assumption of a fixed relationship between a word and its meaning. Thus Cummings perpetually calls attention to his poetry’s sign status, as it takes linguistic shape and immediately the readings proliferate. Language, for Cummings, works to construct reality, projecting qualities of selfhood into the world. Each time he delivers the little “i”, he concurrently issues an injunction to the coherent conception of the self.

¹⁴⁶ Heusser, 288.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 216.

The compartmentalization of the self erupts beyond all categories and limits, arriving at a notion of the individual that extends beyond boundaries of unity and fragmenting into a self that actively resists any attempt at homogeneity. This fragmentation of selfhood is a recurrent theme of Cummings' poetry, sometimes taking the shape of the "absurd i" (CP 281), while at other times proposing that the actual parts of the self assume separate roles: "if sometimes my eyes stay at home/then my mouth will go out" (CP 187).

"if he had been playing a fiddle i had
been dancing:which is
why something about me reminded him of ourselves)
as Nobody came slowly over the town" (CP 356)

The end of this poem from *[Viva]* identifies the true complexity of the subject, its relegation to subjectivity. The caesura of the first line of the parenthetical isolates the transmutability of the subject, as reading it alone with its natural line break gives us "if he had been playing a fiddle i had." An action by one subject intuits the action of a separate subject, and the verb structure strikes a further connection, as each subject is modified by a parallel verb clause of the passive gerund: 'been playing' or 'been dancing'. Moreover, the action of the verbs marks a paratactic, and thereby concurrent and ultimately singular movement of song and dance. These two actions assimilate into a hybrid moment in their unification, presaging the supposed unification of the two actors to follow in the line "something about me reminded him of ourselves." The subjects convene at 'ourselves', the 'he' so confused about his unified self that he misrecognizes another as a part of his own self. This state of perplexity is highlighted by the string of unqualified subjects, "which is why

something,” each hinting at an assumed resolution to some quandary, an explanation for some dilemma, yet each simultaneously denoting an impossibility in the act of identification or explanation. ‘Which’, ‘why’, and ‘something’ all suggest a question, and without qualifiers these words each fail to resolve themselves definitively, opening up to inexpressibility. When grouped together, they proliferate the unanswered quest for meaning, posing a verified system of unresolved questions. The poem then proceeds beyond the parenthetical to an emerging, and deceptively substantive subject that assumes its reign over the rest of the poem, a ‘Nobody’. We know this ‘Nobody’ to assume the role of a subject insofar as it is isolated by its capitalization, immediately rendering it a proper noun, an active subject in the poem, intimated also by the verb ‘came’ which proposes an active subject that has arrived of volition. ‘Nobody’ therefore purports to occupy the self of multiplicity, the heterogeneous self that contends the complexities of both ‘i’ and ‘him’, resolving itself in the inherent dialogism of ‘ourselves’. The individual often assumes other subjects in its categorization of the self in Cummings, as in poems like “a man who had fallen among thieves” in which the subject subsumes the role of another subject, “put[ing] him all into my arms” (CP 256). In other poems, the subject’s utterances are instantly hybrid constructions, occupying a dialogic role in which separate voices contest for and inform the same utterance, such as in “Will i ever forget that precarious moment?”, where Cummings’ writes “Let us perhaps excuse me if i repeat himself” (CP 261). When Cummings posits “i repeat himself,” he means to construct ‘i’ as a dialogic signifier, which is to say that it opens up to a system of multiform languages, and in Cummings’ work these are the manifold ‘subjects’ contending with

each other over the word ‘i’. The word is a hybrid construction, belonging to two different “semantic and axiological belief systems,”¹⁴⁸ and contending multiple connotations, rendering it multiform. These inversions of the subject assure the heteroglossic nature of the subject, always in-flux, breakings boundaries of categorization and refusing to ossify into the cohered self. Cummings’ poem “timeless” best characterizes the multivalent layers of the self, always contesting its own assertions and assuming multiple, conflicting roles:

timeless

ly this
(merely and whose
not

numerable leaves are

fall
i
ng)he

StandS

lift
ing against the
shrieking

sky such one

ness as
con
founds

all itcreating winds

“Timeless,” made up of seventeen lines and organized according to the ‘mirroring’ formalism, lets the phrase ‘StandS’ occupy the center of the poem. The use of this word indicates the stasis of the self in the poem. Two separate movements occur around this static center, the first being the passive motion of falling, and the second

¹⁴⁸ Bakhtin, 304.

the active motion of lifting. In stark contrast, the standing in the poem is surrounded by first falling and then lifting back up. Religious connotations are certainly implicit here, but the crux of the poetic discourse here occurs in the positioning of selfhood. The self explodes into multivalence immediately, the lineation fragmenting the word “fall/i/ng” isolates an ‘i’ within the very motion. This ‘i’, however, is at once a ‘he’, a ‘whose’, and also a tree (symbolizing multiple renderings of the self). The ‘not numerable leaves’ are the multiform discourses that inform selfhood, as the tree is composed of a multiplicity despite its apparent unitary nature. This self is also projected from a nothing, as the sound play of ‘whose’ can simultaneously produce the vocalized effect of ‘who’s’, inverting the line to performatively define its subject according to ‘who’s not’. When this man lifts directly against the streaking sky, we find a rupture between man and nature despite the assimilation of the man and the tree earlier, a man that verily ‘confounds’ the winds. The split of “one//ness” reinforces the shattering of a unified sense of selfhood, for the natural world cannot understand the wholeness being proclaimed. This distrust of the ossified self explains why Cummings can find “selves unimaginably mine” (CP 810). Yeats had written in “The Second Coming”: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”¹⁴⁹ For the modern poet, especially for Cummings, the self was falling apart, the static center of poems like “timeless” could no longer hold together the contesting movements of the self, the polyglot voices, dissonant asides and secondary thoughts. Cummings, in a fundamentally modern fashion, saw the self as a “becoming” not to be contained by the limiting implementation of an insufficient, static noun:

¹⁴⁹ Yeats, W. B., and Richard J. Finneran. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. (New York: Scribner Paperback Poetry, 1996): 187.

Life is, he insists in the Houghton notes, ‘a mystery and not a system, a verb & not a noun.’¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Heusser, 43.

suppose

Life is an old man carrying flowers on his head.

young death sits in a cafe
smiling, a piece of money held between
his thumb and first finger

(i say "will he buy flowers" to you
and "Death is young
life wears velvet trousers
life totters, life has a beard" i

say to you who are silent. - "Do you see
Life? he is there and here,
or that, or this
or nothing or an old man 3 thirds
asleep, on his head
flowers, always crying
to nobody something about les
roses les bluets

yes,

will He buy?

Les belles bottes - oh hear
, pas cheres")

and my love slowly answered I think so. But
I think I see someone else

there is a lady, whose name is Afterwards
she is sitting beside young death, is slender;
likes flowers.

Death & Satire

At least my theory of technique, if I have one, is very far from original; nor is it complicated. I can express it in fifteen words, by quoting The Eternal Question And Immortal Answer of burlesk, viz. "Would you hit a woman with a child?—No, I'd hit her with a brick." Like the burlesk comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement. ("Foreword" to *is 5*, CP 221)

E. E. Cummings was certainly a modern satirist, poking fun at the world, its variable perversions, at each and every turn. His satire is based on an understanding of the importance of comedic approaches to the problematic. For Hannah Arendt, it was laughter and friendship that could bring us out of 'dark times',¹⁵¹ and the Greeks were not without a strong tradition of satirical poetry (take Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* for example).¹⁵² Poets and writers alike have consistently employed humor in a very serious fashion in order to establish and disparage their discontents. Cummings was more explicit and playful with his parodying than almost any other modern,¹⁵³ setting the standard for later poetic satirists. And how can his humor be any more modern, its deliberate engagement with difficultly layered meanings and its representation of worn images in new, innovative manners? His ardent use of humor to issue injunctions is well-documented, and can be divided among three basic categories: in his construction of the obscene, of death, and of the political.

¹⁵¹ In her essay, "On Humanity in Dark Times," Arendt explains that the world becomes more humane through discourse, that we humanize what is going on in the world by speaking about it. She focuses on laughter and friendship as critical modes of overcoming. Like Cummings she holds a disdain for scientific objectivism and the categorical imperatives of Immanuel Kant, imploring the reader to allow for discourse to remain open without a single thought dominating. Arendt, Hannah. "On Humanity in Dark Times." Repr. in *Men and Dark Times*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968): 3-31.

¹⁵² *Lysistrata* overtly employs sexualized humor, depicting a scene in which the wives of Athenian soldiers refuse to copulate with their husbands until they end a war with the Spartans. The language is idiomatically foul and obscene, and we find that like in Cummings' poetry, obscenity has been used historically to combat the world. Aristophanes, and Sarah Ruden. *Lysistrata*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 2003.

¹⁵³ We can consider Frost to be similar with his employment of irony, but his was more duplicitous than Cummings. Where Frost surreptitiously employs hidden ironies (for self-depreciation see "Not Quite Social," and for subtle humor, see the concluding lines of "There are Roughly Zones" and "A Boundless Moment"), Cummings is vocal and deliberate with his ironies. Frost, Robert, and Edward Connery Lathem. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969): 233-234, 305-307.

Obscenity, as Schroeder notes, is an indefinable term, entirely contingent upon the context and age in which it is uttered as well as upon the tastes of casual readers and critics alike.¹⁵⁴ The use of the obscene generally carries the connotation of comedy, satire, and irony. This is not to suggest that obscene language is remedially vulgar, nor that it is a perverse, basic language intended solely to offend the reader or to elicit a humorous response. Obscenity, particularly in the modern period (but also clearly in the Symbolist poets Baudelaire and Mallarmé),¹⁵⁵ became a mechanism for satirically engaging with and exposing the ludicrous realities of the world. For Cummings, the burlesque style was an appropriate method for addressing his discontents with the world and allowing new personality-types to enter into his poetry. Critics have castigated Cummings for his obscene satire, calling poems of this order “slumming in morals along with the he-men and lady social workers.”¹⁵⁶ Cummings faces the problem that any writer who focuses heavily on the satirical must face, from “those who insist on reading his work with fustian literalism.”¹⁵⁷ Nonetheless, he viewed the burlesque stylistic as a powerful form of social commentary:

For Cummings the burlesque theatre was paradise, as he explains on several occasions, both in prose and in poetry. The ability of burlesque to reconcile opposites—to comprehend both filth and motherhood, sin and sentimentality, and to move rapidly from one to the other—earned Cummings’ admiration.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Schroeder, Fred E. H. *Obscenity and its Functions in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings*. *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Summer, 1965): 469.

¹⁵⁵ Baudelaire and Mallarmé were entirely invested in writing a dirtier language, divorced from the flowery language of poetry that insists on the good-natured aspects of the world. Von Abele notes the possible connection between Cummings and these poets as innovators of language:

“...it might be remarked *in vacuo* that his efforts to interweave different lines of meaning are anticipated in Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de Dés*, and his mimetic typography by Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes*...” Von Abele, 917.

¹⁵⁶ Blackmur, R. P. “Notes on E. E. Cummings’ *Language*.” Repr. in Rotella, Guy L. *Critical Essays on E.E. Cummings*. (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1984) 115.

¹⁵⁷ Ray, David. *The Irony of E. E. Cummings*. *College English*, Vo. 23, No. 4 (Jan., 1962) 282.

¹⁵⁸ Metcalf, Allan A. *Dante and E. E. Cummings*. *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Sep., 1970): 375.

We have already seen how Cummings employs satire in his varied speech-types. This style arose first in his book, *is 5*, in poems like “oil tel duh woil doi sez” (CP 312) and “buncha hardboil guys from A.C. fulla” (CP 333). Friedman terms this speech-type ‘New Yorkese’, and its vulgarisms produce the feeling of pathos in individuals who speak it.¹⁵⁹ These poems arouse a sense of pity and laughter, as we snicker at their bravado and simultaneously understand the terrible consequences of such boldness. The impression of these characters, then, becomes one of demonstrative and pithy satire. In “what does little Ernest croon (CP 409)”, he mocks the bloated perspective of Hemingway with this New Yorkese language, and in “ygUDuh” (CP 547) he sneers at those who attempt to “SIVILEYEzum” (civilize ‘em). This phonetically produced ‘gutter talk’ can take the form of a disapproving perspective toward parental moralizing, as in “one nonsufficiently inunderstood (CP 398)”, which satirically shames parents’ stammering efforts at disabusing children of the myth of Santa Claus.¹⁶⁰ The layered ironies of his poetry disengage the reader from a singular viewpoint that purports to assume all truth valuation. Language, for Cummings, becomes a point of departure for satire. He frequently brings sarcasm to archaic, Latinate, and formal phrases, satirizing high-flown language in order to debunk its prestige.¹⁶¹ Over and over, we find phrases such as “yon motheaten forum” (CP 258), “o pr/gress verily thou art” (CP 392), “Life, dost Thou contain a marvel” (CP 406), and “ye/galleon/wilts” (CP 389). Cummings appropriates these

¹⁵⁹ Friedman, Norman. *Diction, Voice and Tone: The Poetic Language of E. E. Cummings*. *PMLA*, Vol. 72, No. 5 (Dec., 1957): 1052-1053.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1053.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1055.

archaic terms in order to parody their formalism. In the poem “oDE” (CP 248), Cummings laments “the sweet & aged people/who rule this world”, as they invented and tacitly adopted this conventional rigidity of language and strict forms, constricting poetic possibility. At other times, his use of obscenity comes as a direct rebuff against moral prudery and the bellowing of erudite fools, making explicit the ‘mirth’ of language in a way that only Baudelaire can match:

“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”

squeeze your nuts and open your face (CP 407)

Friedman is correct in explaining that “rough diction has always been held as decorum for satirical poems...and it is largely for the purposes of comedy and ridicule that Cummings has either his own persona or other assorted speakers talk in this way.”¹⁶² His obscenity is oftentimes produced by sexual delinquency (as is achieved slightly in the final line of the above poem), positing the burlesque aspects of prostitution. In “Paris:this April sunset completely utters” (CP 183), he calls the night a “lithe indolent prostitute”; in “II. MAME” (CP 224), he describes an occasion

¹⁶² Ibid., 1054.

in which Mame, an overtly sexualized character, has her tooth pulled. Sexuality, though, takes on many different forms in Cummings' poetry. Sometimes the obscene language is transparent, i.e. "the harsh erecting breasts and uttering tits" (CP 210). In this poem, Cummings sardonically approaches the anatomy of a woman, transforming classical images of sensuality and innocence into hyper-sexualized descriptors. The effect of his sexual satire is exemplified by the poem "she being brand" (CP 246), in which he constructs a metaphor comparing the that act of deflowering to the breaking in of a car: "i went right to it flooded-the-carburetor cranked her//up,slipped the/clutch." Nonetheless, the poem is never flagrantly obscene because of the intimacy of the description.¹⁶³ "May i feel said he" (CP 399-400) may be one of the best examples of how he forcefully exploits pristine imagery. The piece operates as a dialogue; having no descriptive or figurative language, it is wholly engaged in the sexual act, representing a conversation between two people from the moments leading up to their encounter to the eventual consummation of the act in the final lines:

(cccome?said he
ummm said she)
you're divine!said he
(you are Mine said she)

At first the characters exhibit a partial reluctance (one of them is actually married to someone else), but their flirty conversation leads them onward. These lines are explicitly sexually charged as the stammering question refers to whether or not the partner climaxed. The last line invites a new type of satire, one not necessarily of an obscene nature. "Mine" is the only capitalized work in the poem, symbolizing the

¹⁶³ Alkalay-Gut, Karen. *Sex and the Single Engine: E. E. Cummings' Experiment in Metaphoric Equation*. *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Winter, 1996): 255.

woman's assertion of power over the man in an anti-Romantic satire of misogyny.¹⁶⁴ These abuses of love and power comically portray the demise of love under the play for control. Love, for Cummings, must be an act of uniting the two lovers, so in this case when the lovers are pitted against each other they cannot truly convene, never uttering a sentence at the same time and always existing on separate lines in their vacillation back and forth. Through myriad colloquialisms, Cummings casts personalities that tow the line between humorous and sympathetic; his approach to high-end language demands that language be beautiful, in opposition to static archaisms; through his de-sensitizing of sexuality, he forces one of his most important themes into the burlesque arena, politicizing the sexual and informing it with both redemptive and contemptible attributes. In this way, Cummings' obscenities provide insight into his satirical mannerisms, deepening perspective within his poetry and reinforcing a contempt for purely clean and considerate language.

Death is satirized on a similarly comprehensive scale. For Cummings, death is not to be feared because it can be overcome by the embrace of life and love. There is no panic about its impending reality, as would be found in Keats. Instead Cummings laughs in the face of death, framing it in satirical terms in order to prevent it from precluding life's potential. This does not stop Cummings from approaching death thematically, carrying each reader with him "into nibbling final worms" (CP 277). Some poems address the issue symbolically, challenging the stale, classic poetic conception of a rose, its effervescent beauty and suggestive connotation, and re-issuing that "the rose/is dying" (CP 88). In almost every case, Cummings seems to

¹⁶⁴ Schroeder, 476-477.

conceive of death with a jocular tone, continually parodying mortality in original ways. He paints death as both “Satanic and blasé” (CP 278), a pernicious force that is also casual and generic. According to Cummings, it is the canon that has exaggerated the effects of death, building it into a debilitating, existential force. In response to this Cummings personifies death, attributing to it human-like characteristics that generally denote fragility:

the bigness of cannon
is skilful,

but i have seen
death’s clever enormous voice
which hides in a fragility
of poppies...(CP 55)

Here death is personified as a voice, and while it exhibits a sense of cunning and carries the imputation of enormity, it chooses to conceal itself beneath fragile flowers. Often relating death to flowers, perhaps because flowers themselves grow from soil, Cummings illustrates that even the most beautiful things must suffer through death. In these cases “beauty is more now than dying’s when” (CP 592), meaning that death does nothing to destroy their beauty, which is the truth of the eternal as Keats’ “Ode to a Grecian Urn”¹⁶⁵ explains. Cummings’ injunction to the canon is clear: ‘death’ must be revisited. It must be reformulated, and in order for us to understand exactly what death is, we must anthropomorphize it. In other poems we learn that while “Death is young/life wears velour trousers” (CP 189), or are introduced to a “crazy

¹⁶⁵ “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” Keats emphatically proclaims in his “Ode to a Grecian Urn,” demonstrating through its tautological assertion that beauty, or art for that matter, can be eternal, though we mere mortals ephemerally come and go. Repr. in Stillinger, Jack, Deidre Lynch, Stephen Greenblatt, and M. H. Abrams. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 8th ed. Vol. D (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2006): 905-906.

The poem explores death and the figure of Buffalo Bill from two separate perspectives: that of a child admiring his hero and then that of a man looking back at this figure once he has passed. 'Jesus he was a handsome man' is spoken almost as a childhood introject, as are the few preceding lines of exclamatory adoration. The boy had been impressed by Bill's abilities and made him out to be a national hero. Now, in mature retrospect, his awe is disillusioned. He sees Bill as being part of a tawdry world of cheap tricks. The change in perspective is reinforced by the shift in tense, as the lines from the younger viewpoint are written in the past tense and the other lines, those coming closest to the beginning and the end of the elegy, are formulated in the present. The poem, then, is a sardonic and derisive attack on our sentimentality toward national heroes, contending that "we as a nation are adolescent in our infatuation with such fraudulent 'heroes'."¹⁶⁹ Cummings is attempting to tell us that we idolize the wrong figures, building mental monuments for those who are only famous for their flashy exteriors. Death arrives to us on these terms, as a pretense that allows us to revisit earlier experiences, but all the while stripping the world of the feelings of those past experiences and perspectives. For Cummings, it is an actual entity that we can (if only sardonically) address, helping us cope with the wretched affairs it brings about.

As we saw in "Buffalo Bill's", Cummings' poetry can be politically irate, sarcastically issuing complaints about past public figures and patriotic duties. Schroeder calls this the "ironic discovering of the patriotic fallacy."¹⁷⁰ Cummings intends to heap a list of blames on rhetorical political oration, especially of the kind

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 288.

¹⁷⁰ Schroeder, 473.

that inculcates misguided patriotism. He shows no hesitation in mocking political figures with an irreverent tone:

the first president to be loved by his
bitterest enemies” is dead

the only man woman or child who wrote
a simple declarative sentence with seven grammatical
errors “is dead”
beautiful Warren Gamaliel Harding
“is” dead
he’s
“dead”
if he wouldn’t have eaten them Yapanese Craps

somebody might hardly never not have been unsorry,perhaps (CP 337)

The final line, in stringing together indecisive qualifiers, captures the crux of the attack: Cummings is no longer remorseful for his passing. Once again, death and irony become inter-mingled in this poem, chaffing Harding for his hasty misspellings and his amicable stance toward his enemies. In each instance, the word ‘dead’ arrives with an individually nuanced set of quotation marks either surrounding or beside it, hinting at the different possibilities of remembrance that death guarantees. The spelling of ‘Yapanese’ more than subtly suggests a sarcastic tone aimed at Harding. Not only in representative American figures does Cummings find subjects for his humor, he also makes his satire an affront to America itself, especially the patriotic attitudes that instill its national myth. In “next to of course god america i” (CP 267), Cummings depicts a speech given by a politician who sees the flaws of patriotism but chooses to proffer his love of the glorious country regardless. By the end of his speech, he recognizes the fallacy of fervent patriotism, discussing the “heroic happy dead/who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter.” The rhetorician drinks “rapidly a glass of water”, illustrating an anxiety and distrust of even his own words. Other poems use obscenity to harangue the maladies of war, such as “come gaze with me

upon this dome” (CP 272), which depicts soldiers going off to war “for God for country and for Yale” in spite of ‘loving relatives’. The sheer obscenity of the line is a remark about the obscenity of war, indicting the nationalist sentiment that urges people to die for their country and equating it with a venereal disease: “the son of man goes forth to war/with trumpets clap and syphilis.” He does not just respond to war, though, as Cummings jests about “the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls” (CP 115) (one is reminded of Eliot’s ‘in the room/the women come and go’). “Poem, Or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal” (CP 228) explicitly confronts Americanism and monumental figures, resulting in what Carl Bode calls “his [Cummings’] most acrid criticism of boom-time America in the 1920’s.”¹⁷¹ He sportively retorts patriotic refrains: “let freedom ring//amen. i do however protest.” His lurid criticism of this type of America is consistent, but other political regimes also garner his satirical attention, especially Communism. His book, *Eimi*, chronicles his trip into the depths of the Soviet Union, subversively politicizing the oppressive policies that communization engendered.¹⁷² In “kumrads die because they’re told” (CP 413), Cummings argues that ‘kumrads’ fall in line and submit to order, and then that they die “because they are afraid to love.” For Cummings, death should not scare us, rather being ‘unalive’, not fully living, should be a much more frightening prospect. Cummings hurls abuse both at America and Russia, their simplistic moralisms and the various ways through which they undercut individuality. He is protesting against a whole set of ideological imperatives that obstruct truth and limit freedom:

¹⁷¹ Bode, 360.

¹⁷² Mills Jr., Ralph J. *The Poetry of Innocence: Notes on E. E. Cummings. The English Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 8 (Nov., 1959): 437.

Humanity i love you because you
are perpetually putting the secret of
life in your pants and forgetting
it's there and sitting down

on it
and because you are
forever making poems in the lap
of death Humanity

i hate you (CP 53)

Humanity, who has access to all of the wonderful mysteries of life, opts instead to accede to instructions, to ignore the truth of life and submit to authority. The very center of his satire responds to those humans who choose not to live. He is being cheeky each time he says that he loves humanity, as the poem ends on the exact opposite note. Cummings approaches religion from the same standpoint, advocating a distancing from religion in his parodying of its supposed authority and infallibility. Although he was raised in a devoutly religious household, he decisively turned against religious influence in his early poetry. In “the skinny voice” (CP 72), he begs the question “will anyone tell him why he should//blow two bits for the coming of Jesus Christ.” Through satirically engaging with the notion of resurrection, Cummings creates a situation in which religion offers no recourse, solves no problems, even exacerbating those already existing. A more comprehensive indictment of the religious processions of the Church can be found in “candles and” (CP 280):

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)

The satiric irreverence is made apparent by the epithet for Saint Ignatius, who is ludicrously believed to inhabit the ceremonial 'glass box'. Around this procession, Cummings jokes that people begin to crumble down and tumble onto their knees in submission. People even cross each other, having a physical but also divisive connotation, as if to suggest that the procession initiates rivalry among factions. This is the 'blubbering', ineffectual crowd that is conditioned by ceremonies of conformity. Cummings attributes a parodically sexual nature to this religious sacrament, describing it 'sensuously' and thereby depreciating the religious nature with sexual undertones. He bemoans the state of being always in 'procession', that the Church continues to run its rounds in an orderly fashion, to the point at which he claims the ceremony is composed of "artificial limbs" and "defunct geraniums". The poem satirically addresses religion, denouncing its forced exuberance and methodical treatment of spirituality. This is 'unlife', the 'unworld' of followers that are characterized by "not having/most ever lived" (CP 412). For Cummings, the satirical held a unique power to disengage us from political oppression, patriotic duty, and moralizing regimes, exposing their bizarre qualities through pungent, biting humor.

In his use of satire, irony, and comedy, Cummings is very much an iconoclast. His poems implement locutions of speech replete with obscenities and politicizations of sexuality in its perverse variants. They also attempt to address death under a satiric lens and frame an indictment of political and religious issuances of moralizing authority. He challenges these concepts with violent and irreverent language. For Cummings, the modern world presented timeless dilemmas as well as new difficulties that demanded attention. It is how he chose to respond to the world that individuates

him among moderns. In his poetry, the maladies of modernity were not the signs of the end of times, or an invocation to submit to disillusionment. Rather Cummings asked for only a scoffing glance, an occasional, though insistent, parodying of the deplorable conditions of the world in order to overcome them. His poetry laments, but then leads us elsewhere, to the beautiful aspects of life that arise whether or not the rest of the world continues its tawdry, cheapened state of existence.

Love & The Inter-Subjective

Cummings found a solution to the maladies of the world (a modern wasteland full of hollow men) in a timeless theme: that of love. While at Harvard, Cummings encountered another prominent modern force in the philosophy graduate student, Tom Eliot. Eliot was a member of the *Harvard Advocate's* staff, a publication Cummings had earlier rejected a position in, in favor of the *Monthly*. During his tenure on the editorial board of the *Monthly*, Cummings not only developed poetically, but also began to establish lifelong friends and literary confidants in Robert Hillyer (who later won the Pulitzer Prize in 1934), John Dos Passos, and S. Forster Damon, among others.¹⁷³ Despite his rather religious upbringing, the pursuit of women became an interest of his in his later college years, once he had finally moved from his parents' home in Cambridge. He developed a love interest in Amy de Gozzaldi, of whom he had made the acquaintance through theatre.¹⁷⁴ In 1913, they were both cast in *The New Lady Bancroft or Fanny and the Servant Problem*, and his courtship with her timidly ensued. He was well aware at the time that Gozzaldi was enamored with an older student who played the role of Lord Bancroft, T. S. Eliot. While it is suspect as to whether Eliot reciprocated these feelings, he did at the very least present her with a bouquet of flowers on opening night. Cummings pursued Gozzaldi more ardently, presenting her a poem at the end of the performance. De Gozzaldi was so taken with the poem that her interest in Eliot began to wane, and

¹⁷³ "It was Damon who introduced Cummings to Debussy, Stravinsky, and Satie...who loaned him Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Ezra Pound's *Rispostes*, and later Pound's *Cathay* and his anthology *Des Imagistes*." Sawyer-Lauçanno, 52-56.

¹⁷⁴ This encounter has been adapted from the biography of Cummings by Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno, who details the meeting and its influence on Cummings. See *Ibid.*, 57-58.

she soon found herself on outings “to Revere Beach, to the circus, and to the Copley Plaza to drink gin fizzes and dance to a live band”¹⁷⁵ with the younger Cummings. This was an important victory for Cummings as he had not only successfully wooed the woman he had desired, but in the process had triumphed over Eliot, an older, promising poet at Harvard. This brief instance from his past can help show us why we must turn to Cummings on the matter of love, and how his lyrically romantic poetic vision could be less bleak and dreary than Eliot’s.¹⁷⁶ For Cummings, in the face of death, the fragmentary, and the “comfortable disease” that is progress, only love would allow the individual to be fully himself. The popular phrase ‘love conquers all’ was made new in his poetry. When other modern writers thought not of love’s feasibility, rendering it an old, trite poetic endeavor, Cummings sincerely implored the reader “open your heart” (CP 586) and you shall be made whole again. “Love is the supreme mystery, Cummings’ lyricism tells us over and again, and the person who gives reign to the ‘illimitable’ in himself may achieve that ‘selftranscendence’ which is love’s reward.”¹⁷⁷ By transcendence, though, it is important to note that we mean not that the individual transcends phenomenal reality through love and enters a metaphysical relation, but rather that one introduces himself to an inter-subjective realm in which love and caring alleviate the pressures of the world. Love’s irrationality mimics the liberation that takes place in Cummings’ linguistics, it makes the fragmented individual whole through integration with an

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷⁶ Eliot sought transcendence religiously; he was hesitant regarding the perverted, sexualized ‘modern’ connotation of love, see: “A Game of Chess”, in “The Waste Land”. The section involves the themes of abortion, infidelity, and abandonment. Eliot, T. S. *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963): 56-59.

¹⁷⁷ Mills Jr., 440.

other, and it responds to the imminent pressure of death by engaging in an eternal timelessness.

Cummings' conception of love must be approached developmentally, for he engages with love poetry in various ways throughout his career as a writer. In his earlier poetry, the world of 'love' is considered to be a distant reality, one that might have been obscured by the devastation of war, but still has not been tainted by our human deficiencies. In *Tulips & Chimneys*, Cummings begins to formulate a thematic positioning of love, framing it as a distant region that we cannot touch without much work:

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

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 people

than houses and steeples and clouds:
go sailing
away and away sailing into a keen
city which nobody's ever visited,where

always
 it's
 Spring)and everyone's
in love and flowers pick themselves

In order to appreciate the beauty of love, the two lovers must physically ascend the world on a balloon to escape the cruelly 'keen city'. This ascendance takes the two lovers beyond the bastions of modernization, the houses and the steeples, into the clouds that fill the sky. The city at which they arrive is one "which nobody's ever visited," a poetic Galapagos where only spring and love exist, far removed from the pressures of reality. Here, the world is eternal, due to the unchanging season of

spring that is always at bloom with autonomous flowers and the power of togetherness. This is a quite progressive statement coming from Cummings' earlier poems since the rest of his work in *Tulips & Chimneys* deals with love in a strictly sexualized sense. As a young poet, Cummings had succumbed to the strong play that emotions had on him, and his writing is as visceral and irreverent as what one might find in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress." Stamped with the very sexual act, a number of his earlier poems are imbued with highly sexual overtones that make little attempt to culminate in an aesthetic or artistic stance regarding love's full potential. These poems sing of "the dirty colours of her kiss" (CP 205) and "harsh erecting breasts and uttering tits" (CP 210). Many poems are entirely about individual sexual experiences, "in making Marjorie god hurried" ends as the boy in the poem "fill[s] her hips with boys and girls" (CP 211). The early writing is graphically sexual, being written by a poet whose only recent introduction to sexuality engendered a youthful impertinence and exuberance. Cummings' later books tirelessly grapple with love as a realistic solution to the imperfections of the world. As Richard von Abele notes, "Some poets grow vaporous with age, like Whitman; in others, like Yeats, the agony of sense achieves new heights; here we may have a relation between growing old and finding a universal level from which to contemplate one's major passion."¹⁷⁸ His later work reveals a poet considering love as the alternative to the 'unworld', as more than just an eternal beauty, but one having the ability to truly conquer all. As he states in *Eimi*, once he has delved into the depths of the evil Soviet empire: "something—is sure, I feel; something's certain: Eros wins. Eros wins; always: through a million or a trillion

¹⁷⁸ Von Abele, 930.

million selves, musically which are 1 who always cannot perish...”.¹⁷⁹ Love is the undercurrent of the world, and therefore love rests much closer to the heart of humanity as opposed to transcending it. Love is the each and every, the power internal to each individual that enables him to access the beauty of the world. By the time he had written *No Thanks* and *I x I*, Cummings had begun to more fully appreciate the power of love. Even the title of the latter book, *I x I*, suggests a further development of love’s capability, as it mathematically asserts a new understanding of the confluent power of love: not as an additive force, but as a multiplying force. In the case of one and one, the equation yields not two people, but rather just one new whole. This style of thinking characterizes Cummings’ late work, and the concluding piece to this volume of poetry best summarizes the goal of Cummings’ later love poems: “we’re beautiful one times one” (CP 594).

An important aspect in the battle love wages with the world is its opposition to progress and the totalizing push toward modernization, focusing specifically on scientific objectivism and rationalism. *I x I* offers a harsh rebuke of this type of progress, problematizing progress insofar as it does not permit a place for love:

of all the blessings which to man
kind progress doth impart
one stands supreme i mean the an
imal without a heart. (CP 544)

Why is it important that progress leaves behind the heart? Is this indeed a ‘supreme blessing’, or could Cummings be protesting against progress by means of its symptomatic exclusion of love? The latter seems a more apt interpretation, with the poem derisively challenging the notion of progress which leaves man without his very

¹⁷⁹ Cummings, E. E. *Eimi*. (New York: Grove, 1958): 116.

core element: the heart. Love testifies against progress, against the inclusion of rationality in justifying an indoctrination of society. Love will advocate the illogic of spring, a spring which answers not to reason but instead to the chaotic ethos of nature. Cummings goes so far as to claim that “lovers are mindless” (CP 563) and that “love is a deeper season/than reason” (CP 578). These are not simply declarations about the state of mind that love incites, a Dionysian intoxication that momentarily denies all standards of logic, rather they contend that love is an actual state of existence wherein man disengages from the overwhelming regime of reason that dominates and suppresses reality. For Cummings “only love/occurs immortally beyond the mind” (CP 576), leading to the proposition that “nothing false and possible is love” (CP 574). Because love is not subject to rationality it can be at once impossible and true, it can extend beyond the bounds of possibility and enable man to reach the sublime (in the form of inter-subjective truth). “Love,” as Cummings writes, “is the only every god” (CP 526), it is the ultimate source of transcendence, occupying the place of Eliot’s Christianity. For Cummings, only love can thwart the oppressive rule of progress that seeks to diminish it. Love stands as a force against the superimposition of logicalities because it does not subscribe to reason and because it is a timeless reminder of humanity’s potential: “love is more thicker than forget” (CP 530).

How, exactly, does love wage this war against modern existence? It is precisely in its solving of the physical distance separating humans that love generates an inter-subjective possibility of truth. In “The Se(e.)lf as Heteroglot,” we encountered the dilemma that modern fragmentation presents to any attempt at situating an ossified self. Through love Cummings solves this problem, contending

that the search for ‘oneness’ does not take hold in the individual, but when the individual makes himself ‘one’ with another. Cummings’ project consists not of discovering an elevated transcendental, but rather of finding the transcendent here on earth, of becoming closer to the world and practicing the logic that only nature deems true. He solves the dualism conditioned by physical distance of the self and the other through love: “love is the whole and more than all” (CP 521). Love allows two individuals to become one, and in this way man is allowed to cohere into a complete entity:

The striving toward reintegration of the self with the other is typically Romantic; yet it is important to be aware that Cummings’ emphasis is not on the escape from the self into the other, but on the expansion of the self’s potential through *complete* meeting with the other. Here the experience of Being is put to the uses of Becoming.¹⁸⁰

Through love, we can overcome our compartmentalized natures and submit to the transcendental power of inter-subjective truth. The construction of a ‘youandme’ is neo-platonic to an extent, as it brings to memory the conflated beings famously articulated by Aristophanes in the *Symposium*.¹⁸¹ Cummings is proffering a return to the manner of existence of an individual combining with another individual to form a more perfect being. It is important, now, to turn to Cummings’ poetry in order to delineate exactly how he conceives of this dual-existence, and how it solves the complexities of modernity:

¹⁸⁰ Tal-Mason Cline, 90.

¹⁸¹ The speech of Aristophanes in the Plato’s *Symposium* involved a mythical account of love in which humans were originally whole, four-armed, four-legged creatures, but when they made an attempt on the Gods, Zeus decided to break them in two. The story of the human is therefore a quest to discover its other half, very similar to the way Cummings describes love:

“Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature [191D].” Plato, Alexander Nehamas, and Paul Woodruff. *Symposium*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1989): 25-31.

me
you gave gave darling

birds are
in(trees are in)
song
when to me you
leap and i'm born we
're sunlight of
oneness (CP 589)

and we who are we?surely not i not you
behold nor any breathing creature this?
nothing except the impossible shall occur

—see!now himself uplifts of stars the star
(sing!every joy)—wholly now disappear
night's not eternal terrors like a guess.

Life's life and strikes my your our blossoming sphere (CP 582)

In the first poem, the 'darling' gives herself fully to the 'me', and the world is in spring and alive with song. The 'darling' then undergoes both a spatial and typographical leap, hurling herself across the distance that separates the two people. Cummings places the two pronouns in direct proximity to each other in the poem, "when to me you." The result is that a new individual is born from the giving over of oneself to the whole, as "i'm born we" suggests. The enjambment that splits the contraction "we're" serves to first isolate the phrase just discussed, and then ultimately the next line constructs the actuality of this new being, that we now 'are', or in Cummings terms, " 're". This new, complete individual is made of the "sunlight of oneness" a wholly convergent figure comprised of two individual lovers. The other poem asks "we who are we," responding with 'not i' and then also 'not you'. Love compresses the distance between people, so when they unite in the eternal act, they become something different altogether from the individuals they once were. Once again, there is musical rejoicing as we are to sing every joy, and the end of the poem deepens the lack of distance between the people by, in the last line, stringing together each pronoun that constitutes the set of individual lovers. Life strikes 'my your our blossoming sphere', connoting the progressive compression of these pronouns into a single entity as 'our' which encompasses an entire sphere of existence. Confronted with this combinatory force, the terrors of the night subside;

disappearing from the poem are the problems of the world and of the self who otherwise fails to cohere. Often when love is addressed in his poetry it creates a comparison to nature, especially the springtime, representing rebirth and joy: “more leastfully than i am you/,we are spring” (CP 583), Even in some earlier poems, Cummings comes to the realization that love has the power to overcome the expanse of distance between individuals, as in “your little voice” (CP 41), in which one hears the voice of his beloved over the phone and is whirled up into joy and ecstasy. Cummings’ understanding of lovers is that they unite through love and become whole again. The beginning of the following poem lays more groundwork for this unifying possibility and confirms the relation to Aristophanes’ lovers:

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 (CP 594)

In this poem the self is inherently incomplete. It is at once halved, and must reintegrate itself with another in love in order to experience sublime ‘oneness’. We know this project to be pivotal for Cummings when he asserts “there’s nothing as something as one” (CP 594). In combination, the lovers’ self precludes death and becomes ‘the actual more’, an illimitable, eternal force of life. Cummings claims outright that the fragmentation of the ‘modern’ self is solved by submitting to the infinite power of love. This explains why an even older Cummings writes: “i carry your heart with me(i carry it in/my heart)i am never without it(anywhere/i go you go, my dear;and whatever is done/by only me is your doing,my darling)” (CP 766).

Not only does love overcome the distances between people, it also serves to overcome the pressures of death by situating the lover’s self within a timelessness. In

the next stanza of “i carry your heart with me,” Cummings claims that because of love, the lover ‘fears no fate’ and ‘wants no world’. Cummings persistently maintains the notion that love can overcome the terrible forces of the world, even ‘time’ itself, propelling lovers into a timeless and sublime embrace. “Love,” Cummings insists is “imagined, therefore limitless” (CP 574). This is the case in *95 Poems*, when Cummings writes that love is the very air and ocean and the land, and that it will remain eternally: “being as to timelessness as it’s to time, / love did no more begin than love will end” (CP 768). Then again in *Xaipe*: “Love only has ever been, is, and will ever be, So” (CP 631). Love has the ability to escape time, to become part of the dynamic and eternal current of the world, and to affirm the true value of living in spite of the tragic dilemma of modern man:

Lovers can escape time—they are immortal: ‘true lovers in each happening of their hearts/live longer than all which and every who...’ [CP 576]; they can escape the ‘colossal hoax of clocks and calendars’ [CP 659]. Gaining emphasis in *95 Poems*, as in ‘stand with your lover on the ending earth’ [CP 765], the ‘eternal now’ of love is a major theme in *73 Poems*. There lovers are ‘(hosts of eternity; not guests of seem)’; poets, children, and lovers cannot tell time [CP 817].¹⁸²

Through love, we steer ourselves toward an infinite tomorrow. The poems mentioned by Tal-Mason Cline illustrate a deliberate focus on love’s timeless qualities throughout Cummings’ later poetry. The final lines of “which is the very” attest to his belief in togetherness as a mechanism for thwarting the fear of death:

—all perfectly dyingest
my and foreverless
thy?
 why our
is love and neverless (CP 590)

While ‘my’ is ‘dyingest’ and ‘thy’ is ‘foreverless’, ‘our’ can be ‘neverless’. This is to say that while individuals must submit to death and the impossibility of forever, love

¹⁸² Tal-Mason Cline, 96.

is not bounded by these regulations. 'Our' can be 'neverless', it can be completely without never, participating instead in the eternal domain of ever. He constructs the narrative of love as a macrocosm, an all-encompassing power pertinent to every individual. He also formulates the various microcosmic iterations of love, constructing individual relationships within many of his love poems that exemplify love's power to grasp the eternal as in the concluding lines of "as freedom is a breakfastfood":

—time is a tree (this life one leaf)
but the love is the sky and i am for you
just so long and long enough (CP 511)

The love between two individuals escapes the 'tree of time', as love metonymically becomes the eternal sky, and the lovers remain atemporally in the lovely sky 'just so long and long enough'. The emphasis on individual situations of love is even more clear in the poem "(ponder,darling,these busted statues)":

unimportant)whereas Life
matters if or
when the your- and my-
idle vertical worthless
self unite in a peculiarly
momentary
partnership (CP 258)

The words yourself and myself are each broken in half by the interposition of the line 'idle vertical worthless'. In the next line the self is realized as a unification of the two individuals, they actually 'unite' in the act of sex. What has happened up to this juncture in the poem is deemed 'unimportant', as the parenthesis that separated the first part of the poem abrasively cuts it off, and the reader is shown that which is truly important, love:

Cummings' emphasis here on the momentary nature of the sex act is typical. Love, the union of two individuals into one "self," may be fleeting, he tells us, but it is the meat of life—the only victory humans can achieve over the greedy paws of death.¹⁸³

Life, we find, only matters when the two selves unite. These people do not 'matter' individually, but by uniting into the momentary partnership of love, they can make life meaningful. In this case, love rescues man from a 'vertical tyranny' by giving him the momentary possibility of 'constructive horizontal business'. The act of love alone is enough to rescue man, but love as a whole is the important concept for Cummings. Love breaks the vertical binds of metaphysical, transcendental propositions by operating on the horizontal plane of inter-subjectivity. Through love, man can combat the onward march of progress, the fragmentary nature of his own self, as well as a fear of death. Love resounds to all of these modern dilemmas with a silent shrug, a tender embrace, a whole heart's yearning for inter-subjective truth. And Cummings' poetry certainly will not stop whispering the secrets of love into our ears:

(though love be a day
and life be nothing, it shall not stop kissing). (CP 14)

¹⁸³ Wilson Jr., G. R. "Cummings's '(Ponder, Darling, These Busted Statues)'." *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Nov., 1972): 68.

Toward a Conclusion

In a very interesting article about teaching the poetry of E. E. Cummings to a class of high school students, Dolores Barracano Schmidt poignantly concludes “Isn’t all change, all learning, all comprehension the same, in that the familiar becomes unfamiliar, the unfamiliar, familiar?”¹⁸⁴ This is the situation the Cummings reader typically finds himself in, the gradual ‘discovering’ of the poem, the steady ‘becoming’ of life. The process is similar to that in the poem about the grasshopper, whose enigma is only revealed after the delay of several anagrams, in that we learn slowly (or as Cummings would put it, ‘slowliest’). “The purpose of Cummings’ deliberate obscurantism, then, is to force the reader to take part in the poetic process.”¹⁸⁵ Perhaps this explains why it has taken so long for an academic appreciation of Cummings to unfold, that with the help of time we might eventually begin to understand and welcome this figure into the midst of modern discourse. We contend that the moment of Cummings’ epochal resurrection is upon us, that enough time has passed and we must re-learn the poetry of Cummings. With even the best critics, there is still a hint of resistance to accept Cummings fully, as the following quote from Haskell Springer shows:

It is not what E. E. Cummings has to say, but the way in which he says it that has established for him a secure position in the history of modern American poetry. His ideas are not trite, but are, for the most part, unexceptional, and derivative rather than original.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Schmidt, Dolores Barracano. *Cummings in the Classroom*. *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Composition as Art (Feb., 1964): 29.

¹⁸⁵ Springer, Haskell S. The Poetics of E. E. Cummings. *South Atlantic Modern Language Association*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Nov., 1967): 8.

¹⁸⁶ Springer, 8.

Statements of this caliber deny Cummings the secure post in modernism they presume to award him. By contending that Cummings is unoriginal in thought, Springer actually suggests that he is in no way modern. We know the modern project to be predicated upon ‘newness’, especially when this meant taking the old and co-opting it with fresh language, imagery, symbolism and purpose. For Cummings, old poetic symbols (love, death, irony, the self) are made fresh insofar as they are projected into the modern world. At a time when other poets see destruction, he innovatively tells us that even the modern world can accept the power of love, the potency of irony, and freedom through the manipulation of inherited forms (like the sonnet, for example). Cummings is novel in that he uses these ideas in modern times, and this is what the critic has still failed to notice. So when we say that Cummings has not escaped the fate of being read as a divergent poet¹⁸⁷, we intend to prove that this divergence is what enables him to be utterly, and undeniably, modern.

The case for Cummings as a modernist is more than just strong, it is factual. Take the three principles of modernism, and you will find that Cummings not only accedes to this classification, but is of seminal importance in expanding and delineating the terms upon which it rests. With his language alone, Cummings is an eminent force of the push toward ‘newness’. Anyone reading a poem by Cummings will no doubt be swept away by the inherent musicality of his language (*melopoeia*).¹⁸⁸ Similar to the experience of visually ‘seeing’ the fragmented poem on the page, the reader might also be distracted by how ‘song-like’ his poetry actually is. The notes available at the Houghton Library attest to Cummings’ exacting process

¹⁸⁷ Von Abele, 913.

¹⁸⁸ See the explanation of these three Imagist principles on page 21 of the Modernism Chapter.

of editing, the exhausting permutations of lines until they achieved the precision of language Cummings desired (*phanopoeia*). And it has been consistently shown that Cummings is aware of the predispositions of language, manipulating them through irregular syntax, the fragmentation of the unitary word, and the morphological inversions of noun, verbs, adjectives, suffixes and prefixes to create a neologistic language (*logopoeia*). In this way, Cummings ascribes to the fundamental principles of Imagist language appropriated by Ezra Pound.¹⁸⁹ In his preference for connotative signification Cummings also fits the mold of Vorticism, valuing “art before it has spread itself into flaccidity, into elaboration and secondary applications.”¹⁹⁰ His poems are always ordered by the most intense of experiences, whirling the reader up into an emotive response. It is hard to imagine a more exemplary proponent of *vers libre*. The modern ‘newness’ also featured the use of old forms in new manners, and Cummings followed the sonnet down to new depths and then brought it back in the modern era, revitalizing it with his experimental form. In addition, his later books invented their own systems of poetic form, propelling forward modern possibilities of form. ‘Newness’, for Cummings, was to be inscribed on the very heart of poetry, it was a command to reinvigorate poetry in the modern era.

With ‘difficulty’, Cummings was also quick to notice the polyglot situation of the world. However, his poems approach this socially rather than politically. His poetry is comprised of endless social dialects, like that of Langston Hughes; Cummings asserts that the language of everyone is the true poetic voice, and that this

¹⁸⁹ We did acknowledge in the Modernism Chapter that Cummings shies from absolutely direct language, considering it a modern impossibility. This does distance him from the Imagists, but only insofar as it informs Cummings with an even more modern outlook on language. And of course Cummings himself was not among the Imagists.

¹⁹⁰ Pound, Ezra. *Vorticism*, *Fortnightly Review* 573, (1 September 1914): 461-71.

is a whole society of utterances and perspectives. Cummings' poetry is poly-vocalized in that it considers the world from a plurality of perspectives, refraining from any universal, transcendental viewpoint and instead proffering that all viewpoints must be taken into account. His very poetic self is 'difficult', being equally informed by the stratification of poly-vocal languages and discourses and thereby fragmented into 'not numerable' pieces. Through Bakhtinian theory, we showed how Cummings explores the role of the heteroglossic self, framing it under the furtively evasive lower-case "i". The self is difficult in that it is inherently dialogic, subject to the contestations of *sotto voce* and intercalation. Not only is the self fragmented in Cummings' poetry, language is as well. To Cummings, in line with the semanticists, deconstructed language offered the only method of honestly expressing ourselves without inheriting pre-existing meanings. His deconstruction of the standards of linguistic formulation aligns him with modern poets like Stein and Williams, and his exploitation of typographical devices is similar to that found in the work of Mina Loy. But Cummings systematically engages in this project, probably representing the most consummate poetics of linguistic re-formulation. Finally, like Stevens and Crane, Cummings was an advocate of illogicality, arguing against the totalizing push for rational order. Cummings, with skillfully crafted ironies, warns us against succumbing to the indoctrination of reason and neglecting the beauty of love. His "solution" to the difficulty of the world was in love, inter-subjective truth, a momentary embrace of humanity and erasure of overwhelming rationality.

The instantaneous occasion of love ought direct us to Cummings' utilization of 'immediacy' in his poetics. Like Lawrence and Pound, Cummings was interested in producing a poetry that responded to the fluctuating nature of life:

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 whenever 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.¹⁹¹

The modern principle of immediacy, succinctly summarized in a single phrase of Cummings' writing: "Life,for eternal us,is now." So when Cummings writes "being as to time as its to timelessness," we should understand that being, or life itself, is as related to the eternal as it is grounded in the immediacy of its occasion. His poetry, then, focuses on life in the immediate. Each poem reads like an instant in time, featuring language that parallels the very conditions of life. His poetry presents the immediacy of thought, contending with itself and changing its opinion instantaneously. Like Eliot's stream of consciousness, Cummings' poetry situates the fabric of the imagination as it thinks, an eternal becoming. His self-proclaimed "Ineluctable preoccupation with the Verb"¹⁹² solidifies his stance on creating a poetry invested in making, growth, and becoming (all products of the verb's modification of a noun). His poetry is about the world around us; wholly alive, it is immediate, present, standing before us and placing us within the moment of the world. Exactly like Lawrence, Cummings writes of the momentary because he believes that poetry must represent the conditions of life, of the flux self projected into an eternal world.

¹⁹¹ This was part of his "Introduction" to *New Poems*. CP 461.

¹⁹² This quote comes from his "Foreword" to the book *Is 5*. CP 221.

E. E. Cummings is a tireless contributor to poetic modernism, exemplifying its characteristic features and developing a unique approach to modernity by positing the importance of love. We find that he is a serial experimentalist in language. However, he does more than just experiment with language (as many critics would contend), Cummings fervently experiments with poetry itself, with form, stylistics, aesthetics, imagery, and signification. He tells us that no matter who nor where we are, we are human, or have the capacity to be so. And who knows, perhaps Cummings will see a revitalization in criticism in years to come, he is a poet of timeless themes, after all. But I much prefer the way he describes it:

I will rise
 After a thousand years
lipping
flowers
 And set my teeth in the silver of the moon

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