Cummings with Himself : The "i" in Cummings's *i six nonlectures*

MATTHEW Main
Faculty of Science,
Okayama University of Science,
Ridai-cho 1-1, Okayama 700, Japan
(Received September 30, 1995)

For the academic year 1952-53, E. E. Cummings accepted the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship at Harvard University, his alma matter. The Norton Professorship was and still is the most distinguished chair for visiting professors, and seeing how Harvard was where Cummings began his poetic journey, it seemed fitting that he should be offered such a position. The professorships only obligation, aside from the one-year stipulation of residency in Cambridge, was a minimum of six lectures over the academic year with the option of their publication by the Harvard University Press.

The lectures turned out to be an "immense popular success among the undergraduates and the visitors"(Kennedy 443). Literally, it was standing room only the first night of the lecture and Cummings's personal introduction by Professor Finley as "Odysseus returning to Ithica"(Kennedy 442) provided "a suitably literary and personal atmosphere" (Kennedy 442) that would last through out the entire lecture series. By lecture six, personal friends, students and professors were coming all the way from Rochester, Rockport, and New Your City to hear Cummings perform. As Richard Kennedy points out:

> He(Cummings) was still slaving over the last lectures during the spring, tirelessly revising and polishing their phrasing. (H is) delivery was so masterful and his preparation of the text carefully marked" (444).

For some reason, Cummings had acquired the notion that he was responsible for entertaining the audience rather than lecture to them. And this notion directed his worries toward the delivery and success of the method, "for he did not want to let his generous audience down theatrically"(Kennedy 443). In fact, Cummings often admitted to his wife Marion that he had "never worked harder in his life"(Kennedy 440) than he did during his professorship.

The surprising, but certainly welcome success of his lectures encouraged Cummings to publish them in book form. As agreed, Harvard University Press published the book and the result, entitled *i six nonlectures*, is a unique and profoundly personal autobiography. It can only be surmised that Cummings had every intention of allowing Harvard to publish his lectures, and considering such, the amount of energy that Cummings poured into them is understandable. In fact, even before the position was offered to him

Cummings was working on "some narrative account of his own life"(Kennedy 440). However, while the contents of the lectures remain to this day interesting reading, the lectures, the book, and Cummings's professorship itself remain a paradox. How could the lectures receive so much attention, yet be disliked by so many? This irony remains as an apt metaphor for Cummings's poetry, for at his death Cummings was, along with Robert Frost, one of the most popular poets in America, yet his poetry, even to this day, remains the least understood.

The first ironic aspect of the lectures that must be pointed out is the "trepidation" Cummings held for Harvard, the Cambridge community, and the obligatory lectures he had to give. While the prospect was tempting (or was it the money? Near the end of his career, Cummings was consistently scraping together what he could to pay for his medical bills and the mortgage on Joy Farm), he looked upon the job as a year of "unmitigated boredom"(Kennedy 439). Cummings's real desire, as Kennedy points out, was to "perform six lectures, employjng his own special linguistic utterance, and then skip town after each appearance"(439). Indeed, Cummings's acceptance of the "non-professorship" is most ironic. Why would he throw himself to the lions for a year, when he could have spent the time doing other things?

Another ironic aspect of Cummings's lectures was the mixed reviews it received. Overall, people "liked" what they saw, but there was sharp criticism from the Harvard faculty, a majority of it, not surprisingly, coming from the Humanities and English Departments. The faculty and graduate students "thought (the lectures) were elegantly phrased and delivered but empty of content"(Kennedy 443). This attitude about Cummings's lectures probably did not surprise Cummings, and more than likely amused him, for this same attitude had been the status quo through out his entire publishing career. Cummings's poetry has always appealed to the undergraduates and common audiences of the world. Cummings loved the little guy, and hated the organized institutions in which the professors of the world lived.

This reaction, mixed with Cummings's penchant for uniqueness leads us to the third irony of the lectures: namely, the style in which they were written and presented. Late into the first lecture, Cummings said to the sizable audience present: "If you ask 'but why include trivialities?' my answer will be: what are they"(6)? This line in interesting because it epitomizes the attitude Cummings held about his life and his poetry. Namely, if you like something, don't ask why, just enjoy. And if you want to write something "creative", don't criticize, just write. Professor Finley, before offering Cummings the distinguished professoship, knew Cummings was to individualistic to buckle down for a year and "profess", poetry, and no amount of money would ever convince Cummings to simply lecture. So, again we are faced with the irony of why Harvard University, back then the bastion of intellectual conservatism, wanted Cummings, *the* conscientious objector to everything institutionalized, on campus.

The final irony, or ironies, is the lectures themselves. Not surprisingly the first thing Cummings did as a lecturer was change the name and format of the lecture. "I haven't the remotest intention of posing as a lecturer"(3), Cummings declared at the beginning of his first lecture. From the start, he promised not to lecture about poetry. And since he could not lecture, Cummings is left to his own devices: "since I can't tell you what I know (or rather what I don't know) there's nothing to prevent me from trying to tell you who I am — which I'd deeply enjoy doing"(3). Thus, the supposed lectures of poetry had suddenly turned into six brief autobiographical vignettes or "nonlectures", as Cummings called them. In short, *i six nonlectures* is E. E. Cummings's "aesthetic selfportrait of one whole half...indivisible igsoramus"(Cummings 5). It is final word about himself, his poetry, and the relationship the two share.

What remains quite surprising about the nonlectures is the manner in which Cummings approached poetry — generally, poetry he respected and specifically, his own. "I hereby solemnly swear to devote the last fifteen minutes of each and every lecture to nothing but poetry"(6), Cummings announced during the first nonlecture. The man simply read poetry, offering no analysis or criticism, leaving such trivialities to the audience. Of the poetry found in the nonlectures. Cummings included only a humble handful of his works, indicating that only "twenty poems" represented himself(4). However, he did offer a generous selection, lines and whole pieces, from other poets and writers such as Shakespeare, Dante, and Donne, to name a few. But why would Cummings do such a thing?

Considering the ironies that surround the nonlectures, it is a wonder they were ever written at all. However, published they were and to this day remain one of the most interesting and curious lectures in the history of the Norton Professorship. It is this unique approach to the Norton lectures that I would like to explore in this paper. Of all the poems Cummings wrote, good or bad, why would he only choose a small amount, fifteen at most, to represent himself? More so, what do these poems say about Cummings the man, the poet, and the individual?

Cummings's attitude about art is as good as any place to begin a discussion of E. E. Cummings, for the man and his art are inseparable. In his first nonlecture, Cummings is posed with the question, "but why not criticize (poetry) as well?"(7) and not surprisingly, Cummings answers this question in an indirect, typically Cummingsesque response with words from Rainer Maria Rilke's, *Letters to a Young Poet*:

> Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing to be so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them (6).

While cute and clever, the above lines certainly set the tone for the rest of his lectures. Cummings did not come to criticize poetry and will not criticize poetry. To Cummings, "those two sentences are worth all the soi-disant criticism of the arts which has...or will ever exist"(7). More so, Cummings asserts that if ones forgets this idea, "you will have forgotten the mystery which you have been, the mystery which you shall be, and the mystery which you are"(Cummings 7).

What does this response say about Cummings and his outlook on life? First and foremost, we can assume that Cummings was a man who prized poetry, and art for that matter. To him, poetry was a personal thing, an individual thing, and something that should be written and appreciated but not criticized. Even more so, Cummings was a man who found even the smallest things in life worthy of a poem. A second look at Cummings's response to the "trivialities" question proves this point easily. "What are they"(6)? he asks. Taking life under one arm and the beauty of expression under the other, Cummings set out to express his ideas about the world around him. Whether or not other people approved was not his concern.

But the beauty of Cummings quoting Rilke doesn't end there. Cummings was a man sensitive to language — what poet isn't? — so it is safe to assume that Cummings choose this quote carefully. And what insight does it have to offer? From it we can see that art, or in Cummings's case, poetry, is something fragile and of "infinite loneliness". Poetry must be read and handled with kid gloves. It is one thing to say poem A is good because of this and this, and poem B is bad because of that and that. But where does poetry come from? A machine? No, it arises from a feeling. So in many ways, we can see Cummings subtly asking us, "Who is human enough to admit they like this poem simply because it is poetry? Or simply because it is a poem?" As people search more and more for quantitative answers to qualitative questions, art loses its significance. So why criticize? Why not just enjoy?

To support this idea, Cummings followed the Rilke quotation with one of his own poems. Entitled, "so many selves (so many fiends and gods", it was one of the few poems within the lectures that Cummings read in its entirety.

> 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 (7).

While not one of the ten poems that is intended to help answer the question who is E. E. Cummings?, this poem, still deserves to be looked at considering its content and placement within nonlecture one. It speaks of the fragility of the singular person in the nonsingular world, where men are made up of "so many selves", and all these selves hide "in another", unable to "escape from none". And indeed, if we are all busy hiding within each other's selves, Cummings's warning will most certainly come true: each one of us will forget the mystery that we are.

Cummings continues to address a person's lonely state of desperation, finding his/her inner thoughts and ideas the "heartbeat of some sun" and his/her emotions roaming "the youngest star". From these lines we find that Cummings believes that the average person is as far from his emotions as the next universe. So far, that these fools cannot even "comprehend not numerable whom?" And who is "unnumerable whom?" In this case, the individual himself. And if a fool cannot comprehend himself, if a fool is as far from knowing himself as the next universe, then how can he be trusted to comprehend the value of a poem? To Cummings, most people have forgotten how to feel with their hearts. And thus being, cannot be trusted to criticize poetry.

"So many selves...". also leads us to even more assumptions about Cummings and his love for poetry. Cummings's certainly loved poetry and even more so believed that "only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge" poems(6). Another good example of this attitude and how it embodies the poetry of Cummings is the poem "voice to voice, lip to lip". Published early in his career, this strong poem is a contrast of "flowers and machinery"(29). "not for philosophy does this rose give a damn",(29) says Cummings, arguing for the sake of feeling. He costinues with:

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

This final stanza of "voice to voice, lip to lip" is similar to "so many selves" in that it criticizes people who are too busy measuring rather than feeling. However, Cummings changes the tone dramatically in two ways. First, there is the mentioning of the "oneeyed son of a bitch" who is trying to measure Spring. This quixotic idea is obviously impossible. Spring can't be measured. And those who try are just as far from this universe as the "fools" in "so many selves". But in another sense, Cummings is using the metaphor of Spring to represent poetry. Considering such, we find that criticism, an "instrument (with which) to measure" poetry is just as quixotic. Second, Cummings offers a simple solution to dealing with such people: "who cares". This assertion moves the persona into a forward and assertive dialogue with the reader, and after reading the poem it is clear that Cummings not only has no time to waste on critics, but more so these people should not even be considered human.

This harsh attitude harbored by Cummings is countlessly expressed in his lyrical satires. And while some may see this attitude as negative, especially for a poet who believes in love, it is this same attitude that helps Cummings achieve such poetic states of grace. For without it, Cummings could never have created his "other" world, the world of his poetry where he lived and wrote for over half his life. As we shall later see, it is a world of "us" against "them", transcendental lovers, and the ubiquitous we.

And of the hundreds of poems Cummings wrote, he chose his best, that is what *he* felt was his best, to represent himself in *i six nonlectures*. Of these poems Cummings said:

> All they hope to do is to suggest that particular awareness without which no human spirit ever dreams of rising from such unmysteries as thinking and believing and knowing (82).

And so who is the "i" in Cummings's *i six nonlectures*? The first poem in the series, titled "when serpents bargain for the right to squirm", shows that Cummings was a man who could do without society. Sarcastic and even at times simplistic, the poem consists of a series of juxtaposed images where things in nature mimic the actions of everyday men. For example, the first stanza reads:

> when serpents bargain for the right to squirm
> and the sun strikes to gain a living wage —
> when thorns regard their roses with alarm
> and rainbows are insured against old age (83)

While these images are interesting, they are also, obviously, impossible. The sun could never strike to gain a living wage. And the absuridty these lines suggest shows us the subtle humor Cummings used in his poetry. But it is this same humor that leads the reader through the poem and up to the final two lines: "then we'll believe in that incredible/unanimal mankind (and not until)"(83). With these lines, the poem takes a shocking turn. We discover that this poem is not a simple play on words or fantasy of the impossible. What Cummings is saying is that the human race should not be trusted. People are too greedy bargaining and striking for wages.'We ask our fellow person to "sign on the dotted line"(83) and are "compelled to close "(83) if they don't. To Cummings, the world of nature offers him more stability than humans. In many ways, Cummings in an anti socialite and proud of it.

The second poem, "why must itself up every of a park" futher demonstrates Cummings's dislike for society. However, it is much more severe. He begins the poem posing the question why do people feel impelled to erect status of war heroes in public park? To Cummings, "a hero equals any jerk who was afraid to dare to answer 'no'?" Answer "no" to what? A good guess would be answering no to society or the group, for these were the things to which Cummings traditionally said no. However, the fourth and fifth stanza show that Cummings is specifically speaking of conscientious objectors, the world's only heroes in Cummings's heart. The poem reads: "'Nothing' in 1944 A D/' can stand against the argument of military necessity'"(84).

These line show us that Cummings is obviously against war, but probably more against the military machine and the nonmen it turns out. Cummings ends this poem again with a sarcastic twist, saying: "you pays your money and/you doesn't take your choice. Aint freedom grand"(84). In this case, money means state and government taxes and the choice we do not take is the wishes of the government. Wish what you want, but the government, to Cummings another big, bad group, will do what it wants, running over the little guy. To this atrocity, Cummings concludes "Aint freedom grand"(84).

Within the small confides of two poems, Cummings has dismissed society and its inventions. Indeed, he is a man alone, and it appears that Cummings likes it this way. But within his own world, it is possible for the "we", namely lovers, to exist. For example, in the next poem in the series, "all ignorance toboggans into know" the persona asserts that "all history's too small for even me;"(85). This statement, while typical of Cummings, is important because it further places him away from the group. Not only is the individual more important than the whole, but everything that has happened up until his moment is also travailing. This line shows us a new dimension about Cumming's' idea of the individual. First, the individual is alone, and second he remains in the present. History has no claim on him/her.

Within this present moment, the "we" can also exist; however, it changes the condition of the individual. As we can see in the second stanza: "all history's too small for even me;/for me and you, exceedingly too small"(85). If history is too small for one, why would dt be smaller for two? The only logical assumption would that the two — the "we" — are lovers, and that they are two busy making their own world to consider another world's history. This concept is classic Cummings and what it shows is that to Cummings the individual, love is one of the most important things in life. When in love, "tomorrow is our permanent address", and anything can happen(85). Anything, including escaping the crowd: "tomorrow is our permanent address/and there they'll scarcely find us (if they do,/we'll move away still further:into now(85). So for Cummings, the we is a powerful concept. By two people becoming one, they can create their own world, leaving behind the "unanimal mankind".

This concept of simplifying and living in the present moment is also deftly expressed in the poem, "life is more true than reason will deceive". To the persona, "the mightiest meditations of mankind/cancelled are by one merely opening leaf/(beyond whose nearness there is no beyond)"(86). Again, Cummings presests us with a persona who delights in the simple. In this case the opening of a leaf. And to the persona, does time continue after the leaf has opened? Apparently not. "There is no beyond" beyond the nearness of the beauty. "futures are obsolete;/pasts are unborn"(86). This Zen-like attitude toward life, where "less than nothing's more than everything"(86) helps Cummings exist in the world of nonhumans.

The fifth poem in the series helps Cummings define himself and his relationship with people. As we have seen, he has set himself apart from the crowd, and this attitude makes him appear a cold and callous poet. But Cummings needs this distance in order to reevaluate himself and others. In many ways he hunkers down to reposition himself so that he may deal with the problem of being human. In short, he has entablished his world, now Cummings needs to establish himself. And this is easily seen in the poem, "no man, if men are gods; but if gods must". The poem discusses the value of the poet and the limits of people. To Cummings, "the sometimes only man is...a fiend"(87). This image is then compared to the poet who Cummings considers to be "an angel; ...a coward, clown, traitor, idiot, dreamer, breast"(87). What is obvious is that Cummings finds "the sometimes man", the man of "occasion", of "perhaps", of "maybe", of "if" to be one thing — uncertain. Yet he finds the poet, namely himself, to be specific. The poet embodies images of innocence (a clown), of smallness (a coward), of simplicity (an idiot), of ideas (the dreamer), and of fantasy or mystery (angels and beasts). The average man, and perhaps the everyman, is one-sided, while the poet is multi-dimensional. And what purpose does each serve? This question is not answered by Cummings directly. Rather, Cummings poses a question to the reader, leaving it up to him or her to draw conclusions. The question is complex:

— who'll solve the depths of horror to defend
a sunbeam's architecture with his life:
and carve immortal jungles of despair
to hold a mountain's heartbeat in his hand (87)

But, the answer is simple: the poet. From this conclusion, we find that Cummings believes that most people are shallow and ill-equipped to deal with the day and the emotions it brings. The "sometimes only man" could never "hold a mountain's heart-beat in his hand" or "defend a sunbeam's architecture with his life:"(87). And since the "sometimes only man" is not in touch with his emotions, it is obvious that he is also not in touch with himself. Can he love? Perhaps remotely. But the poet, the clown-dreamer-angel of the world, elevated into his own realm, his own world, is in every position to love. Love is one of the dominant themes in Cummings's poetry, and via love he celebrates the "we" of his world. The next two poems in the series illustrates this point beautifully.

The sixth poem, "hate blows a bubble of despair into" is a comparison of counter-parts. Here, Cummings uses such paired emotions as hate and fear and pleasure and pain to illustrate the anxieties of life. Because hate blows a bubble of despair"(88) and "fear buries a tomorrow under woe"(88), naturally, yesterday will appear "most green and young"(88). Pleasure and pain, while parts of yesterdays and tomorrows" are merely surfaces/(one itself showing, itself hiding one)"(88). But with love, an under-standing can be reached. To Cummings, love is "life's only and true value", making "the little thickless of the coin" (88). Love brings balance to life and offers security.

With this balance, our perspective about love is also changed. For example, in the seventh poem, "one's not half two. It's two are halves of one:", Cummings continues the counterparts motif, explaining that one and one are not two, but that two is nothing but the halves of one. We have been taught to think that two people together make two, but in the world according to Cummings, the two is approached from the point of view as a constant entity, something beyond "death or any quantity"(89), which owes its existence to the halves of individuals.

From the previous two poem, we have found that love harmonizes the universe. It balances and permeates, making individuals whole. The next step in Cummings's world is using this love to achieve a higher state of awareness. In many ways, Cummings's poetry resembles that of the Romantic Poets in that one of the end-goals of poetry is transcendence, that twilight state of intuition and communication with God. For example, in the eighth poem, "if (touched by love's own secret) we, like homing", the persona, along with his lover, "into infinite tomorrow steer"(90). The infinite tomorrow for Cummings is not necessarily the tomorrow that follows today. The conventional tomorrow in "a million wheres which never may become"(90). The tomorrow Cummings seeks is a future state "more than reality of more than dream —"(90). It is a higher state of awareness.

But this higher state cannot be achieved by just anyone. "how should contented fools of fact envision/the mystery of freedom?"(90) asks Cummings. Again, Cummings separates himself from the mob of "somebody only men", leaving the question unanswered. The "fools of fact" Cummings mentions are those men that are too busy measuring and computating the world around them. In short, the ones who help create and maintain the clocks of the world. These fools have neglected the world of feeling, especially love, and therefore, cannot transcend. But, as the last three lines of the poem show, if one stops to love, then one can transcend: "you'll (silently alighting) and i'll sing/while at us very deafly a most stares/colossal hoax of clocks and calendars"(90). Here Cummings and his lover, or the "we", have escaped time, avoiding the cold eye of "clocks and calendars", and are left to themselves in their own private world, which is where Cummings has all along wanted to be.

As mentioned earlier, the ultimate state for Cummings is a state of communication with God. And the last two poems in the sequence demonstrate Cummings's belief in this strength. The first poem, "i thank You God for most this amazing", is an honest celebration of the day and the simplicities it offers. The persona is filled with gratitude, thanking God "for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes"(91). The persona's transcendence is "the sun's birthday...the birth/day of life and of love and wings"(91). But more importantly, the persona also knows humility and affirms his "smallness" with the question:

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

The arrogance that Cummings presented to us in his first sonnet, in actuality, is not arrogance at all. It is simply an earnest wish to be alone. The humility found in this poem shows that Cummings is indeed a human, thinking man, whose only desire is to experience the divine in everyday life.

And once this divine is experienced, Cummings takes his experience and shares it with his lover, the only other person he is willing to let into his private world. If we look at the first stanza of "true lovers in each happening of their hearts", we find that:

> true lovers in each happening of their hearts

live longer than all which and every who;
despire what fear denies, what hopes asserts,
what falsest both disprove by proving true (92)

If lovers are honest with each other, "love immortally occurs beyond the mind"(92). Again, Cummings asserts that love can transcend time, freeing lovers from the grip of the world of the "somebody any man". Mind sets are changed, and we now find that lovers can see that "such a forever is love any how/and her each here is such an everywhere",(92). And with love being all around, "even more true would truest lovers grow"(92).

And so concludes the poetry sequence that Cummings choose and arranged to represent himself. What remains to be noted is the arrangement of these sonnets and how they represent Cummings the man. From sonnet one to sonnet ten, the poems progress through various stages. Stage one being Cummings setting himself aside and apart from the crowd. Stage two being the limits of Cummings's relationship to the world; chiefly the "we". Stage three being the "new life" of Cummings and how this life defines him as a poet. Stage four being falling in love. And stage five being transcendence. Cummings, having set himself, or his "self" apart from the everyday person, is free to love and uses love as a tool to communicate with God.

From this sequence of poems we see that Cummings was quite a complex man. He humbly affirmed that love in the mystery of all mysteries, and nothing measurable matters "a very good God damn"(110). An artist, as well as a man and a failure, is not a mechanism to be measured, but an eternally giving human being, "whose only happiness is to transcend himself whose every agony is to grow"(110). An individual is someone who stands far from the crowd, unnoticed, choosing to be powerless, yet able to weild the power to open his heart to poetry, and even more so, to art. God is ommipresent in the world of "man unkind", or the natural world. And although unfathomable to ordisary mortals, is most closely approached by those people who believed in fidelity to the self: the individual.

Cummings believed in the natural life rather than the "civilized" life. Mystery was preferred over certainty and poetry choosen over science. And if a person could keep these ideals as conerstones of his being, then undoubtably they would be guided by their inner self. A self unique and strong enough to resist conformity and the demands of society, yet sensitive enough to listen to nature and find whole-hearted enthusiamism for whatever is new and unusual.

References

Cummings, E. E.: *i six nonlectures*. Massachusetts: Harvard Univeristy Press, 1953.
Kennedy, R.: *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E. E. Cummings*. New York: Liveright, 1980.
Kennedy, R., ed.: *Selected Poems: E. E. Cummings*. New York: Liveright, 1994.