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E. E. Cummings: From Parenthesis to Personality (Part II)

Summary

The paper presents the unique oeuvre of E.E. Cummings, who claims an outstanding position in the heritage of American poetry, as a case of *Bildungsdichtung*. This status is largely due to his highly innovative and iconoclastic approach to poetic composition, starting from his early rebellious endeavours drawing on an astounding variety of non-standard and downright shocking potentialities of the English language (including such peculiar linguistic and stylistic idiosyncracies as drastic changes of the syntactic English word order, shifts at the morphology and word-formation level, unorthodox use of punctuation, extravagant typography and spacing or arrangement of space between the lines, a diversity of meters and rhymes, as well as seemingly eccentric imagery), to his later and invariably maturer poetic diction – the diction of one who has apparently come to terms with the world and his fellow-beings, realising that genuine wisdom resides in the understanding and forgiveness of the inherently fallible human nature rather than in its continuous sardonic scrutiny.

Key words: E.E.Cummings, uniqueness of rhetoric, poetic truth and human truth, epiphany

E.E.Cummings: Od oklepaja do osebnosti (2. del)

Povzetek

Članek oriše umetniški in človeški razvoj ameriškega pesnika E.E.Cummingsa, ki ima v ameriški književnosti poseben sloves. Utemeljen je na Cummingsovi nezmotljivi avtorski govorici ter vrsti njegovih izvirnih posegov v ustaljeno pesniško dikcijo, ki jo spoznava za preživeto, iztrošeno, neprepoznavno in zatorej vredno temeljite prenove. Takšno prenovo najde Cummings v mnogovrstnih preigravanjih skrajnega dometa angleščine ter njene leposlovne izraznosti, od osupljivih jezikovno-slogovnih bravur, kot so na primer drastično spreminjanje ustaljenega skladskega reda, premiki na oblikoslovni in besedotvorni ravni (posamostaljena raba glagolov, zaimkov, prislovov in veznikov), neustaljena raba ločil (zlasti oklepajev) ter velike/male začetnice, nenavadna tipografija in razmiki oziroma razporeditev prostora med verzi, preigravanje raznoterih oblik metruma in rime, do navidez čudaškega podobarstva in drugih retoričnih ter vizualnih prijemov. Razprava sledi razvoju avtorjeve pesniške in osebnostne konstelacije, ki jo zaznamujeta mladostno vihravo uporništvo ter poznejši zreli uvid v bistvo človeškega poslanstva.

Ključne besede: E.E.Cummings, revolucija retorike, pesniška in človeška resnica, epifanija

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2. The significant *i*

The very first collections of Cummings' poetry, *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923) and *♣ [AND]* (1925), while not yet displaying the full range of the author's linguistic and stylistic virtuosity, already introduce all the themes to which he would adhere for the rest of his life: (1) love, especially in its relationship to the outside world and to death, following the well-known paradigm *Eros–Thanatos*:

*i speak to
thee with a sword
and thou art silent
thy breast is as a tomb
softer than flowers
Come hither
O thou is love not death?* (Cummings 1972, 27)

which takes up nearly half of his work; (2) a merging with the urban environment – the streets of cities and metropolises:

*Paris; this April sunset completely utters
utters serenely silently a cathedral...* (Ibid., 93)

– and with nature:

*Thou aged unreluctant earth who dost
with quivering continual thighs invite
the thrilling rain the slender paramour
to toy with thy extraordinary lust...* (Ibid., 3)

The latter theme comes to predominate in his third (*XL Poems*, 1925) and all subsequent collections, a fact which is linked by many exegetes (sometimes mistakenly) to Cummings' adherence to the romantic tradition. The third issue concerns the poet's indefatigable interest in people, either as individuals mentioned by name (Abraham Lincoln, Joe Gould, Ford Madox Ford, Paul Rosenfeld, Picasso, Buffalo Bill¹) or unnamed men and women, or as types which are despised by the author and thus become the objects of political or social satire (generals, presidents, merchants, gossipy Cambridge ladies²) – in other words, the part of humanity for which the poet has coined the expression *mostpeople*. These are the major concerns of Cummings'

1 A typical poem from this collection is *Buffalo Bill*, displaying most of the above-mentioned linguistic, stylistic, and technical devices (colloquial and slang expressions, as well as highly arbitrary free verse, with the lines breaking off and forming without any scheme): See appendix 1 on page 134.

2 See appendix 2 on page 134.

poetic spirit, overarched by many other themes such as death or eternal life, which are marginal at first but increasingly important in all subsequent collections: as a rule, these themes are not central to his early poetry but ramifications of the broader thematic framework of love, or life. Clearly, this stage merely lays the foundations of the great themes which are to attain larger dimensions in the poet's mature and later periods. These foundations are complemented with the issue of World War I, which is likewise only outlined at this stage, namely in a short cycle with a French title, *La Guerre* (poems on war themes, both those from the front and those relating to Cummings' experiences in Paris brothels, are often written in a mixture of English and French, presumably in an attempt to approach the idiom of the street, of the common people), which will reappear under the same title in the collection *XL Poems*:

*little ladies more
than dead exactly dance
in my head, precisely
danced where danced la guerre*

*Mimi à
la voix fragile
qui chatouille Des
Italiens ...* (Ibid., 120)

A wide range of elements, sketched themes, aspects, ingredients, and poetic devices may be discerned in the very first collections of Cummings' poetry, while certain characteristics prevailing in the contemporary or subsequent poetics of modernism are lacking. Most notably, these include the tragic vision (revealed e.g. in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*), linguistic ambiguity (Wallace Stevens), structural contradictoriness (Ezra Pound), metaphysical cleverness (W. H. Auden), introduction of mythical fragments (W. B. Yeats), and some other constitutive modernist elements. Nevertheless, as noted by Norman Friedman, one of the leading experts on Cummings and a long-time friend of the poet's family, the absence of the tragic vision from Cummings' work simply means that his vision is of a different kind, but carries no less weight as a basis for lyric poetry for all that (Friedman 1960, 4).³ This emphasis is particularly important because it is Cummings' lack of a tragic vision that has often led to his characterisation as a sentimental and naive poet. As suggested in the first part of this paper, the essence of Cummings' poetic philosophy lies in transcending the physical world, and his explicit lack of interest in the *condition humaine* of his time does not mean that he is insensible to it or too naive to perceive the evils surrounding him. On the contrary – Cummings is deeply aware of the manifold perversions in the modern society, as well as of the individual, lost in this society and seeking for a higher meaning. But in contrast to many other poets, such as Eliot or Pound, who seek a remedy for the so-called *mal-du-siècle* in the anthropology of the human spirit, by leaning on the values of the medieval tradition and on ancient mythology, Cummings understands the current situation as the reflection of a degenerate will, rather than the consequence of an evil inherent in the universe.

³ As a key argument in support of Cummings, the critic adduces the poet's experimentation with linguistic form and structure as a vital rhetorical device for attaining artistic vision.

He sees the final solution in an all-encompassing love, which can only be attained through the renunciation of suffering, preceded by the rejection of one's ego or self.⁴ Cummings' attitude to suffering and evil is characteristically averse and unsympathetic to the individual as a helpless victim of historical or metaphysical circumstances. In this attitude, Cummings is probably more strict and inexorable than in any other: a person who wants to be truly alive must be fearless, for this alone dispels all reservations about love:

...
each dream nascitur, is not made...)
why then to Hell with that: the other; this,
since the thing perhaps is
to eat flowers and not to be afraid. (Ibid., 264)

The complete liberation from fear and the consequent move to a level of existence dominated by pure and absolute love is, according to Cummings, attainable only through the abolition of all desires and needs fuelled by the ego. Admittedly, Cummings' thesis is by no means an original one, showing sympathy not only with Buddhist and Taoist thought but also with the traditional philosophy of American transcendentalism, from Emerson and Thoreau onward. Far from being simple, however, this sympathy contains a formidable measure of contradictoriness. More than any other poet or writer of his era, Cummings is a zealous supporter of individualism, free will and independence, a trait which may partly stem from his religious, Unitarian upbringing. His father, who aroused in Cummings both immense admiration and perpetual competition, even served as a Unitarian minister for a while. He was a peculiar, obstinate man, firmly convinced that he was in the right, as the poet reveals in one of his famous Harvard lectures:

I wot not how to answer your query about my father. He was a New Hampshire man, 6 foot 2, a crack shot & a famous fly-fisherman & a first-rate sailor (his sloop was named The Actress) & a woodsman who could find his way through forests primeval without a compass & a canoeist who'd stillpaddle you up to a deer without ruffling the surface of a pond & an ornithologist & taxidermist & (when he gave up hunting) an expert photographer (the best I've ever seen) & an actor who portrayed Julius Caesar in Sanders Theatre & a painter (both in oils & watercolours) & a better carpenter than any professional & an architect who designed his own houses before building them & (when he liked) a plumber who just for the fun of it installed all his own waterworks & (while at Harvard) a teacher with small use for professors – by whom (Royce, Lanman, Taussig, etc.) we were literally surrounded (but not defeated) – & later (at Doctor Hale's so-called South Congregational really Unitarian

4 The renunciation of one's self is a principle which may be found both in Christianity (cf. Matthew 16.24; Mark 8.34; Luke 9.23) and in Eastern thought, especially in Taoism, which exerted a great influence on Cummings through its most accomplished master, Lao Zi. While the aim of this renunciation in Christianity is to draw nearer to God ("the imitation of Christ"), the philosophy of Taoism teaches that wisdom can only be attained by one who has transcended and forgotten his ego. Another element which is common to the Christian and Taoist-Buddhist thought and congenial to Cummings is the principle of *casting bread* ("Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again", Eccles. 11:1).

church) a preacher who announced, during the last war, that the Gott Mit Uns boys were in error since the only thing which mattered was for man to be on God's side (& one beautiful Sunday in Spring remarked from the pulpit that he couldn't understand why anyone had come to hear him on such a day) & horribly shocked his pewholders by crying "the Kingdom of Heaven is no spiritual roofgarden: it's inside you..." (Cummings 1995, 8)

The above passage, with its undoubtedly exaggerated portrayal of Cummings' father, suggests that the father's figure played an important role in the son's personal and poetic development. As admitted by the author himself in his published letters (Dupee and Stade 1969), the essential problem was that his father was both loving and intrusive, a strange amalgam of emotions which left a crucial stamp on the poet's literary production, imbuing it with perpetual rebelliousness and an emphasis on his own identity. According to Cummings' biographers, it also had far-reaching consequences for his private life. And since Cummings' life, as has already been mentioned, copied the ideal image of the poet–artist which he had constructed in his youth, conflicts at this level were bound to occur. As it turned out, the poet's bard was maturing faster than the poet himself, for even when the projection of Cummings' personality had practically reached the level of complete liberation from worldly ties, he himself continued to lug around the needless clutter of his past, be it his parents' heritage or his two unsuccessful marriages.⁵ According to research into Cummings' biography, it was his unresolved past that produced the main limitations and weaknesses of his art, noted by many critics but inadequately addressed through the ignorance or neglect of the author's personal development and/or decisive biographical facts.⁶ The available information suggests with reasonable certainty that if Cummings ever slipped, it was on the thin line dividing life and art. Although this line is in many respects capable of being erased or even changed into an equation mark, it is also worth reflecting on W. B. Yeats' observation that an artist has to decide whether he will seek perfection in his work or in life. Throughout his life, Cummings appears to have been (sub)consciously burdened with the necessity of this decision, perhaps all the more so because he tried to merge the two. This, however, requires an enormous expenditure of strength and time, and it is precisely to his – sometimes more, sometimes less successful – attempts at transferring his professed artistic postulates to everyday life and vice versa – applying his life experiences and insights to his artistic activity – that certain critics ascribe his inability to compose a truly longer poem, prose piece, or play.⁷

5 The most traumatic period of Cummings' life is framed by the years 1917 and 1932, stretching from his twenty-third to his thirty-eighth year. In 1924 he married Elaine Orr but divorced her in the same year. The offspring of this union, a daughter named Nancy, remained with her mother, who never revealed to her her father's name. It was only in 1948, when Nancy was twenty-nine, that she incidentally learnt of E. E. Cummings being her father. In 1927 the poet married his second wife, Anne Burton, but this relationship also proved unsuccessful after a few years. Between 1928 and 1929 he underwent psychoanalytical treatment, then travelled to Russia (1931), and shortly after his return met his third wife, Marion Morehouse, with whom he spent the rest of his life.

6 Among such vital limitations imposed by "life", N. Friedman emphasises Cummings' crippling attachment to his mother accompanied by an unresolved Oedipal complex; his rebellion against the humanist values fostered by his father, in which he actually believed himself; his late discovery of sexuality and his frequent division of women into whores and Madonnas; and, last but not least, even his rejection of man's role in marriage and community, as well as the resulting identification of his own art with this rejection (Friedman 1996, 171).

7 E.g. Kennedy 1980.

3. Parenthesis

Cummings' personal and poetic contradictoriness may be perceived either as an advantage or as a weakness. On the one hand, it places him convincingly in the modernist context of the aesthete's ambivalence and contradictoriness of artistic practice, which is established through seemingly irreconcilable views. This is confirmed by Cummings' admiration for Yeats' ability to understand opposing views – the collective and individual, the systematic and spontaneous, the rational and instinctive (Dupee and Stade 1969). Yet this type of dualism has its weaknesses as well. The one which calls for a closer examination in Cummings' case relates to his – sometimes disputed – humanist stance, which stems from the poet's division of humankind into *mostpeople* (snobs) and *you and I* (human beings). A categorisation of humanity is by its very definition contrary to the American tradition of "Whitmanian" romanticism and of transcendentalism as established in the philosophy of American literature by Emerson and inherited by E. E. Cummings.⁸ In contrast to Whitman's inclusive, omnipresent love, Cummings' introduction to his 1938 *Collected Poems* argues for an exclusivist view of man:

*Mostpeople fancy a guaranteed birthproof safety suit of nondestructible selflessness.
If mostpeople were to be born twice they'd improbably call it dying—you and I are
not snobs. We can never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a
supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing: 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 to busy being a little more than
everything to seem anything, catastrophic included...
Never the murdered finalities of where when and yes no, impotent nongames of wrong right
and right wrong; 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.
Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question
(Cummings 1972, 461–2)*

Clearly, Cummings at this stage of his personal development is not yet capable of attaining the level of transcendental experience from which the firmly established Whitman speaks to the entire humanity, *urbi et orbi*. Rather than by an experience of immanence, which would involve Cummings' acceptance of the natural laws of existence and, above all, the inclusion and respect of all things existing,⁹ the poet's mature (but not fully matured) work is permeated by a rebellion against differentness, against resignation, against contemporaneity, against lack of spontaneity – that is, against rationality – and against any form of insufficient (artistic) creativity. It is in this rebellious stance where Cummings comes closest to the romantic principle of Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", although the perceptible ironic undertone is not characteristic of the romanticist world-view:

8 For a Slovene introduction to the poetics of American transcendentalism, see e.g. Mozetič 1999.

9 Cummings' personal attitude has often been characterised by critics as superior and haughty, and, above all, as intolerant and discriminatory. In Slovene poetry, some surprising parallels with the American poet may be found in the "I" of the poetess Svetlana Makarovič. For the time being, we shall apply to both authors' subjects the makeshift label of *clandestine philanthropy*.

*the mind is its own beautiful prisoner.
 Mine looked long at the sticky moon
 opening in dusk her new wings*

then decently hanged himself, one afternoon... (Ibid., 170)

and

*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 mightest conceive
 gods*

*(but
 true*

*to the incomparable
 couch of death thy
 rhythmic
 lover*

thou answerest

them only with

spring) (Ibid., 46)

The moment of “truth” has come, and, with it, Cummings’ realisation that he has been led by aestheticism into “a salt marsh” – or, as he puts it in Keatsian terminology, “beauty has shut me from the truth”.

Nevertheless, the poet trapped in his temporary blind alley does evince some struggle to resolve and transcend the state in which he has found himself. Cummings appears to realise that the established concept of absolute individual love as a principle of salvation will have to be redefined and probably extended beyond the *you-I : others* paradigm.¹⁰ If we aim at mystical experience, it is bound to elude our reach as long as we exist in the monad, regardless of whether we fill our emptiness with metaphysical nihilism or with a beloved person. The first step is thus known. The second, for Cummings, would have been to recognise and decide which is the path leading to true transcendence: is it the emergence from the material towards the spiritual (as e.g. in W. Blake), or the complete annihilation of the difference between the material and spiritual? A dichotomy, then, one at least as old as humanity, reaching from antiquity to modernity, where it becomes flesh in the pellucid discourse of W. B. Yeats’ poem “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”:

*My Soul. Such fullness in that quarter overflows
And falls into the basin of the mind
That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,
For intellect no longer knows
Is from the Ought, or Knower from the Known –
That is to say, ascends to Heaven;
Only the dead can be forgiven;
But when I think of that my tongue’s a stone.* (Yeats 1994, 285)

As may be expected, Cummings’ subsequent poetry collections express increasing pain, loss and hollowness, which is largely due to his more profound quest for the path to transcendence. All three collections, *50 Poems* (1940), *One Times One* (1944) and *XAIPE* (1950), display a satirical and/or panegyric turn rather than an ontological or existentialist one. They could be said to represent an intermediate yet productive stage in the poet’s quest for that general humanist attitude which he has tirelessly sought to establish ever since his first collection. *One Times One* in particular contains Cummings’ sharpest and best poems of socio-political satire, poems such as “a salesman is an it that stinks Excuse”; “a politician is an arse upon”; “pity this busy monster,manunkind”, and of course the popular “plato told”:

10 Kidder (1979), whose analysis includes the Christian elements in Cummings, illustrates the poet’s development from an initial sexuality through romanticism to his final, purely transcendental love poetry – transcendental in the sense of the Christian ethos, or the Christian conception of love as God. (Cf. also 1 Corinthians 13:2.) On the other hand, however (this is not explicitly mentioned by Kidder), Cummings’ work also contains love poems which bear no immediate relation to any kind of transcendence, continuing instead the tradition of medieval courtly poetry. A case in point is the following piece from the collection *is 5* (1926): See appendix 3 on page 134.

plato told

*him:he couldn't
believe it(jesus*

*told him;he
wouldn't believe
it)lao*

*tsze
certainly told
him,and general
(yes*

*mam)
sherman;
and even
(believe it
or*

*not)you
told him:i told
him;we told him
(he didn't believe it,no*

*sir)it took
a nipponized bit of
the old sixth*

*avenue
el;in the top of his head:to tell*

him (Cummings 1972, 553)

Despite the acidity of Cummings' satire at this stage, it is significant that the substance of the poem, although founded on the antithesis between good and evil, no longer draws on the familiar polarisation of the world into the poet and *mostpeople*. Instead, there is a perceptible tendency to a gradual integration with that part of humanity which mostly involves the good and is apparently not as negligible as he had thought in the early period of his development. Indeed, every now and then we are surprised by a poem which, while ridiculing human foibles, nevertheless evinces so much compassion and understanding that it hardly still qualifies as a true satire. The fact that Cummings' world-view is undergoing an actual change is further evidenced by the increasing number of so-called panegyric poems – modern odes and hymns, not entirely devoid of romantic admixtures. What is foregrounded is the praise of nature, children, life as such, and love (both *eros* and *agape*), with the object no longer established according to the principle of positive versus negative, but existing in its own right, deserving full attention because of its immanent characteristics:

*nothing false and possible is love
 (who's imagined, therefore limitless)
 love's to giving as to keeping's give;
 as yes is to if, love is to yes...* (Ibid., 574)

The most characteristic romantic element in these poems is probably the poet's infinite wonder at everything surrounding him, simply because he sees everything that he perceives with his (wide open) senses as a miracle. If "[t]he Child is father of the Man" (Wordsworth), an intermediary between God and man as well as a gate to the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Matthew 18:3), the poet is the father of the child or, more accurately, a "divine child" whose archetypal images may be found in most religions and mythologies of the world. In the inner human consciousness, the birth of a divine child symbolises the splendour of truth or the emergence of a spiritually renewed personality, such as is aspired after by mystics.¹¹ Cummings, however, never directly refers to mystical experience, preferring expressions such as "magical", "mysterious", "miraculous" (e.g. "Miracles are to come. With you I leave a remembrance of miracles") etc. A reliable insight into the poet's spiritual and emotional state around 1950 is given in the poem "i thank You God for most this amazing". It was published in the collection *XAIPE* (1950), which cemented Cummings' fame and opened for him many doors which had been hitherto closed:¹²

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

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

*how should tasting touching hearing seeing
 breathing any—lifted from the no
 of all nothing—human merely being
 doubt unimaginable You?
 (now the ears of my ears awake and
 now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*

(Ibid., 663)

11 According to certain esoteric schools, the rebirth of the personality depends on the development of a third state in the human being, that is, on the functioning of the two higher human centres – those of emotion and thought. Cf. e.g. Burton (1995), who builds on G. I. Gurdjieff's tradition of the Fourth Way. Especially appealing seems the possibility of drawing a parallel between the two higher centres and the state symbolised in the Bible by the child (see e.g. 1 Corinthians 13:11), except that the child's love, compassion and wisdom are unconscious. The title of a modern/neoromantic mystic could thus apply to one who has become the father of his inner child.

12 In 1950, Cummings was accepted into the Academy of American Poets. The next year he received the Guggenheim Fellowship grant, and a year later the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship at Harvard for the academic year 1952–53. In 1957 he received two prestigious national awards: the Bollingen Prize for Poetry and the Boston Arts Festival Award.

4. Beyond the *self*

But while the publication of *XAIPE* improved Cummings' standing with the institutions, the essential question of his poetic credo remained open: the question of the right way leading to transcendence, and the related dichotomy between spirit and matter.

In principle, this dichotomy may be resolved in two ways, either by translating reality into pure imagination, as practised by the most "philosophical" modernist, Wallace Stevens,¹³ or by equating that which exists in reality with that which should transcend this existence – in other words, by equating the matter with the spirit, a feature of most Eastern religions. While Stevens seeks a higher sense of reality by establishing a moral and aesthetic order, finally discovering it in what he calls *supreme fiction*, Cummings focuses on a moment in eternity, finding in it what is poetically described by Auden as "our mortal world enough". The realisation that the true nature of things is revealed through the act of complete focalisation has, of course, long been familiar and proper to many esoteric schools as well as to Eastern wisdom. But although the two share a common goal – the so-called *eternal now* – their methods of approaching this goal are fundamentally different. According to the doctrine of the then influential esoteric school under the spiritual guidance of P. D. Ouspensky and G. Gurdjieff, the only path leading from the world of illusions to a realisation of the truth about oneself and the world, and thus to an insight into the objective reality, is that of *divided attention*. In principle, this means being attentive to two or more things at the same time, attentive to one's own environment and to oneself within it, as opposed to the principle of identification, where all attention is focused on one single thing to the extent of excluding everything else (Ouspensky 1949). Cummings, thoroughly familiar with the poetry and philosophy of the Chinese poet Lao Zi, undoubtedly also knew the teaching of the Chan School, "which leads to a vision of the true, Buddha nature of man lying deep inside the individual. This insight is the state of immediately experiencing unity with the universe, which transcends all differences between subject and object, observer and observed, *samsara* and *nirvana*." (Lavrač 1999, 50) Burdened with a number of complexes, from Oedipal problems and the sense of a continual threat to his own identity to a purely artistic complex, Cummings made a decision uncommon in his time but quite expected in ours: he opted for the Eastern path of unity (*via unitiva*) rather than the Western path of purification (*via purgativa*). The two paths, however, are linked by a common denominator, the human struggle to overcome the three main obstacles on the way to illumination: pride, attachment, and anger.¹⁴ Now these three had been, as the present portrayal of the poet as a human being and as an artist has sought to show, Cummings' main problems since the beginning of his life and writing career. To these three "cardinal sins" might be added a fourth, characteristic of the belief of the orthodox Christian, whose fundamental moral and ethical responsibility is based on constantly trying to decide between *right* and *wrong*. On the path of unity, however, such an attitude simply cannot bear fruit: Taoist wisdom, with which Cummings was evidently familiar, puts it this way:

13 The paradigmatic relationship between the real and imaginary constitutes the basic substance of Wallace Stevens' poetics. Starting from the philosophical premises of G. Santayana, whose work was known also to Cummings, as is evident from his published letters (Dupee and Stade 1969, 262), both Stevens and (at least partly) Cummings see the need for poetry in its role of a saviour who might replace the outdated religious myths. Church liturgy should thus be replaced with art, and religious faith with fictional faith.

14 On the relationship between Eastern and Western theosophical thought, we recommend the exhaustive study by Naranjo (1973).

The man in whom Tao
Acts without impediment
... is not always looking
For right and wrong
Always deciding "Yes" or "No." (Friedman 1996, 77)

When Cummings succeeded in shaking off all four – let us call them Western Christian – burdens for the first time, four years before his death, he wrote a poem which appeared in the last collection published during his lifetime, *95 Poems* (1958):

now air is air and thing is thing: no bliss

*of heavenly earth beguiles our spirits, whose
miraculously disenchanted eyes*

live the magnificent honesty of space.

*Mountains are mountains now; skies now are skies –
and such a sharpening freedom lifts our blood
as if whole supreme this complete doubtless*

universe we'd (and we alone had) made

*– yes; or as if our souls, awakened from
summer's green trance, would not adventure soon
a deeper magic: that white sleep wherein
all human curiosity we'll spend
(gladly, as lovers must) immortal and*

the courage to receive time's mightiest dream (Cummings 1972, 675)

This poem (in experimental sonnet form) expresses, graphically and persuasively, the words of a Chan master explaining the essence of *satori* (illumination) through the parable of a mountain:

Before one has immersed oneself in the Chan, a mountain is for them a mountain, and a river is a river; once one has perceived the truth of the Chan with the master's aid, the mountain is for them no longer a mountain, nor the river a river; but when one has truly attained one's peace of mind, the mountain again becomes a mountain, and the river again a river. (Lavrač 1999, 175)

In other words, the essential shift may occur only at the point where knowledge breaks into experience. This becomes possible only when one consciously apprehends and experiences the world in a single moment, obliterating all boundaries between matter and spirit. Even more exciting may be the dynamics of perception and the picture of reality emerging from the above

poem. The latter is formed by the interaction between two ideas: that what we see is a part of us, and that we are a part of what we see. This fact may ultimately lead us to a recognition emphasised already by transcendentalists with Whitman in the vanguard, and likewise attained by Cummings: what exists outside us in no respect differs from that existing inside us, that is, there is no difference between the so-called World-soul and our true nature. Such a recognition, however, by definition excludes all such polarisation and categorisation as we have traced especially through Cummings' personal and artistic development.

5. Conclusion

Cummings' development seems to have run in two different directions simultaneously. Like his modernist colleagues, he was trying to save art on the one hand and himself on the other, except that he attempted to attain through transcendence that unity of human existence which had been professed already by the metaphysical poets, especially by John Donne. This was his first divergence from modernism. His other divergence was a consequence of his relatively conservative mentality, which led him to toy with the tradition of romanticism. Particularly in his initial and middle periods, marked by the extreme intensity of his life experience, his poetry grew out of that experience, transforming it into a universal idiom recognisable to all readers. In his mature and final periods, however, the influence changed: the poet's reflection of the outside world turned inwards, towards itself, thus becoming a copy of itself. A new view emerged, directing the focus towards itself and discovering the universals there, in the particulars. This discovery took Cummings approximately a lifetime.

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Appendix 1

*Buffalo Bill's
defunct*

*who used to
ride watersmooth-silver*

stallion

and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat

Jesus

he was a handsome man

and what i want to know is

how do you like your blueeyed boy

Mister Death (Cummings 1972, 60)

Appendix 2

the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls

are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds

(also, with the church's protestant blessings

daughters, unscented shapeless spirited)

they believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead,

are invariably interested in so many things

at the present writing one still finds

delighted fingers for the is it Poles?

Perhaps. While permanent faces coyly bandy

Scandal of Mrs. N and Professor D

.... the Cambridge ladies do not care, above

Cambridge if sometimes in its box of

sky lavender and cornerless, the

moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy

(Ibid., 70)

Appendix 3

after all white horses are in bed

will you walking beside me, my very lady,

if scarcely the somewhat city

wiggles in considerable twilight

touch (now) with a suddenly unsaid

gesture lightly my eyes?

And send life out of me and the night

absolutely into me.... a wise

and puerile moving of your arm will

do suddenly that

will do

more than heroes beautifully in shrill

armour colliding on huge blue horses,

and the poets looked at them, and made verses,

through the sharp light cryingly as the knights flew.