

The Other Cummings: The Private Side

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I want to examine Cummings' biography, his letters, and the records he kept of his dreams in order to see what light they can throw on Cummings the writer. There are two related reasons for doing this, apart from our ordinary curiosity: the first is that he in particular put great emphasis upon separating, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, the man who suffers from the man who creates, and the second is that, paradoxically, he kept voluminous records of his private and inner life. We are left, then, with something of a challenge: on the one hand, an impression of the public Cummings the transcender who strove to sing of love, joy, spring, and childhood; and on the other, a private picture of Cummings as the man who was prey to all the physical and emotional ills that humanity is heir to. Does this represent a deliberate dissociation, or will we find any attempts at integration?

Before we seek any answers to these questions, however, we must first consider the problem of whether the writer's life is indeed separate from his art, and that therefore we need deal only with the latter.

I

The traditional concept of poetry was that it should combine instruction with pleasure, being taken seriously as having something important to say about life as well as offering the sensory delights of art. This has sometimes been seen as the sugar-coated pill theory, claiming that the pleasure made it easier to swallow the difficult truth. By the end of the 18th century, however, this theory came to be seen as denigrating art, subordinating it to the "message." On the other side, the rise of modern science—going back at least as far as Galileo, Bacon, and Newton—tended to split off verifiable knowledge *per se* from other pursuits and accord it a higher status of its own. Eliot spoke early on about "the dissociation of sensibility," which he said occurred by the end of the 17th century.

As a result, poets and thinkers from the end of the 18th century on tried to show that poetry, in responding to the increasing mechanization of modern life, had an important status and function of *its* own. Kant's aesthetic theory was very influential in postulating that poetry was characterized by having a "purposeless purpose"—i.e., that a poem is organized around some sort of end but that this end is not a practical one of

knowledge or action. Although Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and others toward the end of the 19th century took this doctrine to an extreme saying that all art aspires to the condition of music, thereby giving rise to the art-for-art's sake theory, others attempted a more serious, even psychiatric, resolution in saying with Aristotle that art arouses and allays a certain sequence of emotions, thereby producing a catharsis of these emotions.

There evolved an additional defense of poetry with the rise of the New Criticism in the first half of the 20th century, which claimed that a poem embodies “another kind of truth,” a truth of feeling, perception, and experience rather than simply of fact or knowledge. Indeed, science was seen, however important in certain respects, as being reductive in comparison, for poetry aims at the fullness of the whole truth, not just measurable and verifiable truth. As John Stuart Mill said, and was later echoed by Alfred North Whitehead, one can know all about the rotation of the earth and the refraction of light and so on, and still miss the beauty of the sunset (Whitehead 286). How to live and what to live for, although *conditioned* by a knowledge of material reality, cannot be *governed* by such knowledge, for science is necessarily concerned with processes rather than goals, facts rather than values. Indeed, that is the whole point about science, its striving for objectivity.

However, there is so much in life that cannot be settled objectively, and that is where art comes in. It is important to recognize, however, as the New Critics recognized, that if a poem contains another kind of truth, it does so only implicitly—this truth cannot merely be paraphrased and extracted—which is an improvement upon the old sugar-coated-pill theory. Truth is *embodied* in the way the poem is written and organized rather than *found* all wrapped up in the pleasure; truth and pleasure are, in effect, inseparable, one and the same thing. Thus, the attitude toward poetic form, structure, style, and technique became experimental—“make it new” as Pound proclaimed—a new sensibility calling for new embodiments.

A further consequence of this doctrine is that the poet need not take responsibility for improving society—otherwise poems would turn out to be tracts, propaganda, and not art. Which confronted poets of the 30s and 40s and beyond with a dilemma, living as they were through the Depression, World War II, and the rebellions and conflicts of the 60s. An ostensible way of resolving this dilemma is to claim not only that poetry has a truth of its own but also that this is a “higher” kind of truth, a way of organizing experience and of learning how to live more fully and maturely. This

it does not by “teaching” anything but rather by helping us to view life from a number of different angles at once, thereby avoiding the simplistic views of propaganda and the reductive views of science. One need not commit to any *one* of these views; rather, one is to hold them in balance and tension, what was once seen as a form of irony. Thus the speaker of the poem is not necessarily the poet in person but is rather representative of an aspect of someone the poet has imagined—whether like himself or different—and this persona is best presented objectively and dramatically rather than directly and discursively.

Some of the chief influences behind this aesthetic were Shakespeare, Donne and the Metaphysical Poets, some of Coleridge’s poetry and criticism, Keats, Pater and Wilde and the Aesthetes of the 80s and 90s, the French Symbolists, and Yeats. It was chiefly Ezra Pound and Eliot, along with T. E. Hulme and I. A. Richards, who fashioned these influences into what became the basic doctrine of the early modernist poets and the New Critics (such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren) who followed—Eliot’s key phrases, the “objective correlative” and “unified sensibility” having become rallying cries for the times.

The problem was, however, that while they ostensibly aimed to set poetry apart from and even above the business of fact, logic, and prose, almost all of the major modern poets paradoxically became involved willy-nilly in ideas and programs about society and how to improve it. Yeats himself was personally involved in Irish politics and wrote a good number of poems about it, Pound went overboard into Italian Fascism, and the *Cantos* are full of instructions about how to live and to organize society. Eliot evolved inevitably out of the self-referring irony of “Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* and into the religious pieties of *Ash Wednesday* and the *Four Quartets*. William Carlos Williams’ project was to create a contemporary epic of America; the New Critics took their stand upon Southern Agrarianism; Auden went through a number of well-documented phases from aestheticism to Marxism to Christianity. Wallace Stevens seems the only major poet to have remained consistently within the aesthetic tradition of viewing truth from a number of shifting angles without taking a final stand on any one of them.

II

The case with Cummings is both simpler and more complex. He began his adult career quite consciously in the avant-garde camp, and he

early on devoted himself assiduously to experimenting with poetic form, language, and subject matter. He explored the urban landscape, he frequented brothels à la Toulouse-Lautrec, he played with colloquial and even vulgar speech, and he dislocated typography—which was to become his trademark. What he did not do, at least with any of the programmatic consistency of the other modernists, was to experiment with a variety of personae and to exploit the various fashionable forms of irony, knowingness, sophistication, and postures of despair. He was, as many observers have pointed out, a romantic underneath, a sheep in wolf's clothing. You do not find, in other words, the double vision of the other modernists, the ironic distancing, the ambivalent stance. But then again, as one looks more closely, one begins to realize that *their* project also derived from Romanticism, the belief that poetry embodies a higher form of truth in a kind of tension of opposites coming directly as I have suggested, from Coleridge and Hazlitt and Keats, and through them from Kant. The difference is that the modernists tended to *disguise* their messages in the Metaphysical / Symbolist manner. John Donne, himself, we recall, evolved from sexy, playful Jack Donne into serious, religion-obsessed John Donne. And, very few of the Modernists escaped the compulsion, as I have said, to see poetry as having an influence on society.

Both Cummings and the other modernists, then, tended to become lost in the same confusion. Thus, although he defended Pound in public when the latter was accused of treason during World War II, saying that the artist's "strictly illimitable country is himself" (*six* 69), he acknowledged in private that Pound had gone too far and was in all probability mentally unbalanced. This is a crucial point in illuminating some sort of unaware disparity in Cummings between his public persona and his private self. We can even see in the published work a strong strain of didacticism, especially in some of the more virulent satires where he scores points against actual public figures and events—General Eisenhower, for example, and the Soviet repression of the rebellion in Hungary (*CP* 636 and 711). All this despite the claim he made in *i: six nonlectures* that he was not a teacher (3).

I am not sure that either Cummings or the other modernists knew how to resolve this dilemma, whether in their art or personal lives. Nor is it certain that Cummings' forebears—Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman—knew how to resolve it either. Like Whitman, Cummings was a caretaker of the wounded in battle; like Thoreau, he was jailed for his convictions; and like Emerson, he became a performer on platforms. Like them, he was not

always certain where he stood; but *unlike* them, he became less and less able to admit it in public. “Do I contradict myself?” we recall Whitman chanting, “Very well, then, I contradict myself.” Even Eliot came to admit that he wanted to put *The Waste Land* behind him, and that he was not sure what he really meant by his doctrine of the objective correlative.

It was less easy, as I am saying, for Cummings to admit a mistake in public. He seemed to need to put on a brave face for his audience, and that should be the end of it. A poet’s value is to be found in what he has chosen to present rather than in his wastebasket. But, as I have said, there are two related problems with this view. One is that his published poems sometimes seem to suffer from omission, and the other is that he never threw anything away. When he was a boy his mother saved all of his poems and drawings, and when he grew up she started to paste his clippings and reviews into albums—a practice continued by his third wife, Marion Morehouse. He himself preserved all of his notebooks and jottings, and when he went into psychoanalysis, he kept a detailed record of his dreams. Further, he kept copies of his letters, and a large amount of correspondence survives him as well.

Nor did either he or Marion leave behind any instructions that these materials were to be destroyed after their deaths. We are constrained to conclude, not only that Cummings kept a diligent record of much of that inner life he could not find a place for in his published work, but also that he consciously or unconsciously wanted it to be available for future researchers. This was the “other” Cummings, the one he had difficulty integrating into his art, and perhaps he hoped we might be able to give him the benefit of the doubt—and indeed there *are* signs, as I will show below, that integration was on the way.

What we find here, despite the usual scatological material we expect in dreams, is a rather more full and open self-awareness than is often present in the published writings. Instead of using this vulnerable stuff to debunk Cummings, then, by pointing out his weaknesses and failings, I prefer to see it as a sign of that potential strength he sometimes feared to display in public. It is precisely here that we see that self-knowledge, ambivalence, and mature emotional complexity that the modernists were striving for, realizing that it is a sign of strength rather than of weakness to come to grips with your fears and forbidden impulses. And I shall even speculate that, had he lived for another 10 or 20 years—as did many another modernist poet of his time—he was only 68 when he died—he might

very well have absorbed more of this material into his art. As I have pointed out in my previous studies, there are indeed increasing signs of this development, even in his later published work.

When one comes to think about it, it really is very difficult to write poetry exclusively for poetry's sake. To be sure, poetry has its own identity, source, and function, but that does not mean it does not bear upon and reflect some facet of the life we are all engaged in living. While the poet must be free to say what he chooses, as he chooses, he is as bound to take responsibility for the consequences of that choice as anyone else. We are *all*, in this country at least, guaranteed freedom of speech, whether poets or not, and we are all equally liable for the effects of what we say. You cannot, even if you are a major poet, attack a prominent public figure or event in verse, and then claim to be free from counter-attack. Nor, on the personal level, can you claim to be free from taking responsibility for the consequences of your private actions simply because you are an artist. "The Other Cummings" was perfectly aware of this, despite the protestations of the public Cummings.

Let us embark upon our quest for The Other Cummings by glancing first at his life story, as told by Richard Kennedy—who also analyzes this doubleness and talks about Cummings' secret or private self.

III

In order not to repeat the whole story, we shall confine ourselves here to three key factors or moments in the poet's life. First is the family romance: the imposing and somewhat forbidding father, and the warm and indulgent mother. In early adulthood, Cummings himself was aware of the oedipal implications of his background, but it was not so clear that he knew how this problem affected either his love-relations with women or his attitudes towards his career. His first two wives were attached to other men when he fell in love with them, and, tragically, they subsequently deserted him to move on to still other men. He did, however, manage to embody some of this struggle in his play, *Him*. The problem is that when he managed to *resolve* it, both in life and in art, it was more the result of his splitting *off* the artist from the man than of *integrating* the parts into a unified, cohesive being. With his third, and lifelong companion, Marion, he created a relationship in which she was the caretaker—a position with which she was apparently quite content. The effect was in part the defensive stance of "you-i" against "mostpeople" and the increasing virulence of his satires against the world of mostpeople.

The second key moment, to backtrack a bit, was his post-adolescent break from the piety and conventionality of his Cambridge upbringing. He himself records his childhood escapades into “sinful Somerville,” and thence into the delights and temptations of metropolitan Boston itself (*six* 31, 47-49). While in college at Harvard, He began becoming involved in the then current rebellious modernism in the arts, and he moved as soon as possible to New York, where he gave himself up to exploring the exotic strangeness of *that* city. This period was interrupted by his volunteer service in the ambulance corps in France during World War I, his subsequent imprisonment, and his stint in the U. S. Army at Fort Devens thereafter.

He was now in full-fledged rebellion against the bourgeois society in which he had grown up, and this was not, of course, without some crucial connection to his rebellion against his father, a man who was in many ways committed to the betterment of that very society. If the father was concerned to *help* the indigent, the son delighted in *celebrating* their ostensible freedom and creativity. And in some fashion, Cummings was enabled to have it both ways. On the one hand, he did live an authentic existence of semi-poverty, remaining true to his ideals of artistic integrity; on the other hand, however, he was helped financially and in other ways by well-to-do friends and a family inheritance. He was able to travel extensively and to spend his summers at the family farm up in New Hampshire.

The third key moment came when he lost contact with his daughter, Nancy, because her mother Elaine, Cummings’ first wife, divorced him to marry another man. Although he was in despair and fought to retain some sort of visitation rights, Nancy was taken away at the age of five and grew up in England without knowledge of who her real father was. On the other hand, *before* he lost that wife and child, it would seem that he took his role as husband and father rather lightly, privileging himself to come and go as he pleased, dedicated as he was to his career as an artist. And it is not irrelevant that he lost his own father in a terrible auto accident at around this same period.

The sequel to the Nancy question is even more distressing. When she was a young woman, married and with children, she returned to the U.S. during the 40s and was able, through a series of circumstances, to meet and recognize her long-lost father. She was delighted and naturally assumed that he would be only too happy to be her father and grandfather to her children. Cummings, however, suffered the torments of hell in com-

ing to a decision, and, fearing any infringement upon the artistic self he had taken so long to develop, finally said no. In the process, however, he toyed with the thought that constricting his personal self in this way was responsible for the constriction he was feeling around this time in his writing. Nevertheless, he could not act upon that profound moment of self-awareness, and he was forced to go on without it. One wonders incidentally, what Marion would have thought had he decided to *accede* to Nancy's request, since her *own* desire for having a child was denied by Cummings.

What we learn from the biography, then, is that Cummings threw himself into life with great zest as a young man, but that he was not wholly prepared to encounter the severe challenges with which that gesture confronted him. The eventual result was a self-protective entrenchment of the one public self he could feel committed to, that of the artist, while the secret or private self was confined to his dreams, letters, and unpublished papers—and, no doubt, of course, to Marion herself.

We turn now to the letters—or at least to those which have been published; but even there, although they were selected under the supervision of the poet's widow, we find many signs of The Other Cummings. I am confident that the eventual publication of additional letters will but confirm the picture we already have. Once again, as I have previously published a full analysis of *Selected Letters*, we shall confine ourselves to three key points relevant to our present purpose

IV

First there are the signs of Cummings' ambivalence toward his parents when, during his 20s, he was trying to break free of his family's influence. The difficulty was in part, paradoxically, that he had had such a warm and supportive family context in which to grow up. But that, of course, was crossed by his feelings of rage against his father for ostensibly dominating his mother, and of fear of his father for being so tall, successful, and imposing, whereas the son was—even in adulthood—short in comparison. He writes to them from New York, for example, that he wants to be on his own, and he writes to his sister, Elizabeth, a few years younger, urging her to break free likewise. He consciously and deliberately set himself up to be as different from his father as possible, and yet at certain crisis points in life—for example, when imprisoned in France, or when Nancy was being taken away from him—he needed to turn to his father for help. He must have felt many extremely painful emotions, in addition to grief, when his father was killed in an automobile accident. Interestingly, he did not use his

first name—Edward, also his father’s name—instead, preferring to be addressed by his middle name—Estlin.

Fortunately, his old college friend and supporter, James Sibley Watson, now a well-to-do physician, and his wife Hildegard Lasell, became his surrogate parents, and he felt he could turn to them for emotional as well as financial support. The letters testify, early and late, to his need for them and his gratitude for their aid. At the same time, however, this situation cast doubt on his need to feel independent, so he developed the compensatory solution that, if he could not be materially independent, he could be spiritually free—”the most who die,” as he concluded one of his poems, “the more we live” (*CP* 560).

Secondly, we see in the letters much pain about the difficulties of his career, as well as of his somewhat uncertain physical well-being. What ensued during the second half of his career was a growing identification with—not the city, the downtrodden, and nonconformists—but rather rural New England and conservative values. He became more defensive and irritable, and he gives voice to the doubts and black moods which he for the most part kept out of his published writings. And, most significantly, he tells of moments of intense self-awareness, realizing that there may be something amiss within.

This leads us to our third key point, a brief consideration of the dream manuscripts. These seem to have emerged in two separate phases, the first occurring during 1928-29, and the second between 1952-59. We know he was in psychoanalysis with Dr. Fritz Wittels, a disciple of Freud, during the first phase, and that it was primarily motivated by the stresses arising from his divorce from Elaine and the loss of Nancy. We do not know whether he was in analysis during the second phase, but I have noticed that he mentions a certain Dr. Bak a number of times as if he *were* in treatment again—this time following the crisis of Nancy’s return in search of her father and his tragic refusal of her need.

Whatever the case may be, he was spurred on to a much longer stint of dream-recording, 7-8 years, as opposed to the first period of 1-2 years. My guess is that, perhaps as a result of his crisis over Nancy, he was feeling a certain block in his creativity and, moving through his late 50s into his early 60s, was aware of the encroachments of age. And the sad fact is, of course, that he died only a few years later, in 1962.

Thus he wrote to his sister in 1954, several years after the start of the second phase of the dream-manuscripts, “I feel I’m somehow gradually

evolving; despite self-pity narcissism an inferiority complex & possibly several other psychic ailments” (*Letters* 238). He realizes that hatred is sometimes a projection outward of what one hates in oneself; he reminds Pound that “hatred bounces” (*Letters* 243); and he was fond of quoting his favorite Bible passage—“He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her” (John 8:7). This seems to reveal an enormous potential for growth, even thus late in his career, and it serves to counterbalance the impression he gives of becoming more cranky as he ages. Further, it argues in favor of the hypothesis that he was in treatment again—this time perhaps with a more demanding therapist.

V

To turn now to the dream manuscripts themselves is to find confirmation of this impression. Both early and late, his narration of and commentary on his dreams are full, frank, and fearless. He seems determined to expose himself to himself totally and somehow to come to terms with whatever emerges. For ease and economy of exposition, I will discuss the two periods together, making distinctions between them when the material requires. My orientation is not primarily Freudian or psychoanalytic in general. I am an English professor who subsequently trained as a social worker and Gestalt Therapist, so my approach will put more emphasis on the content and structure of the dreams themselves than of taking them through the manifest to the latent content. I do not eschew Freudian concepts, however—as you may have already noticed—when they seem especially applicable.

Proceeding in order of importance and frequency, we find many comments and ideas—mostly later—about himself, his life, his art, his career, his psychology and his psychoanalysis, and his dreams. In addition to a minimal amount of self-rationalizing and self-justifying, there is a good bit of real self-criticism and self-awareness about his limitations, faults, and failings. He realizes, for example, how he’s internalized the “weak child” position and projected it onto his criticisms of society. He is aware of his need for approval; he realizes one needs to *do* as well as to *dream*; that he needs to develop, etc.

Next, we find a great deal of struggling around his sexuality, both early and late. Naturally, he dreams, especially during the early period, of Elaine, Thayer, and MacDermot, and of course the theme is jealousy. However, he also has incestuous dreams about his daughter, his sister, and his mother; and sexual dreams about young girls, exhibitionism, masturbation,

fears of impotence, etc. Interestingly enough, he's aware in his dreams of his feminine side, and indeed he fears at times that he is more feminine than masculine and suffers from gender confusion. He even found himself put off, when he was in Cambridge again for the 1952-53 Norton Lectures, by what he felt was a pro-male, anti-woman atmosphere. In view of the criticisms that have been leveled at Cummings for his archaic attitudes toward women, it is significant to pause here and reconsider what the whole story contains. And the same is true of his dreams about blacks and Jews, but I want to reserve treatment of those issues for another occasion.

Third in importance, as we might expect, is the struggle with his parents, again both early and late. The first period is marked by the struggle for mom against dad, where dad is seen as a forbidding figure, and the son feels cowardly and inadequate, shooting arrows at dad's steed, for example. Later, he dreams of himself as a fool, bum, baby, expecting dad's disapproval. Significantly, he comments on January 11, 1952: "NB/Freud's mistake is in making the father terrible, mother loving—& nothing else. Actually, the mother is terrible (too) & the father protects me against her." It would seem that he was feeling the influence of Jung by now, which is not surprising, as he mentions Jung several times in his letters and dreams. And it also seems that he was working toward a more comfortable masculine identification, in line with his earlier poetic praise of his father in the well-known "my father moved through dooms of love" (*CP* 520).

The next category of dreams contains images of conflict. Reflecting the difficulties of the oedipal struggle, the first two types came both early and late and involve violence in general and military scenes in particular. The former contains scenes of fighting, terror, shooting, killing, falling, wild beasts, torture, insects, fire, filth, chaos, destruction, havoc, holocaust, rage, explosions, etc.—as if right out of Dante's *Inferno*. The military imagery involves shooting a Russian general, burning deserters, civil war, escaping from the firing squad, being besieged, etc. The third type, mainly from the later period, involves situations in politics: the Communist threat from Russia, traitors, revolution, occupation, escaping from a concentration camp, pursuit, terror, etc.

That these dreams are not exclusively symbolic is evidenced by the fact that Cummings actually *was* at the front during World War I, that he really *was* imprisoned, that he actually *did* visit the Soviet Union, etc. It is also true, however, that these images were internalized and became attached there to embody Cummings' own inner conflicts—and surely these

conflicts derive in large part from the prior categories of the struggle related to his sexuality, as well as the variables in the relationship he had with his parents, which are of course related to each other. We may observe further that it was precisely this sort of material which he found difficult to embody in his published writings. What emerges is the enormous amount of tension going on inside his psyche, which he was aware of, and which motivated him to seek help and to keep a record of his dreams in the first place.

This rage, terror, and violence reflect the effort it cost him to escape from his beginnings and move into independent selfhood, and with too little help and too much resistance from those around him. Too much love from his mother and too much power in his father put Cummings into a hell of a struggle. Remarkable also, nevertheless, is the number of dreams in which the catastrophe fails to materialize or where the dreamer manages to escape, thereby indicating a strong thrust toward resolution—a theme we shall be returning to shortly.

The fifth category consists of dreams of traveling, both early and late, and of dining in restaurants, mostly later. Here again the dreamer is characteristically entangled in difficulties—missing his train, having trouble packing and getting luggage on board, his auto sinking in sand or running out of gas, his plane or motorcycle not starting, fearing his train is running off its tracks, losing articles of clothing and his keys, not finding his hotel, not knowing the language or the currency, not finding the bathroom, being arrested for driving without a license, eating spoiled chicken, finding the restaurant too expensive, not having any money, not getting what he ordered, etc.

Once again, although such dreams reflect that Cummings did do a lot of traveling in his waking life, the relevance of these events and the way in which they present themselves to the dreamer are governed by and in turn reflect what is going on in his psyche. The meaning here once again relates to the struggle within Cummings to fulfill himself, except that in this case we find, not so much the rage, terror, and violence of the images of conflict, but more the feelings of impotence and frustrations he struggled with in trying to get past his inner obstacles—most profoundly, his need to free himself from his attachment to his mother and to be able to identify with his father.

Dreaming that your engine won't start, for example, seems a clear reflection of feelings of impotence—whether explicitly sexual or implicitly

regarding your ability to function in non-sexual areas. This sort of imagery, along with other similar sorts, such as losing things, getting lost, not having money, etc., is not so much *symbolic* as it is exemplary, or at most, *metaphorical*. A stalled engine is not so much a symbol of feelings of impotence as it is an instance of such feelings—or, from another point of view, it is an external embodiment of an internal state. It is not symbolic because I do not need to move from manifest to latent content to find another, more hidden meaning. Thus in Gestalt Therapy we are content to work with the dream imagery on the literal level. We do not need to assume that the dream represents a disguise for the real meaning. Assuming rather that it is what appears to be—and that whatever the dreamer remembers and however he remembers it is what we need to attend to. We go to that engine, by means of role-play, and see if we can get it started, and if not, we become the engine and see what's holding us back. Interpretation might be interesting, but it is not necessary.

We come next to a rather large group of dreams involving disintegration of one sort or another, which I've formed by combining three related subgroups: concerns about health, the body, illness, and madness; excretory dreams; and dreams about losing things and things breaking. In the first, we find dreams about acne, tooth decay, pestilence, fever, lockjaw, infected cuts, syphilis, a sick dog needing care, venereal disease, a heart attack, a dead body, etc. Then there are dreams about going crazy, being put in a strait jacket, being committed, etc. The excretory dreams involve a river overflowing, looking for a place to go to the bathroom, not finding privacy and feeling exposed, revulsion at dirty toilets, etc. And the dreams of losing and breaking things include a broken watch, a car breaking down, a bicycle losing its chain, losing his pants while climbing a fence, losing his notebook or hat (or raincoat or pants), seeing Joy Farm being dismantled, etc.

Fears about the integrity of body and mind are quite profound, relating to one's very sense of self and of being. More than about impotence, whether sexual or otherwise, these images question the roots of one's existence. And excretory dreams remind one of the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch, another way of picturing the damned and their torment. Then the losing and breaking things follow suit as manifested images of things coming apart, i.e., "the center that is not holding."

So, we have reached the bottom of Cummings' personal hell, the most difficult part of the inner experience which he by and large felt unable

to deal with in his writings meant for the public. While *The Descent into Hell* has been treated in many ways over the centuries, both in mythology and in the great literary epics of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton, it is a difficult subject for the lyric poet. One thinks of the *Inferno* sections of Pound's *Cantos* and Eliot's *Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, and one is thereby reminded that these works were modernist attempts to transcend the lyric form without falling into the trap of mere narrative and exposition. The aim was to achieve lyric depth and intensity without losing the scope and significance of the long poem. Nevertheless, there are indeed moments in modern *lyric* poems where the confrontation with Hell occurs, as in the conclusion of Frost's "Desert Places," for example, or of Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour." But these are of necessity more implicit and suggestive than actual journeys.

It is significant that Cummings had difficulty in achieving longer poetic and dramatic works—with the notable exceptions of *Him* and *Santa Claus*. However, if we turn to his two major prose works, *The Enormous Room* and *Eimi*, we find him consciously using the mythical pattern of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in the former and of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the latter. Further, he also said that he strove to arrange his books of poems in a sequence that would reveal, poem by poem, a descent-and-ascent pattern. (See *Letters* 261.) It is of additional interest that his daughter, Nancy, entitled her book of poems and writings *Charon's Daughter*—Charon being, of course, the mythical Ferryman of the dead across the River Styx in Hades. Further comment on this work will also call for separate treatment.

Cummings himself suspected that there might be some connection between his difficulty in achieving longer works and his ultimate decision to put aside Nancy's request that he take on the role of father and grandfather, and one could speculate that there *is* some sort of relationship between enlarging one's human grasp and enlarging one's artistic scope—or at least there may have been in the case of Cummings.

Nevertheless, it is crucial that in his second stint of dream-recording and analysis in his later years, Cummings showed clear signs of additional insight and growth—for example, as we have already noted, in being able to identify, from within himself, with his father. Then there are the increasing numbers of dreams where he moves explicitly from negative to positive, and others that are simply positive. For example, he loses his key but finds another, or he escapes from a Roman gladiator arena, or he

falls off a ship but catches a rope, or a thirsty horse gets watered, etc. In the purely positive vein: he's elected editor of his college magazine; he's painting a picture of a mother and child; he's reconciled with Nancy; he sees a glorious full moon; he attends a wonderful recital of Eliot reading *The Waste Land*, etc.

There are specific signs, then, that The Other Cummings, the personal and private self, was becoming more and more able to integrate himself, and that ultimately this would have resulted in a deeper and broader artistic self—an achievement which a too-early death prevented him from reaching. It may be coincidental that Cummings' father also died in his sixties, but I can't help thinking it may have been one of the less happy results of Cummings' increasing ability to identify with him. Pound, Eliot, Frost, Stevens, Williams—many contemporaries lived longer lives, which enabled them to broaden and deepen their achievement. It remains to us to appreciate the difficulty of this struggle and to carry it on—not only in filling out the picture of himself which Cummings left us but also in filling out our *own* portraits as well. It is one of the functions of art, as Cummings would have agreed, to help us to become more ourselves, and as far as I am concerned, we can learn as much from the unpublished as from the published work. Fullness of being can only result from looking into and coming to terms with our nightmares as well as our dreams.

—*Flushing, NY*

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