

A STUDY OF TWO POEMS

I "since feeling is first"

Including its provocative metaphoric infrastructure ("syntax," "paragraph," "parenthesis")—redolent of a composition class—"since feeling is first" (*Complete Poems*, Liveright, 1991, 291) remains a quintessential "heart" poem in the Cummings canon. The theme of the poem, clearly enunciated in the first line, is a major and constant electrifying current in Cummings' work. He insists over and over, "exists no / miracle mightier than this: to feel" (762).

The theme in "since feeling is first" is constructed on the sharp antithesis between the "heart" attitude of the lover "i" and the head notion of one "who pays any attention / to the syntax of things." For this "head" kind of person too often "logic thwarted life" (799). Thus kissing "wholly" is feeling; paying "any attention / to the syntax of things" is thinking, being logical and pragmatic and cerebral, and not being committed enough to feeling to be a complete lover.

Is Cummings then saying "never think," is he totally rejecting reason, is he anti-intellectual as is so often charged, and does he really want us to toss away our books (including those he slaved over to write)? My answer is no. The poem says "feeling is first." It does not say feeling is everything: there is nothing else. I am contending that there can be no first without a second. It is true that one of Cummings' "five simple facts" is that there is "the holy miraculous difference between / firstrate & second" (803), but this does not deny the total existence of a second. And so with feeling first and thinking even a distant second, Cummings in one of his loveliest sonnets insists, "only love / immortally occurs beyond the mind" (576). I stress the word *beyond*. It occurs a number of times in Cummings' poetry in this same relationship "beyond the mind" as in "beyond logic" (262), "beyond doomed thought" (138), and especially in the lovely "in time of all sweet things beyond / whatever mind may comprehend" (688). Feeling is first, then, *beyond* mind, beyond that mind, that deceiving mind, for "life is more true than reason will deceive" (592). And so, because "feeling is first," Cummings condemns that person who "does not have to feel because he thinks" (406). And in another context the poet argues, "love is a deeper season / than reason" (578). True: but even reason must have its season. Feeling is beyond, far beyond, thinking, but it does not obliterate it. A whole person feels but also, at appropriate times, reasons.

That Cummings was himself “man thinking” at times is revealed not only in the ideas of his writing, its vocabulary, structure, stylistics, but also in the elaborate meditation, concern, pondering, and thinking exemplified, for example, in the “Notes and Drafts” for “Buffalo Bill’s” and the “FINAL SCHEMA” for *No Thanks*, both presented in Richard Kennedy’s *E. E. Cummings Revisited* (57, 96), and in the painstakingly worked-over version of “rosetree, rosetree” reproduced in Norman Friedman’s *The Art of His Poetry* (138). Cummings attacks “the syntax of things,” but this is not to say that he abandons reason or never follows syntax in his writing. He is talking about a way of life, not a way of writing. His own writing, vibrant as it is with feeling, is reasoned in the sense that it is organized, it is coherent, it has accessible meaning, and most of the time it is syntactical at least with those “Syntactic Deviances” and those “Syntactic Innovations” that Irene R. Fairley has identified and exemplified.

Anyone, then, “who pays any attention / to the syntax of things” is being unduly rational and logical at a most inappropriate time and will, consequently, “never wholly kiss you.” When we are faced with a crucial life decision, Cummings vigorously advises a “heart” rather than a “head” choice. The etymology of *syntax* can be illuminating here: related to *tactics*, the word stems from the Greek meaning to arrange troops for battle as a General would. The cogitation and practicality involved are obviously crucial for any General facing an enemy army, but such syntax, such thinking and practicality in love, mean only a partial, incomplete lover.

While the “i” of the poem is undoubtedly regarded as a “fool” by the one “who pays any attention / to the syntax of things,” the “i” paradoxically revels in being a fool. To be a feeling person, a more complete individual, “my blood approves” he insists. The superiority of blood over brain, that is, “my blood approves” as opposed to the scorned “gesture of my brain,” carries on the contentions of this feeling-first lover, this self-styled “fool,” who lives and loves more “wholly.” He does so because, as a fool, he can move beyond mind, beyond “the syntax of things.” It is this fool, then, that is wise: the wise-fool paradox that is the incredible and miraculous foolishness of “All lose, whole find” (556). This is the foolishness of love.

Another antithesis in “since feeling is first,” built around similar oppositions, comes in the injunctions “Don’t cry” and “laugh.” This segment of the poem includes one of my favorite lines in all of Cummings: “we are for each other.” Teaching composition, I often urged vigorous verbs. Here is a poet with a compelling and precise vocabulary, a subtle selector of just the telling word, choosing one of the weakest of weak verbs. But note the accumulated meanings that *are* garners here: “we are for each other.” We who are in love find, the verb sings, our very are-ness, our being in each other. Or, as Cummings put it in “because it’s / Spring”:

what’s wholly
marvelous my

Darling

is that you &
i are more than you

&i(be

ca
us

e It’s we) (782)

Reinforcing the point is that magnificent *be* and *us* emerging from *because*. In addition, one of the love sonnets insists that love makes the loving me of the poem “morethanme” (807). This is the miraculous enhancement and transcendence of love: “we are for each other.”

The poem concludes with two precise statements. The first, “life’s not a paragraph,” reminds us (as we also recall our old composition classes) that life is not one topic with a topic sentence, developed with unity, coherence, and emphasis. In his cogent “in time of daffodils” Cummings argues that “the goal of living is to grow” (688); consequently a severely limited paragraph of life cannot contain the constant growth and the concomitant change he advocates. He is arguing for a shifting, multifaceted, growing and changing meaning in life, not an orderly, rational, unified, and single meaning that can be caged in a paragraph. Life moves *beyond*; “life’s not a paragraph.” Etymologically, *paragraph* means a marking off, a note placed in the margin beside the writing to indicate another start. Life, Cummings is insisting, is always a new start, a new meaning, a new topic sentence, another new paragraph.

The second statement at the end of the poem, its last line, “And death i think is no parenthesis,” helps convince me that, despite the reference to “your eyelids’ flutter,” and despite the injunctions “Don’t cry” and “laugh, leaning back in my arms,” this is not a seduction poem. Far too much in “since feeling is first” lies beyond eroticism. The poem illuminates, rather, a way of living and an approach to dying.

It is later in his career that Cummings more fully distinguishes between *death* and *dying*. Twenty-four years after “since feeling is first” appeared in *is 5* (1926), Cummings published “dying is fine)but Death” in *XAIPE*, which makes this distinction:

when (instead of stopping to think) you

begin to feel of it, dying
's miraculous
why? be

cause dying is

perfectly natural

While for its part:

Death

is strictly
scientific
& artificial &

evil & legal) (604)

I take it, then, that *death* in "since feeling is first" is the same as *dying* in the later poem. It is "not a parenthesis," not an aside, not an enclosure; it is an organic segment in the natural life cycle, part of that renewal and regeneration beautifully symbolized everywhere in Cummings by the notion of Spring. In "O sweet spontaneous," for example, (a very early poem in which he also used the word *death* in the meaning of the later *dying*) we find:

(but
true

to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover

thou answerest

them only with

spring) (58)

Out of dying comes life blossoming (that blossoming, natural, lively, lovely, whose idiom in our poem is "lady i swear by all flowers"); out of dying, Spring.

What should we make, finally, of that "i think" at the end of the poem? My own feeling is that here we have a poet who knows in his heart that feeling is first but who also realizes with courage and conviction that sometimes a whole person does think. The movement of the poem is from the intensity and immediacy of the love scene to the abstractions of philosophic contemplations. It is most appropriate that this shift be echoed by the shift of emphasis in the whole human response of feeling in the first line to thinking in the last. In all this Cummings reveals himself to be a poet who penetrates the mysteries for existence, of love, of life, and of death with feeling always first, but with thought also (though a distant, far-off second) to express the totality of his unique and inspiring and *unified* being.

II "in time of daffodils (who know)"

I'd like to present "in time of daffodils (who know)" (*Complete Poems*, Liveright, 1991, 688) as Cummings' words to a graduating class. Like graduation speakers immemorially, Cummings begins with a typical graduation-speech generality: "the goal of living is to grow." No dispute about that well-worn sentiment! However, unlike most graduation speakers who remain in the realm of generalities, Cummings indicates specifically *how* to grow. He provides a guide to life with succinctness and a stunning inspiration.

In this poem, dealing with abstractions, Cummings localizes his discussion from the start in specifics. The first are those of flowers, daffodils, lilacs, roses. The joy, the loveliness of the natural world in springtime, forms a setting that itself illuminates the injunctions that Cummings presents. The flowers add immediacy and aliveness to the *how, so, yes, seek, and remember* themes the poem advocates.

The poem is structured on antitheses. The first pair, *why* and *how*, suggests yet again Cummings' insistence on moving beyond reason. With the *ing* in "forgetting why" in his first tercet, Cummings reminds us that this is a process, a movement, a part of that growing which is "the goal of living." Advising us not to ask "why," a childish habit, an immature question about life, a fruitless pursuit that adds information but not growth, Cummings counterposes a focus on *how*, and he reveals his suggested mode of how to grow by the *so/seem, if/yes, seek/find* polarities of the rest of the poem.

Lilacs (in haunting assonance) "proclaim / the aim of waking is to dream": that is, because "unbeing dead isn't being alive" (803), being fully awake requires imagination for self-transcendence and other "dream" possibilities such as love. The way to this, according to Cummings, is to move to the real world of imagination beyond the mundane unworld of routine events: "worlds are to dream now" (755), he insists, but the problem is, as he argues in one of his very early poems, "the world goes forth / to murder dreams"

(67). In other words, in that persistent theme of Cummings, things are not what they seem: appearance belies reality. Someones and everyones, we recall, "slept their dream" (515). Part of growing, Cummings is insisting, is to live one's dreams in the real world of *so*, not *seem*. The trick here, of course, is to know which is which. The paradox is profound. As Cummings puts it later in *95 Poems*, "the departure of everything real is the / arrival of everything true" (720). While the *real* may be *seem*, the *true* is certainly *so*.

Roses, Cummings continues, shock us with amazement as we realize that, as we grow to apprehend and savor our *now* and *here* fully, we can dwell in paradise now and here. It is critical in Cummings' view of life to be alive in each now:

infinite also
ourselves exist sans
shallbe or was (755)

Paradise is not necessarily, then, some mental construct of a far-off, forever, after-death eternity ("such a flower is love's any now" [576]), but is rather the joyous affirmation and acceptance of what is, what truly is, what is now, what is here—or in a word, "yes." So *yes* beyond *if* moves to this *now* and *here* because the *yes* person knows how to grow and thus can dream the world to *so*. This is to be amazed "with paradise." *Yes*, then, is aliveness and growth: "i imagine that yes is / the only living thing" (528). Cummings insists, indeed, to summarize the point, "yes is a pleasant country: / if's wintry" (578). The affirmation and acceptance of life now and here is growth to self-transcendence and the paradise that is.

One can gain this paradise through *yes*, but it is a *yes* that must move beyond *if*. The choice is clear: Cummings says that "the greedy the people" act "as if as can yes" (801). Living *if*, living *as if* (if only I had been a baseball player, the dissatisfied teacher might think), all this, which is not *yes*, negates growth. Cummings decided on this as a boy. One of his first poems, entitled "If," essentially makes this point: "For if here was there / We wouldn't be *we*" (1064). As this poem is from his Cambridge Latin School years (1908–11), we can see that the feelings involved lasted a lifetime.

I have discussed "in time of all sweet things beyond / whatever mind may comprehend" in my remarks on "since feeling is first." About *seek and find* let me say that growth in Cummings ("the goal of living is to grow") demands not standing still on established dogmas, rituals, answers, but moving beyond to new perspectives, new truths, or, as Cummings put it another way, as we have seen, "life's not a paragraph" (291). Denying, for example, "the merely undeniable fact that two times two is four," he "rejoices in the purely irresistible truth" of his title *is 5* (221).

As I approach the conclusion of these remarks on "in time of daffodils (who know," let me pause for a moment to remind you that a lovely musical version of this magnificent poem has been prepared by Catherine A. Richards and printed in *Spring* (New Series Number 2, 29–32).

And now I turn to that last tercet of the poem, to that "mystery to be / (when time from time shall set us free)," and I approach it through Cummings' theme of timelessness. In another of his *95 Poems* he proclaimed "there is a time for timelessness" (683). Indeed, one of his most splendid sonnets, the penultimate poem of the same volume, begins:

being to timelessness as it's to time,
love did no more begin than love will end (768)

And so at this moment of time, in this now and here, we dream of timelessness as we consider his final injunction, "forgetting me, remember me."

I feel we can note about Estlin Cummings himself a timelessness even in that process of forgetting that inevitably occurs after one's death, as occurred to those alter egos "anyone" and "noone" (515). Fewer and fewer of those privileged to know Cummings in person are still with us. Yet throughout our time, and especially on this 100th Anniversary celebration of his birth, we do remember him. Somehow here, now, I feel Cummings saying to all, to each of us gathered in his spirit: "forgetting me, remember me."

—Palo Alto, California

Works Cited

- Fairley, Irene R., *E. E. Cummings and Ungrammar: A Study of Syntactic Deviances in his Poems*. New York: Watermill Publishers, 1975.
- Friedman, Norman. *E. E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1960.
- Kennedy, Richard S. *E. E. Cummings Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.
- Richards, Catherine A. "Scoring Cummings." *Spring*, New Series Number 2 (October 1993): 20–33.