

The Tiny Room:

The Jottings of E. E. Cummings

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American humorist Don Marquis once said that publishing a volume of verse is like dropping a rose petal into the Grand Canyon . . . and waiting for the echo. In contrast to this despairing cynicism, the poetry books of E. E. Cummings have made their echo. So, too, has the poet's best-known memoir, *The Enormous Room*—hardly a rose petal. But other lesser contributions of Cummings' written output have garnered little or no reaction. The "Jottings" that the poet published in *Wake* #10 in 1951 (also found in *A Miscellany*, published in 1958, and *A Miscellany Revised*, published in 1965, sixteen of which also appear in *i:six nonlectures*, published in 1953) show a small but unusual side of Cummings' writing—one that, to my knowledge, has not received a single echo of critical response. This lack of attention is no great oversight, for the Jottings are relatively inconsequential, yet they are singular and brave amid Cummings' output due to their brevity, assertiveness, and buoyant character.

Indeed, the lack of an echo is surely because these adages, labeled as mere "Jottings," are slight and seemingly ephemeral. They amount to thirty-three independent declarative sentences that bear a resemblance to epigrams and witticisms, and perhaps also to haiku (although only superficially in terms of length). Each Jotting lacks an initial capital and concluding punctuation, and they range from two words (#26: "hatred bounces") to nineteen words (#22: "enter labor,with an itching heart and a palm of gold:leading(by the nose)humanity,in a unionsuit"). One is in French (#27: "il faut de l'espace pour être un homme"), and two may be more cryptic than clear to many readers (#8: "brother,that's not a buck to you:that's a century to me" and #21: "false is alike. False teeth").

Yet one might hope for critical echoes because these Jottings share the traits of effective aphorism by being, for the most part, concise, compressed, memorable, clever, and timeless. In his introduction to *A Miscellany*, where the Jottings were first reprinted in their entirety along with hitherto uncollected essays, a poem in translation, and speeches from unfinished plays, Cummings referred to his Jottings as "a cluster of epigrams," and also said that they "need (I feel) no comment" (*Miscellany* 3). But here, for better or worse, is some comment.

Because Cummings contends that his Jottings are epigrams, and perhaps not aphorisms, we may begin by defining the difference between epigram and aphorism. An aphorism asserts a principle, or is a wise or clever saying or general truth. An epigram is primarily a witty or satirical short *poem*, or secondarily a pointed and often antithetical statement. In his book collecting the correspondence of Cummings and Ezra Pound, editor Barry Ahearn refers to a selection of these Jottings as “aphorisms” (Ahearn, 365), and some of them definitely are. Perhaps Cummings’ Jottings are both, but the poet’s choice to label them as epigrams suggests an emphasis on their poetic and antithetical qualities, traits that are borne out in the maxims themselves. What follows is a classification of all thirty-three Jottings, divided into logical categories.

Almost But Not Quite Aphorisms

Cummings’ Jottings fit five main categories. The first is that nearly all of his Jottings may be considered aphoristic. The ones that are perhaps not (#8, 13, 14, 21, 22, and 24) seem to be too topical, cryptic, or personal to have the timelessness or immediacy of an effective aphorism. These nonaphoristic Jottings are harder to parse, or seem less universal or applicable to general life. Jotting #14 (“not that she wasn’t a faithful husband”) and the second half of #21 (“false is alike. False teeth”) are both fragments, a trait usually avoided in epigram as well as aphorism. Relative to the other Jottings, concision and perhaps pithiness elude both #13 (“of course Bacon wrote Shakespeare;but so did everybody else,including (luckily)Shakespeare”) and #22 (“enter labor,with an itching heart and a palm of gold:leading(by the nose)humanity,in a unionsuit”). Both of these offerings seem cumbersome, which also inhibits their success as aphorisms. Jotting #22, just mentioned, as well as #24 (“item:our unworld has just heaved a sigh of belief”), may be too topical to be timeless, even though Cummings said he found “nothing dead” (*Miscellany* 3) in republishing them. And what of Jotting #8 (“brother,that’s not a buck to you:that’s a century to me”)? A transient might say “Brother, can you spare a dime”; make it ten dimes and Cummings seems to have his beggar counter with “that’s not a buck to you;that’s a century to me.” Thus, we are given a contrast of a hundred pennies to a hundred years—perhaps all the money a destitute vagrant might earn in that time. So we see into the life of the cadger. But what are we to make of the convolution of this Jotting and its adoption of a first-person voice? We can at least value each buck we earn with greater appreciation than before, but in contrast, a claim such as

“everything near water looks better” (Jotting #2) is much clearer, as well as more immediate, memorable, and timeless. The rest of Cummings’ Jottings, as shall be seen, seem more wholly aligned with aphorism and epigram.

Feeling Over Thinking

Another grouping of these Jottings includes two that assert feeling over thinking. The first of these, Jotting #1 (“knowledge is a polite word for dead but not buried imagination”), pits imagination against knowledge as if they are opposites. It is easy to presume that the poet equates imagination to feeling and, “since feeling is first” (CP 291)—as Cummings is renowned for proclaiming—this aphorism maintains a central theme of his poetry in promoting feeling over knowledge, or heart over mind. The imagination here is not utterly dead but merely buried, so those with “knowledge” do at least have hope. We also do well to remember that Cummings himself “wholly kiss[ed]” because feeling remained first, yet he paid plenty of paradoxical attention to the syntax of things. A second Jotting in this category of valuing feeling over thinking is #29 (“think twice before you think”). It catches our attention with its ironic declaration. Cummings turns “think before you speak” (or “look before you leap”) on its head, and paradoxically urges us to “think twice” about thinking itself, suggesting that intuition and feeling are more reliable or valuable.

Appreciation for the Child

A third category of Cummings’ Jottings is an appreciation for the child, and the wonder, joy, and unsullied openness for which the pure child is idealized. In Jotting #3 (“it takes three to make a child”), Cummings affirms the value of the newborn as a person. The act of procreation is elevated beyond the sex act to be the divine act of creation, and the child—the required and presupposed third person—is made holy by Cummings’ firm reminder.¹ Jotting #16 (“many parents wouldn’t exist if their children had been a little more careful”) again focuses on the child. Cummings rejects the Victorian notion that children are to be seen and not heard, empowering them to the point that they are responsible for the very existence of their mothers and fathers (who could not be parents were it not for the children being born). And we are reminded that careless children require much more parenting that careful ones do. And Jotting #32 (“it may be dreadful to be old but it’s worse not to be young”) declares childhood’s great openness and potential. Cummings suggests, with hope, that it is possible to be old *and* young at heart, and that one should attempt to remain

young even while one is old, something that the poet himself seemed to achieve until his last day of chopping wood at Joy Farm.

Humor or Lightness

A fourth category of these Jottings may be that of humor or lightness. Jottings in this class include #4 (“only as long as we can laugh at ourselves are we nobody else”), which espouses a prominent theme for Cummings: individualism. In his second nonlecture, Cummings states that “poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality” (*six nonlectures*, 24). Elsewhere he distinguishes between “you and me” and “mostpeople” (CP 461), and here he attributes individuality not just to humor but to the ability to laugh at ourselves. It has been said that laughter is one attribute that distinguishes humans from animals. Cummings takes this trait further to say that we can be truly individual if we are also capable of laughing at ourselves. Another humorous Jotting is #5 (“the expression of a clown is mostly in his knees”). The pratfalls of clowning invariably involve the buckling of the knees, and here we may be reminded of Cummings’ fondness for vaudeville and burlesque. “Like the burlesk comedian,” Cummings writes of his theory of technique, “I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement” (CP 221). Whether precise or wobbly, the clown’s movements begin in the knees. Jotting #9 (“ends are beginnings with their hats on”) has a lightness to it that easily amuses. It has a sense of joy, putting a positive spin on endings, the hat jauntily suggesting that it’s time to go (one may picture Chaplin departing from the camera in his vaudevillian waddle). Jotting #13 (“of course Bacon wrote Shakespeare;but so did everybody else,including(luckily)Shakespeare”) retains some humor. Jotting #14, already mentioned (“not that she wasn’t a faithful husband”), is a fragment that highlights the masculine behavior or capabilities of certain women, presented as if a snippet of overheard conversation. It also implies its opposite (“not that he wasn’t a faithful wife”) and begs for the *ba-da-bing* of a cymbal in response. Jotting #23 (“the pigpen is mightier than the sword”) is a fresh turn of the Bulwer-Lytton phrase, re-energized simply by adding the inherently funny word “pig.” By this assertion, we can give this revised maxim renewed thought. One knows the power of the pen, but what is the power of the pigpen? Nature’s dirt may indeed be mightier than the sword. Finally, Jotting #29, already mentioned (“think twice before you think”), may also be considered humorous due to the technique of irony that causes the reader to do a double-take.

Antithetical Reversal

A fifth category is that of reversal. A significant number of Cummings' Jottings rely on an antithetical strategy. Some of these may be taken simply as good advice, such as #10 ("never put off till today what you can do yesterday") and #17 ("let rolling stones lie"). At least six antithetical Jottings are claims or observations, as in #12 ("nothing recedes like progress"), #15 ("a chain is no weaker than its missing link"), #16 ("many parents wouldn't exist if their children had been a little more careful"), #18 ("great men burn bridges before they come to them"), #23 ("the pigpen is mightier than the sword"), #30 ("an intelligent person fights for lost causes, realizing that others are merely effects"), and #31 ("equality is what does not exist among equals"). At least one such Jotting, #25, also seems poetic ("people who live in steel houses should pull down the lightning").

A closer look at some of these antithetical Jottings reveals added meaning. With #12 ("nothing recedes like progress"), Cummings seemingly takes aim at science, complaining about modern "progress." It is unlike the poet to be nostalgic; rather, he mostly focuses on the evils of said progress. The poet has a consistent stance on the topic. In the poem "Jehovah buried, Satan dead," he satirizes progress by saying that the "illustrious punks of Progress shriek" (CP 438). And in "pity this busy monster, manunkind," he proclaims that "Progress is a comfortable disease" (CP 554). If nothing recedes like progress, then progress is indeed a disease—one that Western culture has become all too comfortable with. Cummings warns us with paradox, decrying our backward steps in pursuing "progress," diagnosing disease even though we think we're comfortable.

Jotting #15 ("a chain is no weaker than its missing link") takes the customary phrase, "a chain is no stronger than its weakest link," to its logical opposite conclusion, and thus makes us more aware of the proverb we already know. But we may also wonder about the overtones of the reference to a "missing link"—is the theory of evolution itself weakest at the point of its missing links? And what of the logic itself here? If a chain is missing a link, then is it not two chains, or a *broken* chain, where such a "weakness" is more severe than a merely weak link? Just as a chain itself may be thought of as containing logical steps connecting one idea to another, Cummings violates that chain of logic, perhaps even questioning logic itself (since, after all, feeling is first). Or perhaps he is even questioning the hierarchy of *scala naturae*, the "great chain of being." If

nothing else, with this Jotting Cummings launches his readers off the cliff of ponderability.

Jotting #17 (“let rolling stones lie”), much like #15, is an extension and reworking of two common phrases—“a rolling stone gathers no moss” and “let sleeping dogs lie.” But a *rolling* stone cannot actually lie still, so Cummings also reverses our expectation, perhaps with some humor, possibly meaning that we should let rolling stones *roll*, and let them be individualistic as they are.

Jotting #18 (“great men burn bridges before they come to them”) also gives us a reversal. To force his troops onward and to eliminate retreat as an option, Julius Caesar is said to have burned bridges after his troops crossed them. If this served to motivate the troops, giving them no possibility to retreat, to fight to the death, it may indeed have made them braver and better men, or at least more desperate. Cummings, though, turns this phrase on its head by saying that *great* men burn their bridges *before* they come to them because doing so requires greater ingenuity thereafter than taking the easy way forward over each bridge. One might conclude that this is offered as good advice for the truly imaginative life, and hope that it is not merely cavalier creative license. However, in his play *Him*, Cummings said that “An artist, a man, a failure, MUST PROCEED” (Act I, Scene II), so the necessity of proceeding applies to those who fail just as much as to those who succeed. One may puzzle about how to actually proceed if the bridge before you is now burned, but that is the challenge that Cummings offers, with the assumption that great men *do* meet the challenge. One may also speculate about the overtones of “burning one’s bridges.” We’ve all heard the advice never to burn one’s bridges after you cross them, because one’s past connections may turn out to be useful at unexpected times, and because you never know when you might have to retreat. But Cummings incinerates that idea. More importantly, he may be emphasizing the sheer individualism required to blaze one’s own trail, relying on no one else, including those one might meet in the future.

Finally, Jotting #29, mentioned previously (“think twice before you think”), also presents a reversal of a known aphorism; #30 (“an intelligent person fights for lost causes, realizing that others are merely effects”) turns on two meanings of the word “cause” and on the common but perhaps mistaken expectation that the intelligent person would not fight for lost causes; and #31 (“equality is what does not exist among equals”) points up the irony of those who perceive themselves as “equals” to certain others.

Further Speculations

Other Jottings may be considered surreal, or perhaps also poetic, as in #7 (“don’t stand under whispers”), or may be considered as jokes or punch lines, as in #14, previously mentioned (“not that she wasn’t a faithful husband”). The remaining Jottings, in numerical order, may be speculated upon in more detail. Jotting #2 (“everything near water looks better”) offers an observation that architects and garden designers have long known. Cummings does not let it pass that beauty exists in the symmetry of reflections. Jotting #6 (“private property began the instant somebody had a mind of his own”) may suggest that private property is a negative thing. Yet having a mind of one’s own presupposes individuality, and individuality led to democracy, which supports the value of personal property. Thus, the existence of personal property testifies to potential individuality among the populace. In Jotting #11 (“a poet is a penguin—his wings are to swim with”) we see Cummings’ only comment among these Jottings on the subject of poetry itself. If a penguin is possibly malignable for being unable to fly, then perhaps this aphorism seeks to defend some supposed weakness in poets, though we may rightly wonder what it might be. Perhaps it is simply that a poet uses language in a way that differs from other birds. Further, in “I Take Great Pleasure in Presenting” (*Miscellany* 137–140), Cummings notes how penguins have two contrasting personalities on land and in the water. The penguin’s grace in water may be viewed as the poet being “in his element,” and Cummings also asserts that the penguin’s underwater “flights” symbolize the unconscious—surely poetry’s primary source. In Jotting #19 (“when Americans stop being themselves they start behaving each other”), the syntax at the end jars us. One possibly expects the word “like” or some other construction, but it is not there. Instead, Cummings pricks at typical American arrogance—making others “behave” as expected. In Jotting #20 (“you can’t ef the statue of liberty”), the prudish politeness of “ef” might have been to assuage the editors of *Wake*. That aside, can one fuck with the Statue of Liberty and what it stands for? Could one do so in 1951? In 1957, Cummings wrote about the American nonreaction to the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolution by concluding that “the statue of liberty / . . . begins to smell” (CP 711). So perhaps, by a sin of omission, the country did fuck liberty, even if it was Hungary’s. But beyond that, on a literal level, although Cummings may be saying that one cannot have carnal pleasures with a statue, he is also implying that you *can* fuck it, or fuck

with it, all too easily on a nonliteral/symbolic level. You can't of the Statue of Liberty, but Americans *have* violated what it stands for. This Jotting is a thus also a reversal, in that Cummings means one thing literally, but quite the opposite symbolically.

Returning to Jotting #21 (“false is alike. False teeth”), here we have the only period that appears in these Jottings. It’s an odd syntax, but we receive the assertion that the “false” consists of things that are alike, rather than unique and individualistic, and then he provides an example, with false teeth being idealized as perfect cookie-cutter teeth, but lacking distinctiveness and individual character. One can surmise that what is “true” is *unlike*—that is, individualistic. This thought echoes Jotting #31 (“equality is what does not exist among equals”), where being unequal is equivalent to being *true* rather than false.

And again consider Jotting #22 (“enter labor,with an itching heart and a palm of gold:leading(by the nose)humanity,in a unionsuit”), which is not just a satiric reversal of “an itching palm and a heart of gold.” The organized union labor that Cummings refers to is perhaps easily bought (the “itching heart” is paid with “a palm of gold”) and, consequently, labor leads humanity like leading a bull that is easily controlled by the ring in its tender nose. In “Poem,Or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal” (CP 228), the line “Turn Your Shirrtails Into Drawers” quotes an advertising slogan for the Imperial “drop seat” union suit, one-piece long underwear with a buttoned seat panel sometimes mocked in more recent cartoons and movies—however, this richly compressed Jotting could easily be referring to more than just underwear. For example, a “unionsuit” could even suggest a lawsuit—think of the legal serpents in “when serpents bargain for the right to squirm” (CP 620). Sixty years after Cummings wrote his Jottings, we may forget that a union suit is one-piece underwear for the entire body, but even if that meaning were more readily understood in his day, Cummings may not mean merely underwear, but the union “suits” (top-brass leaders) who are (mis)leading nearly naked and vulnerable (not fully dressed) humanity.

Returning also to Jotting #24 (“item:our unworld has just heaved a sigh of belief”), one wonders if some topical event gave this description greater meaning than survives on reading it years later. The indication that this is a news item is a clue. But we do not need a topical context for this description, for perhaps it repeats its truth after each act of terrorism or war or natural disaster—a return, perhaps, to a belief in God.

Of all thirty-three Jottings, #26 is the shortest. If “hatred bounces,” then

common sense would suggest that it bounces back at us. As mothers are fond of saying to rude children, don't point, because three fingers are always pointing back at you. In a letter to Cummings dated January 15, 1955, Ezra Pound commented (among much else) that "you are too GODDam tolerant, my dear kumrad" (Ahearn 363). In his response, dated January 22, 1955, Cummings wrote that "talents differ: if heroic thine be cursing swine & ringing nex, our tolerant unhero may only re-remark (vide 6 nonlectures page 70) that 'hatred bounces'" (Ahearn 364). Pound's reply, also from January 1955, notes that hate and disgust are not the same, and we may wonder what prompted this exchange, and what, indeed, might have prompted Cummings' original Jotting. In *Spring 7* (1998), Michael Webster has written in greater detail about this theme in his essay "'hatred bounces': Satire and Prejudice in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings."

Jotting #27 appears in French ("il faut de l'espace pour être un homme"). The reverberations of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* continued long after its first publication in late 1929. With this aphorism, seemingly deliberately in French to help contrast with Woolf's English feminist perspective, Cummings counters that men need space as well—not particularly to disagree with Woolf, but at least to stand up for men. While Woolf made her case for women needing rooms of their own in which to write, create, and thrive, it seems reasonable that men do, too, though for different reasons. A room is enclosed, of course, and the "l'espace" men and women each need to write and thrive is much more open and liberating a concept than a room. It takes not just a room to be a fully realized man or woman, but the openness of space, intellectually as well as physically. Just as Cummings' *EIMI* emphasizes openness as opposed to the shutness in the unworld of Soviet society, these Jottings are not as tiny or enclosed as they might seem.

As for Jotting #28 ("most people are perfectly afraid of silence"), being afraid of silence may possibly be a fear of contemplation, a fear of feeling, thus perhaps Cummings is advocating for more silence, and that more people should welcome it. Indeed, many of Cummings' poems address or celebrate silence, and perhaps this jotting is a defense of his own attraction—that he is not afraid of it. (See also Webster's "'singing is silence': Being and Nothing in the Visual Poetry of E. E. Cummings.") I am also reminded of Cummings' concise creation that begins with "silence"—a poem suggesting that perhaps inquiry can arise only out of silence, from being empty in order to receive (CP 712):

silence

.is
a
looking
bird:the

turn
ing:edge,of
life

(inquiry before snow

The final Jotting, #33 (“sleep is the mother of courage”), may propose that if one “sleeps on it,” one can gain courage. Perhaps something as simple as physical preparedness is fundamental to what one needs to also gain mental preparedness—and courage. If nothing else, Cummings himself may be considered a courageous poet for daring to be himself, as he undeniably is in his Jottings.

A Personal Echo

What more can one say about the Jottings of E. E. Cummings? By calling them “Jottings,” it seems that the poet recognized that they were not poetry. One thinks of the many aphorisms and short sayings by Theodore Roethke collected in posthumous volumes, yet one might also think of more poetic cousins, such as the “gregorio” short-poetry form in the Spanish tradition, or even the “grooms” of Danish poet Piet Hein. Cummings’ Jottings are brief, like haiku, yet too overtly philosophical to be haiku. The brevity of haiku may have influenced the writing of these Jottings, because around 1951 (when the Jottings were originally published), John Cage lent Cummings a book of haiku translations by R. H. Blyth (Kennedy 438), but little more than brevity and the occasional image seems to connect the Jottings to haiku. They are sometimes witty and condensed, like epigrams, yet nearly always they are sentences, operating formally in a line or two of prose, and thus not poetry. Always they are idiosyncratic, in the poet’s well-established style of writing, and some of them develop his common themes of feeling over thinking and valuing the child, which at minimum makes them intriguing for Cummings observers. Some of them may be assigned to the larger traditions of zingers or punch lines, even if droll, and they may be compared with the later tradition of “American sentences,” the creation of Allen Ginsberg as an often

philosophical or observational variation on haiku that has since been carried on by Ruth Stone, Paul Nelson, and other poets. Despite their label, they are more than random toss-offs. Ultimately, whatever their worth, even if they receive few echoes of appreciation, Cummings' Jottings are suffused with playfulness, creativity, and a significant measure of joy. In the same letter in which he rebuked Pound, Cummings wrote with a reference to 1 Samuel 17 (verse 40) and David and Goliath that "something informs me that Joy is the name of a brook from which . . . a mere child chose him five smooth stones" (Ahearn 365). In 1922, Cummings published *The Enormous Room*, his most sprawling book—a memoir of his time in a French prison at the end of World War I. Norman Friedman describes the book's emotional tone, despite its dark and thick content, as one of joy (28). Likewise, joy pervades the tiny rooms that Cummings created with his thirty-three epigrams and aphorisms, for most of them are positive, entertaining, and buoyantly creative. We can give the Jottings we like best, if we wish, our own personal echo.

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Note

1. In addition to the child as the third person involved in her own making, Cummings may also be referring to the third person who appears when the lovers unite as one: "one's not half two. It's two are halves of one" (CP 556). [Editor's note]

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