Poemgroups in *No Thanks*

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> "By the laws of its own structure, which are the irrevocable laws of juxtaposition and contrast, the revue is a use of everything trivial or plural to intensify what is singular and fundamental. In the case of the *Folies Bergère*, the revue is the use of ideas, smells, colours, Irving Berlin, nudes, tactility, collapsible stairs, three dimensions, and fire works to intensify Mlle. Josephine Baker"
>
> —EEC, "Vive la Folie!" (*Miscellany* 162-63)

I

Critics have often noticed that E. E. Cummings grouped his poems in sequences, both in their first magazine publication and later in book form. However, only Rushworth M. Kidder and Richard S. Kennedy treat the phenomenon of "poemgroups" in any extensive way. In his later books, Cummings disguises or hides these sequences: as Kidder notes, sequences are clearly identified by separate titles only in Cummings' first four (three) books, all published in the 20s. Kidder writes:

> In his collections of poems, sequences determined context and provided a means for making larger statements. A thoughtful examination of his sequences reveals that Cummings had much more to say than could be said in individual short poems. (18)

Kidder does show how Cummings used sequences to structure his books of poems, especially for the sequence structures in *ViVa* (see Kidder 84-85). But Kidder seldom if ever descends from analysis of larger structures to discuss how the poemgroups alter our readings of individual poems. We know that Cummings tinkered considerably with the order of the poems in *No Thanks*. He drew up an early table of contents which lists 63 of the 71 poems in an order that differs markedly from the final one.[1] Sometime later, Cummings created what he called a "schema," or outline of the book, which began with a snow poem and ended with a star poem. In the center of the book, he placed three sonnets, preceded by a snow poem and followed by a star poem. At the very middle was "sonnet entitled how to run the world)"—a poem which did not even exist in the first 63-poem version.

The final design of the volume was first revealed by Richard S. Kennedy in 1978 in his introduction to the "Typescript Edition." This highly symmetrical final "schema" is reproduced as chart 1. *No Thanks* begins with two moon poems and ends with two star poems. In between, sonnets appear like bookends before and after groups of three poems. The one exception to this rule is at the very center of the volume (at the bottom of the V), where only one poem appears between two sonnets.

Chart 1: Schema for No Thanks

°2 moons   *2 stars
('mOOn Over tOwns mOOn')   ('brIght')
('moon over gai')   ('morsel miraculous and meaningless')
                NO THANKS:schema of construction
°2 poems   2 poems*
 sonnet I   sonnet XVIII
   3 poems   3 poems
  sonnet II   sonnet XVII
    3 poems   3 poems
  sonnet III   sonnet XVI
    3 poems   3 poems
   sonnet IV   sonnet XV
    3 poems   3 poems
   sonnet V   sonnet XIV
     3 poems   3 poems
   sonnet VI   sonnet XIII
     3 poems   3 poems
    sonnet VII   sonnet XII
     3 poems   3 poems
    sonnet VIII   sonnet XI
     3 poems   3 poems
('how dark and single,where   ('conceive a man,should he
  he ends,the earth')—sonnet IX   sonnet X—have anything')
                1 poem ('into a truly')

Though he notes that the "general thematic development" of *No Thanks* "progresses in the first half downward toward the poems of defeat at its center, and thereafter moves upward into more transcendent ideas," Kidder finds "no clear identity to most of the sequences embraced by these boundary sonnets" (106). However, if we look more closely, the poem groups in *No Thanks* reveal complex thematic and structural identities and interactions.

In general, Cummings' poem groups work with what he called "the irrevocable laws of juxtaposition and contrast" (*Miscellany* 162) to intensify and complicate themes in individual poems and in the book as a whole. Beyond this, Cummings' poem groups

> a) express aesthetic ideals of wholeness while working with imagistic de-
> vices of fragmentation such as split words and syllables;
> b) provide a context for (re)reading and (re)evaluating poems that on first
> reading might seem self-indulgent, tasteless, or easy throwaways; and
> c) express what Cummings called the "third voice of life" (quoted in *six* 64
> and in Norman 210).

What the "third voice of life" means requires a long explication; it will suffice for now to say that Cummings sometimes thought of it as inspiration, or a fortuitous combination of intuitions. In the Houghton manuscripts, he connects the inspiration of writing a poem with that involved in "building a poemgroup":

> One day,perhaps three weeks after this poem had written & believed itself(you see I respect the 3rd voice "which cannot mean because it is")I received a cordial invitation to contribute to a socalled little magazine....So I promptly began building him a poemgroup. To build a poemgroup generally takes me at least several weeks;but this one came quicker.[3]

Obviously, the largest group in *No Thanks* is the book itself. Within this largest group of 71 poems are smaller groupings, mostly composed of the three-poem / sonnet sandwiches that characterize the book's design. In addition, Cummings' aesthetic ideals of wholeness allowed for smaller wholes to interact with larger ones, and hence we can study the relations among the single poems and groups that make up the modern "bookofpoems" (*Letters* 128). Indeed, Cummings often spoke as if each poem were an individual that fit into a larger whole. For example, in a letter to Ezra Pound, Cummings called the poems in *No Thanks* "a new family of 70" (*Pound / Cummings* 43).

Thus, even though any given poem is part of the larger whole of the book and also part of a smaller group, it also must stand on its own. Indeed, Cummings was so concerned about the individual integrity of each poem that he had the book bound sideways, so that the longer poems could remain on one paper-surface. Two years later Cummings would write to the editor of his *Collected Poems*, Cap Pearce:

> what I care infinitely is that each poempicture should remain intact. Why? Possibly because with few exceptions,my poems are essentially pictures. And(in my own naif way)I believe that you're one of the few people in America who can work out such a combination of typesize and papersize as will allow every picture to breathe its particular life(no "runover" lines)in its own private world. (quoted in Norman 288-89)

Cummings' individual poems are certainly more stable as texts than those of an earlier writer of poetic sequences, Emily Dickinson. Unlike Dickinson, Cummings does not offer variant word-choices and line-spacings. In fact, Cummings' typographic manipulations are at least in part a way of insuring that his texts will remain fixed, a way of "protecting himself against future liberties which printers and editors may take with his work" (Riding and Graves 62). However, like Walt Whitman, Cummings did re-shuffle the order of poems, and not just in manuscript. While Cummings did not, like Whitman, re-order poems in the context of an all-embracing master tome like *Leaves of Grass*, he did change the grouping and / or sequencing of poems from periodical publication to book publication, and he completely re-shuffled

the order of poems from *No Thanks* when he published 50 of the poems in his *Collected Poems* (1938). Yet despite the massive re-ordering in the 1938 volume, it seems that Cummings usually viewed each volume as providing a coherent context and environment for individual poems.[4]

As we have seen from the "schema," *No Thanks* has a particularly elaborate structure. On the map of this schema, Cummings plots his thematic groups. For the most part, the first half of the book explores various forms of rejection ("no thanks") of the unworld while the second half explores forms of acceptance ("thanks"). The themes of rejection of the unworld and acceptance of a loving, human world are emphasized by the two dedications: the first at the front of the book extending "no thanks" in the form of a funeral urn (or loving cup?) to the fourteen publishers who rejected the manuscript; the second at the back offering "THANKS TO R. H. C."— Rebecca Haswell Cummings, the poet's mother, who paid for the publication of the volume. The poems explore this rejection or acceptance by offering variations on themes of birth and death, feeling and thinking, love and un-love, the individual and the mass, nature and culture, and, in many of the sonnets and later poems, the transformation or transcendence of these contraries.

The various poemgroups of the book function in slightly different ways from what M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall have called, in their book of the same name, *The Modern Poetic Sequence*. (Rosenthal and Gall do not even consider Cummings as a writer of poetic sequences or groups. Indeed, they mention Cummings only once in a 500-page volume.) For one, Cummings' groups are not linear or sequential; his poems are grouped near one another, but they are not composed into a single large poetic "movement," as are, for example, Eliot's *The Waste Land* or *The Four Quartets*. The authors of *The Modern Poetic Sequence* consistently use musical and psychological metaphors to describe their notion of a poetic sequence. For example, they say a sequence is best read in terms of its "progression of affects, its *dynamics* or curve of movement" (15). They speak of "breaks in tonality in the *Cantos*" (14) and of poems changing key (13). But since Cummings' groups are much more informal, musical or even psychological metaphors do not seem an apt way to describe them. Within the strict architectural schema of *No Thanks*, the poem groups form fluid, ad-hoc bodies of themes, verbal echoes, and techniques. In general, the sonnets will enclose and comment upon or contrast with the interior groups of three or six or even nine poems, while at the same time offering transitions to new groups and themes. Since the word "sequence" implies a musical and psychological progression, and since in Cummings' poemgroups there is influence and interaction rather than sequencing, I will refer to them as "groups" rather than "sequences."

As part of small group constellations or of the larger cluster of the whole book, the life of each poem is enriched when we look at the poems that surround it, even when the subjects of these poems seem unrelated. For example, after #3, a love sonnet of metaphysical complexity and abstraction which gradually builds the phrase "that which we die for lives" come three poems: # 4, "a)glazed mind layed in a urinal" (about a drunk), #5 "i / (meet)t(touch)" (about a boxing match), and #6 "exit a kind

of unkindness exit" (about a businessman) (CP 386-89). [5] All three address the theme of the death and life of the individual in the un-world. But while narrator says that the drunk in #4 is "just,look)ing dead" and that the two boxers in # 5, despite being called "items" and "slopped givers of not," nevertheless "Is)aRe," the businessman in # 6 seems to suffer a most definitive death: "you // are dead / you captain." All three poems feature a collapse of consciousness: the drunk has passed out in a urinal, and one of the fighters has been knocked out ["(a stopped A)with!notgirl'swith?dumb"] arising only to "wi / lt." And in number 6, the captain of industry's "galleon / wilts." Yet within or behind these collapses, the protagonists still retain some individuality or being, symbolized by the "i" that appears in all three poems. If we look at the first and last letters of poem 4, we see that the drunk has "not complete / -ly . . . turned to seem."—he is still, as the poem tell us, "a) . . . (i." The two boxers' identities are more contradictory—they fight for pay, pounding their hardness into softness, fighting like males, clinching like females, and blurring their identities to become "items" in a show "made" by promoter "jeff dick / son" (the last lines of the poem unscramble to read "jeff dickson fecit 1933"). Yet the boxers remain at the beginning and end of the poem (and the fight) "i" and "I"—the capital being perhaps the victor.

> i
> (meet)t(touch)
> ems crouch(
>)ing bruiseD
> Suddenly by thousand
>
> starings rinsed with
> thoroughly million yells they
> f-oo-l(whom,blinds;blood)pa-nt
> stab are
>
> (slopped givers of not)bang
> spurting mesh(faith
> -ful which -ly try are ing)al
>
> most fe(hug)males(one-t
> wo-l oop-l
>
> eftsthrowr ightsm issingupperc
>
> uts-lurc hhurt-re
> coil charge&)swooN

Crowdloomroar:ing;diskface,es
(are two
notSoft soft one are

hard one notHard)not
boys boy-
ish(a stopped A)with!notgirl'swith?dumb
(thewith girl)ness(ish The eyesthe

Is)aRe
iS ar(ise)wi
lt(wit(hprettyw)ith)mr
jeff dick
son fec

i
(m
c)
t

(m
x
x

x
ii)

I

    However, neither fighter is individualized in any way—they exist as an inter-
changeable duo who swap identities, who pound each other into not one thing or the
other, and even change genders: they "(meet)t(touch)"; they are "fe(hug)males"; or
they "(are two / notSoft soft one are // hard one notHard)not / boys boy- / ish. . .
The eyesthe // Is)aRe / iS ar(ise)." Despite their antagonism, the boxers' identities
meet, touch, hug, "swooN," and "mesh" "w)ith" one another: the boys become
girlish; their hardness becomes soft; and their eyes hide their "i"s (they "IsaRe" "ise",
or "i"s, or just plain "iS"). In fact, in the pair "Is . . . iS" we can see one "I" rise, while
the other "i" wilts. This playing with the letters of IS foreshadows the last line of
poem 31: "I the lost shoulders S the empty spine" (CP 414). There are many more
symmetrical pairings of the two boxers towards the end of the poem: "notSoft
softone . . . hard one notHard . . . (a stopped A)," along with the incredibly symmetri-
cal line "lt(wit(hprettyw)ith)mr" [note the numerical pattern of the letters: 2(3(1-6-
1)3)2]. The entirely unpronounceable end of the poem recapitulates the interchange-
able dualities of the whole—"i" and "I," "(m" and "(m," "x / x," and "ii." The x's

may indicate bruises or kisses, as the m's may indicate moans of pleasure or pain.

If I have taken some pains to tease out a few of the meanings of " i / (meet)t(touch)," it has been to indicate how a complex and fragmented poem may yet resolve into a whole, and to show how its complexities may enhance the meaning of the two other, much simpler, poems in the group. For example, the final poem of the group may seem on first reading to be a cheap or easy shot at the "little / mr Big / notbusy / Busi / ness notman," but it becomes more interesting when we see the "i" buried in the poem's dead center (line 11 of 20). This "i" is hidden in the galleon's wilting, its bending, or "e;n,d // i / ng," implying that the dead businessman possessed an "i" or self hidden in his busi-ness, one that may have awakened if only his kind of "unkindness" had become "kind." And the drunk in "a)glazed mind" (who is referred to as an "it" in the very middle of the poem—line six) also has an "i", an "is", and a "be" obscured by drunkenness and hidden in his vomit: "willbeishfully bursting un- / eats wasvino isspaghett(i." Like the boxers, both busi-nessman and drunk have had their identities pounded into "not." Yet the "i" is still there in all three poems.

The well known "sonnet entitled how to run the world)" (CP 390) follows, continuing the "mock-agenda format" (Friedman, *Growth* 85) that ended the previous poem. The immediate juxtaposition of poems 5 and 6 suggests that the sonnet is Cummings' memo to the wilted businessman above. Cummings' answer to the question of how to run the world is a succinct "always don't." In line 12, the poet's lowercase "i" makes its first official appearance. This poem also continues the theme of dying in order to live. As Cummings wrote:

> lines 9 10 11 say that the subject of the sonnet's 2nd part is not "flesh is grass"(i.e. living is dying)as the Bible tells you,
> > but dying is living("grass is flesh") (*Letters* 271).

Poems 8, 9, and 10 which follow continue this theme of death in life and dying in order to live. The first poem (CP 391) is about "the(/ Wistfully // dead" who "seem generous" because they lack the vices and voices of the living. (The dead are "minus / news alimony blackmail whathavewe // and propaganda"). In fact, the dead confine their "destructivity to non- // entities e. / g. / the) / whis-per it / (// Living." The second poem in the group, "o pr" (CP 392), castigates progress by illustrating the emptiness (the missing o's on the left margin) of a mediated non-event—a newsreel of the president throwing out the first ball of the baseball season. This poem would seem to have little relation to the living-dying theme, but when we translate the Latin tag, the relation becomes clear. The line, "*unde negant redire quemquam*" ["whence, they say, no one returns"] comes from Catullus' poem on the death of his mistress' pet sparrow, which has gone to the underworld never to return. Cummings hints that the inhabitants of the newsreel are already encased in the medium—they have ceded their breathing lives to a kind of celluloid death, never to return. The ball, too, is gone like the missing o's, even though it is presumably forever "present" in the newsreel.

The missing "o" may also refer to another kind of mass conformity: Sheridan Baker notes that it refers very probably to "the little white ball that used to bounce along from word to word of the songs flashed-on at the lower edge of moving picture screens, a line at a time, marking the beat for the audience to join in the chorus" (232). The third poem in the group, "little man" (CP 393), illustrates how the dead "little / mr Big" businessman of poem 6 might come alive: "halt stop forget relax / / wait" and become a "little child" and "lie bravely down // sleep." In other words, he needs to slow down, to die down (metaphorically), and allow something *really* big—"big rain / big snow / big sun / big moon" to "(enter" him.

<p style="text-align:center">II</p>

The next series of poems continues the living / dying theme while modulating into new themes by offering variations on the basic metaphor. For example, the next sonnet (poem 11, CP 394), "ci gît 1 Foetus(unborn to not die" talks of a person (the "Foetus") wholly at home in the death of the modern unworld ("whose epoch fits him like a grave"). In the second quatrain, the Foetus becomes a "Ghost," who, while he is "dead" may not be buried, and who flees "himself for selves more strangely made." Both Foetus and Ghost hate "a Man"—the poet-figure who would "rather make than have and give than lend." Thus the new theme of "a Man"—the individual who has "no wealth but love"—is contrasted with two new varieties of non-life, the Foetus and Ghost. The biological metaphor introduced by the notion of a Foetus—a being yet to be born—is continued in a more positive manner in the next three poems, while the new theme of "a Man" will eventually modulate into the theme of the poet and his lover. A third group presents varieties of misunderstanding and un-love in the un-world. (See chart 2.)

The "strange and ungainly" (Heusser 61) poem 12, "why why" (CP 395), is the first in a biology-nature group. Here, the poet muses on the biological symmetries and dissonances of humans and angleworms. Cummings writes:

> this poem says(if I remember my zoology)that nothing is more,or less,significant than if I pick up the You of an angleworm from the ground where he-she squirms(instead of e.g. stepping on it). Vide dictionary "metameric","homonomous","heteronomous"[6]

In the first part of the poem, the speaker asks a series of unanswerable questions such as "How many winds make wonderful" or "did anybody Open a moment," questions which the "doDreaming" metameric poet ("me") somehow picks up ("picked from / dumb sleePdeep") from the metameric "squirmcurl // ing" worm. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that a *metamere* is "One of the several similar segments of which certain bodies consist." (We might notice that the poem begins with two "metameric" segments: "why why.") Both humans and worms are made of metameric parts, but they differ in their antimeres, or their symmetrical opposite halves. As Aristophanes theorizes in Plato's *Symposium*, love can be explained as the

struggle of human beings to find their symmetrical opposite half, the soul-mate who was split from them in the mythical past. One of the poet's unanswerable questions, "who's myself's Antimere," might simply be translated, "Who is my self's soul-mate?" [7] The poem says that some unanswerable questions ("why") "are Not // more than" another set of unanswerable questions ("why"). All of these questions are also "not Less than" those asked by the curled question mark that is the worm. Note how the "Pd" pair in "sleePdeep" forms an almost symmetrical whole out of two complementary (antimeric) halves. One could also draw a question mark and a curling worm in the middle of the "Pd."

Chart 2: *No Thanks,* poems 7-18

#7 "sonnet entitled how to run the world)"— "always don't."	#11 (sonnet) "çi gît 1 Foetus(unborn to not die" Foetus and Ghost vs. Man.	#15 "one nonsufficiently inunderstood" (sonnet) Santa Claus = "criminal."
#8 "the(/ Wistfully // dead" who lack the vices and voices of the living. ["minus / news alimony blackmail . . . propaganda"].	#12 "why why" The "doDreaming" poet muses on impossible questions while he picks up an earthworm.	#16 "may i feel said he" presents misunder-standings and different agendas of "he" and "she."
#9 "o pr" —progress brings media / mediated death.	#13 alive, moving grasshopper.	#17 "o / sure)but" "Nobody Understands Her RERLY"
#10 "little man" —stop and wait for something really big —rain, snow, sun, moon.	#14 "mouse)Won" —dead, still mouse who "Won / derfully is."	#18 "this little / pair" who "courted" and then "aborted."

    The poet picks up not only questions but also a worm. If we leave out the questions and concentrate on the worm, its singular being creates a problem when we read the syntax of Cummings' construction as something like "the worm are picked [up] by a doing and Dreaming poet." But the poem also gives us a solution to this riddle: the poet's human metameric symmetry is *heteronomous*, or subject to a different

law or mode of growth than the worm's *homonomous* law or mode of growth. The worm *is* plural because it can split and remain whole: it carries its halves within him / / her / it, and thus has no need to wonder about antimeres and soul-mates. The worm reproduces the same homonomous segments, while the human heterono-mously seeks the Other, whether as soul-mate, as worm-curling questions, or as answers to impossible questions.

In the next two poems the lovers, now an indivisible "we," observe two small natural creatures: a very alive, jumping and erratic grasshopper and a dead and interred (in earth and leaf) mouse. This "we"—whom we haven't seen since poem 3—love and dream and question together as one and yet separately—"heteronomously" and "homonomously." Their mysterious loving and dreaming is seen as much a part of nature as the grasshopper and mouse they observe. Unlike the Foetus and Ghost, the lovers, grasshopper, and mouse are alive (though dead, the mouse "Won / derfully is"). Like the "Man" of poem 11, the mouse is (re)born through the failure of death and so "cannot fail"—though dead, he still has "Won" (and is "one" with the earth). In addition, the mouse is related to the lovers in at least two other ways: 1) his "tiniest smile?" is somehow ("Per // haps") bigger than the fears of lovers and nonlovers alike, and 2) he is sleeping enfolded in a leaf, at one with nature. The "we" who are presumably soul-mates are both part of nature and observers of nature in these two poems; I think Cummings would say that they have followed the advice of poem 10 and allowed nature to "(enter // us" (CP 393). The natural, alive, born world of poems 12-14 seems to be deliberately contrasted to the previous poems on the un-born life-in-death un-world of modern cities and commerce.

The next poemgroup emphasizes satire while presenting four varieties of un-love in the un-world. One of these poems, the often-anthologized "may i feel said he" (# 16; CP 399) illustrates how a group-context can alter our reading of a poem. This is one of those poems that critics of Cummings cite to show his juvenile lack of taste or his sentimentality.[8] Even a critic friendly to Cummings, Richard S. Kennedy, calls it "something on the level of a college humor magazine" (*Dreams* 354). (I would agree with Kennedy, with one caveat: few students write so concisely.) However, the point is not the puerility or lack of taste in the poem, but how are we to take it, to read it? By reading the poem carefully and by considering it in its group context, we can tell what Cummings thinks of the sexual encounter that he portrays so well. The poem makes it clear that the "he" asks only for sexual gratification, all the while seeking to control the object of his desire. By contrast, the "she" asks for love and commitment, all the while enjoying herself and her sense of possession at the end of their love-play: "(you are Mine said she)." What Cummings thinks of these emotions may be unclear until we consider the group-context of the poem, and then it becomes plain that Cummings no more approves of these two pleasure-seekers than he does of the "father" in poem 15 or of the verbally-challenged speakers of poem 17. All four of the poems in this group present various misunderstandings, difficulties in speaking or communication, and distorted forms of love. The father in 15 considers "Santa Claus a criminal . . . concept"; the lovers of "may i feel said he" pursue their selfish

desires without considering the needs of their partner; the speakers in 17 talk incoherently about knowing and understanding the "real" (Cummings emphasizes their devotion to an unreal reality by spelling "really" in four different ways: "Rully," "Reely," "Rilly," and "RERLY"); and the "little / pair" in poem 18 act out a modern adult fairy tale in which the poet rhymes "bed" with "dead" and "courted" with "thwarted" and "aborted."[9]

The next 13 poems (19-31) explore the relations among various psychological deaths (of feeling, of the individual "mind," of the self and its relation to nature, of love, and, finally, of inspiration) and the mass society and machine-made world of modernity. Poem 19 starts this large group by noting how someone "who before dying demands not rebirth" will never be touched by "meaningless precision" (art) and "complete fate" (life). Here, Cummings' example of rebirth is an Emersonian transcendence: the "who" needs to affirm "mind" by allowing his / her life to be "swallowed" by the clouds ("large one coloured nonthings of gluttonous sky"), whose "pauseless immeasurably Now . . . breathes fleet / perfectly far from tangible domains / rare with most early soul" (CP 402). The 11 poems that follow show how the lack of such an independent, reborn "mind" leads to collective delusions and herd behavior. Number 20 "go(perpe)go" (which I will examine in much greater detail in a later paper) compares humans to a mass of "al / ways // alingwaysing" ants about to be gobbled up by an anteater, while 21 laments the death ("IN . . . MEMORIAM") of "all those who got / athlete's mouth" by changing political positions during the constantly shifting orthodoxies of the 1930s. Number 22 serves as a warning to newcomers to this world:

> when muckers pimps and tratesmen
> delivered are of vicians
>   and all the world howls stadesmen
>   beware of politisions
>
>   beware of folks with missians
>   to turn us into rissions
>   and blokes with ammunicions
> who tend to make incitions   (CP 405)

Notice how Cummings' comic misspellings turn honest tradesmen into traitor-men and their visions into vices; and how they make statesmen staid and transform Russians into risible "rissions," while the incisions made by the blokes with ammunition become incitements to further violence. The last stanza asks us to pity the politically confused anti-Semitic fool who likes his steak "all ried" (red) but "hate[s] the juse." Number 23 is a sonnet about an "afraid;aggressive" American who "does not have to feel because he thinks / (the thoughts of others." His feelings have been killed by spurious knowledge, thus limiting understanding and leading to excessive drinking. He and the others in this group are very far from having a mind open to

clouds.

This sonnet is followed by an art group satirizing the radical pretensions of little magazines (24), the pomposity of public statues (25), and the macho posing of Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* (26). The minds that make this art are guided not by individual vision but by fashionable emotions and recycled formulas. (Even little Ernest Hemingway is reworking clichés from Tennyson and Longfellow.[10]) A sonnet on the Greenwich Village bohemian Joe Gould follows, and surely we are meant to contrast Gould's "sort-of-aliveing" and "fun" with the fearful "death named Smith" of poem 23. Note that while Joe Gould certainly drinks and may also be lying about his oral history ("a myth is as good as a smile"), the drinking and lying of Mr. Smith are functions of his fear and the submergence of his personality into the mass. By contrast, Gould's drinking and mythmaking are aspects of his playful individuality.

After Gould's quirky individualism comes a group that satirizes the delusions of collectives: the "famous fatheads," utilitarians who think that "every thing must have an end," or purpose (28), the "most(people" who, instead of living, "always)don't / die" (29), and the "kumrads" ("comrades" or communists), who obey orders (they "die because they're told") and are filled with "unmitigated hate . . . because they are afraid to love" (30). A complex sonnet that explores the sense of poetic failure follows ("does yesterday's perfection seem not quite"—#31, CP 414). Here, though his poems "should stink of failure more than wars of feet," the poet nevertheless perceives in the midst of this defeat an "eternal mere one bursting soul," an upright IS even in the slump of despond: "I the lost shoulders, S the empty spine." We may presume that this not so hidden "I" refers to the poet, who, if he slumps in the text, is nevertheless upright in the iconic "I." This poem about the artist's struggle to remain an IS in the modern world looks back to the satires of mass politics (20-22), fearful conformists (19 and 23), formulaic art (24-26) and soulless collectives (28-30), none of which contain the hidden "i"s we saw earlier. (The "kumrads" poem does, however, feature the familiar lowercase "i" of the poet.) This "IS" sonnet also looks forward to the final poem in *No Thanks*, in which the poet asks in a more confident tone for an "isful beckoningly fabulous crumb" of a star to "nourish my failure with thy freedom" (CP 456).

III

Poem 31 also announces a new theme: the poet's own death and rebirth, which extends from this poem through three winter-snow poems (32-34) to the dark center of the volume (poems 35-37) and on through to the early spring, sunrise, and "opening" of poems 38-41. The center poems (35-37) mark the transition from the first half of the book to the second; that is to say, through them we see the movement from "no thanks" to "thanks," from death to life, from thinking to feeling, from the mass to the individual, and from the fragmented un-world of modernity to the whole worlds of nature and love. As with the failed poet of poem 31, who, despite being a "thin . . . ghost" still "might live," the three snow poems that follow contain hints of resurrection in the dead of winter. In the very obscure "numb(and"

(poem 32, CP 415), snow and ice cling, hang, and droop from a large iron structure (possibly the Eiffel tower), looking like "w / ar / pin / g dre // ams whichful sarcasms / papery deathfuls"—but under its winter coating this structure is an "alive secretly i" that "awaits / yes" (spring). In the next poem, snow rhythmically floats through "emptied.hills" and ",not,alive,trees," while in the third, snow speaks wordlessly as it folds over the graves of the dead ["cold / stones(o-l-d)names / aren'ts"], who nevertheless once were "L / iv / es" (CP 417).

S. I. Jacobs, Cummings' personal typesetter, wrote that in "how dark and single,where he ends,the earth" (poem 35, CP 418), "the poet imagines himself dead and buried" (quoted in Norman 284). The poet's death is seen as coterminous with the ending of the earth in the sea while "this ghost goes under" into "the unimaginable night not known." In the center poem, "into a truly," the poet's ghost has now become a living soul which embarks upon the darkened sea in a raging storm: "the ship lifts / on seas of iron // breathing heights eating / steepness" (poem 36, CP 419). Kidder suggests that "the curving form" entered by the speaker's soul is not only a ship but also "the 'form' of poetry [that] carries the spirit along and is guided by it" (115). I would suggest further that the darkly lifting and plunging prow of the ship also echoes the curved, V-shaped form of Cummings' schema for *No Thanks* (see chart 1), as well as the pronounced V-shape of the sideways printing and binding of the 1935 edition of the book itself. And at the top of each end of the V, as with the ship, are the moon and stars. In addition, since Cummings writes that his spirit is both "passenger" and "pilot" of this "form," the ship symbolizes all the poems in the book, which the poet's soul both pilots and inhabits.[11]

Chart 3: center poems

#35 (sonnet) "how dark and single,where he ends,the earth"—dusk, as tide comes in with "unimaginable night"	#36 "into a truly" poet on ship at night: feels "all small / facts dissolved / by the lewd guess / of fabulous immensity"	#37 rebirth: "conceive a man,should he have anything" theme: "a man" who "took bedfellows for moons mountains for friends"

After hitting the dark bottom of the V at poem 35, Cummings asks the reader to conceive of a man whose "dark beginnings are his luminous ends" and whose giving nature somehow overcomes time and death. Instead of singing of an unworld that produces conformist ants, hate-filled kumrads, "famous fatheads," deaths named Smith, and people untouched by "complete fate" (CP 402), Cummings invites a capitalized actual "World" to "open [its] thighs to fate and . . . conceive a man" (poem 37, CP 420). In the three poems that follow, the winter snows of poems 31-34 melt into spring rain and the world is born anew. In the first poem in this "renewal group" (38), a light snow falls on early spring blossoms, its descent marking the end of

winter and beginning of spring: "(endbegi ndesginb ecend)." In the second (39), spring rain recolors the world while opening up love in people's selves. In the third (40), the sun ("as if" it were an "i am alive" poet) slowly rises to reveal sky, trees, fields, and "budofshape" and to make the world anew: "mmamakmakemakesWwO woRworLworlD." The final poem in the group, a sonnet called "here's to opening and upward,to leaf and sap," celebrates this newly re-made world. The rebirth, day, and spring of poems 37-41 replace the failure, night, and winter of poems 31-36.

IV

Three poems on movement and dance follow poem 41, the sonnet to "opening and upward." A *second* group of three movement-dance poems (#46-48) complements the first.

Chart 4: No Thanks*, poems 38-49*

renewal group	movement / dance #1	movement / dance #2
#38 light snow, spring	#42 Sally Rand moves (fan dances— "she jes was")	#46 bird moves across sunset
#39 spring rain, love	#43 "theys sO alive" —tap-dance at end	#47 boxer Al Brown "floatScor / ruptingly," pivots "musically"
#40 sun rises to make new world	#44 unrefined boys shake mountains when they dance	#48 Paul Draper dances: "floatfloafloflf"
#41 (sonnet) "here's to opening and upward,to leaf and to sap"; "here's to silent certainly mountains"	#45 (sonnet) "sometimes / in)Spring" — "somewhere between what is and what may be . . . until peace outthunders silence"	#49 (sonnet) "silent unday" (cf. #2 "moon over s / -unday") —a rain suddenly "out of sheer / nothing" becomes a violent storm.

The first movement / dance group presents dance in its popular, folk, and crudest, most violent form. The naked Sally Rand (42), the "born / alive" dancers (43), and the oversexed boys (44) all fit into a world that is newly born. Moreover, while the dances of the first poemgroup become more and more spontaneous, moving from popular culture to crudest nature, those in the next group of three

poems (46-48) present successively more artful forms of movement, moving from nature to high culture. In poem 46 a bird moves across a sunset; in 47 the boxer Panama Al Brown, whose movements are described as "sli / nkil / -Y- / stroll(pre)ling(cise)dy(ly)na(/ mite)," artfully dispatches his opponent; and in 48 the dancer Paul Draper spins and twirls like a saintly cupid. Each poem in the second group represents, respectively, swiftness, precision, and artful aliveness.

The third poem of the first movement / dance group, the politically incorrect "the boys i mean are not refined" (CP 427), has occasioned some comment. If "may i feel said he" (poem 16; CP 399) is at the level of a college humor magazine, the even more tasteless and puerile "boys" is at the level of what Kidder calls "outhouse verse" (118). However, Norman Friedman categorized it as a "poem of praise" and found some "delight" in its bawdiness (*Growth* 86-87). The unrefined "boys" of the poem, who "do not give a fart for art" or "a shit for wit" consort "with girls who buck and bite" and "hump them thirteen times a night." This was enough to shock Helen Vendler into saying that the poem's "admiration for boys . . . *because* they hate art and wit is a measure of cummings' [sic] self-hatred" ("Ammons" 330).

This poem's crude content seems to have frazzled Vendler's critical antennae, usually so sensitive to nuances of context, genre, persona, and meter. For example, while her later review of Cummings is quite perceptive about the meter of "may i feel said he" (see note 8), this review fails to notice how the unsophisticated, thudding iambic of "the boys" fits so well with its subject matter and bathroom-stall genre. The "boys" poem lacks any metrical or rhythmic complexity—in fact, it is written in a sort of Dr. Seuss meter *avant la lettre* (compare / contrast with "Green Eggs and Ham"). In addition, the rather fastidious "i" of this poem seems to bear little relation to the "i" of the poet. In any case, without taking into account its defining context it is difficult to say what the speaker's or the poet's attitude may be towards "the boys." Certainly, within the celebratory, populist context of poems 42 and 43, the poem would seem to belong in the praise group where Friedman places it. But there are other contexts to consider before we can decide how to take, or read this poem.

The poem's anonymous *fabliau* quality and its violent sexual imagery (one "boy" carves a cross in a woman's behind; others "masturbate with dynamite") are so unreal, fictive, and stylized that I cannot believe that the poet endorses its comic-book crudity. Thus I cannot see the poem as written out of self-hatred. Moreover, outside of its place in the sequence of poems in *No Thanks*, the poem existed in a very special context. It was published as a handwritten "holograph" sheet, inserted into only nine copies of the original edition of 1000. Certainly, Cummings needed to "publish" "the boys" as a manuscript to avoid the censors, but why write it in his own hand? Though the handwritten, rare, and personal aspect may indicate the poet's private endorsement of the poem's contents, I think it points in a different direction. This "holograph" manuscript edition is also a satiric comment on deluxe, rare, and expensive editions, which were often merely the rich man's version of the pornography found in bathroom stalls. It could also be construed as a satire on the commodity fetishism of signed first editions, and it is certainly contrary to Cummings' usual

typewriter graphics. The poem achieved wide circulation only after Cummings' death, when the Harcourt, Brace edition of the *Complete Poems* was published in 1972. Now you might say that it's a very odd group that includes a poem that is both a throwaway and a prized collector's item—and one that Cummings thought only nine people would ever see or read. Nevertheless, it fits within its group. Similar themes of an absolute, natural aliveness with no care for intellect appear in the two poems before "the boys"— "out of a supermetamathical subpreincestures" and "theys sO alive" (42 and 43). In the first, the fan-dancer Sally Rand is more alive and moving than the mediated forms of movies and radio (she "jes was which the radio ain't"), and in the second the speaker asserts that black people are "all / born / so / Alive."[12]

Though Marianne Moore wrote that "he [Cummings] does not make aesthetic mistakes" (*Prose* 635), if we look at "the boys" in the context of the poems outside its group, we can see that Cummings included it in the volume as a kind of deliberate aesthetic mistake. For one thing, the poem stresses that these are *boys*—certainly not the ideal man "conceived" in poem 37 (CP 420), nor even the failed man of poem 31, "does yesterday's perfection" (CP 414), and especially not the ideal poet of poem 56, who is both "fool and man" (CP 440-41). If we compare "the boys" with the "man" poems (especially "Jehovah buried,Satan dead,") we can see that Cummings implies that this childish, crude, and destructive behavior is one of the few ways life gets expressed in a world where "illustrious punks of progress shriek," and where "Souls are outlawed,Hearts are sick," and thus "Minds nothing can." The "boys" are the lowest forms of life in a world where "Hate's a game and Love's a fuck," and no one "dares to call himself a man" (CP 438).

Clearly, Cummings means to shock his few readers, but his last line, "they shake the mountains when they dance," startles us once again—these boys who hate art and wit enjoy dancing. The generic frame is broken in the last line, and no longer anonymous, the poet asserts that despite their crudity and lack of real manhood, the boys' life forces are something to be reckoned with. This approving last line is an aesthetic mistake because we know that Cummings really cares for art, gives a shit for wit, can chat quite well "of that and this," would not kill "like you would take a piss," and would certainly not condone carving on buttocks or doing "whatever's in [your] pants." We know the mistake is deliberate because his real views are well expressed in other poems outside this group of three. This is another reason why Cummings hides his aesthetic mistake on a little handwritten sheet of paper, for collectors only. It is his ultimate gesture of rejection of the publishers who rejected him.

In between the two movement / dance groups is a seemingly unrelated sonnet (45) on how "ignorant disappearing me" finds peace and timelessness in the spring twilight. This sonnet develops the theme of nature entering us (see poem 10) in a complicated, metaphysical fashion. In a timeless moment, the "ignorant disappearing" poet forgets all, empties his soul, and yet discovers a "most secret i" in the spring twilight. Here the secret "i" is not the hidden "i" of poems 4-6 or the selfish "i"s of poems 15-17, but something more akin to the "transparent eyeball" of Emerson's nature essay. The next poem, "swi(" (46), links the transcendence of poem 45 with

the physical movement of the second dance group. Here it is:

swi(
        across!gold's

rouNdly
)ft blac
kl(ness)y

a-motion-upo-nmotio-n

Less?
        thE
(against
is
)Swi

mming

(w-a)s
bIr

d,   (CP 429)

The poem depicts (or enacts) the swift movement of a bird flying across a golden sunset. As Norman Friedman writes:

> This "poem is made up of two parts—one outside the parentheses, and the other inside. The first is the noun-adjective part, while the second is the verb-adverb part: "swift blackly, a motion upon motionless, the swimming bird" tells us *what*, while "across gold's roundlyness against is-was" tells us *where*. The point is, of course, that this bird is moving, moving simultaneously across the sun (space) and against is-was (time), and hence for the speaker represents a living moment of perception, an instant of motion. (*Growth* 83-84)

Friedman leaves unexplained the puzzling use of hyphen and parentheses in "(w-a)s"—but perhaps Cummings indicates that a) the bird is "-a" unique being, and b) even though its "is" is gone ["(w-a)s"], it nevertheless ")s" or "is." In addition, the "w" and the parentheses may reproduce the flap of the bird's wings. In this poem (Friedman says) Cummings' problem "is to catch that moment without freezing it in a static frame; to fix and print, as it were, a motion picture without losing the motion." This poem, too, contains an Emersonian "most secret i"—in the second-to-

last line, the bird that *was* merges with or enters the capital I (eye) of the poet who still *Is*, even after the bird has flown away. The "i" is now merged with or into nature, in stark contrast to poems 4-6, where the "i"s of the drunk, the boxers, and the businessman were obscured and hidden by alcohol, physical pounding, and busy-ness.

Like "swi(", the following two poems of the group (47, 48) enact movement by iconic means. These poems contain no "i"s indicating selfhood because they represent the movements of human individuals, whose 'i's are openly performed in the poems. Like "i / (meet)t(touch)" (5), poem 47 ("ondumonde") is also about a boxing match, but this poem presents iconically the motion and art of a very specific boxer named Panama Al Brown. (In the last line, the French announcer pronounces his name as "ahlbrhoon"—the first line of the poem reproduces the end of the announcer's introduction: "[champi]ondumonde" [champion of the world].)[13] Brown was known for his "grace of movement" in the ring, and after a brief Cocteau-inspired comeback in 1938, he was featured at the *Cirque Médrano* "in a shadow-boxing dance act to a jazz accompaniment" (Steegmuller 433). In a similar way, poem 48 re-enacts the graceful movements of Paul Draper's floating and spinning tap-dance, the art, as the end of the poem tells us, of a "tip-toe r" and "apeR."

V

The next poemgroup (poems 49-52) presents the poet in landscapes, and each landscape, whether tempestuous or idyllic, also contains the threat of death. Each poem also deals with the death inherent in the life of nature and (especially in 49 and 50) how this timebound cycle might be overcome by timelessness. In poem 49 the death and destruction of a darkness-bringing storm clears in the final two lines, when "new fragrantly young earth space opening was. / Were your eyes:lost,believing:hushed with when" (CP 432). The next poem again shows the poet powerless against nature: unlike the storm, he "cannot) / tear up the world;& toss / it away or / cause one causeless cloud to purely grow." But somehow his weakness is a strength, and with his lover he "shall / carve time so we'll before / what's death / come(in one bed." Poem 51 shows Cummings in a rather uncharacteristic Wordsworthian mode, telling a story of a rural walk in an exotic location (probably rural Spain) while meditating on his surroundings. As he climbs "the best hill," hearing a clock strike nine, noticing windmills, a "little moon," a lark rising and falling, and a graveyard with its "minute mown lives," his spirit tumbles and climbs like the lark. Sure enough, his mind becomes fitted to his natural surroundings ("crickets within me whisper"), and the poem ends with a symbolic affirmation of the life-spirit against death, symbolized by the end of the road:

> at the Ending of this road,
> a candle in a shrine:
> its puniest flame persists
> shaken by the sea   (CP 435)

Even though the puny flame and dark Ending echo the slender win and thick failure of the previous poem, and the next poem complicates matters by asserting that Spring "most singular- / ly . . . is . . . Death," I find the individual poems in this group relatively weak. Thus the strength of the whole group is lessened.

Indeed, in some of the poems in the second half of *No Thanks*, Cummings shows us that he is still polishing and perfecting his rhetoric of praise and blame. For example, the "proud dreamhorse pulling" a flower-laden cart through the "raving city," chased by "small / its [children] hungry for Is for Love Spring" (poem 53) certainly repeats previous themes, but in an all-too obvious and schematic way. (Horse and flowers awaken city kids to beauty and color, etc.) In later books, Cummings will develop similar themes with much greater linguistic and figurative control and precision, as in his poem about the knife-sharpener ("who sharpens every dull"—CP 624) or the poem about the organ-grinder and the cockatoo ("that melancholy"—CP 697). In addition, we can see that the satires in *No Thanks* (especially those in the second half) show a movement away from the more specific topical poems of earlier volumes. Before, Cummings tended to attack individuals like Mr. Vinal (CP 228) or even wrote poems about sensational news items as in "y is a WELL KNOWN ATHLETE'S BRIDE" (CP 319); here, he concentrates on more conceptual and abstract targets. For example, some lines of "Jehovah buried,Satan dead," (poem 54) move the more topical satires of *is 5* and *ViVa* closer to Cummings' later more complex, conceptual, and figurative manner:

> go dreamless knaves on Shadows fed,
> your Harry's Tom,your Tom is Dick;
> while Gadgets murder squawk and add,
> the cult of Same is all the chic;   (CP 438)

(Note the just perceptible allusion to Plato's allegory of the cave in the "dreamless" moviegoers fed on "Shadows.")[14] The two poems following "Jehovah buried" show this shift towards the abstract, but were done better later: if "worshipping Same" (poem 55) seems like a pale precursor to the more humorous and ballad-like "(of Ever-Ever Land i speak" (CP 466), it does not come close to the savage economy of "of all the blessings which to man" (CP 544). And the portrait of the ideal poet in "this mind made war" (poem 56) is certainly eclipsed by the later "no man,if men are gods;but if gods must" (CP 562). All three poems in the group (54-56) emphasize the necessity of remaining a "man" in the face of mass standardization, and all clearly state the contrast between the mass conformity of the unworld and the freedom of the individual. We've seen this contrast stated less clearly but more concretely earlier in the volume. Thus, the "unfools of unbeing" and "unfools unfree" of these two poems remind us of "those who got / athlete's mouth jumping / on and off bandwaggons" (21), or the "famous fatheads" (28), or the conformist "kumrads" (30). And if the proud tall individual standing against the prevailing winds at the end of poem 55 seems much less real than the lost and empty IS at the end of poem 31,

or if the ideal poet, "this fool and man," of poem 56 seems more abstract than little Joe Gould with his "bad brittle / candy" (poem 27), we must remember that Cummings is attempting something more difficult with the more sweeping satires and the abstract transcendental poems of the second half of the volume.

VI

In addition, there seem to be fewer connections among the "thanks" poems near the end of the volume. For example, poems 57-61 are: (57) a sonnet on two lovers in the city at springtime, (58) a short poem on how love and "yes" move through and contain all places and worlds, (59) an iconic-syntactic presentation of a striptease act, (60) an iconic celebration of church bells in the city, and (61) a metaphysical love sonnet that echoes (in part) Shakespeare's sonnet 116. [In the 1935 volume, poems 59 and 60 trade places and numbers so that "(beLls?bE" may appear on a double-page spread.] The connections among these poems don't seem at all obvious, but perhaps the contrasts are more important here than the similarities. If we concentrate on the middle poem about the stripper and the love sonnets at each end, we can see a group pattern of sorts begin to emerge.

The first sonnet starts with a description of drunks stumbling along the sidewalk; then it presents a marvelous iconic imitation of the sounds of a hurdy-gurdy and a hand-organ, and the sight of sparrows in the trees:

> !o-ras-ourh an-dorg-an ble-at-ssw-ee-t-noth ings orarancidhurd ygurdygur glingth umpssomet hings(whi,le sp,arrow,s wince among those skeletons of these trees)
>
> (CP 442)

We can re-space this section to make it more legible:

> Or a sour hand-organ bleats sweet nothings or a rancid hurd-y-gurdy gurgling thumps somethings(whi,le sp,arrow,s wince among those skeletons of these trees)

Besides imitating the sounds of these two different street instruments ["ras-ourh an-dorg-an ble-at-ssw-ee-t-"], the lines hide several messages: "o-ras" ("prayers" in dog-Latin), "ourh" ("our"), "ee" (obviously the poet), and the darting cupid's "arrow" in "sp,arrow,s." (Also note: sour / sweet / rancid; nothings / somethings.) After a city description that reads like an evocation of an Edward Hopper painting ("when sunbeams loot / furnished rooms through whose foul windows absurd / clouds cruise nobly ridiculous skies") and another description of the sidewalk drunks ("scr:a;tch-ing lousy full.of.rain / beggars yaw:nstretchy:awn"), the poem concludes with the poet and his lover making love:

and upon the beyond imagining spasm rise
            we
                    you-with-me
                                around(me)you
                                            IYou

A new "we" is born in coition; the lovers' selves merge to become a third self called
"IYou."

     The middle poem, "sh estiff" (59/60), would seem to depict a kind of parody
of this union of selves. The pouting stripper in the poem "stiffly struts all ifs and
buts" (she struts away all possible objections). As she begins to disrobe, Cummings'
spacing and syntax mimes both her movements and the crowd's drunken anticipa-
tion:

                    epoutin(gWh.ono.w
                    s li psh ergo
                    wnd ow n,
                                r
                    Eve

                    aling 2 a
                    -sprout eyelands)sin
                    uously&them&twi
                    tching,begins   (CP 444)

The spacing reveals numerous messages hiding within the words. In addition to the
opening admonition to silence ("sh"), the poem both conceals and reveals the appre-
hension in the crowd ("ono"), some drunken (or pouting?) lips ("li psh"), a reference
to the inevitable logic of the performance ("ergo"), the flutter of the gown ("wnd"),
an expression of pained delight ("ow"), and a reference to the name of the performer
and / or Goethe's "eternal feminine" and / or the first, archetypal woman ("Eve").
The woman's breasts are presented as isolated natural features ("2 a / -sprout
eyelands"), which are not only places on which all male eyes land, but also a pair of
surrogate female eyes ("i"s) pointing back at the gazing crowd. These isolated breasts
are also emblems of "sin," even as they are objectified by the aroused men ("&them&").
After unbuttoning, stepping out of, and "flipchucking" the gown away, the woman
".grIns" and "gRiNdS // d is app ea r in gly." Within the grin and grind are an "I" and
"i"—most probably the nipples ("eyelands"), which now that they are revealed and in
motion, seem to represent the woman's objectified and submerged selves.[15]
     Yet why are these revealing grinning and grinding movements performed "d is
app ea r in gly"? Again, the spacing of the word offers us a paradox: the woman's
living being, or "is," both appears and disappears in the dance. Unlike the complete
consummation of "mind in mind flesh / In flesh succeeding disappear" (*ViVa* LV;

CP 365), this disappearance is only adverbial, occurring only in the mind, not the flesh. The woman's flesh (or "is") is submerged "in" the "glee" of the gripping living looping crooning miming eyes of the men, even as her own "eyelands" (""i's"") both appear and disappear "in" "gly"—the swirling whirling dance.[16] Likewise, there is a paradox of possession at the end: the performer gives something called "it"—which becomes "yoursmine mineyours yoursmine." The men of the audience wish to merge "mine" with "yours" and vice-versa, but they can possess "it" only with their eyes and in their fantasies. The logic of striptease and visual depiction easily reveals the identity of "i()t." The woman who started out the poem as a "Wh.o" and became an archetypal "Eve" is reduced at the end to her sexual organs. The last hidden "i" is merely part of her "it"—and this "i" is mirrored by the men's excited and astonished fantasies of possession, iconically represented by the exclamation point above the "i."[17]

If Cummings does not seem to condemn or condone the audience's leering fantasies, neither does he seem to lament or applaud the woman's objectification. The scene is re-created without comment or abstract statement, unlike the love poems around it and unlike the earlier stripper poem about Sally Rand (42), which celebrated individual aliveness as a contrast to the unworld. Sally Rand is "flesh" while the movies are merely "shadow"; she moves and is, while the so-called movies and radio can only imitate movement and voice. The unworld never appears as contrast in "sh estiff"—Cummings presents a scene, a reality, and he presents it in the context of poems in praise of love. However, the objectification and fantasies of possession of "sh estiff" stand in clear contrast to the self-transcendence depicted in the love poems. Whether it works or not as poetry, the transcendent "TYou" depicted at the end of poem 57 is quite different from the possessive "yoursmine" at the end of poem 59/ 60. And in many ways, poem 61 reads like the antithesis to poem 59/60.

Poem 61 is built upon metaphors of clothing, hiding, and paradoxical stillness: "love's function is to *fabricate* unknownness"; life is "lived *wrongsideout*"; lovers' "selves *abide / under* whatever shall discovered be"; and their ignorant breathing "dares to *hide* / more than . . . wisdom fears to see" (CP 446—my emphases). Moreover, love is seen here as transcending death and the everyday world of "fact" and "sameness," considerations that do not enter into the lustful world of striptease. Here the wish is not for possessive knowledge of a body ("yoursmine") but for "unknownness" and some unspecified discovery. Love is made "all of wishing," not of knowing or getting. In striptease, the parts are objectified, and all parts are in movement; when love is fabricated, "the whole moves;and every part stands still."

Poem 61 tells us that in the unworld, "truth is confused with fact"—and these two poems contrast the fact of lust with the truth of love. Why then does Cummings put such clearly contrasting poems in the same group? Another poem in the group tells us that "all places" move through love, so perhaps even the raucous antithesis of love partakes in its "brightness of peace" (CP 443). (In these poems, love and lust do have at least two things in common: both function through wishes, and both await some revelation or discovery.)[18] However, I think it more likely that Cummings

places these poems near each other (in the 1935 edition they are on facing pages) in order to use "the irrevocable laws of juxtaposition and contrast . . . to intensify what is singular and fundamental" (*Miscellany* 162-63). In other words, opposites have more intensity when juxtaposed, just as the so-called complementary colors appear more intense when placed next to one another.

Milton Cohen calls this contrast of opposites Cummings' "seeing around" aesthetic. The poet and painter took the idea of color contrasts and (with some help from Cézanne) applied it to the three dimensions. According to Cohen, this aesthetic "became Cummings's shorthand for sensing three dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface" (*Poet* 119). Cummings soon adapted the idea to poetry, grafting it onto a theory of language he discovered in Freud (see Cohen, "Freud" 598-601 and *Poet* 129-132).[19] Indeed, for Cummings, "seeing around" became applicable to all the arts, something he seems to have first realized while watching burlesque comedian Jack Shargel perform.

He wrote that "in burlesk . . . 'opposites' occur *together*. For that reason burlesk enables us to (so to speak) *know around* a thing, character, or situation" (*Miscellany* 127). For example, in one routine Jack Shargel was handed a rose. Shargel graciously accepted the rose and "rapturously, deliriously, even" inhaled its fragrance:

> then (with a delicacy which Chaplin might envy) tosses the red rose exquisitely, lightly, from him. The flower flutteringly describes a parabola—weightlessly floats downward—and just as it touches the stage, there is a terrific, soul-shaking, earthquake-like *crash*: as if all the glass and masonry on earth, all the most brittle and most ponderous things of this world, were broken to smithereens.
>
> Nothing in "the arts," indeed, not even Paul Cézanne's greatest painting of *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, has moved me more, or has proved to be a more inextinguishable source of "aesthetic emotion," than this *knowing around* the Shargel rose; this releasing of all the un-roselike and non-flowerish elements which—where "rose" and "flower" are *ordinarily* concerned—*secretly or unconsciously* modify and enhance those rose—and flower—qualities to which (in terms of consciousness only) they are "opposed." (*Miscellany* 128).

In this passage we notice a slight variation on the notion that opposites intensify one another: here, the opposites are opposed not only in the conscious mind but "modify and enhance" one another in the unconscious realm. That love and lust have unconscious affinities would have been no great news to Cummings, the assiduous reader of Freud.

In *No Thanks* this aesthetic intensification via juxtaposition of opposites is more often manifested as hidden contraries, rhetorical paradoxes, or as oxymoronic or paradoxical phrase constructions. For example, we saw how in a group about occluded individuality (poems 4-6) Cummings inserted a hidden "i" to indicate a

buried self. And in "i / (meet)t(touch)" (poem 4/5), we saw how the two boxers were characterized by opposites (male-female / boy-girl / hard-soft) that emphasized the sameness of the two boxers rather than intensifying their individualities. Here, the contradictions of the unworld are shown to be illusory, but the two protagonists of the poem cannot transcend these dualities. At other times, however, paradoxical opposites show how the poet transcends the seeming dualities of the unworld. For example, in poem 50, the poet cannot "tear up the world," but his weakness turns out to make "more than most / strength," and even though he "thickly" fails," he will "slenderly" win (CP 433). Of course, he wins through love, which snubs death and time by (be)coming one in the now:

> and shall
> carve time so we'll before
> what's death
> come(in one bed.

Here, the opposites generate a third term: the united lovers in one bed. We have already glanced at some of these oppositions in the non-love poems. For example, poems 13 and 14 contrast a leaping grasshopper with a dead mouse, and the lively fun-loving bum Joe Gould of poem 27 is contrasted with the "afraid;aggressive" American "death named Smith" of poem 23. In addition, many of the sonnets contrast with the unworld depicted in the inner three poems. As we move towards the end of the volume, oppositions become more paradoxical, mysterious, and abstract. For example, "we)under)over,the thing of floating Of" depicts two lovers at the beach watching two hovering kites ("keen parallel specks") which are more "forgetful:ever than,is even:the(sea's;me,m(or.y" (poem 62; CP 447). And the voices of the birds of poem 63 fade into silence: "are / ar / a" (CP 448). The increase in paradox, mystery, and abstraction is warranted because the final poems center on the theme of love transcending death and time. Lovers transcend time and death by going to bed (66), by being "of love(a little) / More careful / Than of everything" (68), by forgetting themselves (62), by becoming one with nature, especially at twilight (63, 64, 69), by opening themselves to "eternity" (65), by ignoring the mischief-hatchers (67), and by becoming one "anonymous" self through love-making (64, 69). In poem 69, this one-self of the lovers is symbolized by the "one not imaginable star" that they "put on" "beyond time's sky" (CP 454). The last two poems extend the single star imagery: the star becomes a holy object in "brIght" (poem 70, CP 455) and in the last poem of the volume, an "isful beckoningly fabulous crumb" that nourishes the poet's failure (poem 71, CP 456). These stars also symbolize an un-changing realm beyond time and death and the shifting oppositions of the unworld.

In Cummings' schema for the book, this unchanging realm is represented by the four poems at the top of the V: the two moon poems at the beginning and the two star poems at the end. The "mOOn" in the first floats "Over tOwns" to become a "SLoWLY SPoUTING SPIR / IT" (CP 383). The "brIght" star of poem 70, al-

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though "holy" and "alone," is also inexplicably "near" (CP 455).[20] It also contains in its first line the last of our hidden "i"s—this time capitalized right up front but somewhat disguised by the play of capitals throughout the poem. This "I" tells us that the poet identifies with the calm, deep, holy, and wholly alone star. As the last poem in the volume tells us, the star's timeless "crumb" can "nourish" the poet with an alive ("isful") sense of individual integrity, and honor the loneliness of a fearful mortal (CP 456). For the most part, the poet and his poems inhabit the world of change and death below, the world presided over by the moon in poem 2 that floats above the "taxis . . . crowds mov / -ing ing ing . . . dreams . . . mutterings . . . lovers" and street performers observable on a July evening in Paris. The moon also floats "over death"—over the cemetery of Montparnasse and the nearby catacombs under the square Denfert-Rochereau. The street performers play right above these catacombs "at // denfert," and at the end of the poem, a girl sings, her voice carrying over a child's white ball that is rapidly "suc kedt oward / black" (CP 385). The white ball is a sublunary moon that symbolizes innocence, or perhaps even the whole world, bouncing away into the dark while a song floats above it. Cummings' poems celebrate and excoriate this sublunary world, and I think he hopes that his songs float above it, redeeming it in some way.

Certainly the formidable fragmentation of many poems in *No Thanks* appears to disdain the sublunary common reader, and in that sense these songs may float above and beyond the reader, seemingly as "meaningless" as the star in poem 71. Though I do not think that Cummings would claim that his poems were as timeless, "miraculous," and "luminous" as that star, I do know that he hoped that they were "isful" or alive (see *six* 82). Like any individual, the poems in *No Thanks* can present a prickly and forbidding surface, and like all alive individuals, they become more complex but more inviting as you come to know and study them. Mostly, they are about failure—the failure of the individual in modern society and the failure of a poet—and they are about how to redeem those failures. Most often the failures are seen as a kind of death, and the redemptions are seen as a kind of rebirth.

The book offers several ways to redeem failure: opening oneself to nature, "dying" and being reborn, finding oneself, becoming a living self through performance, and loving. I am tempted to say that using the imagination, seeing the world as a poet, is another way out of failure, but Cummings believed that poets are considered failures (or worse) in the eyes of the world ("on him they shat"), and, more importantly, he thought that his poems were also, in many ways, failures. The words "failure," "fails," and "fail" appear more often in *No Thanks* than in any of his other volumes. ("Fail" or its cognates appear in poems 10, 11, 31, 35, 50, and 71—see McBride 237.) Certainly, by 1935 Cummings had every right to see his writings as failures in both worldly (financial) and spiritual (literary) terms. His book *Eimi* (1933) had failed to convince many among the politically correct literati of 30s of the dangers of the Soviet system. Indeed, as Richard S. Kennedy says in his biography of the poet, "In the 1930's [Cummings] found himself isolated, still not accepted by the general reader but now separated also from the literary world" (361). In the late 50s,

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this failure still smarted: he told Robert Wegner that "I don't believe that one hundred people have read *Eimi*" ("Visit" 66-67). As its title indicates, *No Thanks* rejects the rejections of fourteen publishers and confidently asserts the claims of the individual and his art over those of the corporation and commerce, turning failure into triumph. Indeed, one could say that Cummings' most experimental and difficult book thumbs its nose not only at capitalist publishers, but also at anyone, whether capitalist sentimentalist or socialist realist, who would sell simplistic anaesthetics to the masses. Yet for all its experimentation, it is not an art confident of success with any audience: in the penultimate line of the book, the poet asks a luminous, remote crumb of a star to honor his loneliness and to "nourish my failure with thy freedom" (CP 456).

<div align="right">

—*Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI*

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Notes

1 Houghton Library, Harvard University, call number bMS Am 1892.5 (735) sheets 1 and 2.

2 The Introduction to the 1978 *No Thanks* lacks pagination; Cummings' schemata appear on the second page. The schemata and much of the same commentary are reprinted in Kennedy's *Dreams in the Mirror* (350-58). Kennedy reproduces the first schema from the Cummings papers at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1823.7 (22), folder 7. The manuscript for the second, final schema is at the Clifton Waller Barrett Library, University of Virginia, Deposit 6246-a.

3 Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (90) "Notes for a nonexisting lecture," folder 19.

4 On Whitman and Dickinson's sequencing and structuring of poetic parts and wholes, see Sharon Cameron's *Choosing Not Choosing*, pp. 59-62. Firmage's *Bibliography* lists the various periodical publications of 25 *No Thanks* poems on pp. 53-54. The grouping and sequencing of poems is quite different from that of the final publication, with the one exception of "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" and "mouse(Won," which were published in 1932 in the middle of a group of four—the first and last being "let's start a magazine" and "ondumonde'." In *Poems 1923-1954*, Cummings reprinted all 71 poems from *No Thanks* in the exact order in which they appear in the 1935 volume.

5 In most later editions, "a)glazed mind layed in a" is #5 and "i / (meet)t(touch)" is # 4. Cummings switched the manuscript order in the 1935 volume so the longer "i / (meet)t(touch)" could fit on one double page spread.

6 From an unpublished letter to Norman Friedman, dated "June 25 1955." (Houghton Library, Harvard University, call number bMS Am 1892.1 (55) folder 1.

7 I thank Martin Heusser for this insight (62). He is the only critic I know brave enough to explore this poem's meanings. His view of it as love-poem, while

mistaken in some particulars, is not altogether wide of the mark. He comments: "The issue of the relation self-other as an enactment of the myth of Aristophanes is taken up again in lines thirteen and sixteen in 'metameric me' and 'metameric You.' The term 'metameric,' like 'antimere' is culled from biology. A metamere is defined as 'one of s a series of homologous body segments' . . . . In variation and elaboration of the notion of the other as a natural correspondence, self and other are here treated as inherently identical elements of the same body. In addition, however, the self is characterized as 'heteronomous,' the other (the 'You') as 'homonomous.' Both these terms are also biological *termini technici*. In a strictly etymological sense, the latter means 'subject to the same or a constant law,' the former the opposite, i.e., 'governed by a different law'" (62). In addition to being seen as a question mark and a curling worm, the "Pd" might also be read as a lovely iconic illustration of "Aristophanes' myth of the split sexes as halves searching for the other half" (Heusser 59). Heusser convincingly shows that this myth was one of the main sources for Cummings' view of love (59-73). For Aristophanes' myth, see Plato's *Symposium* 189a-193e.

8 See Horton and Mangan, pp. 88 and 92. One exception—the usually censorious Helen Vendler praises "may i feel said he" quite highly. Vendler observes that "It is hard to write poems in dimeter, and even harder to write them in monometer; Cummings does both at once, brilliantly" ("Poetry" 213). See also Vendler's "Poetry: Ammons, Berryman, Cummings," pp. 328-29.

9 This poem also magically transforms, via parody, two nursery rhymes:

> a) There was a little man,
>   Who wooed a little maid,
> And he said, «Little maid, will you wed, wed, wed?
>   I have little more to say,
>   So will you, yea or nay,
> For least said is soonest mended, -ded, -ded, -ded.»
>
>   The little maid replied,
>   «Should I be your little bride,
> Pray what must we have for to eat, eat, eat?
>   Will the flame that you're so rich in
>   Light a fire in the kitchen?
> Or the little god of love turn the spit, spit, spit?»
>
> b) Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
> How does your garden grow?
> With silver bells and cockleshells,
> And pretty maids all in a row.

10 Richard S. Kennedy points out (*Revisited* 100-101) that the first line, "what does little Ernest croon," is a send-up of Tennyson's "Cradle Song": "What does little

birdie say / In her nest at peep of day?" Line three, "(kow dow r 2 bul retoinis," echoes Longfellow's "The Psalm of Life":

> Life is real! Life is earnest!
> And the grave is not the goal;
> Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
> Was not spoken of the soul.

11 Vicky Brehm has pointed out to me the possible connection here between Cummings' conception of the ship / book / soul and Emily Dickinson's "There is no Frigate like a book" (#1263).

12 Even a supporter like Ezra Pound sometimes viewed Cummings as anti-intellectual. In 1952 he wrote to Cummings that "the said kumrad / wuz more in'erested in Sally Rand / than in Tallyrand" (*Pound / Cummings* 329).

13 I am grateful to George Wickes for deciphering the beginning and end of this poem. Wickes writes: "The subject of this poem is a Negro [bantamweight] boxer named Panama Al Brown who was a familiar figure in the Paris ring between 1926 and 1938" (117). He continues: "The most astonishing part of Al Brown's career came years later when he lost his title, and Cocteau—of all people—managed his comeback campaign. 'Al Brown was a poem in black ink,' wrote Cocteau, unwittingly describing the poem Cummings had written. The composition not only outlines the boxer in action but reports the whole scene through scraps of conversation and incidental details" (117-118). According to Tyler Stovall's *Paris Noir*, Brown was managed in Paris by the promoter Jeff Dickson, who is mentioned in "i / (meet)t(touch)" (CP 387).

14 Manuscripts of "Jehovah buried,Satan dead," show that EEC was thinking of the movies here. One version of the line reads: "when masses are with movies fed." Cummings wrote on one manuscript page, "argument:man fancies himself god but has become base;what's needed is a(god who dares to be a)man" [Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1823.5 (165)].

15 Both the typescript edition (1978) and a fair copy at the Houghton Library [bMS Am 1892.5 (477)] read ".grIns "—while the 1935 edition of *No Thanks* and the 1954 and 1994 *Complete Poems* read ".grins". Apparently the error was corrected in the typescript edition but remained in the new *Complete Poems*.

16 Both Nat Henry and Barry Marks see line 23 as depicting a "peek-a-boo disappearance into, and re-emergence from, the wings" (Henry). Marks says that the woman "disappears in glee" (83). While this interpretation does not necessarily conflict with mine, its literal nature may limit more metaphorical speculations.

17 Then as now, the word "it" functioned as a euphemism for the sexual act. Cole Porter's double entendre song "Let's Do It" was a big hit in 1928; in the early thirties, Hollywood promoted Clara Bow as the "It girl" (see Kammen 173, 226-227).

18 Unconscious desires as wishes and dreams and artistic creation as vicarious wish-fulfillment are Freudian ideas that Cummings was very familiar with. See Cohen, "Cummings and Freud," especially pp. 606-610 and Freud, "The Relation of the

Poet to Day-Dreaming."

19 In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud remarks that dreams "show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or for representing them as one and the same thing. Dreams feel themselves at liberty, moreover, to represent any element by its wishful contrary" (353). In addition, Freud wrote in a footnote, ancient languages behave like dreams, using a single word describe two contraries (e.g., "weak-strong," "old-young"). See also Freud's "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words." There is some evidence for this seemingly outlandish idea—*pharmakon* in Greek means both "medicine" and "poison"; *l'hôte* in French means both "host" and "guest."

20 For more complete interpretations of "brIght," see McIlvaine, and Wegner, *Poetry*, pp. 154-157.

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