

Difference and Similarity at Mt. Chocorua: Notes on a Brief Odyssey

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My wife Christien and I had the good fortune to visit Cummings' New Hampshire relatively thoroughly after the ALA conference in Boston in May-June this year (2013). At the conference we enjoyed the further good luck of visiting 104 Irving Street and Norton's Woods, thanks to Michael Webster's organising the venture for the Society. This was in the singular company of Cummingspersons such as Aaron Moe, Gillian Huang-Tiller, Jane Everhart, and Bernard Stehle.

I was amazed by the spaciousness and warmth of our non-hero's childhood home. There were white stairs that seemed to spin silently and heavily into the heavens. My eye was led upward to a roof window slanting towards the sky, through which a unique, slim, tall tree carrying late-spring foliage was visible. And I could well imagine a busy and playful and bright little boy running in that house, or sitting down on the floor to make a drawing or begin writing for the first time. And to me, something of that childhood spirit that I could sense there also by virtue of my own children's lives, unfolding as they do so very near to one and within one, has remained—no, has grown and flourished—in his poetry that we are fortunate enough to read simply by opening a book of his poems. I recalled W. B. Yeats's famous statement that he is certain that

a man should find his Holy Land where he first crept upon the floor,
and that familiar woods and rivers should fade into symbol with so
gradual a change that he may never discover, no, not even in ecstasy
itself, that he is beyond space, and that time alone keeps him from *Primum Mobile*, Supernal Eden, Yellow Rose over all. (Yeats 215)

To be sure, our non-hero's sense of the sacredness of childhood space is more optimistic, and, as far as his writing goes, more clearly connected to the spaces outside of one's home—such as Norton's Woods, which we found to be, yes, literally a “butterfly's glide away” (*six* 32) from 104 Irving Street. I love that phrase (it is ambrosia to me): a watersmoothsilver phrase of the kind that only Cummings could come up with. How full it sits in the mouth and in the mind's eye! And butterflies also open one's eyes, as

I've discovered by way of my interest in them in my lifetime on this planet—the historians also of my infancy (see Wordsworth 244). And so, there we were, thanks to Michael Webster's keen research and incredible knowledge of the *minutiae* of Cummings' world, in Norton's Woods, a more sylvan playground than that mudluscious puddle-wonderful world where bettyandisbel came dancing from hop-scotch and jump-rope (CP 27).

For us, being so grown up, it was serene, smallish, very green. The ground was still slightly damp. Then I saw a butterfly: at first I thought it was what Lepidopterist folk call "a brown" (a satyrid... yes, Pan found his way into butterfly taxonomy), but then I caught a glimpse of the pale yellow fringe of its wingborders and the blue eye-like dots !looking back at one.¹ I've consulted my books, and it was a mourning cloak (known in Britain as the camberwell beauty), *Nymphalis antiopa*. Its American common name points at sorrow and sombreness, but a careful look at the butterfly itself soon shows that its melanin centre gives way to the said yellow fringe: perhaps this unlikely combination of darkness and light would have been attractive to our non-hero. One can well imagine that the childlike perception that he retained into his maturity may have responded gaily to this particular wings-and-prayer.

May we never lose the childlike perspective on things, despite the fact that places grow smaller and more ordinary as we mature: may we be wrong even when it's Sunday, and may our mind stay fearless and supple and thirsty. [See "may my heart always be open to little" (CP 481).] And may the butterfly's glide stay intact for children to follow in concrete places: may we therefore mature into a wiser understanding of sombreness and light. For, would Cummings' poetry have been the same without a place such as Norton's Woods? Of course it is impossible to answer such what-if questions, but given Cummings' own excellent writing about the place in *i: six nonlectures*, I allow myself to think not.

And then Christien and I set off for New Hampshire in our rented black Dodge. Our first view of Mt. Chocorua was from the road, and it was breathtaking: it has a real presence. Through the green foliage flashing by the car windows, it towered and hovered and floated with its deep greenish blue body and somewhat triangular summit. This, roughly, is the view of it that one sees mostly in Cummings' vibrant paintings of it—it is the view from the south, very different from the north, as we would later discover.

At Silver Lake we hung around the stone edifice to Cummings' father, Edward Cummings, after fruitlessly looking for Joy Farm. (Next time, we

will try to contact the owners beforehand.) But the spirit of hanging around without too much intent was fortuitous in its way. We saw more than one farm with a barnhouse that we tried to persuade into the shape that Cummings gave it in his paintings once, and the lake was placid and silvery blue and embedded beautifully in its fringe of big, tight trees—thus opening us up to a sense of our non-hero’s place on earth, perhaps more so than if we had a schedule and a predetermined path to follow. We did not know, and still do not, exactly why the stone edifice came his father’s way, but a sense of fatherhood and childhood and appreciation for people’s efforts permeated the atmosphere at this somehow-humble site. And that was more than enough.²

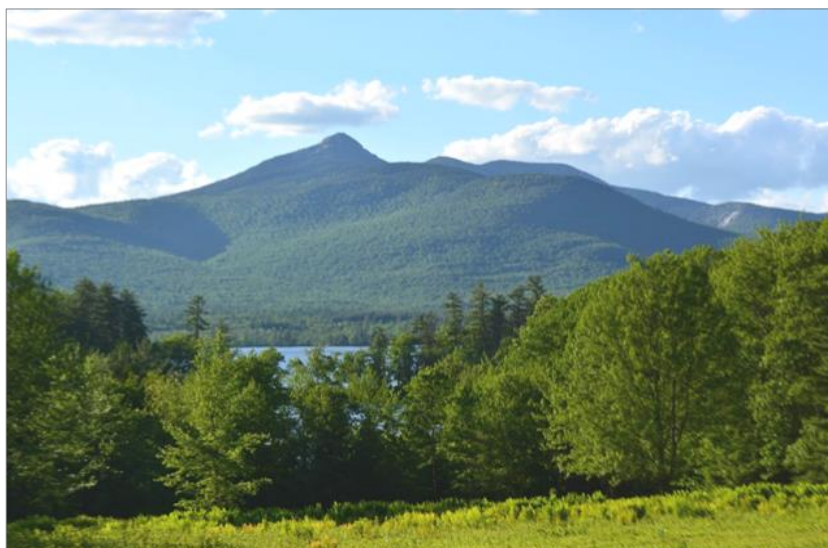


Figure 1: Mt. Chocorua from the roadside (photo by the author)

We took the trail up Chocorua’s northern slope, which allows one to reach its summit. Before we entered the forest, I could see in the distance on the footpath that we were going to be welcomed by very special guests: swallowtails of one kind or another were whirling and dancing about, having been attracted by something on the ground. Soon those silhouettes at the entrance where the trees sash the footpath turned into tiger swallowtails. They were sucking minerals (with their delicate long proboscides) from a bundle of dung on the ground—these minerals they use as part of their building up of a spermatophore (sac containing sperm) that they pass on to the females as a nuptial gift during mating (Russell 82).

And then we entered deeper into the forests on the foot, the lovely foot, of the mountain. Treetops closed above us: why does this always feel like a blessing of sorts? Is it only because of the leafy shade that protects one from the sun's glare? We were struck first by the fact, the delightful fact, that everything was the same and different at once. Christien and I have walked in wilderness or countryside as often as possible, with our kids most of the time, and of course we are used to the kinds of trees to be found in our African forests and bush. For instance, the Chocorua forest, in contrast to what we are used to, seemed to us so "neat": the trees seemed more abundant, straight, and of fewer species, despite the fact that we were probably surrounded by at least seventy or so species with poetic names such as ash, beech, spruce, juniper. Oh, and their leaping greenly spirits (CP 663), standing up so straight, carrying water from impossible depths to impossible heights and back!

At one stage of our walk I was struck by something else that I had never seen before, certainly not in our kinds of forest. These were dapple-patches of pink light. So green was the canopy, that the sun came through and rested on the ground and remnants of pine needles in a refracted pink shade! First I thought that my eyes were taking their time to adjust, but these lights remained pinkish after a while. Just to make sure, I took footage of them on my little video camera, and am glad to report that they are still pink on the screen here at home. To speculate (surely they deserve at least some speculation): it could well be that they were complementary dapples to the green foliage through which they came, thinking of red being the complementary colour to green. And so, they were real examples of the "threeness" that Cummings was fond of: the delicately tossed rose alighting on the stage floor with a crash of drums, the hovering of an opposite in any straight statement, so to see in a fuller, three-dimensional manner, "around" things. I am reminded of a passage in Milton A. Cohen's compelling *Poetand-Painter*:

Thus, as [Cummings] suggests, what seems nonsensical to the waking mind, "a good bad men," becomes entirely possible in dreams. Such a yoking of opposites is necessary to capture the wholeness of "pure form" and complete meaning, to "see around" an object or a word. A word, for example, might really possess two "sides": a front, or conventional meaning that one sees and hears (e.g., "Bad"), and a back, or antithesis, unseen and unheard (e.g., "Good"). The front may leave a semantic trace of the back on the mind, just as the color red leaves a fleet-

ing afterimage of its complement, green, on the retina. Placed side by side, red and green intensify each other. (69)

Those pinkish dapples on the forest floor must have been the “around,” I think, of the overwhelming greenishness there. Those were unconventional dapples! It is little wonder that they reminded me of Cummings’ life and art: his ability to enter through and beyond “good” and “bad” into the just-so-ness of natural phenomena.



Figure 2: The author taking notes at Champney Cascades
(photo: Christien Terblanche)

Further up, at Champney Cascades, Christien and I could not skip the temptation of taking a dip in the ice cold mountain water with its greenish tinge. In South Africa, at the Cape, mountain streams have a deep brownish (though still transparent) tinge: they look like tea. In fact, one of the Cape areas carries the Afrikaans name *Teewaterskloof*: tea-waters-cliff. At Chocorua, the leaves are so perennially green, I guess, that the water enjoys the mentioned transparent green. And it was cold! Even at a distance of a couple of metres away from the stream, we were physically struck by a soothing coldness emanating from it in the sweltering heat. As we sat on the huge friendly warm goldenish silently singing rocks after the dip, a very

special visitor came by. Hovering about there, it was interested in Christien's blue-painted toenails. It perched on the rocks to sip moisture from it. I tried to follow it with my video camera, but its meandering flight of course made that nearly impossible. Then it slipped over the edge of the rocky cascade. It was a wary little blue, so akin (even in habit) to and different from the *Polyommatus* back in Africa: probably a *Glaucopsyche* species, that is, the silvery blue. It is tiny, but huge in soul: its Latin genus name enjoys a wealth of potential connotations with the ocean and myth. *Psyche* is the ancient Greek word for butterfly, but we know that it also means "soul." Glaucus is the mortal turned scaly sea-god upon eating a magical herb, and in the case of this "little soul," it probably refers to the fact that it has a metallic sheen, like scales on a fish. Serendipitously, the distinctive feature of the *Lepidoptera*—the Order to which all butterflies and moths belong—among insects is that they carry microscopic scales on their wings.

Upward on the footpath, another appeared and warily disappeared, not unlike a little glint of steel in a changing ocean: there and gone. Imagine amidst all this greenness and the rich brown footpath a little flash of bright metallic blue inside its greyish outer colours (on the underside of the wings, as *Lepidopterists* say): this was the magical nature of our visitor. As if nature just loves to give birth to incredible little creatures, or little white flowers floating ankle-high above the soil, such as the ones near the place where the metallic soullet appeared. I find it actually impossible (*six* 32) that big-hearted nature just continues to give these immense little gifts again and again and again. Is she inexhaustible?

And so, we were on our way to the top, to look out south from the summit towards Silver Lake and the place where Cummings looked from when he made his paintings of that summit. Let me blame it rather clumsily on jetlag, therefore: Christien was still very much up for the final stretch, but I no longer saw my hot and exhausted way up. There was something poignant, I think, in deciding not to go to the summit, after all. This summit, dear to Cummings, will remain near and far for me.

To conclude for the moment: mountains occur now and again in Cummings' poetry, perhaps most notably to show that to blame them for their altitude (CP 620)—as nature may have inconceivably done had she been more like us humans—would be entirely unnatural; would be part of a world made, not born (CP 554). But he spared his real attention to Chocorua for his painting. He may have felt, in his way, that the summit of such a

mountain could not be reached by words alone: that one needed access to something more direct and immediate in response to it—such as the concrete persuasion of line and shape and colour.

In his poetry, though, that same sense of these three concrete aesthetic phenomena surely gives rise to some of the most profoundly modern nature poetry that we have available to us. In its way, his poetry is a butterfly's glide that takes us along a wholly singular poetic path into the active and open centre of earth. For this, and for his many other poetic qualities, I will never forget him, and will continue to return to the path that his poetry offers me, just as it offers other paths to his many readers.



Figure 3: The summit of Mt. Chocorua: both near and far
(photo by Christien Terblanche)

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Notes

1. For Cummings' use of "I!ook," see "n(o)w" (CP 348) and Aaron Moe's "Two Converging Motifs."
2. In "Our Trip to Silver Lake," Norman Friedman and David V. Forrest

write of this monument: “We went back to the town of Silver Lake, where we had lunch at one end of the lake. In the village square by the shore we noticed a stone pillar (Photo 8) dedicated to Walter Kennett, landholder and town father, and to Cummings’ father, Reverend Edward Cummings (Photo 9). A Mr. Arnold, whom we met there, told us he was the great-grandson of a Mr. Al Stacey, who built it sometime before his death in 1958. Mr. Arnold thought it was a tribute by the relatives of people drowned in a lake-storm—hence the lighthouse shape—but this story has not been confirmed” (14-15).

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