

## "Wristers Etcetera": Cummings, the Great War, and Discursive Struggle

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### I

In his project to recover the lost American poetry of the First World War, Mark Van Wienen presents the response to the war of one of the signal writers of the literary generation of the 1920s, E. E. Cummings, in terms that characterize him as "disillusioned" in a pejorative sense, terms that isolate Cummings' response both from the war itself and from most other poetry about the war, except perhaps that of other modernist poets. Van Wienen sees Cummings' poetry as typical of the ironic modernist response to the war and makes an invidious comparison between this poetry and what he sees as the politically engaged poetry written during the war itself. Despite his clear sympathy with anti-war sentiments, Van Wienen finds the anti-war poetry of the 1920s such as that of Cummings debilitating because, unlike both the pro- and the anti-war poetry of the war years, as a "self-contained linguistic construct," it retreats into subjectivity, reducing poetry to a privatized, isolated discourse (*Partisans* 24, *Rendezvous* 7-10). While Van Wienen successfully, indeed admirably, pioneers new terrain in literary history, he inadequately characterizes and, perhaps as a consequence, undervalues the exact nature of Cummings' response to the Great War. In this article I will examine Cummings' response to the war in two poems: " 'next to of course god america i,'" a satirical poem that directly contests the discourse and culture characteristic of the war years, and "my sweet old etcetera," which adds to this satirical negation a positive moment. In this positive moment the lyrical nature of Cummings' response to the war, far from signifying a simple retreat from the social and the political, indicates his affirmation of a realm of value antithetical to the lies enacted and the destruction enabled by the pro-war discourse that he elsewhere negates. Taken together, satirical negation and lyrical affirmation in Cummings should be seen as moments in a vital discursive struggle, in which he contests the meaning of the Great War, very much a matter of public concern.<sup>1</sup>

While Van Wienen sees Cummings and postwar modernism generally in quite straightforward terms, Malcolm Cowley was rather more ambivalent in his assessment. Writing in the aftermath of World War Two, Mal-

colm Cowley offered that the writers of the 1920s “were often described as being ‘disillusioned,’ but I have always felt that the adjective was badly chosen” (*The Literary Situation* 37). Yet in *Exile’s Return*, his critical memoir of the 1920s, Cowley characterized the literary generation of the 1920s in terms consistent with the notion of disillusionment (37). Cowley describes the 1920s generation in this representative passage:

We had lost our ideals at an early age, and painlessly. If any of them survived the War, they had disappeared in the midst of the bickering at Versailles, or later with the steel strike, the Palmer Raids, the Centralia massacre. But they did not leave us bitter. We believed that we had fought for an empty cause, that the Germans were no worse than the Allies, nor better, that the world consisted of fools and scoundrels ruled by scoundrels and fools, that everybody was selfish and could be bought for a price, that we were as bad as the others—all this we took for granted. (*Exile’s Return* 83)

Written in the 1930s, *Exile’s Return* admits the shortcomings of the 1920s generation and its values, but also defends it by arguing that those values were a genuine and in large part justified response to the situation in which that generation found itself.

For example, Cowley presents these writers as averse to politics, but argues that this aversion sprang from a lack of viable options:

All the moderate reformers, including the right-wing Socialists, had been discredited by the war and the Treaty of Versailles; all the radicals were impractical and silly. Guild socialists, anarchists and syndicalists belonged to a forgotten age of innocent aspirations. The communists were shrill futile voices crying out that we should imitate Russia—and to what purpose? (217-18)

Cowley elaborates on and draws the logical conclusion of this analysis a few pages later when he discusses the desire, widespread in the artistic community, to escape from “the mass that believed in Rotarian ideals”:

There is danger in using the word “escape.” It suggests evasion and cowardice and flight from something that ought to be faced. Yet there is no real shame in retreating from an impossible situation or in fleeing from an enemy that seems too powerful to attack. (236)

Cowley presents the aversion to politics of the twenties generation as itself political in so far as it springs from the political situation. He thus makes a historical point to those who would impose a moral or ethical demand on writers to be “politically engaged” regardless of the nature of the situation.

Why then does Cowley eventually object to the terminology of disillusionment if it helps to describe a justified withdrawal from engagement in a hopeless confrontation? Because “disillusionment” is so rigorously and exclusively negative, describing these writers in terms of the loss of something that was false in the first place, a double negative that does not, however, necessarily become positive. In his defenses of the 1920s generation, Cowley suggests that within their negation lies some form of affirmation. While he suggests this in *Exile's Return*, Cowley clarifies the point in *The Literary Situation*, immediately following his objection that “disillusioned” was an “adjective... badly chosen” to describe the writers of the twenties: “They were something quite different: rebels in life and art. To be a rebel implies faith in one’s ability to do things better than those in power” (37). Cowley’s rejection and use of the terminology of disillusionment results not so much from the passage of time between the writing of *Exile's Return* and *The Literary Situation* as it springs from an ambivalence internal to his understanding of the experience and situation of the American writer in the 1920s, an ambivalence that helps to illuminate the work of one of the writers presented in *Exile's Return*, E. E. Cummings.

## II

Published in Cummings’ 1926 volume is 5, “ ‘next to of course god america i’” parodies American political speech, especially as Cummings found it in the context of the war and the immediate post-war era. The heavily rhetorical speech characteristic of the war, but certainly common enough in American political discourse generally, is directly—and caustically—mocked:

“next to of course god america i  
love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh  
say can you see by the dawn's early my  
country 'tis of centuries come and go  
and are no more what of it we should worry  
in every language even deafanddumb  
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry  
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum

why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-  
 iful than these heroic happy dead  
 who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter  
 they did not stop to think they died instead  
 then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"  
 He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water (CP 267)

This sonnet presents the speaker's words as an incoherent string of phrases that seem to rise to truth only by accident, particularly in the line, "they did not stop to think they died instead," which parodies Tennyson's famous war poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade":

Theirs not to make reply,  
 Theirs not to reason why,  
 Theirs but to do and die. (1035)

But while Tennyson's poem lives on in cultural memory, the texts characteristic of the more immediate atmosphere that generated Cummings' response do not. Representative examples are Agnes Chalmers' "Gethsemane Redeemed," Mrs. Adna Clarke's "Acrostic to the Flag," and Mary DeMoney's "Fields of Victory."

Chalmers' "Gethsemane Redeemed," occasioned by the Second Battle of the Marne, into which American troops were rushed to stop the 1918 German offensive that threatened to break the Allies' lines, resembles Cummings' poem as much sonically as otherwise, though not, of course, with parodic intent:

The men who watched on the Marne and prayed  
 With their guns that wondrous night  
 Redeemed Gethsemane. They weighed  
 A world in the scale of right.  
 They had naught to lose,  
 They had naught to choose  
 But to slumber not and wait.  
 The men who watched on the river bank  
 Slept not one hour too late. (13)

Also lightly echoing, consciously or not, Tennyson's "Charge," Chalmers' poem typifies the pietistic attitude toward the war that finds its purest ex-

pression in the opening lines of the second stanza, in which the American soldiers at the Marne, “prayed / With their guns,” lines one might find to be simultaneously the most and least truthful in the poem.

Not only does Mrs. Adna Clarke’s “Acrostic to the Flag” inform “next to of course god america i,” it is also one of a flood of “flag” poems to emerge from the war.

From its lofty, antiquated diction to its presumably unintentional similarity to Twain’s parodic “Ode to Stephen Dowling Botts, Deceased” through its use of a rhetorical question answered “Ah no!”, Clarke’s poem embodies the culture of uncritical and unreflective nationalism mocked by Cummings.

Yet Clarke may take second in this regard to Mary Hartley DeMoney, whose “Fields of Victory” manages in its four quatrains to contain, by my not entirely scientific method, 10 clichés central to wartime poetic discourse:

From over the fields of — Victory  
The poppies are nodding today  
Watching the silent sleepers,  
The Heroes who fell in the fray.

The birdies warble so sweetly  
Chanting their peaceful lay—  
Telling each soldier while he sleeps  
Of the joyous victory day.

Ah, rest in your peaceful slumbers!  
You fell, but not in vain,  
Your valiant deeds of courage  
Are felt o’er mountain and plain.

Sleep on! Ye men of all nations!  
Aye, sleep ’neath God’s glorious sun!  
Your names are emblazoned forever  
On God’s Honor Roll—“Well Done.”

(30)

When Cummings writes

what could be more beautiful  
than these heroic happy dead  
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter

he attempts to destroy poetry like that of DeMoney and the political speechmaking that is so very closely related to it. Poems like those of Chalmers, Clarke, and DeMoney are metrical, rhyming transcriptions of the American pro-war ideology of 1917 and 1918. Cummings attempts to negate this type of public speech not because it is public, but rather because it is false.

### III

While “ ‘next to of course god america i” may be seen as entirely negative, attempting only to destroy jingoistic nationalist discourse and presumably, by extension, jingoistic nationalism, “my sweet old etcetera”—also first published in is 5—combines poetic negation with a positive moment in which truth is held up against the falsity mocked in the bulk of the poem. “my sweet old etcetera” begins with the speaker saying:

my sweet old etcetera  
aunt lucy during the recent  
war could and what is  
more did tell you just  
what everybody was fighting

for

(CP 275)

Thus the poem begins with Aunt Lucy, whom Cummings defines precisely in terms of her familiarity with the discourses of 1917-1918, with “just / what everybody was fighting / for.” There was no shortage of poems detailing the aims and fundamental characteristics of the various combatant nations.<sup>2</sup>

In these poems, as one might expect, the two nations whose war aims and fundamental characteristics were announced most often were the United States and Germany. For example, two poems released in June 1918 to the press by the Vigilantes, a pro-war group of writers, state clearly that for which the two nations, respectively, fight. Abbie Farwell Brown’s “Fourth of July, 1918” presents the cause of the U.S. as simple and intrinsic to the nation’s character:

Let us be sternly quiet on this day,  
 While they are far away;  
 Proud of the stark tradition we inherit  
 Of our forefathers' merit;  
 Vowed to devote our thought, our word, our deed  
 To the same cause for which their scions bleed,—  
 Our young Americans across the sea,—  
 World-Liberty! (n.p.)

This poem concentrates two themes crucial to much war poetry of 1917-18: first, filial obligation to the national forefathers; and second, universalism, the idea that America's cause in the war is universal in character, not particular to any national interest. Brown expresses this through the capitalized compound noun "World-Liberty," emphasizing its conceptual status through the use of the upper case and the hyphen.<sup>3</sup>

While Brown focuses on the United States, Lee Wilson Dodd presents the American cause in relation to that of Germany in "Pan-Germany":

The world's black future shall repeat  
 The midnights of its past.  
  
 Then shall be trampled 'neath Thy heel  
 The harlot, Liberty;  
 Then man, re-chained, shall humbly feel  
 How sweet is Slavery! (n.p.)

Dodd reprises in this comparison some of the same themes found in Farwell: "Liberty" is conceived of as a universal cause whose agent is the United States, hence the defeat of "fair Columbia" would entail a "black future" for the entire world. Germany, on the other hand, is the agent of a universal slavery that amalgamates the past as an object of fear in the traditional American republican manner with fear of a rationalized future of "stern Efficiency."<sup>4</sup> This, then, is the type of poetic discourse that underlies the reference by Cummings' speaker to his Aunt Lucy.

Cummings shifts from Aunt Lucy's encyclopedic and exact knowledge of national war aims—as related in the media of the day—to the rather different engagement of the speaker's sister, Isabel, with the war. The poem lists items knitted by the sister in such a way that sheer productivity be-

comes a comic expression of Isabel's lack of awareness of the nature of the war:

my sister

isabel created hundreds  
(and  
hundreds)of socks not to  
mention shirts fleaproof earwarmers

etcetera wristers etcetera

(CP 275)

The sheer asyndetic seriality of “shirts fleaproof earwarmers,” accentuated by “etcetera,” makes the sister’s activity appear pointless, which would seem to be not a matter of the intrinsic quality of the activity itself—shirts and socks are listed as well as the rather less functional “wristers,” a kind of fingerless mitten—but rather of the activity as it takes place within the context of the war.<sup>5</sup> Placed in relation with the poetry of 1917 and 1918, Cummings’ depiction of the industriousness of the speaker’s sister provides an ironic counterpart to that of a number of women represented in the poetry of the war.



*“Our Boys Need Sox—Knit Your Bit” poster for the American Red Cross, circa 1917-1918.*



An entire subgenre of poems written during the war encourages, celebrates, and praises the practice of sewing and knitting by women in wartime. For example, William Hartley Holcomb's "The Women Knit" focuses on the proper performance of gender roles in wartime—the title is not as casual as it might initially appear. Holcomb begins with a brief walk through American martial history from the American Revolution through the War of 1812 and the Civil War. From the beginning men have fought while women knitted, for this is the lot in life accorded them. And so too is it in the present war:

And today they knit while soldiers train  
    To fight overseas for our land,  
And they knit in the Love that makes men brave  
    With a magic dexterous hand.  
And history says 'twas ever thus,  
    As that is the way of the world,  
For women to knit and men to fight  
    The legions against them hurled.  
Those warm woolen socks and knitted scarf  
    That come to him over the sea,  
Bring with them a flood of tender love  
    And rechristen fond memory;  
They baptize anew his high design  
    To win for his flag there unfurled,  
For women must knit, and men must fight  
    For that is the way of the world. (31-2)

Typical of much First World War poetry, "The Women Knit" presents the war in terms derived from a distant, romanticized, and—given the nature of industrialized warfare—seemingly irrelevant past: the knitted goods replicate the talismans of chivalry, while the troops fight "legions against them hurled," and entertain "high design." This particular "knitting" poem thus enters into the anachronistic neo-medievalist discourse characteristic of much U.S. First World War poetry.

Similarly concerned with knitting but more ambitious is Anthony Henderson Euwer's "The Hands that Drive the Needles," a poem that manages to branch out from its local subject to include a passage on the Statue of

Liberty, a bit of the American prospect poem, a psychologically astute interpretation of knitting as a form of prayer, and a dash of American millennialism in the Wilsonian vein also seen in Brown and Dodd and much in evidence in 1917 and 1918. The poem begins,

Oh the knitters—have you seen them? Why they're knitting every  
where,  
Knitting helmets, sweaters, wristlets for the soldier-boys to wear,  
And those who don't are learning how and those who won't I guess,  
Will soon be driven to it from their very loneliness. (25)

While the poem begins in this fairly lighthearted manner, by the end it takes a turn toward the serious, asking,

Oh who shall say the knitters have not done a noble thing--  
That their knitting will not figure in the final reckoning,  
When the battling, blood-soaked nations shall their destinies fulfill,  
And the Voice that stilled the tempest shall again say, "Peace—be still!"  
And the hands that drove the needles for the boys beneath the sod  
Shall be raised in supplication to the great, white throne of God?  
Will He not hear their pleading for a peace that shall be worth  
All the lives that bled and suffered for a weary world's re-birth? (29)

The emphasis in the very last line, on the remaking of the world in a new image, "a weary world's rebirth," repeats Woodrow Wilson's universalist and millennialist vision of the war and the U.S. role in it, a vision that was quite understandably criticized in the post-war era since the war had most certainly not lead to this vision being fulfilled. Thus, "The Women Knit" and "The Hands that Drive the Needles" are broadly typical of a segment of U.S. First World War poetry, participating in the neo-medievalism and the millennialism, respectively, common in pro-war poetry of the day. Knitting is seen as a practical, and perhaps more significantly, also a symbolic means of contributing to a war effort that is conceived in precisely these neo-medievalist and millennialist ways.

#### IV

Cummings continues to engage with this pro-war poetic discourse, moving toward a contrast between the pro-war sentiments characteristic of the speaker's family and the speaker's experience of the war. Cummings

uses—or appears to use—hyperbole to characterize the speakers’ parents, and their attitudes toward service in the war.

my  
mother hoped that  
i would die etcetera  
bravely of course my father used  
to become hoarse talking about how it was  
a privilege and if only he  
could (CP 275)

When the speaker’s mother hopes that he “would / die etcetera / bravely of course” Cummings is certainly employing hyperbole as a comic device. Yet if one looks at poetry written during the war itself, one finds that Cummings inflates the parental rhetoric of the day very little.

Responding to the culture that underwrote American intervention into the war, Cummings’ poem ironically negates a poem such as William H. Barter’s “That’s My Boy.” The title serves as a refrain repeated three times by the mother of a serviceman. The first use occurs as the mother watches her son march off to war with his comrades and proudly comments, “That’s my boy” (9). The second is prompted by the announcement that her son has been awarded the Croix de Guerre. The final appearance of the refrain occurs when she

. . . reads that her Jim has gone.  
Same old smile of joy,  
Broken heart, but smiling on,  
“THAT’S MY BOY.” (11)

“That’s My Boy” appears in Barter’s *My Flag and My Boy, and Other War Poems*, dedicated “To the American Mothers,” and is one of a vast number of poems focused on the figure of the mother of a serviceman. Cummings’ hyperbole in “my sweet old etcetera” simply replicates in an ironic register the un-ironic emotional dynamics of a poem such as “That’s My Boy.”<sup>6</sup>

Fathers also appear in the poetry of 1917 and 1918, but to find the context most relevant to Cummings, one must turn to Edward S. Van Zile’s “We Pay the Price—We Old!” a poem that focuses on age, the crux of the father’s statement:

Youth pays the price, you say? But I am old,  
My hair is white, the blood in me is cold;  
But is the agony that comes to me  
Less keen than his who dies beyond the sea?....

We pay the price, we old, who cannot fare  
Far, far afield with our crusaders there;  
Nor know the frenzy and the joy of strife,  
Nor win the death that ennobles life. (21)

Like the father in “my sweet old etcetera,” Van Zile’s speaker regrets that his age bars him from fighting and with luck, in Van Zile’s poem, dying gloriously. Cummings no doubt drew upon his own experience: the verse that Cummings’ father sent to his son via telegram shortly before he disembarked for France differs from much of the wartime poetry only in its personal mode of address:

As I said in advance  
I envy your chance  
of breaking a lance  
for freedom in France  
by driving and mending  
an ambulance. (Kennedy, *Dreams* 137)

The parental figures in “my sweet old etcetera” are not only of potential biographical interest, but also—and more significantly—typify broadly expressed sentiments of the day. Both the mother and the father in the Cummings poem express sentiments—slightly inflated in the mother’s case—found elsewhere in American Great War poetry, and which were part of the manipulation of American culture necessary to promote U.S. intervention in the war.<sup>7</sup>

In the case at hand, Cummings parodies the familial and generational rhetoric used in much WW1 war poetry, a rhetoric that not only connects a number of pro-war poems with one another, but which also connects the present to the past through an elastic rhetoric of filial obligation. As in Brown’s “Fourth of July, 1918” (9-10), and Holcomb’s “The Aegis of Our Fathers” this obligation expands to one’s forefathers generally, a rhetorical strategy firmly rooted in American culture, dating back in American liter-

ary history to William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Holcomb employs a rhetoric consistent with Bradford's instructions for the second generation of Plymouth Separatists in the right understanding of the removal to North America. Bradford describes the experience of their arrival in New England eloquently, then asks the rhetorical question, "May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: 'Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried out unto the Lord, and He heard their voice and looked on their adversity,' . . . . He hath delivered them from the hand of the oppressor" (63). Holcomb begins his poem, "Stain not the glory of our Father's [*sic*] time" (33), immediately articulating the imagined history of the nation state within a familial terminology that establishes the sense of filial obligation. He then recalls the voyage across the Atlantic, presenting this as likewise a means of escape from "the hand of the oppressor":

In vain they crossed the strange and boisterous sea  
To found a land for all who would be free,  
If we lack valor now to lead the fight  
And make secure for all their great birth-right. (33)

In this vision of American history Holcomb elides slavery, indentured servitude, and penal transportation as the occasion for removal to North America, making the poem a worthy, if quite unconscious, predecessor to Cummings' " 'next to of course god america i,'" as well as an example of an expanded form of the rhetoric of filial obligation satirized in "my sweet old etcetera."

V

After surveying the parental attitudes toward his participation in the war, the speaker shifts the subject of "my sweet old etcetera" to himself, a perspective that, Cummings implies, provides greater access to the truth of the war than does that of his home front family, whose knowledge of the war appears to be limited to the pervasive pro-war discourse. The contrast between the truth the speaker knows and the lies the family believes is emphasized by Cummings' use of "meanwhile" to begin the final portion of the poem:

meanwhile my  
  
self etcetera lay quietly

in the deep mud et  
 cetera  
 (dreaming,  
 et  
 cetera,of  
 Your smile  
 eyes knees and of your Etcetera) (CP 275)

The playfulness of the poem's repetition of "etcetera" and the mildly carnal nature of the speaker's dreaming contrasts with the idealized and desexualized objects of a number of "sweetheart" poems written during the war.

For example, in "My Love Is a Soldier Boy" William Hartley Holcomb imagines a woman reconciling herself to her beloved's departure with Spartan resolve. While she acknowledges that if

...he need not take the chance  
 Of that "two per cent" of lost ones  
 On those warring fields of France,  
 I would be the happiest mortal  
 That kind God has ever made:  
 Is there no way but through sorrow  
 That old Earth's sad debts are paid?

But the poem ends with renewed resolve:

There now, "Buck up," says my soldier;  
 "Right about" and "Dress" the line;  
 "Forward, March"; I'll show him, women  
 Don't all need to fret and whine;  
 That we give up for our country  
 All we have, and keep dry eyes;  
 If the roll call finds them absent—  
 Then—why, that's our sacrifice. (24-25)

The speaker here is not only regendered, mimicking male ideals of behavior, behaving in what the poem understands to be male, soldierly fashion, but is also utterly divorced from her emotions. Because of this the poem ends on a note of reconciliation which, because of the previous abjuring of

emotion, seems all too easy.

More complex is Agnes Chalmers' "A Bully Sweetheart," which simultaneously restores at least some of the beloved's physical existence and masculinizes her to an even greater degree—or at least more explicitly—than does "The Soldier Boy's Homecoming":

I've got a bully sweetheart over there,  
    Back home in the good old, true old U.S.A.  
I'll say she's treated me right on the square  
    Since I have been away.

She hasn't said: "I wish that you were here,"  
    Or, "I am missing you. The time seems long."  
She hasn't written once of doubt or fear  
    Or loss or war or wrong.

I've got a bully sweetheart over there,  
    Back there in good old, true old U.S.A.  
I'll say she's treated me right on the square  
    Since I have been away.

I've got a bully sweetheart, that I know.  
    She seems forever like a chum of mine,  
A brother or a father or a friend,  
    A mother often, too, this girl of mine,  
A pal to have and lend.  
    She never once has written of a tear,  
    An ache, a pain, a loss, a cloud, a fear  
Since I have been away,  
This sweetheart girl of mine in U.S.A.

I've got a bully sweetheart over there,  
    Back in good old, true old U.S.A.  
I'll say she's treated me right on the square  
    Since I have been away.     (21-2)

This poem focuses on the beloved's refusal to acknowledge any emotional reaction to her soldier boy's absence to such a degree that one is almost tempted to read it as ironic, something that Chalmers' volume as a whole

certainly does not license. While more than a few “sweetheart” poems may be found in the American literature of the First World War,<sup>8</sup> and while the figure of the beloved rendered as a “bully sweetheart” presents a figure of reliability, girlfriends and even wives provide potentially unstable props upon which to rely because they are objects of romantic love.

One way of avoiding the potential instability of romantic love as an underpinning of male resolve lies in the ultimate disembodiment of the sweetheart that also allows her to remain feminine, seen in William H. Barter’s “The Soldier Boy’s Homecoming”:

When the dawn comes to the trenches,  
    And the light is breaking through,  
And I’m feeling kind of tired and weary, too;  
    There’s a something keeps me cheery,  
It’s the light of love, my deary,  
    The light that sends me wandering back to you.

When I’m standing post at darkness,  
    Listening all the dreary night,  
Watching shadows still, way out on No Man’s Land,  
    Some one seems to be quite near to me  
With a hand on mine to cheer me,  
    It’s my mother’s hand, I know and understand. (41)

And here we have arrived at something like the logical opposite of “my sweet old etcetera”: the trenches are perhaps unpleasant, but not gruesome. (One of the strengths of Cummings’ poem is that “etcetera” takes on different implied content in each use, some of which is gruesome indeed.) The imagined presence is not an embodied woman, but rather a sentimentalized mother.<sup>9</sup> Cummings’ poem implies a contrast between the reality of the pleasures of the dreamed lover’s “smile / eyes knees and...Etcetera” and the falsity of that which lies behind the omniscience of Aunt Lucy, the industriousness of the sister, and the rhetoric of the parents.

## VI

In both “‘next to of course god america i” and “my sweet old etcetera” Cummings thus responds to quite specific elements of American poetic culture—though not just poetic culture—that manifested themselves in 1917 and 1918. In these poems, and in his poems about the war generally,



Cummings set out to destroy, through satirical means, part of the ideological armature of the U.S. war effort—an armature that did not simply vanish or become irrelevant once the war ended any more than it sprang into existence *ex nihilo* in 1917. Any account of the literature of the early twentieth century that removes this writing from the social world from which it springs and to which it responds simultaneously removes from it much of its significance. To be fair to Mark Van Wienen, the tendency in Cummings toward a subjectivism based in romantic individualism, ably discussed by his biographer Richard Kennedy, remains central to understanding the trajectory of Cummings' career (*Dreams* 178). Furthermore, the objection, reiterated in different terms by Van Wienen, that Cummings undercuts his political satire in a poem such as "my sweet old etcetera" has a distinguished history, and was stated powerfully in 1935 by Kenneth Burke: "Cummings as satirist is driven by his historical amorphousness into personal moods as his last court of appeal" (63). Burke's point certainly has some force: Cummings' most basic attitudes toward life forbid a thorough understanding of people as social animals (Kennedy, *Dreams*; Friedman, "Cummings Posthumous" 264-73).

At the same time, however, in his response to the war, Cummings criticized the discourse—and through it the culture and ideology—mobilized to enable the U.S. to prosecute the war, a war justified in lofty terms by President Wilson. The ultimate target of Cummings' satire in these poems is the entire propaganda apparatus that used deceptive language to promote to the U.S. public a war whose ultimate end was to establish the U.S. as the successor to the U.K. as the hegemonic power in the capitalist world system (Arrighi 58-74, 265-300; Van der Pijl 50-75). Cummings' engagement with pro-war discourse ought not, then, be understood as a form of disengagement.

Beyond this, Cummings' movement into a decidedly subjective discourse toward the end of "my sweet old etcetera" in a way deepens his engagement with and critique of pro-war ideology. As a poet Cummings inclines more powerfully than any other major American poet of the first half of the twentieth century toward the lyrical, toward a poetic mode in which "the centre of the thing is not the occurrence itself, but the state of mind which is mirrored in it" (Hegel 2:1116). Lyricism suited Cummings' objection to the world unfolding around him, an objection that largely conforms to the general objection of the 1920's generation prior to the advent of the Great Depression, as described by Cowley in *Exile's Return*: "Although the

existing system could satisfy men's physical needs, they believed that it could never satisfy the needs of the individual spirit" (227).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore this lyricism underlies Kennedy's observation that "Although within short poems Cummings was able to work out patterns, he had no ability to develop real structural complexity. The problem is even more evident in his prose works. The only structural principle he was able to follow was an autobiographical one, of the sort we find in *The Enormous Room*" ("E. E. Cummings" 39).<sup>11</sup> Thus Van Wiene is correct to identify an irreducibly subjective element in Cummings' war poems generally, and in "my sweet old etcetera" specifically.

Yet to sunder the subjective existence expressed and realized in lyric poetry from the social world that gives rise to it is a profound mistake, whether committed by formalists or by anti-formalists such as Van Wiene. The nature of this mistake is revealed in T. W. Adorno's programmatic defense of lyric poetry, in the course of which Adorno locates lyric within the dynamic relationship between the individual and society:

It is not only that the individual is inherently socially mediated, not only that its contents are always social as well. Conversely, society is formed and continues to live only by virtue of the individuals whose quintessence it is. Classical philosophy once formulated a truth now disdained by scientific logic: subject and object are not rigid and isolated poles but can be defined only in the process in which they distinguish themselves from one another and change. The lyric is the aesthetic test of that dialectical philosophical proposition. (1:44)

Adorno maintains simultaneously the ontological priority of the social to the individual and the constitutive role of the individual in forming the social, which is to say, the ineluctably dialectical nature of the individual-social relation. While the social is irreducible to the individual, it may be known, if only in a partial way, through the individual; and for Adorno the peculiar virtue of the lyric lies in its ability to reveal the social from the inside, as it were. Seen in these terms, Van Wiene's attempt to discredit Cummings' response to the war merely perpetuates through an inversion of values the split between subject and object, between form and content, that characterizes the formalism that would appear to be Van Wiene's clearest enemy.

Adorno argues that lyric is irreducibly subjective, and precisely by dint of this therefore irreducibly objective as well; in his gloss on Adorno's

writing on language and style Fredric Jameson refers to “the objectivity that speaks through this most subjective of phenomena” (205). It is indeed “objectivity that speaks” here because, as Robert Kaufman explains, “Adorno’s notion is not that a blithe, free-floating subjectivity should fancifully usurp the power of social reality, arbitrarily issuing pronouncements that presume to determine a social content or meaning whose determination really (‘objectively,’ as it were) belongs to society and history” (359). Rather, lyric utterance permits objectivity to speak through the voice of the subject, a subject that speaking as a subject renders visible (or audible) the experiential reality of the objective. Within such an understanding of lyric we may begin to understand more fully the nature of Cummings’ response to the war.

“ ‘next to of course god america i’ ” consists of a single movement, one of negation, while “my sweet old etcetera” operates in two phases: in the first phase, similar to the whole of “ ‘next to of course god america i,’ ” Cummings negates the rhetoric characteristic of the Great War era, which used notions of bravery and sacrifice—a set of values false in the context—to induce young men to risk death, disease, and a dehumanizing exposure to violence on an unprecedented scale. Such risks, it became evident by the 1920s, were not undergone, as Wilson had claimed, “for a universal dominion of right by such concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations, and make the world itself at last free” (348). Second, in the positive phase, Cummings affirms against these false values, what the poem asserts as real ones, those of: “Your smile / eyes knees and of your Etcetera.” These may not be the only real things of value in the world, and need not be held so in order to find the poem poignant, insightful, and in its peculiar way, beautiful. But Cummings reminds us of the importance of those modest, delicate values of the flesh and the spirit, and within them the promise of happiness, values and promises whose delicate nature was nowhere more powerfully demonstrated than on the Western front in the First World War.

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## Notes

1. It is worth noting that Van Wienen tries to rule out any contextual consideration of a poem such as “my sweet old etcetera” by identifying it as a modernist poem, and hence as a speech act that emphasizes locution “and thereby invites inspection as a self-contained linguistic construct, however

dialogic, fragmentary, or indeterminate its effects” (*Partisans* 24). Among other faults, this view commits the error of a definitional fiat that would exclude any poem labeled “modernist” from consideration in its illocutionary aspect (to use the terminology of speech-act theory), despite the fact that every locutionary act is also illocutionary. There is simply no good reason to accept Van Wiene’s view of things insofar as it excludes an intrinsic aspect of poetic utterance. And this is to remain within the theoretical framework of speech-act theory, to say nothing of what happens if one reconfigures the framework, as I attempt in this essay by introducing T.W. Adorno’s analysis of lyric poetry.

2. For example, Alfred Antoine Furman alone provides a fairly comprehensive survey of nations in his work. *Martial Lyrics: Poems on the War for Democracy* offers “The New Japan” (71-2), “Brazil” (75), and “To the Serbians” (104-05), while *The League of Nations* features poems on countries such as Austria (74-75), Germany (76-77), and England (106-07).

3. The universalism characteristic of American discourse and ideology in the First World War, particularly as American war aims were presented by President Wilson, clearly derives from the tradition of seeing America as the “redeemer nation,” a tradition whose origins lie in the colonial era. See Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*; Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny*; and Richard M. Gamble, *The War for Righteousness*.

4. Ironically, while German “Efficiency” figures as part of the “Golden Age of Might” decried by the poem, the U.S. as well as Germany led the way in the promotion of the second industrial revolution value of efficiency, with the American Frederick Winslow Taylor as perhaps its purest avatar. As Samuel Haber notes, “Efficiency became a patriotic duty” in the U.S. during the First World War (119).

5. Van Wiene shows in *Partisans and Poets* that numerous poems were written to celebrate knitting and sewing to support the war effort. He also reprints in *Rendezvous with Death* Sidney G. Doolittle’s cantankerous “Enthusiasts” (237-38), which decries the knitting of sweaters. “Wristers,” a kind of fingerless mitten, as well as what might be called patriotic knitting generally, are mocked also in Lafayette Escadrille member James Norman Hall’s memoir *High Adventure: A Narrative of Air Fighting in France* (228).

6. A representative list of First World War poems about mothers might include Everard Jack Appleton, “Little Mother,” *With the Colors*, 18-19; Amelia Josephine Burr, “Mothers,” *The Silver Trumpet: A Book of Verse*,

16-17; William Hartley Holcomb, "Goodbye, Mother," *Poems of Patriotism*, 16-17; Erwin Clarkson Garrett, "The Battle Mother" and "Little War Mothers," *Trench Ballads and Other Verses*, 38-39, 62. Edward F. Garesché's volume is entitled *War Mothers*. Mother's Day became officially recognized as a day of national observance by a proclamation of President Woodrow Wilson in May 1914; the frequency of poems about mothers in this body of poetry appears to be part of a larger cultural movement or period feeling. William H. Barter's *My Flag and My Boy* is dedicated "To the American Mothers," while Everard Jack Appleton had a poem "Muvver Dear" in the collection *Our Mothers*, which featured many of the luminaries of Schoolroom and Genteel poetry.

7. During the First World War poets often used the language of family to make the war more palatable. Carl Sandburg's 1917 poem, "The Four Brothers" (Van Wienen, *Rendezvous with Death*, 196-201), would be the most obvious example, but it also figures in Abbie Farwell Brown's "Fourth of July, 1918" (pp 9-10), in which England is that "stern Mother at whose knee we learned / Of liberty." France figures as "our dearest sister." In part the language of family here allows the poet to negotiate past conflicts between the U.S., England, and France in terminology that familiarizes such conflict to the reader while simultaneously avoiding any real encounter with the relationship between these nation-states.

8. See also, for example, Amelia Josephine Burr, "The Meeting," *The Silver Trumpet: A Book of Verse*, 19-20; David M. Funk, "The Girl I Left Behind" and "The Faithful Girl," *The Doughboy's Poems*, 11-13, 38; Belle Gray Taylor, *War Verse*, 9; Edward S. Van Zile, "The Armory Steps," *Songs of the World War*, 22-23.

9. Jennifer Haytock notes that the mother as female figure of the home front has the advantage over the girlfriend or wife in that her bond with her son is virtually unbreakable (34).

10. Norman Friedman describes this aspect of Cummings' vision thoroughly in *E. E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry* (7-35).

11. Recent research on poem groupings and the complex structure of E. E. Cummings' volumes calls into question Kennedy's assertions. [Editor's Note]

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