

"IS" as an Action Verb: Cummings and the Act of Being

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Perhaps uncommonly, I came to the works of E. E. Cummings via his prose work, *The Enormous Room*, which, while it shares some expressionistic qualities with his poetry, is not so dependent on the formal devices of poetry. My approach to Cummings' poetry, then, has typically emphasized his ideology more than his experiments with form. Further, a professor at a small university, I teach primarily survey courses rather than more specialized courses, and what opportunities I have to teach Cummings are generally limited to the poems commonly found in anthologies. So, what I plan to discuss may not so much shed any new light on these poems as to provide a slightly different context from which to explore them.

A concept that gains prominence in *The Enormous Room* is that of "IS," a term Cummings uses to describe the Delectable Mountains, a group of individuals who demonstrate what Cummings views as traits of the 'true' individual; it is a term often associated with other recurring terms in Cummings' works such as "Alive," "Real," and "Now" and is likewise associated with "Spring." So, in beginning my discussions of Cummings' poetry with students, I first introduce Cummings' definition of an "IS," which Richard Kennedy found in some of Cummings' notes and reproduces in his biography, *Dreams in the Mirror*:

IS = the cold 3rd singular of the intense live verb, to feel

Not to completely feel = thinking, the warm principle

Incomplete thinking = Belief, the box in which god and all other nouns are kept. (217)

I ask students to reflect on the passage and to identify one poem in the anthology which they think demonstrates a particular facet of the definition.

Sometimes students jump right to the point: One student identified the differences described in the definition as existential states of being, and that led directly into a discussion of Cummings choice of "IS"—which we quickly identified as the third person singular of the "verb of being." Other times, the students are slower on the uptake—perhaps a bit intimidated by

the seeming esoteric formulation of the definition—so I begin with a grammatical review of the verb “to be” and its forms. Then we parse out the implications of Cummings’ description of “IS” as a “live” verb and his equating it to “feeling,” which we later contrast with the opposing state: “belief.”

One of the advantages, in this case, of teaching at a Christian university is that the students typically share a common language that makes a distinction between “being” or “feeling” and “belief” fairly easy to explain. Our goal as a faculty is to challenge students’ faith, not so much to undermine it, but to force them to “make it their own.” In other words, not to allow students to settle for blind acceptance of whatever their parents or youth pastor taught them, but to push them to come to their own conclusions about what they believe—an endeavor Cummings would approve of, since one of his main goals is to eliminate second-hand ideas. That, I suggest to the students, is a key difference between “IS” and “Belief.” The reason God is in this box called “belief” is because many Christians fail to truly explore their faith and its implications.

“IS,” then, is a state of being in which one is fully self-aware and self-determined and in which one makes up one’s own mind. And, whether they initially comprehended the fullness of this definition, most students are successful in identifying poems that exemplify it. The most common response when I ask which poem reflects Cummings’ definition is “i sing of Olaf glad and big” (CP 340), primarily because it clearly demonstrates an individual who refuses to accept the status quo. Rather than accepting the beliefs of the “kindred intellects” (i.e. conformists) who “evoke/allegiance per blunt instruments” (lms. 13-14), Olaf stands up for his views as a “conscientious object-or” (ln. 3). And, while the military tries to make an “object” of him, he passively resists by insisting that he “will not kiss your fucking flag” (ln. 19) and that there is “some shit [he] will not eat” (ln. 33). (Some of the more conservative students bristle at these lines, but most see its empowering effect on Olaf.) At this point I sometimes bring up Cummings’ experience during the First World War and his own rejection of the regimentation expected of him in the Ambulance Corps, and of course this could lead to discussions of other poems in which he rejects empty patriotism.

“i sing of Olaf” is a good introduction both to what Cummings means by “IS” and to his use of language which is still pretty standard, with only a few typographical deviations, parenthetical elements, and run-on words.

But this sets the scene nicely for a poem like “the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls” (CP 115), which I introduce as a negative example of an “IS,” or as an example of “Belief.” Picking up with this poem on the second day, I have students work to explain phrases such as “furnished souls” (ln. 1) and “comfortable minds” (ln. 2). They usually pick up on the notion of “comfortable minds” in relation to conformity and not thinking for oneself. In a recent exam in which I asked students to discuss the first two lines of the poem in relation to Cummings’ “IS,” one student wrote:

IS equals living in the now and not conforming. These women are conforming because they have comfortable minds. When someone conforms, they are comfortable. They are not tested or challenged; they are just comfortable. The “IS” people do not conform and are not comfortable because they are always being challenged to see how they feel and think about issues.

The idea of “furnished souls” is usually less obvious to students, though they do see how it relates in general to conformity. To elaborate on the image of “furnished souls,” I give an example of a furnished basement apartment I rented when I was in grad school—an apartment whose sofa was a pink-flowered pattern with lace throw pillows and whose bedroom was papered in a pale yellow with matching flowered sheets and bedspread. (What can I say, the rent was cheap). Clearly, I explain, this apartment said less of my personality than it did of the woman who let the apartment. Even in their institutionalized dorm rooms, they have more of a means of expressing their personality with posters of their favorite rock bands and the like. Thus, to have a “furnished soul” is to believe what others have told you as opposed to “making your faith your own.”

Likewise, we discuss the “unscented shapeless spirited” (ln. 4) daughters and the empty, mindless acts of charity performed by the women as well as the angry moon which Cummings often associated with the imagination and which the Cambridge ladies have so casually placed in a box—along with “god and all other nouns.”

From “the Cambridge ladies” we move to a poem that students find much more esoteric, and one I had to study for some time before I finally became comfortable with it: “my father moved through dooms of love” (CP 520-521). Most readers, despite the poem’s complexity, gather that the poem is a positive portrayal of the poet’s father, but how it works exactly is not as immediately evident. So, again, I have students pick out phrases and

images that provide some evidence of the positive portrayal, especially any that tie to our understanding of “IS.” Sometimes I’ll begin by pointing out the phrase at the end of the poem, “my father lived his soul” (line 67), and contrast that with the Cambridge ladies’ “furnished souls.” Then we look specifically for forms of the verb to be. For example, the lines “. . . he to foolish and to wise / offered immeasurable is” (lines 39-40) uses “IS” directly—emphasized by the line break after it—and suggests that the father is an embodiment of compassion, or feeling. Conversely, we see phrases such as “sames of am” (line 2) and “conform the pinnacle of am” (line 60) as demonstrating how the world tends to undermine a true sense of being by encouraging sameness and conformity. This opens the door to other phrases, which suggest similar ideas but which are not directly tied to the verb of being, including images of “awakening” and “creation” that also dominate the poem. One phrase I particularly emphasize are the lines “. . . from unburied which / floats the first who” (lines 9-10), which as in “i sing of Olaf” shows an object—a “which”—becoming a “who”—a person or individual. The father of the poem, then, enables others to reach this higher state of being.

From here, I comment on the progression of the seasons in the poem, paying particular attention to spring, which in light of “IS” and its association with being “Alive” gains a new dimension. This, then, guides our discussion of the other poems such as “in Just—” (CP 27) and “O sweet spontaneous” (CP 58) in which spring factors so prominently. Spring is now a season students can approach in its full implications, beyond its generic connotations.

Cummings’ concept of “IS” thus becomes a foundational idea that provides a context for understanding the ideology that permeates much of Cummings’ poetry.

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Works Cited

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