

## The "small eye poet" from Imagism to "not numerable whom"

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We are led to Believe a Lie  
When we see not Thro the Eye  
—William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence"

Cummings' poems work to erase the space between the Eye of perception and the lower-case "i" persona of the poet. Since feeling is first, the Eye of perception is primary; but it is also coterminous with the lower-case "i" of the poet. As Cummings wrote to his mother in 1922: "in the beginning was the Eye(not the mind)" (qtd. in Kennedy, *Dreams* 4). Cummings here may be echoing Thoreau: "There has been nothing but the sun and eye from the beginning" (qtd. in Eiseley, "Vision" 232). The "beginning" that both Thoreau and Cummings refer to is the beginning of an individual consciousness, a lower-case i/eye. Also, Cummings is revising the biblical "In the beginning was the Word [*Logos*]" (John 1:1) to say that the innocent eye shapes our "i" before any verbalizations—yet the ghost of the logos lingers in Cummings' "Eye" (and "i"). In his poetry, Cummings merges the visual and verbal eye and "i" to depict the (e)mergence and realization of a multiple self at one with the natural, actual world, whether ambient air, sun, the eye of a bird, or the self of a lover.

Of course, the lower-case "i" functions in many ways throughout Cummings' texts. For one thing, the lower-case "i" persona appears mostly in the poetry, where it assumes a variety of roles. And despite being almost exclusively autobiographical, Cummings' prose works (essays, *The Enormous Room*, *EIMI*, the *six nonlectures*, letters, prefaces) almost always refer to the author's self with a capital "I." In addition, in *The Enormous Room* and *EIMI*, Cummings created third-person aliases such as "C" or "Kem-min-kz" or "comrade K," which, especially in *EIMI*, emphasize his multiple personae, roles, and selves. It is the poet—and not the prose writer or the everyday person who writes letters—who is (has, sees with) a "small eye" (*Letters* 109). The capital I of the prose seems easy to interpret: it is the everyday social "I" that T. S. Eliot calls "personality," the "I" that thinks of itself as unitary and consistent (and thus Capital).<sup>1</sup> When the capital "I" appears in "so many selves(so many fiends and gods)" (CP 609), the

man “that calls him[self] ‘I’ ” is seen as “a fool.” In the prose works, the supposed consistency of this “I” is called into question by the many aliases Cummings attaches to it, and often these aliases refer to a social, outsider view of the self, such as the “peesahel y hoodozhnik (writer & painter)” of *EIMI* (xvi). In *i: six nonlectures*, Cummings promises to present his audience with “one whole half” (63) of his aesthetic self: the writer but not the painter. And, though the lower-case “i” appears in both the title of the book and the titles of each nonlecture, it is as the upper-case “I” that Cummings appears in the prose of the lectures. And since this “I” of the *nonlectures* consistently claims not to know and only to feel, he presents himself throughout the book mostly by a single alias: “ignoramus” (3, 5, 26, 30, 53, 63, 110). Once (that I have found) he appears as “our unhero” (30). However, this “I” is also presented as any and all of the personae found in his writings (*six* 4). For example, the protagonists of the plays *Him* and *Santa Claus* are termed, respectively, “our nonhero” and “our unhero” (*six* 81, 108). In addition, the “I” plays other roles, most notably that of “the son of [his] parents” (*six* 4). Thus the many roles assumed by Cummings’ I/i in his writings and in his life are also part of the “I” of the *nonlectures*.

Cummings discusses these roles of the upper-case “I” in order to shed light on the lower-case *i* that features so prominently in the title of *i: six nonlectures*. We might say that the public, upper-case “I” non-lecturer discourses on the selves of his private, lower-case personae. Thus the “i” is seen from the outside, first in chapters one and two as “i & my parents” and “i & their son,” and then in chapter three as an “i” who discovers himself as a writer. And though our public non-lecturer promises in chapter one that he will tell us in chapter three about one “wholly mysterious moment which signifies selfdiscovery,” a moment, he says, when “I become my writing” (4), it turns out that the third chapter offers at least three moments that “signify” self-discovery. And these “moments” are actually the places and people whom the non-lecturer “I” thanks at least three times in the chapter for their contributions to his new writing self (*six* 47, 51, 53). Thus the non-lecturer of chapter three transforms this “moment” into “certain attitudes and reactions surrounding the mystery of transition from which emerged a poet and painter named EECummings” (*six* 43).

The “mysterious moment” is, of course, a poetic fiction—out of which Martin Heusser makes much deconstructive hay. Though Heusser’s two chapters in *I Am My Writing* are by far the best and most extensive exploration of the *nonlectures* available, to my mind, they also become overly dis-

traught with (or perhaps excited by) the contradictions of Cummings' I/i. So when Cummings says that he is an "indivisible" or a "nondivisible" ignoramus (*six* 5, 110), Heusser comments that because Cummings presents "a potentially endless chain of . . . widely divergent selves," any claims of the unity of the self must remain "an assertion, . . . a mere linguistic dimension" or "mere allegation" (Heusser 77, 79, 81). Citing Derrida, Heusser concludes that "Cummings' rhetoric testifies to his awareness that to write is to defer that which one aims to name in the text" (103).

However, even though the self's multiplicities and the nature of language may prevent us from naming that self, for Cummings, an "indivisible" or "not divisible" (63) whole may nevertheless be made of different parts, just as one nation may be indivisible yet contain many states and individuals. Cummings' self is like his poetry—tactile, a bodily whole of the moment. Each poem is a body on the page, a whole taking up a position, a "here." As William James wrote: "The body is the storm center, the origin of coordinates, the constant place of stress in all that experience-train. Everything circles round it, and is felt from its point of view. The word 'I' then, is primarily a noun of position, just like 'this' and 'here'" (qtd. in Hilfer 178). Early in the *nonlectures*, Cummings quotes approvingly the verdict of his friend the biographer M. R. Werner: "when you come right down to it, everybody's the whole boxoftricks to himself; whether she believes it or not" (*six* 6). The "himself" and "she" of the self is "the whole boxoftricks"—a self and everything else, a whole self yet insoluble, unresolvable. Cummings indicates as much when he says in his introduction to the *Collected Poems* (1938) that "Mostpeople have less in common with ourselves than the squarerootofminusone" (CP 461). It turns out that the  $\sqrt{-1}$  is what mathematicians call a *surd*, an irrational number, which they represent with the symbol *i*.

In Cummings' poetry, the lower-case "i" refers to the inner self who creates; but it is also quite happily plural, a partisan and exponent of Keats' "negative capability" (41-42). The lower-case "i" may be found in dramatic monologues [for example, "raise the shade" (CP 100), "she being Brand" (CP 246—"believe i we was / happy"), or "i'm / asking" (CP 638)] or in dialogues or quasi-monologues that in a few early poems modulate in or out of the poet's voice. Two noteworthy examples of the latter are "at the head of this street a gasping organ" (CP 109) and "when the spent day begins to frail" (CP 190). In the first, the speaker observes an organ-grinder's monkey and "his solemn blinky eyeswhichneversmile." Suddenly

the “i” voice modulates to become the monkey’s thoughts as well: “i feel the jerk of the little string!” and “i sit up and blink.” In the last paragraph of this prose poem, speaker and monkey merge: “the round funny hat with a big feather in it is tied under myhis chin.” The second poem begins in the poet’s voice as well (“by beauty i declare to you”); but soon, this “i” declares that at midnight s/he was a prostitute, “lithe shuddering big” only to transform yet again: “at twenty minutes to // one,i am this blueeyed Finn / emerging from a lovehouse who / buttons his coat against the wind” (CP 190).

Cummings soon abandoned this lower-case “i” with an unstable or shifting point of view in favor of more subtle strategies to indicate the negative capability or multiplicity of the poet’s “i.” One is to embed this “i” in a poem about someone other than the poet. The “i” is hidden in these poems because the individuality of the subject of the poem is hidden or eclipsed. For example, in “exit a kind of unkindness exit” (CP 389) a “little / mr Big / notbusy / Busi / ness notman” who, despite being described as “dead” and bending (or “e;n,d // i / ng”) like candy, nevertheless possesses a hidden self: an “i” buried in the word “bending” but set off and isolated on a line of its own at the very center of the poem. Similarly, in a companion poem, the drunken man who in the first line is only “a)glazed mind layed in a urinal” comes alive in the last two lines when he “willbeishfully bursting un- / eats wasvino isspaghett(i)” (CP 388). The “i” that “willbe” is obscured by drunkenness, but “was” turns into “is” when the man regurgitates his hidden “i”—which appears at the end of a strand of pasta. This new “i” is actually his old Eye that has existed from the beginning but was obscured by the passions and addictions of adulthood. Even though this drunk is referred to as an “it” in the very middle of the poem (line 6), a look at the two letters isolated by parentheses at the beginning and end reveals that he is “a) . . . (i.”

By dividing his “i” between an obviously subjective persona and a hidden objective other, Cummings re-enacts early imagist debates pitting self-expression against a sort of formalist perception. Cummings’ aesthetic was formed by the early modernism of 1912-1916, the modernism of Imagism and the Armory Show, which he saw in its Boston incarnation in 1913. His visual-verbal poetics was developed when, as Michael Levenson noted, modernist works were characterized both by a belief in art as “individual expression” and by a “desire for autonomy of form” (135). The eye of imagism was both subjective and “objective,” both “I” and “eye.” Even Cum-

mings' subjective lyric "I" is formalized and minimized into a sort of a personal persona, the lower case "i" of a "small eye poet" (*Letters* 109) that (who) combines the personal "I" and impersonal "eye" of imagism. Moreover, Cummings' visual poems are extremely formal little imagist structures that nevertheless flaunt the little "i" persona of an individualist poet. And this lower-case "i" persona may be found (and revealed) hiding in (or spatially detached from) an entire word—or it may show up as someone else's "i"—the individuality of the other.

Cummings also occasionally places a capital I in the poems to refer to himself, to another self, or to the merging of the self with the other. In addition, the "i" in the word "is" is sometimes capitalized to emphasize the individual within the global "is," as in "Is)aRe / iS" in "i / (meet)t (touch)" (CP 387) and "Is poet iS" in "so little he is" (CP 471). The self-dramatizing capital "I" of personality found in the prose appears at least once in the poetry in a poem about suicide: "in the middle of a room" (CP 339). The suicide says, for example, "[capital] I can't imagine real flowers," something we can't imagine Cummings ever saying. However, this larger I refers here to the lower-case "i" estranged from reality and his inner self, much as Cummings must have been when he contemplated suicide in 1924 after the break-up of his first marriage. The poem depicts the version of Cummings' self that *could* commit suicide, "sniffing a Paper rose" and "smiling to a self" in a mirror. In another poem, the upper-case I merges with an upper-case You in lovemaking: "IYou" (CP 442). Here the capital I is an erect penis emerging from the lower-case "i" in "rise" before merging with the Y of the lover's pubic triangle. More visually sophisticated is the poem "air," in which the lower-case "i," hidden within the first word "air," merges by disappearing (or sinking) in the last line to become a setting sun: "a . r" ["a dot r"] (CP 532). (For a discussion of this last poem, see Terblanche, *Poetry* 72-73.)

In contrast to the "i" that merges with the lover or nature, the capital I of personality cannot "comprehend" (understand, contain), Cummings says, the "so many selves(so many fiends and gods / each greedier than every) [that] is a man" (CP 609). As we have seen, the poem ends with a questioning challenge to the capital I of personality: "—how should a fool that calls him 'I' presume / to comprehend not numerable whom?" Although theoretically "not numerable," these "selves" are enumerated quite early in Cummings' career in a poem from *is* 5 (1926) called "weazened Irrefutable unastonished" (CP 253), in which the speaker's "twentysix selves / bulg-

ing” approach two elderly women, asking “How do you find the sun,ladies?” Here the number 26 corresponds to complex numerical prosodic structures within the poem, as well as referring to the two faces plus twenty fingers plus four lips of the ladies. But the poet’s 26 selves also correspond to the 26 letters of the alphabet. For the poet on the page exists only through these 26 letters—each letter representing a possible self, especially (as we will see) /i/, /e/, and /o/. When Cummings refers to “selves” in his work, he invariably refers to his lower-case “i” persona in the process of being reborn and finding multiple possibilities for the self. For example, in the late poem “silently if,out of not knowable” (CP 810), the speaker observes after kissing his lover that “each my deeper death becomes your kiss // losing through you what seemed myself,i find / selves unimaginably mine.” The merging with the lover produces the rebirth of possibility.

In “the(oo)is” (CP 740) the letters /i/, /e/, and /o/ stand for various selves (i’s or eyes) of the poet, as well as the selves of a child. The poem starts with the poet seeing his child-self in the eyes of a child. The two selves (Cummings’ child-self and the child whom the mature speaker sees) merge in the capital I at the center of the center line of the poem: “chlld”:

the(oo)is

lOOk  
(aliv  
e)e  
yes

are(chlld)and

wh(g  
o  
ne)  
o

w(A)a(M)s (CP 740)

Cummings writes in a letter that the poet sees in the first line “a pair of wideopen eyes” that become “an intense stare”—“lOOk”—in the second line (*Letters* 267–68). (See also Moe, “Converging Motifs” 120.) So the double o’s, whether lower-case or capitalized, represent the child’s eyes as well as his selves, his lower-case “i.” The mature poet’s eyes appear in line four—“e)e”—and these individual eyes and “i’s coalesce in the middle in

the capital “I.”<sup>2</sup> However, the poet’s child-self lives only in the AM of the moment—the actual child who Cummings “was” (last line) is “g / o / ne.” This paradox of loss and presence is reinforced when we read the first letters of the last four lines down: “o no” or “o now.” Here, the poet’s multiple selves are made mostly of letters and fragments: “I” and “o” and “e” and yes and gone and AM and was.<sup>3</sup> So the “i” becomes o becomes eyes becomes “e)e” becomes yes becomes “o now” becomes ultimately the capital I of the “chlld” who both was and is—the “gone” child Cummings was and the alive, looking child who is now become (with the removal of a “g”) “one AM.” And: the capital letters of the poem read like a child-like exclamation of self: “OO / I / AM.” Or they say: “I am the eye.” Reading the capitals together with the last line, we find that the Eye that *was* in the beginning nevertheless is now “AM.” (Or, “I who was gone AM.”)

The lower-case “i” becomes “e” again in “dim” (CP 696), which features an “i” and “e” that hide not once, but at least twice.

dim  
i  
nu  
tiv

e this park is e  
mpty(everyb  
ody’s elsewher  
e except me 6 e

nglish sparrow  
s)a  
utumn & t  
he rai

n  
th  
e  
raintherain

In “dim” the poet’s small “i” is hidden yet revealed to be “nu” (naked and new) in the word “diminutive.” Cummings breaks off the last “e” of this small-i-word to begin the second stanza, which features a lower-case “e” at

each corner, emblematic, of course, of Edward Estlin, the author, but also indicating the poet's merging with the diminutive square park. The twelve "e"s in stanza two also link the author with emptiness and the 6 "e // nglis h sparrow / s." (The number 6 looks like an inverted lower-case "e.") Perhaps the twelve "e"s also represent the twelve eyes of the sparrows. The poet, who is one with the park and the sparrows, becomes one with the rain: both "he" and "e" are hidden inside "the rain," as is, of course, the lower-case "i." (See especially line 12.) The rain, which starts in spatters ("t / he rai / n") rapidly becomes a downpour ("th / e / raintherain"), obscuring all.

The most intriguing eye/i poem is the late "i / never" (CP 827), in which the "i" becomes the circular "Eye" of a bird, her nest, and her two (or three) eggs, achieving what Milton Cohen calls Cummings' "subject-object wholeness" (89). In the drafts of this poem, Cummings cannot seem to choose between "we" and "i" as the first word; and now that we have seen the transformation of the "i" into multiple selves and others, we might pause and wonder whether this "we" represents the poet and his lover, the i-persona's multiple selves, the poet, bird, nest, and eggs—or some combination of all of the above. Cummings settled finally on beginning the poem with the lower-case "i," making the i / eye pun explicit:

i  
 never  
 guessed any  
 thing (even a  
 universe) might be  
 so not quite believab  
 ly smallest as perfect this  
 (almost invisible where of a there of a) here of a  
 rubythroat's home with its still  
 ness which really's herself  
 (and to think that she's  
 warming three worlds)  
 who's ama  
 zingly  
 Eye

The lower-case "i" sees (and finds) the small, perfect, round "universe"



of a ruby-throated hummingbird's nest. These nests are quite small, slightly larger than the diameter of a quarter; and, consequently, they are quite difficult to find. Perhaps this difficulty explains why the poem is not in the shape of a nest; instead, its shape depicts the hummingbird's head as seen from above. (Cummings came to this shape quite late in his drafts, on the 17th page.) The moment of finding the nest occurs in the long middle line, when the "i" / eye sees the "almost invisible where of a there of a)here of a / rubythroat's home." Etienne Terblanche sees the parenthesis between "a" and "here" as representing an osmotic permeable barrier crossed by coincidence, marking the moment of the eye's perception. He writes:

this very moment of specificity marks a turning point: the point where the objective world enters the subjective world of innermost perception from an almost imperceptible "where" to "there" and—through the final parenthesis—into "here," indicating a swapping, crossing or transgression, and ultimately fusion of the worlds of the other ("somewhere"/"there") and the worlds of the self ("here"). The final parenthesis within this pointed line would therefore be the embodiment of an osmotic boundary allowing the transfusion of otherness and exteriority into essential selfness and interiority. (Terblanche "Osmotic" 16)

As indicated by the quotation from William James above, "here" is the position of this multiple yet single self. The parenthesis may also indicate the barely visible half diameter of the nest-rim. In addition, Terblanche notes that the parenthesis "looks like the lens of an eye" (*Poetry* 184) and thus echoes the famous passage in Emerson's essay *Nature* in which the philosopher feels that "all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball" (29).

The lens/parenthesis at the center of the poem and the "i / Eye" of lines 1 and 15 certainly may echo Emerson's transformation in the woods, in which he feels "the currents of Universal Being circulate through [him]" and becomes "part or particle of God." However, the speaker's experience in "i / never" is more prosaic and more particular than Emerson's union with the universal. He finds a nest and thinks and feels about the bird and himself. In addition to referring to Emerson, the more prosaic eye symbolism in Cummings' poem may also refer to two rather more down-to-earth "eye" passages in Thoreau's *Walden*. In the first, Thoreau says that a lake "is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his

own nature” (“The Ponds” 125). Cummings looks into the eye of the nest and sees that his own nature (i/eye) is somehow allied with the hummingbird’s. The second passage from Thoreau begins by discussing the instinctive behavior of partridge chicks when warned by their mother of imminent danger. While the mother tries to distract the potential predator, the chicks freeze in place. Thoreau marvels at their stillness:

I have held them in my open hand at such a time, and still their only care, obedient to their mother and their instinct, was to squat there without fear or trembling. So perfect is this instinct, that once, when I had laid them on the leaves again, and one accidentally fell on its side, it was found with the rest in exactly the same position ten minutes afterward. (“Brute Neighbors” 151-152)

Cummings, too, emphasizes the “still / ness” of the nest (and by extension, the bird), certainly an implied paradox when speaking of a bird known for how swiftly and “zingly” it flies. [As Cummings says in another poem—here flattened into a prose statement: “Nothing can surpass the mystery of stillness” (CP 814).] Thoreau sees both mystery and paradox in the stillness in the partridge chicks’ eyes, which are “remarkably adult yet innocent,” reflecting instinct and wisdom at once. “All intelligence,” Thoreau writes, “seems reflected in them. They suggest not merely the purity of infancy, but a wisdom clarified by experience. Such an eye was not born when the bird was, but is coeval with the sky it reflects” (152). The chicks’ eyes are “coeval”—of the same generation—with the sky because their being is as old (or as young) as nature itself. The speaker of “i / never” makes an even more paradoxical and daring assertion, saying that the eye and the “i” of bird and poet are the same.

Grammatically, the home (the nest), its “stillness,” and “herself” (the hummingbird) are the “who” who is “ama / zingly / Eye”—so the home, its stillness, and even the bird are (if we take the grammar literally, as we should in Cummings) an “Eye.” The poem may be taken to narrate two findings: at first, the “i” / eye of the poet saw the head and eyes of the bird sitting in the nest. Then the bird must have flown away at the speaker’s approach, for he also sees the three eggs (“worlds”) she was warming. The vacated nest looks like a bird’s eye—it IS an eye. The nest is looking at the speaker, and he is looking back. The Eyes and “i”s meet. If one looks at photos of ruby-throated hummingbird nests, one can see that they are round

like a bird's eye, not almond-shaped as the human eye appears to be (because of the shape of the eyelid, etc.). So the bird's self is "really" also her home—her "eye/i" is right there in the shape. Of course, the bird's head, beak, and eyes (seen from above) are iconically encoded in the shape of the poem as well. And it is the poet's i and eye "who's ama / zingly" the bird's and the nest's "Eye." Also, the eye of the reader focuses down to the final word in the poem: "Eye." In this poem, the Eye is at the end and (transformed by circling back) "in the beginning" as well.

In his book *PoetandPainter*, Milton Cohen quotes the following passage on the I/i and the eye from Cummings' notes:

NOTE that here, we have separated 'eye' and 'I' (vs. eye&i) in order to make this comparison, we have divided—analyzed a whole, integer, homogeneity

IT IS THE FUNCTION OF ART TO RESTORE THIS WHOLENESS  
\*INTEGRALITY\*

art says—"I' do not 'see,' WITH my 'eye,' 'objects or Things'

my eye does not 'see,' WITH my 'I,' 'objects or Things'

but eye-things(subject)me(verb,reflexive)

[Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS 1823.7 (111), sheet 1;  
qtd. in Cohen 70]

Here, Cummings is saying that even though the I (personality) and "eye" are separate in analysis, the lower-case "i" and eye are one in experience—they are "a whole" in poetry. For the speaker, the hummingbird who has flown maintains a paradoxical "still-here-there-ness" in the nest. The interaction of the subject (eye-things) (which are also "i-things") and the reflexive verb "me" (me me-ing?) cannot be separated in perception or in poetry. The objects or things (hummingbird, eggs, nest) are all reflexive in the Eye/me of the speaker and the bird. It is this wholeness that Cummings conveys through his fragmentation of language.

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## Notes

1. Eliot's idea of "personality" I take to mean our social, conscious

selves, while the truly creative self is something else, something other. This view is indebted to Marjorie Perloff's essay "Gertrude Stein's Differential Syntax," in which she discusses the surprising convergence of Stein's and Eliot's views of personality, identity, and the creative self (46-47). See also Ron Bush's excellent *T. S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style*, pp. 44-47.

2. Max Nänny was probably the first to point out that line "e)e" could represent eyes (212). This poem is also discussed in my paper "Magic Iconism" (110-111).
3. Some of Cummings' poems seem like a Sesame Street segment, "brought to you by the letters 'e' and 'o'." Or, I'm reminded of the passage in James Joyce's *Ulysses* where Stephen Dedalus mocks his own pretentious daydream of titling his books by individual letters of the alphabet. "Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W" (*U* 40; 3.140-141). Indeed, Cummings actually did title one of his books *W* (two overlapping V's, short for *ViVa*). See my "An Old Door, Cummings' Personal Printer, and *W* [*ViVa*]."

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