

## I VERSUS THEM: THE THEME OF INDIVIDUALISM IN E.E. CUMMINGS

JUAN JOSÉ COY GIRÓN  
Universidad de Salamanca

A number of circumstances combined to shape Cumming's personality and to make him a part of that larger poetic movement we know as modernism. His environment -his family and the atmosphere of the place where he grew up- had much to do with it. Richard Kennedy has shown in his biography of E.E. Cummings how he was encouraged, from a very early age, to write and draw, and the influence his parents, especially his father, had on him. Dr. Edward Cummings was an imposing person, a self-made man who taught at Harvard, among other things, and who "displayed a strong individualistic drive for his son to emulate." <sup>1</sup> Cummings acknowledged the lasting impression his father caused him and the influence both his parents had on him in nonlectures one and two.

Another step, also of great consequence, in this formative process was his formal education. He attended Harvard from 1911 until 1916 and his interest in literature and the arts in general was there reinforced by his curricular activities as much as by his extracurricular ones. Among the former were his studies of ancient and foreign languages. Of special significance was his introduction to Keats, after whom Cummings would shape his own ideal "of the poet as the tortured genius whom society rejects or alienates, a view which he held for one reason or another for the rest of his life." <sup>2</sup>

---

1. Richard, S. Kennedy, *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E.E. Cummings* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1980) 34.

2. Kennedy 55.

But no less important were his extracurricular activities. At Harvard he met many people who were to remain his friends throughout all his life. Some of them, whom he mentioned in nonlecture three -significantly entitled "i & selfdiscovery"- were Scofield Thayer, J. Sibley Watson, Stewart Mitchell, John Dos Passos, S. Foster Damon, Theodore Miller.<sup>3</sup> With them, or through them, Cummings was acquainted with the new artistic movements. He became familiar with the new conception about the arts and its manifestations in poetry, painting, music and sculpture. He discovered the magazine *Poetry*; he visited the famous Armory show in Boston in 1913; generally speaking, his eyes were opened to a new exciting and dynamic world.

Foremost among all these interests and activities which he shared with his friends was his own writing. Charles Norman has remarked that during this period "Cummings was writing a great deal, while paying enough attention to his studies to graduate with honors."<sup>4</sup> His poems were published in both of Harvard's literary periodicals, *The Harvard Advocate* and *The Harvard Monthly*. From 1913 he was also a member of the board of editors of *The Harvard Monthly*.

Norman has pointed out that by 1915 some of Cummings's characteristic phrases already appeared in his poems.<sup>5</sup> At the same time his ideas about art and his attitude towards experimentation were also quite well established, as can be seen in his essay "The New Art," which he wrote as a class assignment in 1915, and which he later used as the basis of the commencement address that he delivered in June 1915 at his class graduation ceremonies. In his address Cummings drew parallels between music, painting, sculpture and poetry and he attacked critics for their abuse of Cubism and Futurism: "In each of these new arts, there is a clearly discernible evolution from models; in none is there any trace of that abnormality, or incoherence, which the casual critic is fond of making the subject of tirades against the new order."<sup>6</sup> He concluded by expressing his faith in the value of experimentation: "how much of all this is really Art? The answer is: we do not know. The great men of the future will most certainly profit by the experimentation of the present period."<sup>7</sup>

After his graduation Cummings stayed in university for one more year. In 1916 he received an M.A. and left Harvard at last. At this moment came the final stage of his development. It was the moment when he discovered New York and

---

3. E.E. Cummings, *i: six nonlectures* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1953) 5.

4. Charles Norman, *The Magic-Maker: E.E. Cummings* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958) 289.

5. Norman 36.

6. E.E. Cummings, *A Miscellany*, edited by George J. Firmage (London: Peter Owen Ltd., 1966) 5.

7. Cummings, *A Miscellany*, 10.



did not appear in the published book: someone corrected it, and the “i” was capitalized. I think the detail is significant for two reasons: firstly because, as I have said, it was the first time that Cummings tried out this contrivance; and secondly because it illustrates the difficulties that Cummings encountered throughout most of his career to have his work published in its original form, without the editors' interferences.

Cummings was therefore putting into practice his ideas before 1916. But he was to state them explicitly for the first time in 1920. In the second issue of *The Dial*, which appeared in February 1920, he published his essay “Gaston Lachaise.” In it he expressed his contempt for insincerity and superficiality, and he praised the sculptor for his originality. He scorned “the Gentleman Dealers in Secondhand Thoughts”<sup>13</sup> calling them “the only very great sinners.”<sup>14</sup> And he also put forth his notion of the poet as a special man, with a special destiny: “the man who by the gods has been fated to express himself will succeed in expressing himself in spite of all schools... the greatest artist is the man whom no school can kill.”<sup>15</sup>

Another of his ideas appears in this essay too: he points out the corrupting influence of civilization, which has the effect of killing the uniqueness of the individual. Civilization pushes the individual towards conformity and uniformity, therefore stripping him of his very individuality. Cummings favours naturalness, which is reflected in a type of “unselfconscious expression, that of the child who has not yet inherited the centuries...”<sup>16</sup> In child art, Cummings writes, “objects are depicted not as nouns but as verbs.”<sup>17</sup> The opposition between nouns and verbs is yet another recurrent idea of Cummings's, who stands for the dynamism, vitality and potential to change, that verbs represent.

The basic aspects of Cummings's creed, so to speak, are evident in this critical essay. His thinking is here considerably more elaborate than it was four years before, when he left college, although in the main there are no substantial variations. In that interval, however, Cummings had been through an experience of considerable importance, which had the effect of strengthening his individualistic bias and his dislike, if not outright rejection, of authority. I am referring to his participation in the First World War as a driver in the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps, which ended when he was arrested by the French authorities and imprisoned in a concentration camp on suspicions of treason. The confinement lasted for three months.

Cummings left an enlightening record of this experience in his book *The Enormous Room*, where he set down his impressions about the ordeal and the

---

13. Cummings, *A Miscellany*, 24.

14. Cummings, *A Miscellany*, 24.

15. Cummings, *A Miscellany*, 16.

16. Cummings, *A Miscellany*, 18.

17. Cummings, *A Miscellany*, 19.

reflections prompted by it. *The Enormous Room* is a remarkable novel in many ways. For one thing it is a work that defies classification. It could be described as a war novel, or as an autobiographical prison text -like *Le dernier jour d'un condamné à mort*- were it not for the fact that it subverts those sub-genres' conventions. Another fact which makes *The Enormous Room* even more remarkable is that it is an affirmative and even funny book, despite its subject matter and its setting which would appear to be pretty grim by any standards: "Written as a protest against the stupidity and brutality of officialdom", Isidor Schneider wrote, "it affirms the dignity and beauty of the mankind whom the state opposes . . ." <sup>18</sup> The style, the choice of tone, is what makes the novel funny. Cummings's language lightens his subject matter: he can point out the comic aspects and the ironies of a rather depressing experience. He achieves these effects by a skillful juxtaposition of serious and light tone, of the rhetorical and the colloquial language, that he employs from the very beginning. Cummings also shows his ability to render common speech, as in the following passage in which he portrays with irony the section leader, a narrow-minded man with preconceived ideas:

I doughno what's th' matter with you fellers. You look like nice boys. Well-educated. But you're so dirty in your habits. You boys are always kickin' because I don't put you on a car together. I'm ashamed to do it, that's why. I doughwanta give this section a black eye. We gotta show these lousy Frenchmen what Americans are. We gotta show we're superior to 'em. Those bastards doughno what a bath means. And you fellers are always hangin' 'round, talkin' with them dirty frog-eaters. <sup>19</sup>

But the apparent lightness does not obscure the underlying significance of the situation. It throws into relief the hypocrisy and contradictions of any kind of authority. The French government and the American army, purporting to be enemies of tyranny, harass the individual. Those who do not conform to the rules, to the general mould, are persecuted. Thus, the French government throws into prison a group of harmless people, "some of the finest people of the world," <sup>20</sup> for the only reason that they are unique: "For who was eligible to la Ferté? [the prison where Cummings was confined]. Anyone whom the police could find in the lovely country of France (a) who was not guilty of treason (b) who could not prove that he was not guilty of treason." <sup>21</sup>

---

18. Isidor Schneider, *Contempo*, April 5, 1933; quoted in Norman 33.

19. E.E. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1950)

61.

20. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* 255.

21. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* 100.

It is obvious to Cummings that his fellow prisoners are no more a threat to the security of the state than he is; they are merely scapegoats, so to speak, who fall in disgrace because they stand out from the rest of the people. If anything made imprisonment more bearable to Cummings it was the conviction that, upon entering the enormous room, he had exchanged “a considerable mass of two legged beings for a number of extremely interesting individuals.”<sup>22</sup> Bearing that in mind it is not difficult to understand why most of the novel consists of descriptions of people: some of them despicable, most of them admirable.

Among the former are all the police and prison officials, persons who cannot be distinguished from one another, like those who arrest Cummings, described successively as “two neat soldiers with tin derbies”, then “tin-derby-the-first” and finally “t-d”<sup>23</sup>; or like the Surveillant, a prison official who is merely an “obedient and negative cog . . . in the machine of decomposition.”<sup>24</sup> By becoming a mere part of the machine, they lose their individuality.

As for the ones to be admired, they are simple people who share Cummings’s misfortunes and who deserve recognition for their uniqueness. Cummings singles out four of his companions for special praise. These four are specially remarkable; he calls them the Delectable Mountains, and describes them in greater detail. The four Delectable Mountains are The Wanderer, Zulu, Surplice and Jean Le Nègre. In the description of Zulu, Cummings once again resorts to the idea of the verb as a symbol of vitality, of the very human essence, which most persons -being “two legged beings” rather than human beings- lack. Cummings calls Zulu an “IS”<sup>25</sup>; this is the highest praise that Cummings can bestow on anybody. An “IS” is a natural man, spontaneous and alive -a free soul.

We come at last to the poems in which the theme of individualism is prominent. There are many examples: celebrations of individuality and of love are the main lines that run through Cummings’s poetry, along with the expression of a delight in nature and of the joy of living.

The poems which deal with individualism are almost without exception satires, and they range in tone from gentle, good-natured mockery to the most ruthless, savage attacks on the evils and corruption of society. Some of them center on a positive figure. The character in these cases is a positive example, an embodiment of some desirable, worthy qualities. They usually respond to the non-hero archetype, men whose fate is to be set aside, if not trampled upon and destroyed, by an impersonal, machine-like society that is unable to understand them or appreciate their value. This fate, coupled in most cases with their attitude

22. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* 95.

23. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* 10-12.

24. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* 121.

25. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* 186.

towards it, their moral courage, lends them a heroic stature. They are the ones who do not compromise, the ones who do not renounce their convictions and are willing to suffer for them.

The other poems, in contrast to the former ones, are direct attacks on certain kinds of people, who represent the more negative aspects of human nature, or on society as a whole. Politicians, advertisers, fake artists, policemen and high-ranking military men are some of the classes of people that Cummings despises and resents.

An example of the first kind of poem is “nobody loses all the time.”<sup>26</sup> The speaker tells the story of a simple man, uncle Sol, “who was a born failure”. The anecdote is mildly amusing: a man who could not make any of his businesses succeed until he died, when he was buried “and started a worm farm,” which presumably did not fail. Apart from this ironic end the comic effect is achieved by means of mixing the colloquial language, even the slang, with a formal, at times archaic language: following “highfalootin” appears “to wit”; preceding “scrumptious” is the phrase “upon the auspicious occasion of his decease,” which not only contrasts with “scrumptious” but also holds a surprising internal irony, since we would hardly expect death to be described as an auspicious occasion. In a way it suggests that dying was the best thing that could happen to uncle Sol, in view of his repeated failures.

In “i sing of Olaf glad and big”<sup>27</sup> the story is not amusing anymore. It is a strongly antimilitary poem, which shows the inhuman character of the system. The army, from the lowest to the highest ranks, from the “firstclassprivates” through officers to the president himself, sets about the task of destroying a man who refuses to bend to its pressure. Olaf’s only sin is to be opposed to violence, and the army cannot tolerate this unpardonable weakness, since it is an attack on the very nature of the army.

The style again is a blend of formality, colloquialism, obscenity, archaism:

our president, being of which  
assertions duly notified  
threw the yellowsonofabitch  
into a dungeon, where he died

The poem is remarkable for its sharp, derogatory descriptions of the military men, of intolerant, authoritarian attitudes -the colonel a “trig / westpointer most succinctly bred”; the officers “a yearning nation’s blueeyed pride” -who contrast

---

26. E.E. Cummings, *Selected Poems 1923-1958* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958) 13.

27. Cummings, *Selected Poems 1923-1958* 25.

with Olaf's helplessness and passiveness. Despite being subjected to the most barbaric treatment Olaf does not renounce his convictions, he continues to stand by his ideals, without resenting his torturers: to the abuse he only "responds, without getting annoyed / «I will not kiss your f.ing flag.»"

Olaf's attitude is the same attitude that Cummings had in *The Enormous Room*. Cummings could have avoided detention if he had only given his interrogator the answers he wanted to hear. Instead he chose to answer truthfully knowing perfectly well what would be the result. Likewise Olaf acts and speaks according to his beliefs. He chooses to be true to himself and is fully prepared to take the consequences; between physical and moral destruction he chooses the former as the lesser evil. Because of his unfaltering courage and fidelity to himself he emerges as the moral victor.

Another example of this type of poems is "this mind made war."<sup>28</sup> In this instance the individual harassed by society is the poet, and he too resists all efforts of the majority to change him. The poet is completely the opposite of society as a collective, uniform entity. He is a mind and a heart, whereas the rest of society is made up of unminds and unhearts; he is generous, they are ungenerous. They shit on him; he shrugs off their abuse, and laughs and keeps on daring when everybody else "must fear / because and why." The poet is at war with all the forces which try to crush his uniqueness. He is utterly alone, but he is also the only free man, the only one who is truly alive, because he is concerned with things "beyond because." This is probably his most salient characteristic: he forgets reason in favour of intuition, and that is what makes him ultimately free.

Cummings denounces society in the same manner in "of all the blessings which to man."<sup>29</sup> Society is described as an "animal without a heart", a "collective pseudobeast." In this abominable society there is no room for variation: it is the "land of supernod," of sameness and monotony.

The uniform, herd-like behaviour of men is criticized again in "when serpents bargain for the right to squirm."<sup>30</sup> Cummings compares human behaviour with nature and concludes that human behaviour is unparalleled and is therefore not natural. Animals instinctively act with one goal only, their own individual survival -each one for himself. Cummings seems to suggest that this kind of animal egoism is the natural, right way to act. The poem, however, is open to another interpretation which qualifies the previous one.

This alternative interpretation, that would change significantly the meaning

28. Cummings, *Selected Poems 1923-1958* 33.

29. Cummings, *Selected Poems 1923-1958* 51.

30. Cummings, *Selected Poems 1923-1958* 70.

of the poem, is suggested by lines 4-5: "when every thrush may sing no new moon in / if all screech-owls have not okayed his voice." The difference is that Cummings could be proposing that utterly individualistic course of action only in relation to artistic matters. The artist should be exclusively concerned with trying to attain the highest possible limit of his artistic expression, disregarding any other consideration or the result of his action. This interpretation seems to be consistent with Cummings's thinking. He expressed much the same idea in his article "Is Something Wrong?", first published in 1945 -"when serpents..." appeared in 1950- and in which he said: "when you confuse art with propaganda, you confuse an act of God with something which can be turned on and off like the hot water faucet... You confuse freedom -the only freedom- with absolute tyranny." <sup>31</sup> And he expressed the same view again seven years later in one of his Harvard nonlectures: "One thing, however, does always concern this individual «the artist»: fidelity to himself." <sup>32</sup>

Many of the beliefs and ideas that Cummings brings forth in the previous poems are summed up in "POEM, OR BEAUTY HURTS MR. VINAL,"<sup>33</sup> a relatively early work. Published in 1926 it is a fierce attack on pseudo-poetry and pseudo-poets. Cummings resorts here to the language of advertising, to brand-names and slogans, to popular patriotic songs and clichés. In so doing he gives a bleak view of a country that has been made totally uniform by the commercial interests. He then links this situation with the condition of some poetry in the United States. In his opinion, some examples of so-called poetry are mere rubbish posing as "divine poesy". They are just another commercial product, mass-produced. The fake poets reduce Art to a formula; there is no spontaneity, no vitality, no originality:

. . . And there're a  
hun-dred-mil-lion-oth-ers, like  
all of you successfully if  
delicately gelded (or spaded)

There is, as these lines clearly indicate, no capacity to create, only to imitate what has already been created. Only a dead, dull language to convey dead, dull images and ideas.

To Cummings this total lack of audacity on the mock-poets' side is a unforgiveable treason to poetry's true function. For Cummings the poet is a special being, a man with a mission, who has a duty to himself. When the poet

---

31. Cummings, *A Miscellany* 321.

32. Cummings, *i: six nonlectures* 82.

33. Cummings, *Selected Poems 1923-1958* 12.

renounces his uniqueness, when he gives up originality, and instead of looking for what there is worth expressing in the world and in himself he is content to walk on much trampled paths, he loses his right to be called a poet. A man who is satisfied writing what is expected of him, what he is told; a man who will be “perpetually crouched, quivering, upon the / sternly allotted sandpile” does not deserve the name of poet: he is merely a poetaster, a phony.

I think that, from what I have said so far, it is clear that Cummings had indeed a very strong individualistic attitude, much in the vein of the Romantic poets. From a very early stage in his career he held the view that the poet has to strive hard to fulfil his task: “the Artist is no other than he who unlearns what he has learned, in order to know himself, and the agony of the Artist... arises from his own personal struggle to discover, to appreciate and finally to express *himself*.”<sup>34</sup> Although the poet’s duty is mainly to himself, I think there is also the idea that his efforts will benefit society as a whole. But society does not appreciate the poet’s exertions.

The fact that Cummings felt that his worth was underrated by society may have strengthened his individualism and nurtured a certain resentment against an uncomprehending, ungrateful society. Cummings received little attention from the public for a long time, and if he got attention from the critics it was more often than not in negative terms. For a long time he was not able to support himself, and had to rely heavily on his parents’ help to get by. He had trouble finding publishers, and when he found them he had to fight off their attempts to introduce changes in his work.

In the beginning Cummings may not have been inclined to consider himself superior to the rest of the people. Burton Rascoe, reporting a conversation with Cummings that took place around 1924, says that Cummings scorned poets and artists “who get a shabby satisfaction out of thinking themselves superior to people who are able to adjust themselves to life.”<sup>35</sup> But as the years went by, and Cummings continued to be denied the recognition he felt was due him, his attitude started to change. He could sympathize with the simple man, with the individuals he knew -uncle Sol, Olaf, Goldberger in “i say no world”, Sam in “rain or hail.” But for the rest, those who are just a faceless blob, the masses, he felt contempt and despised them. There is a certain contradiction in Cumming’s attitude, in his simultaneous admiration and scorn for the ordinary human beings. Little by little his arrogance, even elitism, grew out of proportion. A good example of this, I think, can be found in the introduction he wrote to his *Collected Poems* of 1938.

For that reason Cummings has been justly criticized. Randall Jarrell wrote

---

34. Cummings, *A Miscellany* 193.

35. Norman 205.

in 1954: "What I like least about Cummings's poems is their pride in Cummings and their contempt for most other people."<sup>36</sup> Indeed Cummings takes the affirmation of his individualism so far that sometimes it is just an amazing conceit. The affirmation of his singularity becomes then an unreasoned, instinctive reaction; almost an act of childish defiance. The result is, as R.H. Pearce remarked, "a certain chest-pounding bravado"<sup>37</sup> which does very little to improve the reader's opinion of the poet.

Cummings finally began to be appreciated in the 1940s, and got the full recognition he deserved in the 1950s. Kennedy thinks that there is a change in Cummings's outlook -moving towards a somewhat less egocentric attitude- from the mid-1940s; and he ascribes the change to his growing reputation.<sup>38</sup> Cummings himself thought that around 1939 he had entered a new period in his career, in which he started moving towards a greater concern for human beings.<sup>39</sup>

But he remained committed basically to no one but himself. As late as 1952, in his Harvard nonlectures, he said that the artist feels "as someone absolutely and totally alone from the beginning of the world: a solitary individual . . . separated from everybody else . . ." <sup>40</sup> and he is solely concerned "with fidelity to himself."<sup>41</sup> In my opinion, that attitude, when taken to its extreme, can be loathsome. But it is only one aspect of Cummings's character, and we should not allow it to put us off his poetry, which is remarkable for other reasons. In general, it expresses a cheerful joy in nature, in the world, in love; an uplifting delight in life's simple, sensuous -and sensual- pleasures. And it also made an important contribution to modern poetry in the style: his typographical arrangements that add to the meaning of the poem as a whole and enrich it; his diction, his renovation of traditional metrical patterns by using them to express new, modern themes and subjects.

---

36. Randall Jarrell, *The New York Times Book Review*, October 31, 1954; quoted in Norman 383.

37. Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1961) 366.

38. Kennedy 400.

39. Kennedy 400.

40. Cummings, *i: six nonlectures* 81.

41. Cummings, *i: six nonlectures* 82.