

A Divided Vision:  
Defining the Values of E. E. Cummings

by  
Erica R. Freeman

A thesis presented for the B. A. degree

With Honors in  
The Department of English  
University of Michigan

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### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Aric Knuth and all the staff and students of the 1999 New England Literature Program for providing the inspiration for this thesis and the spirit in which it was written. I am deeply indebted to my faculty advisor, Julian Levinson, for his open ear and helpful suggestions. For her advice and kind words of encouragement, I wish to thank my English 492 professor, Adela Pinch. I am also grateful to Marjorie Levinson for her help in developing the section on William Blake. Special thanks go to all of the Honors English seniors for their encouragement, commiseration, and companionship. Finally, I wish to acknowledge my deepest gratitude to my friends and family, especially Dan Freeman, Chris Cousino, and my parents, Fred and Evelyn Freeman, for their continuous love and support.

## Abstract

In this thesis, I analyze E. E. Cummings' values, concentrating on the discrepancies between his transcendental philosophy and the use of oppositions in his satire. I argue that Cummings' satire, which was often accused of being racist or anti-Semitic, is an angry response to the rationalistic and war-torn era in which he came of age. Cummings' values combine elements of New England individualism, British Romanticism, and transcendentalism, yet he constructed his values in terms of oppositions, erecting boundaries as he sought to surpass them. This paradox forms a central weakness in Cummings' philosophy.

Cummings' values, as stated in *i, 6 nonlectures*, can be described in terms of three fundamental oppositions: nature versus civilization, individual versus group, and artist versus "mostpeople." His philosophy esteems spontaneity, authenticity, and uniqueness, while deriding moralism and the modern pursuit of personal security. He opposes the advent of 20<sup>th</sup> century technology, which he believes to promote values and ideals that undermine individuality and growth. Finally, Cummings defines three "mysteries," or transcendental values, which do not oppose the values of modern society, but surpass them: love, art, and "selftranscendence or growing." This value system can be clearly traced to the philosophies of the Romantics, particularly the work of William Wordsworth and William Blake. Like Wordsworth, Cummings seeks to glorify aspects of everyday life as a means of understanding nature and humanity. His unique use of language attempts to alter the appearance and meaning of words, just as Wordsworth's use of common language strives to break free of artifice and cliché. Both Blake and Cummings strongly oppose the mechanized view of the universe purported by scientific rationalism, believing that the rhythms of nature cannot be quantified through human perception.

But in spite of his Romantic viewpoint, Cummings often wrote misanthropic satires that lashed out at particular social, cultural, or political groups. Various critics responded to the issue of anti-Semitism in his poetry, while Cummings himself denied that any of his poems were anti-Semitic in intent. These poems can in fact be read as either anti-Semitic or anti-anti-Semitic, since the poet's imprecise use of satiric form leaves them open to dual interpretations. The weakness in Cummings' satires arises from a contradiction in his philosophy: he is perpetually torn between his desire to lash out at the rationalistic, propaganda-laden society that had betrayed his Romantic philosophies, and his desire to attain the transcendental vision that was his stated goal.

The first section of my thesis discusses Cummings' values as defined in the *nonlectures*, focusing on his use of oppositions and his establishment of the transcendental "mysteries." I next explore his relationship to Romanticism through the work of William Wordsworth and William Blake. Following an examination of the debate surrounding Cummings and anti-Semitism, I conclude with a discussion of the discrepancies between Cummings' stated values and his opposition-based satires.

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Short Titles

“Anti-Semitism”: “Anti-Semitism and E. E. Cummings: A Critical Round Robin.” *E. E.*

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UP, 1962.

*nonlectures*: Cummings, E. E. *i, 6 nonlectures*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1953.

## Introduction

On the evening of October 25, 1952, Edward Estlin Cummings sat behind a lamp-lit desk on the stage of Harvard University's Sanders Theater. As the recipient of the 1952-1953 Charles Edward Norton Professorship, an award granted annually to a modern writer, composer, or critic of the arts, the renowned poet had traveled to Cambridge to give the first of six obligatory lectures on a topic of his choice. The hall was packed, and when the ushers began turning students away, young men and women climbed fire escapes and tapped on the windows with coins, asking to sneak in and sit in the aisles. As Cummings' voice began resonating across the room in slow, measured phrases, a perfect hush fell over the hall (Kennedy *Dreams* 438-442).

Let me cordially warn you, at the opening of these so-called lectures, that I haven't the remotest intention of posing as a lecturer. Lecturing is presumably a form of teaching; and presumably a teacher is somebody who knows. I never did, and still don't, know. What has always fascinated me is not teaching, but learning; and I assure you that if the acceptance of a Charles Eliot Norton professorship hadn't rapidly entangled itself with the expectation of learning a very great deal, I should now be somewhere else. Let me also assure you that I feel extremely glad to be here; and that I heartily hope you won't feel extremely sorry (*nonlectures* 3).

Thus began the first "nonlecture" ever presented by a Harvard professor who claimed to *not* know anything. The compiled lectures were later published in a volume entitled, *i, six nonlectures*. In the introduction to his first talk, Cummings defines two privileges granted to a "nonlecturer": first, as "an authentic ignoramus," he need not follow the conventions and posturing of a "genuine lecturer," but may remain "quite



indecently free to speak as he feels;" and second, since the nonlecturer cannot tell his audience "what he know[s] (or rather what he [doesn't] know)," he can only tell his audience who he is.

Cummings spends the first three installments of his verbal self-portrait depicting his youth and young adulthood, followed by three nonlectures focusing on his current stance as a writer. However, as Norman Friedman points out in *E.E. Cummings: Growth of a Writer*, "This book is less an autobiography than it is a testament of faith, a witness to a vision of life...the entire set of nonlectures is concerned primarily with Cummings' values, for his self is equated with what he stands for" (177). The nonlectures present, at the apex of Cummings' career, a comprehensive manifesto of the prevailing values that shaped four decades of his poetry and prose. These values combine elements of New England individualism and transcendentalism, as well as British romanticism; they also draw upon Cummings' life experiences to illustrate the development of these values, particularly his idyllic Cambridge childhood, his experience in World War I, and his visit to Communist Russia.

As a Romantic idealist, Cummings glorified the transcendental power of nature, the "imagined, therefore limitless" significance of love (*nonlectures* 11), and the fundamental experiences of living that unite all human beings. His philosophy praises "the humanness of humanity," and urges us to discover our individual identity as "a temporal citizen of eternity; one with all human beings born and unborn" (53). However, Cummings' fame as a Romantic lyricist was matched by his renown as a vicious satirist. The vocation of the satirist, pointing out incongruity and division through ridicule, seems rather incongruous for a poet of Cummings' Romantic and transcendental values. But in

spite of his stated philosophy, Cummings the satirist hisses at his audience, “pity this busy monster,manunkind,” (*Poems* 554) and contemplates humanity’s eventual self-destruction in “wild (at our first) beasts uttered human words” (844). His satire is bitter, contemptuous, and tragic, standing in sharp contrast to his life-affirming, celebratory lyrics. Furthermore, Cummings spares no one from his lash – and while his satire often reaped praise for its freshness and precision, his indiscriminate barbs brought upon him accusations of anti-Semitism, racism, even insanity.

In the first part of this thesis, I will explore the structure of Cummings’ stated values through analysis of *i, 6 nonlectures*, investigating his use of oppositions and defining his transcendental “mysteries.” Next, I will examine the relationship of Cummings’ values to those of his romantic forbears, in contrast with his modernist contemporaries. Finally, I will look at the debate that erupted around suggestions of anti-Semitism in Cummings’ poetry and discuss the ways in which Cummings’ satire emerged from the apparent contradiction of his Romantic philosophy.

### Definition through Opposition

Throughout the *nonlectures*, Cummings defines his values by placing them in opposition to the beliefs and institutions that he opposes. “Worlds” are contrasted with “unworlds,” “growing” with “ungrowing,” “reason” with “unreason.” Cummings delights in contradictions and asserts that living truth can only be achieved by turning comfortable literary and ideological conventions on their heads. Friedman calls him “a true Paradoxer, one who perceives the soul only through the body, victory only through defeat, and social order only through individual freedom” (*EEC: Growth* 180). It is by

creating polarity and inversion that Cummings attempts to draw meaning from a chaotic modern world, and seeks to question the emerging doctrines of 20<sup>th</sup> century society.

While oppositions appear in many guises throughout Cummings' work, in the *nonlectures* he consistently uses three opposing categories – nature versus civilization, individual versus group, and the Artist (or “you and I”) versus “mostpeople” – to highlight his primary values.

#### Nature versus Civilization

In nature, Cummings is able to identify all the elements of existence that he finds most wonderful: spontaneity, authenticity, growth, and uniqueness.<sup>1</sup> According to Cummings' vision, nature is in constant motion, perpetually sprouting unique and authentic life. Its eternal cycles remain oblivious to the policies and propaganda of men. Cummings uses nature to provide a stark contrast to the corrupting influence of civilization, an artificial construction that promotes conformity and divisiveness while opposing spontaneity and growth. He highlights the opposition between civilization and nature in his description of Norton Woods, the place where, as a child, he first “encountered that mystery who is Nature”:

Only a butterfly's glide from my home began a mythical domain of  
semiwilderness; separating cerebral Cambridge and orchidaceous Somerville.

Deep in this magical realm of Between stood a palace, containing Harvard

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<sup>1</sup> According to Cummings, the fully actualized self will mimic the qualities of nature. A spontaneous individual, unencumbered by the expectations and demands of 20<sup>th</sup> century social structure, will experience continuous personal growth. This unconstrained self exhibits true authenticity and, consequently, genuine uniqueness. Just as nature creates uniqueness through a process of spontaneous and unselfconscious growth, human beings will only develop into unique and authentic individuals if they remain open to the spontaneous experiences that inspire personal growth.

University's far-famed Charles Eliot Norton: and lowly folk, who were neither professors nor professors' children, had nicknamed the district Norton's Woods (32).

Norton's woods are both "mythical" and "magical," an unexplainable "realm of Between" that recalls the enchanted forests outside of Shakespeare's Athens. It exists outside of both the intellectual elitism of Cambridge and Somerville's flashy, low-rent charm. While wealthy families of the Cambridge aristocracy shun those unaffiliated with the Harvard community, admonishing their children to avoid the distasteful district of Somerville, Norton's Woods has a quality of universal accessibility that stands in contrast to the insurmountable social boundaries of the surrounding communities. Although Norton's Woods contains the "palace" of a renowned Harvard professor (ironically, the same Harvard professor that Cummings' award seeks to honor,) the district was named by "lowly folk, who were neither professors nor professors' children," and therefore appears to be inhabited by both castes. It is a region of "semiwilderness," where nature exists "only a butterfly's glide from" civilization, allowing Cummings' young Estlin his first glimpse of a life devoid of the predetermined social constructs that dictate our ambitions and behavior. Cummings' opposition to the cultural forces that override our individuality, assigning each of us to Cambridge or Somerville, forms the basis of his powerful hatred of modern civilization.

Cummings vehemently opposes the technological and ideological developments of 20<sup>th</sup> century society, which he believed were preventing individuals from obtaining a genuine perception of the world and destroying the privacy essential to the development of an authentic self. In a world bombarded by made-for-TV images of life, Cummings

doubted that anyone could develop a true and untainted sense of identity. He ironically asks his young audience,

What is privacy? You probably never heard of it. Even supposing that (from time to time) walls exist around you, those walls are no longer walls; they are merest pseudosolidities, perpetually penetrated by the perfectly predatory collective organs of sight and sound... You haven't the least or feeblest conception of being here, and now, and alone, and yourself (23).

According to Cummings, modern society has caused the natural boundaries that allow human beings to develop into differentiated individuals to deteriorate into "pseudosolidities," which are constantly penetrated by a collective consciousness. While the invention of mass communication technology allowed people to perceive and interact in entirely new ways, Cummings felt that television's standardization and wide distribution of fashions, morals, and lifestyles had begun to erode the private environments that create authentic individuals. Instead of turning inward for answers to life's questions, "being here, now, alone, and yourself," Cummings feared that people "at the mercy of a ruthless and omnivorous everywhere" would base their all of their feelings, actions, and beliefs on the universalized messages of mass communications. As a new-and-improved, technologically enhanced civilization dragged human life deeper into a world of artificial constructs, Cummings feared that the value of authentic experience, as well as natural processes of growing, thinking, and exploring, would be entirely lost from individual consciousnesses.

Cummings believed that another vile offshoot of the 1950s push for televised conformity was young people's desire for "security." In contrast to his own idealized

adolescence, which he characterizes as “a rising and striving world; a reckless world, filled with the curiosity of life herself” (43). Cummings is horrified to discover “people who’ve been endowed with legs crawling on their chins after quote security unquote.”

He defines security as:

Something negative, undead, suspicious and suspecting; an avarice and an avoidance; a self-surrendering meanness of withdrawal; a numerable complacency and an innumerable cowardice. Who would be ‘secure’? Every and any slave. No free spirit ever dreamed of ‘security’ – or if he did, he laughed; and lived to shame his dream. No whole sinless sinful sleeping waking breathing human creature ever was (or could be) bought by and sold for, ‘security.’

Cummings is disgusted by the idea of “security” because it suggests a static end-goal for human life which, to him, is a state of being “undead” – physically alive, and yet in a state of personal stagnation, moral death, and spiritual slavery. According to Cummings, when an individual reaches a static state of “security,” his or her personal evolution stops. “Rising” and “striving” cease, and the person becomes subhuman, like some bizarre species of insect who has chosen to abandon its humanity, “crawling on [its] chin” in order to preserve its legs. Individuals who strive for security are suspicious of uncertainty, greedy for a superficial sense of well being, and willing to abandon the potential fullness of life in order to avoid risk.

Cummings’ objection to “security” is based on its inherent inactivity. He believes fundamentally in action, movement, and growth, which to him are far more important than any life “goal.” The opposite of the security-seeking sub-human is the laughing “free spirit” who is “sleeping waking breathing.” The first figure is characterized as a

passive “slave” who is “bought” and “sold,” whereas the second figure is characterized by active verbs. The free spirit may be “sinless” or “sinful,” implying that society’s moral judgment of an individual’s actions cannot define the degree to which he is free. Cummings makes another attack on convention in his inversion of the old cliché: “How monstrous and feeble seems some unworld which would rather have its too than eat its cake!” For those who seek security, the empty, meaningless phrase “have its too” is more important than the active endeavor of living. The “unworld” that values security over experience is the opposite of the natural and private world in which Cummings grew up, “a world which was a world.”

#### Individual versus Group

Cummings’ concept of Civilization stems from an even more basic social structure that he also derides: the Group. He believes that any group will to some degree pre-formulate the beliefs and affiliations of its members, preventing them from undertaking their own learning processes and asserting their own individuality.

All groups, gangs, and collectivities – no matter how apparently disparate – are fundamentally alike...what makes any world go round is not the trivial difference between a Somerville and a Cambridge, but the immeasurable difference between either of them and individuality (31.)

According to Cummings, the defining feature of a group is not *what* it thinks, but the fact that its members think *collectively*. When individuals define their ideas according to group affiliation, as opposed to cultivating beliefs based on personal, intuitive values (or “unreasons,” as Cummings would say,) they abandon their individual identity.

Therefore, Cummings asserts that all discrepancies between groups – whether social classes, political parties, or independent nations – are entirely transparent.

Nor will anything ever persuade me that, by turning Somerville into Cambridge or Cambridge into Somerville or both into neither, anybody can make an even slightly better world. Better worlds (I suggest) are born, not made; and their birthdays are the birthdays of individuals. Let us pray for individuals, never for worlds (31-32.)

Cummings suggests that any attempt to establish a universal way of life, to make a “better world,” is necessarily doomed to failure, since no single “world” can accommodate an infinite combination of unique individuals. Only unique individuals who choose to live authentically can inhabit a “better world,” since they exist in a realm of continuous discovery and joy, a world that is not made, but is continuously born and reborn.

Although the world of the individual appears to be a distinctly psychological realm, it also exists on literal and symbolic levels in the form of Nature. Friedman points out that “Nature is, of course, the literal and symbolic alternative to ‘turning Somerville into Cambridge or Cambridge into Somerville or both into neither,’ for she has an ‘illimitable being’ and ‘mortally immortal complexities of...beyond imagining imagination’ (p. 32)” (*EEC: Growth*, 179). Just as the universally accessible Norton’s Woods exists outside of the stratified communities of Cambridge and Somerville, Nature acts as the alternative to Civilization, the place where individuals can exist apart from conformity-promoting groups. Nature continuously expresses the spontaneity,



authenticity, and growth that true individuals wish to cultivate, and therefore serves as a nurturing place for inspiration.

Cummings' universal objection to groups regardless of their agenda also causes him to reject moralism, on the grounds that it arrogantly claims to pre-determine what is universally "right" for all the diverse members of humanity. He describes moralistic thought as an immature attempt to evaluate the world via simplistic categories of "good" and "bad," which emerges as a reaction to our parents' attempts to teach us the difference between right and wrong. As an example of this ideology, Cummings describes his own childhood method of evaluating poetry, which was based exclusively on a poem's moral function:

The one and only thing which mattered about any poem...was what the poem said, it's socalled meaning. A good poem was a poem which did good, and a bad poem was a poem which didn't: Julia Ward Howe's Battle Hymn Of the Republic being a good poem because it helped free the slaves... Thus it will be seen that, by the year 1900, one growing American boy had reached exactly that stage of "intellectual development" beyond which every ungrowing Marxist adult of today is strictly forbidden, on pain of physical disappearance, ever to pass (29).

As individuals develop mature thinking patterns, they become able to recognize subtleties and complexities, and consequently they realize that the world cannot be evaluated exclusively on the basis of pre-determined categories of "good" or "bad." Cummings feels that adhering dogmatically to moralist ideals (like those enforced by the Communist regime in the USSR) is inherently incompatible with the development of a mature

thought process.<sup>2</sup> Those who refuse to question moralist thinking remain in a perpetually underdeveloped state of “ungrowing.” Like American men and women who crave security, moralist thinkers are fixed in a state of inactivity that prevents personal development; in both cases, the inactive state results from the internalization of social constructs.

Cummings also opposes moralist dogma based on its ability to manipulate the masses. He asserts that all groups, from warring nations to social activists, will use moralist stances to support their own positions and activities, no matter how abhorrent they may appear in the eyes of outsiders. Nazi Germany, which used a moralist position to justify institutional genocide seven years earlier, presents the most striking example of this paradox. Cummings had witnessed this type of dogma, and its destructive consequences, first hand. The recent memory of two world wars are well apparent in his stance; as a volunteer ambulance driver in the early months of World War I, he had seen, “(at the halting touch of some madness called La Guerre) a once rising and striving world [topple] into withering hideously smithereens” (53). The dogmatic, propaganda-laden moralism of the USSR seemed to Cummings yet another outbreak of this ideological disease.

#### Artist versus Mostpeople

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<sup>2</sup> After witnessing the horrifying butchery of World War I, Cummings, like many of his contemporaries, became highly critical of his own nation and was drawn to the idealism of the socialists. Inspired to travel to Russia in spring of 1931, he encountered dismal living conditions, miserable people, and an oppressive totalitarian government. He left with a permanent and powerful opposition to the communist ideology. Cummings’ account of the experience formed the basis for his book *Eimi*, which was published in 1933. (*Dreams*, 306-315.)

While Cummings uses the security-seeking suburbanite and the moralizing collectivist to present worldviews that stand in opposition to his own, the Artist exemplifies Cummings' own individualist ideals. As opposed to the non-artists who are perpetually trapped in static, "ungrowing" frames of mind, artists are in a constant state of creative and intellectual motion. In the *nonlectures*, Cummings quotes from the forward of his 1926 book of poetry, *Is 5*:

Ineluctable preoccupation with The Verb gives a poet one priceless advantage: whereas nonmakers must content themselves with the merely undeniable fact that two times two is four, he rejoices in an irresistible truth (to be found, in abbreviated costume, upon the title page of the present volume) (64).

According to Cummings, the poet is gifted with a delightful ability to reshape the universe through his own constant acts of creation. Ordinary people are unable to conceive of a world in which two times two does not equal four, and therefore they are forced to accept "merely undeniable fact." The poet, however, is able to create and recreate the world around him through the medium of his art – he is able to imagine, and construct, a world in which two times two *Is 5*. While non-artists must settle for what they already perceive, poets (as "makers" obsessed with "The Verb") can actively reshape their world.

However, Cummings notes that in a society that strongly encourages normalization, the path of the artist is difficult to tread:

If you wish to follow, even at a distance, the poet's calling...you've got to come out of the measurable doing universe into the immeasurable house of being. I am quite aware that, wherever our socalled civilization has slithered, there's every

reward and no punishment for unbeing. But if poetry is your goal, you've got to forget all about punishments and all about rewards and all about self-styled obligations and duties and responsibilities etcetera ad infinitum and remember one thing only: that it's you – nobody else – who determines your destiny and decides your fate (24).

Cummings points out that modern society does not reward individuality; rather, it encourages us to follow pre-formulated paths, fulfilling obligations imposed upon us by the outside world “ad infinitum,” until they consume our entire lives. This structured life is a preprogrammed and “measurable” state of “unbeing,” which negates the unique energies of the self to produce socially idealized individuals. Society condemns those who enter “the immeasurable house of being” to lead the authentic life of an artist; but in order to produce art, individuals must dutifully ignore the punishments and rewards of society, and instead choose to lead a self-guided life. Like the serpent that tempts Eve to pluck the deadly apple from the Tree of Life, “wherever our so-called civilization has slithered” individuals are tempted to give up the blessed Eden of their individuality in exchange for the false rewards of security and acceptance.

On the book-jacket of *Him*, Cummings' first play, he published an imaginary dialogue between the allegorical figures of “Author” and “Public,” which he later cited in the *nonlectures*. This dialogue further emphasizes the differences between the artist and the non-artist:

Public: What is *Him* about?

Author: Why ask me? Did I or didn't I make the play?

Public: But surely you know what you're making –

Author: Beg pardon, Mr. Public; I surely make what I'm knowing.

Public: So far as I'm concerned, my very dear sir, nonsense isn't everything in life (64).

Here, Cummings asserts his unwillingness to restrict the meaning of artistic work to the limited and quantifiable. The Author does not strive to make a play "about" a concrete and objective subject: rather, he seeks to express sublime truth, to "make what [he is] knowing." He defines the process of creation as the expression of an innate understanding, rather than a simple exposition of information. Cummings further implies that the author is not the one to decide what the play is "about;" this process of objectification may only be accomplished through the appropriation of the audience, reader, or critic, and detracts from the original intent of the author. Public, who is unable to understand this sentiment, insists that Author's wordplay is "nonsense," implying that his work is meaningless as well, (a sentiment not uncommon among Cummings' critics at the time.)

Cummings goes on to use the figures of Author and Public to contrast the artist's vision of life with that of the non-artist:

Author: And so far as you're concerned, "life" is a verb of two voices – active, to do, and passive, to dream. Others believe doing to be only a kind of dreaming. Still others have discovered (in a mirror surrounded with mirrors), something harder than silence but softer than falling; the third voice of "life", which believes itself and which cannot mean because it is.

To the non-artist, "life" is a verb of two voices: an individual may "dream," remaining in a state of passive inactivity and accomplishing nothing, or "do," actively pursuing

predetermined goals and objectives. However, as Cummings previously asserted, life within “the measurable doing universe” is also a passive existence, since “doing” is a meaningless expenditure of energy separated from any legitimate expression of self.

The artist not only equates “dreaming” with “doing,” but also discovers “the third voice of ‘life.’” Within this framework, life is not a scientific pursuit of objective truth, a journey down a socially pre-determined path, or a dichotomy between reality and fantasy. Instead, the artist seeks truth in all its obscurity and complexity, recognizing that life, because it is “harder than silence but softer than falling,” cannot be rationally or objectively perceived by the senses or the intellect. The third voice of life is the voice of sublime truth, which can only be heard through the indirect route of intuition, “in a mirror surrounded with mirrors.” Because it is intuitively derived, this voice cannot be rationally evaluated: it “cannot mean because it is.” According to Cummings, it is the artist’s calling to listen to the third voice of life, expressing sublime truth through art.

Cummings modifies the opposition between the artist and “mostpeople” in an essay written for a 1944 exhibition of his own art:

‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ are simple things. You bomb me = ‘bad.’ I bomb you = ‘good.’ Simple people (who, incidentally, run this socalled world) know this (they know everything) whereas complex people – people who feel something – are very, very ignorant and really don’t know anything (68).

This dichotomy echoes Cummings’ introduction to the *nonlectures*, in which he rejects conventional “knowing” in favor of “learning,” presenting himself, the nonlecturer, as an “authentic ignoramus.” Here, Cummings places “simple people” who “know everything” in opposition to “complex people” who choose to “feel” instead of “know.” In the

context of World War I, this opposition recalls Cummings' previous objection to moralism. After spending four months in a French prison at La Ferté Macé, (an experience that he documented in his first published work, *The Enormous Room*,) Cummings was returned to the U.S. only to be drafted in the final months of the war. Although he never returned to Europe, Cummings was sent to Camp Devens training area, where he was horrified by the blind hatred of the enemy that officers sought to instill in their troops. This experience permanently destroyed Cummings' belief in the righteousness of the United States and its American values (Kennedy *Dreams* 173).

Finally, Cummings points out the absurdity of the subjective constructs of "good," and "bad," returning to the association between art and his own fundamental values:

Very luckily for you and me, the uncivilized sun mysteriously shines on 'good' and 'bad' alike. He is an artist (68).

Cummings points out that dogmatic "knowledge" directly contradicts intuitive truth about human nature and the order of the universe. He equates the sun with an artist who, instead of using his work as a vehicle for insubstantial dogma, expresses sublime truths that transcend all the subjective "good" and "bad" of the world. Cummings attempts to prove that society's values are constructed and false, while the values of art represent the values of nature, and consequently, the values of sublime truth.

Over the course of his career, Cummings' construction of the opposition between artist and "mostpeople" undergoes a notable change. His earliest oppositions create dichotomies between poets and non-poets, Author and Public. Both of these oppositions suggest that the individuals who conform to Cummings' fundamental values are artists,

while non-artists are condemned to “do (or undo) till [they] drop” (24). But Cummings later broadens his terminology, creating more generalized oppositions between “you and I” and “mostpeople,” as well as “complex people” and “simple people.” Not only do these terms allow Cummings to reach out more explicitly to his readers (who, as a result of Cummings’ increasing popularity, are now more likely to be non-artists,) they also suggest a broadening of his ideology, to include anyone who recognizes the importance of being “faithful to ourselves.” However, his suggestion that all “human beings” (66) conform to his own values relegates “mostpeople” to a sub-human position. This problem exemplifies the contradiction inherent in much of Cummings’ work. While he wishes “you and I,” i.e. his reader and himself, to be excluded from his bitter critique of modern society, he maintains a vaguely defined opposition party, which may fall under a particular name [such as “Public,” “simple people,” “mostpeople,” or even “a soulless and heartless ultrapredatory infra-animal” (111)] or may be left undefined, existing only by implication.<sup>3</sup> While Cummings strives to achieve an inclusive, transcendental vision of life, his need to maintain this opposition party of sub-human humanity creates a fundamental flaw in his ideology.

### Transcendental Mysteries

While Cummings uses oppositions to contrast his own ideas with the dominant beliefs of society, he believed strongly in “mysteries,” [defined by Friedman as “transcendental values” (*EEC: Growth* 181),] which do not oppose the values of the “measurable doing universe,” but transcend it. These mysteries speak from the “third

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<sup>3</sup> This indeterminate opposition party, which represents the segment of humanity that does not conform to Cummings’ values, serves as the object of his satires.



voice of 'life'" which, rather than opposing the first two, "dreaming" and "doing," transcends them completely to create a complex and honest vision of the "unmeasurable being universe." The *nonlectures* discuss "three mysteries: love, art, and selftranscendence or growing" (81), whose attainment is the ultimate goal of human beings. Alfred Kazin, in a review of the *nonlectures*, points out that in these mysteries lies "the personification of the old transcendentalist passion for abstract ideals." The New England transcendentalists' "faith in the visionary powers of the mind" resonates strongly in Cummings' own "belief in imagination," which he considers far superior to scientific fact or inherited wisdom in its ability to ascertain sublime truth (59).

Cummings own definition of the term "mystery," in the 1944 art exhibition essay, confirms Kazin's assessment of Cummings faith in the transcendental properties of the imagination.

Art is a mystery.

A mystery is something immeasurable.

In so far as every child and woman and man may be immeasurable, art is the mystery of every man and woman and child. In so far as a human being is an artist, skies and mountains and oceans and thunderbolts and butterflies are immeasurable; and art is every mystery of nature. Nothing measurable can be alive; nothing which is not alive can be art, nothing which cannot be art is true; and everything untrue doesn't matter a very good God damn..." (68).

According to this definition, the fundamental property of a mystery is its immeasurability. The properties of a mystery cannot be judged accurately by the senses, but must instead be apprehended and understood through an intuitive process. "In so far

as every child and woman and man may be immeasurable,” to the extent that each individual chooses “being” over “doing,” art may be used to represent the essential, uncorrupted selfhood of “every man and woman and child.” Furthermore, when a “human being” looks upon the world with the lucid, untainted vision of the “artist,” “skies and mountains and oceans and thunderbolts and butterflies are immeasurable”; the mysterious essence of nature becomes apparent. Conversely, Cummings asserts that all measurable things cannot be alive, all that is not alive cannot be art, and all that cannot become the subject of art is not true. This statement negates the validity of the objectively sensible world: the “knowing” scientist cannot ascertain truth, for sublime truth can only be accessed intuitively.

Earlier, Cummings moved from an opposition between the artist and the non-artist to an expanded, vague opposition between “human beings” and an indistinct other. Here, Cummings refines this opposition, stating that while art represents one way that loving human beings may achieve “eternity,” or recognition of sublime truth, through love of a lover or love of a god:

Art is a mystery, all mysteries have their source in the mystery-of-mysteries who is love: and if lovers may reach eternity directly through love herself, their mystery remains essentially that of the loving artist whose way must lie through his art, and of the loving worshipper whose aim is oneness with his god. From another point of view, every human being is in and of himself or herself illimitable; but the essence of his or of her illimitability is precisely its uniqueness... (82).

This is the most explicit definition of Cummings' dichotomy between "you and I" and "mostpeople": "you and I" dedicate ourselves to loving pursuits, through which we gain access to the "mystery-of-mysteries" (love) and an intuitive understanding of sublime truth, while the vision of "mostpeople" remains fixed on the artificial constructs of civilization, trapping these individuals in lives devoid of true meaning.

### The Romantic Vision

The value system outlined in E. E. Cummings' *i, 6 nonlectures*, which advocates authentic and spontaneous individuality while rejecting rational and contrived social structures, creates a romantic vision that stands apart from the rational modernist views of Cummings' contemporaries. While Cummings was characterized as the *enfant terrible* of modernist poetry (Horton and Mangan 59), often falling under critical fire for his unorthodox use of language, his values and perspective ironically recall the vision of a much earlier period – that of the British romantic poets a century before. Although Cummings' poetry is visually and linguistically unique, his basic ideology, as well as the rationale for his use of language, can be traced to the poetic philosophies of the Romantics. Since the modernist values of Cummings' times were, for the most part, hostile to his Romantic viewpoint, Cummings' vicious satires, which seem so disparate from his idealistic vision, can be interpreted as an angry reaction to the rationalistic, propaganda-laden, war-torn era in which he came of age, a world that refused to recognize or value the Romantic worldview of his predecessors.

In his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth claims that the "principal object" of his poetry is "to choose incidents and situations from common

life...and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way” (257). Wordsworth’s technique attempts to reveal the transcendental value of our everyday experience, just as Cummings’ unique use of language allows us to see beyond the conventional, culturally derived meaning of words. Like Cummings, Wordsworth opposes “the influence of social vanity” on personal expression and the “application of gross and violent stimulants” to the human mind. Although Cummings set himself in opposition to “televisionary” culture and Wordsworth condemned excessively elaborate language, both poets encouraged the reader to avoid culturally contrived systems in favor of introspective and individualistic philosophies. Their goals were the same: to cause the reader to gain a renewed understanding of the self and the transcendental values of our everyday lives through poetry.

In contrast to Cummings’ poems, which “practically defy paraphrase into prose” (Horton and Mangan 62), Wordsworth insists on utilizing “a selection of language really used by men” (357.) However, just as Wordsworth’s poetry causes us to look at ordinary and rustic subjects in a fresh light, Cummings’ irreverent and experimental use of language strips words of their usual meaning, forcing the reader to consider them from new visual and connotational angles. Lloyd Frankenburg describes Cummings’ linguistic technique as the “resurrecting of language from the dead box of grammar,” creating a “reanimation of the cliché and colloquial”(157.) R.P. Blackmur criticized Cummings vehemently for this technique (as did many others), but his claim that Cummings “deprives many of his words of as much as possible of *their own* meaning: so that they

take on *his* meaning,” (173) is entirely accurate.<sup>4</sup> By altering the usual grammar, spelling, and syntax of his language, Cummings forces us to look at familiar words, phrases, and clichés as if for the first time. Through this disturbance, we recognize new aspects of each word’s rhythm, sound, and meaning. Cummings’ disruption of language allows us to see through words to the underlying truth of his seemingly simple subject matter; Wordsworth pursued the same goal by putting simple language and “common life” into complex philosophical poetry. Like Wordsworth, Cummings strives to “throw over them a certain colouring of imagination” (357) over ordinary subjects, for both writers believe that the poetic perspective on common life is a lens through which we can clearly view our world and ourselves.

The word “trivial” echoes throughout Cummings criticism; Philip Horton and Sherry Mangan claim that Cummings’ “mingling of the trivial and serious...is a result of his deliberate rejection of knowledge, whether of himself or of life at large” (61). The illicit mingling of trivial subjects with the serious art of poetry was also the charge most frequently leveled against Wordsworth, and in both cases, the critics have missed the point of the poet’s efforts. The combination of seemingly simplistic or trivial subjects with weighty poetic techniques is not a meaningless gesture; rather, the poets intend to show that the “trivial” is indeed serious, for the common people and moments captured in their works hold important keys to our understanding of life and human nature. In Wordsworth’s words, it is the poet’s goal “to make these incidents and situations *interesting* by tracing in them (truly, though not ostentatiously) the primary laws of our nature” (357, my emphasis.) The “trivial” in poetry is not only an object of fascination,

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Blackmur also accuses Wordsworth and Shelley of attempting to imbue words with indeterminable personal meanings outside of their standard connotations.

but also suggests a philosophy of thought that can produce considerable returns if we, as readers, choose to invest in it.

In addition to its dependence on Wordsworth's precepts, Cummings' Romantic vision also finds origins in the philosophies of William Blake. In nonlecture 2 Cummings quotes Blake's aphorism, "He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars / General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer" (32). Both Blake and Cummings believe that "General Good," (often in the guise of scientifically proven "knowledge,") is the manipulating cry that the "scoundrel, hypocrite, and flatterer" use to control others; according to Cummings, Blake's words "[spell] the doom of all unworlds; whatever their slogans and their strategies, whoever their heroes or their villains" (32). Again, regardless of mission or affiliation, Cummings believes that all dogmatic, generalized beliefs dictating human behavior, the laws of "unworlds," prevent us from experiencing authentic truth.

Blake's opposition to 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism, particularly the work of Newton, Locke, and Bacon, is clearly reflected in Cummings stance towards 20<sup>th</sup> century technology. Just as Cummings recoils at the reduction of "immeasurable" nature to quantitative science and individuality to televised ideals, Blake believes that human senses are a false indicator of reality; an unwavering belief in the reliability of perception will distort our understanding of the universe. In the margins of Emanuel Swedenborg's *The Wisdom of Angels, Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, Blake wrote, "Man can have no idea of any thing greater than Man, as a cup cannot contain more than its capaciousness" (431). He points out the arrogance of humanity in claiming to deduce the order of the universe, when our faulty perceptions provide the only indicator of our

success. Since we are incapable of understanding anything greater than ourselves, Blake claims that science presumes its own accuracy, creating a false vision of a mechanized universe. In *Jerusalem*, he writes of “the Water-wheels of Newton”:

black the cloth

In heavy wreaths folds over every Nation; cruel Works  
Of many wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic  
Moving by compulsion each other: not as those in Eden: which  
Wheel within Wheel in freedom revolve in harmony & peace (319).

Blake views Newtonian physics as a terrible and false conception of the order of the universe, in which “tyrannic” cogs set the universe in ordered motion “by compulsion.” In contrast, Blake views the true motion of the universe as spontaneous, each element neither fully independent nor constrained, but instead interacting within a system of “freedom,” “harmony & peace.”

In “O sweet spontaneous” (*Poems* 58), an ode to “earth,” Cummings also suggests that science is incapable of understanding the true nature of the universe. He describes the molestation and rape of “sweet spontaneous / earth” (1-2) by “prurient philosophers” (6) and “the naughty thumb / of science” (10-11). However, the forces of reason cannot gain control over earth:

true

to the incomparable  
couch of death thy  
rhythmic  
lover

thou answerest

them only with

spring) (20-27)

According to Cummings, the rhythms of nature and death, innately intertwined, will forever remain beyond the grasp of rational human thought. Although, as stated in the *nonlectures*, it is possible to gain an intuitive understanding of the mysteries of the universe, the “sweet spontaneous earth” will forever remain beyond the grasp of science and philosophy.

#### Cummings and Anti-Semitism

After recognizing the origins of Cummings’ lyrics in Romantic idealism and individualism, the basic misanthropy of his satire comes as a shock. But even more strikingly, Cummings, who dedicated a good deal of his philosophy to a transcendental viewpoint that glorifies human individuality, sometimes appears to express bigoted viewpoints. In the early years of the 1950s, when Cummings was beginning to earn recognition as one of the most prominent poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he was increasingly accused of using his poetry to express anti-Semitic sentiments. “IKEY (GOLDBERG)’S WORTH I’M,” from Cummings’ 1926 book *Is 5*, was often cited by Cummings’ accusers. This short poem seems to capture the Jewish stereotype of obsession with material wealth:

IKEY (GOLDBERG)’S WORTH I’M

TOLD \$ SEVERAL MILLION

FINKELSTEIN (FRITZ) LIVES

AT THE RITZ WEAR

earl & wilson COLLARS (*Poems* 242.)



The poem suggests an overheard conversation, with Cummings' use of capital letters evoking the Jewish stereotype of abrasively loud voices. The speaker (or speakers) is discussing two presumably Jewish figures, who are described exclusively on the basis of their material wealth. The one-name references followed by parenthetical qualifiers suggest that these figures are well known and considered important by the speakers. The figure of Ikey Goldberg is assigned a "worth" with a dollar sign as would appear on a price tag, suggesting that the man himself could be bought and sold. Similarly, Fritz Finkelstein loses his human identity, and is reduced completely to his residence at the Ritz and his "earl & wilson" collars. The words "earl & wilson" are the only two in the poem that are not capitalized, suggesting that the speaker's voice that has been lowered for emphasis. The speaker may wish to emphasize the Anglo connotation of the brand name; he suggests that Fritz is using wealth to try to escape his stigmatized ethnic group, in a presumptuous attempt to climb above his designated social rank. Both Ikey and Fritz have in fact become their luxurious possessions, in exchange for the loss of their identity as human beings. The poem seems to capture the stereotype that Jews base their value system exclusively on money, a belief that dates back to the middle ages, when Jews were forced to become moneylenders because they were barred from entering other professions.

Poem number 46 from Cummings' 1950 volume, *Xaipe*, according to Cummings' biographer Richard S. Kennedy, was the source of "the most unpleasant controversy Cummings ever provoked" (Kennedy *Dreams* 431):

A kike is the most dangerous  
machine as yet invented

by even yankee ingenu  
 ity(out of a jew a few  
 dead dollars and some twisted laws)  
 it comes both priggd and canted (*Poems* 644.)

The poem seems to suggest that the “kike” is the ultimate bloodsucking capitalist, “the most dangerous /machine” that “even yankee ingenu / ity” could produce. This inhuman figure (like Ikey and Fritz) is incapable of the process of authentic creation which, to Cummings, represents all the positive possibilities for human life; in a corrupt mockery of the creative process, the Jew produces only “a few / dead dollars and some twisted laws.” The poem originally concluded with the line, “it comes both pricked and cunted,” but Cummings changed the wording in 1945, when publication problems arose upon the poem’s submission to the *Quarterly Review of Literature*. While Cummings agreed to the change in wording, he defended the poem, insisting that “anyone who resents [poem] 3] on the unground that it’s ‘antiJewish’ must be méchant or eed-yoh – since my Good American point = that the kike isn’t (hélas) a Jew...” (Kennedy *Dreams* 432.) Although the poem may be easily interpreted as anti-Semitic, Cummings emphatically asserts that his poem does not intend to equate the figure of the “kike” with actual Jews.

When Cummings was awarded the Academy of American Poets Award in 1951, many critics loudly objected to the choice, lambasting the poet, among other things, for his use of anti-Semitic verse. In a critical round robin on the Cummings-anti-Semitism debate, printed in *Congress Weekly* in June of 1951, Alex Jackson asserted that “enough suspicion, present and past, exists concerning Cummings’ alleged bias for a critical examination of his work.” He cites accusations of anti-Semitism from a variety

of sources, including Virginia Kent Cummins (publisher-editor of *The Lyric*), Cummings-detractor Earl Byrd, and Cummings-admirer David Daiches (“Anti-Semitism” 173).

The opinions that appeared in *Congress Weekly* revealed a huge variation in the critics’ responses to Cummings’ poems. Some critics accompanied opinions on Cummings’ anti-Semitism with a complete dismissal of Cummings’ work. Stanton A. Colentz, for example, begins his commentary with the following opinion: “Cummings is an affected mouther of inanities, whose work has no more relationship to poetry than the barking of my dog has to an aria sung by Caruso” (177). Not surprisingly, Colentz contends that Cummings’ work contains

the same outrageous racial bias as was responsible for the circulation in Europe of the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and that was not only instrumental in precipitating pogroms but that was the central factor behind the bloodiest massacre in known history: the Hitlerite slaughter of the defenseless Jews of Europe (178).

Ludwig Lewisohn took a similar stance, dismissing Cummings on the grounds that “he who is indiscriminately bitter about everything has evidently no balanced judgment or assured sense of values. He can in his amused and amusing universal disgruntlement be made out anything – fascist, anti-Semite, what you will. Fundamentally he is nothing” (177). Colentz asserts that Cummings’ words are vicious enough to inspire genocide, while Lewisohn suggests that a poet as ideologically muddled as Cummings should be of little concern, anti-Semite or not. But aside from the issue of anti-Semitism, both critics agree that Cummings’ work is essentially meaningless and ineffective.

Leslie Fiedler and Harry Roskolenko also acknowledge anti-Semitic overtones in some of Cummings' work; however, they present a more appreciative response to his poetry, as well as a more tempered and contemplative view of the anti-Semitism issue. Fiedler agrees that "Cummings undoubtedly has written of Jews *only* in terms of the stereotype which makes a total equation of Jew and vulgar exploiter possible" (180). But he goes on to concede that "Cummings is like everyone else (somewhat) evil, and like few others, a remarkable artist... Certainly, when the attackers of Cummings (or Eliot or Ezra Pound or Céline) are revealed as men motivated not so much by a love for Jews as by a hatred for art, I know where to take my stand." Fiedler asserts that while some of Cummings' work seems culpably anti-Semitic, it is foolish to disregard the entire body of his work on this basis. Roskolenko implies that Cummings' allegedly anti-Semitic poems are open to two interpretations, as a result of Cummings' attempt to create a "biting double-take portrait" (181). While he asserts that "Cummings is too bright to fall for the wholesale *merde* of anti-Semitism," he also suggests that the "ancient portrait" of Finkelstein is required "for [Cummings'] pyrotechnics; as much as Eliot needs his Bleistein." Roskolenko claims that Cummings' use of negative Jewish stereotype may be interpreted as anti-Semitic or anti- anti-Semitic; however, Cummings' use of the traditional Jewish caricature reveals his internalization of anti-Semitic conventions. Both Roskolenko and Fiedler recognize anti-Semitic tendencies in Cummings' work, but are unwilling to discount an exceptional poet on account of a few unsavory poems.

Jacksonson argues for Cummings' acquittal, insisting that "even a cursory examination of Exhibit 46 should prove that, far from being anti-Semitic in intent, the lines are pointedly and effectively anti anti-Semitic...what scorn lies in the words is

aimed not at Jews, but at a society in which *kike*, *coon*, *dago*, *spic* form an integral part of the vernacular” (176). Charles Glicksberg, while he writes, “I must confess...that I do not like [Cummings’] poetry,” proclaims his admiration for *Eimi* and *The Enormous Room*, writing, “It is difficult to see” how a writer of such “creative imagination and insight...could be infected with the anti-Semitic virus” (179). He goes on to argue, “He who is a downright anti-Semite...will betray all the classic symptoms of the syndrome of racial and religious prejudice. We need no literary detectives, no special acumen, to ferret them out. Their work is their own indictment. In it they stand self-betrayed and self condemned.” Both these critics focus on the importance of viewing a poets’ work from a broader perspective before passing judgment on allegedly anti-Semitic expressions. They contend that a satirist who is such a vocal defender of individuality and personal freedom is unlikely to harbor strong anti-Semitic convictions; Jackson argues that Cummings’ words are in fact anti- anti-Semitic, and Glicksberg suggests that if Cummings were indeed anti-Semitic, his prejudice would be more apparent.

Cummings reacted to the accusations of anti-Semitism inspired by Exhibit 46 with distress and bewilderment, in spite of the fact that the poem had been called into question upon its first publication in the *Quarterly Review*. Furthermore, several friends had warned Cummings not to include exhibit 46 in *Xaipe* for fear that it would cause uproar among readers. Cummings, of course, gleefully refused to do anything of the sort; by no means would the poet alter his artistic vision to pander to a hateful and paranoid public. When Lloyd Frankenburg suggested that he remove this and another poem (which used the word “nigger”) from the collection, Cummings responded with the following:

...it is more than most kind of thee, monsieur, to warn me of le public's reaction to 2 Wild Words (see how they run). And yet the (however painful) fact that America is not a free country doesn't, I feel, justify anyone's behaving like a slave or three... (Kennedy *Dreams* 433).

Judging from his reply, Cummings does not seem to believe that Frankenburg's concerns are stem from his own use racist or anti-Semitic sentiments. Rather, Cummings seems to view the request to remove the poems as a petty attempt at language censorship. Instead of considering the implications of potentially anti-Semitic or racist interpretations of his work, he dismisses concerns as an attempt on the part of the publisher to censor his use of racial epithets, which in the poet's mind were essential to the meaning of the poems.

Immediately prior to the publication of *Xaipe*, Cummings included this justification of the use of the word "kike" in a letter to Hildegard Watson:

...the little poem states (in effect) that a "kike" is what becomes of a jew – not every jew & not any – thanks to the machine-world of corrupted American materialism: i.e. that America (which turns Hungarian into "hunky" & Irishman into "mick" & Norwegian into "squarehead") is to blame for the "kike" (Kennedy *Dreams* 433.)

This defense, in accord with Jackson's theory of anti- anti-Semitism in exhibit 46, suggests that the "kike" is a fictitious, socially constructed character rather than an accurate depiction of the Jew. Cummings implies that the kike figure – the materialistic, vulgar, exploitative character traditionally associated with the epithet – is merely the product of an American culture that views people within social constructs and not as individuals. According to this letter, Cummings does not use the kike as an accurate

depiction of a Jewish population or any Jewish person; the kike is “not every jew & not any.” In accordance with his assertions in the *nonlectures*, Cummings suggests that the same “machine-world of corrupted American materialism” which is responsible for the lack of spontaneous individualism in modern life also encourages people to create negative stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups. These stereotypes stem from the same social divisions that exist between the worlds of Cambridge and Somerville, which Cummings alleges are both superficial and harmful.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of Cummings’ intent, his anti- anti-Semitic poems “IKEY GOLDBERG’S WORTH (I’M)” and Exhibit 46 fail to function as effective satire because their target is not clearly decipherable. In *The Anatomy Satire*, Gilbert Highet defines two methods or attitudes essential to quality satire. First, the author must describe a painful or absurd situation, or a foolish or wicked person or group, as vividly as possible. Second, the satire must be written with the intention to shock readers into seeing the truth of an evil that they generally ignore (18-19). While these two Cummings satires succeed at the second objective, they fail in their execution of the first. If Cummings wished to satirize the society that produces anti-Semitic sentiments, Highet’s criteria would require that these figures appear prominently and clearly in the poems. However, in “IKEY (GOLBERG)’S WORTH I’M” the anti-Semite does not seem to appear at all. Although it is possible that the speaker or speakers of the poem could represent anti-Semites, Cummings’ use of all capital letters, which clearly conforms to the stereotype of the loud and abrasive Jew, suggests otherwise. A similar lack of clarity exists in “a kike is the most dangerous.” Here, Cummings’ satiric barbs seem to be leveled at both “yankee

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<sup>5</sup> Also in accordance with the *nonlectures*, Cummings asserts that categorization is the source of all racial and ethnic slurs, regardless of actual group identity. Again, Cummings regards all groups as fundamentally

ingenu / ity” and the “dangerous machine” of the kike. Is Cummings criticizing America for producing the vicious stereotype of the Jew as “kike,” or is he condemning American capitalism for providing Jews with the opportunity to produce “dead dollars” and “twisted laws”? Again, Cummings’ true intention is indiscernible. In his book *Satire*, Matthew Hodgard writes, “The art of satire lies in timing...[the satirist] must choose the moment to drop his mask and make his intention perfectly clear” (130-131). In these poems, Cummings avoids choosing a precise moment to drop his satirical mask. Instead of revealing his intentions clearly, he writes ambiguous lines that remain open to vastly different interpretations. His creations lack the precision essential to effective literary satire.

Roskolenko summarizes the failure of these poems in his contribution to the *Congress Weekly* discussion:

An original lyricist, inventive and delicate when he wants to be, Cummings’ literary style in satire insists on indelicacy, mostly for the purposes of shock. But it stems from a divided sensitivity; and in his alleged anti-Semitic poems, his method falls apart and becomes the smallest part of his huge literary bag of tricks. His barbs become cheap; his language loses its accuracy (for the satire is trite!), and the over-all literary losses give the poems a slap-happy quality. They look nasty, sound bitter, cruel, and heartless, yet they are of two minds, going in two directions (“Anti-Semitism” 181).

It is this “divided sensitivity,” so clearly displayed in the varied critical interpretations of Cummings’ work, which explains how an exceptionally talented, widely praised satirist could stumble so profoundly when confronted with the topic of anti-Semitism.



Cummings' letters clearly indicate that he did not intend for his poems to be read as anti-Semitic; his persistent explication and defense of his work, as well as his shock and dismay at the public suggestion that he was an anti-Semite, strongly suggest that he did not wish to be perceived as anti-Semitic. Yet the poems themselves remain vague and imprecise, unwilling to commit to either a wholesale attack on the Jews or an earnest defense. Furthermore, the stereotypical figure of the Jew as "kike" would be a perfect target for Cummings' satiric lash; materialistic and superficial, the "kike" exhibits many of the same qualities as Cummings' "mostpeople." In spite of Cummings' denial of anti-Semitic sentiments, the lack of clarity in his poetry betrays his blurred convictions. As Roskolenko conceded, in Cummings' allegedly anti-Semitic poetry, he "is still testing the language and looking in two directions, or three, or merely into his own mirror." Torn between his transcendental values and his oppositional vision, Cummings seems uncertain whether his "kike" represents a persecuted minority to be defended from a bullying America, or the contemptible antithesis of his own Romantic artist.

Regardless of the extent of Cummings' anti-Semitic beliefs, the insensitivity of these satires, less than a decade after the blazing furnaces of the Nazi death camps were extinguished, is inexcusable. In Cummings' responses to cries of anti-Semitism, he behaves as if the only issue at hand were a certain indelicacy of language. But as Fiedler comments, "there is a terrible *resonance* inevitable in remarks about Jews that makes any comparison with jokes about Scotchmen and Parisians impertinent – and a little disingenuous" (180). While, as Jackinson contends, Cummings uses derogatory terms in reference to a variety of groups, the proximity of the Holocaust gives a unique weight to Cummings' use of anti-Semitic vocabulary.

## The Origins of Satire

Although Cummings' stated ideology clearly echoes the Romantic philosophies of his forbears, more than one hundred years after Wordsworth published his *Lyrical Ballads*, Cummings encountered a deeply divided world that was extremely hostile to his Romantic sensibilities. His emergence from a protected, idyllic Cambridge childhood into the paranoid, war-torn world of his adulthood inspired a bitterness that, while providing inspiration for some of the greatest poetic satires of the time, created a paradoxical crisis in his Romantic ideology. S.I. Hayakawa, in a review of Cummings' 1938 volume *Collected Poems*, writes:

[Cummings] was dumped out into the uninnocent and unlyrical world – the world of chippies, broads, and burlesque shows...and after that into the infinitely more shocking world of the blood, vermin, murder, commercialized idealism, and patriotic hysteria of the Great War...he turned upon the nightmare worlds of reality partly with the assumed callousness and defensive self-mockery of the very sensitive, and partly with the white and terrible anger of the excessively shy (286).

While Wordsworth responded to the pressures of an unromantic society by criticizing popular culture and relegating his romantic vision to "low and rustic life," Cummings' technologically enhanced world is no longer provides for of this way of life. His only refuges from a bleak modern reality were nature, childhood memories, and romantic encounters, which provide the subject matter for most of his lyrics; his fury towards the cruel and hostile world that betrayed his idealism provides the fuel for his satires.

Cummings' misanthropic satire follows in the Juvenalian tradition: his poems do not aim to cure the ills of society, but "to wound, to punish, to destroy" (Highet 235). In contrast to the Horacian satirist, who "likes most people, but thinks that they are rather blind and foolish," satirists of the Juvenalian persuasion believe that evil

is rooted in man's nature and in the structure of society. Nothing can eliminate or cure it. Man...deserves only scorn and hatred. If he [the satirist] laughs at them, it is not the laughter of fellowship, there is no joy in it, no healing warmth. He laughs with contempt at their pretensions and incongruities and base hypocrisies.

This satirist is close to the tragedian.

While the Horacian satirist may gently point out the wickedness of particular individuals in order to cure the shortcomings and ignorance of others, the Juvenalian satirist is more likely to dismiss all of humanity, finding life to be "not tragic, nor comic, but ridiculously contemptible and nauseatingly hateful" (236).

The poem "humanity, i love you," published in 1922 in Cummings' first book of poetry, *Tulips & Chimneys*, provides an example of Cummings' Juvenalian misanthropy. The opening stanzas of this sarcastic love poem to "Humanity," which is the first poem in a section titled "La Guerre," respond to a society that chooses to pursue worldly success at any cost, however "embarrassing" it may be:

Humanity i love you  
because you would rather black the boots of  
success than enquire whose soul dangles from his  
watch-chain which would be embarrassing for both

parties and because you  
unflinchingly applaud all  
songs containing the words country home and  
mother when sung at the old howard (*Poems* 53.)

Cummings' humanity chooses to "black the boots" of success, a phrase that not only suggests polishing, but also an evil blackening through sin. Humanity also chooses to ignore injustice by not asking "whose soul dangles from [the] / watch chain" of the opulent allegorical figure of success. The awkward line breaks betray the disjointedness of humanity's actions. The army men who "applaud / all songs containing the words country, home and / mother" display horrifyingly "unflinching" hypocrisy in the face of their own immoral deeds and beliefs.<sup>6</sup> They are the incarnation of the superficial patriotism and pseudo-morality that Cummings despises. In the final stanzas, Cummings summarizes his bleak vision of human behavior:

Humanity i love you because you  
are perpetually putting the secret of  
life in your pants and forgetting  
it's there and sitting down

on it  
and because you are  
forever making poems in the lap  
of death Humanity

i hate you

Although humanity is gifted with special access to "the secret of / life,"

Cummings humorously portrays our determination to evade what is truly meaningful, as we choose to stuff our most valuable secret into our pants (which may be envisioned as a pocket, or elsewhere,) until we accidentally sit on it and destroy it. Finally, Cummings laments that the human race is "forever making poems in the lap / of death." Cummings often uses the phrase "making poems" in reference to humans' creative or life-giving experiences; humanity may be pictured as a child in the lap of the parent death, who

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<sup>6</sup> These lines recall Cummings' experience at Camp Devens training area, where he was horrified by the blind hatred of foreigners that officers sought to instill in their men based upon the assumed superiority of

tutors humanity in its destructive ways, or as a lover who provides sexual pleasure to death. Cummings asserts that instead of directing our energy and creativity towards self-actualization or positive experiences, humanity's wartime creations produce moral, spiritual, and literal death.

Cummings' final statement to the allegorical figure of "Humanity" expresses the poet's ultimate frustration with the corruption of the human race. The lack of punctuation causes the poem to accelerate in the closing lines, but the unpunctuated phrase "i hate you," set apart from the rest of the poem, is both open-ended and pointedly restrained. The smallness of the phrase, due to its lower-case lettering, recalls the impotent anger of a child towards a world that he or she can neither understand nor control. The reader hears the tiny voice of a young poet and soldier in the midst of an insane world, whose coming of age has brought only disillusionment and bitterness. As suggested by several of Cummings' commentators, this entrance into the adult world of propaganda and deceit is also a descent into hell (Hayakawa 289, Forrest 22).

Why does a poet such as Cummings, who relishes human individuality and the glorious possibilities for human life, choose to condemn all of humanity? In his analysis of satirists' motives, Highet writes:

Most satirists belong to one of two main classes. Either they were bitterly disappointed early in life, and see the world as a permanent structure of injustice; or they are happy men of overflowing energy and vitality, who see the rest of mankind as poor ridiculous puppets only half-alive, flimsy fakes and meager scoundrels" (241).

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patriotic "American" values and intentions.

I would argue that Cummings belongs to both of these classes. Cummings' early and profound disappointment, which allies him with the first class of satirists, occurred in his encounters with the "uninnocent and unlyrical" adult world (Hayakawa 286). The disillusionment that Cummings gained from his WWI experiences is clearly evident in his work, beginning with his first satiric observations in *The Enormous Room*.<sup>7</sup> In 1924, three months after his first marriage (to Elaine Thayer), Cummings' new wife requested a divorce upon falling in love with a wealthy Irishman; she then denied Cummings the right to visit their daughter, Nancy. Finally, Cummings' father, who had supported Cummings financially and personally well into his adult years, died tragically when a train struck his car in 1926. This combination of devastating personal events within a short period of time created a profound disillusionment that permanently scarred Cummings' character (Kennedy *Dreams* 131-293).

Cummings conforms to the second category class of satirists because he recognizes human beings' potential to live lives "of overflowing energy and vitality"; his continual and bitter frustration stems from the fact that most human beings choose not to do so. Cummings himself was described as vivacious, witty, and adventurous; his friend Scofield Thayer compared him to "a stack of Roman candles" (Kennedy *Dreams* 250). While Cummings attempted to both glorify and live a life of passion and fullness, from an early age he was continuously shocked, disappointed, and frustrated by a society that condemned this way of life. Highet writes, "Although some are too embittered, others too convulsed with laughter, to give voice to their positive beliefs, all satirists are at heart idealists" (243). Thus we see that, in fact, Cummings the Romantic idealist fits perfectly

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<sup>7</sup> Commentators who have recognized the effect of World War I on Cummings' psyche include Richard Kennedy and S.I. Hayakawa.

the description of the satirist. But instead of failing to express his positive beliefs, Cummings uses them to inspire his lyrics.

While “humanity, i love you” attacks all human beings as the source of the world’s corruption, Cummings is generally indecisive about where to place the blame for this phenomenon. As suggested by the various names given to his “opposition party” in the *nonlectures* (Public, mostpeople, simple people, etc.), Cummings’ enemy is shifting, uncertain, and ultimately unknown. However, this does not prevent the poet from attacking as culprits a variety of political ideologies, nationalist orientations, and cultures. The world’s refusal to adopt Cummings’ romantic individualism causes him to lash out at humanity, but over the entire course of his life he was unable to adequately define his intended target. In a fashion not unlike the scientific methods that he rejects, much of Cummings’ satire makes a futile effort to identify, categorize, and understand the corrupting force that has shaped modern society.

However, this categorizing tendency creates a fundamental paradox between Cummings’ stated transcendent beliefs and his constant use of opposition in defining them. “The trouble here,” writes Friedman, in his analysis of Cummings’ introduction to the 1938 *Collected Poems*, “is that he derives his denial of categories from out of the prior establishment of categories”:

After having divided humankind into “mostpeople” (snobs) and “you and I” (human beings), Cummings concludes with a rapturous affirmation of the transcendence of division... The trouble here, of course, is that he derives his denial of categories from out of the prior establishment of categories. But a truly transcendental vision, as in Whitman, for example, is inclusive, and if it sees

“mostpeople” as enslaved by habit and routine, it nevertheless identifies with and accepts their humanity in the common struggle to retain some vitality in the face of trying to meet life’s essential obligations and responsibilities (Friedman (*Re*) *Valuing* 47).

While Cummings the idealist wishes to believe in his own transcendental vision, he is nonetheless driven to categorization. Friedman explains Cummings’ paradoxical values in Freudian terms, asserting that his “highly defended ego boundary” produces a “compensatory need to be strict about who and what [he] will include and exclude in order to feel safe” (50). This behavior is both a reaction to “the emerging social consciousness of the thirties” and a result of his “too-insistent need to assert [his] individuality in the face of the fear of engulfment,” which developed as a result of his relationship with his doting mother and imposing father. He goes on to describe Cummings’ best satires and “celebrations” in terms of a continuum, moving from his less-cruel satire to his most transcendent and accepting lyrics. However, Friedman pushes aside Cummings’ most troublesome satire, those that “rest upon the assumed difference between good-poet versus bad-others” or “personal self-justification at the expense of mostpeople” (54). While I would agree that these poems do not reveal Cummings’ “true genius,” they comprise a fair portion of his body of work, proving the existence of a major rift in Cummings’ ideology.

While Cummings’ relationship with his parents may have set a pattern for his subsequent behavior, the suggestion that the poet was responding defensively to a society that largely disapproved of both his ideology and his poetry provides an even more compelling explanation for his conflicting values. He longs for a return to the envisioned



world of his Romantic forbears and the lost country of his own youth: "a rising and striving world; a reckless world, filled with the curiosity of life herself; a vivid and violent world welcoming every challenge; a world worth hating and adoring and fighting and forgiving: in brief, a world which was a world" (*nonlectures* 43). Yet the 20<sup>th</sup> century had begun in spite of Cummings, and splitting atoms, color television, and world wars had become as inevitable as spring. His satiric responses may be furious and bitter, but their frequent contradiction of his transcendental philosophy makes some of them appear paradoxical or inconclusive.

### Conclusion

E. E. Cummings is most often regarded as an innovator and a rebel, a prankster poet who scattered letters haphazardly about the page, celebrated sex and spring, and raised the ire of conservative critics everywhere. Yet on closer examination, Cummings' philosophy is actually far more traditional than that of his time: rejecting the sophisticated self-awareness of his modernist contemporaries, he remained staunchly committed to the transcendental values first espoused by the Romantics a century before. Consequently, the materialism and rationalism of the modern world perpetually enraged the individualist and transcendentalist Cummings. In raising his angry cry against these modern values, Cummings constructed oppositions that contradicted his own transcendental philosophy. While Cummings often surpassed these oppositions, creating rich and lovely lyrics or witty and perceptive satires, the boundaries with which he surrounded himself frequently frustrated his transcendental vision, leaving behind trite and ambiguous poems.

Although Cummings' failure to consistently remain true to his own values represents a serious fault in his poetic rhetoric, his bravery and integrity in attempting to maintain a Romantic viewpoint in the face of continuous criticism must be regarded with respect. Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cummings was berated for permanent adolescence, abstractness, sentimentality, monotony, triviality, and arrogance. Modernist critics who valued sophistication and maturity consistently denounced his transcendental vision as simplistic and immature. Cummings was most often censured for "rejecting knowledge," yet many critics misunderstood the fundamental precept of this idea. Cummings does not reject all knowledge – he cites learning (an element of growth) among his most important values – but in an era of totalitarianism and propaganda, he argues that knowledge should be gained through personal experience and intuition, rather than dogma or science. The validity of his perspective, particularly when viewed from its origins in Romanticism and Transcendentalism, is undeniable.

Today, many passages from the *nonlectures* appear distinctly prophetic. In our world of cellular phones, reality television, and Internet chat rooms, Cummings' "ruthless and omnivorous everywhere" does indeed appear to have penetrated our collective consciousness. Within the 20<sup>th</sup> century "machine-world of materialist America," where corporations drive out family-owned businesses and millions of office workers sit hunched over paperwork in windowless cubicles, Cummings' values of authenticity, spontaneity, and growth seem largely lost from our culture. Indeed, at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Cummings' message, which encourages us to reject convention and cultivate our own "inwardly immortal world," seems even more relevant and urgent than it did a half-century before.

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