

## EDWARD ESTLIN CUMMMINGS' SATIRICAL POEMS: A DEFINITION OF IDENTITY

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### ABSTRACT

Edward Estlin Cummings (1894-1962) is one of the poets of the lost generation who learned to live life within the frame of war. He was uprooted from the unwavering ideals of childhood and plunged into the horror of war, corruption, inhumanities, disbelief and disillusionment. He felt that nothing in the conventional moral and political attitudes current in America he could accept, hence he scorned what he considered hypocritical in American manners and life. As one of the poets of the lost generation, he did not only express his longing for the certainties of childhood against the commercial world, rather he saw everything with a child's clear vision. In his early poems of the 1920's and 1930's he satirizes in his anti-war poems the inhuman conditions which Americans cannot endure being a living nation looks for a change. However, Satire is not limited to anti-war poems. Besides war, the depression years of the roaring twenties and thirties sharpened Cummings' protest against American culture, so much so that he came to be described as a misanthrope. He attacked the forces which prevented growth and awareness represented in the individual's battle with the capitalist's society in which he tried to live. Thus much of his criticism extends to include the entire western world, a world of mechanized thought, feeling and action, giving a picture of its moral and cultural anarchy. His satiric poems define his identity by rejecting the "unloving", and non-existence of "most people".

**Key words:** childhood, war, satire, anarchy, depression

### 1.1 Introduction

Edward Estlin Cummings (1894-1962) was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. From 1911 to 1916, Cummings attended Harvard where he dedicated himself to painting and literature.<sup>1</sup> When the United States entered World War I in 1917 Cummings volunteered as an –ambulance driver serving in France for

five months before he and his friend William Slater Brown were arrested. The indiscreet comments in the letters of Brown which had expressed pacifist views led to their arrest on suspicion of espionage in Depot de Triage, a concentration camp at La Ferte Mace.<sup>2</sup> This experience gave Cummings the subject of his only autobiographical novel, *The Enormous Room* (1922), which marked his first literary attack on authoritarianism.

In the 1920's and 1930's Cummings divided his time between Paris and New York. Though he described New York as a place which "reduced mankind to a tribe of pygmies,"<sup>3</sup> it was significant to him. His move from Cambridge to Greenwich Village paralleled a move from traditional values to bohemian life symbolic of his quest for freedom.<sup>4</sup>

In Paris he studied art. In *i: Six Nonlectures* (1953) Cummings writes of his experience there, saying:

Paris was for me ... this homogeneous duality:  
This accepting transcendence; this living and dying more  
than death or life. Paris...was continuously expressing  
the humanness of humanity. Everywhere I sensed a  
Miraculous presence not of mere children and women and  
men, but of living human beings, and the fact that I could  
scarcely understand their language seemed irrelevant since  
the truth of our momentarily mutual aliveness created an  
imperishable communion.<sup>5</sup>

His extended stay in Paris in the 1920's, a decade of experiments, brought him in touch with Dada, Surrealist and Cubist movements, influences that appear in his increasing experiment with language, particularly the irrational modes of expression in his poems.<sup>6</sup> This marked his protest which appeared in style and theme.

The impact of the above movements was embodied in his rejection of the prevailing conception of order and his insistence on a seemingly chaotic surface which he considered a sort of freedom and order. Thus his "verbal acrobatics"<sup>7</sup> were no longer expressive of disorder but a special and personal kind of order. He broke up his material on the page to present it in a new, visually directed way.<sup>8</sup> This mode of disorganization was part of the influence of paintings on Cummings the poet and the painter, turning his poems into picture poems.

Violation of order could be seen in words which are stretched out vertically and horizontally, fragmenting and merging of words, scattered punctuation marks, grammatical anarchism as employing verbs as nouns, capital letters jumping where they do not belong, all made him one of the "obscurantist," as S.V. Baum describes him.<sup>9</sup> Some critics find this system of typography irritating and had nothing to do with the poem. Harriet Monroe in the poem "flare and Blare" prefaced her critical reception of Cummings' poetic exuberance, saying: "Cummings has an eccentric system of typography which has nothing to do with the poem, but intrudes itself irritatingly, like blurred spectacle, between it and the reader's mind."<sup>10</sup>

Cummings technical innovations make him "a modern of the moderns."<sup>11</sup> They are both a reflection of and a protest against his world. The seemingly disorderly lines reflect the chaotic world of mass society. They also function as a protest against it because his personal way of writing asserts the individuality, which mass society destroys. Besides, his stripping the film of familiarity from language is a way, he thinks, to transform the world, i.e., to unlock the aliveness within the convention.<sup>12</sup>

It is the vitality of movement which Cummings is concerned with, the feel of the poem as it lies on the page which gives it a sense of visual structure as in painting.<sup>13</sup> He sees the poet's job in bringing the world into life and not merely in having a vision of the world, and that is where his technical devices come in.<sup>14</sup> Thus parts of speech are for him "living creatures" that would "alter and grow."<sup>15</sup> He believes that commas, periods, letters, syllables which seem chaotic but in reality each stand for impassioned feeling: "since feeling is first /who pay any attention/ to the syntax of thing." IS 5, "Four", VII<sup>16</sup>

To present his feeling as directly as possible is what Cummings tries to do. Hence his neological negatives, as "un he," "un hearts," etc. a favourite device for expressing the complication of pure feeling;<sup>17</sup> or printing several words together to imply scornfully that the words become a cliché.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, capitals are used for special emphasis. Academic procedure obligates the poet to capitalize the initial letter in every line and the pronoun "I" whenever it may occur. Cummings rejects the initial capital letter on the basis that he might not necessarily wish to give that word the emphasis such capitalization implies.<sup>19</sup> Some capitals might occur in the middle of the sentence. This is one of the reasons behind the hostility in academic circles against his works. Besides, his use of the lowercase "i" is a well-known means of self-reference in his work. It evokes the paradoxical kind of the individual modesty and concern.<sup>20</sup> That is, it reflects the role that he creates for himself to assert his individual style as the humble unnoticed dreamer, the down trodden one, and the child in the man.<sup>21</sup>

Directness and immediacy constitute the centre of his method. He sees his responsibility to set down without falsification the single fragment of time and makes it as intense as possible.<sup>22</sup> Hence he does not

follow any chronological order. The spontaneity with which he writes his poems marks him as a "maturely childish" adult.<sup>23</sup>

Cummings' protest exceeded technical innovation to theme. His poetry has some of the Dada spirit, not the Dada method.<sup>24</sup> Primarily he is a Dadaist, one who believes in throwing commonly accepted human values, but he is "a poet of affirmation rather than of negation."<sup>25</sup> He loves the world too much to deny it, hence he accepts the world with vigour and protest. Satire constitutes a face of his protest.

### 1.2 E.E. Cummings' Satirical Poems

The poems of the 1920's and 1930's mark Cummings early period. Mostly they are satires against the inhuman conditions which Americans cannot endure.<sup>26</sup> Being a living nation America looks for a change and cannot stand still, it is always "on the move," says Cummings in an article entitled "Why I Love America"(1927).<sup>27</sup>

Cummings' anti-war poems alone constitute a memorable body of his satiric poetry against the nightmarish reality. John G. Neihardi in "Book of Great significance" comments on this, saying:

we are living in a great individualistic age... But  
individualism ...if unchecked, must result in ... ruin.  
Danger signs began to appear...The war was one  
of these signs, demonstrates what may happen to  
people when notions...become absolutely  
individualistic.<sup>28</sup>

For Cummings, war is part of science which can neither be true nor alive. In *i: Six Nonlectures* (1953) he describes war as: "the science of insufficiency. And science is knowing and knowing is measuring ...Nothing measurable can be alive; nothing which is not alive can be art, nothing which cannot be art is true."<sup>29</sup> Anger is the central passion of his war-poetry. Anger against the state which he (like Thoreau) considers "an abstraction," superficially democratic.<sup>30</sup> In the second sequence of his volume *IS 5* (1926) satire is directed against the progressing influence of government in the lives of individuals.

In "next to of course god America i" Cummings describes his country as "land of the pilgrims." He loves his land and sympathizes with its people who are described as "deaf and dumb." In writing these three words without a space he indicates that this is a fact that turns to be a cliché. Young men, in the "glorious name" of their country, "rushed" to war without thinking:

why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful  
 than these heroic happy dead  
 who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter  
 they did not stop to think they died instead  
 (ll -9-12)

Cummings, at the end of the above poem, wonders if the voice of freedom, the democratic principle of the state is mute? "Then shall the voice of liberty be mute?" (l.13). Man is no more free to choose. He is fettered by the abstraction which is called the state. War, one of the catastrophic principles of this abstraction, would not exist if it depended on people's wishes.

In another poem " come , gaze with me upon this dome " he describes going to war as " duty " which "whispers low, " like the devil, " for God for country. " The young man with his " determined head " and " manly heart and conscience free" should carry " the sacred flag of truth." In this poem he talks of an aristocratic youth who is "his mother's pride , his father's joy ,unto whom duty whispers low /"thou must !" and replies' I can !' " (ll. 3-5) He knows that sickness and death are waiting for him but being a duty of honour he should be happy: "a tear within his stern blue eye / upon his firm white lips a smile " (ll. 9-10).

The sense of commitment in going to war is accompanied by material ends. This is what "the season 'tis, my lovely lambs "says. In the name of religion people go to war. What is religious used for worldly matters. Addressing people as "Lambs" will lead them to be lions. Cummings stresses the material side of it when he says: "the age of dollars and no sense/which being quite beyond dispute" (ll. 4-5).

Moreover, there is no equality among those who are supposed to be equal as human beings. Cummings sees the difference between the Colonel and Jack, James, John and Jim, the soldiers. The Colonel is distinguished by his rank, not his name. He gets the medals of honour and the soldiers get "The Artificial Arm and limb"

Colonel Needless  
 To Name and General You know who  
 a string of pretty medals drew  
 (while messrs jack james john and jim  
 in token of their country's love  
 received my dears the order of  
 the Artificial Arm and Limb) (ll-22-28)

Even in death, the "Honorable Mr." is buried immediately whereas the young soldier who is described as "an erring child of circumstance" (l. 38) will be brought after "six months." Cummings skillfully pictures his

feeling with his capitals and lower cases words. The "Colonel" is capitalized without a name, an indication that war destroys the individuality of man. Rank speaks louder. The names of the soldiers are written in small letters, referring to their insignificance. In this sense both Colonel and soldier are equal, war deprives them of their individuality. They become equal when they lie under ground. This is what comforts Cummings. Earth equalizes people. It unifies them being "The biggest grafter."

In "lis" Cummings asserts that no one knows the reason behind war and further, people do not want to know because it is a matter beyond dispute:

people don't and never

never  
will know  
they don't want  
to  
no

(ll.14-19)

Ending the poem with "no" is significant. Cummings has two meanings in mind: either he means "know" in the sense that people are not interested in knowing because they can see, feel, and live the consequence of war. Hence it is not important to know the reason, or they do not want to end in "no," i.e. nothingness, referring to the futility of knowing the reason of the war since no one will answer them.

However, going to war is a matter of commitment. Refusing the orders will lead to prison and death. This is Cummings' picture of the matter in 'i sing of Olaf glad and big "in Viva (1931), 45 where humour is infused with deep bitterness. Cummings attacks the military establishment as repressive. Olaf, the soldier, is described as "glad and big / whose warmest heart recoiled at war" (ll. 1-2). He refuses to fight telling his "well beloved colonel": "I will not kiss your ...flag" (l.19). This leads to his torture. He is the "erring Olaf, "the " Passive prey " who should be "a corpse." Hence this "Yellow" is thrown "into a dungeon, where he died" (ll. 37).

Satire is however not limited to anti-war poems. Besides war, the Depression years of the roaring twenties and thirties sharpened Cummings' protest against American culture, so much so that he came to be described as a "misanthrope."<sup>31</sup> He attacked the forces which prevented growth and awareness, represented in the individual's battle with the capitalist society in which he, perforce, must try to live. Thus much of his criticism extends to include the entire western world, a world of mechanized thought, feeling and action, giving a picture of its moral and cultural anarchy.

His satiric poems define his identity by rejecting the "unloving," the non-existence of "most people." In his "Introduction" to *New Poems* (1938) Cummings states that what distinguishes human beings from "most people" is life, birth, growth, and activity. "Most people" fear birth. They prefer to live in "passivity," in the "womb," seeking a guaranteed safety. He says:

Life , for ... us , is now ...Life ,for most people ,  
 simply isn't . ...What do most people mean by  
 ' living ' ?They don't mean living. They mean  
 ...passivity which science, in it's finite ...wisdom,  
 has succeeded in selling .32

Cummings sees the major problem of the western world of his time as fundamentally spiritual. The doctrine of progress brought with it a new structure of values, a growing secularization. That is, a growing confidence in man as a builder who can understand and control life for his own well –being, depending wholly on his power not on the power of God.<sup>33</sup> This created what Cummings call " most people, " i.e. scientists, politicians, businessmen and others who are out of touch with the genuine world. He repeatedly calls them to change their lives and be real selves that love life .Through his satire he wants to keep love which he considers the source of man's being. Thus love becomes an" aggressive –defensive maneuver," as G. S. Fraser describes it.<sup>34</sup>

In "O sweet spontaneous," a poem in his early volume, *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), Cummings satirizes the attempt of scientists, philosophers and false theologians, to reduce life to abstractions. They bring death to life. But the mystery lies in the "earth" which affirms its power of renewal. Thus the relationship between earth and death, which Cummings describes as earth's "lover," will issue in the spontaneous vitality of spring:

O sweet spontaneous,  
 earth how often have  
 the  
 doting

fingers of  
 prurient philosophers pinched  
 and  
 poked  
 thee,  
 has the naughty thumb



negative. They bring darkness and "murder dreams," Cummings states this in "the hours rise up putting off stars and it is" in Tulips and chimneys:

on earth a candle is  
 extinguished                      the city  
 wakes  
 with a song upon her  
 mouth having death in her eyes

and it is dawn  
 the world  
 goes forth to murder dreams. ...  
 (ll. 4-11 )

In "mean –," in Viva, Cummings presents a paradoxical picture of deadness and aliveness which influences adults and children alike. The core of the adult world is all self –preoccupation. They rush to do things because they are busy with the future, they do not manage to live their present, to feel alive.<sup>35</sup> They "hurry" their children into their pajamas and quickly shut the lights off. Unconsciously they attempt to drag their children into their no- living state. By time the children will "imitate" them and sink in their business world, to be merely "und / ead," like the flowerless "plants" in their hotel. Cummings admires the detachment of children from this "mean" world, but sees that it will end in attachment to the adult world. The adults who do not realize that children's life is a gift to be received, not a problem to be solved.<sup>36</sup> This is what Cummings considers a killing mistake.

The paradoxical picture of children's attachment and detachment from this world is emphasized in "little tree," a poem in XLI (1925). Though Cummings admires their indifference to worldly concerns, simultaneously he admires their responses to it. The child's sensitivity lies in his sympathy for another being represented by the Christmas tree. He tells her "i will comfort you." The small letter of the "i" refers to his smallness. He is only a powerless child, but he could feel, see, and do what an adult cannot. He acts as a parent. He tries to hug the tree, makes it feel safe, happy and proud by dressing it in Christmas decorations.

I will kiss your cool bark  
 and hug you safe and tight  
 just as your mother would,  
 only don't be a afraid  
 .....  
 put up your little arms  
 .....  
 Every finger shall have its ring  
 and there won't be a single place dark and unhappy

(ll. 9-20 )

The child feels the lack of sympathy and love in the world of "most people":  
 look    the spangles  
 that sleep all the year in a dark box  
 dreaming of being taken out and allowed to shine  
 the balls the chains red and gold the fluffy threads  
 (ll.13-16)

His fear of the "dark box" is effectively revealed. Cummings puts the space after "look" to emphasize the child's fear to see the box dark and the things inside lie as dead . This feeling is opposite to the reaction of adults. They are senseless because they lack sympathy for others, the darkness they implant and could not be aware of. His detachment testifies to the vitality of life beyond survival.<sup>37</sup> Barry A. Marks in E.E. Cummings comments on this, saying:

When Cummings adopted the mask of the child he did so in order to remind us what it feels like to be small and powerless, and to receive, and then to give , ... in spontaneous gratitude ... invite us to discover the meaning of Jesus' warning to his disciples: ' verily I say unto you , who serve shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child , he shall not enter there in.'<sup>38</sup>

However, the child is also attached to the world. His spirit of giving reflects the materialistic interest of his time. Love means to shower others with gifts, a kind of commodity he learns from adults.<sup>39</sup>

In "Poem, Or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal," a poem in Is 5, there is the added measure of contempt to the destructive ideas of "most people." The " land of Abraham Lincoln , " which he loves, is the beauty that hurts Mr. Vinal (Cummings himself) . He sees it filled with "certain ideas" which, unfortunately, are not used in their proper way. He says:

Certain ideas gestures  
 .....  
 having been used and reused  
 to the mystical moments of dullness emphatically are ,  
 Not To Be Resharpened. (ll.19-23)

Hence he protests against whatever is "unspontaneous": "let freedom ring/ amen . i do however protest , anent the un/ –spontaneous" (ll.14-16)

Cummings is the good Samaritan in "a man who had fallen among thieves," a poem in *Is 5*. The allusion to the parable of the good Samaritan is important.<sup>40</sup> He follows this example and tries to save fallen people (most people). He does it with "terror" that they might hurt him because they will not easily accept his satire which aims at changing their lives or society might disdain him since it looks at poets as "mad."<sup>41</sup> But he insists on doing his duty as a poet and attempts to lift them to the "stars," " i put him into my arms/and staged banged with terror through/  
a million billion trillion stars " (ll. 22 – 24). Thus Cummings asserts man's potential humanity which is the cure for the lack of brotherhood.

He always dreams of a transcendental world that will transform this "unlove" which "most people" bring to people.<sup>42</sup> He looks for a better world whose birthday marks the birthday of individuals, as he states in *Six Nonlectures*.<sup>43</sup> This world stands against the "world of made which the "busy monster, man unkind" is trying to build depending on his worshipping of material progress, the "the comfortable disease."<sup>44</sup> Such a world crushes man's personality and turns him into abstractions that animals feel more alive than him.<sup>45</sup> The world which he dreams of where life and "Death" lie safely is "a good universe next door."<sup>46</sup>

Hence in " Who knows if the moon's," AND, Cummings imagines the moon, a symbol of the transcendental world, as a balloon which will carry him to a " keen city" filled with " pretty people" who are in harmony with nature. In this city:

always  
its  
spring ) and everyone's  
in love and flowers pick themselves  
(ll. 13 – 16)

Elsewhere, it is the simple "Ever – Ever Land," *New Poems* (1938) which is built by "simple people" who feel safe because of love. He describes the place in "(of Ever – Ever Land i speak" as:

a place  
that's as simple as simple can be  
and was built that way on purpose  
by simple people like we)  
.....  
that's measured and safe and known  
.....  
down above all with Love

(II. 9 – 17)

**Conclusion**

Cummings' central motif is the immeasurable state of being: the life of feeling which he expresses with a child's sense. He looks with increasing serenity at a better world which is born (not made) by individuals. A world of intuition as opposed to the world of "security" against which he is protesting. This is clearly seen in his technical innovations which are reflected in the unusual means of expressing the fragmented world around; in the violence of the satirical vein of his poems which include anti-war and the Depression years of the roaring twenties and thirties. All rise from the same root: love for life and the individual. He attacks the sell outs of the spirit and the various degradation of the dignity of human character, loathing all regulating of the person by mass pressures, which makes the individual less a person, leading a monotonous death in life . He looks for the indivisible man "one's not half two." Cummings proves to be the man who "dares to call himself a man" in a world which he sees only "a leak." A world of moral corruption, which kills the emotional awareness by which man is kept alive.

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**NOTES**

1 "e.e .Cummings (1894-1962)," <http://www.Esustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap7/Cummings> ,accessed March5,2018.

2Richards Kennedy," E.E. Cumming's Life,"<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/cummings/cummings.html>, accessed January 3,2018.

3e.e. cummings , i : Six Nonlectures , (Massachusetts : Harvest University press , 1969 ) , 53 .

4Bethany K. Dumas, "E.E. Cummings in the Twenties" in *The Twenties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, ed., Warren French (Florida: Warren French, 1975), 368.

5Six : Nonlectures , 53 .

6Kennedy, "E.E. Cumming's Life," 5.

7Lionel Abel, "Clown or Comic poet" in *E.E. Cummings: The Critical Reception*, ed., Lloyd N. Dendinger (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., Inc., 1981), 170.

8Kennedy, "E.E. Cumming's Life," 3.

9S.V. Baum, "E.E. Cummings: The Technique of Immediacy" in *E.E. Cummings: A collection of Critical Essays*, 104.

10Quoted by Baum, 105.

11Louis Untermeyer, ed., *Modern American poetry and Modern British poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1958), 470.

12Norman Friedman, *e.e. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 13.

13Ibid.

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15Marianne Moore, quoted in *The Critical Reception*, 232.

16All line references to Cummings' poems (except 95 Poems and 73 Poems are taken from *E.E. Cummings Poems: 1923-1954*(New York: Harcourt Brace & World, Inc., 1968).

17Theodore Spencer, "E.E. Cummings" in *The Critical Reception*, 235.

18Robert E. Maurer, "Latter-Day Notes on E.E. Cummings languages" in *E.E. Cummings: A collection of Critical Essays*, 86.

19Baum, "E.E. Cummings: The Technique of Immediacy," *E.E. Cummings: A collection of Critical Essays* 114.

20Samuel F. Morse, "lower case poet" in *The Critical Reception*, 264.

21Kennedy, *E. E. Cummings's life*, "4.

22Baum, "E.E. Cummings: The Technique of Immediacy," 106.

23Maurer, "Latter-Day Notes on E.E. Cummings' language," 83.

24Watson, "The Dangers of Security: E.E. Cummings' Revolt Against Future," *E.E. Cummings: A collection of Critical Essays* 42.

25Eda Lou Walton, "More Roses and locomotives" in *The Critical Reception*, 117.

26Six Nonlectures, 46 -47.

27Quoted by Dumas, " E.E. Cummings in the Twenties," 371-372.

28Quoted in The Critical Reception, 67.

29.68.

30Lloyd Frankenberg, "Cummings Times One" in E.E. Cummings and the Critics, ed., S.V. Baum (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1962), 164 -165.

31Viva was the motto of the Italian Fascists of the thirties. It means "live." See Friedman, The Growth of a Writer, 75.

32"E.E.Cummings, " <http://www.en.wiki.pedia.org/wiki/6.E.-Cummings>, accessed January5,2018.

33Poems: 1923 -1954, 331.

34Barry A. Marks, " The Discipline of Giving" in E.E . Cummings (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), 85.

35"The Aesthetic and the Sensationalist," quoted by Marks, E.E. Cummings, 133.

36Ibid. 50.

37Ibid.51.

38Ibid. 57.

39Ibid. 64-65.

40Ibid. 54.

41Luke 10: 30-37.

42"Jehova buried, Satan dead," no thanks.

43 For more satirical poems, see also AND , no. xii of "portraits"; IS 5 , "One";Viva, ii,iv-x,xvii,xix-xxiv,xxvi-xxviii ; no thanks , 8,9,15,21,23-24,26,28-30,54-55.

4431-32.

45"pity this busy monster, man unkind," IXI, xiv. ll. 2, 9.

46Ibid., ll. 11-13.

47Ibid., 1.15.

48 In his early poetry Cummings touched upon the positive qualities of love. See "Tulips and Chimneys," "sonnets-unrealities," in *Chimneys, II-IV, VI*; *Is 5*, "fear," xii, xiv, v; no thanks, 58, 61. For nature poems, see *IS 5*, "Three."

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