E. E. Cummings

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Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is dramatic or nothing. A least lyric alone may have a hard time, but it can make a beginning, and lyric will be piled on lyric till all are easily heard as sung or spoken by a person in a scene—in character, in setting. By whom, where and when is the question. By a dreamer of the better world out in a storm in autumn; by a lover under a window at night.

—Robert Frost, Foreword to *A Way Out*

CHAPTER TWO  

action

We inquire now into the kinds of responses that Cummings portrays his speaker as acting out in consequence of endowing him with a certain character, set of beliefs, and subject matter. And the kinds of responses that a speaker may experience in a lyric are, commonly, to praise, to blame, to persuade, to react emotionally, to describe, to meditate, to reflect, and to set forth or argue a proposition.

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Before going on to examine each in detail, there are several things to be said about the kinds of responses in which Cummings' speaker is involved. In the first place, contrary to the common opinion that he writes only songs or satires, his work exhibits a surprisingly wide variety. This distinguishes him from many of our other first-rate contemporary poets, such as Frost or Thomas or Eliot, whose speakers are almost always represented as reflecting or meditating. There are few modern poets who can equal Cummings in the dexterity with which he writes now a satire, now a poem of praise, now a reflective lyric, now a description, or now a poem of persuasion.

In the second place, and conversely, the one form in which he shows no interest whatever is the poem of meditation. The absence of this type, which is characterized by conflict and struggle in that the speaker is represented in the process of deliberating over a decision he must make or reasoning out a problem he must face, is logical enough, however. His is a poetry of resolution rather than of conflict, and the distinctive trait of Cummings' persona is his certainty, his freedom from doubt and anxiety, his transcendence of ambivalence and paradox. Unlike Thomas, he feels no guilt for his mortal flesh; unlike Eliot, he does not strive to embrace a religious tradition in a secular world; unlike Frost, he feels no pull between the desire to let go and the need to have control. If he had stopped by those woods on that snowy evening, he would in all probability have stayed there to enjoy the wintry trance which Frost's speaker was so scrupulous in resisting.

It is the meditative poem, it seems to me, that is most typical of our age (so typical indeed that some of our critics are trying to interpret the whole of our poetic tradition in terms of this one form); and it is this form that Cummings avoids completely. An instructive contrast may be found in comparing Donne's Holy Sonnet XIII, "What If This Present Were the World's Last Night?" with Cummings' "what if a much of a which of a wind" (XX: 401). We all know that Donne has exerted a striking influence on the kind of modern poetry that I am counterposing to Cummings'; and Donne's sonnet deals in a characteristically
meditative fashion with a characteristically religious subject. Its speaker suddenly imagines that the Day of Judgment is at hand and asks his soul if it can bear to face the image of Christ crucified which he bears engraved upon his heart. Can that suffering face frighten you? he asks; can that tongue, which prayed for the forgiveness of His enemies, adjudge you unto Hell? The implied answer is, of course, yes! But he continues on to assuage the horror he has aroused in his soul by saying, “No, no.” As an ugly face signifies harshness, so a beautiful one bespeaks mercy. Since, therefore, the image of Christ is beautiful, it will be “piteous.”

The essential structural characteristic of this poem is that it reverses its direction as its speaker considers first one alternative solution to the problem raised at the beginning—being damned through unworthiness—and then the opposite alternative—being redeemed, in spite of unworthiness, by the infinite mercy of Christ. And the point is that, although the ending is affirmative, the negative alternative is entertained as a serious possibility. With Cummings it is quite otherwise; he asks the question and then answers it affirmatively, thus bypassing the negative alternative altogether:

what if a much of a which of a wind
gives the truth to summer’s lie;
bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun
and yanks immortal stars awry?
Blow king to beggar and queen to seem
(blow friend to fiend: blow space to time)
—when skies are hanged and oceans drowned,
the single secret will still be man

If the world blows up entirely, he is saying in effect, and if all that we derive support from in this world vanishes, the essential values of the transcendent world will remain untouched:

—all nothing’s only our hugest home;
the most who die, the more we live
The effect of Donne’s poem is dramatic, for its speaker, talking to himself, frightens himself with the negative alternative before he arrives at the positive; the effect of Cummings’ poem is rhetorical, for its speaker, talking probably to his lady, calmly announces the affirmative without taking the negative seriously—the possibility that the destruction of this world will leave us, as in MacLeish’s “The End of the World,” confronting an absolute blank. In this, Cummings is certainly not akin to the metaphysical spirit (with its “unified sensibility,” and “reconciliation of opposites”) of seventeenth- and twentieth-century poetry; he is rather more like the Elizabethan lyricists with their tuneful proclivity for praise, persuasion, and doctrine. Campion’s “What If a Day, Or a Month, Or a Year?” is a case in point. The speaker here, as in Cummings’ poem, is apparently addressing someone else, and, although the thought comes out quite differently than in Cummings, the form is the same. It involves question and answer without a consideration of the alternative:

What if a day, or a month, or a year
Crown thy delights with a thousand sweet contentings?
Cannot a chance of a night or an hour
Cross thy desires with as many sad tormentings?
   Fortune, honor, beauty, youth
   Are but blossoms dying;
   Wanton pleasure, doting love
   Are but shadows flying.

Nevertheless, granted this significant exception, there is little else that Cummings does not choose to do, and to do often and well, with poetic forms. By far the largest proportion of his poems is descriptive, amounting to almost one-fourth of his work as a whole. Although such poems were more frequent in his first two volumes, *Tulips and Chimneys* (1922) and & (1925), they appear fairly frequently in *No Thanks* (1935), *New Poems* (1938), and *50 Poems* (1940). There are few descriptive poems, however, in *is 5* (1926), *VV* (1931), and *Xaipè* (1950). In *i x i* (1944) there are practically none.
Almost as high, in proportion to the work as a whole, is the incidence of poems of praise and eulogy, which appear frequently in *Tulips and Chimneys* (1922), less often in *&* (1925), gradually more so in *is 5* (1926), *VV* (1931), *No Thanks* (1935), and *New Poems* (1938), and most often in the last three volumes. Correspondingly, the satirical poem, which was practically nonexistent in the first two volumes, appears in *is 5* (1925) and has been predominant ever since, averaging almost one-fifth of the complete poems.

Poems of reflection show a tendency to diminish in the later volumes, as do poems of persuasion, each of which accounts for an eighth of the work as a whole. Taken in connection with the increasing usage of poems of praise, do not these facts perhaps indicate that the speaker of Cummings' poems is turning more and more outward to his listener, who is usually his lady, and that, in doing so, he is becoming more interested in revealing her admirable qualities than in pointing things out to her and telling her things?

Description, praise and eulogy, satire, reflection, and persuasion, then, are the kinds of responses that Cummings' persona is most frequently portrayed as enacting, and in that order. And these poems account for almost 90 per cent of the total, the rest being a numerically, if not a relatively, substantial scattering of poems of proposition and emotion.

It remains now to consider Cummings' artistic habits in handling each of these forms.

II / The poem of description is organized to represent the speaker's impression of some dominant physical quality in a character, object, scene, place, or event; and it is, as we have seen, Cummings' most common form. A large portion of his poetic activity may be characterized as perceiving and rendering perception for its own sake—which is not surprising in a poet who is also a painter. But it is perception with a difference: Cummings is most interested in absolute accuracy, and in his effort to be true to the act of perception as it occurs he has developed many of the techniques for which he is so well known. Indeed, there
is cause enough in his vision of life for such an attempt. Immediacy, freshness, directness, spontaneity, simultaneity and precision are theoretical concepts having a palpable effect upon why and how he writes descriptive poems. And the quantity of such poems re-emphasizes in turn the importance that he places upon the experience of sensation itself. It is not pure sensationalism, however, because of the very fact that Cummings regards such experience as having a moral value.

We may next inquire, then, into the things he describes and how he describes them. Times of the day, and particularly sunset-twilight-night-star-moon, which, as we shall see in the fourth chapter, constitute his chief symbolic cluster, share equal prominence with his dominant early interest in the demimonde. With regard to the former, he stresses those qualities—of silence, of orange, blue, yellow, red, and gold color, of contrasts between light and dark, of softness, vastness, calmness, and coolness, for example—which emphasize the erotic atmosphere of indolent, secret, lonely, magical, ghostly, and mysterious dreams, a transcendent world of love and fulfillment. He frequently sees the motion of the sun setting in terms of sound becoming silence, of bulk becoming fragility, of agony becoming serenity; he sees the light of the stars as writhing, bright, deep, and holy; and the motion of the moon rising, he sees as an acrobat in the trees, as a balloon bouncing in the sky:

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mOOn Over t Owners mOOn
whisper
less creature huge grO
pingness
whO perfectly whO
fIOat
newly aOne is
dreamest
oNLY THE MooN o
VER ToWNS
SLowLY SPRoUTING SPIR
IT

(1: 277)
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We may note here that the handling of capitalization suggests not only the roundness of the moon in the capitalized O's of the first three stanzas, but also its gradual disappearance from view, leaving a shadowy spirit behind, as expressed in the capitalization of every letter except o in the last.

In sharp contrast to this dream world, he sees the vulgar, brawling, and blaring world of whores, restaurants, and nightclubs in terms of the click of billiard balls, the clink of glasses, of drinking, the smell of coffee, and the grossness of human flesh. He is far from being a naughty boy who thumbs his nose at prudes and takes a frank delight in the mechanics of sex. His descriptions of whores are frequently crass and shocking, but the qualities he dwells upon have more to do with their obscenity, their decay, the heavy drag and mortal weight of their bodies, the thickness and stickiness of their eyes, their coughing, their indignity, their gross and pathetic availability, their sickly ugliness, their tired and raucous voices, than with their pornographically appealing lusciousness. These are neither trembling virgins nor gossamer courtesans spun out of the harem of an adolescent's overheated imagination; they are lost ladies in league with death. And it is a mark of the humanity of Cummings' speaker that he finds them of such interest and describes them with such honest pity—and often with such humor.

Cumming's description of the seasons is next in importance. He shows a slight preference for spring-summer-rain over fall-winter-snow. The coming of spring is delicate and sloppy, sudden and immortal; what impresses him most is the way in which the world opens, at its arrival, into tints and tones and fragrances. Rain is new, fresh, young, dark, and soft, ghostly, slender, silent, slow, and dreamlike. Cummings often describes the snow as similar in these respects, which is strange when one considers how commonly it is seen as a form of chill dying, icy and tomblike. Fall, on the other hand, is seen as a season of shrinking, shriveling, and lifelessness: petals are murdered; trees are emptied and turn black; leaves drop, whirl down, and scratch across the dry
earth; and birds desert their branches—it is an empty, dark, cold, and brittle time.

Scenery pieces, both urban and rural, are of equal importance. Our speaker is impressed by the sights and sounds of the city and its streets: the flashing on of street lamps; the horns of taxis; the conversation of people; the roar of the elevated trains; the wheezing of a hurdy-gurdy; the faces and streets and shops; carrousels; women hanging clothes in a tenement alleyway; houses; chimneys; roofs; pigeons and people in the park; dogs; children; bells; steeples; churches; and spires. New York, especially lower Manhattan, Boston, and Paris, are his cities. As for landscapes, he hears the tides of the sea moving and sees the wind dragging its waves, and writes frequently of trees, fields, flowers, rivers, forests, hills, and skies.

People and creatures come next. Although he sees an occasional horse or goat, he has a keener eye for smaller, even tiny, animals. He focuses, for example, on the eyes of a goldfish, the hop of a grasshopper, the leap of a cat, a chameleon changing color, a newly born horse or elephant, porcupines, an anteater, or birds; and it is largely their intricate capacity for complex movements and changes that fascinates him. Similarly, the people he describes are odd and out of the way: two old ladies sunning themselves in the park; an ugly and pathetic man; an old lady looking out of a window; an old flower man; a scissors-grinder; two old men on a bench; a man grinding a scythe-blade; a tatterdemalion.

III / Whom does our speaker praise and for what? The classical three phases of development evenly divide the nine volumes of poetry we are studying into three equal groups, and, it so happens, into three decades: *Tulips and Chimneys* (1922), & (1925), and *is 5* (1926); *VV* (1931), *No Thanks* (1935), and *New Poems* (1938); *50 Poems* (1940), *i x i* (1944), and *Xaipe* (1950). In the first phase, our speaker mostly praises his lady for her erotic qualities, the beauty and desira-
bility of her charms, and the wonderful effect that these have on him. In the second phase, praise of his lady declines and he centers on her spiritual qualities, while there is a corresponding increase in poems devoted to the praise of love and lovers in general, instead of just the lady herself in particular. In the third phase, praise of his lady enters a new state wherein her relationship to nature changes from one that compares her favorably with desirable natural phenomena to the more hyperbolic one of desirable natural phenomena being favorably compared to her. The praise of love and lovers doubles proportionately, and a new kind of subject gains in importance as a source of admiration. This source is the ideal poet-man in general and specific friends of the poet who exemplify, individually, that ideal.

Take, as an example of the first period, or phase, the following piece:

i have found what you are like
the rain,

(Who feathers frightened fields
with the superior dust-of-sleep. wields
easily the pale club of the wind
and swirled justly souls of flower strike
the air in utterable coolness
deeds of green thrilling light
with thinned
newfragile yellows
lurch and press
—in the woods
which
stutter
and
sing

And the coolness of your smile is
stirring of birds between my arms; but
i should rather than anything
have (almost when hugeness will shut quietly) almost,
your kiss (XII: 122–23)

The qualities he praises are the lady's person, her smile and kiss; and the natural imagery used by way of comparison consists, typically, of rain, coolness, twilight, flowers, woods, and birds.

As characteristic of the second period, or phase, notice the shift in object and manner of praise:

love is the every only god
who spoke this earth so glad and big
even a thing all small and sad
man, may his mighty briefness dig

for love beginning means return
seas who could sing so deep and strong

one queerying wave will whitely yearn
from each last shore and home come young

so truly perfectly the skies
by merciful love whispered were,
completes its brightness with your eyes

any illimitable star (38: 378)

Here the speaker begins with a general conceptual statement about the creative power of love, and then applies that idea to the praise of his lady, for she personifies or embodies love's creative power—with the result that, instead of comparing her eyes to a star, her eyes are seen as giving brightness to that very star, otherwise incomplete without her.

Two things have happened since the first period. He praises his lady for spiritual rather than physical qualities, and he inverts the earlier beauties-of-lady: beauties-of-nature relationship.

Also in this period, poems praising love and lovers begin to appear:

love's function is to fabricate unknownness

(known being wishless; but love, all of wishing)
though life's lived wrongsideout, sameness chokes oneness
truth is confused with fact, fish boast of fishing

and men are caught by worms (love may not care
if time totters, light droops, all measures bend
nor marvel if a thought should weigh a star
—dreads dying least; and less, that death should end)

how lucky lovers are (whose selves abide
under whatever shall discovered be)
whose ignorant each breathing dares to hide
more than most fabulous wisdom fears to see

(who laugh and cry) who dream, create and kill
while the whole moves; and every part stands still:

Love and lovers are praised for their spiritual strength, their ability to
transcend so-called civilization and the world of death and time, and to
rise up to the world of dream. We notice here typical samples of Cum­
mings' conceptual vocabulary, which he has devised to express his
moral values in a fresh and vivid manner. These concepts include
sameness vs. oneness, known vs. unknownness, fact vs. truth, and fear vs.
dare. There is also his characteristic habit of inverting images—“fish
boast of fishing/ and men are caught by worms”—to indicate the up­
sidedown quality of natural relationships in the unworld.

Praise of the lady, in the third period, is marked by extreme hyper­bo­le—

except in your
honour,
my loveliest,
nothing
may move may rest
—you bring

(out of dark the
earth) a
procession of
wonders . . .
who younger than
begin
are, the worlds move
in your
(and rest, my love)
honour

(XXXV: 409–10)

Also in the third period, praise of love and lovers increases (compare the title poem of *i x i* at the end of that volume, LIV: 422–23; and *Xaipe*, 66: 464–65). Praise of the ideal poet-man and his individual manifestations, having appeared noticeably in the middle period, comes into its own:

no man, if men are gods; but if gods must be men, the sometimes only man is this
(most common, for each anguish is his grief;
and, for his joy is more than joy, most rare)

(XXII: 402)

He praises his father, Old Mr. Lyman, Goldberger, trapeze artists, Sam, Peter Munro Jack, Paul Rosenfeld, Buffalo Bill, Picasso, Froissart, a Breton sailor, Krassin, his mother, Joe Gould, Negroes, Paul Draper, Jimmy Savo, Ford Madox Ford, Aristide Maillol, Nic, a Village scissors-grinder, enlisted men, and Chaucer. He also praises beauty, spring, innocence, nature, natural creatures and objects, and natural process.

IV / Satire, like comedy, is fast becoming a lost art in our age, so strong is the current critical mode in favor of meditation, soul-searching, and tragedy. In keeping with his unfashionable eccentricity on this score, Cummings is a master of wit, in the simple sense of being funny, and of the device of ridicule, in the sense of unreservedly making big things look small. Satire depends, as we know, upon a sense of the individual in society, and it is certainly a mistake to say, as has often been done, that Cummings has no sense whatever of that vexed relationship. A satirist can write from within a given dominant group and
ridicule the nonconformists, as does Pope, or he can write from outside the dominant group and ridicule the conformist, as does Byron. It is a matter of unfavorable contrast to a norm. Far from having no conception of the individual in society, Cummings is obsessed by this problem; but he writes about it from a different standpoint from that of most critics—whether left- or right-wingers—in asserting without question that any individual is better off apart from any group as things now stand. And this is because—since the only true moral goal in life is self-consciousness, self-reliance, and individual integrity—the group always tends to substitute its own manufactured product, its own stock response, and its own conditioned reflex for those of the individual. The artist's only true country is himself, and he is a citizen of immortality; it is the world of abstract loyalties, and its citizens, which are the objects of the ridicule of such an artist.

To speak more precisely, the subjects which are included in the category of national affairs constitute the chief butt of his satires—politics and politicians, celebrities, war, utopian theories, do-goodism, generals and admirals, chauvinism, presidents, bandwagoners, bigots, enthusiasts, alarmists, bureaucrats and bureaucracy. These are sometimes treated in a general way and sometimes quite topically. These subjects did not attract Cummings' scorn until *Is* 5 (1926); in *No Thanks* (1935) his target shifts from war to Communism; Fascism comes in for its share of attack in *50 Poems* (1940); and in *i x i* (1944) and *Xaipe* (1950) war is again a central concern:

when your honest redskin toma
hawked and scalped his victim,

not to save a world for stalin
was he aiming;

spare the child and spoil the rod
quoth the palmist.  

*Cummings, who had been to Russia in the 1930's and who had never felt very warm toward the USSR, felt sometime during the 1940's the*
irony we all now share regarding our unholy alliance with Russia during the Second World War.

Scientific commercialism and commercial scientism come next in importance as objects of satire, but they did not begin appearing until somewhat later, in _VV_ (1931). Man as lord of the universe, man as technician, man as salesman, man as weight-lifter and record-breaker are images in direct opposition to man as individual, man as lover, man as artist, man as man. And fact _vs._ truth, knowledge _vs._ wisdom, physical prowess _vs._ physical strength, quantity _vs._ quality are the terms of the opposition. Cummings as satirist neither pities nor fears our American snake-oil vendors; he rather hates, scorns, and ridicules them:

a salesman is an it that stinks

Me whether it's president of the you were say
or a jennelman name miser finger isn't
important whether it's millions of other punks
or just a handful absolutely doesn't
matter and whether it's in lonjewray

or shrouds is immaterial it stinks

a salesman is an it that stinks to please

To trade on one's manufactured-for-the-occasion desire to help the customer according to the gospel of Saint Dale Carnegie, to sell toothpaste on the basis of laboratory proofs, to hawk a scientific theory of progress on the basis of philanthropical humanitarianism—these are anathema, the products of the damned and the merchandise of hell. Modern American advertising today, whether of the forum, the marketplace, the academy, or the laboratory, is an insult to human dignity; sloganism, testimonialism, and gadgetism are so common now that most of us can even bear it, and that, Cummings warns, is what is killing us.

The satire of people and types is almost of equal importance, and persists throughout the nine volumes. The Cambridge ladies, Salvation Army howlers, the superconventionalized and inhibited little Effie, the
smug and sexless graduate of an obscure university, lesbians and homosexuals, lady tourists in Venice, the sterile Miss Gay, Lord John Unalive who made a fortune selling recorded musical culture to the millions, little Mr. Big not busy Businessman, and a woman who complains that birth was wicked and life is worse are the opposites of those people and types whom Cummings praises, like old Mr. Lyman who, fresh from a funeral, can still say there is enough in life for everybody, or the Negro guitarist who cannot find it in his heart to hate this hurtful world. The former, by contrast, are empty, dead, sexless, lifeless, dull, damned, and without hope:

the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls
are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds
(also, with the church's protestant blessings
daughters, unscented shapeless spirited)
they believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead,
are invariably interested in so many things—

"Mostpeople" is a subject in itself, which, except for is 5 (1926) and VV (1931), shows up in each volume. Neither an individual nor a type, mostpeople is a huge and collective pseudo beast, a busy monster, an incredible unanimal; in short, what mankind becomes "where freedom is compulsory/ and only man is god"—a creature so completely hemmed in by clocks, calendars, advertisements, slogans, loyalties, conventions, machines, and sundry other hoaxes being sold as sovereign remedies to cure the disease of feeling and being, that it is made up of parts that have ceased to exist and yet retain a kind of nonexistent existence by virtue of their being absorbed in the whole:

these people socalled were not given hearts
how should they be? their socalled hearts would think
these socalled people have no minds but if
they had their minds socalled would not exist

* 

Without a heart the animal
is very very kind
so kind it wouldn't like a soul
and couldn't use a mind

Cummings has been accused of being egocentric and undemocratic, but it is only because he has such an absolute conviction in the dignity of man and the freedom of the human will that he can have such a hate for conformity. If the individual were living in sullen revolt against the tyranny of the majority, if flashes of dignity and courage were to be seen illuminating the foggy collectivistic horizon, if gentleness and integrity and innocence were found in some unlikely Rotarian or Legionnaire heart, then would Cummings cry out in pity and joy. But such a hope would be even more sentimental than Cummings has been accused of being. What prevents such sentiment in him is the undeniable horror of the fact that people are submitting everywhere voluntarily to slavery. And they like it! or at least they cannot face the fear of disapproval and discomfort that motivates their sickly compromise. Cummings’ satire is grounded on an unshakable faith in the nobility of the human spirit; not heredity, not environment, not circumstance, not city hall are the causes of human degradation, but rather the corrupt will, the will self-corrupted. If it is in man’s power to choose—the basic premise of human dignity—and to choose rightly, how can we pity him when he consciously chooses wrongly out of fear? Pity is caused by a stricter sense of human limitation and powerlessness than Cummings can command.

Satire of the literati forms a small but substantial group of poems. With the exception of his labeling Hemingway (26: 294) and Untermeier (XI: 394), this is usually done without personal reference. His butts are “wrongers who write what they are dine to live” (XXVI: 242), manifesto-blaring magazine starters (24: 293), and visiting British poets of the leftist variety:

flotsam and jetsam
are gentlemen poeds
urseappeal netsam
our spinsters and coeds)
thoroughly bretish
they scout the inhuman
itarian fetish
that man isn't wuman

vive the millennia
um three cheers for labor
give all things to enni
one bugger thy nabor

(neck and senecktie
are gentlemen ppoyds
even whose recktie
are covered by lloyd's

Cummings never had much patience with the modern psychologically enlightened attitude toward sexual perversion. Homosexuals, especially of the literary sort, receive nothing but his mockery, scorn, and ridicule—especially British, communist, poetic homosexuals (*honi soit qui mal y pensel*). The latter poem amply illustrates several of Cummings' chief satirical devices—the phonetically spelled or punning rhyme ("poeds-coeds," "ppoyds-lloyd's," etc.), the punning allusion ("neck and senecktie" is from Horace's "labuntur anni; nec pietas moram/ rugis et instanti senectae"), and the punning obscenity ("arseappeal netasam our spin-sters and coeds," or, arse-appeal which nets them our lady culture-vultures—and whose recktie, continuing on with the same telling anatomical ridicule, are heavily insured). 

Punning in general is his main source of witty ridicule:

what does little Ernest croon
in his death at afternoon?
(kow dow r 2 bul retoinis
wus de woids uf lil Oinis

Not only the devastatingly punning parody in "cow thou art to bull returnest" (cf. "A Psalm of Life"), but also the delicious mockery of
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archaic language spelled as baby talk and of tough-guy language spelled phonetically, are responsible for the satirical effect here.

Another typical device is ironic self-revelation, by which Cummings allows a contemptible person to pronounce his bigotries in his own revoltingly characteristic language:

ygUDuh

ydoan
yunnuhstan

ydoan o
yunnuhstan dem (VII: 393)

When transliterated back into standard English, this reads, in its entirety, “You’ve got to ... you don’t ... you understand ... you don’t know ... you understand them ... you’ve got to get ... you understand them dirty ... you’ve got to get rid of ... you don’t know nothing ... LISTEN, bud, LISTEN ... them goddamn little yellow bastards, we’re going to CIVILIZE them.” Such an Anglo-Saxon, white-man’s-burden pseudo humanitarianism, spoken in such an arrogant and scornful manner! Here everything depends, as this transliteration testifies, upon the phonetically rendered gutterisms: the speaker’s character, his ridiculous but dangerous bigotry, his hateful­ness.

A more obvious approach to ridicule is direct denunciation and invective: “hear/ ye! the godless are the dull and the dull are the damned” (13: 359). The unfavorable contrast and the unflattering comparison are used frequently. An unreal general, “(five foot five)/ neither dead/ nor alive,” is pictured as standing “(in real the rain)” (42: 452); or mostpeople are compared, in traditional satiric fashion, to beasts, animals, monsters, and insects. Parody is another favorite device, Browning’s “God’s in His heaven” and “Oh, to be in England now that April’s there” coming in for more than their share of service (e.g., IV: 169-70; XXVII: 183). Cummings also parodies the poetry of Kipling
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(4: 335) and of Longfellow (26: 294), slogans, popular songs, nursery rhymes, spirituals, commercials, and patriotic oratory. Exaggeration, mock praise, sarcasm, and grotesquerie also account for many poisoned barbs:

LONG LIVE that Upwardlooking
Serene Illustrious and Beatific
Lord of Creation, MAN:

at a least crooking
of Whose compassionate digit, earth’s most terrific
quadruped swoons into billiard Balls! (VII: 227)

V / The poem of reflection represents its speaker as musing over or wondering about a certain person or type, place, event, or object, in an attempt somewhat tentatively and personally to interpret its significance by associating it with a chain of memories, by comparing it with something else, by converting it into a symbol, or by direct statement. Cummings’ most frequent and persistently recurring reflective situation is one in which his persona describes and then thinks about one or more of his favorite images, such as spring, sunset, moon, star, tree, or bird, thereby transforming it into a symbol representing some concept or other out of which his world of values, or dream world, is built. Such is the case in the octave and sestet of the following sonnet:

before the fragile gradual throne of night
slowly when several stars are opening
one beyond one immaculate curving
cool treasures of silence

(slenderly wholly
rising, herself uprearing wholly slowly,
lean in the hips and her sails filled with dream—
when on a green brief gesture of twilight
trembles the imagined galleon of Spring)

somewhere unspeaking sits my life; the grim
clenched mind of me somewhere begins again, 
shares the year's perfect agony. Waiting 

(always) upon a fragile instant when 
herself me (slowly, wholly me) will press 
in the young lips unearthly slenderness 

He wonders, in the spring, whether Death will touch an old lady looking out of her window; when spring comes he is made a little dizzy by numb thoughts coming to life; he understands what the rain means when he touches his lady's hair; in fall and winter he challenges Death and he makes a miracle of the snow; he senses the infinite nothingness of night; he feels clumsy when he sees a new moon; and a star becomes holy in his vision.

Sex and whores, elements of his Toulouse-Lautrec demimonde, provided many reflective occasions in Cummings' first four volumes:

FRAN

should i entirely ask of god why 
on the alert neck of this brittle whore 
delicately wobbles an improbably distinct face, 
and how these wooden big two feet conclude 
happeningly the unfirm drooping bloated calves 
i would receive the answer more 
or less deserved, Young fellow go in peace. 
which i do, being as Dick Mid once noted 
lifting a Green River (here's to youse) 
“a bloke wot's well behaved” . . . and always try 
to not wonder how let's say elation 
causes the bent eyes thickly to protrude—

or why her tiniest whispered invitation 
is like a clock striking in a dark house 

These heavy ladies are the consorts of Death, perishing, final, and lost. 
The street and city scene, similarly, provided reflective occasions only
in Cummings' first four volumes: "at the ferocious phenomenon of 5 o'clock i find myself gently decomposing in the mouth of New York" (IX: 149). The street is frequently the one through which he is walking on his way to visit his lady, or the one on which he is waiting expectantly for her to arrive; or again, it is where he lives under a stable and shares his room with a mouse, or a mysteriously empty apartment next to where he lives; or a street in Paris before a cathedral where trained animals are performing, or a place in a park near a carrousel where he once met a lover now gone.

There are several earlier reflective poems dealing with people and types, death, love, and time, and assorted landscapes: a twelve-year-old child with venereal disease; a queer old fellow with a yellow flower in his buttonhole; and a man he met on a hill overlooking Rome who reminded him of himself; a vision of paradise where timeless creatures dwell; a reflection on death, and one on the relationship between love and death; a scene where the seashore reminds him of sex; and a sense of personal foolishness provoked by looking at the view from a hill at Calchidas.

VI / As with the development of the poem of praise, we find three equal phases in the evolution of Cummings' handling of the poem of persuasion. This is organized by a situation in which the speaker is directing his remarks to another character within the poem. Speaking almost always to a woman of one kind or another, and most frequently to his lady, Cummings' persona is, in the first three volumes, either artfully posed and spitefully threatening her with his jealousy, flippantly scolding her about her infidelity, wittily demanding that she turn to him, or seriously but sentimentally pleading with her for a little love. He is alone with her in the presence of some night scene and asking for a kiss or an embrace, instructing her almost irreverently about the passage of time and love and of the value of sex, or, in a more serious vein, speaking consolingly of the transcendence of love over time and mind: "Come hither/ O thou, is love not death?" (I: 24); "consider O/
woman this/ my body" (I: 31); "if that he come receive/ him as your
lover sumptuously/ . . . for/ in his own land/ he is called death" (VI: 
36); "it may not always be so; and i say/ that if your lips, which i have
loved, should touch/ another's . . . send me a little word" (I: 61); "if
i should sleep with a lady called death/ get another man with firmer
lips" (X: 121); "(ponder,darling,these busted statues" (XXX: 186).
One of the most successful of these early poems of persuasion is "since
feeling is first," in which the lady has apparently expressed a feeling of
inferiority in the presence of the speaker's superior mental powers, and
he turns to her consolingly and says:

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,
and kisses are a better fate
than wisdom
lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry
—the best gesture of my brain is less than
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other: then
laugh, leaning back in my arms
for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis (VII: 208–209)

This charming piece, implying as it does such delicate praise, expresses
one of our speaker's chief concepts regarding the relationship between
men and women—that a woman, in having a naturally intuitive and
life-giving nature, is closer to truth than a man with all his thoughts
and all his poems.

Such a seriously reverential and philosophical attitude toward the
lady becomes more frequent in the poems of persuasion of the middle three volumes, in which the speaker is more concerned with explaining, assuring, interpreting, and consoling than with scolding or entreating. We’re beyond death, let’s despise cowardice, we’re immortal, ask the impossible of me, be glad and young: “what time is it i wonder never mind/ consider rather heavenly things” (XIV: 233); “come a little further—why be afraid—/ here’s the earliest star” (XLVIII: 257); “breathe with me this fear/ (which beyond night shall go)/ remembering only dare” (LIII: 261).

if you and i awakening

discover that(somehow
in the dark)this world has been
Picked, like a piece
of clover, from the green meadow of
time
lessness; quietly
turning
toward me the
guessable mirrors which your eyes are

You will communicate a little
more than twice all that
so

gently
while we were asleep while
we were each other disappeared . . .

(LXI: 265-66)

In the last three volumes this form of persuasion clearly becomes the dominant mode: “we’ve/such freedom such intense digestion so/ much greenness only dying makes us grow” (5: 354); “deeds cannot dream what dreams can do/—time is a tree(this life one leaf)/ but love is the sky and i am for you” (25: 367); “Let liars wilt, repaying life they’re loaned;/ we(by a gift called dying born) must grow” (XVI: 398); “love is a deeper season/ than reason;/ my sweet one/ (and april’s where
we're)” (XXXVIII: 412); “only stand with me, love! against these its/ until you are and until I am dreams” (35: 448); “—but never fear (my own, my beautiful/ my blossoming) for also then's until” (69: 466). Such a situation provides Cummings with his most characteristic form for dramatizing his moral ideas.

VII / Additionally, there are smaller groups of poems organized around the statement of a general proposition—“(but born are maids/ to flower an hour/ in all, all)” (23: 365); the expression of an emotion—“I have never loved you dear as now I love” (LI: 259); and the instruction of the reader—“open your heart:/ I'll give you a treasure/ of tiniest world/ a piece of forever” (XLVI: 417).

These, then, are the kinds of responses around which Cummings most characteristically organizes his poems. His five major forms are: the description, that locates its speaker in the presence of some sensory stimulus and represents him as perceiving; praise and eulogy, that place him in relation to some person, type, or idea, and represent him as admiring; the satire, that places him in relation to society and that represents him as its critic; reflection, that places him before scenes and people and represents him as interpreting and commenting; and persuasion, that places him in the presence of someone else and represents him as speaking to him or her. As noted above, there are several additional minor ones which we have not been able to examine in any detail.

A speaker who has over five roles to play simply cannot be characterized as lacking in dramatic and rhetorical range, and thus the usual song-satire distinction will not serve to describe it. Furthermore, a thorough inquiry into Cummings' use of these situations has not supported the contention that he is a static poet, for each of them has an individual history in his work, an origin in time, a rise, and perhaps a fall. There is a decrease in description as he gets older and less absorbed in the immediacy of sensation; a rise, a dip, and a rise in his use of praise and eulogy as he gets a firmer grip on his moral values; a
strong current of satire, more and more clearly defining his social values; and a gradual decline in reflection and persuasion as he turns more and more outward toward approbation rather than interpretation, instruction, and consolation. If his growth reveals no crises, it does show a steady development.