now (more near ourselves than we)
is a bird singing in a tree,
who never sings the same thing twice
and still that singing's always his

—No. 87 of 95 Poems

POSTSCRIPT

What impresses me most about Cummings’ latest book of poems, which was published in 1958 after this study was completed, is its vibrant and complex intensity. And this is a remarkable thing, considering that the poet—who has often been deemed a static artist—published it in his sixty-fourth year. I think that this impression of developing intensity has its source in the fact that Cummings has not only deepened and extended his vision but has also perfected several of his devices for expressing that vision. He treats familiar subjects in a continually fresh
way and reaffirms anew an even more transcendental faith in his characteristic acceptance of life and love; he seems to have drained off some of the public venom from those poems that deal with the underside of life, and to have introduced a new note of compassionate awareness; and he is working now a strikingly distinctive vein of paradox.

I / Cummings rarely sings the same thing twice in exactly the way he sang it before. What is exciting about his new treatment of his customary subjects—street and city scenes, country scenes, the seasons, the weather, the times of day, the heavens and heavenly bodies, birds, flowers, the sea, and love—is the increasing sharpness of his imagery, an ever-renewing freshness of language, an unusually provocative and vivid manner of phrasing, a gradually culminating translucency of symbolism, and a new pitch of affirmative emotion. It would seem that Cummings does not return to the same old themes without first having been moved all over again by the felt pressure of their reality. Such poems are not simply warmed-over redactions of what he did so much better when he was younger. A true current of feeling electrifies these latter-day pages, for Cummings writes only about things that genuinely move him, and he writes only insofar and as long as they continue to do so. That is one of the meanings which he attaches to the concept of growth—to grow is always to be awake to living experience.

To cite an example, Cummings has characteristically been fond of natural settings. But he seems to be developing a special fondness for what appear to be the environs of his New England summer place. There is a group of poems in an earlier volume, Xaipe (1950), which apparently have their origin there: #55, which describes the rain over field and forest; #56, which portrays a heavy farm woman wandering through a pasture; #58, which depicts a man sharpening a scythe-blade; #59, which marvels at a newborn horse; and #60, which praises the boulder, sunlight, and trees of the country. These, however, represent merely an incipient interest which seems to have flowered in the new volume—so much so that Cummings almost touches upon Robert
Frost's characteristic themes. In 95 Poems, consider #21, wherein the speaker reflects upon an abandoned farmhouse being swallowed up by the forest. What Cummings sees, though, is not the moral of Frost's "Directive," but rather the emptiness of all that life which is now gone and which nobody remembers. Or again, consider #86, which describes a black forest pool. What the speaker is prompted to feel is not the relationship between the winter snow and summer foliage of Frost's "Spring Pools," but rather the mysterious impenetrability of the water's surface, which "imagines more than life must die to merely know." (For similar country poems, see numbers 23, 79, 81, 82, 83, and 85.)

Or consider the rain, which the poet observes alone (except for six English sparrows) in the park, in poem #24. He has used this theme before, notably in poem #55 of Xaipe. The quality emphasized in the earlier poem is the rain's feathery softness. It is probably a summer rain and the description of its gentleness is enhanced by the supporting typographical devices: the "r's" at the end of "feather" and the beginning of "rain" are joined together to suggest softness; the "o's" of "over," "who," "softer," and "no one" are given prominence to emphasize the speaker's silent wonder. The later work, from 95 Poems, depicts an autumn shower and the solitude of the speaker; the quality dwelt upon this time is the heaviness of the downpour, for the poem ends:

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...t
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e
raintherain
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This is getting the most out of a triple repetition rhetorically as well as typographically, for in both ways it suggests the thick falling of the rain—by virtue of its intensity of phrasing as well as its distribution of letter-syllable-word groups. Both poems, then, are built upon a fresh outlook on a similar experience, the later as well as the earlier.
The snow is another image that means as much to Cummings as does the rain: it is the acceptance of the cycles of time and their transitions, not merely the static moments of obvious fruition, which symbolize for him the harmony and the magic of achieving contact with immortality. This is the burden of #4, for example, which ends:

... a snowflake twi-
tsts
,on
its way to now

-here

A good example of Cummings' continuing use of typographic displacement, this passage also illustrates the increasing functionalism of such a familiar device which is characteristic of this new book. He now more consistently makes words do double duty by splitting them up and thereby creating a charged and punning aura or ghost of ambiguity around the whole poem. The passage just quoted, for instance, clearly creates a montage of "nowhere," or the world of dream and possibility; and the "here and now" turns the latter, therefore, into the former. In #32 of Xaipe, on the other hand, Cummings deals with a similar transformation, only he does so explicitly: "all the earth has turned to sky." Similarly, this "turning edge of life," as it is called in #40 of 95 Poems, turns "sNow" into "Now," in #41, by means of spatial and typographical design.

This device is used again to good effect in the description of a falling leaf—an occurrence which impresses the poet as much as the proverbial fall of the sparrow—which opens the book. Curiously, similar poems also open 50 Poems (1940) and i x i (1944). In regard to the poem in the 1940 volume, what impresses the poet is the black silhouette of the bare tree—from which a dropped leaf goes whirling—outlined against the white sky. The typography, as in each of these three poems, stretches the piece vertically down the page to emphasize the falling of the leaf, but beyond this the design creates no extra auras of meaning. In the poem in the 1944 volume, it is the cold, dim sun in the sky, the absence
of birds, and the creeping of the fallen leaves upon the ground that impress the poet. This time, it is more the syntactic disarrangement than the typography that helps to create the dry, bleak, and discontinuous bareness of the scene. But in the new volume we are shown the simplest and most effective treatment of all. All that is said is that “a leaf falls: loneliness”—but it is so spaced as to create a dozen different supporting effects. The first four “lines” consist entirely of one consonant and one vowel apiece: two “l’s,” two “f’s,” three “a’s,” and one “e.” This pattern suggests, by means of its fluttering alternations, the floating fall of the leaf:

l(a
le
af
fa

The next “line” consists of a double “ll,” thereby suggesting a hovering pause in its downswing. Then the poem concludes:

s)
one
l
iness

which suggests the hesitant slip and final drop of the leaf. But there is more, for Cummings gets as much mileage as possible from the word “loneliness”: its spacing brings out at least three more levels of meaning—“alone,” “one,” and “oneliness.” And all of these meanings take root and blossom as the poem unfolds; they are all precisely suited to the picture being presented. So, too, did Cummings explore the possibilities of meaning to be found in “nowhere.”

If the birds were gone in the autumn of the 1944 volume, Cummings now recognizes poetically the bluejay and the chickadee who remain during the bare season to give him courage. The song of a bird frequently provides him with a symbol for the poetry of the dream world. In poem XLVII of i x i, for example, he tells how he learned from a certain bird to feel “how the earth must fly/ if truth is a cry” of a whole
soul, and to sing the “grave gay brave/ bright cry of alive/ with a trill.” But in #87 of the present volume, there “is a bird singing in a tree” that can reconcile the broken halves of a world and make of a here an everywhere. That song, apparently, has gained in power in more ways than one since 1944.

Another one of Cummings’ simple but potent symbols is, of course, the flower—and especially the rose. Thus, in #76, which tells of his mother’s great-grandmother’s white rosebush and associates it with God’s heaven, I am reminded of the “heaven of blackred roses” in which he imagined his departed mother (poem XLIII of VV [1931]). But whereas this early poem was primarily about his parents, and the roses constituted a lovely supporting image, the later poem is about God and heaven, and the roses are symbols of Paradise itself. The blossoms of this bush, the poet says, are really dreams of roses; and this brings us curiously close—for Cummings—to a traditional Christian symbology:

“and who” i asked my love “could begin to imagine quite such eagerly innocent whoms of merciful sweetness except Himself?”

—“noone unless it’s a smiling” she told me “someone”(and smiled)

“who holds Himself as the little white rose of a child”

The reverent quoting of his lady is very much like that found in #28 of Xaipe:

noone” autumnal this great lady’s gaze enters a sunset “can grow(gracefully or otherwise)old. . . .

But in the new poem we have a host of mystical associations. The speaker asks his lady who could begin to imagine such roses except God Himself. It could be no one else, she replies, unless it’s a smiling someone (the Virgin Mary) who holds God as the little white rose of a (Christ) child. It is clear here that there are associations established
among roses, God's heaven, dreams, and the imagination. It is not inappropriate, it seems to me, to hear archetypal echoes in this poem of Dante's Beatrice and the paradisal rose. This flower has always epitomized love and spring and rebirth—nor is its traditional religious meaning anything different—and it is in no other sense that Cummings uses it.

The moon is another favorite image which Cummings has been trying repeatedly to capture in the snare of his typographical net, and so we have poems #50 and #51 in 95 Poems. Compare them with the first poem of No Thanks (1935) and poem XXXI of i x i (1944). In the 1935 poem, Cummings capitalizes all the "o's" in the first two stanzas and all the other letters in the third (and final) stanza. This is apparently a picture of a full moon, and it is shown floating hugely over towns, "slowly sprouting spirit." In the 1944 poem, it appears to be a slim crescent of a moon, but once again it symbolizes the dream world. Here the image is not mentioned specifically, but is rather suggested typographically. Now, in the two new poems, we have the full moon once again, only this time Cummings is concerned not so much with the symbol as with the image itself: with the first poem it is simply the roundness and the seemingly unsupported floatingness of the moon that impress him, and with the second it is the "poor shadoweaten" waning moon at dawn. He can, it seems, look literally and closely, after years, at a physical presence that has long since had symbolic value for him.

Poem #84, however, strikes me as sui generis. I do not recall any previous piece devoted exclusively—as is so often the case with star and moon—to the sun and its circuit. According to this poem, whether, goldenly in his fathering, he arrives or departs, the sun brings comfort to his children, for even in his disappearing he leaves a trail of stars in his wake. After discussing the splendors of the sun's coming and going, Cummings postulates a deification of sunrise accompanied by the song of a bird and the destruction of the night's thousand million miracles (the stars). If this should happen, he says, then

— we are himself's own self; his very him
This is an almost religious ecstasy of mystical identification with the father of all life and of all light. For intensity of phrasing, I can recall nothing quite like it in all of Cummings' work.

After the sun sets, however, there still remains the magic of twilight descending amidst the streets of a town, as shown in #48. A deservedly well-known earlier example is "Paris: this April sunset completely utters," which first appeared in &. In this youthful poem, the twilight is personified as a lady "carrying in her eyes the dangerous first stars," and the night is personified as a "lithe indolent prostitute" arguing with certain houses. The whole effect is colorful, even gaudy, and deliberately strained in its diction: "bloated rose," "cobalt miles of sky," and "the new moon/ fills abruptly with sudden silver/ these torn pockets of lame and begging colour." But in the mature poem, the speaker, who is wandering the streets at dusk, is almost lifted out of his skin as the visible world of the town disappears with the coming of night and the first star blossoms. It is clearly a moment of mystical transcendence, and, as such, serves to indicate the distance traveled by Cummings' mind and art since 1925.

Similarly, #49 is a poem devoted entirely to that characteristic confrontation of a star by the speaker's soul, and as such recalls the last piece in No Thanks, "morsel miraculous and meaningless." In the earlier poem, the poet yearns toward the "isful beckoningly fabulous" star as a symbol of transcendent freedom, while, in the later work, poet and star merge. This is indeed an interesting development, for the earlier poem had concluded with the appeal: "nourish my failure with thy freedom." But in the later poem, the poet and the star, "immeasurable mysteries/ (human one; and one celestial)," although

millionary wherewhens distant, as
reckoned by the unimmortal mind,

. . . .

. . . stand

soul to soul: freedom to freedom
It would appear, then, that Cummings has made considerable spiritual progress since 1935.

It is from this assured position of transcendence that Cummings by now speaks of love. Perhaps I should say "supertranscendence," for whereas he previously treated love in hyperbolic terms, he now positively outdoes himself in spiritualizing his relationship with his lady. In *i x i*, for example, the poet asserts that the wonders of the earth unfold only in his lady's honor (XXXV), and in *Xaipe* he says that nothing may dare be beautiful without these lovers (#68). But consider #88 in *95 Poems*, in which the poet claims that his lady's "fearless and complete love" causes "all safely small/ big wickedly worlds of world [to] disappear." This poem concludes by saying that such a love also causes "words of words/ [to] turn to a silence who's the voice of voice." This is reminiscent of "gesture past fragrance fragrant" (#71 of *No Thanks*), and of "if i sing you are my voice" (#43 of *50 Poems*). These are beautiful lines, but they are transformed infinitely in the line "silence who's the voice of voice," and the only thing to match it is that line already cited—"himself's own self; his very him"—from the new volume. A similar advance in intensity and the use of mystical paradox is found in #12, which concludes by saying that "love is more than love." Even when compared to the great line—"love is the whole and more than all"—which concludes #34 of *50 Poems*, this new one shines advantageously. Consider, again, #94 in the new volume, in which Cummings finds a parallel to lovers in "divinities/ proudly descending," or #71, which concludes:

... we who have wandered down
from fragrant mountains of eternal now

to frolic in such mysteries as birth
and death a day (or maybe even less)

This last poem, which depicts the speaker and his lady at the margin of the sea, recalls #41 of *Xaipe*. There the speaker tells his lady that the thundering of the waves upon the shore symbolizes death and chaos and hell, but consoles her with the thought that these waves cannot
destroy the imagination. In the later poem, he tells her to imagine that they are as senseless as the “blind sands” upon which the sea leaps and are at the pitiless mercy of “time time time time time.” But then he concludes:

—how fortunate are you and i, whose home is timelessness: we who have wandered down

It would appear that since 1950 the imagination has fulfilled its office.

II / Another change which has occurred during that interval is a softening of Cummings’ “dark” poems and a turning therein away from the national scene toward more personal and human concerns. Except for “THANKSGIVING(1956)”—poem #39—which is a bitter protest against our government’s official indifference toward the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolution, there are no characteristic attacks in this book on mostpeople, bigshots, science, stereotypes, advertising, Fascists, Communists, salesmen, literary fakes, and the like.

What we have instead is a poem such as #30, which presents a slangy examination of the meaning (or meaninglessness) of failure. I am reminded by this poem of XIII in is 5, which begins:

it really must be Nice, never to have no imagination) . . .

and continues on with a meditation in misery by a fifty-dollar-a-week worker who wonders how it would feel not to be saddled with a wife and child and insomnia. The new poem, however, explains that what got him (whoever he was) was not knowing that his whole life was a flop, or even feeling that everything he worked for was less than nothing—these would have been at least something, a sensation of having been in it for a while. What got him was nothing, just plain happeninglessness.

Poem #55 perpetrates a shameless—and, it seems to me, good-
nated—pun in attacking the affluent society of the 1950’s in America. Nobody wants less, observes the poet, and nobody wants most, because everybody wants more and still more. What the hell are we all, he concludes—morticians? This is a long way from the elaborate gusto and venomous sting of “take it from me kiddo,” “I sing of Olaf glad and big,” “red-rag and pink-flag,” and “plato told him,” which left such a perceptible mark on his previous work. It may be, since he is learning to incorporate touches of darkness into his affirmative poems, and is managing a more complex art of paradox for doing so, that his well-known scorn (and even petulance) is being drained off from vitriolic satires and being injected into a whole new middle group of poems.

Aside from such things, there is poem #35, which appears to be in a class by itself. A ballad-like dialogue between two country mothers, one looking for her son and the other for her daughter, it hides within its depths such a tangled tale of fornication, incest, murder, and adultery, that it could have been written by a latter-day Thomas Hardy out of one of Faulkner’s novels. I do not know quite what to make of this piece, and I do not recall anything like it in all of Cummings’ work. These women berate one another like fishwives, and their speech is rendered with wit and skill, but it is not clear just how seriously it all is to be taken. The ending is surely bleak enough, but the whole poem is so outrageously involved and brutal that it might all be a jest.

III / There is, finally, a whole new group of poems which, although basically transcendental, are set vibrating by the conflicting presence of the descendent. Cummings has always been a poet of mystical affirmation, but his insistence upon the reality of the spiritual world has hitherto been accompanied by a denial of the reality of the physical world. Recall, for example, the conclusion of XIV in i x i:

. . . —listen: there’s a hell of a good universe next door; let’s go

—or of XVIII in the same volume:
I have shown how such affirmation has become in 95 Poems even more transcendental. What has also happened is that the affirmation is now frequently accompanied by an acknowledgement of the absolutely real existence of failure, suffering, time, death, and mortality—even, it turns out, his own divided nature:

a total stranger one black day
knocked living the hell out of me—

who found forgiveness hard because
my(as it happened)self he was

—but now that fiend and i are such
immortal friends the other’s each (#58)

As far as I can determine, Cummings has never said anything quite like this before. Consider also in this connection the conclusion to the wonderful poem #10:

For whatever we lose(like a you or a me)
it’s always ourselves we find in the sea

It would seem, then, that as a poet of affirmation Cummings is heightening his art by the poetic recognition, not merely of the presence of evil in the world, for he has always been concerned with the underside of life, but rather of the impingement of that evil upon the good. And that is a new note, for they have hitherto been simply opposed as two mutually exclusive universes—as, for example, in “here is a secret they never will share” of #66 in Xaipe. But now, as in #18 of the new volume, he affirms that we must all lie as low in the dust as flowers when their time is past, and that all flesh is “If” and all blood is “When.” In poem #57 he opposes youth and age, and then concludes by noting how “youth goes right on growing old.” And in #94 he can ask, “do lovers suffer?”

But make no mistake. Cummings is still the poet of transcendence,
and no amount of sophistication will ever hinder his soaring flight. What he has done in *95 Poems*, however, is to incorporate into the structure of his joyful song the very fabric of negation itself. The result is a new sense of what paradox can do. For if the affirmative transcends the negative, then how much more intense will be that affirmation which can transcend the negative even though or because it is in the grips of that very negative. Failure means success, for example, and this hinges upon an apparent contradiction which can be resolved only after the several meanings of these words have been sorted out. This tends to produce, as we all know, a high degree of poetic excitement.

Cummings has dealt on occasion in recent volumes with paradox as a necessary device for expressing the ineffable of the mystic’s vision. Recall, for instance, the conclusion of XVI in *i x i*—“All lose, whole find,” or of XX in the same volume—“the most who die, the more we live.” But something more is happening in *95 Poems*; such a device is becoming not only more frequent but also more inclusive and eloquent. What is being included is an acknowledgement of the reality of the world of appearance:

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now air is air and thing is thing: no bliss
of heavenly earth beguiles our spirits, whose
miraculously disenchanted eyes
live the magnificent honesty of space. (#3)
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What has happened in this poem is that summer has gone and winter is on its way.

Whereas opposites had been habitually opposed and similarities habitually paired, it would now appear that they may be—not reconciled, to be sure—but rather incorporated into the same structure by means of an apparent contradiction. Poem #16 provides a breath-takingly beautiful example of this new note. Built upon five stanzaic blocks (tercets), its first four stanzas circle gracefully around the varied restatement of opposites. It is the time of spring, when the world and the imagination come alive, and
forgetting why, remember how
... ... ... ... ... ...
remember so(forgetting seem)
... ... ... ... ... ...
forgetting if, remember yes
... ... ... ... ... ...
remember seek(forgetting find)

conclude the stanzas, saying: forget the itch of the brain to seek reasons, and remember to open your eyes to what is happening around you; remember that the imagination is more real than reality, and forget the mere appearance of reality; forget your fears, and remember your hopes; remember that the goal of life is the search itself, and forget about finding stability and certainty. So far this is predictable Cummings, but look what happens in the last stanza:

and in a mystery to be
(when time from time shall set us free)
forgetting me, remember me

The same opposition is prepared for and the alternating sequence of the four preceding stanzas seems about to be completed. But instead of following suit with one more pair of opposed opposites to match the why-how, so-seem, and seek-find dichotomy already built up, Cummings surprisingly snaps the whole poem shut with a startling paradox which is created by playing off against each other not clear-cut opposites but rather the opposing meanings of the same word.

The over-all meaning of the poem is somewhat as follows: in time, the poet tells his lady, while we are still a part of the physical world, you should be reminded by the spring to remember the ultimate importance of growth, dream, affirmation, and possibility—which are the material gateways to and symbols of the timeless world—and to forget questions, appearances, doubts, and results—which are the trivial and finite
aspects of mere actuality; and out of time, when we shall have entered that transcendental world (after death), you should remember the part of my life which, through love, partakes of immortality; and forget that part, the merely material existence, which is mortal and ephemeral. The point is that there is an implied recognition that the speaker is compounded of both parts. Thus the final line seems to me to be brilliantly effective: not only does it surprise (because it was unexpected), but it also makes profound sense after the reader’s mind has bridged the gap made by the paradox.

Consider, again, poem #25, which presents the speaker as reflecting on the significance of an organ-grinder and his cockatoo performing along 14th Street. When you ask this melancholy fellow to give you your fortune, he taps with his stick at a cage he is carrying and out steps the cockatoo, who mounts the stick and is carried to an open drawer of the hand organ. The bird tweaks from out of this drawer a faded piece of pitiful paper and, bowing, proffers you the meaning of the stars. The poet is swept away by a gust of sorrow at this sight:

... Because
only the truest things always
are true because they can’t be true

Similarly, in poem #48, as the speaker watches the world float away at the descent of twilight, he feels that “the departure of everything real is the/ arrival of everything true.” In poem #78, he asserts: “Time’s a strange fellow;/ more he gives than takes/ (and he takes all).” In poem #70, he speculates, in the last stanza, on the relationship of beauty to life and death: life is a “blunder” which “we die to breathe,” but if beauty should touch life then it becomes her wonder—

—and wonderful is death;
but more, the older he’s
the younger she’s

The one thing that has marked the curve of Cummings’ development as he has gotten older is the range and depth of his responsiveness
to the approach of death. As the poet becomes aware of the encroachments of age, so too does the speaker of his poems. And in a way, this is a vindication of all that optimism he has been expressing throughout his career, for without an answer to death it would all have been useless. How ignoble to speak during one’s entire life of the ultimate reality of the spiritual world and then to collapse in terror before the final dissolution of the physical. But Cummings speaks of it in poem #3, already referred to, as “that white sleep wherein all human curiosity we’ll spend”; and he speaks of “the courage to receive time’s mightiest dream” which that sleep promises to create. And in poem #11 he plays variations on the biblical theme:

—a time for growing and a time for dying:
a night for silence and a day for singing

but more than all (as all your more than eyes
tell me) there is a time for timelessness

No more dignified way of conceiving the end can be imagined; no more artistic way of climaxing a lifelong poetic career can be conceived.