THE WORLD VIEW OF E. E. CUMMINGS

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THE WORLD VIEW OF E. E. CUMMINGS

THESIS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. REJECTION</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. AFFIRMATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in the Present</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fidelity to Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To understand an artist, one must confront that artist on his own terms. One cannot properly judge Picasso on Monet's terms, nor Debussy in terms of Aaron Copland, nor E. E. Cummings in terms of any traditional poet. Cummings' concept of poetry is different from that of most other poets to date, for the common idea of poetry is that it must communicate to someone about something. But Cummings says that a poem "lives in itself" despite the number of people who do or do not read it.\(^1\) Poetry, as any other art, he says, is "strictly and distinctly a question of individuality;" it is "being, not doing."\(^2\) Cummings goes on to point out that there is only one thing which always concerns this individual, the artist: "fidelity to himself. No simple ... system of measurable soi-disant facts ... has power over the complex truth which he, and he alone, can feel."\(^3\) It is, then, this "complex truth" which the artist in question possesses that should concern the critic confronting the artist's work, and it is that truth for E. E. Cummings which is the concern of this thesis.


\(^3\)Ibid., p. 82.
For means of discussion, Cummings' theory of life, or his "complex truth," may be divided into two major categories: affirmation and rejection, for Cummings sees life in these terms. In six non-lectures, Cummings speaks of his confrontation with the world as a young man:

... I was marvellously lucky to touch and seize ... a vivid and violent world; a world worth hating and adoring and fighting and forgiving. ...

Because this world he then seized is one which is "worth hating and adoring," it is necessary for Cummings, if he is to be true to his conception of that world, to do just that: to at times affirm and praise it and at other points to reject it as "unalive."

For the most part, Cummings' affirmation may be seen in terms of three general categories: growth, fidelity to self, and life in the "now." He mentions these categories in the introduction to Collected Poems:

You and I are not snobs. We can never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing: the mystery which happens only and whenever we are faithful to ourselves. ... Life, for eternal us, is now.

Cummings calls the individual who accepts life as being now, recognizes growth as the basis of life, and is faithful to himself, the "alive" person, the human being.

Accordingly, Cummings' rejection is directed toward the "unalive" or the "snobs," which includes that which does not

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4Ibid., p. 43.
5Ibid., p. 66.
concentrate on the *now*, which does not grow, on which does not enhance the self. Accordingly, Cummings rejects institutions of any sort, persons who refuse to participate in the moment with feeling and intensity, those who reject their real selves by clipping to knowledge or security or possessions, and so on. Cummings elaborates on these "mostpeople":

What do mostpeople mean by "living"? They don't mean living. They mean the latest and closest plural approximation to singular prenatal passivity which science, in its finite but unbounded wisdom, has succeeded in selling their wives.

In brief, Cummings rejects that which he feels is not life-like, that which does not enhance life. And he affirms that which is most lively.

This thesis will explore Cummings' theory of life and the poetry which concerns this theory. Chapter One will be a brief explanation of the three major concepts—growth, self-fidelity, and life in the present. Chapter Two will be concerned with those aspects of life which Cummings rejects, and Chapter Three will deal with his affirmation. Chapter Four will provide a general summary statement concerned with Cummings' "complex truth."

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Cummings bases his response to the world on three general standards: growth, fidelity to self, and life in the present. Those elements of the world which do not promote or exhibit these characteristics are generally considered "unalive" by Cummings. And those parts of the world which do promote or exhibit these characteristics are, for the most part, affirmed by Cummings and considered "alive." That which is "alive" is so because of its affinity to what is best in life, as exemplified by the three standards Cummings employs in judging life. And because the "alive" is that which is most lifelike, Cummings affirms most of the world he encounters. But he also sees that parts of the world are not basically lively, in accord with the best in life, and it is these parts of the world which he must reject. It must be understood, however, that this affirmation and rejection is a basic part of Cummings' commitment to himself to view and react to the world honestly.

Growth is perhaps the primary standard by which life may be judged. Cummings states his theory of growth for the artist quite explicitly in *six non-lectures*, saying that the artist is "a feeling illimitable individual; whose only happiness is to transcend himself, whose every agony is to
Growth, for art itself, is different from growth for the artist or man; the art form itself must in some way convey a feeling of motion and being, of life. A poem cannot just tell about beauty or love or nature, it must become that which it attempts to describe. Norman Friedman quotes Cummings' description of this process as "'content and form'" becoming "'aspects of a homogeneous whole.'" This theory, of course, explains many of Cummings' unusual and often criticized stylistic devices, for just as the dramatist employs devices different from those of the essayist in order to make an idea live, so must Cummings use techniques unlike those of the traditional poet to make his poems live. Both of these parts of Cummings' view of growth, that applying to artists and persons in general and that pertaining to art itself, are vital to understanding his overall view of life, for growth is exemplary of life itself and all that is "alive." John Arthos explains this concept in terms of being versus action: "Existence means more to him [Cummings] than Action. . . . That which is alive . . . and is capable of growth and fulfillment, Is."  


2Norman Friedman, "E. E. Cummings and His Critics," Criticism, VI (Spring, 1964), 117. 

Perhaps of secondary importance in judging the world is the standard of fidelity to self. This concept has many implications in Cummings' poetry, but Cummings most often describes it in terms of being, or any other form of the verb to be, or as individualism. In a large sense, one is faithful to himself only when he acknowledges his feelings as truth and thereby negates knowledge derived from thinking. Cummings says, "to feel something is to be alive."\(^4\) He further explains this idea in reference to the Zulu in The Enormous Room:

There are certain things in which one is unable to believe for the simple reason that he never ceases to feel them. Things of this sort—things which are always inside of us and in fact are us and which consequently will not be pushed off or away where we can begin thinking about them—are no longer things; they, and the us which they are, equals A Verb; an IS.\(^5\)

Cummings thinks that one simply does not become an alive human being until he begins to feel and acknowledge his feelings. This ability to feel, this sensitivity to the world, then, is a major part of what Cummings means when he says one must be faithful to himself, but another aspect of fidelity to self is individualism. He reiterates the importance of this concept to the artist throughout i: six non-lectures:

\(^4\)Cummings, i: six non-lectures, p. 68.

... poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality.\(^6\)

Every artist's strictly illimitable country is himself. An artist who plays that country false has committed suicide. ... But a human being who's true to himself--whoever himself may be--is immortal. ... 

Later in the same book, Cummings quotes from his play \textit{HIM} to emphasize his point that without individuality, the human being "would cease to exist at all."\(^3\) In \textit{The Enormous Room}, the author describes the Zulu as an IS.\(^9\) Cummings spends an entire chapter of this novel describing and explaining the personage of the Zulu, a man whose selfhood was not dependent on doing or becoming, but who was, and saw himself as, a vital human being in the midst of any surroundings, even a concentration camp.

Inherent in both of the above concepts, growth and fidelity to self, is the third standard by which the world may be judged: Cummings' conviction that life must be lived in the present with intensity. Norman Friedman sums up Cummings' concept of the present in saying that the human being must "live in the timeless eternity of the perpetual present, alive at every point to the pressure of the moment."\(^10\)


\(^7\)Ibid., p. 69.

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 81.

\(^9\)Cummings, \textit{The Enormous Room}, p. 231.

Cummings seems to be most concerned with this idea in his later writing. In *73 Poems*, Cummings writes:

seeker of truth

follow no path
all paths lead where

truth is here

Obviously what Cummings means by the "now" is not merely the present minute or hour in time. He implies with this idea that man must live at the present moment, accepting all circumstances which are inherent in one person's present: place, personal station, economic situation, et cetera. The "now" is simply the other side of the issue of accepting oneself, or fidelity to self, in that the person must accept that which surrounds him also. He cannot depend upon his past or future and cannot alter his position in the universe at the moment he is living it, so he must accept himself and his time.

With these three concepts in mind—growth, fidelity to self, and life in the present—the question of Cummings' affirmation or rejection of different aspects of the world becomes more clear, for Cummings generally affirms those parts of the world which embody the qualities listed above. He therefore affirms artists, the natural processes, realistic individuals, and generally, all which is "alive." And he accordingly rejects, as "unalive," collectivities,

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knowledge, static institutions of any sort—in short, that which does not enhance life. Cummings juxtaposes this affirmation and rejection in one poem from 73 Poems and leaves no doubt as to what he affirms.

the greedy the people
(as if as can yes)
they sell and they buy
and they die for because
though the bell in the steeple
says Why

the chary the wary
(as all as can each)
you don't and they do
and they turn to a which
though the moon in her glory
says Who

the busy the millions
(as you're as can i'm)
you flock and they flee
through a thunder of seem
though the stars in their silence
say Be

the cunning the craven
(as think as can feel)
you when and they how
and they live for until
though the sun in his heaven
says Now

the timid the tender
(as doubt as can trust)
you work and they pray
and they bow to a must
though the earth in her splendor
says May

The questions implied by the "Why" and "Who" of the first and second stanzas symbolize the world of growth, as opposed to "because," a symbol of the world of answers and stasis, and "which," inferring the world of knowledge and

12Ibid. "29."
explanation. The third and fourth stanzas affirm "Be" and "Now" as opposed to "seem" and "until." "Be" and "Now" represent the acceptance of one's own personhood and time, while "seem" and "until" connote pretentiousness and hesitation. The last stanza affirms the world in the ambiguous "May," implying both the growth symbol of nature and the possibility of the verb, as opposed to the slave-like "must." Later in the same collection, Cummings says that when the mind ceases to understand the difference between "no and yes," it will become a part of the "unalive" world.

hide, poor dishonoured mind
who thought yourself so wise;
and much could understand
concerning no and yes:
if they've become the same
it's time you unbecame

In brief, for the mind itself to be alive, it must realize the necessity for affirming and rejecting, and it must understand the difference between the two. This affirmation and rejection, then, is an integral part of Cummings' philosophy and not just an arbitrary category in which to divide his life view. And the very process of affirming and rejecting is a part of the poet's own growth and self fidelity.

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13 Ibid., "62."
Although E. E. Cummings is primarily a man affirming life, there are parts of life which he must reject if he is to be true to his view of the world. These all concern what he calls the "unalive"--that is, those things or people which do not remain faithful to themselves, or who do not grow, or who do not live in the present. And although all of these standards are interrelated, each may be examined separately.

In his rejection, Cummings is more often concerned with the theory of fidelity to self than with the other standards. Those whom Cummings sees as unfaithful to their real selves may suffer from intellectualism, lack of feeling, collectivism, lack of intensity in living, or heartlessness.

Cummings' anti-intellectualism takes many forms. For instance, he attacks the fact of war by linking it with knowledge. He says in *six non-lectures*:

"War" and "Peace" are not dangerous or alive: far from it. "Peace" is the inefficiency of science. "War" is the science of inefficiency. And science is knowing and knowing is measuring.\(^1\)

"Measuring," here equated with knowing and having, is opposed to feeling and therein is a symbol of the "unalive."

\(^1\)Cummings, *six non-lectures*, p. 68.
Cummings reiterates this point in the last two stanzas of the following poem, which portrays the need for all individuals simply to affirm life instead of depending upon knowledge.

all knowing's having and have is (you guess) perhaps the very unkindest way to kill each of those creatures called one's self so we'll

not have (but I imagine that yes is the only living thing) and we'll make yes

Having, in the form here of knowledge, destroys the individual, so Cummings says that we who are alive must reject having and knowing and embrace affirmation, for affirmation is itself a lively process. Very similar to this idea that the individual is destroyed by knowledge is the notion that life, in the abstract, is killed by "Know." One of Cummings' later poems expresses this idea:

more than life
must die to merely
Know

Dependence on thinking is an extension of this idea of knowing and having for Cummings. The following poem, which characterizes the average American as "this death named Smith," points out Cummings' notion that knowledge and thought do not necessarily lead to understanding and that

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they eventually may lead to the destruction of the individual.

he does not have to feel because he thinks (the thoughts of others, be it understood)
he does not have to think because he knows (that anything is bad which you think good)
because he knows, he cannot understand
(why Jones don't pay me what he knows he owes)
because he cannot understand, he drinks
(and he drinks and he drinks and he drinks and)
not bald. (Coughs.) Two pale slippery small eyes
balanced upon one broken babybowl
(pretty teeth wander into which and out of) Life, dost Thou contain a marvel than
this death named Smith less strange?

Married and lies afraid; aggressive and: American

Cummings is striking at more than one target here, but the
poem is based on the fact that what the man thinks and knows
does not lead him out his "unalive" state. He "wander[s]
into which and out of Life;" he wanders, without direction
or motivation, into the world of explanations and knowing,
that is "which," and out of Life. He remains unalive.

This same target of intellectualism is again hit as
Cummings condemns the modern world in general for relying on
knowledge as its only tool for understanding:

when god decided to invent
everything he took one
breath bigger than a circustent
and everything began

when man determined to destroy
himself he picked the was
of shall and finding only why
smashed it into because

\textsuperscript{4}Cummings, "23," Poems, p. 292.

\textsuperscript{5}Ibid., "XXVII," p. 404.
The first stanza mobilizes the spontaneity of the circus-like atmosphere to describe the creation of the world so that the poet may contrast this to man's destruction of it. Man explored the world in terms of past or present ("was of shall"), and on finding only its mystery, reduced it to knowledge.\(^6\) This contrast is very much like one the poet offers in \(i: \) six non-lectures where he says that "knowledge is a polite word for dead but not buried imagination."\(^7\)

Cummings' anti-intellectualism is very closely linked, in terms of fidelity to self, to his distaste for those who refuse to trust their feelings. He characterizes these people as "daughters of ifbut offspring of hopefear/sons of unless and children of almost."\(^8\) It is not what immobilizes these persons that Cummings objects to, but the fact that they will not give themselves to their feelings. In the often-anthologized "Jehovah buried, Satan dead," Cummings asks, "if Joy with Pain shall hang in hock/who dares to call himself a man?"\(^9\) Cummings means here that his "man" must be alive to the whole gamut of feelings and experiences, and he must react in terms of his feelings, with intensity. Cummings wrote two interesting poems portraying strippers within their art. One of these poems describes Sally Rand, whom

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\(^7\)Cummings, six non-lectures, p. 70.

\(^8\)Cummings, "26," Poems, p. 367.

\(^9\)Ibid., "54," p. 314.
Cummings portrays as "emerg[ing] a joy," and the other poem pictures "she" who becomes "i(t)." They are both involved in the same actions, but one evokes joy, the other, nothingness. Cummings employs this same technique in his prostitute poems. For instance, he describes one woman as "careful distinct," "sharp," and another in terms of "dirty colours," but still another is spoken of as "emitting minute grins/each an intaglio." Cummings neither affirms nor rejects strippers or prostitutes as a whole, but he does affirm either when she is faithful to herself in terms of her feelings.

A force which inhibits man in his attempt to live intensely is his inclination to become engulfed by the collectivities which surround him. Cummings comments, "Just (or unjust) how any species of authentic individualism could stem from such a quagmire, I don't--as always--know." He describes specifically a situation created by collectivities:

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a peopleshaped toomany-ness far too
and will it tell us who we are and will
it tell us why we dream and will it tell
us how we drink crawl eat walk die fly do?
a notalive undead too-nearishness
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10Ibid., "42," p. 304.  
11Ibid., "60," p. 320.  
14Ibid., "IX," p. 94.  
15Cummings, six non-lectures, p. 47.  
In this poem the society, the collectivity, can tell us nothing about ourselves nor about any of the things which really matter to all human beings, and for that reason, it is neither alive nor dead. Death and life are natural parts of life which must be affirmed, but "undead" and "notalive" convey the nothingness which Cummings feels the collectivity enforces upon itself. Within it, persons become meaningless because they lose their individuality and are merely parts of the whole, and this is not living, Cummings asserts.

This recurrent rejection of those who merely exist and are without feeling involves also Cummings' conviction that man must not just feel, but feel intensely, and he refers in various terms to those who do not abide by his conviction. In one poem he refers to them as "people socalled" and characterizes their lack of intensity in living by saying they "were not given hearts."

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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

but if these not existing minds took life
such life could not begin to live id est
breathe but if such life could its breath would stink

and as for souls why souls are wholes not parts
but all these hundreds upon thousands of
people socalled if multiplied by twice
infinity could never equal one)

which may your million selves and my suffice
to through the only mystery of love
become while every sun goes round its moon
```

On the whole, the poem is self explanatory, for the first and second stanzas simply reject the fact that these "people so-called" have either hearts or minds or even life itself, and Cummings adds that even if they had the least of life, i.e., breath, even that would be rotten. The third stanza is simply reiterating this point by way of one of Cummings' favorite types of images (e.g., 1x1). \(^{18}\) Cummings says that there is no possibility that these people could have souls, for after all, souls are representative of the whole man, and these people are just parts (like those of the "peopleshaped toomany-ness"). And to further emphasize his point, Cummings adds that even if multiplied by all time and space, these people could still not be whole. They could not be whole because they would never be moved to live intensely in terms of heart and mind and life and soul. The last stanza might well be prefaced by "the moral to this is. . . ." For he is saying that this example should suffice for all selves, including his, "to . . . become." One must remember here that becoming embodies the principle of growth. Cummings, then, implores us to become, "through the only mystery of love," "while every sun goes round its moon." This mystery of love implies the entire world of mystery for Cummings, and it is through this world of mystery, of intensity,

\(^{18}\) Cummings is very fond of mathematical images and uses them throughout his poetry. His favorite is 1 x 1, by which he means that two persons in love, when multiplied by one another, equal a new and better one, another self.
of love, that man may grow, may become. The reversal in the last phrase of the poem evokes the mystery of the natural process in that what we deem to be the ultimate, the sun, may be revolving around its own moon. This continuous motion of nature implies the growth and becoming process. The essence of the poem is, then, that one must live the mystery of life so that he becomes a whole person, a soul, rather than an unalive part.

An extension of this idea that in order to be faithful to himself man must live intensely is Cummings' rejection of people whom he calls heartless or soulless. Cummings portrays this type of person in the poem "animal without a heart":

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Without a heart the animal
is very very kind
so kind it wouldn't like a soul
and couldn't use a mind
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In a more humorous vein, Cummings describes one woman without identity, without a soul, without "Who."

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ev erythingex Cept:
that
's what she's
got
--ex
cept what?
why
,what it
Takes. now
```

This problem of intensity is quite clearly portrayed in a very simple poem couched in the unalive diction of reading a book, symbolizing the unalive world of knowledge. The poem juxtaposes the world of intense living to the world of mere existence and concludes that if one substitutes mere existence for living, he might as well close his eyes, for he has become unalive.

For prodigal read generous
--for youth read age--
read for sheer wonder mere surprise
(then turn the page)

Contentment read for ecstasy
--for poem prose--
caution for curiosity
(and close your eyes)²¹

²⁰Cummings, "29," 95 Poems.
²¹Ibid., "17."
These aspects of life which Cummings feels merit his rejection all have one thing in common: they either are not, or do not promote, the life he affirms. And this rejection must be accepted as just as valid a part of his life view as his affirmation, for in rejecting parts of the world, he automatically affirms others. If he rejects knowledge and facts, he affirms sensitivity and feelings; if he rejects those persons for whom life is mere existence, he affirms people who live life with intensity; and if he rejects collectivities of people, he affirms the individual. Cummings' blatant rejection is not, then, what some critics have made it out to be: "spiteful peevishness" or "mockery of] the whole world" or "adolescent idealism." It is a necessary part of his whole world view that must be acknowledged if one hopes to understand Cummings' "complex truth which he, and he alone, can feel."
Although E. E. Cummings is very much aware of parts of the world which he is compelled to reject, in most of his poetry, he confidently affirms life. In his last book of poems, Cummings expresses the desire that he may always be one of the affirmers of life:

may i be gay
like every lark
who lifts his life
from all the dark
who wings his why
beyond because
and sings an if
of day to yes

He wishes here that he may be one to raise his life out of the dark, with all of that word's traditional implications, to carry the life of mystery and growth and process, "why," beyond the world of stasis and answers, "because," and to sing the doubt of "if" into the day (implying life) of affirmation, "yes." It is this image of Cummings as the yeasayer that pervades each volume of his poetry; he loves life and all things which represent or embody life, and it is

1Cummings, "4 3," 73 Poems.
only those things which he considers "unalive" that he re-
jects. He affirms all parts of life which are lifelike and
joys in his affirmation; he proclaims, "yes is a pleasant
country."2

The relationship of this affirmation to the previously
mentioned rejection may be seen in the following poem in
which Cummings praises the parts of the world he sees as
most alive, listing them one after another; then in three
lines in the middle of the poem, he speaks of the world he
rejects. The proportion and placement of the negative por-
tion of this poem are significant, for they represent the
fact that his affirmation is far greater than his rejection
and that his rejection is enveloped in and is only a part of
his affirmation.

here's to opening and upward, to leaf and to sap
and to your (in my arms flowering so new)
self whose eyes smell of the sound of rain

and here's to silent certainly mountains; and to
a disappearing poet of always, snow
and to morning; and to morning's beautiful friend
twilight (and a first dream called ocean) and

let must or if be damned with whomever's afraid
down with ought with because with every brain
which thinks it thinks, nor dares to feel (but up
with joy; and up with laughing and drunkenness)

here's to one undiscoverable guess
of whose mad skill each world of blood is made
(whose fatal songs are moving in the moon 3

3 Ibid., "41," p. 303.
In the first stanza, he affirms the process of nature through leaf and sap and rain, and in the midst of this process, he praises love and its union of "your[elf] in my arms."

Again in the second stanza, the emphasis is on nature, and nature envelops the poet, who is lost in his art which exists for always. Cummings then rejects the necessity of "must" and the doubt of "if" along with people who are governed by fear or imperatives or excuses. Those persons who allow thinking to control them and in so doing deny their feelings are also to be damned. The last line of the third stanza then returns to Cummings' affirmation of joy, laughing, and drunkenness, in contrast to the previous rejection of necessity, fear, and imperatives. The last stanza is different from the other three because it does not affirm something comprehensible and known; instead it simply affirms mystery, "one undiscoverable guess," which Cummings proclaims is the creator of all and which is symbolized by the moon. In brief, Cummings affirms the world of process and growth, of feeling and mystery, and of the present pleasures of joy, laughing, and drunkenness--those same three categories which governed his rejection in the previous chapter--the world of growth, of fidelity to self, and of the present.

Cummings again affirms these same three concepts in a later poem whose prime example of "lucky" is love, represented by "we."
lucky means finding
holes where
pockets aren't lucky
's to spend

laughter
not money lucky are
Breathe
grow dream
die love not
Fear eat sleep kill
and have you am luck
-y is we lucky luck-
-ier
luck
-I-
est

This poem may also be divided into the three categories suggested in the previous poem in that the first two-and-a-half lines represent the world of feeling and mystery, of "finding/holes where/pockets aren't." The second "lucky" is in spending "laughter/not money," or in the world of the now. Growth is the emphasis of the rest of the second stanza and the first two lines of the fourth stanza, for "Breathe/grow dream/die/love" are parts of the world of growth and process, as opposed to "Fear eat sleep kill/and have." But Cummings goes on to say that the best world of all is the world of love, of we, "is we lucky luck-/ier/luck/-I-/est." The "I" in the next-to-the-last line indicates the wholeness, the oneness of two joined by love. This emphasis on love here is significant in exploring Cummings' affirmation, for although most of Cummings' ideas may be said to fall in

one of the three categories which have been mentioned, love
is a part of all of the three. Love is a part of each of
the worlds of growth, of self fidelity, and of life in the
present.

Cummings' affirmation, then, like his rejection, may be
divided into the three categories of growth, fidelity to
self, and life in the present, with one important differ-
ence. Cummings' concept of love is a major part of all
three categories, for it is love that Cummings designates as
the source of all else. Throughout _i: six non-lectures,
Cummings states this view: "Love is the mystery-of-myster-
ies who creates them all"\(^5\); "All mysteries have their source
in a mystery-of-mysteries who is love."\(^6\) That love, for
Cummings, is the most important part of life is indicated by
the fact that about one-third of all of his poems concern
love.\(^7\) It is reasonable, then, that love should embody all
of the characteristics which Cummings deems lively.

These three previously mentioned characteristics, then,
will govern the following discussion of Cummings' affirma-
tion.

\(^5\)Cummings, _six non-lectures_, p. 43.
\(^6\)Ibid., p. 32.
\(^7\)Rudolph Von Abele, "'Only to Grow': Change in the
Poetry of E. E. Cummings." _PMLA_, LXX (December, 1955),
p. 929.
Life in the Present

The essence of the concept of life in the present is an acceptance of the present moment with all that accompanies it, but also inherent in this idea is Cummings' assurance that there simply is no other life, that all we have is what we have at the present moment. This conviction on his part makes time unimportant, for actually there is no time but the present, and accordingly, truth may be found only in the present. These three ideas—that the present is all that we have, that time is then unimportant, and accordingly that truth is found only in the present—constitute the reasons that one must live in the present and accept all which is a part of the present.

Cummings' conviction that the present is all that man has and is, therefore, to be lived to the fullest is inherent in all of his poems which praise the joys of life, such as nature's beauty, love, sex, song, peace, et cetera. But this theory is presented just for itself in the following poem from his last volume of poetry:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{plant Magic dust} \\
\text{expect hope doubt} \\
\text{(wonder mistrust)} \\
\text{despair} \\
\text{and right} \\
\text{where soulless our} \\
\text{(with all their minds)} \\
\text{eyes blindly stare} \\
\text{life herSelf stands}\end{align*}\]

\[\text{8Cummings, "8," 73 Poems.}\]
Here Cummings is saying that man's elaborate plans and expectations, hopes, doubts, et cetera, blind him to the reality of the present, the fact that life is before him, waiting for him to pick himself up and live it. And with the capitalization of the S in "herSelf," Cummings implies that man's self also stands before him waiting for him to realize the present to be fulfilled. In other words, man's fulfillment is an inherent part of his realization that life is now; his becoming a "self" is dependent upon his realization of "life herSelf," who stands waiting for him.

In a similar poem, Cummings exhorts man to live in the present by proclaiming that "futures are obsolete; pasts are unborn." He goes on to explain in the same poem that "beauty is more now than dying's when," and therein he warns that depending on a when, even if it is the when of death, is throwing away the beauty of life now. He reiterates this same point of the uselessness of waiting for a "when" in saying that "the mightiest meditations of mankind/cancelled are by one merely opening leaf/(beyond whose nearness there is no beyond." There is nothing beyond the present in either time or thought or depth. All that man will ever have is to be had now, and to waste the present for thought of another time or place is throwing life itself away.

*Cummings, "LII," Poems, p. 421.*
In an earlier poem, Cummings simply exhorts man to accept the reality of now, saying,

The place is now
let us accept
forever . . .

The meaning of the sentence itself is clear, and the lack of the ending parenthesis is a pertinent implication of Cummings' larger meaning of time. Although he repeatedly states that man must live in the present, he sees the present as open-ended, as a process that does not restrict itself. The present moment is melting into the next so that the present is never limited. Now grows into forever. Cummings can speak of eternity and forever, then, and still be true to his concept of the present, for forever is simply a procession of nows.

Being concerned with forever is different from being ruled by the future as may be seen in the following excerpt:

if i

or anybody don't
know where it her his

my next meal's coming from
i say to hell with that
that doesn't matter

Although Cummings probably overstates his point here, it is clear what he means, for he goes on to say that what does matter is an instance when a person is "beautiful or/deep or

---

generous." What really matters is what is happening at the moment, not tomorrow.

Since all we have is the present, according to Cummings, then it is logical that all history and beauty and life should culminate in the present. In the following poem excerpt, Cummings expresses this extension of the present in terms of a day.

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)\textsuperscript{12}

In the first stanza, Cummings praises the natural world, saying that all that is natural is infinite, without time, or beyond time. And then in the second stanza, he explains what he means by infinity by saying that all creation is a part of now, that the time of all things' creation culminates in the present. All that is, in the present, is a culmination of all that went before.

As Cummings sees it, then, all we have is the present. This idea leads to a second, and subordinate, idea, that time is unimportant. In a poem from his last volume, Cummings writes,

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., "65," p. 464.
Although this idea is subordinate, it is important to an understanding of Cummings' concept of the present in that it intensifies the notion that all we have is now. For Cummings, in the preceding poem, simply negates the existence of all time so that he ceases to recognize even the present. Cummings does this because he feels that one should not be ruled by the intellectual knowledge of a present but must merely surrender himself to the fact of the present.

The last position inherent in Cummings' concept of the present is that of truth being found only in the present:

seeker
follow no path
all paths lead where
truth is here

In another, earlier, poem Cummings calls this truth "the green whereless truth/of an eternal now," indicating again that all truths are found in the present. Historical and future truths may be perceived by man only in his finite present, for that is all he has. But it is not only that that is all he has, for Cummings goes so far as to imply that the

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14 Ibid., "3."
moment's sensations are more valuable than any historical verities. He asks, "does yesterday's perfection seem not quite/so clever as the pratfall of a clown." The present envelops not only eternal verities but also personal feelings, which are after all, for Cummings, often the more important.

These three sides—that the present is all that we have, that time is unimportant, and that truth is found only in the present—make up Cummings' view of the present. But the poet's idea of love is very often involved with his views of the present.

One of Cummings' most commonly stated notions about time and love is that love overshadows and often eliminates time. He describes two lovers and says that "all time and space/[have] bowed to immortal us." Time here is subservient to the lovers who have become one, "us." This same point is made in a poem in praise of love wherein Cummings asks the question, "from only Whom shall time no refuge keep," and answers the question, "Love." A similar idea is that forever becomes now in the presence of love. Cummings likes this idea and uses it recurrently. In the delightful ballad "if everything happens that can't be done," he describes a situation of "now i
love you and you love me" and observes that "forever was never till now." The line here has a double meaning in that it means that forever became realistic at the present and also that forever merged into the present. Forever is no longer far away, but has become a part of now.

He explores this question again in the following poem:

what time is it? it is by every star
a different time, and each most falsely true;
or so subhuman superminds declare

--nor all their times encompass me and you:

when are we never, but forever now
(hosts of eternity; not guests of seem)
believe me, dear, clocks have enough to do

without confusing timelessness and time.

Time cannot children, poets, lovers tell--
measure imagine, mystery, a kiss
--not though mankind would rather know than feel;
mistrusting utterly that timelessness

whose absence would make your whole life and my
(and infinite our) merely to undie.20

Although this poem touches upon Cummings' entire theory of time and love, it seems to be based on the notion of timelessness, of forever. The first two lines simply indicate the relativity of time and the inclination of intellectuals to attempt to call one time true. But, Cummings goes on to say in the next line, no time rules lovers, for since they live in a world of possibilities, they are never faced with the obstacle of never ("when are we never"). He says

20 Cummings, "45," 73 Poems.
that because they are lovers, they are a part of "forever now," meaning either that they are a part of the eternal now or that they are a part of forever at this present moment. They, as lovers, are in command of eternity, rather than at the command of that which only seems to be. He then explains to his lover in lines seven and eight that mechanisms, like clocks, cannot understand the difference between timelessness and time, implying that only lovers, as alive people, can do this. Time, he goes on to say, cannot command the really alive people, such as "children, poets, lovers," and proves his point by asking his lover to imagine trying to measure the mystery of a kiss, for that is after all what time is, a measurer. But at this point Cummings becomes a bit cynical and points out that most of mankind would probably rather measure than sense a mystery and that they mistrust the timelessness which makes life "alive." It must be understood here, however, that Cummings does not mean that timelessness makes all of mankind's life worthwhile, for he points out that the primary recipients of life are those who are a part of an "infinite our." It is for lovers, then, that the absence of timelessness would be "merely to undie." To be "undead" in Cummings' view is equivalent to being "unalive"\(^1\); therefore it is the timelessness, the eternity, the forever, which gives life to the lovers.

\(^1\)The concept of "undead" is explored in Cummings, Poems, "LI," p. 259, where Cummings notes that "he is undead who, living, noone is."
This same position is more briefly noted in a poem which defines "true lovers." In the middle of the poem, Cummings notes that "a forever is love's any now/and her each here is such an everywhere." Cummings is here employing the concept of the present in terms of both time and space. Everywhere is embodied in the lovers' here, and forever is found in love's now. In the last stanza of this poem, Cummings links this idea of the present with affirmation. He concludes,

yes; and if time should ask into his was all shall, their eyes would never miss a yes

Here, if time were condensed into one time, even into the past, it would not affect the lovers, for they would simply go on affirming life, and "never miss a yes."

Time, then, of itself is not important to Cummings or his lovers. What is important is that man accept his time, not as an intellectual concept but as a realistic fact. Man has no choice but to live in his present, and to attempt to live in any other time would be to deny the reality of life. So to affirm life, man must live it as it comes to him each moment.

Fidelity to Self

An examination of Cummings' poems in regard to the criterion of fidelity to self quickly shows that Cummings' rejection and affirmation do not concern the same qualities.

It was earlier pointed out that in terms of self fidelity, Cummings rejects those persons who suffer from intellectualism, lack of feeling, collectivism, a lack of intensity in living, and heartlessness. It would seem from this, then, that he would affirm those who exhibited characteristics opposite of those, and to some extent, this is true. But most of Cummings' affirmative poems which deal with fidelity to self do not speak of specific characteristics; instead they simply affirm the man who, like the Zulu, remains himself in the midst of the persons and institutions which Cummings rejects. He praises the man who simply lives his own life as honestly as possible, and though this often involves the man's refusal to become a part of the worlds which Cummings rejects, the emphasis in the poems is on the good man and not on the circumstances he might have to overcome to remain "alive."

Perhaps the most delightful of Cummings' poems of praise of the man who is faithful to himself is the following one from his last volume of poems.

one winter afternoon

(at the magical hour
when is becomes if)

a bespangled clown
standing on eighth street
handed me a flower.

Nobody, it's safe
to say, observed him but
myself; and why? because

without any doubt he was
whatever (first and last)
most people fear most:
a mystery for which I've
no word except alive

--that is, completely alert
and miraculously whole;

with not merely a mind and a heart

but unquestionably a soul--
by no means funereally hilarious

(or otherwise democratic)
but essentially poetic
or ethereally serious:

a fine not a coarse clown
(no mob, but a person)

and while never saying a word

who was anything but dumb;
since the silence of him

self sang like a bird.
Most people have been heard
screaming for international

measures that render hell rational
--I thank heaven somebody's crazy

enough to give me a daisy²³

It does not matter here whether there really was a clown or
whether he really gave Cummings a daisy. What is important
is that at that "magical hour" when gross certainties have
become mysteries there is an alive human being who is true
enough to himself and to his feelings that he could simply
give a daisy, or joy if you must. He is a genuine personality, an individual ("not a mob, but a person"), "completely
alert/and miraculously whole." He does not feel a necessity

²³ Cummings, "30," 73 Poems.
to be hilarious or to talk without meaning, but by remaining true to himself communicates the joy of life. This clown has rejected the parts of life which Cummings sees as stifling the alive people. For instance, within the poem, Cummings has mentioned many problem areas: people who fear life ("[what] most people fear most: . . . alive"), heart and mind versus soul, and the collectivity versus the individual ("no mob, but a person"). Cummings does not find it necessary to delineate these parts of life, for it is, for Cummings just as for the clown, affirmation which is all important for the moment.

One of Cummings' most famous poems of praise of the self-faithful individual is the often-anthologized "my father moved through dooms of love," wherein the poet praises his father for remaining a genuine human being while passing through the often unalive world. The poem itself becomes trying in its entirety, but two of its many examples will suffice to prove Cummings' point of the things which his father endured and still remained a faithful man:

Scorning the pomp of must and shall:
my father moved through dooms of feel;

if every friend became his foe
he'd laugh and build a world with snow.

And Cummings summarizes the reasons for his praise of his father by simply saying, "my father lived his soul." In an

24Cummings, "34," Poems, p. 375.
earlier poem, he praises the man who says, "'and this be my fame,/the harder the wind blows the/taller i am.'" The point is, of course, the same: that the man who remains constant to himself in spite of his circumstances is the good man, the alive man.

In praise of another good man, Cummings eulogizes "sam" as a man who "done the best he kin." The subject of the poem is Sam Ward, who influenced Cummings' capitalization style. It is not that Sam was an especially great man in terms of accomplishments, but the fact that Sam lived his life truthfully and without pretense (implied by Cummings' use of the vernacular) that matters to the poet.

rain or hail
sam done
the best he kin
till they digged his hole
.

sam was a man
grinned his grin
done his chores
laid him down.

Sleep well
This old farmer is very much like the tailor whom Cummings praises in an earlier poem. The tailor has done nothing spectacular, but he has worked honestly and been faithful to his own self.

28 Friedman, The Growth of a Writer, p. 129.
pregnant one fearless
one good yes
completely kind
mindheart one true one generous child-
man
-god one eager
souldoll one
unsellable not buyable alive
one i say human being) one
goldberger²⁹

The tailor and the farmer are the same: both common men who
lived life simply and honestly in respect for their souls,
their selves.

Cummings also considers Olaf, a conscientious objector
who died to remain true to himself, a successful man.

i sing of Olaf glad and big
whose warmest heart recoiled at war:
a conscientious object-or

his wellbeloved colonel(trig
westpointer most succinctly bred)
took erring Olaf soon in hand;
but--though an host of overjoyed
noncoms (first knocking on the head
him) do through icy waters roll
that helplessness which others stroke
with brushes recently employed
anent this muddy toiletbowl,
while kindred intellects evoke
allegiance per blunt instruments--
Olaf(being to all intents
a corpse and wanting any rag
upon what God unto him gave)
responds, without getting annoyed
"I will not kiss your f.ing flag"

but—though all kinds of officers
(a yearning nation's blueeyed pride)
their passive prey did kick and curse

Olaf (upon what were once knees)
does almost ceaselessly repeat
"there is some s. I will not eat"

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

Christ (of His mercy infinite)
i pray to see; and Olaf, too

preponderatingly because
unless statistics lie he was
more brave than me: more blond than you. 30

Olaf's goodness is not merely in the fact that he had lived
a joyous life or that he had just done his job honestly and
without pretension; Olaf decided that he would die at the
hands of the unalive rather than bow to their ideals. Al-
though Cummings often defends the conscientious objector, 31
Olaf's greatness lies in the fact that life under any terms
except his own was unacceptable for Olaf and not worth the
price.

30 Ibid., "XXX," p. 244.

31 Cummings defends the conscientious objector in Cum-
mings, The Enormous Room, p. 139, by saying that they are
those who were "cursed with a talent for thinking during
the warlike moments recently passed; during that is to say
an epoch when the . . . nations demanded of their respective
peoples the exact antithesis to thinking; said antithesis
being vulgarly called Belief." Cummings, here, is not par-
ticularly defending these persons' selfhood so much as the
position they chose to take in the war. Cummings has else-
where pointed out that war is the creation of a collectivity
and would not exist if all persons within the collectivities
were to react as individuals rather than as parts of the
collectivities.
Though Cummings will always say that to be true to oneself is the only way to live, or die in Olaf's case, he equally affirms the person who promotes another's selfhood.

it's

so damn sweet when Anybody--

yes; no

matter who, some

total (preferably blonde

of course)

or on the other

well

your oldest

pal

for instance (or

; why

' even

i

suppose

one

's wife)

-- does doesn't unsays says looks smiles

or simply Is

what makes

you feel you

aren't

6 or 6

teen or sixty

000,000

anybodyelsey--

but for once

(imag

- ine)

You

32 Cummings, "7," 73 Poems.
The alive individual who attempts to live life as faithfully to himself as possible finds happiness in one who makes him feel his selfhood more clearly. Cummings is not saying here that he wants someone to "accept him as he is," for this would involve another's fidelity to self. But he praises that individual whose life is such that by seeing that life, one understands his own life better; he begins to know his self more clearly.

The fidelity to self which Cummings affirms in the individual is, then, a fairly clear reality, for Cummings affirms the man who remains his truest self in the midst of any circumstance. But fidelity to self in relation to the concept of love creates a new problem, for self no longer means the individual personality. In love, self comes to mean two persons joined as a whole which is separate and different from the two former individuals. Cummings does not speak of this self as he does the individual self, in terms of faithfulness to the individual personality; instead he simply defines the union of the two persons and extols the joys the new self, the "we," enjoy in love. For Cummings, love is life's highest happiness, and the self which is formed from the two persons is a far better creation than either of the preceding personalities. In the last poem of his last volume, Cummings expresses the belief that each individual sees only half of the world, only half truth, and that only two persons joined in love may see the whole world.
all worlds have halfsight, seeing either with
life's eye (which is if things seem spirits) or
(if spirits in the guise of things appear)
death's: any world must always half perceive.

Only whose vision can create the whole

he's free into the beauty of the truth;

and strolls the axis of the universe
-- love. Each believing world denies, whereas
your lover (looking through both life and death)
timelessly celebrates the merciful

wonder no world deny may or believe

Cummings is saying that only that which sees the whole,
i.e., love, is able to know truth. Without love, each
half, or each individual, believes and denies, but lovers
are able to see through both halves, symbolized by life and
death, into the wonder which individuals cannot see, love.
Since only lovers can comprehend the wonder of love, love is
immune to the denial and belief of all other persons and to
the two individuals, life and death.

Cummings further describes this Self created by love in
the following portion of a poem from 95 Poems:

\[
\text{noone and a star stand, am to am}
\]
\[
\text{soul to soul: freedom to freedom}
\]
\[
\text{till her utmost secrecies and his}
\]
\[
\text{(dreaming flame by flaming dream)}
\]
\[
\text{merge-- at not imaginable which}
\]

\[\text{33Ibid., "73."}\]
instant born, a (who is neither each
both and) Self adventures deathlessness

Cummings makes it clear here that the Self formed by the two
separate souls, each a free individual ("am to am," "freedom
to freedom"), is a different being than either of the indi-
viduals who are a part of it. And the new Self which is
created is deathless because it is created by love, which is
not affected by life or death. Cummings reiterates the
point that the new Self formed is neither of the individuals
who are a part of it; just as love is separate from life and
death, so are the lovers separate from the life- or death-
bound individuals they once were. Cummings says,

what's wholly
marvellous my

Darling

is that you &
i are more than you

& i (be
ca
us

e It's we)

He points out here that the "we" created is more than the
"you and i" before the creation and emphasizes this fact by
his placement of "be" and "us" of the word because at the
end of the poem. The whole's overcoming the individuals is

34 Cummings, "49," 95 Poems.
35 Cummings, "10," 73 Poems.
the point of a less explicit poem which explores the disappearance of the individuals in love.

speaking of love

............

this

caress that laugh
both quickly signify
life's only half(through

deep weather then
or none let's feel
all)mind in mind flesh
In flesh succeeding disappear

Here Cummings goes back to his allegiance to feeling in saying that mind and flesh disappear into feeling and love, and the weather, as symbolic of the normal life which surrounds the individual, matters not to those who give all to love.

Cummings emphasizes the importance of the whole and the fact that the individuals disappear within this whole in a poem describing a man whose lover has gone away. Without his lover, the man exists only as "a shadow phantom effigy or seeming;" he is a "noone." He no longer exists as an individual free of his own, but is inextricably bound to his lover by the union of love. He is so much a part of her that he speaks in terms of "my selves," implying that both of their individual selves belong to each of them so that each has two selves, for each is a part of the other, and they cannot be separated. While she is gone, he is engulfed.

36 Cummings, "LV," Poems, p. 262.
37 Cummings, "40," 73 Poems.
by the outside world of hope (for the enjoyment with her of nature) and apprehension (of a stranger's taking her in his arms). But upon her return, he says that all life and joy will be in their union, "we're." The poem is as follows:

your homecoming will be my homecoming--
my selves so with you, only i remain;
a shadow phantom effigy or seeming
(an almost someone always who's noone)
a noone who, till their and your returning,
spends the forever of his loneliness
dreaming their eyes have opened to your morning
feeling their stars have risen through your skies:
so, in how merciful love's own name, linger
no more than selfless i can quite endure
the absence of that moment when a stranger
takes in his arms my very life who's your
--when all fears hopes beliefs doubts disappear.
Everywhere and joy's perfect wholeness we're

This union of self and self to form a separate and different "we" is, for Cummings, the happiest of all experiences. And perhaps one of Cummings' happiest sounding poems is his song of "wonderful one times one,"38 in which he exalts the fact that "now i love you and you love me" and that "there's somebody calling who's we." The concluding stanza of the poem captures the joy of being in love for Cummings.

38 Cummings, "LIV," Poems, p. 422.
we're anything brighter than even the sun
(we're everything greater
than books
might mean)
we're everything more than believe
(with a spin
leap
alive we're alive)
we're wonderful one times one

Cummings captures this same exuberance in the "lucky means finding" mentioned earlier in this chapter, which concludes with the affirmation that

```
. . . . . . . .
you am luck
- y is we lucky luck-
ier
luck
-I-
est
```

Lovers together always equal the happiest, luckiest self

Cummings can imagine.

Cummings compares the happiness of "we" to the dead world of "they" in a poem that philosophically concludes that there must be both we and they in the world.

```
SONG

but we've the may
(for you are in love
and i am) to sing,
my darling:while
old worlds and young
(big little and all
worlds) merely have
the must to say

```
and the when to do
is exactly theirs
precisely ours
is the now to grow

the gift to live.
is without until:
but pitiful they've
(big little and all)
no power beyond
the trick to seem

their joys turn woes
and right goes wrong

our summer in fall
and in winter our spring
is the yes of yes.40

The two of we and they stand opposed to one another in each stanza: we have the opportunity to sing, while they have the necessity to merely say; they are ruled by time and accomplishments, while we live in the present and grow: we have an eternity to love, while they cling to nothing but pretensions; and they experience nothing but sorrow, while we live to affirm life.

Love is the good and happy world, the world of affirmation for a newly created Self.

Growth

Cummings' concept of growth is based on his conviction that the world of process and movement and becoming is superior to the world of stasis, and his prime example of

40Cummings, "4," 73 Poems.
growth is nature. The poet describes his first experience with nature in *six non-lectures*:

Here [in the woods surrounding the home of Charles Eliot Norton], as a very little child, I first encountered that mystery who is Nature; here my enormous smallness entered Her illimitable being; and here [I] wonderingly wondered the mortally immortal complexities of Her beyond imagining imagination.\(^1\)

Cummings was then, and remained, enchanted with Nature and her mysteries. The poet's position in regard to nature is summarized by Norman Friedman:

[Cummings] views nature as process rather than product, as dynamic rather than static, as organic rather than artificial, and as becoming rather than being.\(^2\)

In other words, Cummings sees nature as the embodiment of growth. But nature does not constitute the whole of the poet's idea of growth, for many of his love poems and most of his poems about dying also fit into the category of growth. For instance, he often speaks of love in terms of creation, spring, and a force which allows lovers to grow. And his poems about dying fall generally into three categories all of which relate to growth: dying as a process, dying as a mystery, and the after-life. His growth poems, on the whole then, envelop three major concepts: nature, love, and dying.

In speaking of Cummings' theory of growth, however, it is also necessary to consider at least one aspect of his

\(^1\)Cummings, *six non-lectures*, p. 32.

style--his love of visual and aural process and motion in his poems. Cummings himself explains the link between this technique and his theory of growth and process:

Art imitates nature, and since nature is dynamic, spontaneous, and concrete, art tries to achieve the miracle of the verb rather than the deadness of the noun. A poem should not be about something, it should be something.

This technique of Cummings is related also to his propensity for feeling over more understanding, for it is impossible to merely intellectually understand or paraphrase many of Cummings' most effective poems since their full meaning depends upon the feeling evoked in the reader by the use and placement on the page of the words and punctuation. This element of Cummings' style will be viewed along with his theory of growth.

When speaking of nature as an idea or concept, Cummings generally sees nature as the creator, as an all-powerful force in life, as superior to thought. This does not mean, however, that Cummings does not treat nature's members separately in many poems, for he does. But the poems in which he treats nature as a concept are more definitive of his outlook of growth and process than those poems which are, for the most part, descriptions of parts of nature which in themselves exhibit characteristics of growth.

43 Ibid., p. 12.
The relationship of nature as creator to the idea of growth is an obvious one, for creation is of itself a process, and an inherent element of growth. Rain is most often employed as the creative force in his nature poetry, and in the following poem the poet attempts to capture the creativity of the rain for nature as well as man.

when rain
.............
speaks

.............
thousand
thrusts squirms stars
Trees, swift each with its

Own motion
.............

(when
Rain comes;
predicating forever, assuming
the laughter of afterwards--
i spirally understand

What
touching means
or What does a hand
with your hair
in my imagination"4"

The rain, here, creates not only motion within nature herself but also creates understanding in man. The elemental nature of rain lends a growth ("spirally") understanding to man's elemental feelings and emotions. The fact of this creation presupposes a forever, which is inherent in the continuous growing process. Cummings transposes this same

44 Cummings, "XLVII," Poems, p. 256.
process of rain's creative power into the incidence of a thunderstorm. The thunderstorm and its terror lives upon the page as Cummings verbally and pictorially describes it:

\[ n(o) \]

\[ \text{the} \]

\[ \text{how} \]

\[ \text{dis(appeared cleverly)world} \]

\[ \text{iS Slapped:with;lightninS} \]

\[ \text{at which(shal)lpounceupcrackw(ill)jumps} \]

\[ \text{of THuNd3rR} \]

\[ \text{loSSoMiN} \]

\[ \text{-visiblya mongban(gedfrag-} \]

\[ \text{ment ssky?wha tm(eani ngl(essNessUn} \]

\[ \text{rolli)ng yS troll s(who leO v erd)oma insCol} \]

\[ \text{Lide.hi} \]

\[ \text{no;w : theraIncomIng} \]

\[ \text{o all the roofs roar} \]

\[ \text{drownInsound(} \]

\[ \text{&} \]

\[ \text{(we(are like)dead} \]

\[ \text{Whoshout(ghost)atOne(voiceless)0} \]

\[ \text{ther or im) pos} \]

\[ \text{sib(lly as} \]

\[ \text{leep) But l!ook-} \]

\[ \text{U} \]

\[ \text{n:start birDs(1EAp)Openi ng} \]

\[ \text{t hings(s(} \]

\[ \text{--sing} \]

\[ \text{)all are all(cry allSee)o(vers All) Th(e grEEEn} \]

\[ ?eartH)N,ew^{45} \]

---

\[ ^{45}\text{Ibid., "XXXVIII," p. 250.} \]
The earth is in darkness as it is surprised by lightning and struck by thunder, both of which seem to fragment the sky, and it all seems meaningless as the ferocity pounds. Then the rain begins, and the frightening part of the storm is over (as indicated by the cessation of strange and fragmenting punctuation). The people are as dead people, ghosts, who shout and yet, voiceless, cannot be heard; or perhaps they are asleep, but Cummings notes that that is impossible after the storm. But suddenly (as indicated by the exclamation point after the first glance of look), the sun appears and nature goes into motion. And the earth is born, new and green. Here Cummings has juxtaposed nature's raw power and creativity so that we may understand that creativity is her primary force. Still, her power remains illimitable for those who tremble in her midst.

Cummings affirms this power in several poems in which he points out that nature cannot be limited, that she is all-prevailing. One of these poems is in the form of a satire on businessmen, whom Cummings considers as probably one of the most destructive forces on earth. He says quite simply,

\[\text{yes but even}\]

\[4 \text{ or(§} \h\text{ow)diary}\]

\[a\]

\[\text{meri}\]
Cummings makes the same point in a different way as he reminds his friend that nothing, not even poetry, can hurry spring along and that even "all the policemen in the world" can not stop spring's arrival. He begins by inviting his friend to come with him and enjoy spring.

\[\text{sing)for it's Spring}\]

\[--\text{irrevocably;}\]
\[\text{and in earth sky trees :every}\]
\[\text{where a miracle arrives (yes)}\]
\[\text{you and i may not hurry it with a thousand poems my darling but nobody will stop it} \]

\[\text{With All The Policemen In The World}^{47}\]

Nothing can control nature's force, whether it be in the form of the joy of spring or the fear of a thunderstorm or simply the moon flowing over all the world. In a long poem enumerating the things over which the moon rolls, Cummings implies that the moon's path is unending as it soars "(roUnd

\[46\text{Cummings, "36," 95 Poems.} \quad 47\text{Cummings, "53," 73 Poems.}\]
The moon, like the thunderstorm and spring, embodies growth and process, just as does all of nature.

In line with Cummings' conviction that nature is all powerful is the idea that all thoughts and knowledge are not even comparable to nature's members. The power and beauty of nature simply invalidate all products of the mind; man's meager understanding cannot compare to nature's vastness. As Cummings puts it, "the mightiest meditations of mankind/cancelled are by one merely opening leaf."49 A similar statement connects this superiority of nature to the life of affirmation:

out of the lie of no
rises a truth of yes

making fools understand
(like wintry me) that not
all matterings of mind
equal one violet

Cummings is sure that the natural world is the superior world and that its power is basically good, but he remains in awe of the mystery of dying.

Cummings acknowledges that dying is a part of the natural order of growth and process, but he also is concerned with the overwhelming mystery which surrounds dying.

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49 Ibid., "LII," p. 421.
50 Cummings, "64," _95 Poems_.
He admits that he does not understand, but at the same time he affirms a belief in an afterlife, to which the process of growth must lead. These three concerns of Cummings on the matter of dying—that dying is a part of the natural world of growth and process, that it remains a mystery, and that the process of dying probably leads to an afterlife—form the basis of an over-all view of dying for Cummings.

Dying, for Cummings, is a distinctly different phenomenon from death, for dying implies the natural process which the poet affirms, while death signifies stasis and finality. Cummings makes the distinction in the following poem:

```
dying is fine)but Death

?o
baby

i

wouldn't like

Death if Death
were good:for

when(instead of stopping to think)you

begin to feel of it,dying
's miraculous
why? be

cause dying is

perfectly natural;perfectly
putting
it mildly lively(but

Death

is strictly
scientific
& artificial &

evil & legal)
```
we thank thee
God
Almighty for dying

(forgive us, o life! the sin of Death)

Cummings here contrasts the natural, lively, process of
dying to the legal fact of death; he thanks God for dying
but asks forgiveness from life for allowing death to be.
Cummings seems to be implying that death is chosen by those
who refuse to be a part of the world of process and growth,
who see life and death in terms of the factual, which is for
Cummings "artificial" and "legal." The basic point, how-
ever, is clear: one must be a part of growth and process in
dying as well as in living.

This process of dying is implied in a poem in Cummings' last book of poetry in which the speaker contemplates a
"gently welcoming darkness." The poem is shaded in
mystery, for he speaks of dreaming of "nothing/i or any
somebody or you/can begin to begin to imagine." And al-
though the speaker says that he is only contemplating a
dream, he implies that it will be an everlasting dream by
saying that he feels "that sunlight is/(life and day are)
only loaned: whereas/night is given." But the end of the
poem points to the fact that the speaker is thinking of his
dream in terms of the growth and process of the previous

51 Cummings, "6," Poems, p. 431
52 Cummings, "44," 73 Poems.
poem, for he says that he will dream of spring, which is symbolic of the growth process,

Now i lay (with everywhere around)
me (the great dim deep sound
of rain; and of always and of nowhere) and

what a gently welcoming darkness--

now i lay me down (in a most steep
more than music) feeling that sunlight is
(life and day are) only loaned; whereas
night is given (night and death and the rain
are given; and given is how beautifully snow)

now i lay me down to dream of (nothing
i or any somebody or you
can begin to begin to imagine)

something which nobody may keep.
now i lay me down to dream of Spring \(^53\)

The ambiguity about the pessimism of sunlight being only loaned and the optimism of the ever-coming Spring is confusing, here, but it is important to note the final definition of the dream is in terms of spring rather than of night and darkness. And even in the midst of the statement of the permanence of night is the affirmation that the life-giving rain is also given with death and night. Death, then, may be seen as a certainty always given, but always given with the precondition of spring and rain, of process and growth, so that death becomes not a finality, but simply another world where life begins again, with the coming of spring.

It is significant, however, that Cummings states that the

\(^{53}\) Ibid.
dream is still a mystery ("nothing/i or any somebody or you/ can begin to begin to imagine"), for only as a mystery can death be seen as another life or world to come.

This necessity for mystery in a belief in an afterlife is probably the reason Cummings has, in his last volume of poetry, spoken of dying most often in terms of mystery. Cummings speaks quite surely of an afterlife in his earlier poetry (see below), but in his later life, he affirms the mystery as well as the process of dying. Two of his poems of dying in this last volume clearly affirm this mystery. In one, he simply states that the most mysterious part of life is death.

...of all things under our blonder than blondest star
the most mysterious (eliena,my dear)is this
--how anyone so say possibly could die

In the later poem, Cummings affirms the necessity of mystery by asking a bird to tell him the reason for death and having that bird say that his song would not be if he were to reveal anything. The bird is again symbolic of the natural world which cannot reveal its inherent mystery. Were death to become a fact reciteable by birds, it would lose its affinity to the natural process. The bird's reply may be seen, then,

\[^{54}\text{Ibid., "53."}\]
as an affirmation on Cummings' part of the mystery of the process of death.

"o purple finch
please tell my why
this summer world (and you and i
who love so much to live)
must die"

"if i
should tell you anything"
(that eagerly sweet carolling
self answers me)
"i could not sing."55

If dying is a part of the world of process and growth, no matter how mysterious it is, then it can not be a finality. If one says that dying is a process, it becomes almost necessary that he believe in some sort of an afterlife. And Cummings intimates such a belief. In his second volume of poetry, Cummings writes a brief allegorical poem in which Life, Death, and Afterwards all appear in a cafe where the speaker and his love are sitting.56 Life is "an old man carrying flowers on his head," and Death sits with "a piece of money held between his thumb and first finger." The speaker asks his love if Death will buy Life's flowers, and his love answers,

... I think so. But
I think I see someone else

there is a lady, whose name is Afterwards
she is sitting beside young death, is slender;
likes flowers.

55Ibid., "64."

56Cummings, "XII," Poems, p. 83.
Death and Afterwards are not synonymous, for it is either one or the other who will buy the flowers. Cummings, then, indicates a belief in an afterlife but does not make it synonymous with death. Death, as opposed to dying, is a finality; Afterwards indicates the process of dying, of forever.

The poet shows evidence of this same kind of belief in an afterlife in later poems which speak of the afterlife again in terms of nature. One of these is the ballad of two lovers, anyone and noone, and tells the story of their love, marriage, and death. The poem ends by describing them after their death.

```
all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.\(^{57}\)
```

Again Cummings employs the images of dream, sleep, nature, and spring, implying again the affirmative process of growth. They are dreaming their sleep, are envolved in spring on earth, and are caught up in the world of mystery and affirmation, the world of the afterlife. This natural afterlife occurs again in a poem in praise of the poet's mother, wherein Cummings says that "if there are any heavens my mother will(all by herself) have/one."\(^{58}\) He then goes on to describe this heaven in terms of a garden of "blackred roses" to which he compares his "tall," "deep," father. The

\(^{57}\text{Ibid.}, "29," p. 370.\)
\(^{58}\text{Ibid.}, "XLIII," p. 253.\)
climax of the poem is the tribute which the garden and his
carer pay to his mother:

(suddenly in sunlight
he will bow,
& the whole garden will bow)

Here, as before, the controlling image is one of nature and
life, roses and sunlight. Sunlight is again indicative of
the afterlife in a poem which is based on the image of some-
one stacking lettered blocks to read D
E
A
T
H59

The poem begins as Cummings expresses the mystery of death
even though death is yet far away. His construction of
Death, or life perhaps, is still a pleasant one.

(to start; to hesitate; to stop
(kneeling in doubt: while all
skies fall) and then to slowly trust
T upon H, and smile

could anything be pleasanter
(some big dark little day
which seems a lifetime at the least)
except to add an A?

Then the next two stanzas portray Death as being grand,
powerful, perfect, "now and here," and the last stanza brings
a turnabout of thought in that the sunlight appears, the
builder "plunges rapturously up," and the construction,
Death, is destroyed.

henceforth he feels his pride involved
(this i who's also you)
and nothing less than excellent
E will exactly do

next(our great problem nearly solved)
we dare adorn the whole
with a distinct grandiloquent
deep D; while all skies fall

at last perfection, now and here
--but look: not sunlight? yes!
and (plunging rapturously up)
we spill our masterpiece

The image and the implication here are the same as in the previously mentioned poem: death, or better dying, is a part of the natural order of process and growth and leads to a natural afterlife, but both the process and the life resulting are always mysterious and speculative. In each of the poems, however, there is a positive element of affirmation, be it simply the word yes or the bursting of sunlight, which serves as an assurance of Cummings' basic attitude toward this mystery. We accepts and affirms dying as he does all of nature.

Cummings' concept of nature and dying as elements of growth is related to this idea of love as couched in terms of creation and spring. Love, he says, is the creator of all mysteries, and this statement itself is a bit mysterious, for it is not clear whether he means that love in actuality is the creative force which caused all things to be or whether it is the creative force which causes man to

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60 Cummings, six non-lectures, pp. 43, 82.
understand and realize all things. Cummings speaks of this point:

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

This poem is also ambiguous in that it could support either interpretation—love as the positive creative force or love as that which makes man understand his universe. The first two lines of the poem portray love as the positive creator and even calls love the "every only god," a god or force so grand that it created a man who could understand himself within his short life span. It is at this point that the ambiguity arises, for is it that love actually created this creature or that the creature was not an "alive" being who could understand himself until love was introduced into his life? The dichotomy continues. The poet points out that human love is like nature in that "love beginning means return" and that in a lover's eyes one can see the sky's stars.

Is it that love created nature and man in accord with one another or that man, when enveloped by love, is able to understand the sea and the sky more clearly? The last of these alternatives seems more probable, but Cummings does not make this point clear. He says in other poems that love is certainly a creative force within man, but this clarifies the issue of love as a universal creator very little.

The idea of love as a creative force within man is, however, an important one. In one poem, the speaker asks his lover to create him with her love as the rain creates color (again the link between love and nature). He entreats her to bear with him if he seems not to be a whole man, for, as he points out, he is alive and is only lacking her love to become a complete being. He pleads,

\[
\text{be unto love as rain is unto colour; create me gradually (or as these emerging now hills invent the air)}
\]

\[
\text{breathe simply my each how my trembling where my still unvisible when. Wait if i am not heart, because at least i beat}\text{62}
\]

This same idea of love as a creative force within man is expressed in a poem describing the empty man who has become nothing more than the shell of a man and is like "a clown's smirk in the skull of a baboon,"63 "a birdcage without any

bird,/a collar looking for a dog, a kiss/without lips; a prayer lacking any knees." And the only thing which keeps this man alive is his love of "one small lady." She is either dead or no longer loves him, and because of this his love cannot be returned. And because his love is not fulfilled, he cannot become a whole man, but his love for her is that which keeps him physically alive. Love here is a live force which cannot be creative because it has not been returned.

The idea of love as creator automatically relates love to spring, the creative image of nature, and Cummings celebrates this relationship. He sings,

"sweet spring is your
time is my time is our
time for springtime is lovetime
and viva sweet love"

(such a sky and such a sun
i never knew and neither did you
and everybody never breathed
quite so many kinds of yes)

"sweet spring is your
time is my time is our
time for springtime is lovetime
and viva sweet love"

Love and spring epitomize the world of affirmation, and love and spring create more kinds of yes than any other situation. The poet again affirms love and spring in another poem by announcing that "we are spring" as he compares "earth

opening" to the "flowers of his eyes" and describes leaf as wing and tree as voice. Two persons, "we," joined in love, epitomize the beauties and joys of nature's spring, and the best of life, love, becomes one with the best of nature, spring.

This emphasis upon growth and process in nature, dying, and love often coincide with Cummings' technique, for he attempts to capture the growth and process which he sees as an important part of the world, to hold the poem before the reader so that the reader experiences at the moment whatever idea or feeling Cummings is attempting to convey. Cummings does not restrict this technique to any one area of thought, but the technique itself is a manifestation of his conviction that motion and process, when accurately conveyed, enhance and deepen the reader's experience with the poem and its contents.

Cummings' intention of writing a poem which would "be something" rather than be "about something" is probably best fulfilled in his poems which depict either a feeling or a happening. In the first poem of 95 Poems, Cummings portrays visibly and verbally the feeling of loneliness by showing the descent of a leaf. The poem is effective because it is possible for the reader to experience the motion of the leaf and the essence of the experience of loneliness in one glance.
A poem such as this exists as a whole and cannot be taken apart and still have meaning, but the form of the poem may be examined to ascertain the reasoning for its placement. The first six lines of two letters each clearly portray the descent of the leaf as it falls. But the words contained within the last portion of the word loneliness are meaningful units of themselves in that each of the first two parts exemplify loneliness. "One" and "l," when viewed alone, have the same meaning, the solitary one. Then the last long line not only dramatizes the fact that the leaf has landed but also points to the noun ending "iness" which indicates the irrevocable fact of loneliness. The process and placement of the poem is, then, its meaning and cannot be separated from the meaning.

Cummings' motion poems portraying specific happenings are perhaps even more effective than those which dramatize a feeling or emotion. One of the most delightful of these

66 Cummings, "l," 95 Poems.

67 Barry Marks, E. E. Cummings (New York, 1964), p. 25. Marks suggests that the "iness" of the last line suggests the meaning of the poem to be that of one's own isolation and the meaning of self-understanding.
poems is one which depicts a grasshopper hiding in the
grass, then leaping, then landing in full view of the on-
looker.

Sam Hynes has offered a thorough explanation of this poem
in terms of the grasshopper's motion. He points out that
in line one there is just "something extended" in the grass
or on a twig; the something is yet unidentified. At this
point, Lloyd Frankenberg notes that although we can't make
out what is hiding in the grass, we get a hint of what it is
from the "stridulating sounds he makes," sounds which are
rearrangements of his name. Hynes says that in lines three
through seven "as we glance toward it (the double take, in
two quick parentheses) it draws itself together, becomes
taller and more condensed--becomes a definite and particular

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69 Sam Hynes, "Cummings' Collected Poems, 276," The
Explicator, X (November, 1951), Item 9.

70 Lloyd Frankenberg, Pleasure Dome: on reading modern
poetry (Boston, 1949), p. 179.
object, a The." Lines seven through ten dramatize its leap, and Hymes says that in line ten our glance is following the leap from "S" to "a." The exclamation point of line nine, he says, represents and emphasizes the leap as a "sudden, startling thing." Line twelve is half-way between lines one and five as the thing arrives at its destination and is still unidentified to us. Then in the last two lines, the being settles himself and reveals himself as a grasshopper. The semi-colon at the end of the poem suggests to M. L. Rosenthal that the grasshopper is rearranged only temporarily and that he will momentarily leap again. This attempt on Cummings' part to represent the dynamic world of motion and process is in itself an attempt to represent life and to be so at-one with life that the reader can respond to the poem as he might respond to the actual event in nature. This careful representation of life as the poet feels it also becomes affirmation of life, for he affirms that which he represents.

The entire area of growth is also exemplary of Cummings' affirmation of life in that growth itself represents life, and in affirming growth and process, Cummings affirms life too. He affirms nature as it embodies life's growing process, love, as it creates and responds to the natural order, and dying, as it signifies the growing process leading to an afterlife.

Cummings' world view is an orderly one in that he has exhibited in his poetry recurrent ideas which relate to one another in a clearly discernable fashion. Cummings' view is, like any other man's, one with many facets which point in several different directions, but they all are a part of the same whole view. And that view may be seen as being based upon three ideas in terms of how life should be lived: life is seen in terms of growth, self-fidelity, and the present. If life exhibits these characteristics, Cummings affirms it; if it denies them, he tends to reject it. And this affirming and rejecting process is a necessary one for Cummings if he is to live his own life by the same standards by which he judges others' lives. For he cannot be faithful to his own self without reacting honestly to the world he encounters, and in so doing, he must affirm and reject the parts of the world he encounters. This process, is, then, a vital part of his own self understanding.

These three characteristics by which he judges his own life and the world in general are all interrelated to one another. And no one may be seen completely without the others. For instance, growth, for Cummings, implies not only the meaning of becoming as opposed to stasis on the
part of the individual but also a constant process in terms of the world and the manner in which one reacts to that world. Growth here means becoming and process without ultimate concern for the future product; it is growth and process for their own sake at the present moment. And if one is faithful to himself, he will become a part of this world of process and growth without concern for the outcome of his actions. Growth, then, is inherently related to life in the present and self-fidelity.

Accordingly, self-fidelity also involves the other two characteristics, for one who is faithful to himself is concerned with the integrity of his own self at the present moment without regard for the former or future self. He is also concerned that his life be growing each moment as he remains faithful to his own personhood.

The concept of the present is likewise related to self-fidelity and growth, for within the idea of the present, one is committed to an acceptance of the circumstances of the present and an acceptance of the self within these circumstances. And it is the over-all view of the present as a succession of presents to form a forever to which Cummings commits his life view. The present itself is a process for Cummings.

This interrelation of these three concepts is a more accurate description of Cummings' world view than any one of them can possibly be. Cummings' view is too intricate to be
explained by one simple concept, and even the three inter-related concepts examined here certainly do not explain his world view in full, for the view involves many aspects of his world. But these three concepts, taken together, do account for the most prominent ideas of his poetry and form a firm basis for a more extended analysis of his world view. To say that Cummings may be understood as simply a Romantic poet or an Imagist or a Naturalist1 is overlooking the complexities of his thought, just as is saying that his view is an adolescent or immature one. And those critics who choose to label Cummings as any of these by reading only one short volume or one series of poems are overlooking this complexity.

The "complex truth," which Cummings says is the only thing which always controls the faithful individual, is an orderly one, but it is not a simple one. It is orderly in that it is based on three firm convictions—that man must be a part of the world of growth and process, that he must be faithful to himself, and that he must rely only on the present. And these concepts are exhibited and explained throughout his poetry. Yet it is complex in that its

implications point in many directions and toward many concepts. But as long as Cummings is faithful to his own "complex truth," he may not be condemned for betraying other standards of judgment. As long as he remains faithful to this truth, he cannot be criticized for not being a proper Romanticist or Imagist or Naturalist. He can only be affirmed for being true to his "complex truth."
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