# Cummings, Oedipus, and Childhood: Problems of Anxiety and Intimacy

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## I

There is a choice, of course, among alternative interpretations of childhood. A central strand of Judaism teaches its children to live so as to be worthy of the Messiah when He comes, and at the age of 12 for girls and 13 for boys, initiates them into the religious responsibilities of adulthood. Christian post-lapsarian theology says we are born in sin and must accept and follow the sacraments to be redeemed. The Lockean view says our original mind is a *tabula rasa* and that whatever is inscribed there comes from the environment. The poetic view of childhood since the end of the eighteenth century, the poetry of William Blake, and the onset of the Romantic movement has been characteristically more positive, not to say reverential. "The child is the father of the man," Wordsworth proclaimed, and there is a sense in such a view that adulthood is in some way a falling off, a diminishment of our original innocence and purity of vision—an interesting return to a pre-lapsarian attitude.

The Freudian position, returning to the post-lapsarian view, is that we are born with an innate tendency toward the irrational and must somehow learn to get it under control. In particular, we must struggle as young children—male children, especially—to free ourselves from our natural, original attachment to our mothers in order to be able to engage in the adult activities of work and marriage—hence Freud's central emphasis on the oedipal struggle. The psychologies of Jung, Adler, Fromm, Horney, Sullivan, et al., on the other hand, offer various departures from this theme, until we reach once again the central vision of Romanticism in Third Force psychology (or the Human Potential movement), with Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, F. S. Perls, Paul Goodman, et al., which sees the original innocence of the child as subject to corruption by adult society.

According to this latter view, it is not something inherent in our nature which inclines us to listen to the Serpent, as even Genesis and its various interpretations suggest; it is, rather, a failure to balance out what *is* inherent—that is, that our inborn needs must be met in such a way as to be consistent with the necessities and givens of our existence, and that among these givens are two governing principles. One is that we cannot insure our own safety without attending to the safety of those around us; and that other is that, while we are able to manipulate Nature's processes, we cannot

do so at Her *expense* without ultimately destroying the very ground of our existence.

This view is not simply a manifestation of the enlightened self-interest of the nineteenth-century Utilitarians; it is more a matter of being in effective touch with our inescapable relatedness to others, and to the planet, which rests in turn upon the healthy development of our capacity for sympathy, compassion, and empathy, as well as for balancing short-range benefits with long-range needs. These are not merely "virtues" which would be humane to cultivate; they are, rather, required for our survival.

The cause of our failure to be in touch with our relatedness is, arguably, the tragic difficulty we have in keeping the faculty of *mind* in appropriate balance with our other faculties—our emotions, imaginations, and the physical ground of our being in our bodies. Indeed, it is one of the ambiguous abilities of mind that allows us to speak in this way, as if these faculties were separate entities in the first place. Whereas, in fact, this separation is a fiction created by mind itself. Mind is a two-edged sword: on the one hand, it can help us to enlarge upon the givens of Nature in such a way as to grow and to create fuller conditions of living; yet, on the other hand, by that very token it can tempt us to go beyond or even contrary to Nature in such a way as to hamper, if not destroy, our conditions of living.

That is why there is in Romanticism that strain of anti-intellectualism—anti-science, anti-technology, anti-rational—a reaction against the splitting of human existence into sealed-off compartments, where "reason" is privileged and "feeling" is denigrated. As Alfred North Whitehead put it, Romanticism is a protest in favor of value in a world of fact (138-39). But because reason claims to be based on objective tests, whereas feeling is seen as shifting, subjective, and undependable, we tend to rule feeling out of court. And yet the *fact* is that feeling cannot be eliminated, it can only be repressed, whereupon it can become destructive, as in the Frankenstein myth and the concentration-camp and atom-bomb realities—not to mention the de-forestation and air-pollution realities, among others.

Thus, if uncontrolled emotion can lead us astray, post-Enlightenment experience shows that uncontrolled intellect can be even more deadly. Is there any solution other than that we must work toward wholeness and integration of *all* our faculties? The ancient traditions of Yoga, as well as the later traditions of Zen sitting—*zazen*—and on up to the various Human Potential therapies aiming at the restoration of wholeness, offer ways and means of furthering this crucial enterprise.

If Cummings and other Romantics over-emphasized the emotional, it can perhaps be best seen as the necessary middle phase of the

movement toward wholeness in a culture such as ours. The modernist poets and critics moved in that direction by emphasizing the double vision, with its irony and paradox, while the post-modernists are moving even further toward indeterminacy, pushing skepticism to what seems its outermost limits. I hope to show that Cummings' view of the matter, especially his view of childhood, and of children, and parents, is not as simple or sentimental as has been commonly supposed by academics.

To begin with, of the just over 100 poems in *Complete Poems* which deal with children and childhood in one way or another, only about half deal with the subject in what might be called the expected positive manner, while the other half are mixed, satirical, or dark. Just what these categories mean will emerge more clearly as we proceed, but it is worth pausing here for a moment to reflect on this simple fact: the standard view of Cummings as the romantic, the perpetual adolescent, the poet of hopscotch and jump-rope, the man who never grew up, etc., like most standard views, has to be thoroughly re-examined.

Not that Cummings himself didn't encourage the standard views—we have that passage in *EIMI* where he boasts that he's just a child (212), and most of us can recall "children guessed(but only a few / and down they forgot as up they grew" of "anyone lived in a pretty how town" (*CP* 515). We know how, in his personal life, he avoided certain responsibilities which most of us are constrained to deal with. In stressing feeling over fact, he sometimes can be seen as forwarding the notion that logic and reason are to be ignored in favor of feeling. Indeed, some aspects of the Human Potential movement itself have been seen as saying something similar—again, a valid direction taken to extremes because of the extreme over-emphasis previously placed in logic and reason.

The fact remains, however, that the Human Potential psychologists were serious and learned people, and they knew what they were talking about because they had been there. Just so was Cummings, as Milton Cohen has pointed out, "a closet intellectual" (17). Not only did he work very hard over his manuscripts and drawings and paintings, revising, experimenting, theorizing, correcting, he also respected science in private. He was in psychoanalysis himself, was conversant with a number of ancient and foreign languages, and had a deep respect for certain philosophers—Santayana chief among them. Further, he filled dozens of notebooks with ideas, speculations, and theories, and he kept written records of his dreams.

For an adult to be in touch with the emotive and psycho-biological aspects of life—as the Romantic poets and writers saw—takes a good deal of effort, if not training. We need to discipline ourselves in order to become

spontaneous; we need to get through a good deal of mental clutter before we can honestly feel. We must acknowledge that Cummings was a highly-educated man, remarkably well-endowed, and that therefore his winning through to a vision of spontaneity was not something he simply fell into as he grew up.

One of the crucial determining experiences was his imprisonment in a French concentration camp during the first World War. The conditions of severe deprivation he endured while there, being literally constrained to accept the moment as the only reality, as recounted in his first published book, *The Enormous Room* (1922), made Cummings deal honestly with the world around him, though the method of delivery was clearly experimental. Nor is it surprising that he sometimes went too far in his anti-intellectual stance, in view of the difficulty of the struggle to let go of his education, and especially of his efforts to free himself of his oedipal conflict—about which we shall be saying more as we proceed.

He had an ideal and privileged childhood himself, growing up in Harvard's Cambridge, and enjoying summers on Joy Farm up in New Hampshire. He fosters this view in his published work, especially in his poetic eulogies of his parents (which we shall be looking at below) and the picture he paints of them in his autobiographical *i:six nonlectures* (1953). Yet Kennedy's biography, and especially the manuscripts of Cummings' dreams preserved in the Houghton Library at Harvard, reveal the extraordinary difficulty he experienced for a long time in struggling with and attempting to resolve his severe oedipal conflict.

His life as an artist was constructed partly out of his response to his historical situation—his allegiance to and re-making of the Romantic tradition in the face of the increasing industrialization and commercialization of modern society—and partly as a reaction against his capable and imposing father, and defense against his nurturing and adoring mother. These difficult and not wholly resolved tensions had certain negative effects, to begin with, upon his personal relationships. He had more than usual difficulties with women, as his three marriages and two divorces attest, in tending to idealize them out of all reason. He adopted the worshipful lover stance in life as well as in his poems, with the result that he had great difficulty with the daily grind of supporting a household.

He also had difficulty both in losing his daughter through his first divorce and in accepting her back when she later sought him out as a young woman. In fact, they almost "fell in love" with each other before he revealed himself to her as her natural father, as she had been raised in ignorance of her mother's marriage to the poet. After, however, when she imag-

ined he would become *pater familias* to her and her own children, he balked and said—in so many words—that he could not easily give up his life as a dedicated artist and his concomitant role as Peter Pan (Kennedy 410-430). Which, of course, made it difficult for him to earn his own living, with the result that he had to depend upon his original family and close friends for financial support and encouragement.

These tensions also had a profound effect upon his lifestyle. He tended to be a solitary and reclusive man, and he depended upon his third and most loyal wife, Marion Morehouse, to arrange his practical affairs. He was, however, sociable enough if he felt he was among people he could trust, and he was able to form enduring relationships among friends, my wife and myself among them, so long as he felt safe in their respect and admiration for him. Thus it was only after much inner turmoil that he agreed to face his public directly and to join the poetry-reading circuit in his later years, and especially to accept the Norton Lectureship at Harvard during 1952-53. Even then he made a point of patrolling the boundaries, making strict rules about the staging of his presence, not giving autographs, and the content of his readings.

If we were to reach for a psychological assessment, we could conclude that he suffered from moderate to severe dependent and social anxiety disorders, stemming from that not wholly resolved oedipal tension, which drove him to identify more with mother than father. Such facts resulted in him having a threatened and vulnerable boundary—just how threatened and vulnerable can be seen with especial poignancy in his dream notebooks, where his issues around incest emerge with startling frankness and clarity.

How these tensions affected his *art*, however, is our real concern, and especially how they shaped his vision of childhood, and of children and parents. For it is this vision, interestingly enough, which is generally acknowledged to be one of his chief *fortés*. And as expected, these tensions resulted in a characteristic mix: on the one hand, he naturally reveals a profound sense of the inner meaning and feeling of the beauties of childhood; and, on the other, which has not been fully appreciated, he shows a darker sense of its difficulties.

The really complicating factor, however, and one which requires further explication, is that he was sometimes in artistic control of the inner nature of these beauties and difficulties and of their interrelationships, and sometimes he was not. Specifically, because he was not able to sufficiently resolve his oedipal anxieties, he was not always able to guarantee the emotional/artistic coherence of these poems. That is to say, these tensions re-

sulted in a certain richness, as well as in certain limitations, and we shall be engaged in attempting to discriminate among them in what follows.

**II**

Let us begin, however, with the obvious—that solid group of poems in which childhood and children in general are portrayed in a positive light. We have at the start over thirty poems in which the childlike aura, or the references to children, are presented favorably. But even here the complexities begin to emerge.

In a poem of children addressing their little kitten (*CP* 30), for example, it turns out that the tiny creature seems to have died. Or in an erotic poem to his lady, the speaker refers to her as being "maturely childish" (*CP* 136). We also find that the moon is a balloon (*CP* 202), that children don't fear the rain (*CP* 357), that they enjoy building snowmen (*CP* 390) (contrary to popular opinion, Cummings is interested in other seasons than spring). We also find that the comedian Jimmy Savo is a "childlost foundclown" (*CP* 471), that his lady should be "glad and young" (*CP* 484), and that floating snowflakes are "a child's eyes" (*CP* 491). He likewise praises a friend by seeing children climbing "their eyes to touch his dream" (*CP* 517), sees at twilight a "childmoon smile" (*CP* 518), admires another man as a "generous child- / man" (*CP* 523-24), and notes that "maybe god / is a child / 's hand" (*CP* 652). He sees "poems children dreams" (*CP* 719) in the color of a sunrise, and he notices a child dancing at the seashore in the face of time's mystery (*CP* 843), and so on. So far, we may notice that the beauties of childhood are not so simple as we may have supposed.

But the essential flavor of this group is best brought out by examining in a bit more detail that well-known pair of poems in which Cummings eulogizes his parents. The one he published in 1931 in praise of his mother (*CP* 353) is perhaps less well-known than the one for his father published in 1940 (*CP* 520-21), but to me it is much more fluid and graceful, perhaps because, as we have noted, his relationship with his mother was much warmer—although not without *its* difficulties—than with his father. Here is the first:

> if there are any heavens my mother will(all by herself)have
> one. It will not be a pansy heaven nor
> a fragile heaven of lilies-of-the-valley but
> it will be a heaven of blackred roses

my father will be(deep like a rose
tall like a rose)

standing near my

swaying over her
(silent)
with eyes which are really petals and see

nothing with the face of a poet really which
is a flower and not a face with
hands
which whisper
This is my beloved my

(suddenly in sunlight
he will bow,

& the whole garden will bow)

The really interesting thing here is that the praise of his mother is effected by means of his father's reverential response to her. In fact, the imagery echoes Dante's vision of Beatrice in the *Paradiso* of *The Divine Comedy*, with its emphasis upon the blackred roses which are filling the heavens and which also serve as an emblem for the father, whom he pictures as being a poet and who is bowing toward the mother. This echoes the Song of Songs, and his father is being joined in this gesture by the whole garden.

This is the son working against the oedipal problem and delivering his mother-worship handily over to his father. On the other side, his father was not a poet—whether literally or figuratively—but rather was a sociology professor, a Unitarian minister, and a social reformer. He was, by the son's own account (*six* 8), a tall, impressive, outgoing, and capable man, everything that the poet-son felt he was not. And so, as we have noted, rather than *identify* with his father, the son identifies the father with the *son*, thereby avoiding the normal task of resolution.

A similar reversal occurs, significantly enough, in the praise of his father:

my father moved through dooms of love
through sames of am through haves of give,
singing each morning out of each night
my father moved through depths of height

this motionless forgetful where
turned at his glance to shining here;
that if(so timid air is firm)
under his eyes would stir and squirm

newly as from unburied which
floats the first who,his april touch
drove sleeping selves to swarm their fates
woke dreamers to their ghostly roots

and should some why completely weep
my father's fingers brought her sleep:
vainly no smallest voice might cry
for he could feel the mountains grow.

Lifting the valleys of the sea
my father moved through griefs of joy;
praising a forehead called the moon
singing desire into begin

joy was his song and joy so pure
a heart of star by him could steer
and pure so now and now so yes
the wrists of twilight would rejoice

keen as midsummer's keen beyond
conceiving mind of sun will stand,

so strictly(over utmost him
so hugely)stood my father's dream

his flesh was flesh his blood was blood:
no hungry man but wished him food;
no cripple wouldn't creep one mile
uphill to only see him smile.

Scorning the pomp of must and shall
my father moved through dooms of feel;
his anger was as right as rain
his pity was as green as grain

septembering arms of year extend
less humbly wealth to foe and friend
than he to foolish and to wise
offered immeasurable is

proudly and(by octobering flame
beckoned)as earth will downward climb,
so naked for immortal work
his shoulders marched against the dark

his sorrow was as true as bread:
no liar looked him in the head;
if every friend became his foe
he'd laugh and build a world with snow.

My father moved through theys of we,
singing each new leaf out of each tree
(and every child was sure that spring
danced when she heard my father sing)

then let men kill which cannot share,
let blood and flesh be mud and mire,

scheming imagine,passion willed,
freedom a drug that's bought and sold

giving to steal and cruel kind,
a heart to fear,to doubt a mind,
to differ a disease of same,
conform the pinnacle of am

though dull were all we taste as bright,
bitter all utterly things sweet,
maggoty minus and dumb death
all we inherit,all bequeath

and nothing quite so least as truth
—i say though hate were why men breathe—
because my father lived his soul
love is the whole and more than all (*CP* 520-21)

We may notice first that this poem is much more regularly organized, with its rhyming quatrains, tetrameter lines, carefully balanced phrasing, and its full use of Cummings' special conceptual vocabulary, thereby suggesting a greater need for control—or even of over-emphasis—for the poem seems a bit too long and repetitive in relation to its content. Further, we may mention what some other commentators have also seen, namely that many of the virtues attributed to the father more appropriately belong to the son—exactly what we noticed above in relation to the praise of his mother. "Scorning the pomp of must and shall / my father moved through dooms of feel," for example, is precisely what the son claims for himself in many another poem.

Then with the concluding four stanzas, the son brings in his own special polarities—let giving become stealing, etc.—so that he may intensify his contrasting conclusion "i say though hate were why men breathe— / because my father lived his soul / love is the whole and more than all." That Cummings chose to live out his life in exactly the opposite way that his father chose is nowhere suggested in this piece.

There are, then, even in his positive treatment of childhood a few more complex strands, some explicit, others implicit. This impression is borne out by an inspection of the next, somewhat less simple group of

around 23 poems, almost equally distributed among three specific sub-heads: those dealing with the erotic vitality of youth; with myth, fairy tale, ballad, and magic; and with Christ and Christmas.

When the lady says to her lover, "you fill the streets of my city with children" (*CP* 963), or when the lover sees "a thousand girls" come "marching into / the same garden flinging their marching spurting youth / on the grass (*CP* 1000-01), etc., we begin to get some idea of the poet's appreciation for the erotic vitality of youth. Similarly, we see him referring to his lady as having a "child-head poised with the serious hair" (*CP* 137); or presenting a contrast between Death and Love which Love apparently wins and winds up "such pretty toys / as themselves could not know: . . . and girls with boys to bed will go" (*CP* 451); or staging a dialogue between Lily and Violet in which Violet feels left out when it comes to winning attractive boys (*CP* 684).

But again, in order to go a bit more in depth, let us look at the following dialogue poem (*CP* 1014):

"think of it:not so long ago
this was a village"
"yes;i know"

"of human beings who prayed and sang:
or am i wrong?"
"no,you're not wrong"

"and worked like hell six days out of seven"
"to die as they lived:in the hope of heaven"

"didn't two roads meet here?"
"they did;
and over yonder a schoolhouse stood"

"do i remember a girl with blue-
sky eyes and sun-yellow hair?"
"do you?"

"absolutely"

"that's very odd,
for i've never forgotten one frecklefaced lad"

"what could have happened to her and him?"
"maybe they waked and called it a dream"

"in this dream were there green and gold
meadows?"
"through which a lazy brook strolled"

"wonder if clover still smells that way;
up in the mow"
"full of newmown hay"

"and the shadows and sounds and silences"
"yes,a barn could be a magical place"

"nothing's the same:is it"
"something still
remains,my friend;and always will"

"namely?"
"if any woman knows,
one man in a million ought to guess"

"what of the dreams that never die?"
"turn to your left at the end of the sky"

"where are the girls whose breasts begin?"
"under the boys who fish with a pin"

Here we have a colloquy between two country people, probably a man and a woman—somewhat similar to "'so you're hunting for ann well i'm looking for will'," to which we'll return below—who are exchanging comments about a village that has disappeared—compare Frost's "Directive"—and remembering a certain young pair who became lovers;

wondering what remains of all that is past; and concluding that the lovers somehow still remain, in one another's arms. Or, to put it more exactly, it is the man who wonders and the woman who knows—or, to put it even more exactly, it seems that these two adults are talking about themselves when they were young.

We may conclude, then, that there is something immortal about young love, much as Keats's "Grecian Urn" proclaims, and also that this vision is best understood in the context of Time, as both Keats and Cummings show. It seems to me that here Cummings' vision has achieved a moment of integration, and that he has won a respite from the oedipal struggle. Here "human beings . . . prayed and sang . . . and worked like hell six days out of seven"—they live and grow and die and "nothing's the same," and yet our young dreams need never die.

Myth, fairy tale, and ballad comprise the second characteristic approach to treating children and childhood in a more complex way. In this group we find a boy dreaming of all the ladies who desire him (*CP* 17); a scene suggestive of Halloween (*CP* 28); a girl in a field of flowers being approached by Death (*CP* 31); the well-known "anyone lived in a pretty how town" where "children guessed(but only a few / and down they forgot as up they grew" (*CP* 515); the assertion that "children,poets,lovers" are "hosts of eternity;not guests of seem" (*CP* 817); and a picture of a child of five or six looking out of a window and watching the sunset melt into night (*CP* 824).

The remarkable "Chanson Innocente" from Cummings' first volume of poems (*CP* 27) is worth taking a bit more time over

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's
spring
and
the

goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

As with "Buffalo Bill 's / defunct" (*CP* 90), the opening phrase is one of those Cummingsesque happenings that one can only marvel at: "in Just- / spring" can mean spring has just arrived, or that it is only in spring that such things can happen, or that it is all just right, etc. As for the rest, one has merely to point out the phrasing and spacing to suggest the absolute accuracy of the poet's art here. But in order to get at the real underlying meaning and feeling of this innocent song/song of innocence, one has to take a second and third look at that balloonman. He is "the little / lame balloonman," "the queer / old balloonman," and ultimately "the // goat-footed // balloonMan"—notice the capital here—all of which, of course, suggests something not quite earthly, something reminiscent of the great god Pan (*not* Peter Pan), an image which became, not coincidentally, blended with the Christian image of Satan, the Prince of Evil, the Devil himself. The sum and substance of it all is that there is a hint of the sexual awakening of children, of the Pied Piper, and of a balancing on the edge of the complexity of becoming an adult.

If one reads the poem too quickly, one may miss these crucial connotations and conclude that this is one more of those sweet Cummings poems about childhood innocence. But I find once again an integrated vision showing the poet transcending for the nonce his oedipal struggle.

The final group in this section contains those poems which deal with Christ and Christmas, usually, of course, from a child's viewpoint. In one, a young boy is addressing his Christmas tree as if *it* were the child (*CP* 29); in another the speaker is aware of the early morning bleakness of the day before Christmas (*CP* 12); in a third he speaks ironically of such "psychotic myths" as Santa Claus (*CP* 398); in other poems he talks of an "Elephantangelchild" with a "red christmas bow" on his tail (*CP* 631); or he speaks of his "mother's greatgrandmother's rosebush white" as if it were imagined by "someone / who holds Himself as the little white rose of a child" (*CP* 748).

Let us pause to examine more closely the following Christmas poem (*CP* 714):

from spiralling ecstatically this

proud nowhere of earth's most prodigious night
blossoms a newborn babe:around him,eyes
—gifted with every keener appetite
than mere unmiracle can quite appease—
humbly in their imagined bodies kneel
(over time space doom dream while floats the whole

perhapsless mystery of paradise)

mind without soul may blast some universe
to might have been,and stop ten thousand stars
but not one heartbeat of this child;nor shall
even prevail a million questionings
against the silence of his mother's smile

—whose only secret all creation sings

This, of course, represents a mood of complete and reverential awe before the miracle of the Nativity, and we can only suggest how the

opening two lines seem somehow to reflect that painting by Van Gogh of the sky at night, *Road with Cypresses*. The speaker then goes on to assert that this mystery supersedes all possibilities of intellectual destruction, and that he will put this Child and His Mother—who embody the secret of creation—up against all our questionings. And what is that Secret? I do not think that Cummings intends any theology here, asserting that an acceptance of Christ the Savior will redeem us from sin. Rather, he is talking simply about the mystery of generation, birth, and motherhood as an emblem of the miracle of life itself, and of the Nativity story as the supreme example of that miracle.

Cummings seems here to have sublimated his deep attachment to his mother by embodying his filial feeling in the objective correlative of the Nativity story—and, interestingly, by reversing once again the natural focus of mother to child so that it becomes child to mother.

**III**

We turn now to the other half, the darker side of the moon—an almost equal number of poems which depict childhood in a decidedly mixed context or in a less idealized fashion.

We begin with a transitional group of twenty-three poems roughly classifiable as landscapes, two-thirds urban and one-third rural. The speaker walks the boulevard and watches a dirty child skating (*CP* 81); he pictures a park scene where the children are playing "in the beautiful nonsense of twilight" (*CP* 101-02); or he imagines he's becoming the monkey as children watch an organ grinder (*CP* 109) or he sees "the queer / hopping ghosts of children" watching a hurdy-gurdy (*CP* 187); or a burdened young mother is hanging out her wash (*CP* 216); or a little girl playing on the expanse of beach feels how small she is (*CP* 281); or he meets a man whose fingers are (curiously) like "dead children" (*CP* 356), or a flower wagon around which kids dance (*CP* 537); or a child alone under the moon (*CP* 469); or a mender of things with his wagon who loves children (*CP* 660); or a blue kite lying on the filthy sidewalk (*CP* 668); or a girl and boy in the country coming to the edge of a pasture in a kind of trance (*CP* 757-78); or two children under a tree which is "aflame with dreams" (*CP* 82). For somewhat more detail, we'll look at the following (*CP* 680):

dominic has

a doll wired
to the radiator of his
ZOOM DOOM

icecoalwood truck a

wistful little
clown
whom somebody buried

upsidedown in an ashbarrel so

of course dominic
took him
home

& mrs dominic washed his sweet

dirty
face & mended
his bright torn trousers(quite

as if he were really her &

she
but)& so
that

’s how dominic has a doll

& every now & then my
wonderful
friend dominic depaola

gives me a most tremendous hug

knowing
i feel
that

we & worlds

are
less alive
than dolls &

dream

Here we have a companion piece to the poem about the mender of things "who sharpens every dull" (*CP* 624), as well as an example of that sort of transcendence in the midst of the ordinary which serves as Cummings' true poetic trademark, a feature too often passed over by casual reviewer and serious critic alike. Here is that contrast between the mundane—"we & worlds"—and the immanent transcendent—"dolls & // dream"—in the tradition of Blake's "eternity in a grain of sand." Cummings is referring, of course, to when the ordinary is truly perceived, the specific doll in question having been rescued from the trash heap—whereas "we & worlds" refers to the taking for granted of the ordinary and thereby missing it. And what are we to make of Dominic's truck being labelled "ZOOM DOOM," in caps— is it not a way of humorously mythologizing that no doubt beat-up old jalopy?

It seems to me that this sort of vision is a particularly feminine one—notice the role of "*mrs* dominic"—harking back to Zen Buddhism and ultimately to Hinduism with its important pantheon of female gods, and therefore that Cummings' transcendentalism was of the kind particularly suited to his identification with his mother.

Moving further toward the mixed and the dark, we find a group of a dozen or more satires mentioning children and childhood. Cummings can use the clichéd "listen my children and you / shall hear" to good effect (*CP* 234); he can tell a joke about Amy Lowell spilling children seated beside her as she rises from a bench (*CP* 247); or about "the poorbuthonest workingman" who has "not less than sixteen children" (*CP* 252); or satirize politicians as reversing "the well / recognized regime of childhood . . . since we are spanked and put to sleep by dolls" (*CP* 259); or he pictures Hollywood's pretty girls with "infantile eyes drooling unmind" (*CP* 338); or he uses nursery rhymes to heighten the bitterness of a satire against totalitarianism (*CP* 497); or he can use "child" and "children" in the negative sense of being incompetent (*CP* 511 and 512); or sarcastically as in "bring the kiddies let's all have fun" (*CP* 514).

For further consideration, take the well-known wedding-cake poem (*CP* 470):

this little bride & groom are
standing)in a kind
of crown he dressed
in black candy she

veiled with candy white
carrying a bouquet of
pretend flowers this
candy crown with this candy

little bride & little
groom in it kind of stands on
a thin ring which stands on a much
less thin very much more

big & kinder of ring & which
kinder of stands on a
much more than very much
biggest & thickest & kindest

of ring & all one two three rings
are cake & everything is protected by
cellophane against anything(because
nothing really exists

This is all done with a slight but perceptible touch of baby-talk, the end in view being, of course, satirical diminishment. Notice how the threefold satire parallels the three layers of cake: first, the actual figurines on the actual cake are seen as children, ridiculous enough in themselves; second, the implication is that the actual human bride and groom are no more real than these figurines; and third, the interposition of empty ceremony between ourselves and our most significant moments is like the cellophane protecting the cakes. And notice how the nursery-rhyme tone evolves in a muted crescendo, as the layers of the cake rise, until the final three lines where the speaker's voice rises in an almost scornful denunciation.

Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear just what the object of satire is, whether of the marriage ceremony, the marriage celebration, or marriage in the conventional sense altogether. As we have noted, Cummings' first two marriages were failures, and Kennedy was unable to find any record of marriage for Cummings and Marion. His parents were certainly married, and it's a safe guess that they had a regular wedding. This poem seems like something out of bohemia, and is of a piece with Cummings' scorn for having a regular job and living bourgeois life, and as such it represents his rebellion against his parents.

The last heading in the category of darkness contains about a dozen poems whose main thrust is toward the negative. Death's wife complains that Mankind has broken her doll (Love) by accident (*CP* 985); a twelve-year-old has gonorrhea (*CP* 70); little Effie's head is made of gingerbread (*CP* 192-9); a young father worries about the hardship of his life with spouse and child (*CP* 240); the earth is seen as "childfully diminishing" (*CP* 402); a dancehall scene is portrayed with "dolls clutching their dolls wallow / toys playing writhe with toys" (*CP* 565); Chaucer's pilgrims are seen as "children" of dust (*CP* 661); "maggie and milly and molly and may / went down to the beach(to play one day)" and each finds a reflection of her inner self whether pleasant or horrible (*CP* 682); lovers are pictured as being caught in a storm and then sleeping "doll by doll" in the snow (*CP* 777).

As promised, we shall now take a closer look at that other, less gentle, dialogue poem (*CP* 707):

"so you're hunting for ann well i'm looking for will"
"did you look for him down by the old swimminghole"
"i'd be worse than a fool to have never looked there"
"and you couldn't well miss willy's carroty hair"

"it seems like i just heard your annabel screech
have you hunted her round by the rasberrypatch"
"i have hunted her low i have hunted her high
and that pretty pink pinafore'd knock out your eye"

"well maybe she's up to some tricks with my bill
as long as there's haymows you never can tell"
"as long as there's ladies my annie is one
nor she wouldn't be seen with the likes of your son"

"and who but your daughter i'm asking yes who
but that sly little bitch could have showed billy how"
"your bastard boy must have learned what he knows
from his slut of a mother i rather suppose"

"will's dad never gave me one cent in his life
but he fell for a whore when he married his wife
and here is a riddle for you red says
it aint his daughter her father lays"

"black hell upon you and all filthy men
come annabel darling come annie come ann"
"she's coming right now in the rasberrypatch
and 'twas me that she asked would it hurt too much

and 'twas me that looked up at my willy and you
in the newmown hay and he telling you no"
"then look you down through the old swimminghole
there'll be slime in his eyes and a stone on his soul"

Here we have two country fishwives slandering each other and each other's children, Ann and Will, who have ostensibly gone off into the bushes together; but the true plot seems to be that Willy was propositioned by Ann's mother, who, upon being rejected, drowned him in "the old swimming hole." This is more like the dark side of Robert Frost, or even of William Faulkner, than of the childishly optimistic Cummings supposed by the reviewers and critics. Although structured along the dialogue format of that earlier poem, "'think of it:not so long ago'," and taking place in a similar rural setting, this piece is much darker—quite the darkest poem in all of Cummings.

Further, I can't help but feel that the near-incest theme here reflects in some ways both Cummings' too-close relationship with his mother as well as the attraction he and Nancy felt for each other during her early womanhood before she knew their true relationship. And as I hope to show in a study of Cummings' dreams, he did in fact have incestuous feelings toward her. The really startling thing here, however, is that Ann's mother, who did these terrible things, gets the last word: Will refused her advances

and paid the price. Cummings still seems to be struggling here, in his penultimate book of poems, with the consequences of his relationship with his mother, and doing so in a way that suggests defeat and punishment. Or, à la D.H. Lawrence, we could say he's curing his illness by writing about it; or, using Kenneth Burke's terminology, we could say he's engaged in a symbolic action so as to get rid of his guilt. Either way, the result is a startling poem indeed.

**IV**

What, then, may we conclude? That this romantic is nowhere near as sentimental as has been popularly supposed; that a closer look reveals depths beyond the usual expectations; and that Cummings' overall image of childhood is quite complex. To be sure, the positives are there, but even in that category are strands of darkness complicating the picture. When we move on to the less optimistic treatments, we find an awareness of evil, mischance, and suffering that has not to my knowledge ever been given its due—and *that* is merely what emerges when we pursue our thus limited topic of childhood.

Cummings' commitment to feeling and his distrust of intellect, on the other hand, had much to do with his difficulty in identifying with his imposing father and corresponding identification with his warm and affectionate mother. This oedipal anxiety had two, not always consistent, effects: on the one hand, it led him to praise childhood and be suspicious of adulthood; and on the other, it led him into a dilemma that he was sometimes unable to handle artistically—that is, a child who refuses to grow up remains—not a child—but rather a childish adult. Thus we have the anxiety about intimacy and, symbolically, about incest. As with most of us, although he was sometimes able to resolve this anxiety, he was much more often content with being able to simply struggle with it.

But unlike most of us, he was able to make effective art out of the struggle either way.

*—Flushing, NY*

[**Author's Note**: As I have already published a study of Cummings' *Fairy Tales* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), in chapter 2 of my *(Re) Valuing Cummings* (20-23), I did not want to repeat myself here—although the tales are certainly germane to the present essay.]

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