

# Cummings' "l(a": Solitude, Solidarity, Wholeness

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There is one thing that is invariably complete.  
Before Heaven and Earth were, it is already there:  
so still, so lonely.  
Alone it stands and does not change.  
It turns in a circle and does not endanger itself.  
One may call it "the Mother of the World".  
I do not know its name.  
I call it DAO.  
Painfully giving it a name  
I call it 'great'.

—Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*  
(Richard Wilhelm translation, section 25)

## 1. Introduction

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(95 Poems, CP 673)

One or two aspects of this poem, referred to as the leaf poem, are reconsidered within this article. The poem has attracted considerable critical attention. It is attractive in more than one sense: part of its effect on the reader could be related to the primal centripetal force of gravity. Fall, decay, and recycling. Its effect could equally be related to co-incidence and ecological emergence, as this article wishes to demonstrate. These potential forces and energies embodied within it come to the critical surface when it is read against the background of Cummings' Taoist-ecological sensibility.

The reader could sense the outcome of Cummings' Taoist poetic dynamics without being aware of their origin: Michael Webster pointed out to me that Taoism is slightly hidden within Cummings' poetry. Ezra Pound's Chinese poetry tends to be signposted by means of Chinese ideograms, as found within the *Cantos* or titles which evoke the original poems in *Cathay*. Cummings works Taoist dynamics directly into his work, mostly without similar signposts. The mixture of Cummings' own (western / modernist) creative devices and his Taoist dynamics therefore tends to maintain a high degree of inseparability. Bringing these Taoist dynamics to the critical surface could have the result of a more informative interaction with Cummings' poetry, as is evident from the orientalist readings of critics such as Norman Friedman and Michael Dylan Welch.

In fact Cummings made a conscious decision to write Taoist poetry. In 1940 he wrote the following note, exhumed from the Houghton Library at Harvard University by Milton Cohen: "what i now seek to master is *expressing myself thru a person in the way(Tao)i 'feel to do' [...] through nature*" (Cohen 63; my emphasis). Let this suffice as one example among a number of Cummings' overt indications of his aim to express himself poetically through Taoism, an aim which is likely to have found expression within the leaf poem. (Treating Cummings' overt concerns with Taoism requires a separate article.)

However, an overview of noteworthy developments within criticism of modernist poetic orientalism over the past decades is necessary. Quite briefly: these developments occur in response to Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as well as the orientalists' own warnings, often preceding Said's book, that the West cannot adopt the wisdom of the East as if we may choose, pick, and exploit cultural goods from an imagined multicultural shopping mall, in order to compensate for the relative poverty of our own cultural ecological resources (Bowers 140; Jung 58; Buber 122). Current orientalists and Sinologists—scholars of Chinese—especially, recognize that modernist poetic orientalism at its best is 1) a purely textual yet instructive (mis)understanding of Chinese, in which 2) something of the original spirit of Chinese poetry does get through to the western audience for various reasons, 3) which is part of the legacy of Ezra Pound's English-as-Chinese, and which 4) involves the sustained rediscovery of an active, complex, rewarding middle ground between eastern and western poetry, self and other, sign and nature (cf. Hayot, Kern 223; Qian 72; Steiner 359; Snyder, *Place* 91).

Exploration of the readerly impact of the leaf poem within this article is offered in this spirit of an indispensable, illuminating western (mis)understanding of (also) Taoism, across nationalities and millennia. Cummings is not mentioned within recent texts focussing on modernist Sinology such as those of Robert Kern, Zhaoming Qian, Eric Hayot. Yet his poetry potentially offers important perspectives on the ecological sensibility of modernist Sinology, among which are the Taoist layers that this article delves into: the role of co-incidence and ideogrammatic / ecological emergence within the leaf poem as well as the *kind* of loneliness that this gives rise to.

Mostly, critical responses to the leaf poem are positive and brief. Just one ex-

ample is Helen Vendler's abrupt remarks that the poem shows avant-garde, French, and painterly affinities, followed by the judgement that it embodies one of Cummings' "exquisite and fragile triumphs" (101). Such critical brevity in response to the poem is commendable: the leaf poem can communicate, as T.S. Eliot suggests in a different context, "before it is understood" (206). In other words the leaf poem communicates on profound and incommunicable levels, and it is the spontaneous being of the poem which carries its impact, to which analysis and explanation cannot ultimately do proper justice. Critical brevity in response to it seems to underline this notion. This article wishes to honour this tradition of concise respect for the living textures of the poem, but fails somewhat in this respect. Nonetheless the article should be read as neither an interpretation nor an explanation but as the further exploration of one path within the overall vibrant and stable forest of ideas which the impact of the leaf poem has invoked.

## 2. Co-incidence

Carl G. Jung's orientalist principle of synchronicity describes co- eventualities which fall, strictly speaking, outside logical "motion": it is the principle of the continuous, a-logical, a-causal simultaneity of natural events (Jung 56) which is indicative of the whole, or the fact that nature with all its energies and interactions, remains intact within the continuing, shifting now. Wind stirring through leaves, geese flying towards the river, a sense of uplifting: apparently "trivial" co-events such as these are meaningful in accordance with this principle. Let this sense of the significance of nature's essentially unpredictable co- eventuality stand as an initial definition of coincidence: as the reading of the leaf poem unfolds, further qualities of this phenomenon will become clear.

The modern poet encounters within his/her western thought and language the preservation of considerable resistance to the notion of intuitive awareness and expression of co- incidence. In progressive thought co- incidence is viewed as trivial: we talk of "a mere coincidence," implying that the attachment of value to seemingly unrelated events which occur simultaneously belongs within a backward, primitive, superstitious outlook. And that co- incidence is negligible, false, and to be avoided. Certainly freedom from superstition is to be welcomed and logical respect for the distance between things is admirable. Yet the continuing simultaneity of natural events, a simultaneity which in its vastness and diversity is greater than the predictions of human logic, remains one of the significant aspects of experience. The difficulty is how to express natural co- incidence within language.

And not co- incidence only: Taoist poetry, at least since Chuang Tzu (c. fourth century B.C.), has attempted to get spontaneous, clear, extra- linguistic perception of nature *into* poetic language, and has since Chuang Tzu been overtly aware of the complexity of achieving this through the instantly differentiating and hence also interfering (Chinese) sign (Liu 51). In other words, language readily interferes with natural perception. Cummings knew this. His notes on R.H. Blyth's seminal vol-

umes on Zen and Haiku, also kept at the Houghton Library, sent to me by Michael Webster, and probably dating from 1950, include the following: “Haiku take away as many words as possible between the thing itself and the reader” (bMS Am 1823.7(64) folder 4). Here we have the orientalist ecological dimension of Cummings’ minimalism. The economy of the leaf poem could be aimed at steering the reader towards a revitalization of natural awareness with as little interference (in the sense of authoritative explanation and intellection by the poet) as possible.

How, then, to create a sense of natural co-incidence within western language, and modernist poetic language with its emphasis on objectivity, even “scientific” distance, on top? To my mind the leaf poem provides an example. Read from a Taoist-ecological perspective, Cummings appears to employ the modernist device of fragmentation-and-rearrangement towards a revitalized sense of recombination within this poem. This device allows one (among other things) to radically, that is, in the root, alter and rework entrenched linguistic formulae and preconceptions into new patterns of significance. The leaf poem seems to present a fluent and well-exercised “chopping up” of English and the similarly fluent rearrangement of the resultant fragments, towards the benefit of interconnective ecological and readerly energies.

The current exponent of English-as-Chinese, Gary Snyder, writes that the making and reading of poetry is concomitant with the recycling of decayed bits and pieces found on the forest floor of past linguistic activity, to create fresh, useful meaning in the direction of the living, organic whole of the community (*Real Work* 173-174). John Elder argues that this principle of the dynamic continuity of culture, and the role of poetry in revitalizing this sense of the living whole of the community, is found in the prose of Snyder, Eliot, and Matthew Arnold (229). An intrinsic part of modern culture is this role of the poet as the recycler, so to speak, of ancient and revitalized ecological significance.

Through precisely such careful arrangement of fragments in Cummings’ leaf poem, the synergy and ecology (dynamic natural wholeness) at the core of it, as viewed by the poetic speaker from within the poem, is potentially actualized by the externally deciphering reader. The poem relies on its reader as co-creator and manoeuvres the reading by means of reorganized fragments and open spaces. But towards which *event*, given the controlled yet urgent dynamism—that is, the sense of the sheer “working” of signs—is embodied within the leaf poem?

The unprompted simultaneity of two incidents occurring at the same time is carefully intimated within this poem: 1) the fall of the leaf and 2) the speaker’s growing awareness of his inner, singular self (that is, “loneliness” as the most entire sense of self). And these events can be read as co-incident according to this poem: the growing sense of loneliness is literally graphically interspersed with the flowing fall of the leaf, within a pregnant empty space which suggests no interfering comment and only the stripped co-event. As in Sinology, significance is given to the seeming negligibility of these two incidents occurring in synchronicity. The fall of the leaf coincides with the moment of human selfhood: not logically, but in terms of synchronicity, coincidence. One implication is that it is not statically defined poetic abstractions that

count but how the poetic process creates a sense of place—of being, so to say, “in sync” with nature’s co-incident course.

Webster unearths the following note from the Houghton Library collection in which Cummings states his ideogrammatic preferences and the significance that the poet attached to the poem as an emergent event: “so far as I’m concerned, each poem is a picture [...] ‘I write’ (whence our word ‘graphic’) but originally ‘I make lines’—cf the Poet-Painter of China) and the paperspace around each poem is a where in which it heres or a surface in which it floats” (quoted in “singing is silence” 202). By evoking a sense of co-incident, the leaf poem reflects, mediates, leads into, the sheer (and inclusive) dynamism of nature’s continuation. This ties in with the ideogrammatic potentials of the poem: a sense of poetic surfacing—of the page as a “where” in which the poem “heres” (comes into being as if by itself)—which could further characterize Cummings’ Taoist-ecological sense of co-incident dynamism.

### 3. Ideogrammatic / ecological emergence

According to Nina Hellerstein in her recent exploration of the ideogram within French poetry, its vertical visual arrangement signals gravity, left-right balance, being (the painted Chinese character) and nonbeing (awareness and employment of the emptiness of the blank page) (“Calligraphy”). Combined, these factors signify the human adventure of uprightness within the responsive immensity and gravity of the natural void, according to Hellerstein (“Calligraphy”). Seeing the leaf poem as a type-written textual construct which shows visual affinities with the ideogram, it seems doubtful that this poem “ultimately emphasizes sadness” (Dilworth), “romantic sentimentality,” “a Cole Porter lyric” (Hood 92), or can be reduced to a “bumper sticker message” with the effect of a sentimental Hallmark card (Turco 72-73). Uprightness and emergence seem at least as important in relation to the ideogrammatic character of the poem, along with co-incident and natural individuation. Cummings’ feather-light touch on these deep issues does not necessarily mean that the poem can be taken as a frolicsome, avant-garde textual-visual excursion of no significance or influence.

Instead, the poem is attractive also in the sense of a field force which attracts opposites and allows them to intermingle into nothing, no particular thing, nature’s now-here-nowhere. In this sense the leaf poem could act as a unique ideogram which shifts one’s entrenched preconceptions of opposites and differentiation towards inhabitation (a sense of being in place). Related to its down-and-up ideogrammatic structure, one senses music within the poem—music which goes beyond *either* sadness *or* gladness.

To be sure, the poem is more visual than audial. But as Lewis Turco mentions the poem does entail “a sonic level” (73) of subliminal sounds suggested by vowels, consonants, ancient and new syllables, fragments. And on occasion hints and suggestions can be more intense than emphases and accents. Moving down with the (do-re-me-fa-so-la) scale of fragments or subliminal notes, one reaches the base note, “i-

ness". In ideogrammatic terms, at this fragment the note of human uprightness reaches its full implication. Following this suggestion back up again with the lines—of which the top group of fragments, “fa-af-le-l(a)”, really does approach a musical scale of sorts—one finds the top note of the poem to be *l(a)*. A fragmented rendition of the universal sound of childlike joy and spontaneous expression, *la*. (I mean that mammalian children sing *la-la-la* songs as readily as they say papa and mama, and that “*la-la land*” is a popular, dismissive phrase with hidden positive meanings.) The note is divided or bound by means of one parenthesis. Perhaps fanciful, but one gets the feeling that this parenthesis, upon careful visual scrutiny, kind of amplifies the note: as if the parenthesis marks the exit and direction of the sound from the mouth: *l(a)*.

In this (potential) way—among other more clearly visual up-and-down ideogrammatic aspects of it—the poem indicates that natural being entails the fall and reintegration with nature as a decomposing leaf, but that natural being equally entails a sense of recompositional and co-incident uplifting. Precisely at this point—of recomposition—the poem incidentally stays out of poststructuralist developments in which decomposition, or nature-as-no-more-than-a-linguistic-construct, seems to have taken hold.

Entwinement of self and nature goes hand in hand with childlike clarity of vision, one of Taoism’s uplifting principles (Lao Tzu 39, 51; sections 28, 55); humble connection with the *humus* of natural being as experienced by children who take pleasure in the existence of mud before they grow up to perhaps learn that “dirty” is a word laden with guilt. This “mudluscious” world is expressed in one of Cummings’ other famous, but early, poems: “in Just- / spring” (*Tulips & Chimneys*, CP 27). And isn’t there something sensuous and visceral about the falling leaf as portrayed by the leaf poem?

Norman Friedman succinctly describes this clear impression of the falling leaf within his *E.E. Cummings: the Art of his Poetry* (1961). The poem’s pattern of lines “suggests, by means of alternation, the floating fall of the leaf” — and there is a poignant pause (line five: “l”) — before “the hesitant slip and final drop of the leaf” as suggested by the final lines (Friedman 172). According to Friedman, the simplicity of the poem’s message — “loneliness: a leaf falls” — is furthermore spaced in such a way as to create “a dozen supporting effects” and numerous meanings of the word “loneliness” which “take root and blossom as the poem unfolds,” all “precisely suited to the picture being presented” (172).

One of these effects possibly involves the rotation, gyration, or twirling of the leaf. After all, the poem as a whole presents two strands of meaning—the (subjective / self-centered) word “loneliness” and the (“objective” / other-centered) phrase “a leaf falls”—co-incidentally woven into one another, more or less in the shape of a linguistic plait. The first line begins with the “l” of the word “loneliness” and then crosses, via parenthesis, to the first letter of the phrase “a leaf falls”: “l(a)”. In line six this cross-stitching of the two textual strands occurs again when the phrase gives over via parenthesis to the word: “one”.

The word *text* etymologically refers to a sensemaking, aesthetic material of inter-

woven threads (Van Gorp 396): the leaf poem is also a foregrounded *textus*. But within this larger pattern of interweaving and the concomitant cross-stitching of strands of meaning one finds smaller incidences of a similar cross-stitching of textual threads. For instance lines two to four: “le / af / fa” in which two patterns of reversal and return co-incide: consonant-vowel, vowel-consonant, and back to consonant-vowel again; and in the cases of “af” and “fa” the quite direct reversal of visual and subliminally audial characters. If the vowels and the letter “a” were zeroes and consonants and the letter “f” were ones, the pattern could be diagrammatically presented as follows:

1 0  
0 1  
1 0

Viewing the zeroes as one thread and the ones as another, this diagram can be further pictured as two threads of being (human and leaf) flowingly woven around and into one another. A pattern of gyrational entwinement is therefore suggested by the visual and subliminally audial reversals and returns within the poem. In terms of an actual falling leaf, this would be when (say) the stem points one way and the tip the other, then (further down) stem and point in the reverse directions, and then (still further down) back to the original directions, and so on: in short, twirling, which ties in well with the overall interweaving of textual strands within the poem. A dynamic, three-dimensional (and not flatly oppositional) pattern emerges within the poem, of gyrational stillness or wholeness, and of two strands or helices of code—each marking one leg of an entrenched opposite such as subject versus object and self versus other—twirling or gyrating into combination. Besides presenting a foregrounded text of co-incidence, the leaf poem thus also presents a poem of readerly re-turning and re-turning.

Published in 1958, this poem appeared within a decade dominated by the news of the scientific discovery of the (biological) key to life: the double helix structure of DNA. Francis Crick and James Watson made their discovery public, after a prolonged and frenetic scientific race, in 1953. Even if detailed evidence of Cummings’ knowledge of this universally acclaimed discovery cannot be found, it is likely that he was aware of it, given his interest in science (Friedman, *(Re)Valuing* 127) and ecology especially (Friedman, “Letters” 18).

In any event, it is not merely the visual correspondence between the leaf poem (two linguistic “helices” plaited / plaiting into one, as well as pairs of codes combining) on the one hand and the physical structure of DNA on the other, which is of interest, but also the fact of the affinities between DNA and language. DNA has been described by its co-discoverer Francis Crick as the language of life (Coppedge 125; Olby 420). It encodes and decodes the various “instructions” which induce the diversity of living forms we witness around us, including our human shapes. Linguistic analyses of DNA have been increasing within biology to this day. Some experts on

DNA have been delighted, furthermore, to see that DNA “dances” as it fragments and recombines (Klug 1215)—the leaf poem, too, dances into stillness as it fragments and entwines two linguistic and ontological strands of code / meaning.

DNA has brought scientists before mysterious recognitions such as the spontaneous emergence or “autopoiesis” which seems to accompany life: with DNA things seem to create themselves from nothing. David Berlinski (mathematician, theoretical biologist, English scholar) puts it this way: what DNA “does” is equivalent to a cathedral spontaneously emerging from the head of a carrot! Since I am not versed in the natural scientific intricacies of DNA, I have to superficially admit that this reminds me of the Taoist notion that everything seems to turn into spring when the poet is in the right state of mind (Liu 35)—and of Cummings, the modernist poet of spring, in his autumnal mode within the leaf poem, which seems to emerge as if by itself from the now-here-nowhere, shimmeringly moving through entrenched opposites and rational distances of the mind to indeed float on the surface (like the moon in water), and indeed to “here” within the nowhere of the page. In short this autumnal poem “springs to life.” Even if it takes the reader a while to get used to the poem, at some point there will be that *aha-erlebnis* of a dynamic *gestalt* emerging from the struggle. Moreover, consisting of a mere 22 characters, the poem has yielded a relative forest of readerly response as has been indicated, which is similar to Taoist textuality: Lao Tzu’s slim volume has indeed encouraged a virtual forest of responses.

To provisionally complete this reading: the word “one” on the semantic surface of the poem, being the only English word immediately discernable on first reading, and its l-oney letter o (the only typographical circle amidst the many upright figures 1), could act as the attractor point, the initial impetus, which draws the reader into poetic fusion beyond categories such as down versus up, sound versus silence, sadness versus gladness, and *humankind versus nature*. This is a mature form of ecological integration which nevertheless remains absolutely spontaneous: the leaf poem involves readerly ecological (e)mergence, suggesting the carefully signified co-incidence of a movement of inner poetic awareness and a co-incident movement within nature.

#### 4. Approximate conclusions: solitude and wholeness

These analyses prompt one to postpone one’s judgement about the loneliness as expressed within the leaf poem beyond the point of sentimental lonesomeness. Instead it appears that loneliness is related to Taoist-ecological sensibilities of natural being and individuation as well as modernist art or the isolation of the modern(ist) Fool. Who remains culturally rhythmic—who falls out of step with the often shallow and rigid beat of progressive society—like Dostoyevsky’s “underground man” (Bowers 47). Who is committedly in search of the authentic inner life for which modern progress, as Friedman suggests [(*Re*)*Valuing* 174], sometimes offers marginal if not incarcerating room. We thus encounter the modernist contradiction of the artist as difficult and dislocated provider of authentic meaning (Eliot 65) precisely because s/he is so intensely in solidarity with the living whole of society, history, art, and nature

(Eliot 40; 290). In other words we see a picture emerging of the ecological crisis as reflected in modern art. Cummings' expression of this dilemma as found in the leaf poem is less rueful in many respects, but still pressing.

Additional relevant examples of the artistic Fool include Albert Camus' character Jonas within his short story suggestively titled "The Artist At Work" (1957). Jonas seems somewhat kind if not simple-minded through the materialistically preoccupied and ironically cunning modern eyes around him (Camus 85, 87) — although he also evidently appears artistically refined. At the story's conclusion he makes a final painting which contains, on an otherwise empty canvas, a single word. And it is impossible to pin this word down either to "*solitary*" or to "*solidary*" (Camus 115). Cummings' poem is also impossible to pin down to either of these sensibilities, but it uses this uncertainty to emerge into a sense of wholeness.

This dilemma of isolation and commitment, and its potentially indefinite oscillation as well as its potential dissolving towards wholeness, is central to modern artistic experience. For instance, a similar dilemma is the motif of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's early twentieth century poem "Herbst" ("Autumn"). Some equivalences between Rilke's poem and the leaf poem suggest themselves, as Jakob Lothe, Norwegian Conradian scholar, indicated to me. Robert Bly translates "Herbst" as follows:

The leaves are falling, falling as if from far up,  
as if orchards were dying in high space.  
Each leaf falls as if it were saying "no."

And tonight the heavy earth is falling  
away from all the other stars in the loneliness.

We're all falling. This hand here is falling.  
And look at the other one... It's in them all.

And yet there is Someone, whose hands  
infinitely calm, hold up all this falling. (Rilke 89)

Preceded by Rilke's poems "Einsamkeit" ("Loneliness") and "Der Einsame" ("The Solitary Person"), "Herbst" expresses cosmological weight and descent but also an uplifting. As we have seen, Cummings' ideogrammatic, Taoist-ecological leaf poem also signals fall and uplifting (beyond opposites) but with more serendipity and less sombreness and also without the intervention of God. There are no hands in Cummings' poem to keep things up within descending space. Instead, its sense that things do indeed somehow "hang together" in uprightness and innocence stems from its intuitive ecological awareness of natural co-incidence and the spontaneous emergence of IS (one of Cummings' key verbs) as this article demonstrates.

Within both poems flexibility is the key to wholeness: within the leaf poem in

terms of flux and ecological mergence; within “Herbst” in terms of the eternal *softness* (even lightness) of the touch of the hands which hold things up. The original German poem states that the touch of the hands is “unendlich sanft” (Rilke 88), translated by Bly as “infinitely calm,” perhaps for reasons of different levels of sentimentality and nonsentimentality in German and English, and also because the softness of the hands indicates no anxiety or tension.

Yet it is strange to think that the artist (as found within Cummings’ leaf poem, Camus’ short story, and Rilke’s poem) and the ecologically minded person—with their abundant sense of commitment and interconnectedness—seem isolated in the hustle and bustle of daily progressive existence. (Could it mean at some rock bottom level that art and ecology are deeply interrelated?) Even in China it is true, according to the orientalist scholar Martin Palmer, that the symmetries and moralisms of an official Confucianism marginalized the spontaneity and natural sense of wholeness of the Taoists (16). And also in China, literature allows flexible co-operation beyond societal polarities. Cummings suggested to Pound—who could be stringently Confucian (Hall 27, 31) or flexibly Taoist (Pound 543) on occasion—in one of hundreds of letters between the two poets, and among other things, that within Chinese literature even the most devout Confucianist and indeed Anti-Taoist secretly enjoyed Taoist poetry, especially that of Chuang Tzu (see Ahearn 202 and Yutang 66).

In other words, such tensions between opposites as East and West and the sign and nature are not denied but lived through and sustained with various degrees of flexibility within poetry, including active ecological “oneliness” as found within the leaf poem. Cummings’ loyalty to and artistic expression of natural integration within modern times and modernist art is striking. There is a fulfilling hesitation in Cummings’ poetry: not blindly and progressively forward along with the novelty and sheer artistic temptation of modern techniques and futurisms, but what Webster terms a coexistent “backward” aesthetic (*Reading* 113) towards organic / Romantic wholeness with and within nature, expressed through modern(ist) poetic devices and language.

In this respect Cummings is loyal to the past and future but above all to the ecological now. The incredible (especially visual) movement of Cummings’ poetry is therefore also ecologically *stable* (but not static). His notes on Blyth’s volumes further contain the following: “When we are entirely alone with nature & conscious of it, we feel an emotion that can be explained only by a contradiction, yet it is a single, elemental feeling [...] It is like breathing in and breathing out at the same time” (bMS Am 1823.7(64) folder 5)—that is, the co-incident full-emptiness of one’s primary natural being, at once impossible, incommunicable, and earthy: the mountains are far off and near, infinite yet in one’s breast, eternal and of this present moment, as this note further states.

Consider that nature on earth is simultaneously breathing in and out at the moment, given its many inhabitants. Consider, moreover, that nature is singing silently on earth and in galaxies, one of Cummings’ Taoist / Zen motifs (see Webster, “singing is silence” 207). In a different context Snyder reminds us of this *givenness* of

ecology: “Man has a rendezvous with destiny in outer space, some have predicted. Well: we are already travelling in space—this is the galaxy, right here” (Plave 191). It is this sense of right here and right now, movingly contained within the nowhere, which gives rise to the timeless moment of the leaf poem.

Another of Cummings’ notes on Blyth reads: “‘Loneliness’ is also a state of interpenetration with all other things” (bMS Am 1823.7 (64) folder 4). Undeniably the two ll’s of the pausing fifth line iconically present two ones, two existences, one of the lonely human and one of the single leaf. Surely this is somewhat sorrowful, this separation within the context of the fall. But the spiralling, intercrossing double helix structure of the poem implies that these two ones / existences swap their interpenetrating energies on the way down (and up again) — suggesting the leafness of the self: wholeness, iconically presented further on the way down by the single figure 1, and spontaneously expressed on the way up towards the note / fragment *l(a)*.

Cummings’ ecological arithmetic suggests that one times one is one, and that two plus two is five, also in the leaf poem with its total of five l’s. The answer remains more than the question, given that the question is open-ended towards nature—in Cummings’ sentence which significantly carries no full stop: “Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question” (“Introduction” to *Collected Poems (1938)*, CP 462). Inconclusivity, the continuing question, is more effective and flexibly propellant of growth than force and rigidity. Because the question may continue to open up this momentous space, this place of continuous getting-to-know-how, interactive learning, growing into ecological maturity. (A study of the role of the question in Cummings’ thought and poetry is called for.)

Since five is *one* more than the “real” answer (four), one has to consider that nature remains that which is always more—always *being* the active and interconnective more—than the somewhat static, rational, “final”, correct and progressive sum of the parts. The nowhere continues to include, take along, and supersede any delineated now or here. In almost every way the leaf poem interactively connects with nature-in-motion, and this is its ultimate sense of commitment, solidarity, wholeness: one times one equals the self, that “one” which realizes itself through nature in the coincident instant of a single falling leaf.

In approximate conclusion, therefore: the leaf poem, in artistic manner, provides a remarkable ecological resource; a modern, Taoist-ecological *textus* of *humus*. It reveals that the universe has to *continue* to be vibrantly and immeasurably in place for one to co-incidentally perceive the elusively small, immanent and ongoing whole(some)ness of one natural incident: a falling leaf. As Michael Dylan Welch rightly notes within his excellent “The Haiku Sensibilities of E.E. Cummings,” the leaf poem appears to fall off all by itself and to settle in the reader’s perception, containing the universe within it (117). Digging through layers of “romantic” clichés, Cummings rediscovers, with amazing poise, economical workmanship, and deceptive ease, the propensity of the cultural-ecological poetic sign to propel itself through spontaneous (re)cycles beyond static and often interfering twodimensional reality, so

that the modern reader may catch up again with threedimensional integration and integrity.

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