Translated from the Cummings

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1. That which escapes

Consider the first page of *95 Poems* (1958). Lots of white space around four words—"a," "leaf," "falls," and "loneliness"—three of them monosyllables, unrolling vertically in nine lines. A tremendous concentration. On which description, marginal gloss, and analysis can do only what they know how to do with poetry: translate it into prose. In other words, lay it out flat on its back or stomach and force its "mystery"—as Cummings said, following Mallarmé—to bow down before knowledge. Moreover, Cummings' poetry is far from obscure. Complex, yes, never simply linear or one-dimensional alone, but multifaceted like a crystal that remains perfectly pellucid.

This crystalline text is written in an English accessible to a third grader: "l(a leaf falls)oneliness"—that's all! Except that in this poem words are like living beings: the strict sum of their meanings accounts for only the tiniest part of their movements. "Loneliness" lacks the tone that would authorize a high school student to risk a sad botanical-romantic paraphrase of this sort: "in autumn, the leaf falls from the tree and becomes solitary, just as the poet is alone among his contemporaries. . . ." It takes only a glance at Cummings' previous books of poetry to see that the initial poems often deal with celestial or aerial objects: the moon (poems 1 and 2 in *No Thanks*, 1935), fog (*New Poems*, 1938), a sun in mist (*1 X 1*, 1944), and even a leaf that drops, "wh / IrlI / n // .g" (CP 487; *50 Poems*, 1940). The true subject and real difficulty are found, as it were, in parenthesis.

l(a

le
af
fa

ll

s)
one
l

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Cummings wrote not so much four words as twenty letters arranged in five

stanzas: two tercets, three single lines, resulting in something like a 3 x 3 form—nine lines in all. Each line is endowed with enough expression that the linking, the movement of signs, is of some moment. The leaf falls vertically in a spiraling chiasmus: "(a // le / af X fa // ll // s)." Splitting the words is no less significant. If we consider word-splitting on the typewriters of days gone by (which Cummings was among the first to explore the resources), one typed a lower case "l" to make the number 1 (which recalls the singular indefinite article next to the first "l" of the poem); if we admit that this poet changes word-tools like pronouns or conjunctions into nouns at will (English lends itself to this sort of verbal conversion by the simple addition of the suffix "-ness," among other devices); if we know that the poet refers to himself with the lower case "i" (leaving the conventional grandeur of the capital "I" to everybody else), then we can see that Cummings has written 1 + one + 1 = i-ness [in French, "*jeitude*"]. All of which would make us think of ontological selfhood, or the consciousness of self, if Cummings were not the opposite of a philosopher. Here, "i" = 3, and this is not simply to delight the eye with a graphic game[1] (reinforced by a stanzaic structure that includes three detached single-line stanzas). Sonnet number 11 of *XAIPE* sings:

> so many selves(so many fiends and gods
> each greedier than every)is a man
> (so easily one in another hides;
> yet man can,being all,escape from none)

The number 3, even if it is only one of possible pluralities, marks a decisive leap beyond the dualism that presides over all reductive and flattened visions. Speaking of a friend and Harvard graduate who had made himself a vagabond poet of low dives, Cummings wrote in 1947 to Ezra Pound:

> the question Is Joe Gould Crazy strikes
> me as,putting it very mildly,irrelevant.
> For "crazy" implies either(crazy)or(not).
> And badold goodyoung either-or is okay for
> movie—i.e. 2dimensional—"minded" mobsters;
> be they "intellectuals" or be they "proletarians"
> or be they neither or be they both or etc.
> But Joe happens to be 3dimensional:i.e. human
>
> (*Pound / Cummings* 226)

Three years earlier, the collection *1 x 1* consisted of three parts: "1," "X," and "1." And in many texts of *95 Poems* the third is also the excessive (because infinitely plural) encounter of "i" and "you" with "us." So in poem 15 we find: "silent three like / your my / life and our" (CP 687).

Another arithmetic: "l(a" turns around the central stanza-line "ll"—which one can read as "1 + 1" and which evokes the moment when the leaf separates from the whole, the tree, to become even more one:

> one's not half two. It's two are halves of one:
> which halves reintegrating,shall occur
> no death and any quantity;but than
> all numerable mosts the actual more
>
> minds ignorant of stern miraculous
> this every truth—beware of heartless them
> (given the scalpel,they dissect a kiss;
> or,sold the reason,they undream a dream) (CP 556)

Thus reads sonnet XVI of *1 x 1*, the second quatrain of which sweeps away all critical analysis—this essay included—if it should try to do something other than embrace a dream beyond the sea of twenty letters and the many spaces between and around them.

The equation for freedom of being—"i" = 3—(at a minimum—just as in the 1926 collection *is 5*, 2 x 2 makes 5), and the un-equation of love's individualism—1 > 2—practically translate themselves. In one of the accidents for which languages have a peculiar gift, "l . . . / one / l // iness" can be written as "l . . . / a s / ol // itude," where the "ol" can be read as "01," while the letters "a s" (a flying ace in French) evoke the twistings of the leaf in its fall—a suggestion I think Cummings could have accepted, provided these acrobatics are expressed on the written page rather than in metaphor.

> l(v
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> itude

The dynamism of signs in "l(a"—particularly the "af X fa" chiasmus of the first tercet—exactly expresses Cummings' famous comment from the preface of *is 5*: "I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement" (CP 221). In translating, literal precision seems impossible. For example, "fa // ll" (without the "s") is also the word for autumn in Anglo-American—the other side of *le printemps*, "Spring" or "to spring forth," "to break out," according to the poet who writes

> (his autumn's winter being summer's spring
>
> (l'hiver de son automne étant printemps d'été (CP 420)

The French equivalents for "fall" are "*tombe*," which has a too-funereal connotation, and "*chute*," which implies the idea of sin. And both words have letters that are too wide, dislodging the proper human verticality of the poem. Visually, "*vole*" ["flies"] is much lighter. It says almost the opposite of "falls," but "badold goodyoung either-or" . . . . What is more, the purpose of the poem is not all nostalgic: loneliness is never an evil in Cummings' eyes. From the second scene of his play *Him* (1927), the portrait of the artist who is Him explains to his companion Me how he lives in aerial and acrobatic solitude:

> HIM: . . . and here am I, patiently squeezing fourdimensional ideas into a twodimensional stage, when all of me that's anyone or anything is in the top of a circustent . . . . (*A pause*)
>
> ME: I didn't imagine that you were leading a double life—and right under my nose, too.
> [. . .]
> HIM (*To her*): But imagine a human being who balances three chairs, one on top of another, on a wire, eighty feet in the air with no net underneath, and then he climbs to the top chair, sits down, and begins to swing . . . .
>
> ME (*Shudders*): . . . —makes me dizzy just to think of it.
> [. . .]
> HIM (*Pacing up and down*): This: I feel only one thing, I have only one conviction; it sits on three chairs in Heaven. Sometimes I look at it, with terror: it is such a perfect acrobat! The three chairs are three facts—it will quickly kick them out from under itself and will stand on air; and in that moment (because everyone will be disappointed) everyone will applaud. Meanwhile, some thousands of miles over everyone's head, . . . it rocks carefully and smilingly on three things, on three facts, on: I am an Artist, I am a Man, I am a Failure—it rocks and it swings and it smiles and it does not collapse tumble or die because it pays no attention to anything except itself. (*Him* 12-13)

Well, for better or worse when "*vole*" is placed before "*feuille*" ["leaf" or "sheet of paper"], it takes on a provocative air, making one think of a page that flies from the book. There are times when one must leap out—and that's even one of the possible lessons of the poem. One translates to understand and not the reverse, as scholars imagine.

In the leap, the "af X fa" chiasmus is lost, reduced to a simple rebound: "e fe." No doubt Cummings holds on to less here than the dissectors of his poem do. Also flown away is the singular article of the first line: the French word "*une*" ["one"] is three times as long as the English "a" and, attached to the initial "l(" it would have made a moon ["*l(une*"] rise after its proper time—for the moon had already opened the volume *No Thanks*. Surely that would eclipse the potential "i-ness" ["*je-itude*"] of the last line. However, in return, "***l****(vo****l****e feui****ll****e)a so****l****itude*" recovers the same quintuple alliteration on the letter "l" that is found in "**l**(a **l**eaf fa**ll**s)one**l**iness." Gained perhaps in the "ol" or "01" detached from "*vole*" and "solitude" is the idea of Zero ("nought," but also a dud, a failure in French),[2] which is also the Man and Artist, along with the fall that grips him, suspended in mid-air.

At least the essential part of the poem seems to be preserved: the structure of the whole that Cummings spoke of in the second of his Harvard nonlectures (1952) as of equal importance with the content of the poem, for structure "can and does exist in and of itself, apart from the use to which you or I may not or may put it" (*six* 29). Yes, the dynamic verticality survives as well, a profile in the form of the 1 (one) that sits above this first of *95 Poems*.

Recalling his own "implacably negative definition of poetry" as "whatever cannot be translated!" (*EIMI* 137-138), Cummings saluted the comprehensive patience of the first translator to introduce his poems to the French, D. Jon Grossman. "*IntrAduire*"—"to introduce more than translate"[3]—as Cummings did for his own personality and poetry in his nonlectures at that temple of learning, Harvard University—to open doors a crack (picking their locks if necessary)—is all a translator can hope for. The poet says as much at the beginning of his nonlectures: "What has always fascinated me is not teaching, but learning" (3).

2. How to approach translation

There is no method. But all the same, there are ways of conducting oneself. After all, translating is an approach to "a thing of beauty." Though primarily beautiful, the poem is not deprived of either sense or sensibility, nor of character or its own desires. And since you have been seduced, you should be careful not to ruffle its feathers. Therefore, patience!

You choose a poem: it's a living being. Don't try to decipher it immediately, unbuttoning it word by word, as if thirsty for meaning. Step back to study its outer form. In the sixties, when a free verse puffed up with metaphors dominated the French poetic scene, Cummings' delicately carved dancers caught your eye. Is the poem dressed in prose? in melting-pot haiku? in skidding auto-bio? in playful apple cobbler? Come a little closer. Appreciate the poem's lines and proportions: fluid, generous, long-limbed, nervous, or unique? Above all, notice how it moves: its glides, strophes, bounds, its way of crossing the page. Beauty is so made that it is first through the movements of the body that we divine its soul.

It's only after having welcomed this dynamic—even to the point of imagining it from different angles, dreaming of it on the tip of the tongue—that you can say some words to the poem. Or rather, allow the poem to speak for itself. Try not to understand too much: you have only just been introduced. Just listen to the poem with an attention distracted by detail. Syllables, colors, inflections, dance—learn them as a street-urchin would: by heart. Learn the ability to construct a rhythmic-phonetic mold that folds around the meanings of the words without ever pressing them too closely. You don't want to smother the poem before you have even grasped it, do you?

Become almost a regular visitor, get yourself invited. A poem never exists alone: it has brothers, neighbors, an author of its days, a house which forms a part of its life. Make their acquaintance: some of them will help you; others won't at all. Never lose sight of the poem.

At the end of two or three years of assiduous courting, it is time to really know the poem. Not interpret it. A balance-sheet of its qualities will find you in default: circled, the poem will light out, if it has any character whatsoever. Read to the bottom of it, the interior: into its skin, its empty spaces as well, between its letters and lines. Read its folds and articulations, the fissures in its tissues, so that you can feel each one of its vibrations and the directions, or senses, that they take. Meanings are nothing other than orientations, sometimes confusing, often evanescent or merely a scent, an essence.

At night, returning to yourself, reshuffle the cards of your journey line by line, in all directions. Delicately record this travel journal, syllable by syllable, following the design and the score you had sketched and notated previously. Do not remodel the forms that seduced you or forcibly pile up descriptions. No locksmithing: fitting-fashioning a mirror-cage. No bottling but pouring the essence, the being of the poem, over its own body. Then breathe.

You will utter a portrait of the poem, with maybe even a real rose in its cheeks, a brightness in its eyes, a movement in its play. The poem properly speaking will

continue to live its life, not necessarily true to you. You will try to recover it, or yourself. Usually after ten years of close contact, relations sort themselves out. When one hardly has any further need of words to be understood, translation becomes possible.

[Translated by Michael Webster. This article has been adapted from the afterword to Demarcq's translation of *i: six nonlectures*.]

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Notes

1 There is an untranslatable pun here in French: "Ici: je = 3, et ce n'est pas pur jeu… graphique."

2 In France, 0 / 20 is the worst mark at school, just as F (for Failure) is the worst in the USA. [Author's note].

3 Demarcq combines the French verbs "introduire" ["introduce"] and "traduire" ["translate"].

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