The Influence of Cummings on My Poetry or My Enormous Room

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The influence of Cummings on my poems is rather complex. I am all too aware that he is one of the most brilliant writers of lyrics in English of our century, and I have no illusions of competition on that score. His genius for language and the music of language is unsurpassable, as is his ability to invent exciting formal structures. He chose to be a poet above all else, and that is what he became—above all else. He also became a poet of significant vision, of course. But something became stuck somewhere in this department, and as much as I have devoted my critical prose to expounding that significance, I have also been devoting much of my own poetry, as it turns out, to trying to get past that stuckness myself.

To say that Cummings influenced me, then, would be to profoundly understate the case: he has helped me to shape my very life, not just my career and my writing. For me, poetry has always been more than an academic interest; it has been a map of the possibilities of living. And the possibilities I found in him (and not in T. S. Eliot, for example)—this goes back to my high school years in the early ’40s—added up to a sense that existence could be a positive experience, joyful, loving, and beautiful, and that one could realize one’s dreams in life. Of course, we get from a poet what we need, and I must have needed that positive sense badly enough to take him into myself whole. But what we need may indeed coincide with what the poet actually offers, and I think this is true in Cummings.

I recognize also, since I felt different from my businessman father, that I was adding Cummings early on to my already-growing string of father-substitutes. And what a father! He gave me permission to be my self, and I ran away with the bit. Already entranced by music, art, dance, and poetry, I allowed myself to learn the piano, read books, and write poems. And to dream—of what? Of becoming a lover and a poet, just like Cummings. No need to worry about making a living or supporting a family—although I never doubted I would become a husband and father—these things would somehow take care of themselves.

I picked up as well a lyric feeling for rhythm, phrase, mood, and image,

and also the possibilities of grammar, syntax, and poetic structure. This seemed to me a much finer thing than working in stores, offices, and factories—and whenever I did so work, it always presented itself to me as a merely temporary inconvenience. I was in the world, as the saying goes, but not of it. Thus my youthful poems were often imitations of Cummings, especially of his descriptive, stream-of-consciousness, and erotic modes. And yet they were also attempts to be my self. To be able to render deep and passionate experience in musical language was to me the entire goal of my existence.

It was not until many years later that I began noticing the deep and terrible division within myself which these dreams encouraged, and anyone reading my book today would not fail to notice that something devastating has happened.[1] Although I did not plan it that way when I was selecting and revising poems to include in this volume—thinking only of trying to hammer it down to my very best at the time—it does turn out, as the included cover comments by Richard Eberhart and Denise Levertov indicate, that the book tells a stark story of bitter struggle. It would appear that the poems which seemed most successful to me happened to be about that struggle. In fact, when I first read the proofs of the completed book, having a new and objective view beyond all those typescripts, I myself was surprised by how much bleak turmoil was there. Yet I still believe that being is a positive thing, joyful, loving, and beautiful, and I still hear those lyric cadences in my mind and heart. But something had to be cleared up first.

I have often wondered why my life turned out to be so different from what I learned from Cummings to expect, and I keep coming back to the same point: I entered the Navy in 1943, when I had just turned eighteen, and I became afraid, for the first time, of losing my life. This fear must have triggered that negative side of myself which I had so far succeeded—with Cummings' help—in denying: the plodding, routinized father-side, the side which struggled to make a living, which had to be of the world and not just in it, and which existed in constant fear of being found inadequate. A story which bears some resemblance, as Dick Kennedy's biography helps us see, to Cummings' own family romance.

After I received my draft notice, therefore, I applied for and was accepted into the Navy officers' college training program (the V-12), and began wrestling with the civil engineering program at M.I.T. I had great difficulty at the outset in keeping up with my studies for almost the first time in my life, because I was insufficiently prepared academically for this

sort of program. I did manage to learn what I had to learn, however, and I did succeed in escaping the worst phases of the war. My training continued through various stages, and the end of the war found me on a destroyer in the Atlantic fleet as an anti-submarine officer. I had been married in 1945, just before the atomic bombs were exploded over Japan, and I was discharged in 1946, having been accepted at Harvard to study literature.

Obviously, I was still alive and had not really come close to losing my life, but I had lost something precious nevertheless: being put in demanding situations requiring the mastery of strange tasks meant a constant fear of failure, and failure meant being sent into the battle zones. Officers a year or two older, the lucky ones, were returning from having been sunk by kamikazes in the Pacific. As I have more than half a head on my shoulders, I did master all those tasks—all of them—and I did very well. But I acted out my rebellion (and guilt) in small and insignificant ways, and every now and then I was caught and disciplined—for wearing my uniform carelessly, for fraternizing with the enlisted men on shore leave, and so on. And then I would try even harder to please my superiors, trading my fear of death for a fear of failure, a poor bargain all around.

This was *my* Enormous Room, and although I came out of it in better shape physically than Cummings, I was in much worse shape spiritually. He too had broken the rules, but he refused to apologize to his superiors. And he paid the price, finding his freedom in that gesture. This was the true beginning of the Cummings we love and admire. But then something devastating happened to him too: having refused to say he hated the Germans, saying only that he loved the French, he emerged from his imprisonment hating all authorities, governments, politicians, scientists, businessmen, reformers, salesmen, and philistines. The first gesture was transcendent, refusing the polarization demanded, but the second represented merely an escape into another form of polarization.

Jail had indeed given him his freedom, but it was only partial after all, and the problem is that Cummings only intermittently and by painful degrees allowed himself to realize that something was missing. So we find him in his great play *HIM* a few years later struggling with that other difficult task—the mystery and terror of trying to join art with husband- and fatherhood—and not quite making it. The breakup of his relationship with Elaine Orr Thayer and the loss of his rights to his daughter seems to have been *his* officers' training program, the task which he found too much to handle and for which he was insufficiently prepared.

Nevertheless, he picked himself up and kept going, almost as if nothing had happened, singing of love, joy, and beauty, and dealing out satirical knocks to those who seemed unable to do so. And not noticing, for example, how the tremendous ending of his Introduction to the 1938 *Collected Poems* was contradicted by its controversial beginning. This is basically, it seems to me, the reason why he so often turns some people off. Ever more stridently proclaiming the transcendental gospel of growth, he but haltingly engaged his own growth process and could not consistently allow himself to see that assuming responsibility for those one loves, being of the world as well as in it, is not tantamount to becoming a philistine.

And I too had become just as confused: I too went on as if nothing had happened. Although I still dreamed of myself as a poet and lover, I had to do something for money. So I decided to become a professor—laboring under the delusion that it would be natural for me to study and teach literature, and that I would have sufficient time left over for writing. I had no idea of what was about to happen to me.

I spent six years, beginning as a mid-way undergraduate, at Harvard to get the Ph. D., and I had almost the same demanding experiences there that I had in the Navy: memorizing Anglo-Saxon and Latin word cards, reading more literary works of more kinds and periods than could possibly be digested, reading more criticism and scholarship and literary history than could possibly do anyone any good, learning how to write papers and exams, trying to study twelve hours and more a day for seven days a week, and learning how to get those A's. As I was finally married and starting to raise a family, failure once again meant disaster, and once again I had great difficulty at the outset, pulling myself up with bleak determination and managing to master these strange tasks. And writing damn little poetry, as could be guessed.

And the same story got played out *after* the Ph. D. when I started teaching at the university of Connecticut: one had to publish, give talks at meetings, get promoted, earn tenure, build a house, buy a car, and so on—in short, to do all those things I had decided not to do in rebelling against my father. I was good at this too, and it would be one more delusion to deny that I *am* an academic by now. I am, in fact, not a little proud of what I have done, especially of my work on Cummings. But I also acted out my resentment here in insignificant ways, still dressing a little out of uniform, still provocatively pursuing authenticity of being within the holes in the system, still questioning the very things I was doing and becoming.

Finally (and prophetically), by the early 60s I could stand this inner dissonance no longer, and I started to become unglued just a few beats before the rest of the westernized world became unglued, and mostly for the same reasons. What had happened to my self?—an agonizing sense of self-betrayal engulfed me (and of betrayal of what I imagined I had gotten from Cummings). Rather than wallow in self-loathing, however—and here my positive faith in existence came to my rescue—I began looking for and trying to recover my lost self.

My book is a partial and imaginative record of this struggle and of my attempts to put myself back together—and, I would hope, a partial and imaginative reflection of the similar struggles of many others also. Ironically, it is the opposite of Cummings' struggle, and I had to pick up where he left off: I did have to make a living, to become a part of the world, to support my family—and then I had to rediscover the poet in me. As he became more conservative, I needed the early radicalism all the more desperately. I could not, would not, was unable to choose one over the other.

So I had to enter my Enormous Room once again, only this time it was after trying to join love and art rather than before. I have had to enter my self and the terrible fear there, risking the loss of everything and willing to pay the price, looking for that freedom which comes only when one is no longer afraid. Thus, a number of my poems represent the confrontation with this forgotten and denied other self: some represent the resultant insomnia and nightmares: and some reveal persistent impulses toward rebirth. The joy, the rhythm, the phrasing are more subdued; there is little obvious flamboyance of formal experimentation; but some slight daring in grammar and syntax remain, some precious sense of lyric structure. And the singing, the singing is coming back, transforming deep and passionate experience into music, still the goal of my existence, and now a more complex harmony, a more difficult theme. I am not out of these mid-life woods yet, and there have been times when all of my selves have felt wholly lost. Yet my one continuing need is to keep going, as he himself put it: An artist, a man, a failure, MUST PROCEED.

Note:

1. Friedman refers to his first book of poems, *The Magic Badge: Poems 1953-1984* (Austin, Texas: Slough Press, 1984). Although this essay reads like an introduction to the poetry volume, it was not printed in *The Magic Badge*.