

## I paint (my poems), therefore i am:

### The Visibility of Language and Its Epistemological Implications for the 'i' in E.E. Cummings' Poetry

Guðrun M. Grabher

---

In his 1991 article on modernist literature and the hemispheres of the brain, Max Näanny argues that the Modernist poets' interest in the visual arts implies a switch of focus on the left hemisphere of the brain to a focus on the right hemisphere. Since the identification of the self is generally attributed, as Näanny argues, to the left hemisphere, which is the domain of language, the switch of focus to the right hemisphere, as suggested by the emphasis on the visual, implies the decentralization of the self from poetry.

Using the Cartesian First Principle of Philosophy, *cogito ergo sum*—which introduced the subject-object split into modern thinking—as a starting-point, I intend to argue that by “painting” his poems (that is by adding a semantically significant visible shape to his poems) Cummings draws a holistic picture of the world of which the self is no longer the absolute center. By looking at various examples, I wish to demonstrate how Cummings' use of the lowercase “i” implies a different epistemological outlook on reality, abandoning both anthropocentrism and the hierarchy of subject over object as well as over other subjects. I further wish to argue that Cummings' use of the lowercase “i” manifests a compromise between the Imagist dispensing with the lyrical I and its solipsistic placement as word- and world- creator in poetry.

Etymologically, Descartes' *cogito* means much more than its translation into various languages suggests. The translation “I think” limits its meaning to the rational function of human consciousness. *Cogito*, however, contains also the meaning of thinking in images and pictures—with different implications for the pictured reality as well as for the “i” who pictures it.

To some extent I will follow, in my argument, Michael Dylan Welch, who has convincingly demonstrated the closeness and similarity of Cummings' poems to the Japanese haiku in his article “The Haiku Sensibilities of E.E. Cummings” (Welch 95-120). In his comparison I would agree with Welch in all but one point. Like the haiku poet, Cummings renders a childlike, astonished view of the world in simple, objective, emotional rather than intellectual images; in his mostly brief poems he focuses not only on nature but often on small aspects of nature in the here and now, simultaneously evoking a sense of timelessness; the tone of his nature poems is frequently one of melancholy underlined by the multiple meanings of silence; his visual arrangement of letters and punctuation marks resembles the Japanese characters in their figurativeness; in spite of his direct treatment of things, the implications of meaning are as manifold as those of the haiku. But: whereas the haiku is almost exclusively egoless in the literal sense of the term (there is rarely a lyrical I present in a haiku), Cummings enjoys playing around with the “I” in his poems, linguistically displaying it as a “small” part not only of nature but also of words and syllables, a strategy that,

in spite of all the similarities, clearly separates him from the Japanese haiku poet. That Cummings was concerned with a lifelong interest in the nature of the “I” has been stressed by Martin Heusser in his book *I Am My Writing*:

In his copy of the first volume of R.H. Blyth’s *Haiku* Cummings marked the following passage with a particularly conspicuous mark in the margin and underlined the core of the sentence: ‘... the secret of life is in the understanding of what the self is’ (4). About eighty pages later, he wrote in the margin, next to a similar passage, ‘gnôthi seauton’ (83), ‘know yourself.’ E. E. Cummings’ preoccupation with the ‘self,’ the individual, is well known. (Heusser 1)

The understanding of what the self is, however, takes place in the haiku beyond language. Not so in Cummings. But Cummings’ eventual self-knowledge perhaps comes closest to the idea of the haiku as expressed again by Heusser: “By creating his self as a text, he attempts to transcend the mere *knowledge* of the self in order to *be* his own self” (Heusser 4).

As Welch also rightly points out, the haiku needs to be seen against its Zen Buddhist background. The understanding of the role of language is of decisive importance. Even though the haiku poet means to offer insight into the true nature of things by rendering spontaneously perceived objects through appropriate images, language is not believed to be endowed with the power to render or describe reality. It merely has the function of leading the reader towards his / her own insight (*satori*). “A finger is needed to point at the moon,” says D. T. Suzuki, speaking of the Zen view of language, “but when we have recognized the moon, let us no more trouble ourselves with the finger” (*Outlines*, 96f). The intentional absence of an “I” in a haiku is meant to demonstrate that there is no interference of an interpreting, judgmental human view in the presentation of the images. The emphasis is never on the human I, which is vanishingly tiny compared to the overpowering grandiosity of nature.

Very often Cummings questions Western anthropocentrism by reducing the capitalized I to a lowercase i, and often so by peeling this “i” out from a word or a syllable, as in the poem which Welch calls the most obvious example of a Cummings haiku, namely his “loneliness / a leaf falls” poem. Welch compares this poem to a haiku by the famous Japanese poet Basho, which runs as follows:

Won’t you come and see  
loneliness? Just one leaf  
from the *kiri* tree.

(quoted in Welch 116)

The parallels between Basho’s haiku and Cummings’ poem are so obvious that

they need no further comment:

I(a

le

af

fa

ll

s)

one

l

iness

(CP 673)

Cummings juxtaposes the abstract concept of loneliness and the concrete image of “a leaf falls” in order to illustrate the meaning of the former.<sup>1</sup> He does so by means of one word versus one simple sentence. Since the letters of the concrete image are arranged vertically, they reflect the movement of the leaf falling from the tree. The semantic dimension of the word loneliness is also captured by the visual arrangement of the word’s letters. In various ways the poet manages to stress the word “one”: by splitting up the word into letters and syllables so that “one” comes to stand all by itself in the seventh line; by drawing attention to the letter “l” which—especially when placed separately—looks like the numeral 1(one). Cummings underlines this both in the first and in the eighth lines, and—though with a different emphasis—in the fifth line. By stressing the “one,” Cummings first of all gets across the statement that loneliness means to be all-one, to be one (as separated from everyone else). Moreover, the letter “l” also conjures up the association with the capital “I” so that ultimately loneliness is to be identified not only as being one, but as characterizing the existence of the I. The personal pronoun I is capitalized in the English language and thus marks its central position in the world, the Cartesian ego as the measure of all things. However, when the grand I realizes that to be I is fundamentally to be one, that is to be lonely, this grand I is reduced to a small i, that is to the lowercase i in the final line “iness.” Thus Cummings has managed to make an ontological statement about the human being through the word loneliness.

As conspicuous as the emphasis on the “one” in loneliness is, more or equally striking is the arrangement of two letters each in the lines depicting the image of the one leaf falling. It is this twoness contained in the natural image that creates a bridge to the one-ness or loneliness of the human being. The bridging of the gap is achieved exactly in the middle of the poem, where two l’s, that is “ones,” are standing side by

side. However, the twoness of the ones or the oneness of the two ones is by no means unequivocal. Rather, it embraces a number of different meanings. First, in analogy to the haiku, it may imply that a unity of man and nature has been achieved. The lonely I has identified itself with the falling leaf. Yet this sense of unity is questioned by the fact that it is two ones standing side by side, suggesting duplicity in unity. Thus, the empathy with the falling leaf may even intensify the sense of loneliness. Moreover, it is not even clear whether these two I's stand for two human subjects, stressing the message that even in human company the human being is ultimately lonely. In a more sophisticated, epistemological way, the two I's together may also signify that even though man may through empathy achieve a sense of unity with nature, this unity is realized as a unity in diversity, though stressing the subject-ness of both man and nature rather than the common subject-ness of the former versus the object-ness of the latter. Through the ambivalence of this—both formally and semantically—central line, Cummings does full justice to the Zen Buddhist idea of the *koan*, which evokes a paradox that is meant to help the reader transcend the boundaries of logical thinking.

Robert Aitken explains the literal meaning of the *koan* as follows: “Our Zen practice takes us deeply into the complementarity of aloneness and oneness. The very word ‘koan’ is an illustration. . . . This is *ko*, the sameness that is beyond equality and inequality” (Aitken 89). Finally, the unity and oneness of man and nature, loneliness and concrete image, is further stressed by the fact that the image is inserted into the word loneliness through its parenthetical position between the first I or one and the word one, thus even more strongly emphasizing this oneness in its double meaning. There is only one single incident in the poem where the pattern of one versus two is interrupted, namely in the first line. Here, the opening parenthesis, which is added as a third mark, might be identified as the *kireji* of the haiku, a syllable or dash that marks the transition from one image to another. This parenthesis does exactly that: introduce the concrete image. As Welch has pointed out, Cummings likes to identify himself with a single leaf in fall: “In his posthumous collection, *73 Poems*, Cummings echoed this thought (and his personal identification with a falling leaf) by writing, ‘and marvellously self diminutive / whose universe a single leaf may be’ (821)” (Welch 117).

The self diminutive is the subject of a poem in which this very subject may easily be overlooked:

dim  
i  
nu  
tiv

e this park is e  
mpty(everyb  
ody's elsewher  
e except me 6 e

nglish sparrow  
s)a  
utumn & t  
he rai

n  
th  
e  
raintherain

(CP 696)

As in a haiku, the season is clearly given: it is fall, it is raining, and the image juxtaposed to the rain and autumn is that of six English sparrows in a park. The four e's cornering the second stanza provide a framework for this particular image, thus limiting the scope of the park as does the introductory word "diminutive," which prepares for the microscopic picture that follows. As in the previous poem, a feeling of loneliness pervades this one as well, because the park is empty—everybody is everywhere else. And, as Welch has observed, whereas the sparrows come in a little crowd and thus keep each other company, the human I observing the scene is all by him / herself. Not only is the I solitary, it is also diminished in size through the word diminutive, in which the I as lowercase i is contained, as well as in the diminutive scene of the park with the sparrows on a rainy autumnal day. The vertical arrangement of the letters of "the rain" manages perfectly to evoke the image of the raindrops falling individually, and then the monotony of the sound of pouring rain is imitated by means of the three-time repetition of "the rain" without any space in between. The atmosphere of the poem, the image represented, is "dim," and so is the mood of the i, for it is a "dim i" that watches the scene. That the word diminutive also fits the rain is suggested by another Cummings poem, in which he says: "nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands" (CP 367).

Heusser analyses in detail the following poem, which he considers to be an excellent example illustrating the linguistic elusiveness of the I.

timeless

ly this  
(merely and whose  
not

numerable leaves are

fall

i

ng)he

StandS

lift

ing against the

shrieking

sky such one

ness as

con

founds

all itcreating winds

(CP 826)

I will only briefly comment on this poem. Through the decentralization of the subject, both as *be* and as the lowercase *i* in “falling”, the force that creates *it all* is left unidentified. Although *be* stands as oneness, that is alone, seemingly separated from the itcreating winds, it is this oneness that confounds the itcreating winds, and creates a oneness in the sense of an all-encompassing unity out of everything. One could also argue that, opposed to the Cartesian notion, the human subject as *i* is integrated into the image of nature, into the falling of the leaves, whereas, identified as a *be*, the self stands out as oneness. This comes much closer to an Eastern understanding of the *i*, which, if understood at all, is only understood as part (as a small part) of the whole. However, the I has the rational capacity to make itself an object of its thinking. If it does so, it separates that I to be investigated from its self as a *be*, which, indeed, does stand out then. Maybe it is the fusion of self as *i* and self as externalized *be* that makes for the timelessness of the moment, in which the self is known, and, by Cummings, intricately wrapped up in words. Heusser puts it thus: “What makes the poem particularly relevant for us is Cummings’ linguistic treatment of the self: ‘timeless’ is a poem about the nature of the poet’s selfhood and its created world. Cummings’ ‘i’ is transposed into these seventeen short lines as the subject (‘he’) of the sentence that makes up the poem” (Heusser 37). But I would not agree with Heusser in commenting that it “echoes the poet’s unsuccessful quest for his own ‘self’[...]” (ibid.).

In the following poem Cummings draws on the Emersonian equation of the I with the Eye:

i  
 never  
 guessed any  
 thing (even a  
 universe) might be  
 so not quite believab  
 ly smallest as perfect this  
 (almost invisible where of a there of a) here of a  
 rubythroat's home with its still  
 ness which really's herself  
 (and to think that she's  
 warming three worlds)  
 who's ama  
 zingly  
 Eye

(CP 827)

In his book, Martin Heusser quotes this poem as an example of “several poems with a simple but distinct geometrical shape.” However, Heusser believes that these poems create “‘unmotivated’ visual effects [and] are an expression of what one could call the phenomenon of the *ill-defined referent*” (251). In my view, however, this poem illustrates the phenomenon of a *well-defined referent*, even in a double manner. First of all, the shape of the poem resembles perfectly the head of a hummingbird, as one can tell from the picture (see figure 1). Secondly, the poem contains a semantic referent, as will be demonstrated in the following interpretation. The Eye at the end being capitalized does not only take over the front position of the lower-case i, it is also identified with the hummingbird and, even more so, with the perception of the bird which in turn is earlier equated with its own stillness. The very shape of the poem almost seems to imitate a sharp, pointed outlook into the world and onto the thing particularly perceived, which is targeted by the *a* at the end of the middle line, the longest line of the poem.

As Welch has shown, this poem in many ways reminds us of the Japanese haiku as well: there is the emphasis on the unbelievably smallest thing versus a universe (not *the* universe, which diminishes the importance of the idea of the universe), of the here (and now), and of stillness, which suggests both silence and motionlessness. The Eye thus captures a breathless moment, or, in other words, the moment of time frozen in timelessness. The central line of the poem is central in describing what the Eye does: it focuses on the “almost invisible,” tries to locate its “where,” draws it closer into a “there” and eventually into the here of *a*. Once it has been grasped by the Eye, it is right there, at the beginning of the next line. And only then does the reader get to know that the thing being focused on is the rubythroat's home. As unexpectedly as the home is introduced, just as silently it is left unidentified. For its main characteristic is its stillness, which, however, through the following relative clause, ultimately leads to the Eye. In other words, one could argue, the thing or object,

through its identification with the Eye, that is the organ through which the object is perceived, becomes the subject. Cummings' poem could even be read in the sense of "I am what I see" if one draws together the *i* of the first line, the *ama* (of the word amazingly) as *i am a* of the third but last line, and the Eye at the very end of the poem. Thus, one of the most important goals of Zen Buddhism in the haiku is achieved, namely the bridging of the gap between subject and object. "I am amazingly Eye"! One could even go one step further and argue that the "home" of both object and perceiving subject, that is the *i*, is the Eye. As mentioned before, it is a striking peculiarity of the poem that the focal point of the *i* is not the rubythroat itself but its home. Home is not necessarily so much a place as it is an idea, small, perfect, almost invisible, yet if perceived, home is the *i* as contained in the Eye.



*Figure 1: hummingbird photo*

The "small *i*," as Cummings biographer Kennedy states, was first used in his poem "Crepuscule" and was later to be identified as Cummings' poetic voice (cf. Kennedy 22). In one of his poems he addresses this "little *i*," raising the question of who are you? The poem's speaker seems explicitly to confront the childlike self in himself:

who are you,little i

(five or six years old)  
peering from some high

window;at the gold

of november sunset

(and feeling:that if day  
has to become night

this is a beautiful way) (CP 824)

I would not agree with Welch's reading of this poem. He says: "... trusting the image, reducing it to a basic Zen emptiness, the fullness of life in all its suchness may be revealed. It is akin to the ego-annihilation of Zen meditation, the approach to no-mind, finding the utter basics of existence" (Welch 107). This poem does not reveal an attempt at annihilating the ego. On the contrary, the emphasis on the I could not be more intentionally and consciously expressed than through the first line, where the speaker addresses himself: "who are you"? Or rather, who is the I of the five- or six-year old contemplating this scene? The question of self-identity is, in fact, contrasted with the image as well as the feeling that the image evokes. The perspective of the little *i* is from high above. The scene he watches is that of a November sunset. It is November, fall, the end of the year, suggesting also the end of life. It is sunset, the end of the day, suggesting again the end of life. The transition from life to death is felt, not understood intellectually, by the little *i* as a beautiful way. The way, or *Tao*, is the central notion of Taoism, asserting that the way itself is more important than the goal. In this poem, *way* rhymes with *day*, thus creating a link to life. Maybe Cummings as the adult is wondering here who this *i* is that can gain such a profound understanding of and insight into the cycle of life at such an early age. The question about the identity of the little *i* is at least as essential as is the image of the small boy contemplating this November scene and feeling its deeper truth. Maybe the adult wonders about what kind of *i* one needs to be in order to be able to so deeply understand and feel.

Cummings may have had Fenollosa's criticism of our understanding of a sentence in mind: "The . . . definition, according to which a sentence is a uniting of subject and predicate, he [Fenollosa] dismisses because of its arrogant subjectivity which postulates that the form of the sentence is an adjunct of ego function" (Géfin 28). By painting his *i*, in a whole number of varieties, within the context of images that elude the traditional sentence structure, Cummings succeeds in both getting rid of "arrogant subjectivity" and in probing into the innumerable layers of the self, which seems to be most itself when it is closest to the other.

—University of Innsbruck, Austria

**[Editor's Note:** Regarding "timeless // ly this," I would suggest that the poem is about a tree whose leaves are being torn away by the chill winds of November, and yet whose timeless integrity of being is such that it cannot be reduced to a thing by these winds. —N.F.]

## Note

1 The following interpretation of this poem will also be printed in my article (forthcoming): "In Search of Words for Moon-Viewing: The Japanese Haiku and the Scepticism towards Language in Modernist American Poetry."

## Works Cited

- Cummings, E.E. *Complete Poems 1904-1962*. Ed. George J. Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1991.
- Aitken, Robert. *A Zen Wave. Basho's Haiku & Zen*. Tokyo, New York: Weatherhill, 1978.
- Batchelder, Carol L. "Nobody-But-Himself." *Spring* 6 (1997): 26-44.
- Baum, S. V. "E.E. Cummings: The Technique of Immediacy." In: *E.E. Cummings: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Norman Friedman. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972. 104-120.
- Cohen, Milton A. "The Political Cummings: Iconoclast or Solipsist?" *Spring* 6 (1997): 70-80.
- Encyclopedia Americana*. Complete Edition. Vol. 14. New York: Americana Corporation, 1966. 495.
- Friedman, Norman. *(Re)Valuing Cummings: further essays on the poet 1962-1993*. The University Press of Florida, 1996.
- Géfin, Laszlo K. *Ideogram. History of a Poetic Method*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.
- Heusser, Martin. *I Am My Writing. The Poetry of E.E. Cummings*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1997.
- Kennedy, Richard S. *E.E. Cummings Revisited*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.
- Marks, Barry. *E.E. Cummings*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964.
- Nänny, Max. "Literatur und Hirnfunktionen: Der Modernismus als Ausdruck eines Hemisphärenwechsels." *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 69 (23/24 March 1991).
- Parekh, Pushpa N. "Nature in the Poetry of E.E. Cummings." *Spring* 3 (1994): 63-71.
- Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro. *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*. New York: Schocken Books, 1970.
- . *Der Westliche und der Östliche Weg. Essays über Christliche und Buddhistische Mystik*. Trans. Liselotte and Walter Hilsbecher. Frankfurt a.M., Berlin, Wien: Verlag Ullstein, 1971.
- . *On Indian Mahayana Buddhism*. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1968.
- Welch, Michael Dylan. "The Haiku Sensibilities of E.E. Cummings." *Spring* 4 (1995): 95-120.