Squaring the Self: Versions of Transcendentalism in *The Enormous Room*

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> The worst feature of this double consciousness is, that the two lives which we lead really show very little relation to each other . . . .One prevails now, all buzz and din; the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves.
>
> —Emerson, "The Transcendentalist"

> A son of New England had observed those two realms bitterly struggling for dominion: then, as a guest of verticality, our impuritan had attended the overwhelming triumph of the temporal realm.
>
> —E. E. Cummings, *i:six nonlectures* (53)

E. E. Cummings' links with the tradition of American transcendentalism have been much commented upon since comparisons between him and Ralph Waldo Emerson were first drawn by writers like James Dougherty in *Landmarks of American Writing* and Harold McCarthy in *The Expatriate Perspective*. These critics observed how Cummings, in his avant-garde poetry and painting and in *The Enormous Room*, his autobiographical account of his incarceration during World War I, advocates an Emersonian reverence for the inviolability of the individual soul, its ideal potential, and its resistance to society's corrosive influence. Dougherty sees in Cummings' work an "extension of the American radical tradition of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman" that leads him to make "a typically modern decision" to choose "the role of artist as a new identity" (290). McCarthy takes up this idea of the tradition of radical dissent, placing Cummings among the neo-transcendentalist writers and calling *The Enormous Room* "a manifesto of aesthetic radicalism" (131). Over the past two decades there has been a resurgence of critical interest in the links between these New England writers. Drawing on the prologue to the novel, Marilyn Gaull writes that since "it was, as Cummings discovered, through his art that he was able to become himself," his quest "for an authentic self" becomes the search for an aesthetic credo (658). In defining Cummings' brand of transcendentalism as the self-caused locus of identity and meaning, Gaull sees his credo as another variation of Emerson's ethic of mental self-reliance. Charles Norman, in explaining Cummings' conception of art as a function of his notions of the transcendent realm, makes more explicit the connection between Cummings and his chief literary antecedent (31), as does Gary Boire, who writes that the genre of spiritual biography which Cummings inherits from Emerson no longer "lead[s] man ever onward toward God [but] ever inward to himself" (331).

That Cummings is a modernist proponent of Emerson's moral humanism is a view unanimously shared by Cummings' aestheticist critics, who tend to present him

as an unequivocal advocate of the self-reliant life of the mind. Emerson's influence on Cummings' individualism has thus inspired comparative readings mainly devoted to elucidating the solipsistic nature of these writers' visionary experiences. In this essay, however, I want to examine the techniques in *The Enormous Room* that make Cummings' ethic of self-transcendence so distinctively his own. The impulse to render things consubstantial prompted him to shoulder the two-dimensional reality of his incarceration at La Ferté Macé upward into the hard sunlight of a three-dimensional vision. Cubist artistry duly becomes a central idea in the novel, with the prismatic quality achieved by Cummings' representation serving to add another dimension to the vistas of ideal potential in which Emerson's locates the American self.

In much of his early writing, Cummings does fulfill Emerson's postponed expectations in "Self-Reliance," showing that he understands society's aversion to self-reliance, how it "loves not realities and creators," as Emerson puts it, "but names and customs" (84). But as a receiver of this inheritance, Cummings inclines more toward the prodigal than the elder son. In Bunyan fashion, laden with the ideas of his American fathers, he departed for the city of modernism, wherein he both lost and found himself amidst foul rag-and-bone shops, cities hostile and unfriendly, until he was no longer at ease in an Emersonian dispensation, voiced in the phraseology of an older nation. Where Emerson enlarges upon the relation between America and the self, Cummings, with an existentialist concentration on individuality, narrows the focus on national identity to the nation's focal point. To determine the extent to which their views of the intractability of the self coincide is to consider the different postulates of individualism in their writings. Exemplified by his heroic conceptions of Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Carlyle, Emerson's candidate for the great American person must be "a cause, a country and an age" (178). But such figures, with their unfounded dignity and inscrutable self-reliance, no longer spoke universal sense to Cummings in post-existential America. A great man for him is someone like bathhouse John who, like many characters in *The Enormous Room*, has "no very clear conception of the meaning of existence" (56) and "think[s] of the usual Nothing" (232), while sitting beneath apple trees and "ruminat[ing] thoroughly upon non-existence" (88).

The signal point of contrast between Emerson's and Cummings' notions of the self's spiritual potential concerns the capacity of their heroes to live according to their own heroic or anti-heroic self-conceptions. "Ruminating on non-existence" constitutes the self-abnegating act of consciousness performed in Emerson's well-known "transparent eye-ball" passage (39). Here the hero, in exclaiming "I am nothing," occasions an epiphanic moment while effacing himself in the procedure wherein "all mean egotism vanishes." Yet this vision is generated by the hero himself, the privileged agent of ascent; it is he who becomes "uplifted into infinite space" and "part and particle with God" as the "currents of the Universal Being" channel through his soul. Emerson's confidence in the "divinity in man" plunges the hero to depths of his own self-conceptions. The cause of his failure to achieve self-transcendence thus becomes the result of his indulging introspective tendencies, which lead to the

solipsistic end to which the exploring of his interior consciousness is supposed to be the means. His regression from the higher world of "infinitude and paradise" derives from what Emerson calls in "The Transcendentalist" the self's double consciousness: its self-denying/ self-relying effort to surpass the hardness and darkness of living in the world of "buzz and din" while nurturing its allegiance to the higher realm of pure spirit. While standing in the shadow that falls between the idea and the reality of transcendentalism, aspiring individuals can discover, so Emerson laments, "no greater disposition to reconcile themselves."

This shadow that darkens Emerson's earlier enthusiasm does not fall on Cummings when writing *The Enormous Room* at the outset of his career. For Cummings, there is no distinction beleaguering the individual, whose method of ascent accords with the development of existentialist convictions about the self (9). In the third chapter of *i: six nonlectures* (1953), Cummings revitalizes the equation of cityscape and self and illustrates the benefits gained by those who abandon their self-reliance and experience the resolution of internal conflict:

> Now, I participated in an actual marriage of material with immaterial things; I celebrated an immediate reconciling of spirit and flesh, forever and now, heaven and earth. . . . this accepting transcendence; this living and dying more than death or life. Whereas—by the very act of becoming its improbably gigantic self—New York had reduced mankind to a tribe of pygmies, Paris . . . was continuously expressing the humanness of humanity. Everywhere I sensed a miraculous presence . . . of living human beings; and the fact that I could scarcely understand their language seemed irrelevant, since the truth of our momentarily mutual aliveness created an imperishable communion. While (at the hating touch of some madness called La Guerre) a once rising and striving world toppled into withering hideously smithereens, love rose in my heart like a sun and beauty blossomed in my life like a star. Now, finally and first, I was myself: a temporal citizen of eternity; one with all human beings born and unborn (53).

Regarded as a prefatory text to *The Enormous Room*, this passage highlights the salient principles that inform Cummings' synthetic version of individualism. The privileged moment of self-finding is offered by "certain beautiful givers of illimitable gladness 'whose any mystery makes every man's / flesh put space on;and his mind take off time'" (53-54),[1] and Cummings eulogizes this moment as an imperishable communion of body and soul that proved unattainable for Emerson. Here Cummings is not the self-caused agent of his own ascent but the passive receiver who "participates" and "accepts" a vision born of an engagement with time as immediate *chronos* and spiritual *chairos*, with the immanent, material realm and one entirely transcendent, immaterial. Emerson's lament for America as the ideal lost within the individual soul becomes Cummings' rhapsody that sounds the harmony of his soul's tonic note through the octaves of a parallel edge in a higher register. With Emerson's dual realms

thus reconciled, Cummings now becomes a citizen of two cities usually dissociated: the City of God and the city of Mammon, the Celestial City and the City of Destruction, here symbolized by Paris and New York. Having extended his consciousness upward and outward, Cummings, the "guest of verticality" (53), registers his personal alteration in a manner that portrays the uniquely actual but still other-wordly quality of his epiphany.

The prisoners in *The Enormous Room* yearn for this existential liberty, gained by annihilating the structures that inhibit the union of immanent and transcendent realms of being. Alleviating "the ineffable and terrific and to be perfectly avenged Wrong" they suffer requires "a shaft of bright lightning" that could symbolically "wither the human and material structures which stood always between our filthy and pitiful selves and the unspeakable cleanness of Liberty" (*Enormous Room* 100-101). Such deliverance might come in the form of an actual bolt of lightning to destroy the prison walls and set free the captives. But Cummings concentrates on its metaphoric equivalent too, in the imagistic references to the integration of disparate modes of consciousness. He describes La Ferté Macé as an "abominable and unyielding Symbol" that signifies the potential for self-transcendence to the prisoners contained within "the immutable vileness of our common life" (101). He achieves this reconciliation by filtering the memories of his incarceration through a cubist consciousness that transforms sequential experience into "a vast grey box in which are laid helter skelter a great many toys" (82). Dimension is the cubist watchword Cummings uses to lend depth and significance to the environment he describes as "the somewhat beautiful dimension of Sorrow" (100).[2] Experience in this sordid realm is an unchanging though temporal square which "contains" objects in the same manner a box contains toys. Accordingly, the evocation of various modes of nursery school iconography creates the childlike perspective from which Cummings views his prison experience. Each of the toys, writes Cummings, is "completely significant apart from the always unchanging temporal dimension which merely contains it along with the rest" (82). Irrespective of minutes and months, the penitentiary reality is not teleological, does not extend along a two-dimensional time line, since any "time method" is merely another outmoded "technique which cannot possibly do justice to timelessness" (83). It is displaced by "individualities" or "toys" (82). These are artistic perspectives offered on a variety of cubist entries into his "diary of . . .alternative aliveness and non-existence at La Ferté Macé." Characteristic of all temporal citizens of eternity, these "toys" are "part of the actual Present—without future and past" (83). What makes "death worth living and life worth dying" (107) is the "kinetic aspect of the institution," the movement and change provided by the arrivals and departures of its prisoners.

In the novel Cummings presents a gallery of toys which undergo "an amputation of the world" (83), the same self-transformation described later in *i:six nonlectures* and indicated here as the first stage of becoming a toy-doll. To suffer an amputation of self that precedes spiritual rebirth, one must begin by accepting the humbling conditions of existence at La Ferté Macé. As a sort of obstinate figure from *Pilgrim's*

Progress who refuses to succumb to the debasement of his sordid environs, the "aristocrat" Bragard finds it impossible to paint in a place "where the fellows drop their dung in the very room where they sleep . . . .all this dirt and these filthy people—it stinks! Ugh!" (53). While complaining that he "is treated no better than pigs here," the Victorian Bragard stands as a sort of elder Prodigal son who derides his gamy jailmates with nihilistic distemper and cries injustice at having to accompany his younger brother into the swine trough. He remains at ease in Emerson's dispensation and receives honors as that rarefied individual whose heroic self-conceptions inhabit an ideal realm which has nothing to do with the banalities of quotidian prison life. Yet Bragard resembles his role model in an even more crucial way. Just as Emerson neglected to see the value of things existing externally in themselves outside the mind's consciousness and thus found that the badness of the times gave death an uncanny attractiveness, so Bragard speaks in an increasingly somber tone of "the time [he has] wasted here . . . .A man might as well be dead" (54). The others in the herd, however, are depicted as a "fluent and numerous cluster of vital inhumanity" (66). All the prevailing "buzz and din" of their earthy environment evinces the celebration of life precisely within the ignoble realm of becoming through which they can attain to a higher state of being. With Yeatsian vision, they anticipate the shaft of lightning as the ladder or means to transcendence that is set in mounds of refuse while leading upward to the realm of pure mind.

While journeying toward La Ferté Macé in "I Begin a Pilgrimage," Cummings commences his spiritual descent by announcing, "Gentlemen,friends,comrades—I am going away immediately and shall be guillotined tomorrow" (6). Confident in anticipating his impending death, he says, "They would ask me when I preferred to die. I should reply, 'Pardon me,you wish to ask me when I prefer to become immortal?'" (34). His jovial composure soon diminishes when the heaviness of spirit descends upon "this unearthly patch" (28) of his gloomy environs. In "the yellow flares of lamps, huge and formless in the night," he darkly observes each figure "wrapped in its own individual ghostliness" (28). Stumbling onwards, "blind and dumbly in a disorderly state of my mind" (25), Cummings presses on like Eliot's wayfaring Magi, pilgrims involved in an archetypal experience through which ineffable alterations occur within them. "I had seen birth and death," says the nondescript narrator of Eliot's poem, "[b]ut had thought they were different; this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death."

While bowing under his heavy sack, Cummings struggles to see the Damascus-road on which he journeys through this Dantean region. "My eyes were blind" (22), he recounts, in preparation for the visionary mode or consciousness through which he confronts the Wooden Man some hours later. With the increasing lucidity gained by approaching the picturesque Calvary, Cummings recognizes the woeful figure on the cross as one having appeared to him before "in the dream of some medieval saint" (38). In the manner of Eliot's speaker who ends his account with a series of questions about the exceptional nature of his visionary experiences, Cummings wonders: "[W]ho was this wooden man? Like a sharp black mechanical cry . . .stood the

coarse and sudden sculpture of his torment" (38). He still cannot understand the significance of his encounter because the Wooden Man divulges nothing verbally but speaks solely through "the angular actual language of his martyred body." Prostrate at the foot of the cross, Cummings discerns that there is "in this complete silent doll a gruesome truth of instinct," a "success of uncanny poignancy" that parallels his non-linguistic communion with "the living human beings" in *i: six nonlectures*. He pauses to contemplate the misery depicted by the broken image of the prototypical Doll, whose clumsy wooden body suffers a painful amputation like none other in the book. Not standing on its fragile legs, absurdly large feet and funny writhing toes, the figure "Hang[s] all by itself" with "an unearthly ferocity of rectangular emotion," its stiff little arms making "abrupt cruel equal angles with the road" (38). The syntax of Cummings' description suggests that the picture-like body and the cross on which it hangs are one and the same. Reminiscent of *Picasso's Portrait of Wilhelm Uhde* or *Daniel Henry Kahnweiler*, the chromatic posture of the Wooden Man, its "terribly brittle shoulder [on which] the droll lump of its neckless head ridiculously lived" (38), also recalls the figure Cummings puts on canvas in "Saxophone Player" and the "Jesus" who "sags in frolicsome wooden agony" described in his poem "the bed is not very big" (CP 207).

The tacit communion of souls that the Wooden Man's presence implies envelops Cummings' sensibility as he draws nearer. In a surge of emotion that again recalls the ordeal of "living and dying" described in *i: six nonlectures*, he identifies with the suffering figure and is prompted to consider the town (La Ferté-Macé) they soon enter as a "unique unreality" and the moon above it as "but a painting of the moon" (39). He considers blowing hard and collapsing the town and sky, but decides "I must not,or lose all" (39). Essentially, he must negotiate two versions of transcendentalism, the Emersonian ascent empowered by an assertion of self-will— "I must not"— or an absolute loss of self, a complete and passive letting go— "or lose all." Cummings succumbs to the Wooden Man's penitential aura, and by doing so he is initiated to the mechanical rites of selfhood. The metamorphosis through which the contours of his self-image are amputated and distorted to conform to the dire object hanging before him ensues: "I crawled on hands and knees . . . .Prone, weight on elbows . . . .Every muscle thoroughly aching,head spinning,I half-straightened my no longer obedient body" (38). Just like the beauty that blossoms in his heart like a star in *i: six nonlectures*, so the "moon's minute flower" now pushes "between slabs of fractured cloud" (38), as if he is blessed by the cosmic powers crystallized in the symbol of the Christ-figure. Compelled into soulful communion here with the Wooden Man and impelled beyond himself in their moment of "mutual aliveness," of "accepting transcendence" (*six* 53), Cummings' face to "almost obliterated face" (38) encounter has established an ontological identification with the doll-like Wooden Man. The process of this intercession culminates at the end of the book when at last Cummings is about to be released from prison. "I felt myself to be,at last,a doll" (231-232), he then exclaims, an aesthetic re-creation born out of an authentic response to this "Symbol" (101) of what it means to die to himself in the heavy silence of intolerable autumn.

To that end, the pilgrim-like artist proceeds with a mission to impart the significance of his epiphany en route to La Ferté-Macé. Each of the prisoners with whom he endures the hardships of an unjust confinement becomes another convert to the kingdom of the vast gray box. As a collective emblem of Cummings' symbol-making consciousness, the dolls are types which point back to this scene. The monkey man, the two Bears, and Emile the Bum are among the vibrant incarnations of divinity who experience the transformative process of "amputation" into doll-like reconstructions of the Wooden Man. Having undergone the elementary rites of self-renewal with the Wooden Man, Cummings now stands as a pilgrim wanderer in search of greater understanding. Even as Eliot's Magi, bewildered at their journey's end, are no longer at ease in their place among "these kingdoms," so Cummings is disoriented as he travels onward past streets and houses belonging to the "unique unreality" of a "city of Pretend" (39). He too cannot describe his situation in overt terms of Christian paradox until the end of the journey, when he muses with greater clarity upon the Magi's question, "were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?"

This passage has been discussed as Cummings' modernist variation of the tradition of humanist existentialism in American writing as it is passed down from Emerson. In describing the amputative process as "the slow erosion of his personality," and the journey of self in the novel as symbolic or the artist's quest into the interior regions of his mind, one critic writes that here Cummings' creative consciousness becomes awakened to the possibility of gaining an authentic "identity or selfhood" through writing fictional autobiography (Gaull 648-649). He reenacts his self-development by creating "the persona of Cummings-past"; his innovations in perception and language are his way of acquiring "control not only over his environment but also over himself" (Gaull 648, 647). To replace the artist's existential situation with the private worlds of his imagination is to exult in what Wallace Stevens calls the mind's semblance of the real, which is "keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality" (79). This emphasis on fictional sublimity is consistent with Emerson's espousal of the poet's art as the vital quality of ideal vision essential to giving "man the perpetual presence of the sublime" (15). In establishing his own sanctuary, replete with the scene-painting and counterfeit that are the poetic dematerializations of his living reality, the modernist artist embraces the unreality of art from which his fictional sense of identity originates.

Thus the aesthetic argument, while cloaked in an apparently benign version of moral humanism, represents the modernist equivalent of privileging the self-as-creator that informs Emerson's transcendentalism. The conviction that Cummings' aesthetic recapitulates the pure idealism of Emerson's essays is a view that ascribes to *The Enormous Room* the solipsized prescriptions inherent in Emerson's ethic of mental self-reliance. But although Cummings shares a number of intellectual affinities with his New England antecedent, he follows the Emersonian tradition that is weighted more toward the actualities of life than the non-realities of imagined experience. If the concept of imprisonment in the novel functions as the metaphor for the artist who is confined to total self-consciousness in the realm of mental similitudes,

it is worth remembering that, of all those incarcerated at La Ferté Macé to whom liberty is at best an existential notion, Cummings alone puts to use his artistic skill as a form of self-expression. His insistence that authentic selfhood always precedes authentic art, that the former is never achieved by means of the latter, is seemingly at odds with the aesthetic notion implied by his appraisal of art as the means to fulfilling what he envisions as the ideal of himself. But the extensive invocations of self-abnegation in the novel serve to fortify his insistence that the artist's struggle with the question of causality must give way to practical concerns, Cummings' brand of existentialism thus finding its meaning more within the context of theistic existentialism than that of the art-for-art's-sake artist.[3]

On his autobiographical quest, Cummings discovers that self-authored truths, singularly perceived through the mind's eye, prove insufficient for those who are soul-sick in their search for transcendent ministration. Here is the distinction between a subjectively conceived presence, similar to what Nietzsche called "immaculate perception" (121), and one wholly impersonal that Cummings is careful to make when narrating his encounter with the Wooden Man. Their I-Thou exchange is made possible by his willingness to open himself to the sublime presence of divinity occasioned as an intercessional moment, not as an epiphanic episode that is psychologically adduced by an aesthetic awareness. Though the remark taken from the prologue to *The Enormous Room*, "Thanks to I dare say my art I am able to become myself" (Modern Library edition ix; cf. Gaull 649, Boire 332), is the single statement used by Cummings' aestheticist critics to provide an Emersonian context for his aesthetic initiatives, Count Bragard's comment that "I am myself a painter" (53), might constitute a more accurate description of what Cummings takes to be the value gained by dissociating moral growth from creative ascension.

Later in the book, Cummings elaborates further:

> Had I,at this moment and in the city of New York,the complete confidence of one twentieth as many human beings I should not be so inclined to consider The Great American Public as the most aesthetically incapable organization ever created for the purpose of perpetuating defunct ideals and ideas . . . .Let no one sound his indignant yawp at this. I refer to the fact that, for an educated gent or lady,to create is first of all to destroy—that there is and can be no such thing as authentic art until the bon trucs(whereby we are taught to see and imitate on canvas and in stone and by words this so-called world)are entirely and thoroughly and perfectly annihilated by that vast and painful process of Unthinking which may result in a minute bit of purely personal Feeling. Which minute bit is Art (224).

Here Cummings acknowledges true art as the essential product yielded by obliterating the cultural baggage that is acquired through an education in the ways of the world. Artistic representation is drawn from a vast crucible from which he extracts the dross of bygone and lifeless ideals all that is authentic to one's identity. Again, this makes

Cummings sound much like Emerson, and critics have responded to such passages in ways that highlight the links. "Phoenix-like rising from the ashes of the modern world," Cummings' "veritable transformation [is] a traumatic, but nonetheless regenerative rebirth," as Boire writes (338, 339). His method entails a "debilitating negation" that is "inherent in the outworn values and assumptions of an arid tradition" (Boire 332). He acknowledges his "life-long antagonist—the ever-threatening possibility of negation" as the "active, impersonal system that seeks to suppress and eventually negate all that is vitally human" (Boire 336).

Yet this argument fails to account for the positive negation that Cummings addresses in *The Enormous Room*, in *i: six nonlectures*, and in many of his poems. In "what if a much of a which of a wind," for example, he exhorts: "Blow soon to never and never to twice / (blow life to isn't:blow death to was / —all nothing's only our hugest home; / the most who die,the more we live" (CP 560). In "one's not half two," he says that "we(by a gift called dying born)must grow . . . .All lose, whole find" (CP 556). The "non" in Cummings' official "non-existence" (cf. 6, 83, 88, 129) in the Enormous Room is a prefix as significant as the opening epigraph, "FOR THIS MY SON WAS DEAD, AND IS ALIVE AGAIN; HE WAS LOST AND IS FOUND" (xxi),[4] and other passages like: "I almost shouted in agony. . . . I turned into Edward E. Cummings,I turned into what was dead and is now alive,I turned into a city,I turned into a dream" (237-238), that occur near the end of the book. Cummings' aestheticist critics have argued that here prisoners undergo a "process of transformation" through which they reach either "vital liberation" or "spiritual inertia" (Boire 335), freedom or Précigné (cf. *Enormous Room* 83). They extend this either-or paradigm to existentialist modes of difference "between being and nothingness." But equally essential to the protagonist's spiritual progress are the moments of "spiritual inertia" and "vital liberation" that are illustrated by the threatening reality of Apollyon and the beatific Delectable Mountains. These negative or negating circumstances are consistent with the positive experience that for Cummings is one with negation.

Consider the relation between dying and living in the passage from *i: six nonlectures*: the reconciliation of spirit and flesh is achieved by virtue of his "living and dying more than death or life." In the act of becoming "its improbably gigantic self," the city of New York, "a once rising and striving world," topples into "withering hideously smithereens." Here Cummings is equally dead and alive, "one with all human beings born and unborn" (53). A "spirit descends to ascend" (110), his paraphrase of Christ's injunction, "he who would find himself must first lose himself" (Matthew 16:25), indicates the prototypical Christian view that being and nothingness are not in opposition, that being is contingent upon first experiencing what Cummings calls the "no of all nothing" (CP 663). As in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, where the reader is invited to wander with dim illumination through the ambiguities of the human condition and arrive at the meaning of the sense that "nothing is something" in the Marabar caves and on the Congo river, so here the self-abnegation enacted by the soul-sick in *The Enormous Room* becomes the physic necessary to dissolve all the non-essentials of human na-

ture. This confrontation with the nadir of self proves necessary to experience spiritual restoration.

In his aesthetic credo, Cummings interlards the authenticity of self with the accuracy of its representation by linking the grammar used in the portrayal of his toy dolls to their affective state of being. Between 1917 and 1921, while immersing himself in the careful study of avant-garde and cubist approaches, he adopted from Cézanne, Picasso, and Albert Gleizes the artistic strategies designed to exhaust the ideographic possibilities of descriptive words that are void of all semantic traces. The cubists excised all formal modes of art—in particular, color, tonality, and a number of attributes superfluous to the expression of its substance—in their efforts to capture the subjective actuality of an object. Instead they created a mode of representation they felt was truer to its inner qualities. Cummings, in summarizing his developing aesthetic in his article on the sculptor Gaston Lachaise, shows the extent of their influence:

> . . . the inexcusable and spontaneous scribblings which children make on sidewalks, walls, anywhere . . . cannot be grasped until we have accomplished the thorough destruction of the world. By this destruction alone we cease to be spectators of a ludicrous and ineffectual striving and, involving ourselves in a new and fundamental kinesis, become protagonists of the child's vision.
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> To analyze child art in a sentence is to say that houses, trees, smoke, people, etc., are depicted not as nouns but as verbs. The more genuine child art is, the more it is . . . purely depictive. . . . Consequently to appreciate child art we are compelled to undress one by one the soggy nouns whose agglomeration constitutes the mechanism of Normality, and finally to liberate the actual crisp organic squirm—the IS (*Miscellany* 18-19).

Cummings eventually came to regard cubist syntax as the best way of representing an object's vital nature because it helped him achieve, in his painting, poetry, and prose, the perceptual integrity gained by "seeing around" the object and entering what Picasso called "the idea of the object" that transcends linear space and sequential time.[5]

With these techniques for arraying the figure's total being, Cummings expresses the emotion felt by those who observe Josef Demestre upon his departure for Précigné: "with him disappeared unspeakable sunlight,and the dark keen bright strength of the earth" (167). "Things of this sort," he writes, "are always inside us and in fact are us and which consequently will not be pushed off or away where we can begin thinking about them . . . . [They] are no longer things;they,and the us which they are,equals A Verb;an IS" (168). The verb "to be," in what Carl Michalson has called "existential syntax," is not "a copula . . . .one does not say of man, he Is, then go on to add a predicate object, such as he is 'a thinking thing'" (24). What Gertrude Stein called "bottom nature" (137), Cummings puts under the rubric "instinct," whereby he denotes the childlike propensity to perceive reality through an imaginative

engagement with an eternally present moment. Instinct, according to Cummings, is the deepest source of our understanding. Although in its tendency to repeat previous conditions this way of knowledge may appear contrary to his insistence on annihilating the past and its defunct ideals, it encourages the cubist perspective that enables the artist to restate in a repetitious childlike manner the salient characteristics of an object or item. Such was the desired method with which Picasso endeavored to portray his object on canvas with the vibrancy and intimacy known only by direct experience with it. To capture the child-like eye which beholds a single object in all its momentary intensity, the child's instinctiveness constituting his prelinguistic, whimsical, and fully immediate sense of reality, was to reach the highest level of artistic excellence.

In a notebook entry in 1934, Cummings writes: "a chromatic AM conjugates the Human verb [i.e., to feel]. For an instant more or less, we are at the mercy of NOW" (quoted in Cohen 75). In his narrative portrayal of Jean le Nègre, another "Verb; an IS" (168), he ruminates further on the differences between intuitive feelings and reasonable beliefs. Jean delights in "the purely picturesque," is only happy when he is "exercising his . . . imagination" (205); his "use of language was sometimes exalted fibbing; he court[s] above all the sound of words" (199), while holding their cognitive meanings in disdain. He is "like the inconsolable child who weeps his heart out when no human comfort avails and wakes the next day without an apparent trace of grief . . . .A wrong had been done. But that was yesterday. Today—and he wandered up and down,joking,laughing,singing" (200). "He was never perfectly happy unless exercising his inexhaustible imagination" (205). Jean's most unfortunate experiences negate the debilitating "inhibition [that] had held the child,which was Jean's soul and destiny,prisoner" (214). No layers of cultural lamination construct Jean's youthful personality because no shades of the prison house have been cast. He has not inherited, that is, the adult world of discarded beliefs, whereby the "things of this so-called world" could diminish all that is intrinsic to "a minute bit of purely personal Feeling" (224).

Cummings clarifies his point by invoking fairies as an example of the antiquated notions in which "we no longer believe," since "[t]here are certain things in which one is unable to believe for the simple reason that he never ceases to feel them" (168). Belief and thinking are the two epistemologies that Cummings holds separate from all that is genuine about the self and its most candid depiction. Witness Surplice, who "thinks America is out a particular window on your left as you enter The Enormous Room" (188), or recall Cummings' unwillingness "to know except as a last resort." This observation has prompted the most thorough critic of Cummings' paintings to say that "Feeling thus leads to two kinds of wholeness: an involvement in the art—a union of subject and object—and a sense of wholeness in the art itself" (Cohen 68). The cubist painter distorts the contours of his object on the surface of the canvas so that the viewer can penetrate its outward form and respond feelingly to its abstracted vitality through an intuitive response, while his consciousness merges with the soul of the object emotionally perceived. To the extent that his "I" is made optical by the artist's attempt to limit the psychic distance between them, his "eye"

becomes the shared subjective actuality vis-à-vis the artist's mood.

In its devaluation of cognitive engagement and evocation of childlike reactions based on feeling, cubist portraiture integrates the consciousness of the viewing subject with that of the artist as suggested by the viewed object. It gains the transcendental quality of elevating the object from the two-dimensional surface in a moment of immediate representation. Towards the end of *The Enormous Room*, Cummings filters the ruined landscape outside and in and around the prison through the soundless country of his mind. Under an "unhealthy almost-light" that leaks from a corpse-like meridian, "manshaped beings [are] huddled in the mud" (224-225). At the moment he engages the scene artistically, he reduces "la promenade to a recently invented mechanism;or to the demonstration of a collection of vivid and unlovely toys," and suffers the "gradual complete unique experience of death" (225). Hours later, in the cold rotten darkness of his cell, he ruminates on "that brilliant and extraordinary and impossible something:life" (227). The reciprocity of death and life leads to a culminating epiphany: "In front of and on and within my eyes lived suddenly a violent and gentle and dark silence" (128). "I felt myself to be,at last,a doll—taken out occasionally and played with and put back into its house" (231-232). Shortly thereafter, when the "sharp cry sung through The Enormous Room, 'Il tombe de la neige,'" he feels the snow's gentle touch "falling perfectly and suddenly,through the thick soundless autumn of [his] imagination" (232), and playing upon his sensibility like "a child touch[ing] a toy it loves" (233).

Not lightning but falling snow annihilates the boundaries between the protean world of becoming and the spiritual realm of pure being. With cubist proportion, external and internal realms combine when the penitentiary "is filled with a new and beautiful darkness,the darkness of the snow outside,falling and falling and falling with [a] silent and actual gesture" (233). The existential freedom Cummings feels here in his nocturnal vision—as with Gabriel Conroy's at the end of Joyce's "The Dead"—follows from a life-through-death epiphany that leads to a sympathetic universal response to all creatures everywhere. The final realization of his unique autumnal feeling of exquisite elevation is experienced hours later during his release from La Ferté Macé. In another all-encompassing ordeal like the one described in *i: six nonlectures*, he unites—through his synthesizing consciousness—himself with "Paris. Life. Liberté. La Liberté" (237). Overwhelmed by the euphoria of his deliverance, he parses his feelings in existentialist syntax: "to live:infinitive. Present first singular. I live. Thou livest," and registers his transformation in by now familiar terms: "I turned into Edward E. Cummings,I turned into what was dead and is now alive,I turned into a city,I turned into a dream" (238). "No,it is not I who am saying goodbye," he then exclaims, "It is in fact somebody else,possibly myself" (238). While aspiring beyond an Emersonian double consciousness, Cummings stands with arms lifted up and turns into Paris and into the dream of freedom.

Unlike Emerson's epiphanic moments when he becomes an afflatus of everything he sees around him, indeed when everything becomes him, Cummings' passionate self-inwardness turns outward toward the Manhattan skyline in a vision of

reformed America:

> The tall,impossibly tall,incomparably tall,city shoulderingly upward into hard sunlight leaned a little through the octaves of its parallel edges,leaningly strode upward into firm hard snowy sunlight;the noises of America nearingly throbbed with smokes and hurrying dots which are men and which are women and which are things new and curious and hard and strange and vibrant and immense,lifting with a great undulous stride firmly into immortal sunlight … (242)

Here Cummings is bending the world of *The Enormous Room* to examine its indications of humanity in what he calls a "somewhat cubist wilderness" (17). Cummings' approach to the queries invoked by modernist notions of identity and meaning reconciles Emerson's disjunction between the worlds of "buzz and din" and "infinitude and paradise" by virtue of an existential loss and affirmation of self within an expansive three-dimensional reality. The structural characteristics of the human form are conveyed by an aesthetic that throws into greater relief the essential dignity founded upon one's finitude. New realms of expression are opened on the predicament of those trying to gain liberation, not through a mysterious inwardness that discovers the infinite realm within the finite self, but through a mystical outwardness that identifies this sense of timeless eternity as merely one of the myriad vistas residing within the individual soul.

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Notes

1 [Editor's note] Cummings quotes here from lines 7-8 of his sonnet "you shall above all things be glad and young" (CP 484).

2 [Editor's note] This passage describes the Machine-Fixer.

3 In his candid understanding of the limited role the self plays in its transformation, Cummings anticipates Gabriel Marcel, another World War hostage. Basing his reflections on the "situation of prisoners awaiting liberation," Marcel claims that "hope is always tied to an experience of captivity" (142). Beyond the literal incarceration, he speaks of the predisposition which inclines us to imprison ourselves in utter self-consciousness. The person claiming ontological independence as the self-caused source and totality of his being not only betrays an extreme egocentrism, but fails to recognize that he too is imprisoned, that the boundaries of his self actually constitute his prison walls. This is the ambiguous situation from which "we can emerge only on the condition that we pass beyond the limits of the ego." Since hope is "situated in another dimension of which it could be said that it is that of humility and patience" (142), the more a person contemplates his own being, the more he realizes "that this being does not depend on its own jurisdiction" (147).

4 [Editor's note] Cummings' father, the Unitarian minister, quotes a verse from the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:24).

5 For Cummings "seeing around" aesthetic, see Cohen 117-150.