

E. E. Cummings: A Close Study of Two Poems

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## XX

what if a much of a which of a wind  
 gives the truth to summer's lie;  
 bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun  
 and yanks immortal stars awry?  
 Blow king to beggar and queen to seem  
 (blow friend to fiend:blow space to time)  
 —when skies are hanged and oceans drowned,  
 the single secret will still be man

what if a keen of a lean wind flays  
 screaming hills with sleet and snow:  
 strangles valleys by ropes of thing  
 and stifles forests in white ago?  
 Blow hope to terror;blow seeing to blind  
 (blow pity to envy and soul to mind)  
 —whose hearts are mountains,roots are trees,  
 it's they shall cry hello to the spring

what if a dawn of a doom of a dream  
 bites this universe in two,  
 peels forever out of his grave  
 and sprinkles nowhere with me and you?  
 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 **1**

## LIV

if everything happens that can't be done  
 (and anything's righter  
 than books  
 could plan)  
 the stupidest teacher will almost guess  
 (with a run  
 skip  
 around we go yes)  
 there's nothing as something as one

one hasn't a why or because or although  
 (and buds know better  
 than books  
 don't grow)  
 one's anything old being everything new  
 (with a what  
 which  
 around we come who)  
 one's everyanything so

so world is a leaf so tree is a bough  
 (and birds sing sweeter  
 than books  
 tell how)  
 so here is away and so your is a my  
 (with a down  
 up  
 around again fly)  
 forever was never till now

now i love you and you love me  
 (and books are shuter  
 than books  
 can be)  
 and deep in the high that does nothing but fall  
 (with a shout  
 each  
 around we go all)  
 there's somebody calling who's we

we're anything brighter than even the sun  
 (we're everything greater  
 than books  
 might mean)  
 we're everyanything more than believe  
 (with a spin  
 leap  
 alive we're alive)  
 we're wonderful one times one

The critic who attempts to compare and contrast two poems of E. E. Cummings immediately discovers why few others have similarly ventured. Edward Estlin Cummings' poetic output, exceeding seven hundred compositions of all shapes and sizes, beguiles one to try to bridle together a likely pair and then opens the gate to a corral of bucking broncos. It thus becomes necessary to choose carefully, as Thomas Seltzer, publisher of Cummings' first "book of poems" (Tulips & Chimneys), did in 1923 when he selected only 66 of the 152 pieces originally submitted. Unfortunately, this tendency to sidestep has continued and thereby resulted in a paucity of essays focusing on individual works which contain many structural and stylistic parallels.

Two such poems are "what if a much of a which of a wind" and "if everything happens that can't be done," both contained originally in l x l (1944). Coming from the same collection, these pieces express not only the poet's philosophical mood at that particular time, but also the "three or four areas of human thought and experience about which Cummings' speaker has any ideas: love, death, and time; the natural and the artificial; society and the individual; and dream and reality. Transcendence means freedom from limitations and has its source in a sinless universe. Each of these topics, therefore, involves an opposition that illustrates this general freedom in a particular way: love transcends death and time; the individual transcends the group;



the natural transcends the artificial; and the dream is the true reality."<sup>2</sup> Equally as significant are the marked physical similarities between the two poems. This essay, then, will attempt to illustrate the means Cummings employs to convey, ultimately, the truths he would have the world learn.

When one reads through each poem initially, it becomes clear that "Cummings organizes the sequence of his poems on a repetitive and parallelistic basis,"<sup>3</sup> especially upon scrutiny of the verse structuring. "what if a much of a which of a wind" consists of three stanzas, each containing eight lines which pose a question and <sup>end</sup> with its answer. Not only do the stanzas number three, but so do the compounded verbs ("gives - bloodies - yanks"/"flays - strangles - stifles"/"bites - peels - sprinkles") as well as the alliterative refrain of "blow" in each. There are similar characteristics in "if everything happens that can't be done," a poem of five stanzas, each containing nine lines. Immediately one notices the continuous juxtapositioning of "everything" and "anything," and, from Cummings' obvious attempt to satirize himself, the bizarre-looking melding of the two words which appears twice. In contrast, however, to "what if a much...", a poem replete with violent verbs and images, "if everything happens..." is a poem of inaction. The word "books," occurring in every stanza (always in the third line), is invariably the subject of a dull, empty verb ("could plan - tell - can be - might mean"). The one exception is "grow" in the second stanza. Though not a verb of vigorous action, "grow," as it is used in the poem, suggests a blossoming to maturity. But, as we are told, books "don't."



Upon an ever closer examination of the style of these two works, a critic must be struck by the painstaking neatness of Cummings. Indeed, "every stanza matches every other not only as far as the disposition of stresses, line lengths, and rhymes is concerned, but also in terms of the way in which each phrase or syntactical unit of each stanza is balanced by a similar phrase or unit in a similar position in every other stanza."<sup>4</sup> We see, for example, in both poems the repeated use of parentheses, a device Cummings employed, according to critic Eve Triem, "for an interpolated comment or to split or combine words as a guide to his thought."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, Cummings uses the parentheses here according to Ms. Triem's first assertion, and he skillfully weaves them into the exact place in each stanza of "what if a much..." (line 6) and "if everything happens..." (lines 2-4 and 6-8). Just as obvious is the physical appearance of each stanza as a result of the line breaks. Both poems seem quite conservative and traditional if placed alongside the poet's now classic:

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although, compared to each other, "if everything happens..." is the more venturesome. Cummings forces the reader's eyes to zigzag through the long - short - long sequence of lines, paralleling the "we" who, in the poem, are led "up, down, around and around." This interrelationship of form to content is what critic Gary Lane calls "the unity of idea and expression... Cummings' intensity lives almost entirely in the marriage of spirited conception and linguistic flesh; divorce these or make one subservient, and what vanishes is poetry."<sup>6</sup>

But what, after one performs a critical biopsy on that linguistic flesh, is the poetry of "what if a much of a which of a wind" and "if everything happens that can't be done," and what do these two carefully wrapped packages tell us? Stephen E. Whicher grapples briefly with "what if a much..." in his analysis in The Explicator but then concludes only that he "would be glad to see further explication of this mercurial poem."<sup>7</sup> Norman Friedman, in his 183 page treatise on Cummings poetry, devotes but one paragraph to "if everything happens....," calling it only "a poem of praise."<sup>8</sup> And Gary Lane avoids both poems entirely in I Am, an exhaustive study of the poet's output. Certainly poems as *exactly crafted as* these deserve a bit more critical attention. Let us, then, attempt to turn on the light.

The two poems contrast in meaning as well as they compare in style and structure. "what if a much of a which of a wind" gives us, through hyperbole, three disasters and three conclusions as to what mankind can expect to learn from them. "if everything happens that can't be done" takes a satirical look at man's feeble attempts, --

especially through books, to explain the inexplicable. In the first stanza of each poem, Cummings gives us the sample which the other stanzas are to augment. The verbs in "what if a much..." are, as previously mentioned, ones of violence, and the exaggerated power given to the wind ("Blow King to beggar and queen to seem/blow friend to fiend: blow space to time") teaches us the truth about "Summer's lie" or the false sense of security the pleasantness of summer gives - namely, we must someday perish ("when skies are hanged and oceans drowned"), but what remains of man, not, obviously, in flesh but in spirit will be the "single secret" or *lone*, remaining mystery. In contrast to the foreboding beginning of "what if a much...", the statement made at the outset of "if everything happens..." is not nearly so dark as it is mocking. It is important to reiterate here the preponderance of parenthetical expression balanced throughout the poem. Cummings presents first the illogical statement ("if everything happens that can't be done) and then intensifies it by interjecting how books fail in their attempt to make everything logical ("and anything's righter/than books/could plan"). He does not stop there, making the teacher guilty of trying to "guess" and leading us, parenthetically, on a happy, wild-goose chase ("with a run/skip/around we go yes"). Every stanza follows with a new and different view of this folly.

Thus the foundation is laid in each poem. What follows in the middle stanzas is a continuation of the same train of thought. In "what if a much..." we see the same natural disaster, the wind, this time winterizing the world with the same violence (the verbs "flays --



stifles - strangles" more than adequately perform this task) of autumn. What we are to glean, according to Cummings, is that only a select group (thus the reference of "they") will survive or "say hello to the spring." Just who these privileged ones are, however, causes me, I confess, as much difficulty as it did to critic Stephen E. Whicher who eventually suggests:

—the response of our hearts to mountains and trees, which gives them meaning, and which has in our nature the permanence of mountains, the grip and toughness of tree roots, is all that can name, know, and give meaning to spring, and so in a kind of metaphoric ghostly way will be around to greet the earth's recovery from the last winter; or (alternatively) since the heart's responses are all that have value, they "exist" as brute destruction cannot; as mountains and trees rank in endurance, so these rank in worth; though the world end in ice, spring will still conquer in the sense that no outward winter can alter the value man has found in spring.

I prefer to stick to the idea that Cummings is talking about man's insecurity in a world where both nature and man himself have the power to destroy. If that is so, the cryptic ending of the second stanza would more likely refer to the stalwarts of society, those who, like mountains and trees, are well anchored, unyielding, steadfast, and, therefore, well equipped to endure. In "if everything happens....," however, Cummings is not so enigmatic. The middle stanzas utilize the established image of the merry-go-round as a background scene while the poet continues to jibe at books. Besides not being<sup>able</sup> to capture in words the songs of birds, Cummings says, books would dare to intellectualize "now i love you and you love me," but they can have nothing to say ("and books are shuter/ than books/can be"). The non-existent comparative of the adjective

"shut" is as absurd as is book's attempt to say any more about love than "it is."

In the concluding stanzas Cummings, not surprisingly, makes his final statements as to what we should have perceived to be the ultimate truth of the poems. The difference between the two, however, is that in "what if a much..." Cummings shifts the subject of the stanza whereas in "if everything happens..." he remains constant. This time it is not a wind which now "bites - peels - sprinkles," but a "dawn of a doom of a dream." One can reasonably assume, especially through the plosive alliteration, that it is a bomb, man's own technology (hence the "dream"), that looms as just one more threat to his security and survival. On the other hand, Cummings maintains the focus in "if everything happens...", portraying man as if in a comic ballet, pirouetting and leaping, only to discover the truth that should have been self-evident - "we're alive." Though the structure and technique of the two poems are quite similar, obviously their final message vastly differs. "what if a much..." ends with the gloomy realization that it is impossible to find security ("all nothing's only our hugest home") as we continue in the cycle of life ("the most who die, the more we live"). "if everything happens..." rings out grandly with the assertion that, just as we are, we are unique, and our individual identity ("one times one") makes us above the realm of bookish categorization; we are, therefore, truly "wonderful."

Thus E. E. Cummings, in "what if a much of a which of a wind" and "if everything happens that can't be done," gives us two polished gems, but, at the same time, he leaves a disturbing thought in the critic's

mind. One can feel the impact of these poems and yet rely largely on instinct to interpret those feelings. Perhaps Eve Triem says it best when she observes "because of its nature Cummings' work cannot be held within the bounds of conventional literary analysis. The critic must stretch his own powers to find the significant new insights waiting to be revealed by this poet's language in action. What is required is 'intelligence functioning at intuitional velocity'...the approach a perceptive critic-reader must take to Cummings' writing."<sup>10</sup> If intelligence and intuition, then, are the keys to Cummings, it serves as a fair warning to anyone who exposes his mind to these two poems: he may, perhaps, smile the next time he seeks a book to help him solve an intellectual matter; but he is just as likely to grow considerably more pensive the next time he is greeted by a fresh, cold wind.

A. —  
 I think you do a  
 good job with 2 different  
 poems  
 23 (25) — organization of ideas  
 15 (15) — writing style + effectiveness  
 10 (10) — M.L.A. form  
 48 (50)



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>George James Firmage, ed., E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), pp. 560 & 594. All subsequent references to these or any other Cummings poem are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup>Norman Friedman, E. E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967) p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Norman Friedman, "The Poetic Language of E. E. Cummings," PMLA, LXII (Dec. 1957), p. 1050.

<sup>4</sup>Friedman, p. 1051.

<sup>5</sup>Eve Triem, "E. E. Cummings," Pamphlets on American Writers (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Gary Lane, I Am: A Study of E. E. Cummings' Poems (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1976), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup>Stephen E. Whicher, "Cumming's **[sic]** 'WHAT IF A MUCH OF A WHICH OF A WIND,'" The Explicator, XII (Nov. 1953), Sec. 14.

<sup>8</sup>Friedman, E. E. Cummings, P. 73.

<sup>9</sup>Whicher, Sec. 14.

<sup>10</sup>Triem, pp. 15-16.

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