

AN ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE UNWORLD
ON THE INDIVIDUAL AS EXPRESSED IN
THE PROSE AND POETRY OF E. E. CUMMINGS

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The prose and poetry of e.e. cummings contains both a transcendentalist's belief in a spiritual world and a skeptic's observations of human folly. cummings sees that the individual is continually threatened by the unworld, that is, the restricting elements in society which will eventually destroy him.

cummings exposes a particular instance of the unworld's existence in The Enormous Room. In the prison-camp of La Ferté he witnesses individuals struggling to maintain true values against the French war machine, which attempts to relegate them to the position of subservient, de-personalized pawns. By the end of the novel he sees that the unworld is not restricted to France, but exists in America as well.

Eimi enlarges the concept of the unworld to include an entire country, Russia. Here the unworld is far more powerful than in The Enormous Room, and individuals are either destroyed outright or restricted to the point where their chances of escape are negligible. cummings himself is threatened, to a greater degree than before.

The poetry examines the unworld extensively. Individuals from all walks of life are affected by the unworld's tendency to view man as an insignificant digit who possesses meaning only in the mass sense. The politician's lies and the scientist's false knowledge combine to crush the individual and all but nullify his chances for perception of transcendental truth. cummings sees that the cause of man's downfall is his inability to love, but the power of the unworld is such that he is unable to communicate his truth and thereby overcome it successfully.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

e.e. cummings is both a twentieth-century transcendentalist and a bitter critic of human society. "Each of his volumes can be divided into two: one part violent loathing, one part gentlest love."¹ He has attempted to reject the temporal world in favour of a spiritual realm, but his escape has not been entirely successful. This inability to achieve complete transcendence is due to the unworld, a malevolent force that imposes restrictive rules and meaningless values on the individual. From these false values is created

a world so blurred
that its inhabitants are one another
-- an idiotic monster of negation:
so timid it would rather starve itself
eternally than run the risk of choking;
so greedy nothing satisfies its hunger
but always huger quantities of nothing --
a world so lazy that it cannot dream;
so blind, it worships its own ugliness;
a world so false, so trivial, so unso,
phantoms are solid by comparison.²

Critics have found it understandably difficult to reconcile these two aspects of cummings' work, for if the forces of the unworld are as significant as the body of his satiric writing would indicate, it is hard to escape the

¹George Haines IV, "The World and E.E. Cummings," Sewanee Review, LIX (Spring, 1951), p. 207.

²e.e. cummings, Santa Claus (Vol. III of Religious Drama, ed. Marvin Halverson; New York: World Publishing Co., 1963, pp. 79-97,) p. 84.

conclusion that his transcendental poetry lacks sincerity. If cummings' affirmative writing is accepted as genuine, it would appear that the satiric themes represent a man merely toying with the problems of society. It is only when the unworld is viewed as a general threat to humanity that his work becomes a self-consistent whole. All aspects of human life are vulnerable to the unworld's influence, and real values are everywhere ~~subject~~ to its destructive powers.

cummings is found to be aware of this threat, even to his individuality. He is seen at times admitting an essential alienation from the bulk of humanity as a result of his knowledge of spiritual truth; consequently, he will exist apart from the unworld, unable to communicate the truth he possesses.

Eleanor Sickels mistakenly suggests that this very factor renders his transcendental vision immature: she remarks that cummings' concept of love "can never expand to the rest of humanity -- to the multitudes who exercise authority or submit to it. . . ." ³ Yet his vision need not be regarded as immature but rather as comparatively ineffective against the strength of the unworld. For that matter, this inability to communicate in itself implies a victory for the forces of evil. The artist is left virtually alone, unable to tell others of his vision and thereby combat the elements in society that threaten man.

³Eleanor M. Sickels, "The Unworld of E.E. Cummings," American Literature, XXVI (Mar. 1954--Jan. 1955) p.227.

CHAPTER II

A PARTICULAR MANIFESTATION OF THE UNWORLD: THE ENORMOUS ROOM

In cummings' first major prose work, The Enormous Room, various individuals are seen in contrast to the unworld, whose forces are manifested in the First World War. Later it becomes evident that the war itself is merely one instance of a general denial of values responsible for the suppression of truth.

The Enormous Room contrasts the individual, struggling to maintain his humanity, with the grotesque, sub-human representatives of the war machine. It is made clear early in the book that one's individuality is strengthened and given new meaning through any defiance of the rigid and unflinching military society. cummings' reply to a friend is significant: the friend asks, "'Did y' do something to get pinched?'" 'Probably', I answered importantly and vaguely, feeling a new dignity.⁴ He replies vaguely because in reality he has done nothing wrong, but importantly because he feels his self personally strengthened by this unconscious defiance of the unworld. Being a criminal in the light of the military's values is tantamount to being a hero or martyr in reality.

cummings' 'crime' is examined by the French officials,

⁴e.e. cummings, The Enormous Room (New York: The Modern Library, 1949), p.9. All subsequent references are to this edition.

who, in their adherence to the unworld have in effect sold their individual souls or personalities. The examiners are described as "six eyes which sat at a desk." (Enor. Room, p.13). They ask cummings if he hates the Germans, to which he replies, "Non. J'aime beaucoup les francais." (Enor. Room, p.19).

In other words, he has denied the accusation that there is hatred in his soul, denial of which in the perverted terms of the unworld is a punishable crime. Essentially, he is sent to prison for his ability to love; the dismay of his inquisitors at his refusal to admit hatred only serves to show the hold the unworld has upon them.

In addition, they wish him to succumb to the manufactured 'truth' of propaganda that the unworld furnishes the masses. For example, cummings refuses to believe without adequate proof the rumours of German atrocities, although he is aware of their possibility. His inquisitors are attempting to force cummings to hate through their mention of the atrocities. cummings cannot allow himself to be duped in this way, and is thus found guilty for refusing to hate.

As a result he is filled with a sense of joy at having defied the soul-crushing force from without:

An uncontrollable joy gutted me after three months of humiliation, of being bossed and herded and bullied and insulated. I was myself and my own master. (Enor. Room p.23)

In contrast to this newly-developed self is the de-humanized

guard who "woke up, straightened and buckled his personality, and murmured, 'It's time, come on, '" (Enor. Room, p.12). Any true values he possessed have been supplanted by the false values of the unworld.

Later it is seen that the military men who accompany him to La Ferte concentration camp, when divested of their military trappings, regain their humanity. When one of the guards offers him food, cummings notices in astonishment that he

had relaxed amazingly: his cap lay beside him, his tunic was unbuttoned, he slouched in a completely undisciplined posture -- his face seemed to have been changed for a peasant's, it was almost open in expression and almost completely at ease. (Enor. Room, p.49)

Continuing, it is seen that from "that moment till we reached our destination at about eight o'clock the other /soldier/ and I got on extraordinarily well." (Enor. Room, p.49). Yet as soon as the train arrives, the situation reverses itself:

Finally watches were consulted, tunics buttoned, hats donned. . . . Looking at the erstwhile participants in conversation, I scarcely knew them. They had put on with their caps a positive ferocity of bearing. (Enor. Room, pp. 50-51)

The two scenes are important as they show the result of the unworld's influence on potential human beings. The train exists as a symbol of freedom from society. While on the train the unworld's hold on the guards is relaxed, and

their basic human kindness emerges. However, they are reclaimed by society as the train stops and returns them to the world of de-humanized values. Their personalities are replaced by the uniform that perverts true values and suppresses the self.

Once in jail cummings discovers that he has not been the first to be imprisoned for refusing to relinquish his humanity. "It was then that I noticed the walls. Arm-high they were covered with designs, mottoes, pictures."

(Enor. Room, p.24). In other words, he sees in the profusion of art on the cell walls a testimony to the existence of truth despite the attempts of the unworld to crush it. However, the scene, like many others in cummings' work, is ambiguous. It is first made obvious that true individuals can exist throughout the world irrespective of geographical boundaries and the efforts of propaganda to convince the world that the Germans alone are detestable: "There had been Germans and Frenchmen imprisoned in this cell. On the right wall, near the door-end, was a long selection from Goethe""

(Enor. Room, p. 24). This suggests that meaningful values in life will endure no matter how strong and concentrated are the unworld's efforts to stifle them.

Yet cummings simultaneously suggests that any triumph of the individual is transitory. It becomes apparent that the

unworld is perfectly capable of crushing such values.

Last, I found a drawing surrounded by a scrolled motto. The drawing was a potted plant with four blossoms. The blossoms were elaborately dead. Their death was drawn with fearful care. (Enor. Room, p.24)

It turns out that the scroll is a funereal scroll which reads, "Mes derniers adieux a ma femme aimee Gaby." (Enor. Room, p. 25). cummings notices that a "fierce hand, totally distinct from the former, wrote in proud letters above: 'Tombe pour desert. Six ans de prison -- degradation militaire.'" (Enor. Room, p.25).

Significantly, cummings reads this latter quotation last, which acts as a countering emotion to the previous suggestion of the individual's triumph depicted by the symbolic survival of true value in Goethe's poetry. In contrast is seen the picture of the four dead flowers, which shows the triumph of the unworld in one specific instance.

Like cummings, the man who drew the flowers and deserted from the unworld's army possessed meaningful truth. His affirmation of love is seen in his last good-byes to his wife. Here the unworld has not only destroyed his personal values, as symbolized by the dead flowers, but also has torn him from the most important of all relationships, love. The 'fierce hand' probably belongs to a guard, representative

of the unworld, who significantly has the last word and thereby shows the persistence of the false values and the destruction of the true ones. Elsewhere cummings refers to his 'trial' as an attempt by the military to separate him from his friend 'B', and in so doing, prevent the development of a meaningful human relationship.

cummings says that the "attempt of the three gentlemen sitting before me to endow my friend and myself with different fates had irrevocably failed." (Enor. Room, p. 20). This is an ironic passage and an important one, for it will later be seen that they are successful in effecting their separation.

The concept of the true individual who is seen by the unworld as a criminal is basic to The Enormous Room and is found throughout the book. When cummings is being taken to La Ferté he encounters another 'criminal:

a beautifully-smiling shortish man, with a very fine blanket wrapped in a waterproof oilskin cover. We grinned at each other (the most cordial salutation, by the way, that I have ever exchanged with a human being). . . . (Enor. Room, p.31)

cummings is given food and wine from the man, acts which suggest the Christian communion service. This is substantiated by his repeated reference to the travelling-companion as a 'divine' man.

This 'criminal' is a deserter, which is enough to signify

his humanity. Yet he is aware of the unworld's strength, for he remarks that he was fortunate to be a bachelor and escape the heartache of being torn from his family. Also, he is powerless against the guards whose eyes cummings refers to as "little and cruel, [as they] woke from the trance of digestion and settled with positive ferocity on their prey." (Enor. Room, p.34). The 'divine' man sees that he is beaten and piteously asks, "'What can we do, we criminals?'" (Enor. Room, p.34) against the forces of hate in the world.

cummings is imprisoned before being moved on to La Ferté, an imprisonment which ironically signifies freedom from the unworld. Correspondingly, release from jail is tantamount to being imprisoned in the unworld, a condition to which cummings refers at the end of the book. In prison, he sees the extent to which the unworld has intruded on humanity; the sight of the innocent children at play is more than countered by the "bored silhouette of the soldier moving imperceptibly and wearily against a still more gloomy piece of autumn sky." (Enor. Room, pp. 37-38).

This suggests that the innocent world of the children is being observed by the unworld which in time will make them a part of its system. By becoming a part of the unworld's society they will forget or lose any intuitive spiritual awareness they may have possessed.

That the unworld is seen not merely in the military becomes evident as cummings walks through the night with his guards towards La Ferté. He "drank heavily of its [the night's] perfect blackness. It was icy, talkative, minutely alive." (Enor. Room, p.53). Yet such communion with nature is not to be tolerated by the unworld, and immediately thereafter the guard's command forces him back to the world of false values. cummings' attempt to return to his communion with nature is again thwarted by their arrival at a town:

I was wrong, the moon and I and he
 were not alone. . . . A glance up
 the road gave me two silhouettes at
 pause. The gendarmes were waiting. . . .
 Nor had we gone a half-hour before
 several dark squat forms confronted
 us: houses. I decided that I did not
 like houses -- particularly as now
 my guardians' manner abruptly changed;
 once more tunics were buttoned,
 holsters adjusted. . . . (Enor. Room, p. 54)

Here the unworld has prevented to a degree his ability to communicate with the real world of true values. For that matter, its forces can be found even in the midst of the real world, of which he is here attempting to be a part. The latter inference is further supported by his awareness that the moon, symbol of the spiritual world, is endangered by the presence of the houses:

Yet when I examined the moon she too
 seemed but a painting of a moon, and
 the sky in which she lived a fragile

echo of colour. If I blew hard
the whole sky mechanism would
collapse gently with a neat, sound-
less crash. (Enor. Room, p.55)

Also, he sees that the unworld has extended its influence to that of religion in its perversion of true spiritual values. He remarks that he was told to walk "in the direction of a long, dull, dirty mass not a hundred yards away, which (as near as I could see) served either as a church or a tomb." (Enor. Room, p.55). In the blackness of the night's truth he is unable to differentiate objects in the town, because they are all equally meaningless distortions of reality.

Later, inside the chapel of La Ferte, he becomes aware of the essence of the unworld at its strongest and most repugnant. He is surrounded with images that call to mind futility and decay:

To the left and right through lean
oblongs of stained glass burst dirty burglars
burglars of moonlight. The clammy,
stupid distance uttered dimly an
uncanny conflict -- the mutterless
tumbling of brutish shadows. A
crowding ooze battled with my lungs.
My nostrils fought against the
monstrous atmospheric slime which
hugged a sweet unpleasant odour.
Staring ahead, I gradually disinterred
the pale carrion of the darkness --
an altar, guarded with the ugliness
of unlit candles, on which stood
inexorably the efficient implements
for eating God. (Enor. Room, pp. 58-59)

Here cummings is confronted by the unworld at its full strength. All of his senses are attacked, leaving him completely at its mercy. He sees that religion itself has been perverted by the unworld. For the majority of the prisoners in the Enormous Room going to church is merely a chance for an 'outing', an opportunity for the male prisoners to view the women. The Mass itself becomes a grotesque comedy, cummings likening it to a burlesque show. The prisoners eat the Communion wafer out of sheer hunger rather than from desire to participate meaningfully in a religious ritual.

The Enormous Room to which cummings is assigned is initially described in the most sickening terms possible, in order to demonstrate its complete separation from the world of truth and beauty. His surroundings are degrading; manure and sputum litter the floor. As it is at night when he first enters the room he cannot distinguish individual people: his eyes waded "laboriously through a dank atmosphere, a darkness gruesomely tactile." (Enor. Room, p.61). He is only aware of a chaos and insanity about the place.

However, in the midst of this degradation he is reunited with his friend 'B', an ironical situation since he previously remarked that this separation was the main purpose of his imprisonment.

'B''s initial remark is significant and links with the earlier impression cummings received in the temporary cell. He says, "'There's a man here who is a friend of Vanderbilt and knew Cezanne.'" (Enor. Room, p.63). This would imply that the true values exist despite the unworld's efforts to suppress them. Unfortunately, the man referred to turns out later to be a fraud, but the remark in itself is significant.

The remainder of The Enormous Room is mainly concerned with portraying certain true individuals among the prisoners and contrasting their humanity with the lack of humanity in the prison officials. In many instances a conflict is seen in the form of personal battles for survival on the part of these individuals. The prisoners are naturally aware of the conflict, and in retaliation display their individuality in any way possible. cummings remarks that, having told him the rules of the jail, "my friends proceeded to enliven the otherwise somewhat tedious morning by shattering one after another all rules and regulations." (Enor. Room, p.81).

In comparison with their display of individuality is cummings' description of the plantons who stand by helplessly. One such planton has "wise eyes situated very far apart in a mealy expressionless ellipse of face, to the lower end of which clung a piece of down" . . . (Enor. Room, p. 81) .