

A Case Study of E. E. Cummings :
The Past and Presence of Modernist Literary Criticism

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2 E.E. CUMMINGS AND THE ELIOTIC TRADITION.....	14
CHAPTER 3 E.E. CUMMINGS AND THE AFTERLIFE OF MODERNIST ROMANTICISM	38
CHAPTER 4 E.E. CUMMINGS AND THE LANGUAGE OF ADVERTISING.....	64
4.1 CUMMINGS’S PHILOSOPHY AND COMMODITY CULTURE.....	64
4.2 CUMMINGS’S POETRY AND COMMODITY CULTURE.....	76
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION.....	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	98

ABSTRACT

The early- to mid-twentieth century criticism surrounding E. E. Cummings often dismisses his poetry in Eliotic terms. In analyzing Cummings's critics' arguments and methodologies, I attempt to reveal the ways in which Cummings has been unfairly labelled, and also the strains in modernist criticism that have continued up through to today. I compare the modernist approaches to the text to the way recent critics talk about Cummings in order to shed light on our critical inheritance from modernism. Finally, I analyse Cummings's poetry in terms of one of the more recent discussions of modernist texts, that of relationship between commodity and advertising culture and modernist poetry. My project seeks, by using Cummings as a case study, to articulate not only how certain literary values came to be established, but also how certain methods of persuasion in literary criticism can undermine and even silence certain aspects of a text.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Is there no guidance nowadays for a reader who yields to none in reverence for the dead, but is tormented by the suspicion that reverence for the dead is vitally connected with understanding of the living?

– Virginia Woolf (237)

The above excerpt is from Woolf's 1923 essay, "How it Strikes a Contemporary," and although her reflections on the difficulty of trusting critics' opinions on the "chaos of contemporary literature" (236) are about a particular moment that has now passed, her question is nevertheless relevant for what it indicates about a particular strain of Anglo-American literary modernism, and, in particular, this brand of modernism's view of the literary past. Woolf's question points to the problem of historicizing the present moment, and of the related desire to systematize the literary past. Unfortunately, Woolf finds no such person to offer her the kind of guidance she seeks; instead, it is best "to respect one's own instincts, to follow them fearlessly, and, rather than submit them to the control of any critic or reviewer alive, to check them by reading and reading again the masterpieces of the past" (237-8). The type of modernism Woolf promotes here is characterized by a description of the past as an authoritative agent that guides the present. Such a view has affinities with an Eliotic view of the past: according to Eliot, the past is so authoritative and prevalent as to be inescapable, and, even, as John Guillory has remarked, oppressive: "Few writers of our century seem more oppressed than Eliot by the feeling that the canon is by its very nature closed and that it can be reopened only by the most elaborate and even covert of strategies" (177). While Eliot does not come right out

and argue that the canon is closed, as Guillory seems to suggest, he nevertheless writes about the past as though it holds a rather unquestionable authority. Eliot does, admittedly, write that the past can be changed: if “a new work of art” is introduced into “the existing order,” then “the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered” (5, emphasis original). So, on the one hand, the present can alter the past, but, on the other hand, the present only enters that revered class of “existing monuments” as it ceases, in essence, to become “new” or present – it is only recognizable as art once it becomes inseparable from the past order. In this sense, the “existing order,” the past, has the final word.

For Woolf, the past is not only the master and guide of the present taste and judgement; it is also a time in which superior critics gave wise guidance and direction to all readers.¹ A shift in criticism’s, and, by extension, the discipline of English’s conception of its relationship to this literary past is what allows for inquiries such as the one I will be making here, for such inquiries question the very thing that Woolf assumes: namely, that the past is an authority on the literature it has handed down to us, the literature that she somewhat ironically calls the “fixed luminaries of English letters” (236), and that the critics of the past were correct in the judgements they made. For us, T.S. Eliot and Woolf herself belong to the same category in which Woolf includes Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge, and Arnold (238) – they are all critics who precede us, and their criticism is inseparable from the rhetoric and values of our criticism today.

¹ “Once upon a time, we must believe, there was a rule, a discipline, which controlled the great republic of readers in a way which is now unknown” (238). Despite Woolf’s ironic tone, the targets of her irony are not the authorities of the past, but rather contemporary critics, of whose criticism she writes that “half a guinea is altogether too large a sum to squander upon contemporary enthusiasms” (237). That her most scathing irony is directed at contemporary critics is apparent in sentences such as: “Reviewers we have but no critic; a million competent and incorruptible policemen but no judge. Men of taste and learning and ability are for ever lecturing the young and celebrating the dead” (239). The piling up of adjectives (“taste,” “learning,” “ability”) undercuts any sincerity the adjectives might have conveyed on their own.

However, while an attitude of reverence characterises Woolf's relationship to the critics of her past, an attitude of scepticism and an inclination toward subversiveness characterises some of today's critics' dealings with the past, especially past critics.

Indeed, the nature of the attitude toward these past "authorities" is where the parallel between Woolf and contemporary critics on modernism breaks down. Today, it is part of critics' jobs not simply to dispute the authority of the past, but to conduct a thorough inquiry into the very nature and concept of authority. Such is the rhetoric of the inquiries into the ideology of canon-formation, for example, or of the much-written-on, much-questioned concept of modernism's "great divide" between mass culture and high art. Indeed, current discussions on modernism (and beyond, but such considerations are outside the scope of this project), center on the assumption that the past can be rewritten – there is a sense in which the more the past is rewritten, the better, for there is some sense of advantage in qualifying and contextualizing the authority of the past. While Woolf revered the past, we explore the implications of that reverence, thus bringing both past and present attitudes toward the past under an inquiry that will allow us to make sense of and explain those attitudes, and so make more sense of our own position in the relationship between literature and culture.

The aspect of such a relationship that I take up and examine here is the nature of the authority of modernist critical discourse. Modernist criticism and reviews of modernist poetry provide insight into which aspects of the literary criticism that arose in the early twentieth century have continued on through to today. In my project, I conduct a case study of the criticism and reviews of E. E. Cummings's poetry, thereby opening up questions about the nature and rhetoric of modernist criticism, and also exposing which

aspects of modernist criticism we have inherited today. The reception history of E. E. Cummings's poetry tells an interesting tale when considered in light of his status today: he is well-known, though minor, even working his way onto the occasional university syllabus. And yet, despite his recognition and his status as a minor poet, since his death in 1962, critics have paid little serious attention to him. My project seeks to find out why this has happened, and in doing so, it traces the wider values in literary criticism that became important in modernism and that have continued up through to today.

Beyond just articulating those values, though, I hope to make space for alternate models of criticism and other types of reading practices. In the first chapter, I trace the Eliotic principles of criticism that govern much of Cummings's early reception, with an embedded argument that a version of these principles still governs our criticism today. Norman Friedman identifies New Criticism, a school of criticism that adopted Eliot's critical principles, as being responsible for Cummings's marginalization:

New Criticism's methods of close analysis, which had by now [the 1950s] become fairly standard in college and university courses in literature and criticism, did not often suit Cummings' poems very well, for the kinds of irony, paradox, ambivalence, ambiguity, and symbolism favored by that method were frequently not to be found there. (*ReValuing* 73)

In other words, early reviewers' accusations of such sins as childishness, romanticism, and simplicity directed at Cummings still held ground. However, my findings reveal that Cummings's reception and the establishment of his reputation as a minor poet, as well as his exclusion from the more contemporary discussions on modernism, have involved more complicated factors and processes than what Friedman identifies as a simple matter

of a text's not fitting well with the current values of literary criticism. That is, modernist criticism helped establish the dominance of specific literary values, and what have proved to be fairly unshakeable assumptions about where the value in a text lies, and about how to read a text. According to Eliot's explicit literary criticism, literary values are intrinsic to the text; he is relatively silent on the notion of a text's accruing value based on external factors. While criticism from the mid-twentieth century on certainly did its part to heavily challenge Eliot's criticism, the Eliotic approach remains rigid enough for the texts that Eliotic criticism disfavoured to remain fixed in such unfavourable standings.

In a way, our treatment of modernism today necessarily dispenses with the approach of reverence that characterized Eliotic modernist criticism. An attitude of reverence toward a work of literature is inextricable from the reification of that object. According to Fredric Jameson, "the 'great modernist works' in effect became reified" (317), and modernist artworks were endowed with "the unique and restricted signature of the modernist seer or prophet," thus becoming "stamped as unique activities of modernist style and genius inaccessible to other people" (317). The opening up of the canon that has been happening since the 1960s makes sense as a reaction against what Jameson observed as reification of modernist art works. Modernist works are certainly no longer inaccessible, but the fairly unshakeable hierarchy of authors has proven that such an opening up of the canon has not entirely done away with the effects of reification Jameson identified. My project seeks to examine, by means of a mini case study of one author's poems, the process by which texts accumulate certain values. More specifically, I examine the rhetoric of modernist literary criticism and reviews. As Ann Ardis argues, "aesthetic value ... is directly related to *how* [works of art] circulate in culture" ("T. S.

Eliot” 316, emphasis original). The type of reception theory I conduct here contends, with Ardis, that textual value accrues in processes and conversations extraneous to the text, and that the values accrued by this process in turn govern the more direct interaction between text and critic, and, by extension, oversee any subsequent interpretation. That the texts we deem emblematic of and central to modernism are not the only texts of modernism or even the only texts worth studying has of course long since been proven. However, my inquiry focuses on our critical inheritance from modernism, and points to the fact that the style of method of analysis that modernist critics helped establish remains implicit and powerful in our criticism today.

Of course, the specifically Eliotic principles of criticism that are the focus of my inquiry have been coming under attack since the mid-twentieth century. The rise of postmodernist literary theory helped to introduce new reading practices to replace those of modernist critics. For example, reception theory, with its focus on the interaction between text and reader as the location of literary meaning, seems to get away from Eliotic principles that led to an objectification of the text at the expense of the subjectivity involved in textuality. Still, H.R. Jauss, in his 1982 *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, places a surprising emphasis on the psychology of the reader, at the exclusion of material conditions such as social, historical, and contextual factors – factors that play a major part in more recent reception theory. For Jauss, the “succession of the pre-given elements of the reception” that “limit the arbitrariness of readings that are supposedly merely subjective” (141) are psychologically rather than historically motivated: once he moves into his example of Charles Baudelaire’s “Spleen,” those “pre-given elements” prove to be pretty tightly latched to the text itself, and do not extend to include

extraneous aspects of a text (such as its reputation) that actually do far more to “limit the arbitrariness of readings” than does the individual, isolated experience of the reader, such as Jauss describes it. Jauss’s theory seems to depend upon the text as a determiner of meaning, an assumption that Eliotic criticism also makes. My examination of criticism surrounding Cummings shows how the interpretation of Cummings’s poems, far from being governed by a pure interaction between text and reader, depends upon Cummings’s status and reputation that arose through modernist critics. In order to emphasize how significantly an approach to a text determines its meaning, I aim to distinguish between a text’s modes of signification where other critics have not, thus showing the implicit hierarchy of different kinds of reading practices.

Friedman’s treatment of Cummings does not take up the question of where the values of a text lie, a question whose answer is bound up with how a text signifies. An examination into the status and reception of a poet is also an examination into how literary texts are analysed. Friedman ends his most recent (1996) study of Cummings with a surprising concession that Eliot – one of the people responsible for Cummings’s being relegated to, according to Friedman himself, the position of a minor poet – may be right. On Eliot’s obsession with the “objective correlative,” he writes,

I think that it is *this* structural feature – a respect for the separateness of the object – rather than any simply technical device such as concreteness, indirection, symbolism, irony, and so on, which distinguishes successful lyrical embodiment from what T.E. Hulme and the early Pound liked to call emotional slither, or what the New Critics called sentimentality – what

Eliot called emotion in excess of the object. (*Re)Valuing* 176, emphasis original)

Friedman rephrases Eliot's principle to be one that requires an artist to have "self-awareness, and the ability to embody it in artistic form" (176). For Friedman, Cummings "has more than enough self-awareness but too little confidence in his ability to put it into his published work" (176). Friedman, in a way, reproduces the standards that he, at times, criticises. For example, he writes, "I would ask... 'isn't there at least a chance that the fear of the emotional response to life may be as much a sign of immaturity as anything else?'" (70), on the modernist disdain for too much "undigested" emotion in literature.

But Friedman's concession that the Eliotic principle of the "objective correlative" might be right is the result of a slight blind spot on Friedman's part, or a failure to acknowledge the depths to which Cummings's reputation is bound up with the particular rhetoric of the criticism that came out of the modernist period. Besides being flooded by Eliotic principles and values, the twentieth-century reviewers of Cummings's poetry mimic Eliot's rhetoric in which the text is shown to be the embodiment of certain literary values (or lack thereof), and such values are exposed "scientifically."

Criticism that follows this "scientific" method often finds Cummings wanting. Friedman's observation that modernists seem squeamish about too much emotion in literature relates not so much to the *themes* of modernist criticism, but to its methods of persuasion. Laura Wilder, in her 2005 study, "'The Rhetoric of Literary Criticism' Revisited," argues that just as Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor observed in 1991, "'the pleasure principle is not absent in criticism' but is instead 'transferred from the literature to the criticism' (p. 94)" (Wilder 110); indeed, "there does appear to be a link

between the value of pleasure and the value of complexity” (110). In other words, while qualities like maturity, formal perfection, and a refined style were qualities that were shown to be desirable properties of the literary text, pleasure was located not in the text but in the criticism; it is the by-product of a well-conducted close reading of a well-structured, complex text.

That Eliotic criticism gave birth to and helped establish a rhetoric of literary criticism that sounded more “scientific” is hard to believe when one comes face to face with modernist criticism, including some of Eliot’s own. For example, Philip Horton and Sherry Mangan’s 1938 essay on Cummings is full of fairly blatant evaluative statements: “Cummings, like the Italians, has, admirably, *a lot of taste*; it is merely regrettable that some of it is bad” (69, emphasis original). Or, similarly, they write,

The accusation of undue limitation of subject, however, begins, by 1938, to carry much more weight. True enough, spring, love and death are large and universal subjects; but to make them a complete universe of discourse begins to suggest, after some sixteen years, a certain lack of sensibility, imagination, and courage. (69)

The latter instance reads more like an accusation against Cummings’s character than a piece of literary criticism.

But some of this criticism contains a more recognizable style of criticism, though the evaluative element is not as subdued as it is in criticism now. A 1944 essay by Peter DeVries tries to understand why Cummings does not seem to be appreciated by “the more average reader:” “resistance to unfamiliar technique probably accounts for it” (73), he writes. He proceeds to unpack and analyse (in a general way) the nature of

Cummings's "liberties with the 'laws of grammar'" (73), declaring that "there is a kind of key to Cummings in it" (74). This last statement is the most recognizably "modern" statement: a grammatical analysis of the text leads to a proper appreciation of it. The pleasure of the text occurs in the interaction between text and reader – occurs post-explanation, post-analysis, and is therefore not a property of the text, but the product of a process.

As Leonard Diepeveen has argued, one of the main shifts in modernist criticism is that works' meaning now had to be interpreted: "it may be true that for the first time in history, criticism's routine activity became not to articulate affect, but to elucidate meanings that the art work obscured" (*Difficulties* 224). The dominance (and continuance today) of such a reading practice, in which explanation and analysis necessarily precedes pleasure, means that pleasure, or the emotional response to the text, being of a different category of its form and its linguistic properties, remains an undocumented and unanalyzable aspect of the text. While a text's formal properties are central and articulated, its ability to give pleasure, where that ability is untraceable to any particular formal properties, remains secondary, and leaves certain texts fairly silent and impotent – because of their stubborn refusal to inspire lengthy and appropriate formal analysis. As we see in the case of Cummings, it is in interpretation that previously misunderstood authors and poets are shown to be pleasing. That the pleasure of reading Cummings's poetry occurs primarily in the initial interaction between text and reader, and not in the post-reading commentary and analysis, may be one explanation for why he has more or less fallen by the critical wayside.

One description in particular that is frequently applied to Cummings relates to this problem of the very present emotional quality in Cummings's poetry: that of being too romantic. Of course, for modernist critics, "romantic" was an easy label to apply to any poet they wanted to belittle or criticise negatively, but the label also encompasses notions of being too emotional, simplistic, and symbolic. Charles Altieri frames the modernist opposition to romanticism as a "stylistic refusal." He writes, "The stylistic refusal consists in the poets' turning from ideals of sensitive description and symbolic representation to pursue instead what seemed a new presentational realism" (207). The "new presentational realism" relates to a focusing on "dry, hard classical verse" (Hulme qtd. in Parkes 227) without the symbolic connotations of the kind of verse that is characterized by, for example, "ideals of sensitive description."² Cummings's poetry, characterized as it is by an intense focus on the signifier (via his unusual typography), and his purposeful overuse of nouns, should seem to fit well with this dispensing with symbolism. However, as critics began to draw attention to his use of the lower-case "i," he came to be known for the symbolism behind that move. Richard Kennedy, for example, writes that the lower-case "i" creates a "persona" who "stands away from the crowd, unappreciated, without power, yet able to open his heart with song or mock the follies of society and denounce the pretensions of authority" (xvi). Similarly, Peter Devries writes of Cummings's poetry's "celebration of the individual human identity" (76). Kennedy's characterization of Cummings's persona as "unappreciated" and "without power" fits and helps create Cummings's reputation for the use of a modest, diminished persona. In a way, this characterization also associates Cummings with the

² See Parkes for an adept analysis of this decree.

“egotistical sublime” (Keats 500), and places him in the softer, more romantic tradition – specifically the Wordsworthian one – and thus he has come to be established as less complex than the dryer, harder forms of classical modernist poets.

As I argue in the second chapter, Cummings’s reputation today shows him to be considered not only romantic (in both the literary and the popular senses of the term), but also as having tried to conduct the formal experiments characteristic of modernist poetry, and having come out with an inferior version of those forms. His reputation centres on a vague knowledge that he liked to use lower-case letters in unconventional ways, but a sophisticated systematization of his typographical innovations, and, more importantly, an articulation of how those experiments fit in with current discussions on modernism, remain to be done. My second chapter thus looks at the ways that, even though today’s critics writing on modernism no longer judge modernist poetry by modernism’s own standards, the values that certain texts accrued in the first half of the twentieth century remain stubbornly attached to those texts. Indeed, those characteristics – that Cummings was, for example, too arbitrary in his form – still make sense because the rhetoric of modernist criticism still resembles in many ways contemporary criticism, not least in our inheritance of formal analysis as a source of literary pleasure.

My third chapter shifts the focus of this project from criticism to poetry, in an attempt to show what Cummings’s poetry would look like if situated in more current discussions about modernism. I have chosen to examine his poetry through the lenses of the discussion about modernism’s relationship to the consumer aspect of mass culture, for this aspect of his society is something with which Cummings was deeply concerned. Rather than look at Cummings’s actual relationship to specific instances of a consumer

culture, I examine his philosophy on aspects such as the loss of privacy, advertising, and the nature of the individual identity in the face of these things. I look at Cummings's poetry's relationship to this philosophy in terms of different modes of meaning that happen in art and advertising. Roland Barthes's theorizing about how advertising signifies proves especially useful for situating Cummings's poetry within the discussions on the connections between commodity culture and modernist poetry. In articulating such connections, I hope not only to move Cummings away from the lasting labels that his modernist critics gave to him, but also to show how different modes of signification in a text form part of that text's overall signification, and that formal complexity is not the only place where the pleasure of a text can be found.

The testimony of T.S. Eliot's contemporaries speaks loudly to his widespread influence as a literary critic. For example, Delmore Schwartz in 1949 called Eliot's "position in the English-speaking world analogous to that occupied by Ben Jonson, Dryden, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, and Matthew Arnold" (qtd. in Tate, *T.S. Eliot* 262), and René Wellek proclaimed in 1956 that "T. S. Eliot is by far the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world" (qtd. in Tate, *T.S. Eliot* 262). Of course, Eliot did not invent these literary qualities, but he helped to set them up as standards by which to judge good literature, and pitted them in opposition to the literature and literary criticism immediately preceding his own time, and so gave qualities such as "variety" a particularly modernist flavour, as well as an authority that was apparently difficult to argue with. Ann Ardis has, more recently, argued that Eliot succeeded "in shaping the critical standards by which his own creative work was evaluated" ("T.S. Eliot" 316). While such statements about Eliot's pervasive influence have become fairly commonplace in modernist scholarship, perhaps the more powerful testimony of his influence can be found in less obvious places, where the traces of that influence are less immediately apparent. It is into the essays and reviews of lesser modernist critics that his critical standards work their way, often silently, without explicit reference to him, and so his ideas thus become more authoritative, for they are not attributed to a single, human source, but rather permeate more critical discourse in an uncontested way. Ardis goes on to talk about the "dissemination and reproduction of those standards in academic curricula for literary studies" (316). Indeed, the authority of

Eliot's name, as well as the type of literary criticism that he helped establish, still have a powerful sway in the world of literary studies today.

The examination of such cultural contexts relates to a larger argument that Ardis makes about modernism: that the literary world at the turn of the century was “a highly unstable and fiercely contested discursive territory” (318). I aim to continue this examination of the discursive territory of modernism by focusing on the territory covered by Eliot's prose work, and specifically on the ways in which certain Eliotic ideas worked in the criticism surrounding E. E. Cummings's poetry. Eliotic principles and phrases seep their way into Cummings's critics' articles, and these articles offer insight not only into the history of Cummings's reception, but also into the wider literary-cultural landscape, certain aspects of which continued through the modernist period right up until today. An inquiry into the ways in which Eliot makes his arguments, and the way lesser modernist critics pick up these arguments, reveals a movement toward a more apparently scientific criticism that elevated not only certain values such as variety and maturity, but also introduced and began to cultivate certain methods of criticism that privilege some aspects of the interpretation of a literary text at the expense of others, such as the emotional response of the reader.

Eliot's thoughts on emotions in art form part of his anti-romanticism, many forms of which can be found in his influential essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” His conclusion that “‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’ is an inexact formula” (10), and his subsequent, somewhat murky, complication of that formula, is one of his more explicit arguments against the romantic approach to poetry and criticism. Chris Baldick writes that Eliot's advocating of a “supersession of Romantic principles” (71) included a

mandate that “the private emotion should be completely digested or objectified in the public form” (72). Baldick’s formulation aims to defend Eliot against a reduction of his ideas into a simple and total distaste for emotions. Indeed, the distinction between “art emotion” and “non-art emotion” is intelligible enough in itself,³ but exactly what that distinction looks like is harder to define – in part because it is hard to find such details in Eliot’s criticism. Instead, the distinction between “digested” and “undigested” or “art” and “non-art” emotion becomes a motif in modernist criticism that provides an easy way of sneaking in evaluative criticism under the guise of a more objectively based, “neutral” criticism.

However, as some have argued, Eliot’s criticism is in fact based on more than its proposed basis of strictly objective observation and inquiry. Although his oppositions may seem to relate to and even help create an aestheticism that is far removed from non-literary spheres, many recent studies of Eliot have shown that his criticism in fact relates and reacts directly to a wider political context. As Leonard Diepeveen argues, “Romanticism for Eliot was not just an aesthetic category; more fundamentally, it was a political category aligned with the excess of democracy” (“Taking Literature *Seriously*” 271). That is to say, as much as Eliot wanted to create a discipline that had its own system with clearly defined boundaries and internal coherence, his ideas are politically interested, and so, as much as he may try to mask this by presenting an internally coherent discipline, his principles are much less disinterested than he seems to realise. Diepeveen goes on to write that “politics doesn’t cover it completely: the split between romantic and classical forms of art was also an attack on unproblematized ideas of

³ See Leonard Diepeveen, “Taking Literature *Seriously*” 270, on this distinction.

expressivism, on lack of rigor and balance” (“Taking Literature *Seriously*” 272). Still, politics, in the broader sense of the word, *does* cover it fairly completely because qualities such as “rigor” and “balance” relate to the way a society is structured, and so Eliot’s reaction to romanticism plays out in terms of political ideals.⁴ So, when modernist critics drew on Eliotic labels in their own work, their arguments related to an argument about the way a society ought to be ordered. The endorsement of certain literary values was also the endorsement of larger societal values.

Indeed, what lurks behind Eliot’s disdain for romanticism is a disdain for the poet with the “incapacity for surrender or allegiance to something outside of oneself” (Diepeveen, “Taking Literature *Seriously*” 272).⁵ Eliot draws on the language of war and religion in order to redefine the value of a poet based on his ability and willingness to put himself under that “something outside” himself. The problem, and perhaps the fun, then becomes defining that “something else.” This idea of “something outside oneself” is in many ways just another way of talking about the relationship between the private and the public sphere as it is manifested in literature. Modernist criticism, again thanks in part to Eliot, played out partly in terms of this public / private opposition, and so, as I will show, Cummings’s critics, in employing various forms of this opposition, were placing him under an implicit valuation in Eliot’s criticism – the favouring of the public over the private. Cummings was too often placed on the less favoured side of that which had to do

⁴ Cf Baldick on the New Critics: “Even those critics who seemed most eager to isolate the literary work from its social contexts, as in the New Criticism, defend the work’s integrity in the name of such social principles as order, tradition, and community” (86).

⁵ The idea of the artist as one who surrenders himself to something outside himself is an idea that occurs frequently in Eliot’s work. For example, in “The Function of Criticism,” he writes that “there is ... something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position” (13).

with the private, and such placement occurred under the guise of all sorts of labels, as I will demonstrate later.

One form that this opposition takes, and it again relates to Eliot's anti-romantic tendencies, is to separate the poet from his poetry; emotions and ideas that seemed to originate in the poet himself are relegated to the less relevant sphere of private fancy. Indeed, one of Eliot's most influential ideas resides in his formulation that "it is in ... depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science" (7). Eliot writes that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (7). It seems that, for Eliot, the poet belongs to the private sphere, and the poetry to the shared, public sphere, and it is with the latter that the critic should be concerned. As much as Eliot tries to maintain this functional distinction between the poet and the poetry, a closer examination of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" reveals that he has not in fact taken himself at his own word. For example, in distinguishing between the mind of the mature and immature poet, he directs his criticism at the poet, and so the separation of poet and poetry turns out to be simply a convenient way to use the former to talk about the latter. In fact, Eliot's own criticism is often based on a loose association between the poet and his work. For example, in his essay on Charles Baudelaire, he writes, "he was one of those who have great strength, but strength merely to *suffer*" (374). Later in the essay, Eliot moves easily from this statement, so explicitly about the poet, into statements about Baudelaire's poetry, evaluating him in terms of his "excellence of form" (375) (a form of praise he frequently invoked), "perfection of phrasing, and ... superficial coherence" (375). These latter arguments, about the poetry itself, seem to be more objective and scientific, and yet they occur alongside comments

about the poet's strength to suffer, an ability that is presented as, in part, responsible for the strength of his poetry.

And although, according to Eliot, poets are supposed to depersonalize their work, critics certainly did not abide by this principle of depersonalization. A lot of the Cummings criticism, as I will demonstrate, tends to criticise not just the finished product, but the *process* of artistic composition. Because Eliot directs his dictums at both poetry *and* criticism, even when he proposes to be talking solely about criticism, as in his 1923 essay, "The Function of Criticism," he necessarily gives advice on not only proper critical methods but also on proper poetic methods. For Eliot, criticism and poetry are not entirely separable; indeed, he criticises Matthew Arnold for

distinguish[ing] far too bluntly... between the two activities [of 'criticism' and 'creation']: he overlooks the capital importance of criticism in the work of creation itself. Probably, indeed, the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing. (18)

According to this description, the poet is just another critic, the majority of the labour of the two being more or less identical. For Eliot "some creative writers are superior to others solely because their critical faculty is superior" (18). These Eliotic principles of composition mean that Eliotic criticism often directs itself at the poet's process of composition, and, by extension, at the poet as a subject, and as originator of the entirety of the work, including its effects on the reader. Such a criticism renders the work less sealed-off from the world, less untouchable; the process of composition can be imagined, and the work becomes more humanised. Criticism that aims itself directly at the poetry,

on the other hand, transforms the poem into something of a sacred object. As I will discuss in detail later, Cummings criticism, in aiming itself at the poet and the artistic process, debunks his poetry and prevents it from having the sacred-object status that some of, say, Eliot's own poems do, to take an at-hand example.

But Eliot's call for an "impersonal theory of poetry" (7) also provides a clue to his aims as a critic: to discover something more all-encompassing than a singular methodology of poetic criticism. According to Eliot, he was attempting "to find ... common principles for the pursuit of criticism" (17).⁶ Eliot's rhetoric aims to demonstrate literature's natural affinity with science, and both his use of scientific words and phrases such as "catalyst" and "formula," and his development of a rather confusing analogy involving oxygen, sulphur dioxide, a bit of finely filiated platinum, and the mind of the poet, reveal his goal of rendering criticism a more scientific discipline. The significance of this movement toward a more scientific discipline can be better understood in light of what Eliot was reacting against: he was trying to move away from what he saw as the

⁶ Such an ambition resurfaces decades later in the work of Northrop Frye, who also attempted to elucidate a set of external principles by which to analyse literature, and in whose works Eliot's influence can be clearly seen. To take just one example, Frye's dictum that "The great technical experiments of Joyce and Proust in fiction, of Eliot and Hopkins in poetry, have resulted partly from profound literary scholarship, from seeing the formal possibilities inherent in the literature they have studied" (*Bush Garden* 234) greatly resembles what Eliot calls "the historical sense," which, he writes, "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (4). It was Frye's hope that in re-orienting the discipline in a more "scientific" direction, the character of literary criticism would be "change[d] ... from the casual to the causal, from the random and intuitive to the systematic" (*Anatomy* 7). In a way, Frye just pursued the implications of Eliot's formulations further than Eliot himself did. Indeed, the two both draw on the rhetoric of science in order to make their points about literature. Frye's rhetoric organises itself according to the principle of *ordo naturalis*, ("the term for the *ab ovo* opening (beginning from the beginning, 'from the egg') of a narrative" (Lanham 105)), in order to show literature's natural affinity with the organic world, and, by extension, literary criticism's natural affinity with the sciences. Frye makes this point most explicit when he considers the relationship between physics and nature: "Physics is an organized body of knowledge about nature, and a student of it says that he is learning physics, not nature" (*Anatomy* 11).

more impressionistic criticism of preceding and even contemporary critics: he accuses people he identifies as “most of our critics” of being “occupied in labour of obnubilation; in reconciling, in hushing up, in patting down, in squeezing in, in glozing over, in concocting pleasant sedatives” (14). In other words, they are too obscure, too imprecise, and not scientific enough.

Along with introducing a more “scientific” criticism, Eliot seems to have succeeded in introducing other values, such as “seriousness,” “sincerity,” and “objectivity” not only as qualities of good criticism, but as desirable qualities of the literature itself. Eliot did not, of course, invent these qualities, but by pitting them as qualities that are quite oppositional to those of the preceding generation of criticism, he invested them with a particularly forceful authority. His “science” of the art of criticism turned out to be less about setting down a methodology than about establishing certain values against which literature was to be judged or deemed worthy of examination. It is on the grounds of being too unvaried, emotional, immature, and individualistic that Cummings was relegated to the undervalued realm of poets who are too romantic, and therefore simply not worth closer examination. There is a whole slew of accusations that have their roots in an Eliotic criticism that, although its movement away from impressionistic, evaluative criticism and toward something more scientific may have certain merits, was nevertheless too quick to place certain poets under a condemnation that was based on a methodology that was itself very impressionistic. Such an impressionism is perhaps most striking when Eliot engages directly with a text. For example, his analysis of an excerpt from *The Revenger’s Tragedy* consists of little more than an assertion that “in this passage ... there is a combination of positive and negative

emotions” (9) – Eliot does not engage with the language of the text, and so his analysis appears strikingly vague.

One Eliotic value that shows up in Cummings criticism is that of *variety*, which Eliot presents as the mark of a great poet. For Eliot, Dante’s *Paradiso* “is as various as any poem” (225), but his description of Dante’s variety turns out to be comparable not just to “any poem;” “take the *Comedy* as a whole, you can compare it to nothing but the *entire* dramatic work of Shakespeare” (225, emphasis original). At the end of the essay, he justifies his writing on Dante with the assertion that

it may be observed that to write in this way of men like Dante or Shakespeare is really less presumptuous than to write of smaller men. The very vastness of the subject leaves a possibility that one may have something to say worth saying; whereas with smaller men, only minute and special study is likely to justify writing about them at all. (237)

What is interesting about this conclusion – for this is indeed the conclusion – is its explicit justification of its choice of subject matter, as well as its implicit warning against venturing to examine “smaller men,” for such an examination would of course be presumptuous. (Note, too, how, when Eliot talks about the worth of a poet, he switches to a personal vocabulary: he talks about writing not of *poets* but of *men*.) Another form that his ascribing of worth takes is that of metaphors of largeness: where Shakespeare “gives the greatest *width* of human passion,” Dante gives “the greatest altitude and greatest depth” (226, emphasis original). These metaphors of largeness encompass other values, such as that of variety.

In light of these Eliotic formulations, critics' condemnation of Cummings as based on his limitations of variety are also criticisms based on the Eliotic principle of smallness: F.O. Matthiessen writes, "the fascinating thing about Cummings is that he is always talking about growth, and always remains the same" (77), and that "it might almost be said that from the moment when he turned his first noun into a verb ... he has been writing the same poem" (78). The criticism that Cummings – and again, it is Cummings himself who lacks variety, not his poetry – has stayed the same finds its roots in an Eliotic criticism that values poets based on their wide variety, their richness. Similarly, Yvor Winters writes of Cummings, "the possibilities of variation in the arrangement of so limited and arbitrary and uninteresting a set of forms as the printed letters of the alphabet are few indeed" (99). Philip Horton and Sherry Mangan write that "as regards the poetry, the most general statement to be made is that it shows no technical improvement or intellectual development over a period of fifteen years" (65). Allen Tate observes a similar tendency of stagnation, but spins the idea more positively: he writes that "from the first to last [Cummings's] work has shown the growth of a uniform quality, and a progressive tendency to define that quality with a certain degree of purity" (55). The word "purity" signals an Eliotic judgement – Eliot's comparison of Francis Herbert Bradley to John Ruskin produces the confident statement that "a profounder difference between a style like Bradley's and a style like Ruskin's is a greater *purity* and concentration of purpose" (395, emphasis mine). Purity is a label that Eliot frequently assigns as a form of praise.⁷ The quality of being pure might be seen as the more agreeable cousin of the quality of being *unvaried*.

⁷ For example, he writes of Philip Massinger that "the language is pure and correct" (187).

Another evaluation in particular that critics consistently assign to Cummings is that he is immature, and immaturity is, of course, a quality that shows up frequently in Eliot's literary essays: ⁸ "the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one," he writes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "not precisely in any valuation of 'personality,' not being necessarily more interesting, or having 'more to say,' but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations" (3). It is directly after this statement that Eliot goes on to develop the analogy of the catalyst. His formulation not only establishes the words *mature* and *immature* as evaluative labels, but it also frames these labels as arising from a "science" of criticism. Still, the label of immaturity, far from being a scientific method of criticism, provides a convenient way for critics to make judgements and arguments without conducting their own "scientific" inquiry into an individual poet.

Even critics who favoured Cummings like to apply the adjective "immature" to him. R. P. Blackmur, for example, was one of Cummings's more favourable critics: he wrote in 1941, "I have been one of [Cummings's] admirers for twenty-one years since I first saw his poetry in the *Dial*" (70). Still, his 1931 essay entitled "Notes on E. E. Cummings' Language," draws on (and perhaps helps establish) many objections to Cummings, and they are objections that eventually become commonplace. For one, he ends his essay with what reads like a stern warning against over-valuing Cummings: he writes that "he forgets that poetry, so far as it takes a permanent form, is written and is

⁸ For example, of the metaphysical poets he says, "they are more mature, and ... they wear better, than later poets of certainly not less literary ability" (248); "immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different" (182); and "the French in the year 1600 *had already a more mature prose* [than the English]" (17, emphasis original). In all cases they are clearly meant as positive criticisms.

meant to be read, and that it cannot be a mere private musing” (113). Blackmur’s formulation of Cummings’s work as “mere private musing” hearkens back to “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” which states that the poet’s “own private mind” is not as important as “the mind of Europe” (2). Eliot’s essay displays an extreme distaste for private emotions, even if he does not explicitly condemn them, and so Blackmur’s criticism of Cummings introduces Cummings into a debate about the artist’s relation to society. Blackmur’s problem with Cummings’s privacy, then, is also a problem with the belief that the role of the artist is not primarily a social one.

Blackmur ends his essay by observing that Cummings’s art “seems a kind of baby-talk” (124), and 13 years later F.O. Matthiessen in a 1944 “Review of *l x l*” cites (from memory) Blackmur’s critique: “ten years ago,” Matthiessen says, Blackmur dissected Cummings’s language as “a species of unvaried babytalk” (77). But Blackmur and Matthiessen are not the only ones to accuse Cummings of childishness: John Hyde Preston in 1927 calls him “a reckless grandchild of the Symbolists” (52), saying he is “smart-alecky, and burdened by his artistic immaturity and bad taste” and that he “has yet to learn that, to be clearly understood, he must not speak with his mouth full” (53). One reviewer in 1927 writes of “the super-infancy of Mr. Cummings” (Auslander 85). Allen Tate in 1932 uses the child metaphor in a slightly different way: “Mr. Cummings’ imagery reaches the page still-born” (56), he says. Kenneth Burke in 1935 writes, “much of [Cummings’s] wider scope is devoted to cryptic naughtiness of an immature sort, a somewhat infantile delight in the sexual parts, alembicated confessions that seem unnecessarily shy and coy” (61). Yvor Winters in 1939 writes: “after the first two hundred pages (or twenty years) most readers will find the method tiresome and

mechanical, especially when it is employed exclusively in the interests of subject matter so immature” (99). He goes on to accuse Cummings of an “infantile exhibitionism, at once mildly unpleasant and infinitely tedious” (99).

While a lot of the accusations of childishness are made directly at Cummings himself as a stand-in for his work, many of them also personify his work in order to criticise it, as for example, Edmund Wilson, who writes in 1924 that “Cummings’s style is an eternal adolescent, as fresh and often winning but as half-baked as boyhood” (44). The quality of adolescence carries with it not only an obviously negative and dismissive criticism, but also the added negative connotations of the unrefined and (to use Baldick’s word) “undigested” emotions associated with adolescence. Burke’s criticism especially reveals that the accusation of immaturity is partly linked to the emotional quality of Cummings’s poems: he calls them “shy” and “coy,” which are qualities of emotion. By accusing Cummings of being immature, critics are also accusing him of a whole range of literary sins, such as the sin of being too emotional or not extinguishing his personality enough. By Eliot’s own standards, these critics are deeming Cummings unworthy of “honest and sensitive criticism,” because they are directing their criticisms at the poet and not the poetry. Such a criticism that is composed mostly of labels also devalues Cummings’s work because the label replaces, and so leaves no space for, serious examination. In addition, the accusation of being too childish is not only a simple way of criticising Cummings, it is also a way of establishing certain tropes of literary values;

“maturity” becomes a silent standard that encompasses other particularly modernist values such as sincerity, seriousness, and difficulty.⁹

Many critics *do* explicitly accuse Cummings of being too emotional, as an obvious way of devaluing him, and the effect of such devaluation is twofold: it both devalues Cummings, and relegates emotions to a marginal place in the appreciation of good literature. For example, John Berryman, reviewing Cummings’s collection *95 poems*, says, “Cummings is extremely sentimental, a fact long partly disguised by his satirical and tough-guy attitudes and still partly disguised by some of his language” (91); and Wilson writes, “his emotions are conventional and simple in the extreme. They even verge occasionally on the banal” (46). In a similar vein, critics commonly accuse Cummings of the sin of *affectation*. John McClure writes that “much of Mr. Cummings’ work looks like affectation” (35); one reviewer says he “reveals a power of imagery that makes one instinctively wish he would sacrifice a little of the affectation of unconventionality upon the altar of clarity and comprehensibility” (F.W.B. 42). The word *affectation* implies an artificiality that opposes itself to the *genuine* nature that Eliot insists good poetry must have. Cummings’s “unconventionality” becomes a stance, something he puts on, and something that therefore renders his poetry artificial.

Similarly, Blackmur, in a sentence with a strikingly Eliotic ring to it, writes in his essay on “the more obvious types of distortion which Mr. Cummings has practiced upon

⁹ These are key words that appear in Eliot’s criticism, as favourable evaluations and interpretations: “I know that the word ‘sincerity’ sounds very vague; yet it represents that moral integrity which unites the prose styles of speech and writing in any good writer” (444), he writes of Charles Whibley; he groups “Donne, Crashaw, Vaughan, Herbert and Lord Herbert, Marvell, King, Cowley at his best” under the heading of “serious poets” (250); and in comparing Dante to Shakespeare, he writes, “it is futile to ask which undertook the more difficult job” (226), as an obvious form of praise of Shakespeare; he even goes so far as to contend that “poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*” (248, emphasis original).

language,” that “the question central to such a discussion will be what kind of meaning does Mr. Cummings’ poetry have; what is the kind of equivalence between the language and its object” (“Notes” 109). This equivalence between language and object parallels Eliot’s discussion of the objective correlative: emotion in art can be expressed only through “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion” (124-5, emphasis original). According to Diepeveen, for Eliot, “emotions need to anchor themselves in an object; the poet must find an objective correlative” (“Taking Literature *Seriously*” 270). The metaphor of the anchor reveals how Cummings’s being accused of being too emotional is linked to his reputation as inconsequential. Metaphors of largeness and heaviness become a way of expressing value at the same time as they propose to describe a quality inherent in the poetry itself: that Shakespeare is “vast” is meant to be a discovered quality in his work, but it also functions as a means of status elevation. Cummings, on the other hand, remains fixed in his littleness, rendered immobile by Eliotic principles that evaluate even as they propose to describe.

For Eliot, the accusation of being too emotional is not just an accusation as such; it is also an accusation that the poet has not extracted enough of his personality from the poetry. Such ideas make sense of Allen Tate’s criticism of Cummings on the basis of his including too much personality:

From *To His Coy Mistress* we derive no clue to the existence of such a person of “Andrew Marvell”; from *Viva* [a collection of Cummings’s poetry] we get only the evidence of personality.... he has shown the possibility of making personal conventions whose origin and limit are

personality. It is the kind of convention that, given “talent,” can make of anyone a poet. (57)

He goes on to quote the second stanza of “somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond,” saying that the “sententiousness in excess of the occasion” brings us “back to the poet who becomes the only conceivable reference of an emotion in excess of what is said” (57). He concludes in a very Eliotic vein: “the poet asks us at last not to attend to the poem as poetry, but to its interesting origin” (57) – that is, to Cummings himself. In this way, Tate employs the language of Eliot’s criticism, showing that the poet has not “reached th[e] impersonality” (11) required, according to Eliot, by great art. Tate’s essay shows how the reverse of Eliot’s formulation has been proven to be true: that is, rather than abiding by Eliot’s principle that “honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry” (7), Tate demonstrates how honest criticism cannot direct itself at Cummings’s poetry because Cummings’s poetry (apparently) contains too much of himself. Tate takes this to the extreme, by perhaps somewhat dishonestly and insensitively directing his criticism at the poet by means of biographical details. Right after his declaration that Cummings’s poetry “asks us ... to attend to ... [the poem’s] interesting origin” (57), he goes on to quote a note from the publisher on Cummings: he is one who “has a ‘cheerful disdain for the approval of pundits and poetasters’” (57). It is not without reason that a lot of people found Cummings to be something of a snob. Still, what started as critics’ grudge against Cummings himself, has turned into a reputation and lowly status that is based on a criticism whose principles are at times overly based on personality, exactly the thing that they disparage certain poets for doing.

An extension of the Cummings-has-too-much-personality criticism happens in the form of accusations of being too individualistic. For example, Edward M. Hood, writing on Cummings's language, opens his article with an analysis of what came to be one of Cummings's more well-known poems, "l(a)" : "Cummings cannot play upon and extend convention; he must smash it, escape society and the public tradition, and be individual to the point of anarchy" (93). Hood's criticism is fraught with the language of Eliot's criticism: to "escape society" and "tradition" and turn to "anarchy" looks a lot like a poet who is trying to "ha[ve] his complete meaning alone" (4) and, according to Eliot, no real poet does any such thing. Eliot declares that he means this principle "as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism" (4). Indeed, the principle of collective and relational meaning appears as not only a *principle* of aesthetic criticism, but as simple means of appraisal of a poet.

Still, the label of individuality differs from a lot of the other labels in that it is not necessarily always an overtly negative criticism. In fact, sometimes his individuality appears as a form of praise, and other times it is hard to tell. Lloyd Frankenberg, for example, opens a fairly lengthy essay that extensively quotes and examines Cummings's poems, as well as his play *Him*, with the statement that "the poems of E. E. Cummings celebrate individuals" (144), a statement he obviously intends as praise of Cummings. Randall Jarrell writes that "Cummings is one of the most individual and American of poets" ("A Poet's Own Way" 191), an idea that he repeats elsewhere: "how wonderfully individual, characteristic, original, all his poems are" ("Review" 81); "he is one of the most individual poets who ever lived" ("Review" 79). Theodore Spencer writes that

There is no doubt about what Mr. Cummings stands for. He has said it again and again. He is for the individual human being against mechanical regimentation, for the living Now – in flower, bird, mountain and man.
(119)

The weight of the criticism in this sentence lies in the opposing words “individual” and “mechanical,” an opposition which relates to Eliot’s principles of order, and poetry’s relation to the “mechanical” aspects of society. Of course, Eliot’s call for order is not a call for “mechanical regimentation,” but his call does give a rather negative valence to the word “individual,” for he pitches the “individual” in opposition to the desirable qualities of a society. Later, Spencer writes, “Cummings is obviously an individual poet” (123), and although he seems to be trying to evaluate Cummings in a positive light, he still relies upon and perpetuates the other common negative criticisms of Cummings: he is unvaried (“He has said it again and again”), and romantic (through the association with nature). Spencer’s details may therefore somewhat counteract his overall evaluation, which is that Cummings is “the finest, the most delightful, lyric poet in this country” (123). Such evaluations based on Cummings’s individuality and romanticism fit so nicely into the scheme of Eliot’s bad poetry that, no matter what Spencer’s intentions, or implied disagreement with Eliot’s principles, his article cannot but hold up Cummings as a nice example of a bad poet.

The writers of the more positive criticism that bases itself on Cummings’s individuality are either not aware that in Eliotic criticism such a trait is a bad thing, or they are using his language to belittle a poet even while they praise him. One reviewer praises Cummings for his “not being afraid of the tone-quality and rhythm of song,” but

ends by hinting that Cummings may indeed be verging on the too-idiosyncratic: “he has an extraordinary power; to waste it in a desert of eccentricity would be a pity, even a sin” (Whipple). Peter De Vries writes, “Cummings’ poetry with its celebration of the individual human identity is particularly nourishing and reassuring today when that identity is either destroyed by mass violence or submerged in the mass disciplines that shall save it” (76). De Vries’s criticism points to the popular current in modernist critical discourse – that of the “masses” as being particularly undesirable, something against which the artist must pitch himself in order to survive and retain the purity of his art. Still, that modernism was elitist, and aimed to separate itself from mass culture, is a myth which the modernists fairly successfully created about themselves, and a myth to which recent critics have been putting an end.¹⁰

While Cummings’s more favourable critics may be trying to show exactly how Cummings fits with Eliot’s general claim that a good poet needs a proper combination of tradition and individual talent, they end up showing how he is unfortunately too individualistic, and not traditional enough, thereby ostracising him somewhat. That Cummings pitted himself against the masses just does not cut it as a marker of his sophistication. Instead, the individual, for Eliot, cannot hold his ground if he does not have that “historical sense,” that is “a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (4); in other words, “you cannot value [a poet] alone” (4). If this is so, then what surfaced as Cummings’s strongest

¹⁰ See, for example, David Chinitz, *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*. Chinitz is just one of many critics who dispute this myth. See also Ardis, Dettmar and Watt, and Outka.

qualities – his individuality, his unconventionality – are, in Eliotic terms, his weakness. Indeed, certain critics have noted that Cummings’s poetry seems to weaken more, on Eliotic terms, the closer it is examined: Carl Bode reviews the evaluations of Cummings, and then observes that “the closer the scrutiny, the less favourable the appraisals prove to be” (81). Bode gives Cummings a patient and sympathetic examination, but in the end deems him “a man who has made his vogue out of a large amount of – at best – casually semi-private writing” (85). Bode writes of one instance of Cummings’s use of “words without a particular meaning” (83) that “it can be doubted if there is any depth of meaning here beyond the mechanical one” (83). Depth, again, draws on Eliot’s metaphors of largeness in quality and in meaning. Bode maintains his initial proposition throughout the essay: “if Cummings has ever shown the sort of subtlety that rewards close reading, few critics have noticed it” (83). His solution to the by now familiar problem of Cummings’s “sentimental celebration of the individual” (83) is to “approach Cummings on a simpler level” (84), which, of course, just pins a label of simplicity on Cummings. Bode’s method of deeming Cummings’s failure to bear fruit in close scrutiny as a fault of the poet’s rather than of the critic’s simultaneously enforces the Cummings stereotype, and gives strength to Eliotic critical methods, for it shows them to be an accurate judge of poetic merit when in reality they are simply creating their own standards by which poetic merit may be judged.

Not all criticism on Cummings, however, deemed him to be simplistic. T.K. Whipple, in a state of somewhat mixed emotions, writes,

Poetry, as practiced by the “advanced,” has come to be a sort of Eleusinian mystery, an esoteric art the secrets of which are kept hidden from the

profane. Year by year it has grown more difficult to guess what the poets are up to. It is especially difficult in the case of Mr. E. E. Cummings's first volume, "Tulips and Chimneys"; the more difficult because it is as evident that Mr. Cummings is a real poet as that he is a radical.

He goes on to say, "Mr. Cummings's originality is beyond question – thanks, however, not to his vagaries, but to what always has and will make a poet original: fine emotion perfectly expressed." Such a phrase is reminiscent of Eliot's explanation of how emotion may be used in poetry: "the business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all" (10). Whipple is making the unfortunate mistake of praising Cummings in the same terms that on Eliotic principles allow critics to make an argument against Cummings.

One characteristic of these reviews is that many critics not only adopted Eliotic principles, but they also developed a particular way of making their arguments. Many of the reviews, both positive and negative, make their argument not by extensive articulation, but by a demonstration of their main point. Such an argumentation style is not particular to Cummings criticism; Diepeveen has noted that the language of the early reviews of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, published in 1914, "is a different kind of writing that is performative" ("The Newspaper Response" 201). In this performative, the words demonstrate their argument even as they make it. In the case of Stein, the reviewers aimed to argue that Stein's writing was mad, and they often did this by simply exhibiting it, with scarcely any comment.

In a similar manner, the critics of Cummings, though they do not seem to quote him as extensively as the reviewers of *Tender Buttons* quoted Stein, do not in general enter into a detailed analysis of his language or even provide a detailed elucidation of their own argument. John Hyde Preston, for example, after quoting an excerpt from Cummings's play *Him*, says, "you will have to draw your own conclusions." Similarly, William Clark writes: "for the benefit of the mildly curious, we quote one poem from his 'Portraits.' One is enough" (41-2). He then quotes from the poem, and ends with nothing more than: "If this be poetry, make the most of it" (42). The force of these critics' argument lies in the silence of their own voices, in their gesturing toward an argument about a poem's simplicity that proves itself by its demonstrated lack of ability to produce complex critical commentary. The arguments have a suspiciously self-fulfilling element.

Critics' refusal to examine Cummings in any complex way in fact reproduces the same simplicity that they argue to be a fault of Cummings rather than a fault of theirs. Indeed, that the poetry must not be simplistic is an unspoken rule that gains strength from its being left implicit. The Eliotic principle that "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*" (248, emphasis original) is perhaps the one main principle that encompasses many of the other Eliotic principles to which Cummings does not adhere: the qualities of being immature, unvaried, and too emotional are all characteristic of a simplistic poet. Diepeveen's identification of difficulty as having "an important social function as a cultural gatekeeper" (*Difficulties* xv) in the modernist world does indeed explain how Cummings has been kept from entering into the unquestioned canonical status that other modernist poets enjoy today. Indeed, Diepeveen concludes his study by arguing that "difficulty has become 'ideology' in the sense that [Terry] Eagleton uses the

term, a space of significant silence” (*Difficulties* 231). In other words, nobody talks about difficulty as a literary value because it is too deeply ingrained as one. As a value that goes without saying, there is little room for the examination of how difficulty functions in a particular work, for most of the work examined is examined because it is assumed to be, in some way, difficult. Modernist, Eliotic criticism, then, creates difficulty with its rhetoric of science, and its ever-complicated oppositions. Cummings criticism, on the other hand, shows over and over again how Cummings’s poetry does not fit into such rhetoric.

Moreover, Diepeveen points out that difficulty is “a reading protocol that is radically affect-based” (*Difficulties* 244). That is, it is not so much a property of the work, but rather informs a way of reading, and is related to the readers’ unarticulated response to that work. Difficulty’s being affect-based means that the perception of difficulty in a work is based on the readers’ response to that work. It is possible that difficulty is not talked about because affect is not talked about either. Because difficulty is ideological, it does not make up the subject matter of the criticism, but rather acts as a starting point for it. Gary Wihl adeptly observes, in reference to Eliot’s concept of the historical sense, that “the strength of this very abstract position lies in its resilience as a method of reading” (518). Wihl goes on to argue that criticism becomes “a matter of feeling the accumulated weight of meanings in poetic words” (518). In other words, affect (“feeling”) has come to be a silent starting point for critical examinations, and the nature of a particular work’s affect is not examined explicitly in works of literary criticism, because it remains part of the pre-articulated response. Modernist criticism found the qualities of its criticism – the difficulty, maturity, and purity – to be inherent in the text itself, rather than in any

interaction between text and subject. In this way, Cummings's reputation has remained somewhat unshakeable because the qualities that Eliotic critics criticised him for were demonstrated to be part of the text itself, rather than part of the world of, say, Eliotic criticism.

Moreover, Cummings's poetry may rely heavily on emotional affect in order to accomplish some of its effects. That is, if Cummings's poetry achieves its effects through an interaction between text and reader, then part of the reason why modernist critics for the most part wrote of Cummings's work could be because it had not yet developed the proper means of giving such poetry serious critical attention. In other words, modernist critics who adopted Eliotic principles were not only adopting specific valued qualities of poetry; they were also adopting a specific way of understanding the merit of a text – poetic merit is a property inherent in a text rather than a property of the text's interaction with a particular person in a particular setting. The authoritative rhetoric of Eliotic criticism helped certain Eliotic standards such as variety, complexity, and maturity to become dominant, and certain aspects of these standards have been developed beyond the modernist period. However, because not all of the dominant literary principles in the modernist period have remained influential, certain pieces of modernist criticism seem more foreign to us today than others. So, one favourable reviewer writes of Cummings: “he has given me far more of genuine poetic pleasure than anything I have read by the others, more even than the much-touted ‘Waste Land’” (Anonymous). Pleasure is one response that Eliot leaves little room for in his critical method. In fact, pleasure may even find an opposite in Eliot's dictum that art must be “depersonalized.” Perhaps we have Eliot to thank for why it is so difficult for literary critics to talk about pleasure.

CHAPTER 3

E.E. CUMMINGS AND THE AFTERLIFE OF MODERNIST ROMANTICISM

In the past ten years, E. E. Cummings has made few appearances in the world of literary academia, and those rare appearances have, for the most part, occurred either between parentheses, or in the endnotes of essay collections on modernist American poetry. He has not been given much sustained or sophisticated attention, and, while often anthologized and therefore arguably a canonical poet,¹¹ the results of that canonization have been, somewhat oddly, neglect and belittlement. For one, contributors to anthologies of essays on modernist poetry tend to cite Cummings in an off-handed way, as though his reputation as a poet has been established and discussed in detail elsewhere. Yet their minimal references constitute the majority of what critics have to say about Cummings at all. For example, in *Forces in Modern and Postmodern Poetry*, a 2008 study, Andrew Cook, writing on Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, writes of a certain section of the poem that "consists of two crisscrossed lines," saying that it is "an effect that dimensionalizes the simultaneities beyond Apollinaire (or beyond the mere arbitrariness of Cummings)" (54). Similarly, in *The Poetics of the Limit*, a 2002 study, Cummings is mentioned literally in parentheses in one instance (Wood 28), hidden in a list of examples ("such as") in another (37), and then introduced merely for the purpose of comparison ("the likes of e.e. cummings" [(36)].¹² That most critics mention him without any introduction reveals his paradoxical status in the world of modernist literary studies: he is widely known, but little studied.

¹¹ See Baym for one example.

¹² The fact that his name is still being spelt in lower-case letters also shows the relatively little attention that has been paid to him. Norman Friedman in 1995 made a convincing argument for the capitalisation of Cummings's name. See Friedman, "Not 'e. e. cummings' Revisited."

Such neglect has not gone completely unnoticed. Norman Friedman, responsible for the few book-length studies of Cummings, and certainly his most prolific critic, published his most recent study, *(Re)valuing Cummings*, in 1996. While he gives insightful and sophisticated treatment to Cummings's poetry, he fails to account for the problem surrounding Cummings that he identified as early as 1960 in *E. E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry*. He then provided strong evidence for Cummings's "high place" among his generation's "innovators and experimentalists" (2), including the many prizes and honours awarded Cummings, the numerous editions and translations of his work, biographies about him, his being "in constant demand for poetry readings" (2), and his ability to invariably attract "large and enthusiastic audiences" (2). Still, as Friedman points out, in spite of such enthusiastic responses, he has had a lot less "concentrated critical attention" (3) than many of his contemporaries, such as "Eliot, Pound, Auden, Stevens, Frost, Thomas, Williams, Jeffers" (3). What Friedman identified as a problem in 1960 has, since then, only intensified; today, those names continue to receive volumes more critical attention than Cummings does.

Iain Landles, too, has objected to this critical silence and, as recently as 2008, has tried to understand what he calls a "wilful ignorance" (5) of Cummings. Landles's main argument is that "critics are clearly viewing the early Cummings through the glasses of a established, future poet [*sic*]" (95), which has led to his becoming "'fixed' in criticism due to a misreading of his work" (5). His indignation at critics' neglect of Cummings is more than warranted. However, while his argument is convincing enough in itself, it does not get to the heart of the matter; it is not very useful to assert that critics have collectively been "wilfully ignorant" of a poet without a serious examination into why

and how such an ignorance might have developed. The problem, I would assert, runs much deeper than that, and is rooted, as I will argue, in the continuance of certain forms of romanticism in current literary values, including the recent, common examination of modernist texts in light of the values of a consumer culture, and, specifically, that culture's appropriation of romantic values. Cummings's unfair, but early-established reputation as a poet of the individual, and of private emotions, places him on the side of poetry that is less engaged with the culture at large, and such a reputation renders it more difficult to study Cummings in a way that would offer a critique of that culture, a critique which recent critics like to make.

Cummings's association with romanticism may be, according to the few recent critics that have written on him, the most damaging part of his reputation. Keshav Kishore Singh, a critic who has written on Cummings's being "relatively unknown" (15-16), makes the same mistake as Landles and Friedman; he tries to revive Cummings simply on Cummings's own terms, without any serious inquiry into what those terms signify in the context of current modernist criticism: "His poetry is the voice of the great internationalist who stood for entire human race [*sic*]. His voice gives us poems that deal with the eternal, the universal and the mysterious" (80). Unfortunately, his argument makes the mistake of reproducing the labels that Cummings's twentieth-century critics assigned him, and then trying (unsuccessfully) to rearrange the positive and negative values assigned to those terms.

Adam Parkes has recently written on the same tendency in modernist criticism of the 1970s: writing on the romanticism / classicism opposition that modernist critics invoked, Parkes notes that while critics of the 1970s disagreed over the worth of certain

modernist poets, their placement of these poets in the traditions of either romanticism or classicism did not change:

Neither [Harold] Bloom nor [Helen] Vendler disagreed with the terms on which [a] comparison [of Wallace Stevens and Edward Lear] rested; they simply reversed the criteria of aesthetic judgment, reading Stevens (like Yeats) as a major poet of sublime, transcendent, apolitical imagination. (229)

Something similar has happened with Cummings; he is variously linked to a romantic tradition, from the early reviews that blatantly accuse him of being too romantic to more recent criticism, including that which touches on the romanticism implicit in the commodification of authenticity, a topic which I will be exploring later in this thesis. It is partly through his brief connection with the “commodified authentic” (Elizabeth Outka’s phrase) experience that Cummings’s reputation as minor, small “r” romantic (and therefore unimportant) poet continues, but it is also through that connection that he could regain a dignified place in current discourses on modernism. The distinction between the acceptable romanticism of Stevens and Yeats and the less acceptable romanticism of Cummings lies in the inclusion of qualities such as sublime, transcendent, and general aesthetic sophistication in the former kind of romanticism, and the inclusion of qualities such as starry-eyed, parochial, and simplistic in the latter.

Friedman’s arguments in his 1960 study begin to accomplish the re-examination of values of criticism that will be necessary for a true renewal of Cummings’s status as a serious, complex poet. He argued, in a very New Critical vein, that an incorrect assumption of the values of modernist poetry is responsible for Cummings’s demise and

marginalisation: “I believe,” he writes, “that some of our reigning critics are bound by certain limiting conceptions as to what poetry should be and that these conceptions do not happen to apply very comfortably to Cummings” (3). He goes on to identify what I take to be his perception of literary values in criticism on modernist poetry (and perhaps poetry in general): “tragic vision,” “ambivalence of structure,” “studied use of verbal ambiguity,” “display of a metaphysical wit,” “employment of mythic fragments,” and “climax of spiritual conversion” (3). He spends the rest of the book trying to show on what terms a just criticism of Cummings should be carried out, often answering critics’ individual charges.¹³ Friedman attempts to convince his readers of Cummings’s merit mostly by showing that Cummings is not guilty of the particular charges brought against him, and by aptly demonstrating the kind of sympathetic attention he deserves. Still, what Friedman makes as a passing argument – that Cummings simply does not fit in with the literary values of other modernist poetry as they were understood in 1960 – wants more examination. When he argues that complexity, for example, is not the only literary value, he implies that the problem lies in the assumption of the singular dominance of a small set of literary values, not in the fact that these values have wrongfully been found wanting in Cummings.

In other words, Friedman’s reflective comments on literary value reveal the way that values in literary criticism affect a text’s reception. A value such as complexity is not just absent from Cummings’s poetry; it is not truly present in anybody’s. It is a value that attaches itself to the text, claiming to be a property of it, when it is really a property of

¹³ For example, he opens his third chapter with: “R.P. Blackmur has complained that Cummings’ language is frequently unintelligible because he disregards the historical accumulation of meaning inherent in words in favor of merely private and personal associations” (61-2). Friedman goes on to explicate the complexity of Cummings’s language, implying of course that Blackmur has been unable to perceive such complexity.

how a text is read. As Terry Eagleton has articulated, what is literary is defined not by the properties found in a text, but by the particular value judgements on which criticism is implicitly founded.¹⁴ Leonard Diepeveen has demonstrated that a value such as difficulty can be read even into a poet whose work is relatively simple. For example, he points out that Frost's canonical status rests on the basis of his "deceptive simplicity" (*Difficulties* 194), and on the fact that many critics believe that "careful reading will uncover not a surface simplicity but an essential difficulty" (194). Again, what critics present as a quality of the text is in fact a quality of the way a text is read. In this way, the location of literary values and properties remains imprecise. Of course, certain texts do arguably fit better with certain ways of reading, but an over-arching value such as complexity, as a quality that does not relate to specific formal properties of the text, remains a characteristic of a reading practice rather than a formal characteristic – and yet critics talk about it as such. The mathematician Robert Kaplan writes that "of all the arts, mathematics most puts into question the distinction between creation and discovery" (8), but I would argue that the art of literary criticism could compete with the art of mathematics for its ability to put into question such a distinction.

One recent value of literary academia to which both Friedman's and Landles's observations point is that of a more socially minded criticism. Cummings's reputation as romantic has pretty securely removed him from that more socially oriented criticism. Landles gets at such a removal implicitly when he argues that "Cummings' work, previously interpreted as subjective and individual, can be linked to the social, and in particular to the political" (13). He is trying to redeem Cummings from his ruinous

¹⁴ See *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, esp. pp 1-14.

reputation as romantic by re-casting him under the value that Laura Wilder identifies as “the social justice topos” (91). Her study examines the way that the topoi, or topics – “the stuff of which arguments are made and the form of those arguments” (Lanham 152) – of literary criticism have developed since the 1970s. One of the major developments is the “rise of the social justice topos” (100). Articles from the 1970s often end with some form of a lamentation about the fragmented state of the world, but that lamentation has been largely replaced by more hopefully “advocating social change” (98). Landles is not amiss in his aim to demonstrate that Cummings fits into this “social justice topos,” for if he were able to successfully do so, he would be placing Cummings under one of the most current topoi in literary criticism.

Wilder’s findings certainly fit with the oft-noted recent shift in modernist studies from simple close readings of high modernist texts to more culturally based analyses that reveal the extent of the works’ embeddedness in their culture,¹⁵ and it is toward this value of social justice, and away from the more isolated, cut-off-from-the-world view that the few critics who write on Cummings today are trying to move. Such arguments as Landles’s implicitly recognise the problem that the critical language surrounding Cummings has remained relatively unchanged, even though the values and rhetoric of modernist criticism overall have changed.

Parkes, writing in 2006, argues that “critics still employ the same language – or at least a version of the same language – to describe modern verse” (229) as they have done since before the 1970s, when criticism of modernist poetry was carried out in terms of the

¹⁵ Or, more often, the two types of analysis are combined. Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Mark Wollaeger, in the Foreword to Elizabeth Outka’s *Consuming Traditions*, for example, praise Outka for her “contextually informed close reading” (ix).

romanticism / classicism opposition. He contends that, nevertheless, “there’s much less certainty as to where romantic slop ends and hard, dry classicism begins” (229), even within the poetry of poets who have previously been characterised as mostly romantic or mostly classical. He goes on to point out the new, more “elastic” view of T.S. Eliot, formerly seen as a critic who had nothing to do with “romantic slop,” that has recently emerged (234). Still, the romantic / classical divide was not just completely dropped, and the versatility especially of the term romantic (as I will later show), is perhaps one reason not only for the romantic theme’s enduring sway in modernist criticism, but also for why Cummings, whose most prevalent and negative labels can be read as qualities of a “romantic” poet, continues to be relegated to a marginal position in literary academia. As I will also later show, these terms permeate the discourses of current modernist criticism, taking on many forms, and having their roots in a conversation that started in the modernist period.

According to Parkes, one form that the romantic / classical opposition can take is that of an opposition between symbolism and concrete things. Classicism, that party with which both T.E. Hulme and Eliot sided, can be defined in terms of its hardness, its concern with the thingness of things; it “traded in dry goods – dry, hard goods, to be precise” (Parkes 227). Interestingly enough, Parkes, although he admits that “it’s tempting to say that it no longer makes much sense to talk, as Hulme once did, of romantic wells and classical buckets” (234), still carries out much of his discussion using these very terms (romantic and classical), albeit morphing them and questioning them somewhat. He concludes by proposing that recent “cultural readings” of modernist figures and texts “displace Hulme’s romantic well-cum-reservoir from the individual poet

onto culture itself” (234). The nature of romanticism’s continued presence, more recently in the form of a displacement onto a whole culture, is something that I will take up and examine later. What Parkes’s article points to, though, is the prevalence of the label “romantic” as it is applied to poets: his article’s brief discussion of various poets still carries itself out in the very terms that he seeks to demystify.

For now, it is striking that the shallow, romantic labels applied to Cummings do *not* work out in terms of Parkes’s noted trend of a romanticism that is projected onto a whole culture, but rather work out in the staler terms of the romanticism of the individual. For instance, Harold Bloom introduces his critical edition of Cummings by noting that “the characteristic flaw in Cummings is his flagrant sentimentalism” (11), accusing him of what he calls “hyperbolic flaws” (11). Of course, to introduce a poet by belittling him is a move typical of Bloom, and so we should not perhaps read his condescension too widely as an indicator of Cummings’s general reputation, but similar accusations occur in other contexts. Still, his choice accusation of “sentimentalism” comes straight from Cummings’s reputation among his contemporaries back in the mid-twentieth century,¹⁶ and it places Cummings firmly not just in the general romantic tradition, but, more specifically, in the particular variety of romanticism that modernists like Hulme and Eliot (are commonly perceived to have) promoted as inferior to the tradition of classicism, into which (superior) modernist poets were entering.

¹⁶ Some examples of Cummings’s contemporaries’ accusations of sentimentality: “Primarily, Mr. Cummings’s poems are loved because they are full of sentimentality” (Jarrell 79); “He is a romantic poet. He waxes sentimental about sky-scrapers and gum chewing molls and sweat and sunsets just as other poets have been sentimental about pale ladies and painting bosoms” (Auslander 84); “Cummings’s subject matter is relatively simple: in his serious moods, he writes sentimentally about love, conceived primarily as copulation; in his satirical moments, he makes smutty jokes about it” (Winters 98).

But Bloom is not the only one who continues the Eliotic and Hulmean definition of romanticism when writing on modernist texts; Cummings often appears in collections that try to analyse him “on his own terms,” but that analysis often ends up simply continuing the romantic tropes that have been applied to him since the 1920s. A choice example of this occurs in a 2007 collection *Modernism Revisited: Transgressing Boundaries and Strategies of Renewal in American Poetry*, which contains an essay on Cummings by Isabelle Alfandary, who has authored a book and many articles on him. The romantic trends in this collection take the form of organic metaphors. Such metaphors are one way of continuing the Eliotic view of literature: Eliot’s characterisation of classicism as more mature than romanticism¹⁷ implies a view of literature in which literature undergoes a natural process of growth, becoming progressively more adult-like. Such a view is striking for its conception of literature as natural and organic; this natural quality of literature is then something on which the introduction to *Modernism Revisited* draws, in its characterisation of modernist art as a location of tension between two “drives,” the more conservative drive and the more transgressive drive, and that tension is “one source of the peculiar dynamism of American life” (Patea and Derrick 1). They continue: “the works of art then become the locus where this evolutionary process can be beneficially experimented with...and contemplated” (1-2). That art should be the locus of evolutionary drives fits uncannily with Eliot’s implicit view of literature in which the qualities of a nation’s literature gradually mature, the stronger qualities winning out over the weaker ones. It seems odd or at least somewhat

¹⁷ See Eliot, “The Function of Criticism:” “Were the French in the year 1600 classical, and the English in the same year romantic? A more important difference, to my mind, is that the French in the year 1600 *had already a more mature prose*” (17, emphasis original).

ironic that Cummings should be included in an anthology that takes the evolutionary process as its governing principle, for Cummings's poetry seems scarcely to have survived that process.

Still, this collection does not exude that "elasticity" that Parkes notes is an attribute of recent Eliot criticism; its editors employ a more conventional language of modernist critical discourse: namely, that modernism is characterised by a "strong urge to reconstruct the fragments" (5), and this "urge" (again, they continue to use the language of evolution) "should induce a corresponding urge to reconstruct ourselves – that is, to reformulate our generally-accepted notions of what we are and how we fit into the puzzle of the world" (5). However trite such a conclusion may sound, its presence proves Wilder's study right, for, weak example though it may be, it follows that "hope for social change" (Wilder 99) that she notes characterises especially the conclusions of recent literary criticism. In the same way, Alfandary's essay does not exhibit that elasticity that would allow formerly opposing romantic and modernist values to intersect; rather, she places Cummings in the romantic tradition, writing of his need to "grow out of Romanticism, without giving up his lyrical ambition" (115), defining this move as an "adopt[ion] [of] a mode of minor, diminutive lyricism, that of the lower-case first person singular" (115). Alfandary does not realise that she still reads Cummings's strongest qualities in romantic terms, thereby rendering it difficult for him to grow out of romanticism. Of course, the word *diminutive* refers to Cummings's famous use of unconventional lower-case letters, especially the lower-case "i," but it also carries with it an unfortunate metaphor of smallness – Cummings, too, is diminished, although Alfandary seems scarcely to realise this. Furthermore, Alfandary's focus on Cummings's

“i” keeps him with this book’s most notable romantic value: that of its emphasis on the individual subject. Cummings’s passion is a passion of the individual, which, according to the editors’ introduction, will then reconstruct itself in order to fit into the “puzzle of the world.” Unfortunately for Cummings, his “strategy of renewal” (Alfandary 111) sounds a bit weak in comparison to the current climate of modernist criticism, where the romantic tropes arise in much more complex ways than Alfandary allows them to do in her essay on Cummings.

The 2007 *Norton Anthology of American Literature (Shorter Seventh Edition)* also places Cummings under a tired and rigid view of modernism; modernism here is still an art that collects the fragments of society, and tries to, somehow, through art, redeem them. The editors’ headnotes to Cummings contain the curious statement that he “was less ambitious in his attempts to reshape poetry than Stein, Eliot, Pound, Stevens, or Williams, partly because he was much more concerned to be widely accessible” (Baym 997). It is strange that Cummings should now be “less ambitious” in his unconventionality, for that is certainly not how some of his contemporaries conceived of him: John Hyde Preston wrote in 1927, “you will probably think him mad” (54), giving him the strange description of being “abnormally sane,” for only such a man “could imagine and set down such deliberately crazy stuff” (54). Of course, the difference in perception of conventionality arises just as much from a different placement in time; what seemed mad in 1927 does not necessarily seem mad to a literary world whose inheritance comes from that tradition. Still, the difference in perception also relates to the Cummings that has survived the modernist period: the poems that follow in the anthology

are Cummings's less experimental poems.¹⁸ In any case, his being "widely accessible" can be read as a residue of the more modernist complaint of Cummings's simplicity.

The headnotes continue to summarise Cummings's poetry and his life by employing decidedly modernist-romantic (modernist versions of romantic) language:

beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, Edward Estlin Cummings built a reputation as author of a particularly agreeable kind of modernist poetry, distinguished by clever formal innovation, a tender lyricism, and the thematic celebration of individuals against mass society. (Baym 996)

The phrase "particularly agreeable kind of modernist poetry" betrays to even the most uncritical reader a strict departure from modernist poetry as it is typically known – that is, its penchant for being disagreeable, inaccessible, and certainly not tender. The phrase "tender lyricism" sounds like an accusation of soft romanticism, whose opposition is what Hulme identified as "small, dry things" of beauty (qtd. in Parkes 227), and the typical modernist belief that language "had to be *concrete*" (Perloff, "Epilogue" 575, emphasis original). Furthermore, the editor's identification of Cummings's poetry as a "celebration of individuals against mass society," besides sounding somewhat trite, places Cummings under a somewhat out-dated view of modernism: as Parkes claims, "it may be misleading to argue ... that mainstream modernism emerged in reaction against mass culture" (234). But if we can still argue such a thing about Cummings, then the implicit argument becomes that he is indeed out-dated, for he will not fit smoothly into the more recent themes of modernist criticism, which center around the complex

¹⁸ "Thy fingers make early flowers of;" "in Just-;" "O sweet spontaneous;" "Buffalo Bill's;" "next to of course god america i;" "I sing of Olaf glad and big;" "somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond;" "anyone lived in a pretty how town"

relationship between individuals and mass society, not their simple opposition to one another.¹⁹ In other words, Cummings's "celebration of individuals against mass society" means that he remains cut off from the dominant writings on modernism that depend upon the complicating of this opposition that apparently defines Cummings.

But these are only headnotes, and it is hard to make complex statements in a paragraph. Still, *Words into Pictures: E. E. Cummings's Art Across Borders*, a study that aims to appropriate Cummings through the language of visual rhetoric, and one of the only book-length publications on Cummings in the past ten years, also has a tendency to identify Cummings with an out-dated romantic view of the individual poet reacting to society. The editors suggest that "E. E. Cummings *is* the William Blake of Modernism," saying that such a thought "might help us in understanding why his art has been so often misunderstood, rejected or intentionally relegated to being a minor modernist: he is simply too complex and controversial to gain an unambiguous standing in the canon" (Flajésar and Vernyik xiii, emphasis original). His being too complex is certainly not the ostensible reason for his relegation to being a minor modernist; most critics dismissed him on the grounds that he was too simplistic. And as much as the comparison of Cummings to Blake seems a little stretched (Cummings, though a visual artist, did not illustrate his own work), it may seem a stretch in part only because of Cummings's now confirmed status as a minor poet, something of which the contributors to this volume are well aware. Moreover, there is a sense in which the comparison to Blake is not mere coincidence; it may be that much easier because of Cummings's firm placement in the tradition of the romantics.

¹⁹ See Outka, Ardis, and Dettmar and Watt for such discussions.

Such a placement also occurs in Cummings's appearance in Bloom's 2005 collection of essays on *Modern American Poetry*, though Cummings is not of course listed among the "major modern American poets" (a title reserved for Robinson, Frost, Stevens, Williams, Pound, Moore, Eliot, and Crane [vii]). Edward Hirsch, in an essay on American poetry in the 1920s, writes, "he was a determined individualist who signed his name in the lower case and defined the self with a small *i*" (269). Non-evaluative as such a statement may appear to be, Hirsch condemns Cummings on the same terms as Cummings's contemporaries, and he tries to elevate him on the very terms on which other critics disparage him – namely, the familiar terms that Cummings was concerned with self-definition and individualism. Hirsch repeats the criticism that Cummings was immature, and it is a criticism that, whether or not one identifies the Eliotic influence in the criticism, it clearly belittles the poet: "a feeling of adolescent rebelliousness still clings to a large number of his typographical experiments" (269). He also accuses Cummings of "time-honored, circumscribed, and conventional subject matter" (269), and goes on to write that "his oppositions were forceful, elementary, reductive" (269), saying, in perhaps one last failed attempt to elevate Cummings on his own terms, that he "always he spoke up for the spontaneity of feeling – the new, the irreverent, the unselfconscious – and sang in celebration of love and the individual self" (269). Cummings, by these standards, is a romantic in the belittling senses of the word.

What is perhaps most interesting about this essay is that Hirsch suddenly, apparently without the author's or the editor's noticing, switches from present to past tense: his paragraph on Marianne Moore begins: "Moore is particularly American in her belief in 'accessibility to experience'" (268), while the next paragraph, on Cummings,

begins “Like Williams and Moore, E. E. Cummings *was* a poet of...” (268, emphasis mine). In this way, he implicitly belittles Cummings, implying that his poetry is a thing of the past – that although he always *did* sing in celebration of love and the individual self, such songs no longer have any consequence for today. Hirsch’s verb tenses reveal his (Hirsch’s) attitude toward Cummings, even though its explicit articulation takes the form of a fairly sophisticated analysis, to be one of condescension. The past tense which marks his conclusion – “His best work gave a sense of freedom and buoyancy to the struggle to create an innovative, indigenous, process-oriented American poetry in the twenties” (269) – considerably weakens any case he is trying to make for Cummings. The markers of time occur not only in the past tense but also in other ways such as the telling phrase “in the twenties” – Cummings’s poetry belongs to the ’20s, where the effects of his poetry had sway and influence – by implication, his poetry does not have such an effect today. The guarantee that a poet remain minor and understudied occurs sometimes in the most implicit ways.

But one of Hirsch’s criticisms, though it contains an affirmation of Cummings’s status as a “lesser poet” (a by now familiar refrain, uttered with a by now familiar confidence), applies the (also familiar) adjective “romantic” to Cummings in a potentially productive way. He writes,

Like Williams and Moore, E. E. Cummings was a poet of contact and immediacy, the present moment. A lesser poet than either – in an ultimate sense he altered no language but his own – he was nonetheless allied with them in. [*sic*] a commitment to the new and experimental. In a way he

combined the romantic bohemian sensibility of Millay with the restless formal experimentation of Williams. (268)

That he feels no need to prove his claim that Cummings “altered no language but his own” (or, for that matter, to prove that such an accomplishment would mark him as a greater poet) reveals the extent to which Cummings’s lowly reputation as a “lesser poet” has been continuing on unquestioned. More interestingly, though, Hirsch is not alone in linking Cummings with the “romantic bohemian sensibility.” Michael Murphy, in his essay on what he identifies as “a certain modernist preoccupation with the marketplace” (85) that can be seen in the “burgeoning bohemian nostalgia industry” (62), also links Cummings to the commercial aspect of the culture of romantic bohemianism, as seen in the magazine *Vanity Fair*, a magazine in which Cummings’s poetry appeared:

modernist works themselves often traded on the styles and rhythms of commodity culture explicitly – even, arguably, in spite of their own formalist ‘anxieties’ about mass culture. This is clearly the case with such landmark pieces of modernism as William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, certain sections of Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, [and] much of e. e. cummings’s poetry. (85)

While Murphy explicitly links Cummings to commodity culture, he does not conduct any in-depth study of Cummings’s exact relation to it, or of his, as Murphy puts it, “trading” of the “styles and rhythms of commodity culture.” Cummings’s relationship to commodity culture is in fact in keeping with his being linked to romanticism for it associates him with a culture of the romantic, authentic experience, as opposed to a culture of the so-called “high modernism” of Eliot. Even though a straight opposition

between mass culture and high modernism has been for the most part disputed, it still continues in various forms, such as in the opposition between the two that is implicit in examinations into commodity culture's influence on modernist texts. In this way, Murphy's offhanded comment signals a potential for Cummings to be connected with more recent discourses on modernism, through his relationship to that commodity culture.

According to Murphy, the birth and promotion of a bohemian nostalgia for the days of the "dignified starving artist" (86), means that "modernist bohemia, unlike the 'authentic' Romantic bohemian experience to which the *Vanity Fair* article's title ['One Hundred Per Cent Bohemia'] refers, can often be seen to have reached the very brink of achieving an acute consciousness of its own commodification" (86). For Murphy, the difference between the modernist bohemian aesthetic and romantic bohemia is that the modernist aesthetic involves a "highly ironic, self-consciously decadent *enactment* of the popular, the consuming of consumption, carried out with special effect in ballrooms and magazines of culture" (86, emphasis original). In other words, one of the main features of the modernist appropriation of the bohemian experience is irony. And if irony characterises the modernist aesthetic, romanticism is, in turn, characterised by a sincerity and taking seriously of the notions of authenticity it has to offer. It is this sincerity which can then be adopted, with irony, in the modernist aesthetic. A nostalgia for more romantic days means that the past for which it yearns cannot contain the ironic self-consciousness that characterises the modernists who appropriated it.

Murphy's argument about the irony of modernism's self-commodification does indeed continue the opposition between romanticism and modernism that critics like Eliot

enforced, insofar as it devalues the romantic principles of sincerity and authenticity, and elevates, on the basis of that opposition, the irony characteristic of modernism's relationship to that authentic experience. For Eliot, the opposition occurred through an association of classical principles with what came to be recognisably modernist ones: in "The Function of Criticism," Eliot responds to an essay by Middleton Murry on the similarities between romanticism and classicism: "With Mr. Murry's formulation of Classicism and Romanticism I cannot agree; the difference seems to me rather the difference between the complete and the fragmentary, the adult and the immature, the orderly and the chaotic" (15). In a way, Murphy, like many other modern critics writing on modernism, simply continues, in another form, the distinction between romanticism and classicism.

Indeed, another form of the continuance of this opposition occurs in the introduction to *Marketing Modernisms*. Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt warn that

the positioning of such a gulf [the great divide between modernism and mass culture], such a guarantor of Romantic isolationism for modernisms of various form and political inflection, is not only inaccurate, but also exceptionally damaging insofar as it influences matters of canonization and reception. (6)

In other words, reading a "romantic isolationism" into modernist culture is a move that buys into the myth that the modernists in many ways successfully created for themselves. That is, a part of the modernist aesthetic is a paradoxical appropriation of a romantic nostalgia for the "authentic" and, at the same time, a romantic detachment from mass culture – a carefully explicit distancing from this aesthetic. However, to read such an

isolationism into the *actual* modernist aesthetic would mean taking the modernists completely at their own word, and sharing some of their blind spots. It is in highlighting modernism's dependence upon more mass culture ideas, such as those found in commodity culture and in romantic ideas of authenticity, that critics may enrich their understanding of the modernist aesthetic, unhindered by this blind spot. Murphy's rightful identification of Cummings as one of the poets who appropriated "the styles and rhythms of commodity culture explicitly" (85) should place Cummings under that more recently arisen modernist aesthetic of an ironic but complex relationship to commodity culture. Instead, Cummings remains a part of the romantic aspect of the modernist aesthetic, appropriating commodity culture and its notions of the authentic romantic experience, but, fatally, doing so (apparently) without the irony that would undoubtedly give him the more honoured status of a poet of complexity, and earn him more in-depth analyses.

Irony may be one of those tropes that took on a more central importance during the modernist period; its centrality in literary critical discourse has continued up through to today, and it is all the more powerful as a quality for its dominance as a marker of good literature. Irony, like difficulty, dominates as a literary value, at the unfortunate expense of the continued exclusion of those texts which have previously been found not to fit the criteria of irony, even if the nature of that irony has shifted from simply an ironic detachment from commodity culture to a more complex (but still ironic, of course) appropriation of that mass culture. Eliot's romantic myth of aesthetic purity has more or less disappeared with the rise of the studies of commodity culture and modernism. As Dettmar and Watt point out, "such an interrogation [into modernist works in light of

marketing and market concerns] would tend to contradict notions of the aesthetic purity of the modernist artefact” (8), and the consequence of such interrogations, as more recent critics of modernism have argued, is the potential for a more inclusive canon as well as a more nuanced view of the way in which certain literary values arose in the modernist period.

Elizabeth Outka conducts one such study, which, although it does examine fairly conventionally canonical texts, also reads those texts in a new light. Outka summarises the shift in modernist studies as one that has moved to “more inclusive readings that expose modernism’s intimate connections to advertising and commodity culture, as well as its surprising alliances with issues of nostalgia and authenticity” (156). The “alliance with issues of nostalgia and authenticity” is also an alliance with the form of romanticism that has continued through the modernist period up to today’s scholarship on modernism. On marketing strategies in Britain at the turn of the century she writes, “New objects and places were packaged and sold as mini-representations of supposedly non-commercial values: nostalgic evocations of an English rural past; appeals to an original, genuine article; and images of a purified aesthetic free from any taint of mass market” (4). The modernists’ successful creation of this “image of a purified aesthetic” can perhaps explain the surprising nature of Outka’s reading of some of the texts she chooses – notably her reading of the scene in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* where Lily Briscoe paints, a scene which she notes “might not at first appear to be commercial at all” (168). The fact that the scene, and, indeed, the whole book, does not seem to draw on commodity culture (indeed, it seems quite removed from commodity culture) reveals the

extent to which modernism has succeeded in commodifying itself as a pure, authentic, aesthetic experience.

Outka's reading of *To the Lighthouse* reveals that the "very image of authenticity and noncommercial suggestion was at the heart of so much commercial strategy" (169-70). That commodity culture depends upon the paradox that we do not fully buy into the illusion of authenticity it presents is what Outka suggests as the reason for its strong staying power: commodity culture "demands that we unmask it and see it as constructed, for unless we do, we cannot imagine that we could obtain it for ourselves" (171). It is this unmasking that means that in order to still buy into any ideas of a purified aesthetic experience we have to acknowledge the improbability of any such thing's existing. The notion of a purified aesthetic, while it may need to be continually and easily unmasked, still governs the way we approach certain modernist texts, which in turn has a profound effect on how we interpret them. In other words, art that successfully markets itself as offering an authentic aesthetic experience also demands that we approach that art with a reverent attitude, believing it to contain that purified aesthetic we expect to experience. However, this also means that the confident, negative labels that critics continue to apply to Cummings erases any approach of reverence that would otherwise be accorded him, and he is excluded from the same category as other more major modernist texts.

Marjorie Perloff, too, in considering the relationship between modernism and commodification, focuses her analysis on the nature of the readers' approach to the text. She examines the customer reviews on amazon.com of *The Waste Land*, citing customers' phrases such as "He's the one and only poet of modern man's soul" ("The Aura" 21); "the poem is one the true benchmarks for twentieth century literature [*sic*]"

(21); and “‘T.S. Eliot explores the greatest of human melancholy – disillusionment’” (21). Perloff notes astutely that “[Fredric] Jameson might respond that these customer reviews testify to the thorough commodification of *The Waste Land*” (22). She argues, against Jameson, that “it seems that what readers look for is not the poem’s political unconscious but the charm of its distinctive rhythm and its deployment of a language that is somehow extraordinary. It must, in short, give pleasure” (22), taking their admiration to be a sign of the continued aura of modernism’s being in fact a quality of the language of those modernist texts.

Perloff may be right in insisting that the readers, non-professional ones as she assumes them to be (“they are not likely to be professionals or even students, although they are generally well informed and highly literate” [20]), are simply looking to read for pleasure; however, the very things she opposes to pleasure – what she (after Jameson) identifies as “the poem’s political unconscious” – may in fact not be separate from the charm of the poem’s “distinctive rhythm” and “deployment of a language that is somehow extraordinary,” and may be part of what gives pleasure in a poem.²⁰ These non-professional readers likely bought the book and read *The Waste Land* with at least some knowledge of its reputation and canonical status, and may even know some of the particulars of the way it is customarily praised – praises which very well may get reproduced in turn in their own reviews. Such knowledge comes even from the simplest, most at-hand places such as in the endorsements on the book jacket. Indeed, the part of

²⁰ Eagleton makes this point when he writes, “The problems of literary value and pleasure would seem to lie somewhere at the juncture of psychoanalysis, linguistics and ideology” (*Literary Theory* 167). He also articulates this idea more fully in an earlier essay: “the relation between the kind of pleasure people take in art, and the pleasure they derive from striving to realize their political needs, has become extremely obscure” (“Poetry, Pleasure and Politics” 179), he notes in answer to the question “‘Why do people like/dislike certain lines of poetry?’” (179).

Jameson's essay on postmodernism from which Perloff quotes talks about the reification of culture, a reification which "somehow shuts us out even from a sympathetic participation, by imagination, in its production. It comes before us, no questions asked, as something we could not begin to imagine doing for ourselves" (317). Moreover, "this in no way means that we cannot consume the product in question, 'derive enjoyment' from it" (317). In other words, the reification of culture, as seen for example in the creation of modernist classics, dictates the way we experience pleasure. That is to say, part of the pleasure of *The Waste Land*, according to the reviews, seems to originate in the notion of the work's coming from a genius – the producer of the work is rendered inaccessible and reified. Thus, Eliot's and his text's reputation is part of the pleasure experienced in reading him.

In a way, Perloff's findings signal a resurgence of the romantic veins of modernism, particularly those romantic veins that have to do with commodity culture. She argues that "The Modernist 'masterpiece' – that term of opprobrium – seems to be reasserting its auratic claims upon us, even as Internet discourse held, in some quarters, to be responsible for the loss of literary 'quality,' is ironically reinforcing its presence" ("The Aura" 34). Perloff's selected amazon.com reviews of Eliot are striking for their obvious acceptance of the "aura of modernism," an acceptance which involves an approach of a sort of blanketing reverence that sees modernist texts as influencing all facets of life, in almost a god-like, disinterested way. One review especially betrays what Perloff identifies as modernism's aura: *The Waste Land* here is not only concerned with grand, sweeping narratives about "searching for reason inside chaos" (20) and "spiritual alienation and degradation" (22), but is in fact "one of the ... most ...

interesting poems ever written” (21). In this way, the aspect and the texts that the amazon.com reviews privilege are those texts that apparently include grand narratives, and about which readers can make equally grand statements. The readers must be able to justify and fulfill the attitude of extreme reverence they have toward the text.

At least two distinct forms of romanticism appear to have been very much a part of the modernist aesthetic, from its affinities with commodity culture’s own romantic nostalgia for the past to the creation of an obviously enduring version of the modernist text in which art provides a pure experience outside of that culture – the romantic isolationism that Dettmar and Watt talk about. These forms of romanticism extend, as I have tried to show, beyond a mere philosophical framework that modernists and critics of modernism apply to modernist texts. They are, rather, properties not of the texts themselves, but of an interaction between the text and the reader because they affect the way the reader approaches the text. Such all-encompassing forms of romanticism mean that we approach *The Waste Land* with reverence, but Cummings’s poetry with an undue familiarity.

Of course, my point is not by any means a new one. Reception theorists have been emphasising the importance of the interaction between text and reader, and what that interaction means for interpretation for a while now. As Stanley Fish puts it, “both readers and interpreters begin (exactly the wrong word) *in medias res*; they go about their business not in order to discover its point, but already in possession of and possessed by its point” (37). Cummings’s poetry could easily be accorded a canonical status and rewarding analysis through a reading of his poetry that draws on current themes in modernist studies, and that approaches him with the same amount of reverence accorded

other canonical modernist texts. The continuance of this aura of modernism, and, indeed, of reified art forms in which the pleasure of reading poetry is inextricably bound up with the pleasure of consumption, both of the poem and of the poet's reputation that has become a part of that object, testify to the philosophies of consumer culture's extensive influence in our relationship to modernist poetry in particular, and works of art in general. Outka's study maintains that consumption in modernism has a complex relationship with the object of that consumption. Cultural consumption in the modernist period and cultural consumption today share the requirement of the idea of an authentic experience: in the modernist period, the authentic itself was commodified; today, reading certain modernist poems is commodified as an authentic experience, and that experience is bound up with the reputation of the poet himself. So, as long as Cummings remains literally in the parentheses and endnotes of current studies on modernism, his reputation as romantic and sentimental means that he remains too easy to understand, and so he is paradoxically not able to be consumed.

4.1 CUMMINGS'S PHILOSOPHY AND COMMODITY CULTURE

In their foreword to the 1996 volume *Marketing Modernisms*, Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt write with incredulity of “the durability of the notion of an impassable gulf between modernist writing and the popular audience,” saying that such a notion’s resilience “has been nothing short of remarkable” (3). In the years following, the notion of an unbreachable fissure between literary modernism and mass culture so much weakened that in 2002 Ann Ardis felt the need to discourage fellow critics from erring too much in the opposite direction: “What Michael North has termed the new modernist studies’ ‘return to the scene of the modern,’ shouldn’t simply ignore the modernist avant-garde’s exclusionary moves and anxious territorialism” (175), she writes in reference to critics’ dispelling of the myth that there was a great divide²¹ between modernist high art and mass culture. In fact, Ardis insists that “modernism’s defense, however contradictory, of a pristine and sacralised high art against the threatening pollution of mass culture needs to be recognized ... as one component of a very complex network of great divides separating ‘literature’ from non-literary writing” (175), among other kinds of divides. Indeed, the way that certain modernist text’s interaction with mass culture affected specific aspects of those texts wants more detailed examination.

As Ardis rightly points out, the problem with this newer account of modernism and its relationship to mass culture is that it threatens to erase certain modernists’

²¹ This phrase is in reference to Andreas Huyssen’s fairly influential book, *After the Great Divide*.

deliberate creation of a sacred space for their art. Even though the distinction between high and low modernist art has essentially all but crumbled, residues of this myth remain, not only in our conception of certain texts' status, nature, or origin (or, indeed, our complete ignorance of certain texts), but also in the texts themselves. Lest we gloss over the strong influence of certain Anglo-American modernists' insistence on separating mass culture from high art, that insistence needs to be examined and analysed in its proper place. E. E. Cummings's loud elitism makes him an obvious candidate for such an inquiry, and so I will examine the way that this particular myth works out in his poetry.

Cummings's relationship to mass culture is particularly interesting because of his noisy, unambiguous protestations against certain aspects of mass culture – particularly against what he saw as the exceptionally abrasive and degrading culture of advertising. It is not without reason that many of his contemporary critics accused him of snobbery. Still, although Cummings harboured a notable elitism, he did not unfortunately secure for his own poetry the revered, sacred position that would have matched his attitude to art. Instead, as I have argued earlier, Cummings enjoys the strange status of being more or less recognised as a canonical poet, but he also remains a relatively minor poet, which means that little scholarship has been devoted to him, especially in recent years. My focus here will be on the nuances of Cummings's relationship to this commodity culture. His disdain for the masses can be seen in his repeated insistence on defining and categorizing the artist, and taking pains to stress the artist's distinct role in society. Cummings's poetry in many ways fits with the older view of modernism as a site of resistance to this commodity culture, in its use of words, letters, and typography as autonomous, almost tangible things.

Cummings's determination to resist the commodification of everything from love to people to culture itself shows up in his poetry in its decidedly anti-commercial creation of a (poetic) space free from *use*. In many ways, his poetry is an ideal example of Theodore Adorno's view of art as something that "becomes social by its opposition to society" (226), and that "keeps itself alive through its social form of resistance" (226). Admittedly, just how adequate such a theory of art is has recently come under questioning: for Marjorie Perloff "even such resistance is no longer possible" (33), and "it is high time to replace an aestheticist 'litcrit' with a more useful and disinterested cultural history and theory, with the methodology of anthropology whereby artworks and literary texts can be seen as so many cultural phenomena" (33). A "disinterested" cultural history and theory may not be possible insofar as a wholly disinterested account of anything is really not possible. However, Perloff points to the limitations of a criticism which sees art as simple resistance; in such a view, engagement with culture only occurs at a very abstract level, and the connections between art and culture will be loose indeed. For current modernist scholars, if there is any resistance to or turning away from more popular culture in those texts (as undoubtedly there is in Cummings's poetry), that resistance or turning away occurs alongside an intense engagement with the culture.

Cummings's explicit attitude toward commodity culture is undoubtedly negative, and can be quite arrogantly condescending at times. In the 1952-1953 Charles Eliot Norton lectures, published as *i: six nonlectures*, he shares an anecdote that not only reveals an attitude of arrogant condescension, but also betrays a sense of nervousness about this new advertising culture that was springing up all around him. In his third nonlecture, he tells an anecdote about "an old college chum" who had been making "big

money as an advertising writer” (45), describing how his friend learned three rules for writing magazine articles that teach the writer rather insidious ways to make their articles appeal to readers. At the end of the anecdote, Cummings concludes, “As far as I’m concerned, it [the anecdote] [i]s the unbelievable – but also unquestionable – selfportrait of a one hundred and one percent pseudoworld: in which truth has become televisionary, in which goodness means not hurting people, and in which beauty is shoppe” (47). This story may hit close to home for Cummings because it relates to writing, and it also relates to a world where everything starts to become commodified, for what he describes is precisely that: commodified writing. For Cummings, this commodification has such far-reaching effects as to actually be able to distort at least the definition, if not the nature, of truth, goodness, and beauty.

And, rather unsurprisingly, Cummings’s antidote for such a society can be found simply in poetry. With minimal transition and preamble, he moves from the above-quoted pronouncement into quoting his poetry: “Just (or unjust) how any species of authentic individualism could stem from such a collective quagmire, I don’t – as always – know; but here are four lines of a poem which didn’t ” (47) – and he goes on to quote lines from the poem “voices to voices, lip to lip”:

(While you and i have lips and voices which
are for kissing and to sing with
who cares if some oneyed son of a bitch
invents an instrument to measure Spring with? (262)²²

²² All poems are from *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*. Henceforth abbreviated as “CP.”

That Cummings barely introduces his poem before he quotes it, and that he provides no direct commentary afterward, reveals the extent to which he believed in his own poetry's power to directly address the problems raised by the advertising story. The grammar of his introductory phrase perhaps most powerfully underscores this belief: the final word – “didn't” – is a lonely auxiliary verb, and so requires the readers to refer back to the previously summarised problem of “authentic individualism.” In this way, Cummings's poem itself becomes the authentic individualism that he laments has so been lost. The poem becomes a site for individual subjectivity to nurture itself, against the backdrop of the “collective quagmire” of advertising culture.

Indeed, the individualistic tendencies for which so many critics belittled Cummings (a belittlement I discussed earlier), forms a large part of his theory of poetry. But what critics dismissed as an unpleasant and over-the-top individualism forms part of a more complex reaction to society than what critics such as John Bayley allow for: in a 1982 article for the *Times Literary Supplement* Bayley wrote,

Inside their own closed idiom, a John Crowe Ransom or an E. E. Cummings can do almost anything, provided they do not reveal themselves to be sensitive to outside possibilities. The poems they make must not show signs of wanting to be “understood.” (341)

Bayley goes on to argue that “in his best poems he is absorbed, like a good child in its toys, and isn't the least concerned with understanding” (341). Bayley links Cummings's immaturity, and his inferior status as a poet, to what Bayley calls his lack of “artist's sensitivity to the outside world and to the reality of other people and their responses” (349). Bayley's reading comes from a less-than-sympathetic reading of Cummings's own

reading of his culture. But Cummings's snobbery is not as all-encompassing as Bayley suggests; what may come across as a general disdain for any aspect of society that was not self-identified high art, is in fact a much more focused position – one that pits art in opposition to specific detrimental characteristics of a society that, according to Cummings, was being swallowed up in a world of advertising and commodification.

One aspect Cummings explicitly takes up in his railings against consumerism is the loss of privacy. For him, “one of the many wonderful things about a home is that it can be as lively as you please without ever becoming public” (*i:six nonlectures* 26), but that private space had been so much destroyed that he assumes that his listeners “probably never heard of it” (23). The problem with such things as television is that it means that “those walls [that exist around people] are no longer walls; they are merest pseudosolidities, perpetually penetrated by the perfectly predatory collective organs of sight and sound” (23). Although Cummings's lamentation is focused on the loss of privacy, and the various effects of that loss on the nature of individual identity, his word choice betrays a different sort of fear: that of being unable to distinguish between reality and unreality. Some of Cummings's critics applied this very philosophy to Cummings's poetry itself. For example, G.S. Fraser, writing in 1955, quotes Cummings's poem “o by the by” (CP 593), and then contends that “there is some of the matter of life here” (317). According to Fraser, Cummings's later poetry is characterised by its inclusion of ““a philosophy of life”” (317). Indeed, much of Cummings's disdain for such aspects of commercialism takes the form of a disdain for them as agents of a false experience, as his coinage “pseudosolidities,” like the above-quoted “pseudoworld,” shows. Of course, Cummings does not believe that what appear to be walls are not actual walls, but that

what were once walls that kept public and private space firmly separate no longer have that function. In this way, Cummings frames the shifting nature of public and private space as a much more drastic shifting nature of reality.

Indeed, for Cummings, the public invasion of the private affects the very nature of the self: because of such an assault, he writes, “you haven’t the least or feeblest conception of being here, and now, and alone, and yourself. Why (you ask) should anyone want to be here, when (simply by pressing a button) anyone can be in fifty places at once?” (23). For Cummings, the pervasive presence of commodity culture threatens the nature of the subject, and in particular each person’s *individuality*. He subscribed to what Allison Pease has called a “defining impetus behind modernist criticism” – namely, “that mass-produced forms of cultural entertainment, such as fiction, radio and films, were destructive to the quality of individual lives, and hence the fabric of society as a whole” (168). For Cummings, it was art’s job to resist such destruction, through an assertion of individuality, and through a carving out of a distinct position for the artist in society. As he says, “as far as I am concerned, poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality. If poetry were anything – like dropping an atombomb – which anyone did, anyone could become a poet merely by doing the necessary anything” (24). Cummings is being ironic, but his irony, rather than undercutting what he says, only adds to the force of his argument. His choice of example here is strange indeed, for “dropping an atombomb” is of course not something “which anyone did.” His example thus reveals that, for him, the problem of commodity culture was found in its destructive aspect. The “anything” that anyone could do resembles the accessibility myth of advertising culture: anyone, to take Cummings’s own disdained

example, can, like Lindbergh, fly over the Atlantic ocean (46). At the heart of commodity culture lies a myth that the very thing that they advertise as a unique and authentic experience is also, paradoxically, available to everyone.²³ That such campaigns of accessibility were as explicit as Cummings makes them sound may perhaps be surprising to us today, where the myth of accessibility is both much more insidious and much more familiar.

For Cummings, though, poetry must be the place to resist this commodity culture, with its myth of accessibility – and one way to do that was by making poetry rather inaccessible. He reminds his lecture audience that “in the course of [his] first nonlecture, [he] affirmed that – for [him] – personality is a mystery; that mysteries alone are significant; and that love is the mystery-of-mysteries who creates them all” (43). Cummings quite blatantly mystifies the subject that he clearly thinks is in danger of demystification through such privacy-invaders as television. For Cummings, the violence of the public sphere’s invasion of the private finds its antidote in the gentleness of the “mystery-of-mysteries.” Indeed, the abstract nature of “love,” “mystery,” and “personality” contrasts with the harder, rawer, concreteness of radio, films, and television – Cummings’s mystification then becomes a way of resisting these invasions, and fighting against the commodification of love. Indeed, that love and art are mysteries is a concept he repeats:

Art is a mystery; all mysteries have their source in a mystery-of-mysteries who is love: and if lovers may reach eternity directly through love herself, their mystery remains essentially that of the loving artist whose way must

²³ See Outka for an insightful discussion of this paradox, especially pp. 9-10.

lie through his art, and of the loving worshipper whose aim is oneness
with his god. (*i: six nonlectures* 82)

Cummings's aim seems to be to render art as ineffable as the world of advertising makes us believe it (and everything) to be accessible.

The lack of accessibility is something that even Cummings's admirers admitted to finding. Laura Riding and Robert Graves, in their 1927 *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, write, "In the poetry of e. e. cummings ... is to be found apparently not only a disregard of ... intelligence, but an insult to it. Such poetry seems to say: 'Keep out. This is a private performance'" (5). They go on to defend Cummings, by means of a meticulous analysis of the punctuation of his "Sunset" poem. Although Riding and Graves claim that Cummings's poetry in fact only *seems* to shut the reader out, and that it proves to be "capable of yielding the kind of experiences customarily expected from poetry" (10), they nevertheless maintain that "Cummings' technique, if further and more systematically developed, would become so complicated that poetry would be no more than mechanical craftsmanship"(8). Their reading of Cummings's apparently exclusive attitude accords well with Cummings's own philosophies, right down to the details of his valuing privacy all the more for his fear that it will soon disappear. Cummings's prose style resembles that of his poetry, and is full of sentiments that help explain the nature of the criticism of his poetry. He wrote in a letter to Howard Nelson on the role of the artist:

the poet Hart Crane would thunder there'd always been and would always remain three sorts of people:warriors,priests,merchants. I imagine an artist(whatever his art)is a kind of priest,or perhaps vice versa,no artist surely is a moneymaker and no artist surely is a mankiller. Also perhaps:if

enough skin deep so called people are so confused about what they are that they'd itch rather than not be what they aren't, this so called world will change his skin. (*Selected Letters* 157)

Far from the sometimes common conception that Cummings's consistent use of the lower-case "i" is a sign of his humility, what we have here is a Cummings bursting with elitism, who once even wrote to his mother, "Maybe, some day, I'll be blessed with a touch of true humility" (*Selected Letters* 159). How sincere he may be in such a plea remains indeterminate. Still, what emerges here again is that, for Cummings, poetry is inextricably bound up with a particular kind of subjectivity that is inextricable from the fabricated nature of the consumer culture. The role of the artist as priest and guardian becomes to counteract that fabricated nature – and force people to scratch harder, thus changing their skins.

It seems that Cummings believes that the art that the priest-artist protects is and should be characterized by mystery. The strangely idiosyncratic system of punctuation and typography that Cummings employs in his poems also appears in his more casual prose writing. In fact, he goes so far in the direction of inaccessibility that he writes a letter to Ezra Pound, who then responds that he didn't understand it, to which Cummings responds, "so my letter's obscure? Tiens. Can't compare with your last, I imagine" (204). He then goes on to decode his own letter for Pound. Notably, though, that "decoding" still has Greek words, French phrases ("au fond"), and a general Cummingsian ring to it – he seems unwilling to write in a mode of complete accessibility. Indeed, a shutting out through a style that presents itself as self-conscious and coded

springs from Cummings's philosophy on the status of art, as seen in his introduction to the 1938 collection *New Poems*, in which he warns that

The poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople –
it's no use trying to pretend that mostpeople and ourselves are alike.
Mostpeople have less in common with ourselves than the
square root of minus one. You and i are human beings; mostpeople are
snobs. (CP 461)

His pitting himself, as a poet, against "mostpeople," occurs in terms of an opposition between nothing less than the human and (by implication) the inhuman. His association of the term "human" with "artist" betrays what critics have called Cummings's simplicity, but a closer look at other writing that reveals that he consistently employs the adjective "human" in specific opposition to what he sees as a dehumanizing and destructive commercial culture.

Indeed, the mechanical aspect that the commodification of culture brought to art is what seems to have spurred Cummings to emphasize the unadorned human side of art. Again and again Cummings's disdain for "mostpeople," or for those who remain incapable of participating in the kind of exclusive art that he demands, takes as its target the specifically commercial aspect of society. So, he writes in a letter to Pound,

According to 'Time' mag, that very museum is very very advanced: every
gallery being wired for sound, pictures are interpreted while you gaze at
them; I gather nobody so much as drops a nickel in a slot, the wisdom just
gushes . . . and harken – by way of hoisting the man in the street out of
lamentable ignorance & through Art's Portals, what do you suppose?

Perfumes. Yes, the public's nostrils are approached: did I say
approached? titillated. (163)

For Cummings, the “wired” gallery leads to a very shallow experience of art. “Perfume” is a notable choice for Cummings’s metaphor of people’s experience of the museum, for perfume is not just any commodity, but is something that belongs, like art, to the world of excess. Perfume also relates to the commodification of beauty, something at which Cummings took umbrage. Cummings’s implicit argument is that the marketing and selling of beauty and art leads to a shallow experience in which the commodification obscures the humanness of “most people.”

Such obscuring forces can come from many different sources. In a letter to Norman Friedman, he tells an anecdote about his middle floor neighbour who is “buried in a perpetual night-&-day bath of radio” (174). Cummings writes that he includes the anecdote in order to show that “[his] taste isn’t everybody’s” (174). Indeed, the anecdote relates to Cummings’s ideas of art, for he describes his living space as somewhere that is “friendly, unscientific, private, human” (174). Again, he opposes technology and the consequent invasion of privacy to the quality of being human, and, by extension, to the status of good art. He concludes his letter with a sort of explanation or excuse for his anecdote: “I felt that perhaps this parable, this metaphor, might help you to understand me. If it doesn’t, I’m sorry. If it does, I’m glad” (175). In making pains to offer the anecdote as an explanation for himself and his art, but neglecting to explain the connection, Cummings leaves implicit and so multiplies the various upshots of the anecdote, which include the notion that the radio is destructive: “being himself,” Cummings writes, “he

respects others. He lowers his gadget until(a)he enjoys it while (z)others are not destroyed by his enjoyment” (175).

Perhaps the most telling part of the “metaphor” of this anecdote lies in its cryptic style. Notably, the letter is not as cryptic as some of his other ones, but it nevertheless contains the appearance of crypticism, including variously thrown in parenthetical phrases and this barely intelligible “deep favour” he asks of Friedman by way of concluding his letter:

Never,come Hell or High Water,read a word of mine or look at a picture of mine or (if possible)even think about me & mine while any mechanical unsubstute for experience is anywhere even slightly audible. (175)

The “mechanical unsubstute for experience” is, of course, the sound of the radio, a sign not only of the destruction of privacy, but also an element of mass culture whose mechanical nature threatens, according to Cummings, to destroy Cummings’s own art. Still, in opposing his art to this privacy-destroying, mechanical nature of mass culture, Cummings found a way to define his art, and to define the function of his poetry in society. Indeed, the automatism, unreality, and apparent dehumanizing aspects of mass culture gave Cummings something against which to write his poetry, to which I shall now turn.

4.2 CUMMINGS’S POETRY AND COMMODITY CULTURE

Cummings’s various strains of disdain for mass culture are held together more or less by a mourning of a radical change in the make-up of the subject. His disdain for the

radio is really, as we saw, a fear of its potential to destroy privacy, or the unexhibited aspect of a person's life, and his fear of the advertising world is that it becomes impossible to find any "species of authentic individualism" (*i: six nonlectures* 47) in such a world. Allison Pease argues that it was a characteristic move of modernist artists to position the subject in opposition to mass culture:

Mass culture was framed as a contemporary enemy which, as a phenomenon, could not be defeated. Defense against this phenomenon, then, was devised as having to originate from within the subject, whose sophisticated reading and viewing practices could protect against mass culture's cheapening or deadening effects. (171)

Her observation bases itself on certain reading *practices*, which operated on the assumption that poetry, unlike its "enemy," mass culture, did not offer an accessible and easily digestible message. Cummings's poems provide an example of texts that operate on the same assumption. Indeed, his poems, in a way, embody his idea of proper subjectivity: they, in their typographical deviance, strive to maintain the privacy that Cummings finds so central to human subjectivity. Such an embodying of privacy is perhaps most obvious in a poem like "little ladies more" (CP 56), which switches back and forth between French and English, or in a poem like "as if as" (CP 423), of which I will quote the first few stanzas:

as if as
if a mysteriously("i am alive"
)

brave

ly and(th

e moon's al-down)most whis

perhere)ingc r O

wing;ly:cry.be,gi N s agAains

t b

ecomin

gsky?t r e e s

!²⁴

Phrases such as “ most whis / perhere)ingc r O // wing;ly:cry.be,gi N s agAains” seem almost indecipherable. “Almost,” however, is the key word, for the line does invite decoding, by virtue of being, upon closer examination, quite readable – one can make out the words “most whispering crowingly.” It is just that the meaning is not pre-consumed, as it is in the world of advertising. Furthermore, in this poem, Cummings’s strategy of maintaining individuality lies in his idiosyncratic employment of punctuation. Such a strategy asserts linguistic independence from and violation of a shared, agreed upon system. Each individual punctuation mark is saturated with a deviant, undigested meaning. Such an independence can be seen to stand as a metaphor for how human

²⁴ When using block quotations to cite Cummings’s poetry, I will be departing from the standard MLA practice of placing the closing punctuation mark before the parenthetical citation in order to clearly preserve Cummings’s original punctuation.

individualism is to be maintained – through a careful deviance from a system that seems to be moving toward a world of instant consumability and such effortless collective meaning that signification seems impossible for the individual, on his own, to accomplish.

As a parallel to this type of typographical signification, Cummings successfully endows the individual typographical elements with meaning by virtue of their violation of the system of conventional punctuation. But Cummings’s punctuation and capitalisation is not always so raw, and its violation of norms is often much subtler, as in the following example:

so many selves(so many friends and gods
each greedier than every)is a man
(so easily one in another hides;
yet man can,being all,escape from none) (CP 609)

In this poem, Cummings’s philosophy about the relation of the individual to contemporary culture is evident. The first stanza tries to define the self as “so many selves,” but the second stanza contains the language of destruction:

so huge a tumult is the simplest wish:
so pitiless a massacre the hope

Such language is, as we have seen, the language Cummings used to describe the effects of mass culture on the individual. Indeed, the first line of the third stanza of the poem fairly thoroughly summarises Cummings’s view of the problem of consumer culture: “never is most lonely man alone.” In this poem, I would argue, the parentheses exemplify the kind of privacy that the individual subject must strive to maintain: each quatrain (for

the poem is indeed a sonnet) contains at least one set of parentheses, and the third contains this telling information:

(his briefest breathing lives some planet's year,
his longest life's a heartbeat of some sun;
his least unmotion roams the youngest star)

The private musings of this poem relate to the world of nature, that world stripped of culture, where man's effects, if any, are minimal. But the final couplet moves away from both nature and culture (insofar as such a movement is possible), in an attempt to combat too-readily-available meaning:

– how should a fool that calls him “I” presume
to comprehend not numerable whom?

The key word here is *comprehend* – the way to preserve the meaning of an individual lies in a protection against others' too easily understanding oneself. One of the most insidious effects of advertising and consumption can be found in its changing of the nature of systems of signification – such a shift is what Cummings responds to in his poetry, and I will return to this idea later when I examine Cummings's presentation of love as a means of resisting the possessive quality of advertising.

For now, I will argue that one way Cummings's poetry fights advertising's impulse toward total appropriation of images, art, concepts, and words is by promoting a philosophy in his poetry in which the gaze of the subject at its object regards things merely as things, and not as things with marketable potential. Adam Parkes, in his essay on the romantic and classical tendencies in modernist poetry, points out that many critics “have agreed that the central division in modernist aesthetics concerned an obsession

with the ‘thing’ ... and the apparently contradictory desire to explore its symbolic associations” (229). For Cummings, this opposition takes the form not necessarily of mere things versus things and their symbolic associations, but of mere things versus the seizing of things in order to endow them with a new, marketable meaning. In fact, Cummings does not just revel in the signifieds of his words, but, through his poems, he creates a world in which the most miniscule units of meaning, such as a capital letter or a comma, are endowed with significance.

That this is so can be seen in a letter of explication Cummings wrote to someone who clearly asked for an explanation of what two of his poems mean. The poem he explains reads, in prose form, “two old once upon a(no more)time men sit(look)dream.” Cummings writes to his inquirer that the poem is about “a couple of old zeroes – who are physically two(o o)but spiritually one(o)” (*Selected Letters* 190). He goes on to say that “toward the poem’s end,these two lonely zeroes (o o)have moved closer to each other (oo)” (190). His explanation uncovers the extent to which Cummings viewed even letters as individual things, whose positioning on the page becomes part of their meaning, and which he saturates with more meaning than they could seem to bear. The important distinction between the mode of signification Cummings employs in his poems, and the mode of signification found in advertising is that in advertising the signifier does not exist in its own right, but always associates itself with a more abstract concept, such as beauty, happiness, or authenticity. In Cummings’s mode of signification, the signifier (here, the “o”) does an about-face and turns back on itself. I will examine more differences between these two modes in a moment.

Beyond the fact that Cummings is able to explain his poems with the aptness of a critic, despite his initial lamentation (“what a pity I’m not a ‘critic’, who can ‘explain’ the poems which puzzle you!” [190]), what is striking about this letter is its final single-sentenced paragraph: “ah well;as Gilbert remarked to Sullivan,when anybody’s somebody everybody will be nobody” (190). Such a statement seems incongruous with the explanation of the two poems, and contains a characteristically Cummingsian crypticness. The “anybody” who is now “somebody” could be the reader who is now, thanks to Cummings’s letter, able to understand the poems. Or the “anybody” who is now “somebody” could be the characters in the poem who are now “somebody” because Cummings has written them into a poem, and, through his explanation, has revealed their identity. The latter explanation would fit well with the second poem Cummings explains, a poem which opens, “chas sing does(who” (CP 611). Cummings explains that “chas sing” is actually the name of a Chinese laundryman (*Selected Letters* 190). In any case, the cryptic remark does reveal that, for Cummings, the interpretation of his poetry is bound up with codes of inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, the words *anybody*, *somebody*, *everybody*, *nobody* all belong to that category of abstract and indeterminate words that Cummings liked to render as concrete subjects.

We come to a feature that Cummings is probably best known for: his grammatical quirkiness.²⁵ In spite of the large amounts of praise he’s received for his grammatical deviation, a closer look at it will show that the exact nature of this deviation is in fact very specific – he likes to turn non-nouns into nouns. So, for example, in the poem “yes

²⁵ A lot of books on Cummings published in the ’60s deal with his grammatical deviance and idiosyncratic typography. See, for example, Norman Friedman, *E.E. Cummings: The Art of his Poetry*; Barry Alan Marks, *E. E. Cummings*; Eve Triem, *E. E. Cummings*.

is pleasant country” (CP 578), he makes nouns of the words “yes,” “if,” “both,” and, in a subtler instance, renders something that is already a noun even more concrete: “april’s where we’re.” In this line, April becomes a physical space to inhabit. Indeed, the driving force behind one of his more well-known poems is this creation of an embodied subject through the word “anyone,” a subtle concretization that catches the reader off guard. The first stanza runs,

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn’t he danced his did. (CP 515)

Indeed, the subjects of the poem, the abstract pronouns “anyone,” “someone,” and “everyone,” who have all been turned into more material agents, provide a commentary on the nature of the “pretty how town” in which “anyone” lived: anonymity characterises the inhabitants of this town, and their death is of little consequence to the speaker: “one day anyone died i guess.” But Cummings is also combatting that threatened anonymity (“everybody will be nobody” is his fear as expressed in his letter) by allowing those “everybody”s to have a more tangible, real-life presence in the syntax of his poetry.

In order to check the overwhelming threat to individuality that Cummings saw in modern society, he asserts the individuality of the units of meaning in his poetry, curbing any potential for those units to signify so much beyond themselves that individual meaning is lost. Indeed, *curbing* is the apt word here, for its implication of movement; many of Cummings’s poems exhibit a movement from the abstract to the concrete, often creating a jolting, bathetic effect that left many people grumbling. For example, his well-

known poem “the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls” (CP 115) ends with the startling line, “the / moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy” (CP 115), a line which R. P. Blackmur has cited as an “improper distortion of language” (118). But he has also been praised for such surprises. One critic called this same line “a pleasant shock of originality” (Tribble 299), citing as another example,

the sky a silver
dissonance by the correct
fingers of April
resolved

into a

clutter of trite jewels (CP 60)

Cummings’s movement from the abstract, site of seemingly infinite symbolism – the sky – to the more concrete image – “a clutter of trite jewels” – betrays his need to curb the potentially infinitely reverberating associations of meaning in poetry, and give his images an individual integrity and independent signification.

Perhaps part of what Cummings’s critics find so enigmatic about him (to the point that they do not engage with his poetry in any sophisticated way), is his toying with modes of signification. Here I will turn to Roland Barthes, who, in *Mythologies*, makes explicit the connection between advertising and modes of signification, thus providing a convenient model for the modes of signification that permeate a culture of commodification. For Barthes, the act of turning a thing, such as a tree, into a myth means that that thing becomes “adapted to a certain type of consumption,” and so is “no

longer quite a tree” (109). That is, when another concept is associated with a thing, it ceases to be purely itself, and becomes “laden with... a type of social *usage*” (109, emphasis original). It is this meaning-burying being laden with usage that Cummings resists, and he does so by concretizing and fleshing out the specifically physical qualities of abstract concepts. He does this especially in his love poems, as a way of combatting the commodification of love. Edwin Honig notes that in Cummings’s poems, “Love is the object, the unrehearsed response or the spontaneous expression felt through the senses most immediately, most intensely” (321). Honig is pointing to Cummings’s poetry’s connection to the physical world, and his model of meaning, which, as I have been arguing, is a fairly exact antithesis to the model of meaning of the advertising world as Cummings understood it.

Indeed, as I have been maintaining, one of those antidotes occurs in the form of a proliferation of concrete images, as a way of curbing more abstract ideas. In this way, many of his poems on love are characterised by an almost excessive cataloguing of body parts. So, for example, the poem of which Honig comments that “love is the object,” asks, “am i separated from your body smile brain hands merely / to become the jumping puppets of a dream?” (CP 296). “Smile,” “brain,” and “hands” are all superfluous, but they fit comfortably beside the other body part images in the poem (“arms” and “face”). However, toward the end of the poem, the speaker moves away from these more concrete renderings of body parts and into a more abstract and breathless conclusion:

for the reason that i
hate people and lean out of this window is love,love
and the reason that i laugh and breath is oh love and the reason

that i do not fall into this street is love. (CP 296)

His rhythm-interrupting, unexpectedly-placed “oh” in the second last line is reminiscent of the “ah” in Hopkins’s concluding lines to “God’s Grandeur:” “Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast, and with, ah, bright wings” (13-14). It is fitting that Cummings should find a parallel rhythmist in Hopkins, someone else who believed in the “thingness of things.”²⁶

Indeed, the Barthesian model of advertising is characterised by the very opposite of this Hopkins-Cummingsian intensification of the thing itself. For Barthes, myth is characterised by a different referential mode, and, in part, by a reduction of meaning: “the materials of mythical speech, ... however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth” (114), he writes. And yet, advertising produces a simultaneous and paradoxical thing of richness and impoverishment of meaning: taking as his example the image of “the Negro who salutes,” Barthes writes, “he appears as a rich, fully experienced ... image. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little” (118). He continues, “once made use of, it becomes artificial” (118). In advertising, what defines the image is the use to which it is put; “the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be *appropriated*” (119, emphasis original). Pease, writing on the aesthetics of obscenity, likewise talks about the prevalence of “the appropriative impulse” as “one of the defining characteristics of ... modernist literature” (181), in reference to “the

²⁶ See Friedman, “Hopkins, Cummings, and the Struggle of the Modern,” on the similarities between the two poets, which he defines as “the struggle to achieve th[e] recovery [of immanence]” (45).

incorporation of mass-cultural works including pornography into an aesthetico-moral framework” (181). Of course, the sense in which Barthes uses “appropriation” refers to the associative nature of the myth, and its “formless, unstable, nebulous condensation” (119) as well as there being “no fixity in mythical concepts” (120). Still, what unites the two senses of the term is a particularly nebulous relationship between meaning and thing, an impulse to take over the meaning of a particular thing or concept, and reframe a signifier’s meaning in terms of the myth’s own driving purpose.

Cummings both resists this appropriative impulse, as seen in his ability to walk the fine line between meaninglessness and profundity (as we saw with “the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls”), and embraces it, especially in his poems about prostitutes. One poem, for example, begins with a raw description of “kitty:” “‘kitty’ sixteen,5’1”,white,prostitute.” (CP 126). The careful punctuation in this poem emphasises the crudeness of commodified sex. However, in the next stanza, Cummings performs his characteristic move of transforming verbs into nouns: “ducking always the touch of must and shall” (CP 126). Suddenly, he switches back to catalogue language: “Kitty. a whore. Sixteen.” In this way, Cummings is doing what Pease identified works such as *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* to be doing: she argues that these works “introduce sexually explicit bodies into their larger, multi-perspectived frameworks,” and so “enact [a] reintegration [of the body with the mind and of divided class sensibilities],” and it accomplishes such a reintegration “by setting the pornographic, or bodily, representations as incitations, into dialogue with the other discourses that enter the text” (169). Cummings certainly sets a rawer language of cataloguing against a much more abstract, grammatically deviant language, putting them in dialogue with one another.

Indeed, Cummings's love poetry in particular is characterised by a dialogue which allows for a reintegration of meaning by presenting a language that successfully resists the Barthesian model of meaning in the world of popular myth or ideology. His poem "it is so long since my heart has been with yours" (CP 298) opens in relative abstraction, but with a touch of tension introduced by the unexpectedness of the grammatical deviation of the strange first verb tense ("is" instead of "has been"). The speaker of the poem maintains the tension through the second line, which reads, "shut by our mingling arms through." The easily pictured image flashes through the mind while it tries to make sense of the less-readily-available image of being "shut by" this. Indeed, the "hurrying crudities / of blood and flesh" bring a physicality to the poem that combats the more abstract subject matter of Love, and such physicality stubbornly refuses to be used or appropriated; its very fixity combats the mode of meaning employed in advertising. The poem concludes with a flawlessly balanced positioning of the abstract and the concrete: "– after which our separating selves become museums / filled with skilfully stuffed memories." The juxtaposition of "stuffed" and "memories" harbours a perfect sense of the integration of properties of the individual subject ("memories") and the commodification of those memories (they are "stuffed"). Whether this image speaks of the threat of commodification or of commodification's capacity to be integrated smoothly into the self remains ambiguous.

To conclude, I would like to turn to one of Cummings's most celebrated poems, which not only contains his typical grammatical deviances but also maintains, perhaps more than any other of his poems, the tension between self and other that arises in part from the tension that an advertising culture puts on the individual self. The dialogical

nature of “somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond” (CP 367) allows for a reintegration of meaning that succeeds because the movement in it combines an antithesis to the Barthesian model of meaning with subjectivity. That is, the alternate model of meaning, the one in which meaning is not easily accessible, and the unexpected grammatical deviances, keep the reader engaged enough that he must actively decipher meaning. Such an alternate model of meaning is what finally allows one person to speak to another, for without a model of meaning that stands in opposition to that of the advertising world, there would be no possibility of individual expression. Furthermore, the gaze of the speaker in this poem toward the other is *not* one of objectification, but one that sees the other as an agent her(or him)self. That is, in lines such as, “your slightest look easily will uncloset me,” or “you open always petal by petal myself” the other acts upon the speaker (“uncloset,” “open”). This gaze differs from the gaze of a consumer looking at a thing to be consumed, for the object is as much a subject as the gazer himself.

When Cummings’s contemporary critics accused him of being too private and too individual, as I have discussed earlier, they were also upholding a specific view of the function of art, in which art should not separate itself too obviously from the more public sphere. Cummings’s poetry exemplifies those exclusionary moves that Ardis talks about, for his disdain for certain aspects of mass culture is unmistakable. Still, such an exclusion means, in a way, that Cummings’s poetry, far from being romantic, simplistic, and, in short, not engaged with the culture of modernism that allows it to be rewarding for critics to study, in fact engages with and reacts to the culture in quite subtle, and precise (even more precisely than I’ve been able to show here) ways. Indeed, his correspondence and

his prose works such as *i: six nonlectures* reveal him to have a very strong attitude toward his culture, and this fact alone should cue us to read his poetry more carefully in light of the culture of commodification, the expansion of the public sphere, and the new modes of meaning that were arising because of the development of the culture of advertising. And if we do read modernist poetry in such a light, perhaps we may find that the poetry that seemed least affected by or engaged with advertising, the market, and mass culture may also be the poetry that is more capable of speaking the most directly to those spheres.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude by returning to Virginia Woolf's 1923 essay, "How it Strikes a Contemporary." The conclusion of her essay contains a telling request and warning to the critics of her day:

As for critics whose task it is to pass judgement upon the books of the moment, whose work, let us admit, is difficult, dangerous, and often distasteful, let us ask them to be generous of encouragement, but sparing of those wreaths and coronets which are so apt to get awry, and fade, and make the wearers, in six months time, look a little ridiculous [*sic*]. (246)

In other words, criticism should not be too evaluative, lest the ensuing months reveal such evaluations to be the silly things that they are. Woolf's desire that critics "take a wider, less personal view of modern literature" (246) fittingly embodies the modernist critical movement toward a more "scientific," apparently non-evaluative criticism. Her caution to not be too evaluative has been heeded, at least in an explicit way, in post-modernist criticism, so much so that evaluative and non-evaluative criticism has developed into two distinct genres; reviews have taken over the role of providing literary evaluation.

However, the consequences of criticism's movement away from evaluation are more than just the development of a scientific-sounding discourse. One of those consequences can be found in the repercussions of modernist criticism's distrust of emotion, in both art and criticism, and its consequent association of "emotion" and "sentimentality" with an inferior kind of literature. As I have discussed, many of Cummings's critics criticised him on the grounds of having too much emotion in his

poetry, which I have argued relates to the modernist reaction against romantic aesthetics. Still, the association of Cummings's poetry with a particularly emotional quality can be found not only in critics' constant association of Cummings with an overly personal, overly emotional, too romantic style, but also in the tone of criticism surrounding him.

Criticism on Cummings, from the early essays through to more recent book-length studies of him, from Iain Landles's 2008 *Case for Cummings* to Norman Friedman's 1996 *(Re)Valuing Cummings* to Jierâi Flajésar and Zênão Vernyik's 2007 collection *Words into Pictures: E. E. Cummings' Art Across Borders*, almost always involves some form an argument that Cummings deserves more recognition than he has received, and, by extension, must necessarily conduct an inquiry into the ideology of canon-formation, a topic that today seems pretty stale. Philip Horton and Sherry Mangan, writing as early as 1938, include such an examination in their essay-length analysis of him. They argue that "to attempt to argue out of existence the notorious fact that Cummings's poetic power merely by (quite correctly) alleging that it is not canonical, is a petulant absurdity" (69). Horton and Mangan do not belabour the point they make here, though it is a point that will get picked up and belaboured decades later – namely that "canonical" literary values are not the only literary values worth valuing.

In this way, an analysis of Cummings nearly always involves a defense of his status, and so emotion is necessarily more at the forefront in the analysis than it is in criticism on poets whose status is not so weak. Indeed, perhaps part of the problem with Cummings's inferior status is that a treatise on his relationship to canonical values necessarily takes precedence over systematic and close analysis of his work. In this way, he has been excluded from ostensibly more scientific criticism; the emotion involved in

evaluation has necessarily taken a central place, thereby giving what little contemporary criticism there is on him the more casual air of a review. Affect, the reader's unreflective emotional response to the art,²⁷ remains an unarticulated part of criticism – the pleasure arises only after an affect-less analysis has been conducted. Our critical inheritance from modernism has been this implicit devaluation of more emotion-based criticism.

This pre-reflective stage of meaning is perhaps what unites modernist poetry and criticism to the advertising culture that recent critics have proven to be so inseparable from modernist art. That is, advertising and commodity culture thrive on a mode of meaning in which the comprehension of a message occurs at the affective stage that is characterized by its necessarily pre-reflective nature, and, by extension, pre-articulate nature. In this way, Kantian affect has affinities with Barthesian myth. If the history of Cummings's criticism has shown his critics to have come to a common consensus, then that consensus is that his poetry's formal properties do not require very much articulation in the New Critical mode, and in this way criticism on him lacks the complexity and the extended commentary that is associated with literary pleasure. An alternative approach to Cummings – through his relationship to the culture of advertising – is only one of many possible: as I have shown, Cummings had a fairly tense relationship to the culture of advertising and consumerism that was gaining force around him, and the examination of such a relationship, as I have begun to show, may help to at last provide a meaningful articulation of the significance of Cummings's poetry.

²⁷ This definition is from Immanuel Kant: "Affects belong to *feeling* insofar as, preceding reflection, it makes this impossible or more difficult" (166, emphasis original).

In some senses, the intersection of the culture of modernist advertising and the culture of modernist art is an obvious one to spot, simply because they both (along with religion) belong to the realm of experience associated with excess. In both advertising and poetry, language has a non-referential function, and so they are, in a way, competing for the same type of attention. Advertising and commodity culture, still so much with us today, has perhaps outsmarted poetry because it has effectively blurred the lines between excess and necessity – the things you need and the things you want become indistinguishable – excess becomes necessity. Paradoxically, the proper response to that call to excess results not in accumulation, but in a disappearance. As Fredric Jameson remarks in his famous study *Postmodernism*, “consumption in the social sense is very specifically the word for what we in fact do to reified products” (317). Products must be theoretically consumed rather than accumulated in order to maintain a proper flow of consumption – their use is not to fulfill any *need*, but to spur the desire for more.

If advertising culture wanted to dispense with the distinction between excess and necessity, modernist art seemed to do the opposite. That is, modernist art’s much-questioned myth about its distance from cruder forms of culture involved a certain disdain for the monetary aspects of commodity culture and even of more popular art. This disdain includes a disdain for pragmatism, usefulness, and, above all, accessibility. Modernist art did not want the more vulgar associations of commodities that could be easily accessed through money. Cummings was thoroughly aware of the impossibility and even hypocrisy of such a stance. He satirizes such an attitude in a fictional dialogue between “an unconsciousnist painter” and “a kindly critic of ye olde schoole exchange ideas” (*Miscellany* 115). The artist, indignant at the critic’s assumption that he will see

the artist's picture "in some gallery," cries, "The parasitic art galleries are clamouring with slaving mouths for my work, sir, but I want you to know that I am too much in love with my art to stoop to such a vile, degenerate and neurotic act as the exhibition of my canvases" (117). In the end, the artist demands "five thousand five hundred and fifty dollars plus fifty-five cents war tax" (119) of the critic for painting his portrait. The critic falls on his knees and begs him to show mercy, but when the artist shows none, and refuses to take a cheque, he pulls out a five dollar bill, at the sight of which the artist, melting with happiness, calls the critic his "good, kind friend," "patron," "mentor," and "saviour" (119). Cummings clearly found certain modernist artists' flouting of the commercial side of art slightly absurd.

Behind the modernist disdain for the commercial side of art lies a dislike of usefulness, for such usefulness diminishes the status of the art. If both modernist art and modernist poetry rely on modes of signification that depend upon the possibility of excess, that mode of signification differs in its end goal – where advertising presents a product to be consumed, art does not depend so much upon immediate consumption in order to survive – hence Jameson's disdain for the reification of modernist artworks: such reification diminishes their status to that of a product, made useful only in being accessed. Perhaps one good thing that has come of Cummings's status as a minor poet is that he has therefore been less reified than the giants of modernist poetry, and so has, somehow, remained distant from the consumer impulses that act upon even poetry.²⁸

Strangely enough, this idea of use has led me full circle: I would like to return to a poignant moment in Eliot's criticism. In "The Function of Criticism," he calls the

²⁸ See Perloff, "The Aura of Modernism," for an insightful commentary on this impulse.

“assumption that criticism is an autotelic activity” “preposterous” (13). In other words, criticism has a function beyond itself, which Eliot defines as “the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste” (13). His statement sounds trite, but the assumption behind it is important for its reminder that criticism is, on some level, meant to be useful. The nature of that use is, of course, up for debate. But surely some aspects of that use can be found in its necessary distinction from the type of use promoted by the commercialist aspects of our culture. That is, while the excess found in the commodity and advertising culture surrounding us always desires more consumption as its end goal, and so verges on meaninglessness, criticism avoids such destructive impulses through a constant self-critique which pushes it continually beyond itself.²⁹

Marjorie Perloff concludes her 2002 study *21st Century Modernism* with the proposition that “ours may well be the moment when the lessons of early modernism are finally being learned” (200), in reference to the current “impressive range and production of poetry in which language, sound, rhythm, and visual layout are, in Pound’s terms, ‘charged with meaning’” (200). Indeed, modernist authors and critics probably did not imagine just how far the implications of its extreme emphasis on language could be pushed. Moreover, Perloff’s statement, if applied specifically to modernist criticism, becomes only too true. There is a sense in which the lessons of modernist criticism have been learned too well, for modernist criticism helped establish the recognizable mode of criticism in which the force of analysis lies in a focus on the work’s formal properties, and in which the pleasure of the work is inseparable from an analysis of these properties.

²⁹ Cf Paul de Man’s assertion that “literary theory is not in danger of going under; it cannot help but flourish, and the more it is resisted, the more it flourishes, since the language it speaks is the language of self-resistance” (347).

Indeed, what I have started to show is that it is necessary to systematize the rhetoric and assumptions of modernist criticism and the modes of signification of certain modernist poets such as Cummings, for such a systematization always keeps in view the possibility of alternate models of meaning. That the approach to a text embraced by current critical discourse is not the only approach available becomes especially important when such an approach masquerades itself as such, for when it does so, alternate possibilities of meaning become obscured, as do certain texts that rely on those other possibilities. Indeed, the dialectical aspect of literary criticism must be maintained if it is to avoid collapsing into the very autotelism that Eliot called preposterous.

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