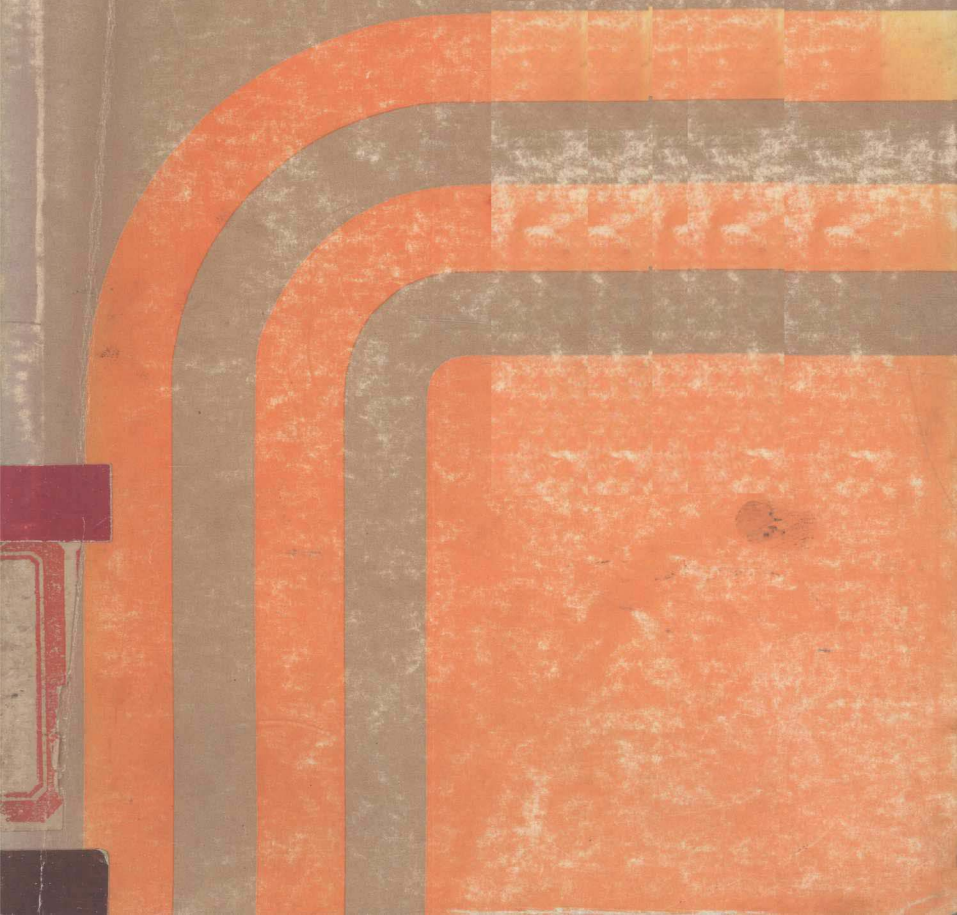


comprehensive study guide to

FOURTEEN POEMS
BY E. E. CUMMINGS

康明思的詩



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今日世界出版社出版

香港九龍尖沙咀郵箱5217號

港澳總代理：張輝記書報社

香港利源東街四號二樓

1977年12月香港初版

定價：HK \$ 2.00

COMPREHENSIVE STUDY GUIDE TO FOURTEEN
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Literary Study Guides Association, Taipei, Taiwan.
Hong Kong edition published by World Today Press,
Hong Kong.

First Printing

December 1977

Acknowledgments

"in Just"

"Buffalo Bill's"

"when god lets my body be"

"O sweet spontaneous"

"the Cambridge ladies"

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"my sweet old etcetera"

"next to of course god america i"

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"anyone lived in a pretty how town"

"my father moved through dooms of love"

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"spring is like a perhaps hand"

"i like my body"

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"plato told"

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"r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r"

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"l(a"

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"moon over towns moon"

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E. E. Cummings
(a self-portrait)

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Introduction

Edward Estlin Cummings
1894-1963

mOOn Over tOwns mOOn
whisper
less creature huge grO
pingness

whO perfectly whO
flOat
newly alOne is
dreamest

oNLY THE MooN o
VER ToWNS
SLoWLY SPoUTING SPIR
IT

The mere typography of this poem identifies it as the work of e e cummings (as he liked to print his name). Yet this is one of the more tame of his poems. Another begins:-

(b
eLl
s?
bE

One of the most famous, entitled "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r," on a grasshopper, is a typographical orgy of spacing, punctuation, capitals, small letters, line divisions, and anagrams of the grasshopper, not to mention the chaos of grammar and word order. Cummings the poet was also a professional painter and gave extreme care to the visual format of his poems. He was also a rabid circus fan and wished his playful use of words and their physical appearance on the page to be as clever as the pratfalls of a clown. He meant to surprise and to amuse. He always surprised but did not always amuse the staid critics of poetry. Some he infuriated.

Cummings began his adult life as a prankster who soon suffered from those who did not enjoy his sense of humor. After graduating with an M.A. from Harvard in 1916, the son of a well-known Congregationalist minister, he left for France in 1917. In the company of another prankster from Columbia University, William Slater Brown, he joined an American ambulance corps during World War I. Brown began writing letters home asserting a widespread despondency in the French army. His prediction of imminent mutiny and even revolution failed to amuse the official censors of mail who soon had the two young men arrested as spies. Since the irresponsible prank was the work of Brown, Cummings could have been immediately released if he had been willing to swear, to the satisfaction of the French authorities, that he only felt hatred for all Germans without exception. Cummings was already a worshipper of true individual feelings and refused to comply

to such a condition for his liberation. He spent three months in prison for treasonable correspondence after which he sailed for home. From this experience came his first work, a novel he called *The Enormous Room* foreshadowing the literature of the absurd that was to spread after the second world war.

After publishing a volume of poems, *Tulips and Chimneys*, in 1923, he returned to Paris to study painting while still writing poetry. When he returned to America two years later he found that his novel and book of poems had already made him famous, and the Dial prize for poetry was offered to him. From then on he devoted all his time to poetry and painting, always playful, the complete individualist, a lover of life and art. Besides *Tulips and Chimneys* his collections of poems include *&[AND]* (1925), *XLI Poems* (1925), *is 5* (1926), *W [ViVa]* (1931), *no thanks* (1935), *50 POEMS* (1940), *1 x 1* (1944), *Xaipe* (1950). All these were collected by definite choice in a book entitled, *Poems 1923-1954*. In 1927, he wrote his first play, *Him*; it might well be considered "one of the first successful attempts at what is now called the theater of the absurd," with a Beckett-like dialogue:

Him: What are the audience doing?

Me: They're pretending that this room and you and I are real.

Him: I wish I could believe this.

Me: You can't.

Him: Why?

Me: Because this is true.

Anthropos followed in 1930. It is a criticism of what people call progress at the expense of real life. *Tom* (1935)

is a ballet based on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *Santa Claus* (1946) is a blank verse play written after Hiroshima; it attacks science and scientific habits of thought: "Knowledge has taken love out of the world/and all the world is joyless joyless joyless." In 1952, he delivered a series of lectures at Harvard, later published under the title *i: six nonlectures*.

In all these works there is real delight in the absurd, the comical, even the clownish. Yet a closer look into the content of the poems reveals a more serious purpose than mere amusement. By distorting the physical appearance of the words and phrases of a tired language, Cummings forces the reader's attention back to their real meaning. As appears in the "mOOOn" poem above, by relating the appearance of words and their meaning, he achieves a sort of impact on the reader's consciousness not unlike the impact of Chinese ideograms.

When the door of meaning has once been opened for us, quite an attractive interior is revealed. Already in *The Enormous Room*, the main themes of Cummings' poetry are present. It is a celebration of the joy of life in the midst of the waste land of modern times. The novel relates how in conditions degrading the human, striving to extinguish the personal, stifling the individual, etc., life is still made liveable by the "triumphant survival of distinctiveness, of idiosyncrasy, of all those elements of character and behavior that separate the individual from the 'unperson'." Cummings' poetry is a celebration of the triumph of life. The freshness of language mirrors the freshness of apprehension, of sponta-

neity, of instinctive response to existence:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings;and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should rasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You ?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Fullness of life means fullness of awareness of the present,
forgetting the past, ignoring the future; it is a full dedi-
cation to what he repeatedly calls the "illimitable Now and
Here." His philosophy is that of an unconditional yes said
to the present. Any other way of living is a nonlife:

Wherelings whenlings
(daughters of ifbut offsprings of hopefear
sons of unless and children of almost)
never shall guess the dimension of

him whose
each
foot likes the

here of this earth
whose both

eyes
love
this now of the sky

The "wherelings whenlings" are the dead afraid to be born; in other words, the unpeople, and "mostpeople" are unpeople: "by some fatal, some incomparably fatal accident" only a few men have a soul; only these can live their souls. His anti-intellectualism verges on the fanatic: "The more we know the less we feel," he writes in one of his letters, while one of his poems begins "he does not have to feel because he thinks." The human body, an essential element of the person, must be absolutely, fearlessly alive. Naturally then, Cummings wrote the greatest number of erotic poems of all 20th-century poets. He also wrote some of the most musical lyrics of the age:

All in green went my love riding
on a great horse of gold
into the silver dawn.

Of course the speaker in Cummings' poems, the celebrator of life, of joy, of love, of the illimitable now is a *Persona*, a creation of Cummings' imagination. Yet, like Whitman, Cummings tried to live his *Persona*. His letters often refer to his anxiety over financial problems and to his depressions, the "dying night" of his soul at the time of the failure of his marriage. But he would soon bounce back to life, joy, and love. His determination to BE, to live his soul, always won. As he wrote in the introduction

to his collection, *New Poems*:

The poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople....Take the matter of being born. What does being born mean to mostpeople?... If mostpeople were to be born twice they'd improbably call it dying...you and I ... we can never be born enough. We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing: the mystery which happens only and whenever we are faithful to ourselves.

Because of the novelty and experimental nature of his poems. Cummings will always remain a controversial poet. His prominence is assured, though, because his ideosyncrasies are purposeful, his apparent illogicality meaningful, and his language clear, precise, and melodic.

CUMMINGS' TECHNIQUE

Cummings' strange technique may perhaps be best explained by examining it progressively from the poems which depart only slightly from traditional verse to the most idiosyncratic and puzzling forms.

Use of Capitalization & parenthesis

"My Sweet Old Etcetera" contrasts the abstract, conventional idealism of the speaker's family towards war and the realism of his actual dying in the mud dreaming of love and conception of life. The stanzas are arranged in a 2-3-2-4-2-5-2-6 (3-3) line pattern. The pronoun "i," the proper name "isabel," the first letter of each line are not capitalized while "Your" and "Etcetera" in the last two lines use the upper case. Cummings' use of capital letters for stress or other effects preclude their conventional use—"Your smile" and "your Etcetera" achieve thus an impact on the reader's consciousness. Furthermore, this unconventional use of capitals contribute to the theme of the poem which mocks the conventional attitude towards death in the field of honor. The parentheses enfold the secret thoughts of the speaker as opposed to the objective scene of the rest of the poem. The separation of "et" and "cetera" which both divide and unite the 3-3 line pattern of the last stanza slows down the rhythm and suggests either the breaking off of life or the last gasp of the dying.

Use of Adverbs & Verbs as Nouns— Word Order

"Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town" with its conventional enough four line stanzas and occasional rhymes intensifying the rhythm of the stanzas where they appear, presents a peculiar use of the parts of speech. Expressions like "how town," "he sang his didn't," "he danced his did," "they said their nevers," where adverbs and verbs are used as nouns, give freshness, force, and new life to worn out words. They are clear in spite of, or rather because of, their deliberately faulty grammar. In the context of the whole poem the how-town is the community where what counts is how to conform to the requirements of society and become somebody, and not how to live fully from the spontaneous springs of love and life within us. In the larger context of Cummings' poetry, to live in the fullness of one's possibility for intense living, sensations, and feelings is perhaps the most frequent and profound theme. Cummings always equates success in life with a life lived in harmony with the deepest natural instincts of man; to chose to be in his uniqueness and become "anyone" rather than to play the social game and become "someone." This is the only way man can feel alive and enjoy the gift of life in an industrial, conformist culture. In his other writings, Cummings exalts the being that *is*, what he calls "an IS," one that exists fully, that realizes the full potentialities of life within oneself. In such a context, expressions like "they sowed their isn't," "they said their nevers" applied to the someones and the everyones in the how-town,

acquire concentrated force. The theme of the poem is really to be or not to be, that is, in Cummings' parlance, to be an "is" or an "isn't."

"Anyone" is an "is" because he can love, and consequently be loved, his life is a dance in harmony with the rhythm of nature. The contrasts between life and death are carefully arranged in the poem. "Anyone" *lived* in the dead how-town, "noone" loved him, while women and men in the town cared for "anyone" not at all. "Anyone's" any was all to "noone"; she laughed his joy and cried his grief, while loveless "someones" laughed their "everyone's" crying; "anyone" danced his did, the "someones" did their dance, and so on.

Another peculiarity of the poem is the syntax of a line like "with up so floating many bells down" in which the order of words seems to be that of a foreign language. Cummings often distorted the normal order of words to force attention by having the reader re-order the words properly in his mind and to preserve a fitting rhythm. The normal order, with so many bells floating up and down, would be a flat insignificant statement.

Creative Use of Clichés

A third remarkable device used by Cummings in this poem is the renewal of clichés. "Little by little" is refreshed by the use of "more by more," a pattern of speech he prolongs into "when by now," and "tree by leaf," in which "more" is multiplied by "more"; "when," suggesting some-time in the past or the future is replaced by the "now"; the