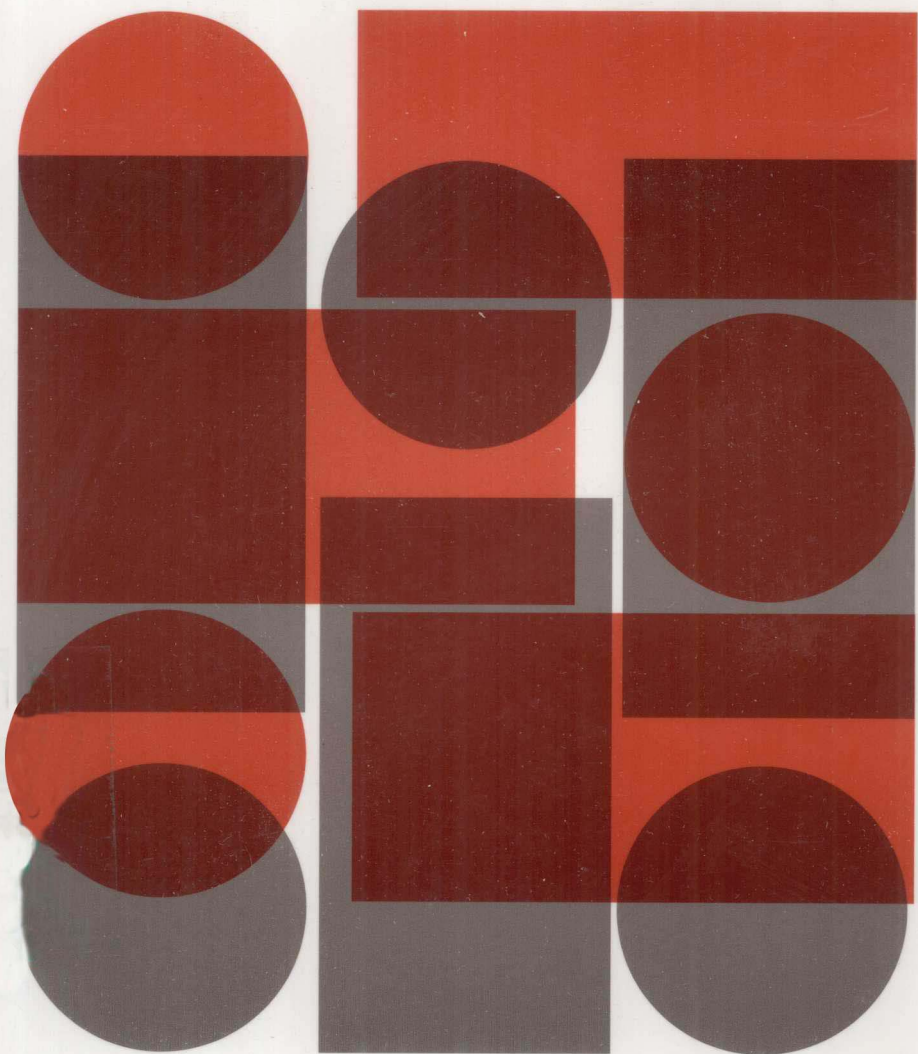


i six nonlectures e e cummings



SIX NONLECTURES

harvard university press
cambridge, massachusetts
london, england

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Eighteenth printing, 2000

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number
53-10472
ISBN 0-674-44010-2

Typography by
BURTON L. STRATTON

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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&

my parents

NONLECTURE ONE

Let me cordially warn you, at the opening of these so-called lectures, that I haven't the remotest intention of posing as a lecturer. Lecturing is presumably a form of teaching; and presumably a teacher is somebody who knows. I never did, and still don't, know. What has always fascinated me is not teaching, but learning; and I assure you that if the acceptance of a Charles Eliot Norton professorship hadn't rapidly entangled itself with the expectation of learning a very great deal, I should now be somewhere else. Let me also assure you that I feel extremely glad to be here; and that I heartily hope you won't feel extremely sorry.

Ever since many of you didn't exist I've been learning and relearning, as a writer and as a painter, the significance of those immemorial maxims "one man's meat is another man's poison" and "you can lead the mare to water but you can't make her drink." Now—as a nonlecturer—I am luckily confronted by that equally ancient, but far less austere, dictum "it's an ill wind which blows nobody good." For while a genuine lecturer must obey the rules of mental decency, and clothe his personal idiosyncrasies in collectively acceptable generalities, an authentic ignoramus remains quite indecently free to speak as he feels. This prospect cheers me, because I value freedom; and have never expected freedom to be anything less than indecent. The very fact that a burlesk addict of long standing (who has many times worshipped at the shrine of progressive corporeal revelation) finds himself on the verge of attempting an aesthetic striptease, strikes me as a quite remarkable manifestation of poetic justice; and reinforces my conviction that since I can't tell you what I know (or rather what I don't know) there's nothing to prevent me from trying to tell you who I am—which I'd deeply enjoy doing.

But who am I? Or rather—since my drawing and painting self concerns you not at all—who is my other self, the self of the prose and of the poetry? Here I perceive a serious problem; as

well as an excellent chance to learn something. There'd be no problem, of course, if I subscribed to the hyperscientific doctrine that heredity is nothing because everything is environment; or if (having swallowed this supersleepingpill) I envisaged the future of so-called mankind as a permanent pastlessness, prenatally enveloping semi-identical supersubmorons in perpetual nonunhappiness. Rightly or wrongly, however, I prefer spiritual insomnia to psychic suicide. The hellless hell of compulsory heaven-on-earth emphatically isn't my pail of blueberries. By denying the past, which I respect, it negates the future—and I love the future. Consequently for me an autobiographical problem is an actuality.

Inspecting my autobiographical problem at close range, I see that it comprises two problems; united by a certain wholly mysterious moment which signifies selfdiscovery. Until this mysterious moment, I am only incidentally a writer: primarily I am the son of my parents and whatever is happening to him. After this moment, the question "who am I?" is answered by what I write—in other words, I become my writing; and my autobiography becomes the exploration of my stance as a writer. Two questions now make their appearance. The first—what constitutes this writing of mine?—can be readily answered: my writing consists of a pair of miscalled novels; a brace of plays, one in prose, the other in blank verse; nine books of poems; an indeterminate number of essays; an untitled volume of satire; and a ballet scenario. The second question—where, in all this material, do I find my stance as a writer most clearly expressed?—can be answered almost as readily: I find it expressed most clearly in the later miscalled novel, the two plays, perhaps twenty poems, and half a dozen of the essays. Very well; I shall build the second part of my autobiography around this prose and this poetry, allowing (wherever possible) the prose and the poetry to speak for themselves. But the first part of my autobiography presents a problem of another order

entirely. To solve that problem, I must create a longlost personage—my parents' son—and his vanished world. How can I do this? I don't know; and because I don't know, I shall make the attempt. Having made the attempt, I shall tackle my second problem. If either attempt fails, I shall at least have tried. And if both attempts succeed, I shall (by some miracle) have achieved the impossible. For then—and only then—will you and I behold an aesthetic selfportrait of one whole half of this and no other indivisible ignoramus As Is.

Some, if not most, of the distinguished members of this enlightened audience are now (I suspect) internally exclaiming "alas. We come here expecting that a poet will lecture on poetry; and the very first thing the socalled poet does is to tell us he hasn't the slightest intention of doing so. Next, the socalled poet indulges in a lot of pretty corny backtracking; all of which proves exactly nothing, unless it's that as a draughtsman he doesn't know his gluteus maximus from his olecranon. Finally (adding injury to insult) the socalled poet graciously announces that we may expect him to favor us with a description of his prepoetic career, and then—as if this weren't bad enough—with a bevy of largely prosaic tidbits which have occasionally escaped him in the course of the last three decades: because only in this manner can he possibly understand who he is today. Why in the name of common sense doesn't the poet (socalled) read us some poetry—any poetry; even his own—and tell us what he thinks or doesn't think of it? Is the socalled poet a victim of galloping egocentricity or is he just plain simpleminded?"

My immediate response to such a question would be: and why not both? But supposing we partially bury the hatchet and settle for egocentricity—who, if I may be so inconsiderate as to ask, isn't egocentric? Half a century of time and several continents of space, in addition to a healthily developed curiosity, haven't yet enabled me to locate a single peripherally situated

ego. Perhaps I somehow simply didn't meet the right people, and vice versa. At any rate, my slight acquaintance with senators pickpockets and scientists leads me to conclude that they are far from unselfcentred. So, I believe, are all honest educators. And so (I'm convinced) are streetcleaners deafmutes murderers mothers, mountainclimbers cannibals fairies, strong men beautiful women unborn babes international spies, ghostwriters bums business executives, out and out nuts cranks dopefiends policemen, altruists (above all) ambulancechasers obstetricians and liontamers. Not forgetting morticians—as undertakers (in this epoch of universal culture) prefer to denominate themselves. Or, as my friend the distinguished biographer M R Werner once subrosafully remarked, over several biscuit dubouûchés “when you come right down to it, everybody’s the whole boxoftricks to himself; whether she believes it or not.”

Now let me make you a strictly egocentric proposition. Assuming that a socalled lecture lasts fifty minutes, I hereby solemnly swear to devote the last fifteen minutes of each and every lecture to nothing but poetry—and (what’s more) poetry for which I am in no way whatever responsible. This will leave me only thirty-five minutes of any lecture to chatter unpoetically about myself; or (now and again) to read part of a poem—perhaps an entire poem—of my own. The unpoetical chattering will begin with my parents and proceed to their son, will touch upon selfdiscovery; and then (at nonlecture number four) will shift to an exploration of EECummings’ stance as a writer. By contrast, the poetry readings will run clean through all six lectures; forming a strictly amateur anthology, or collection of poetry which for no reason or unreason I dearly love. In the course of my six halfhours of egocentricity I shall (among other deeds) discuss the difference between fact and truth, I shall describe professor Royce and the necktie crisis, I shall name professor Charles Eliot Norton’s coachman, and I shall define sleep. If you ask “but why include trivialities?” my answer will

be: what are they? During my six fifteenminute poetry readings, I shall only try to read poetry as well as I don't know how. If you object "but why not criticize as well?" I shall quote very briefly from a wonderful book, whose acquaintance I first made through a wonderful friend named Hildegard Watson—a book whose English title is *Letters To A Young Poet*, and whose author is the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing to be so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them.

In my proud and humble opinion, those two sentences are worth all the soi-disant criticism of the arts which has ever existed or will ever exist. Disagree with them as much as you like, but never forget them; for if you do, you will have forgotten the mystery which you have been, the mystery which you shall be, and the mystery which you are—

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

so huge a tumult is the simplest wish:
so pitiless a massacre the hope
most innocent(so deep's the mind of flesh
and so awake what waking calls asleep)

so never is most lonely man alone
(his briefest breathing lives some planet's year,
his longest life's a heartbeat of some sun;
his least unmotion roams the youngest star)

—how should a fool that calls him "I" presume
to comprehend not numerable whom?

And thus we arrive at the parents of a longlost personage, who is these parents' child.

By way of describing my father, let me quote a letter and tell you a story. The letter was written by me to my good friend Paul Rosenfeld; who used it in an essay which graced the fifth number of that ambiguously entitled periodical *The Harvard Wake*:

I wot not how to answer your query about my father. He was a New Hampshire man, 6 foot 2, a crack shot & a famous fly-fisherman & a first-rate sailor (his sloop was named *The Actress*) & a woodsman who could find his way through forests primeval without a compass & a canoeist who'd stillpaddle you up to a deer without ruffling the surface of a pond & an ornithologist & taxidermist & (when he gave up hunting) an expert photographer (the best I've ever seen) & an actor who portrayed Julius Caesar in Sanders Theatre & a painter (both in oils & watercolours) & a better carpenter than any professional & an architect who designed his own houses before building them & (when he liked) a plumber who just for the fun of it installed all his own waterworks & (while at Harvard) a teacher with small use for professors—by whom (Royce, Lanman, Taussig, etc.) we were literally surrounded (but not defeated)—& later (at Doctor Hale's so-called South Congregational really Unitarian church) a preacher who announced, during the last war, that the Gott Mit Uns boys were in error since the only thing which mattered was for man to be on God's side (& one beautiful Sunday in Spring remarked from the pulpit that he couldn't understand why anyone had come to hear him on such a day) & horribly shocked his pewholders by crying "the Kingdom of Heaven is no spiritual roofgarden: it's inside you" & my father had the first telephone in Cambridge & (long before any Model T Ford) he piloted an Orient Buckboard with Friction Drive produced by the Waltham watch company & my father sent me to a certain public school because its principal was a gentle immense coalblack negress & when he became a diplomat (for World Peace) he gave me & my friends a tremendous party up in a tree at Sceaux Robinson & my father was a servant of the people who fought Boston's biggest & crookedest politician fiercely all day & a few evenings later sat down with him cheerfully at the Rotary Club & my father's voice was so magnificent that he

was called on to impersonate God speaking from Beacon Hill (he was heard all over the common) & my father gave me Plato's metaphor of the cave with my mother's milk.

This, I feel, is an accurate sketch of Edward Cummings, Harvard '83—except as regards his neighbourliness. He certainly had "small use for professors" in general; but with the particular professors around him his relations were nearly always amicable and in certain cases affectionate. The neighbour whom my father unquestionably preferred was William James; and it's odd that I should have forgotten to mention so true a friend and so great a human being. Not only is it odd: it's ungrateful—since I may be said to owe my existence to professor James, who introduced my father to my mother.

Now for the story.

Thirty-five years ago, a soiled envelope with a French stamp on it arrived at 104 Irving Street, Cambridge. The envelope contained a carefully phrased scrawl; stating (among other things) that I was interned in a certain concentration camp, with a fine friend named Brown whom I'd met on the boat going to France—he, like myself, having volunteered as an ambulance driver with Messers Norton (not Charles Eliot) and Harjes. Immediately my father—than whom no father on this earth ever loved or ever will love his son more profoundly—cabled his friend Norton; but Mr Norton hadn't even missed us, and consequently could do less than nothing. Next, through a mere but loyal acquaintance, my father set the American army on our trail; forcefully stipulating that my friend and I must be rescued together. Many days passed. Suddenly the telephone rang—top brass demanding Reverend Edward Cummings. "Hello" my father said. "This is Major Soandso" an angry voice sputtered. "That friend of your son is no damned good. May even be a spy. Unpatriotic anyhow. He deserves what's coming

to him. Do you understand?" "I understand" said my deeply patriotic father. "We won't touch Brown" the sputter continued "so it's your son or nothing. And I guarantee that your son alone will be out of that hellhole in five days—what do you say about that?" "I say" replied my father "don't bother." And he hung up.

Incidentally, the major bothered; and as a result, my friend Slater Brown is also alive.

Let me only add that while my father was speaking with the American army, my mother was standing beside him; for these two wonderful human beings, my father and my mother, loved each other more than themselves—

if there are any heavens my mother will(all by herself)have
one. It will not be a pansy heaven or
a fragile heaven of lilies-of-the-valley but
it will be a heaven of blackred roses

my father will be(deep like a rose
tall like a rose)

standing near my

(swaying over her
silent)
with eyes which are really petals and see

nothing with the face of a poet really which
is a flower and not a face with
hands
which whisper
This is my beloved my

(suddenly in sunlight

he will bow,

and the whole garden will bow)

—as for me, I was welcomed as no son of any king and queen was ever welcomed. Here was my joyous fate and my supreme fortune. If somehow a suggestion of this illimitable blessing should come to you from me, my existence here and now would be justified: otherwise, anything I may say to you will have not the slightest significance. For as surely as each November has its April, mysteries only are significant; and one mystery-of-mysteries creates them all:

nothing false and possible is love
(who's imagined, therefore limitless)
love's to giving as to keeping's give;
as yes is to if, love is to yes

I shall not attempt a description of my mother. But let me try to give you a few glimpses of the most amazing person I've ever met. She came of highly respectable Roxbury stock: so highly respectable (indeed) that one of her distinguished forbears, the Reverend Pitt Clarke, withdrew his grown son by the ear from what we should consider a painfully decorous dance. Nor did Clarke respectability stop there. When my mother's father, who was in business with his father-in-law, affixed (on one occasion) the latter's name to a cheque, that worthy not only sent his son-in-law to the Charles Street jail but obliterated his name from the family archives. My mother told me that all during her childhood she supposed that her father had been hanged. She also assured me that she grew up a shy—or (as we now say) neurotic—girl; who had to be plucked from under sofas whenever friends came to call; and this statement I found almost unbelievable, though she could no more have told a lie than flown over the housetop. For never have I encountered anyone more joyous, anyone healthier in body and mind, anyone so quite incapable of remembering a wrong, or anyone so completely and humanly and unaffectedly generous. Whereas

my father had created his Unitarianism (his own father being a Christian of the hellfire variety) she had inherited hers; it was an integral part of herself, she expressed it as she breathed and as she smiled. The two indispensable factors in life, my mother always maintained, were "health and a sense of humor." And although her health eventually failed her, she kept her sense of humor to the beginning.

It isn't often you meet a true heroine. I have the honour to be a true heroine's son. My father and mother were coming up from Cambridge to New Hampshire, one day, in their newly purchased automobile—an aircooled Franklin, with an ash frame. As they neared the Ossipees, snow fell. My mother was driving; and, left to herself, would never have paused for such a trifle as snow. But as the snow increased, my father made her stop while he got out and wiped the windshield. Then he got in; and she drove on. Some minutes later, a locomotive cut the car in half, killing my father instantly. When two brakemen jumped from the halted train, they saw a woman standing—dazed but erect—beside a mangled machine; with blood "spouting" (as the older said to me) out of her head. One of her hands (the younger added) kept feeling of her dress, as if trying to discover why it was wet. These men took my sixty-six year old mother by the arms and tried to lead her toward a nearby farmhouse; but she threw them off, strode straight to my father's body, and directed a group of scared spectators to cover him. When this had been done (and only then) she let them lead her away.

A day later, my sister and I entered a small darkened room in a country hospital. She was still alive—why, the headdoctor couldn't imagine. She wanted only one thing: to join the person she loved most. He was very near her, but she could not quite reach him. We spoke, and she recognized our voices. Gradually her own voice began to understand what its death would mean

to these living children of hers; and very gradually a miracle happened. She decided to live. "There's something wrong with my head" she kept telling us faintly; and she didn't mean the fracture of her skull. As days and nights passed, we accidentally discovered that this ghastly wound had been sewn up by candlelight when all the town lights went out at once. But the headdoctor had no intention of losing his patient—"move her?" he cried "impossible! It would kill her just to sit up" and several centuries wandered away before we found a method of overruling him. When the ambulance arrived, ready to transfer my mother to a big Boston hospital, she was sitting up (fully dressed and smiling) by the entrance-door. She admired the ambulance, conversed cheerfully with its chauffeur, and refused to lie down because by so doing she'd miss the scenery en route. We shot through towns and tore through cities. "I like going fast" she told us; beaming. At last came the goal. After an interminable time in an operatingroom—where (we learned later) she insisted on watching in a handmirror whatever was happening, while a great brain-surgeon removed a piece of bone and carefully cleansed the wound—up came my mother in a wheelchair; very erect, and waving triumphantly a small bottle in which (at her urgent request) he'd placed the dirt and grime and splinters of whose existence his predecessor had been blissfully unaware. "You see?" she cried to us, smiling "I was right!"

And, though the wound had later to be reopened, she came out of that hospital in record time; recovered completely at home in a few months—attending, now and then, a nearby meeting of The Society of Friends—then boarded a train alone for New York, and began working as a volunteer for the Travellers' Aid in the Grand Central Station. "I'm tough!" was her dauntless comment when we tried to express our amazement and our joy.

My mother loved poetry; and copied most of the poems she loved best into a little book which was never far from her.