E.E. CUMMINGS: A PARADOX OF NON-DIFFICULTY

Its hub and heart, « quick i the death of thing » constitutes the structural pivot of E. E. Cummings' volume of poetry *Xaire* (1950)[1], occupying the centre of its universe both spatially — thirty-sixth poem in seventy-one — and symbolically, as enactment of its mode and mood. So intimate is their relationship that the poem can signify only in terms of the book's theme and Greek title *Xaire*. *xaire* means « rejoice » and both the Greek and its English correlate evoke a climate of exaltation, as we have in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*[2] — where « rejoice » finds its first intransitive use in English literature — or in the Bible[3]; in the Easter Libris of the Greek Orthodox Church — where Cummings attended services while at Harvard[4] — reduplication of *xaire* expresses Pentecostal joy. Sensitive and intense, the poet no doubt was alive to the sacred radiance and spiritual charge of these rites, all the more so, perhaps, as his father — Edward Cummings, whom he celebrates in his most famous poem « my father moved through dooms of love »[5] — was a preacher of the Unitarian Church[6]; *Xaire* may thus be paying homage to both Church and father. Yet it harks back not only to the impressions and feelings of a son and occasional worshipper within a particular rite,

1. E.E. CUMMINGS, *Xaire* (Oxford University Press, 1950).

2. Book V, l. 1164-5: « But hardily, it is naught for nought / That in myn herte I now rejoysse thus ».

3. *Eg. Zech.*, 9:9: « Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Jerusalem ». *John*, 16:22: « but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice ».

4. Information provided by George Steiner personally.

5. E.E. CUMMINGS, *50 Poems* (Duel, Sloan and Pearce, 1940), no. 34.

6. E.E. CUMMINGS, *i six non-lectures* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1972), page 8.

but also to the whole of Christianism as a principle of inheritance from both Greece, mother of arts [7], and from Christ, son of God and God of love. Many *Xaire* poems relate to the Gospels; at their core, lies « quick i the death of thing », incorporating His resurrection with poetry; to Cummings, indeed, « poetry is being, not doing » [8]: is love.

Like so many English children's verses, folk poems, medieval lyrics and contemporary metrics, « quick i the death of thing » is informed with the archaic — embodiment of Greece — in terms of linguistic structure, poetic patterns, musical texture. The poem consists of a full two-thirds of « basic English » monosyllables built into a four-square stanzaic configuration of short lines — three to six syllables — with normally masculine endings and an imperfect — consonantal — rhyming pattern of the type abab, ccdd. We have numerous real or near assonances and alliterations and consonances, often working simultaneously and reinforcing the rhymes [9]. The privileged connection between poetry and cult music in Greece is conjured up in the reader's percipience by the poem's 'music' or structure of 'sonorousness'. Its phonemic analysis reveals an organization of the *crescendo-decrescendo*-type characteristic for musical phrases which culminates in stanza three, vocalic and consonantal systematization lending each other support. Taking into account the complex-nuclei off-glides [10], the high vowels (/i/, /u/, etc.) of strophe one are followed by the mid vowels (/e/, /, / ə /ɛ/, /ʌ/, /o/ etc.) of strophe two, and by the low

7. See for instance his poem « plato told », no XIII of *I x I* (*One Times one*) (Henry Holt and Company, 1944).

8. *i six non-lectures*, p. 24.

9. Strophe one: « th*ing* / *glimpsed* / *flimsying* », and « glimp*sed* / *side* ».

Strophe two: « *u*nder / *a* / *o*pens » can be attacked with a glottal '.

Strophe three: « *what* / *was* / al*ways* »; *always* / *fall* ».

Strophe four: « they'*ll* / *all* / *less* / *love* ».

10. Linguistic terminology reference work here used is W. Nelson Francis, *The Structure of American English* (The Ronals Press Company, New York, 1958).

vowels (mainly /a/ and / ɔ /) of stanza three, whilst the last of the four comprises a mixture of low, mid, and high vowels and more diphtongs than the other three; to the unsophisticated speaker (the non-linguist who conceives of his language in nonscientific terms), high vowels feel 'small', low ones 'big', from the point of view of both oral opening and sound-volume, and he, thus, perceives the vocalic speech-tune of our poem in terms of a gradual increase in intensity up to and included the third stanza which evidences a climax of loudness followed by a gradual decrease in sound-volume to the end. Studying the arrangement and proportion of unvoiced and voiced consonants, we find they follow a parallel movement: whilst nasals play an important role in stanzas one, two and four, they give way to a large amount of semi-vowels (intrinsically more sonorous than any other consonants), in stanza three; similarly, the unvoiced stops and fricatives predominant in the first two strophes relent before their voiced correlatives in the third, whereas the last presents all the consonantal types. We note, then, the progress of voiced consonants from one-half in the first stanza, to two-thirds in the second, to three-quarter in the third, and back to one-half in the last; in other words, the proportion of voiced consonants increases up to the third strophe, then decreases to initial proportions in the last: the noise made by producing the poem's consonants intensifies and diminishes simultaneously with the progression of its vowels from low to mid, to high and back to low. We are effectively witnessing a phonemic *messa di voce* [11] metaphor. Reciting « quick i the death of thing », a performer must begin on a level of relatively high tension (taut vocal cord and lips; jaws hardly open) for the

11. Literally « placing of the voice »; in vocal technique, particularly of the Italian 18th century *bel canto*, the sustaining of a long note at an unwavering pitch and combined with a *crescendo* and *diminuendo* on that note (see RACHELE MARAGLIANO MORI, *La Coscienza della Voce nella Scuola Italiana del Canto*, Edizioni Curci, Milano, 1970).

high vowels and unvoiced stops, in particular; for the mid vowels, he must gradually release it to reach full relaxation on the low vowels, semivowels, voiced stops; then back to higher tension to end with; it is pure *bel canto,* technically speaking, though, in spirit, it is the embodiment of the arts' archaic oneness, on the one hand, but on the other, enactment of any life on earth — which, so alike itself, begins with almost nothing, grows big and recedes back into nothingness — as well as the performance of a total shouting « unto God »[12], climaxing with the poem's and the poet's ultimate truth, the third stanza's mysterious third line — « (yes but behind yes) » — which relates to it as the poem relates to *Haire*: image of the image of an image

If the poem celebrates *Xaire,* it does it, however, on its own theme, resurrection. Thus, whilst the rejoicing mood is expressed by the sound-organization of the words, Christ's rising from the dead is incarnated by their rhythm. Rhythm being a relationship in time — the periodic organization of matter, its conceptual structure, principle of its continuity and seed of its tangibility — the poem's rhythm, which brings its sounds to life, then forms the poem's second non-verbal metaphor, a metaphor for eternity, for the non-interruption of life, for the transcendence of death. In addition, interaction between the vocalic and the rhythmic metaphors produces a further, 'deep-structure' metaphor of sorts, a 'figure of thought' realizing the dialectic relationship between terrestrial life and life after life, between mortality and immortality, matter and soul: between Man and God. My metric reading[13] conceives of strophes one, two and three as dimetric, of strophe four as of a trimetric quatrain[14];

12. *Psalms* 47:1.

13. See Appendix.

14. There exist many alternative readings. The first line conceived as a tetrameter becomes more majestic (stresses on quick, i, death, thing) but the syntactic ruptures are thus emphasized and the movement arrested, not rendering service to both meanings of « quick », alive *and* rapid. For similar reasons, a trimeter is not satisfactory. And at least

that reading does not correlate in its progression with the poem's 'melodic' line: as quantity of sound decreases, number of stresses grows in the last strophe. This particular conception of the poem's 'music' encompasses symbolic uses of numbers: two are the phases of man's life — birth and death — but Christ's life, and our soul, know a third phase, resurrection and life after life.

« quick i the death of thing » presents us with a first person poem; the typically Cummingese lower-case « i » stands for the voice of Jesus. Twice we note the « quick i » formula completed, in the fourth quatrain, with « am »; in the first line, « quick » and « death » are opposed, immediately evoking the 'quick / dead' collations of the New Testament [15]. The very first clause « quick i the death of thing [16] glimpsed » then gives us the poem's theme, resurrection, almost immediately; it also illustrates, at its very incipience, the poem's characteristic syntactic procedure:

one of two possible 3-stress readings — the second hereafter — sounds almost ridiculous in its iambic regularity:

x x x x x x
quick i the death of thing quick i the death of thing

But a balance between 2-stress and 3-stress lines could be justified or many other combinations worked out. On the other hand, some of the stresses in my reading could be shifted without altering their number; also, the fourth strophe can be read as a dimetric quatrain. But it is a false problem: every reading is a personal trial and a comment on the reader's understanding; consensus may never be reached. It is a pity that Cummings' own — recorded — readings do not include « quick i the death of thing ».

15. *Eg. Acts* 10:42: « The Judge of quick and dead ».
2 Timothy 4:1: « judge the quick and the dead ».
1 Peter 4:5: « ready to judge the quick and the dead ».
As we note, the collation implies the notion of judgement.

16. « thing I construe as meaning « body », « physical hull ». The absence of a predeterminer may suggest the indifference of Jesus to what was his body but a split-second ago (for, indeed, He is telling us about His death which must, then, needs already pertain to the past); thus conceived, it would constitute a syntactic enactment, also reminding us of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Venus' contemptuous anger at her indifferent lover when she berates him «Thing like a man » — but the analogue is far-fetched, for Adonis indeed is a statue.

inversion. Clumsily, I would paraphrase as follows: 'I, being alive, have glimpsed the death of my body'. Despite their uncommon order, the poet's words in their very arrangement and choice generate his message much more energetically than my paraphrase.

Next comes the long clause « (and on every side / swoop mountains flimsying / become if who'd) ». The shorter *OED* classifies « flimsy » as both adjective and substantive and gives, furthermore, «flimsiness» and «flimsily»: no signs of a verbal form. The big one however permits us to trace a 19th c. use of 'to flimsy' [17]. So the adjective has not been forced through a class-change, after all. In its adjectival form, 'flimsy' [18] means easily destroyed, frail, slightly put together, paltry, trivial, frivolous, superficial [19]. Since our poem deals with resurrection, we can probatively ascribe its « flimsying » to the first three above-quoted meanings and associate it with mountains that swoop — come down on us with the rush of a bird of prey, make a sudden attack on us from the distance — and, taking note of the last line's utter confusion, intuit that the semantico-grammatical catastrophe in which order, and the relations between all that is on earth, are cathartically altered, corresponds to the universal collapse — to a primeval *tohu-wawohu* [20], void without form, chaos, utter frightening tumult, dream, disruption, earthquake — which follows Christ's resurrection [21], in the New Testament, and

17. *The Daily News*, 17 July 1886, where it means « to write on thin paper ».

18. Etymology: the Norwegian *flim* « lampoon »; by metathesis, it gave us our word « film ».

19. As a substantive, it may mean « thin paper » or « reporter's copy ». In the United States, it also means « thin paper used for carbon copy or transfers » and « copy written on this paper ». In slang, the word stands for « banknote ».

20. *Genesis* 1:2.

21. *Matthew* 27:51-3: « And behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake; and the rocks rent; and the graves were opened; and many bodies of

often also announces the presence of the Lord in the Jewish Bible[22]. In an act of linguistic embodiment, the tortured syntax relates to such experiences of cosmic disorder.

The syntactic break-up achieves the demonstrable possibility of several equally convincing structures. We may, for instance, assume « mountains » to be the subject, «swoop» the verb; « on every side » being the adverbial, « flimsying » can then be seen as either an *-ing*-participial adjectival postmodifying « mountains » or as a derived substantive, apposition to « mountains » and subject of the elliptical relative clause postmodifying it, or as a complement of « become ». On the other hand, « become » — infinitive or past participle — could postmodify « mountains », « flimsying », both, or none, if it be considered as a derived substantive itself: in the chaotic context, 'a become' might sound reasonable. As to « if », it may act as a subordinator — and if on every side mountains swoop, who'd become flimsying — implying a correct question but nonsense meaning. Or it may act as a substantive — and on every side swoop flimsying mountains, who'd become if — « if » expressing the uncertainty and conditionality and hypotheticality normal in or for an earthquake. The same either-or analysis is applicable to « who'd » which, besides assuming the function of interrogative or relative pronoun, could also play the role of a substantive (phonologically equivalent

the saints which slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection ».

Luke 23:30: « Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us: and to the hills, Cover us ».

1 Corinthians 13:2: « and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains ».

22. *Psalms* 114:4-7: « The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs. What ailed thee, O thou sea... ye mountains, that ye skipped like rams; and ye little hills, like lambs? Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the Lord ».

Micah 1:4: « the mountains shall be molten under him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place ».

with « hood »; some of its more sinister connotations [23] crowd themselves upon the sensitive reader), on the same level with « if » [24]. In the poem, the personal relative pronoun in conjunction with mountains only reinforces their prey-animal-like quality suggested by « swoop »; we probably are in presence of an actual metaphor, to which « glimpsed » and « flimsying » add power: a swooping eagle, in his enormous acceleration, would no more than glimpse the world lying under him, nay, his vision might be blurred as if by a very-thin-paper-like-mist. My metrical reading supports this interpretation and draws attention to the metaphor [25]. The syntactic fragmentation does, at no time, deprive the quatrain of meaning nor leave us without sentence: we have a set of words with subject and predicate, made up of two *and*-coordinated clauses, conveying an understandable statement. Cummings organizes chaos into pluri-structural order. Method in depth underlies surface irregularity [26].

23. In American slang, a hood is a hoodlum. Variant of voodoo, hoodoo informally is that which or one who brings bad luck (placed as the last word of quatrain one, the phonic realization of « who'd » entails a necessarily very sonorous /d/, easily perceived as a lax concretizing of the syllable /du/ in final position). And the white hoods of the Klu-Klux-Klan are not an impossible image, their black-crossed pointedness not so different from those tumbling mountain-tops, perhaps, not to mention the disaster threatened by the presence of both.

24. As we know, Cummings often personified things by applying to them the personal relative pronoun *eg.* « if night's mostness (and whom did merely day) », from *no thanks* (1935), no. 65.

25. It emphasizes « who'd » (drawing attention to the rhyme with « side » without, however, overstressing this word), « swoop », « glimpsed » « flimsying ». The /u:/ timbre of « who'd » and «swoop» reinforces the impression of animal cries, owls' hooting, wolves' howling and a sense of sublunary desolation. On the other hand, « mountains » goes unstressed altogether, and I ignore the secondary stress on « flimsying » (which forces the reader hastily to tumble over three non-stressed syllables « -sy-ing / be- ») in order to intensify the skipping rhythm of the word — the longest in the whole poem — and enact rhythmically the mountains' utter instability, the sense of on earthquake.

26. See, for instance, how he organizes the chaos of an earthquake into a syllabic *messa di voce* by aligning the two last lines of the quatrain into a 1-2-3-2-1-1 configuration of words.

With the second quatrain we spin around in a lexical *vertigo* engendering generalized dizziness. The temptation immediately to rearrange the words must be resisted for — what 'is' 'a opens'? We are sure all of us know that we can go into 'the open'. Further checking uncovers other substantival meanings [27]; but the unphonetical — and orthographically incorrect — determiner « a » before a noun beginning with a vowel almost surely clinches the argument against « opens » being a noun: it must be a third person singular, present, indicative, verb. Now we rearrange the words and get a relatively simple sentence: 'under me opens a hole (of petals and silence) bigger than ever-to-have-been' and the allusion to Christ's sepulchre becomes transparent [28]. The hole of silence is the tomb, the hole in the ground, and it is full of petals, the petals of the plants and trees and flowers in the garden of the sepulchre, and full of the spices brought to it by Nicodemus. And when Jesus comes out of it, his tomb itself becomes a flower that « opens ». Since by metonymy « hole » may stand for death, « hole bigger than never to have been » may mean: Jesus's death is not simply going back to zero, for his life was sorrow and grief; the comparative « bigger » associates with spatial bigness (deep hole); Jesus' greatness; Mary's pregnancy and sorrow [29]. Too, His death was much more

27. *Eg.* « aperture », « mouth of a river »; in Lincolnshire, it is « a gap in the sand-dunes through which a road passes to the shore ». In mining, it refers to a cavern.

28. *John* 19:39-41: « And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pound weight. Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid ».

29. *Luke* 2:5: « Mary... being great with child ». From German poetry one recalls that in « Pietà », *Das Marien-Leben*, Rainer Maria Rilke has Mary saying (with Jesus across her lap): « Du wurdest gross — und wurdest gross, um als zu grosser Schmerz ganz über meines Herzen Fassung hinauszustehn. Jetzt kann ich dich nicht mehr gebären »; despite

awful than if He had never existed because His life was big with the suffering foretold by the prophet[30]. Etymologically, hole is of course cognate of hell: death does imply preceding life and what it involved.

Here — as in the first quatrain — the inversions (particularly of line one) constitute no gratuitous game; why not 'under me' instead of « me under »? I see it as a technical device focusing on the voice of Jesus: the initial nasal bilabial mimetically reproduces the voice of atrocious physical suffering, an aching which has, however, no audible impact, a muffled moaning. Prepositioning the personal pronoun and postpositioning the preposition further concretizes the words and what they stand for in space and time. But more than anything, it affords three words in a row after « me » to begin with a vowel preceded by a glottal attack (if one so choses) all of which can 'metaphorize' short, weak, panting cries as might accompany and punctuate acute torment. Thus the « a opens » inversion is not only warranted by the last argument (the effect would, indeed, be lost if, instead, we had 'opens a'), but also justified on psychological grounds, from the Crucified's point of view. And that Cummings writes from both points of view: that of Jesus still alive and that of Jesus resurrected, by no means invalidates either of them, for in Man made God the impossible is possible. From the standpoint of Christ on the cross in the pangs of death, the linguistic-human order of things-and-words is nullified. The method characteristic for Cummings — to make syntactic fractures become meaningful — is at work here too. A further example of non-continuity is the non-concordance between tenses of the

profoundly different movements, we note a similar collocation of the notions of « bigness », « death », « suffering » in Rilke and Cummings: their source imposed it, of course.

30. *Isaiah* 53:5-7: « He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief... he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... He was oppressed and he was afflicted ».

quatrains: from the preterit « glimpsed » we go to the present « swoop » and « opens ». This could also be accounted for in terms of drama. Resurrection abolishes any human concept of time; past, present and future are one, constituting divine space without. With regard to eternity, there is no before, no after, no now, no yesterday, no tomorrow. However present following on past is inevitable in human time, and this is the sequence of tenses in the poem. In fact, the events alluded to occur in their referentially correct order: death of body, earthquake, resurrection. What emerges is the narrative tone of a witness reporting occurring phenomena, tenses being — after all — handled in quite a conventional fashion. There is at any rate no need to have recourse to the sophisticated theory of non-concordance reflecting time-being-abolished through resurrection: the narrator — Christ — looks back from an everlasting present. Despite syntactic fractures and non-concordances, structural ambiguity disturbs no more in the second than in the first strophe, then. Its only difficulty relates to the amount of energy and time required to decode its signals. Having eventually done so — and found it to constitute a complete sentence — we become responsive to its mood of expectant tranquillity, strangely interfering with the sense of physical misery implied in lines one, three and four; as « swoop » and « who'd » of stanza one, their words seem to create a shadowing effect designed better to set of the rising expectations of joy, released in our organism by the stanza's slowly opening vowels. The tranquillity also resides in the images and sounds of the parenthetical verse[31]; here the poet actually paints with words and composes with meters and

31. « Petals » suggests perfume, flowers, peace, balminess, fragrance, spring, aroma, incense, sweetness of smell, bouquet, the bounties of life. And though the hissing sounds of « petal*s* », « *s*ilen*c*e », as well as the unvoiced stops of the former, may suggest final expiration and arrested breath of a dying being, their following each other and being followed by more sounds indicates also that life goes on, but that we now are at rest.

sings with phonemes and speaks with images — and makes our imagination tingle and throb [32].

Entering the realm of the third stanza, we are at a loss as to where to begin. Offhand, we see in the repeated « yes » an enactment of *Xaire;* the rest is mostly prepositions or adverbs of the most common, unexciting sort. But we actually stand by the *adytum* of our poem and of the book to which it belongs. Recalling that which followed Jesus's burial — resurrection, ascension, disciples doubting, faith — our reading says: 'what did fall was always above or without until (yes but behind yes)'. 'what did fall' refers to Jesus' crucified body, « fall » encompassing all of its de—and connotations [33]. The emphasizing auxiliary « did » not only confirms the finality of Christ's earthly demise but perhaps also means to remind us, tangentially, of all that He did for us in the flesh. 'was always above' alludes to the various meanings of « above » in the New Testament: free (like Jerusalem that is above) [34]; precious ((that which pertains to God) [35], and higher than all (that which comes from heaven) [36], attributes — all — of Jesus the Man and the Son of God. « without » probably points

32. My metrical reading emphasizes the personal pronoun and its initial /m/ can thus be dramatized. The rush of short, unstressed, rhythmic units, that comes next, crashes into the pit of the /ou/ diphtong — instrinsically given to being drawn-out — of « opens », which betokens the pain of Jesus' crying « Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? » (*Matthew* 27:46). The mood of tranquillity pertaining to the second line is generated by its feminine ending, its necessary initial thesis, its first accent dampened by the unvoiced stop /p/ followed by the relatively relaxed mid vowel /ɛ/. That of the third line, by the unhurriedness of the spondee / pyrrhic succession (called for by the words' normal lexical stress). The last couplet's bio-hypothetical proposition is pressed upon us by the stress on the infinitival preterit.

33. Drop, descend, sink, collapse, be lowered. Die away. Sin, err, transgress, trespass. Die, perish. Pass, occur, be transferred, etc.

34. *Galatians* 4:26.

35. *Colossians* 3:1-2.

36. *John* 3:31.

to Mary who « stood without at the sepulchre weeping »[37], as well as to Jesus' body already being out of it. « until » seems to refer to the chief priests and Pharisees asking that Pilate secure the sepulchre « until » the third day, lest Jesus then rise from the dead, as announced[38]; its position at the end of the quatrain and its being followed immediately by the statement of immortality — line one of quatrain four — « no atom couldn't die », constitute Cummings' comment on the irony of any man trying to arrest metaphysical processes. As to the contrastive connecter « or », the strategy of its use — between « without » and « until » — implies, I think, an « either-or » reference to the Gospels which state and to the others which imply His heavenward ascension[39] although none doubt His transcendence of death through resurrection: its phases, after all, are not so important! But what about line three? It could be defined as the quatrain's cross; at any rate it is the poem's main crux — its nuclear enigma — and *Xaire's* central mystery. Its being the most sonorous line of the whole poem — it consists almost only of voiced consonants, alternatively, highly audible ones such as the hissed /s/es of « yes »[40] — suggests that it also constitutes a climax of meaning, a focal point of meanings « behind » meanings, all requiring full revelation. And « behind » may, directly, point again to Mary (as did « without ») but only after she spoke to the angels; Mary,

37. *John* 20:11-16.

38. *Matthew* 27:63-64.

39. Ascension is mentioned in the following two Gospels specifically: *Luke* 24:51: « while he blessed them, he was parted from them and carried up into heaven ». (This is its most descriptive mention.) *John* 20:17: « Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God » It is implied but not specified in *Mark* 16:19: « after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up in heaven, and sat on the right hand of God ». *Matthew* does not relate to it.

40. The only theoretically unvoiced unit we meet here is the final to of « but »; however, the laws of English phonetics assimilate it before a following voiced consonant to it; in this case, to the initial of « behind ».

then, is mentioned to see the Lord « behind »: behind herself but she does not recognize him — He is not revealed — until He calls out her name Mary [41]. The texts tell of others, other actors in the drama who also saw Him but yet doubted [42] and of others, still, who did not need to see in order to believe [43]: it is to the people — all that believed but needed to see; those who saw but yet doubted; those who did not see but yet believed — that « but » may contrastively be referring (just as the connecter « or » contrasts various texts) — *or* to « yes » through « but let your yea be yea »: in the New Testament, « yea, yea » — and no more — betokens the truth [44], all the truth and nothing but the truth. Furthermore, truth is in either Jesus [45] or God [46]. But Cummings uses the modern form of the affirmation and this is no accident; to my feeling, the double « yes » blazons the 'enter' of a new voice in the poem, Cummings' own, American voice: the voice of one who knew, for instance, his country's Negro Spirituals and their exultantly affirmative praising of the Lord:

> Yes God is real, real in my soul,
> Yes, Gud is real for He has washed and made me whole.
> His love for me is like pure gold.
> Yes God is real for I can feel him in my soul [47].

41. *John* 20:14-16: « She turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master ».

42. *Matthew* 28:17.

43. *Luke* 24:4-10.

44. *Matthew* 5:37: « let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil ». *James* 5:12: « but let your yea be yea: and our nay, nay lest ye fall into condemnation ».

45. *2 Corinthians* 1:18-22; *John* 14:6.

46. *1 Kings* 17:24.

47. Theo Lehmann, *Negro Spirituals, Geschichte und Theologie*

And Cummings would not ignore the responsorials common in the churches of Negro communities in the United States:

> Lead-singer: O, must I be like the foolish mens?
> Community: O yes, Lord!
> Lead-singer: Will build de house on de sandy hill.
> Community: O yes, Lord!
> Lead-singer: I'll build my house on Zion hill.
> Community: O yes, Lord!
> Lead-singer: No wind, nor rain can blow me down.
> Community: O yes, Lord! [48]

The double « yes » may, thus, well stand at the intersection of a spiritual encounter between two civilizations and be the soul-children of a mighty — temporal-spatial — cross-fertilization behind which lies the ecstasy of a faith refined in the « refiner's fire » [49]. And the strophe's third line's almost mythical quality may well be due to these « yes, yes » 'es recondite generation; but its climactic nature leads us back to Jesus's voice calling « Mary » after which Mary recognizes Him who resurrected. This, I think, is what Cummings points to when making the third line so resounding: Christ resurrected reveals Himself and is recognized as the true Son of God.

The hyperbatonic patterns chosen by Cummings are no more accidental here than anywhere else in the poem. My reading of the quatrain has resulted in the following reversions: 'what did fall always was above or without until (yes but behind yes)'; a paraphrase of it might read: Jesus, who died for us, is free, precious, higher than all, and — whatever the Gospels write about his Ascension — he rose on the third day, yes he did. But if you doubt, it is

(Eckhart-Verlag, Berlin, 1965: the song was published by KENNETH MORRIS, in *Twelve Gospel Song « Hits »* (Martin and Morris Music Studio, Chicago, ?), p. 15.

48. Lehmann quotes it as reported by TH. W. HIGGINSON in « Negro Spirituals », *The Atlantic Monthly*, 19, 1867, p. 689.

49. *Malachi* 3:2.

because you are misled by appearances. Look behind them and you will know that, indeed, Jesus Christ is resurrected'. But it proves the poem's enormous density that paraphrase is almost impossible and awfully wordy. As to the design of inversions and disruptions: why, for instance, one « yes » at the beginning and one at the end of the line? It might point to the poet's multiple inspiration, drawing from many diverse sources. Or it might constitute a metaphor for the equipoising of love and faith. Or aim at a performative effect. As it were, Cummings probably meant all of these and some more [50]. The whole stanza seems to be upside-down — enacting the Gospels' 'first / last' relationship' [51], in a way — with « above » preceding « fall », and « until » following the statement of achieved resurrection made by the third line: the dislocations stage the inconceivable, generating in themselves the reversion of time: they embody resurrection. Each word and each relationship in this stanza then acts as a multi-faceted reflector of sounds and signs. The whole quatrain fairly quivers with reverberations and echoes, ringing with a myriad overtones, harmonics, impalpabilities. In the repercussive process, syntax overcome incorporates particles, auxiliaries, and prepositions, conjunctions and adverbs with the counter-point of subtlest meaning, investing them with the supreme dignity of metrical freedom [52].

50. *Eg.* the title of the Easter Hymn of the Greek Orthodox Church, which is *Xaire, Xaire!* But then, this does not explain the strategy of Cummings' « yes », both initial and final. Or is it precisely *this*: alpha and omega — the beginning and the end — of faith, which it is meant to enact?... The more I think about it, the more I feel this to be relevant, to the utmost: « yes » is truth, faith-bred-breeding.

51. *Matthew* 19:30; 20:16; *Mark* 9:35; 10:31; *Luke* 13:30.

52. My metrical reading of the quatrain's first line stresses « above » and « was » — as if to emphasize Christ's rising — resulting in a rising meter in an act of rhythmic embodiment. That of the second line, on the contrary, is conceived in terms of a falling rhythm, reinforcing the content of its words. The rhythms of both lines counter-balance each other as did His life and death. In the third line, « yes » twice bears the ictus passing lightly over any possible objection to

With the last quatrain, humour makes its appearance: Jesus' physical immortality[53] is stated in atomic terms, and with a slangy tone — two negations in the first line where one would suffice — that deflates some of the emotional build-up of the preceding lines. Indeed the double negation is more critical for tonality than the name of the material particles, particularly as the dual no is a structural countering of the preceding strophe's double affirmation — and an embodiment of the paradox inherent in the notion of resurrection; hence my specific metrical reading[54]. Humour assumes several functional shades; it does deflate overwrought emotions; it provides a stepping-stone to the end of the poem's almost conventional syntax which enacts the grace bestowed on those whose faith allows them to be at peace with the existing order and themselves; it performs as the diminished seventh chord heralding imminent resolution, in other words, it constitutes a metaphor of the believer's forthcoming salvation through the grace of love. Indeed, the last three lines — paraphrased easily with Cummings' own words and with hardly a change of order, to read 'and how

Him which might be suggested by the unaccented « but behind »; we unconditionally surrender to Him, now and forever. As to the last line's strongly rising rhythm, it is self-validating in terms of the last strophe's poetic claim (lastness) and its message (foreverness), which it introduces. But almost *any* other metric conception could be defended equally well!

53. *Luke* 24:39-43: « Behold my hands and my feet, that it is myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath no flesh and bones, as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they yet believed not for joy and wondered, he said unto them, Have ye here any meat? And they gave him a piece of broiled fish and of a honeycomb. And he took it and did eat before them ».

54. De-emphasizing « atom » may sound risky; but it gives rise to the « no-atom » unit of meaning which I feel to be more in the spirit of Cummings' poetry, quite generally speaking, than might seem at first. At any rate, arsis on « no » is essential (one could, of course, have — instead of the sequence « dactyl, trochee, trochee » — spondee, purrchi, iambus, stressing « no », the first syllable of « atom » and « die »).

alive I am, nobody can conceive it who does anything less than love me' — strongly connect faith and love, echoing, it would seem, the lines from Coleridge, *The Ancient Mariner* « He prayeth well, who loveth well » and « He prayeth best, who loveth best » [55], both in poetical wording and spiritual movement. Humour, then, affords the poet an opportunity to retreat from his poem's prior catharsis into the control of serenity through acceptance, a control phonetically enacted by the last lines' more numerous high vowels and diphtongs directing the performer to a strategic retreat from wide open and hence highly vulnerable positions to more protected and better controlled bearings, although the words keep a ringing quality and vibrating transparence due to their consonantal structure, with many sonorants and liquids [56]. They have the ring of a soul rejoicing in its grace.

Serviceable to the understanding of the poem as a whole is Cummings use of parentheses, the poem's only type of punctuation. In each quatrain, one. In prose, parenthetical statements are read (aloud or mentally) on a different level of expression correlating with a different level of thought, either less important than or irrelevant to its main stream; here, what's parenthetical seems to relate to the circumstances in which the events are perceived. The four strophes correlate with four main events and four sets of circumstances:

quatrains	*events*	*circumstances*
one	crucifixion	earthquake
two	burial	garden
three	resurrection	revelation
four	transcendence	grace

Surely, the 'circumstances' in which the events are known are far from being either less important than or irrelevant

55. Lines 612, 614 (in COLERIDGE, *Poetical Works* (Oxford University Press, 3, 1974), p. 209.

56. But quite a few unvoiced stops provide it with firmness.

to them; their hermeneutic subordination makes, however, little doubt. And a final remark about the printing of the very first parenthesis without leaving any space between itself and both the preceding and the following word: it seems to underline the earthquake's functional and metaphoric importance in the sequence of events.

Having thus attempted to come to terms with the poem by probing its sources and structures still leaves me to justify my contention that « quick i the death of thing » constitutes « a paradox of non-difficulty »: does it? Have I fully accounted for the impulse of Cummings' creativity? For his allusions? Yet is there anything nebulous about what motivated Cummings' poetical act, about his celebrating God with the voice of a twentieth century Christian American poet? Or have we now a case for a difficulty in interpreting stanza three's third line « (yes but behind yes) » and its referential — though I believe willed — ambiguity? To E. E. Cummings « mysteries only are significant » and the « mystery-of-mysteries » is love [57]. Connecting of the double « yes » to both the Gospels and the Negro people of America is therefore right for Cummings loved both [58]. This does, of course, not mean that I did not miss even more relevant references; whatever those might be, they would however not cancel out the ones here adduced.

Though « quick i the death of thing », then, presents no real — modal or referential — difficulty, the poem,

57. *i six non-lectures*, p. 11, 43.

58. *Ibidem*, p. 66, about the *New Testament*: « Most of you are no doubt acquainted with this more than famous manifestation of whatever I can only call feeling — as against unfeeling: alias knowing and believing and thinking — this masterpiece of human perception ». And if his attitude to Miss Baldwin (principal of a public school to which his father sent him because of her « gentle immense coalblack negress », p. 8) is of any significance, symbolically, then he loved the *Blacks* of America as he loved human beings in general; says he, about her: « Her very presence emanated an honour and a glory: the honour of spiritual freedom — no mere freedom from — and the glory of being, not (like most extant mortals) really undead, but actually alive », p. 30.

however, remains a paradox: the paradox inherent to its own subject. According to Cleanth Brooks, the language of paradox is the language of poetry [59]. But it also is the language of criticism, or else I would have found a way out of seeming to make absurd statements about poems that are both difficult and non-difficult: or ought oxymorons be reserved for the poets? Of course, the critical oxymoron transcends an ornamental figure of style; being forced to use one means that the critic cannot help but adopt two opposed but dialectically connected points of view, that is to say, that of the simple reader who, honestly, must admit that a text — in our present case E. E. Cummings' « quick i the death of thing » — is difficult, *and* that of the critic who, just as honestly, must assert its non-difficulty. For whereas very few simple readers eventually graduate to become critics, most critics always remain, at some level, simple — or simply — readers. Or: on how to resolve the paradox of a poetical non-difficulty [60].

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59. CLEANTH BROOKS, *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), p. 3.

60. I gratefully acknowledge George Steiner's generous and enlightened guidance in the writing and editing of this paper. It is he who drew my attention to the Coleridge analogue.

Appendix

A
Metric reading
of
« quick i the death of thing »

x x	x ' '	x ' '
quick i the death of thing	dactyl	dactyl
x x	x ' '	x ' '
glimpsed (and on every side	dactyl	dactyl
x x	x ' '	x ' '
swoop mountains flimsying	dactyl	dactyl
x x	' x	' x
become if who'd	iambus	iambus
x x	x ' '	' x '
me under a opens	dactyl	amphibrach
x x	' x '	' x '
(of petals of silence)	amphibrach	amphibrach
x x	x	' '
hole bigger than	spondee	pyrrhic
x x	x ' '	x '
never to have been	dactyl	trochee
x x	' ' x	' x
what above did was	anapest	iambus
x x	x '	x
always fall	trochee	catalectic trochee
x x	x '	' ' x
(yes but behind yes)	trochee	anapest
x x	' x	' ' x
without or until	iambus	anapcts

x x x	x ' '	x '	x
no atom couldn't die	dactyl	trochee	catalectic trochee
x x x	x '	x '	x
(how and am quick i	trochee	trochee	catalectic trochee
x x x	x '	x '	x
they'll all not conceive	trochee	trochee	catalectic trochee
x x x	x x	' x	
less who than love)	spondee	iambus	