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Lugete: The Divine Lost and Found Child in Cummings

Michael Webster

In the last chapter of *EIMI*, Cummings' 1933 memoir of a visit to the Soviet Union, the narrator is in a hot dining car on the Orient Express speeding through Italy on his way back to Paris from Istanbul, Odessa, Kiev, and Moscow. It is Sunday, June 14, 1931, and, appropriately enough two days before Bloomsday, the narration is in stream of consciousness:

Dinner:sweat,runs(not drips)rolls continuously purls & uninterrupted pours rains yes(Lugete,)rains down all me over my throughout self who just a god damned blooming sits who can you babbling brook who imagine no really who no if who anything (447/426)¹

Even as the train hurtles Cummings forward to Paris, this last chapter looks backward to his experiences in Russia, repeating phrases or motifs from earlier in the book, especially in the five sections (each beginning with “oga” or “ago” and each representing one week) that Cummings calls “recapitulations”—word collages made up entirely of disconnected phrases from the earlier chapters. Even in the narration sections between the five collages, as here, Cummings makes allusions and references to earlier scenes. Here, the Latin word *Lugete* [“Mourn”] refers to the first line of Catullus' poem #3, lamenting the death of his mistress' pet sparrow:

Lugete, o Veneres Cupidinesque,
et quantumst hominum venustiorum!
passer mortuus est meae puellae,
passer, deliciae meae puellae,
quem plus illa oculis suis amabat.

Mourn, ye Graces and Loves,
and all you whom the Graces love.
My lady's sparrow is dead,
the sparrow my lady's pet,

whom she loved more than her very eyes
(trans. Harry Walker)

The reference to Catullus (as well as the imagery of rain pouring, and the words *god damned*) point the reader back to the end of the “Thurs. June 4” chapter, which quotes the second line of Catullus’ poem. Cummings is in Odessa, watching firemen create a shower of water and looking at a ‘little piece of [crumpled] boomahgah [paper]’ which turns out to be the “sketch for a telegram—sent?today,sent; this / : mourning” (323/312). The telegram sent to Paris [*Don’t Operate . . . Unless . . . Reason*] asks his wife Anne Barton not to have an abortion unless medically necessary. (See Kennedy, *Dreams* 308-309, 313.) As the pun on “morning / mourning” indicates, Cummings does not expect Anne to follow his advice and is already mourning the potential child in the womb, whose fate is to be aborted.

As if it were part of a children’s book, the “mourning” passage spells backward the letters of the word “Operate,” telling us what each letter stands for:

Don’t

Operate e for someone’s name t for two and two for
tea a for a name r for reality I suppose e for someone’s
other name p for probably preposterous perhaps perfection
possibly pain O for O civilization

Clearly, the “e for someone’s name” and “e for someone’s other name” stand for Edward Estlin, while the “a for a name” stands for Anne Barton Cummings. In addition, “t for two and two for tea” reminds us of Cummings’ Jotting #3, “it takes three to make a child” (*Miscellany* 330). The child as the third person involved in her own making is absent here, leaving only, as the song says, “Just me for you / And you for me—alone.” And even though the song dreams proleptically of raising a family—“A boy for you / And a girl for me / Can’t you see how happy we would be”—this happy dream seems out of reach for Estlin and Anne, who remain separate letters (ciphers for names) in this passage, and in actual space are separated by most of a continent. They are decidedly not the unified halves of “one’s not half two. It’s two are halves of one” (CP 556). The backwards spelling of the word “Operate” also reminds the reader of Sofia Tolstaya’s remark earlier in *EIMI* that “You can . . . not turn the wheels of history back-

ward” (238/231). Anne’s pending operation will cruelly erase the past and irrevocably change the future—and it will cause “pain,” both physical and psychic, in the present.

Besides pain, the letter “p” signifies that it is “probably preposterous” to hope that Anne will not go through with the operation, which if carried out will forestall, perhaps, “perfection.” But why “perfection”? I think Cummings is remembering his father’s sermon on childhood, in which the Reverend Cummings preaches that every child should be treated as a potential savior of humanity and hopes that “Every father and every mother may be inspired with the lofty purpose of giving to this new life the opportunities for development which shall make the divinity within the child grow to perfection” (6). (Cummings owned two copies of this sermon, and no doubt he often heard his father’s thoughts on childhood while growing up.) The meaning of “O” as “O civilization” also stems from his father’s sermon, which asserts that “all civilization may properly be called child civilization” because “helpless” infants force their parents to construct the small society of the family and thus develop “the institutions and . . . ideals that distinguish . . . civilized men and women from brutal savages” (3, 4).

Since Anne and Estlin were responsible for a child, Diana, from Anne’s first marriage to Ralph Barton, the couple was at least theoretically capable of developing a little civilized family unit. (For more on Diana, see Maria Teresa Gonzalez Minguez’s article in this issue of *Spring*.) However, Cummings’ and Anne’s marriage did not create a civilizing family society as outlined in the sermon. Diana was often away at boarding school in Europe; and even while married to Cummings, Anne maintained a steady relationship with an older man named Douglas, who supplied her with gifts and money. In addition, Anne had numerous affairs with other men, and at least once Cummings responded by having an affair of his own (Kennedy 288-89, 297-303). Anne’s own childhood was far from civilized: Kennedy attributes Anne’s promiscuous and destructive behavior to the sexual abuse she suffered as a child (297). Anne’s behavior worsened over time, and the marriage broke up just as Cummings was writing *EIMI* (Kennedy 323-326). For Cummings, the dead sparrow in Catullus’ poem symbolizes not only an aborted fetus, but also the failure of his love for and marriage to Anne. As readers of Kennedy’s biography know, Cummings’ first marriage also ended with the loss of a child—his wife Elaine successfully kept his daughter Nancy from him, despite his gaining some visitation rights (*Dreams* 274-276). Nancy would not know until much later who her real

father was. Much of this trauma went into *Him*, especially the scene in which the man, artist, and failure Him tells of his dream that a child would bring the lovers together. (See Simon Powers-Schaub's analysis of this scene in this issue.) Twenty years after *Him*, Cummings rewrote this dream into the wish-fulfillment ending of *Santa Claus*, in which a dancing Child brings together the Woman and Santa Claus, saving the Woman from Death.

At the end of the "mourning" passage in *EIMI*, Cummings underlines the failure of his love and marriage and lost potential child by quoting line two of Catullus' poem, *et quantumst hominum Venustiorum*, which literally means: "and however many there are of charming men"—or in other words "and all you other handsome guys out there also mourn."² Cummings may have capitalized "Venustiorum" to indicate further that there are many other men hovering around Anne, his particular Venus. And perhaps also "Reason" is called a "god damned word" because Cummings could calculate that the potential child that he asked Anne to save might not be his. In 1919, "Reason" in the person of Scofield Thayer, the husband of Elaine, led Cummings to advise Elaine to consider an abortion of Nancy. As he wrote later, Cummings asked Elaine "to PREVENT the child, with an operation" (qtd. in Sawyer-Lauçanno 155).³ Some three months after Elaine decided against any "operation," Cummings sent Catullus' poem three to Thayer, writing: "I think it used to be usual for one poet to send another a poem as evidence of appreciation of hospitality. Permettez-moi, per Catullus" (Letter, August 16, 1919). Though Cummings may simply have been thanking Thayer for his hospitality that summer on Martha's Vineyard, the association of poem three with an earlier almost-aborted child is striking. Indeed, the situation behind Catullus' poem is eerily reminiscent of Cummings' relations with Elaine and Thayer: the "mistress" in poem three, Clodia Pulcher, was married at the time to Quintus Metellus Celer, just as Elaine was married to Thayer. After quoting Catullus' poem, Cummings writes: "in the train, which arrived at nine seven, i spent my time dreaming. malae tenebrae / Orci, quae omnia bella devoratis . . . [cursed shades / of Orcus, which devour all beauty] with love to / deliciae meae puellae." Ignoring context and Latin grammar, Cummings' 1919 letter relates the devouring shades and the "delight of my lady" not to the sparrow, but to Elaine, treating Catullus' poem as a romantic meditation on the fleeting nature of beauty. Four months later, Elaine would give birth to Nancy, who would be lost to Cummings for twenty years after his first divorce in 1924.

So, in the “mourning” passage in *EIMI*, Cummings laments not only Anne’s potential child, but also the loss of his daughter Nancy. One memory of Nancy comes towards the end of *EIMI* when some flowers generate a “F-e-e-L / -ing” of himself as a child, “toted” by his “miracleprodigy father” at Frank Bostock’s circus, plus memories of seeing lion-tamer Captain Jack Bonavita, of riding an elephant, of drawing pictures of himself as “The Animal Emperor,” and of seeing the loop-the-loop bicyclist billed as “Danger Deriding Death Defying Desperate Dare Devil Diavolo” (429 / 410). After a brief meditation on Diavolo’s death (“someThingHappened”) and a briefer mention of Buffalo Bill, this circus passage ends with two memories: “(a graveyard ‘New York’ &)what fireflies among such grave-stones(afterwards mai and the chevaux de bois & death)” (430/411). With the barest reference to his daughter Nancy riding a wooden horse on a carousel in Paris and to “death,” Cummings alludes to the anguish occasioned by his divorce in Paris in 1924, when he carried a pistol around and contemplated killing Elaine and her lover and/or killing himself (Kennedy 264-265). Immediately after the word “death,” however, Cummings stages a resurrection: “we have arisen,who were dead ; having died we are as only Animal Emperors of the imagination shall be(and as only poets arise : again possibly to die,impossibly again & even out of hell ascending who shall keep our circus hearts against all fear)” (430/411). Most immediately, this resurrection refers to his escape from the collective “hell” of Russia, but for Cummings, cycles of psychic death and rebirth recur, “loopleaping” throughout life, and these rebirths of the self are made possible by a poetic imagination which comes from the child’s inventive circus heart.

The power to be reborn is a divine attribute, but this inspiration sometimes falters. The rain of the “Lugete” passage and the mention of keeping fear at bay recall an earlier scene in Odessa when Cummings visits his Russian teacher’s mother, who will never see her daughters again, and so she suffers, trapped in the past, “the crippled then of her aliveness” (*EIMI* 317/306). Listening to the “immense Rain” outside, she sits amid the clutter of her apartment, among “hundreds” of photographs of her family, three “greenish ikons,” and “coloured drawings, portraits” (316/305). “To suffer,” Cummings says, is “her poem” (316/305). Seeing her cut off from childhood, merely a “Head” or a “suffering motherless of 2 undaughters,” Cummings hopes, as he leaves, that “possibly I slightly how slightly gave?” her some courage (317/307). In the circus passage, Cummings finds courage and rebirth by remembering and reanimating his childhood selves,

which arise “even out of hell”—just as he had arisen from his own suicidal impulses after his first marriage collapsed. Earlier in *EIMI*, Cummings refers to his suicide attempt, thwarted by a feeling (221-22/214-15) and also to his subsequent death and rebirth in a forest (131/129). However, even as his circus heart selves are reborn, he suffers anew in a single phrase the “death” of the loss of his daughter Nancy. His daughter and his own childhood really are gone: his childhood selves arise “as only poets arise”—in the imagination or in a continuous cycle of psychic deaths and rebirths that Cummings calls elsewhere in the book “growing” (*EIMI* 238/231-32 and 335/323).⁵

In *EIMI*, this growing cycle is often symbolized by the words “shut” and “open” (the first and last words of the book), by Sunday (the day on which the book begins and ends and which in Russian is named “Resurrection”), and by moving from a closed indoor space out into the open air, as occurs in the scene when Cummings, having visited Lenin’s tomb, emerges from the stifling underground crypt, the “grave of Self” to breathe “air,Air,AIR” (249/241, 251/243). Early in *EIMI*, Cummings relates a story about John Dos Passos tearing off a “little piece of paper” from a doll’s face. When asked by his Russian hosts why he did this, Dos Passos responded: “pour qu’elle peut respirer”—“so she can breathe” (83/82, 446/425). This breathing doll brings us full circle to the mourning, sweating, breathless Cummings on the train, and we can see now why the rebirth of the child-self is so important—only a child-soul can bring a doll, or artwork, to life. Bringing dolls to life makes the child a divine artist-creator, while adults merely use their “god damned” Reasons and ideology to destroy and kill. Four lines below the *Lugete* passage, Cummings reminds his selves that “we shall come home with” toys (447/426—see also 231-232/224 and 289/281). Even though there is no child at home to play with them, he brings back toys and dolls as souvenirs because they represent an essential creative self.

In a note at the Houghton Library at Harvard that dates from 1918, Cummings comments on the doll as a symbol and souvenir of the child-self lost in the adult world:

doll is a state of mind. childhood is the atrocious battle of mustn’t against doll. Mustn’t is neat, punctual, trivial, right. Doll is uncouth, lazy, futile, so. It is right to study. It is so to play.

The adult is not without souvenirs of a gigantic catastrophe or Itself. Twists which keep a secret pathetically colossal romantic, deform fragments of actuality; or colours, sound, taste, smell.⁴

The creative child-self is reborn when a person becomes intensified, playful, or “so”—“just so”—opening to the immediate actuality of feeling and being in the world of “colours, sound, taste, smell.” How this so-ness of childhood is found and becomes alive for an adult artist is explored in a 1938 poem called “so little he is” (CP 471), about the vaudeville mime and comedian Jimmy Savo:

so little he is
so.

Little
ness be

(ing)
comes ex
-pert-
Ly expand:grO

w
i
?n
g

Is poet iS
(childlost
so;ul
)foundclown a

-live a
,bird
!O
& j &

j i
&
j i m , j i m m
; j i m m y

s :
A

v
o (

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Savo is both “so” and “little” like a child; in his playful comic act, his little so-ness becomes both expert and pert, or his littleness becomes “ex” (“former”—as in “ex-mentor” in *EIMI*), expanding his being, enabling him to “grO // w” his lowercase “i” or child-self like a bird’s wing. As Etienne Terblanche notes, the second time a capital O appears in the poem, it is paired with an exclamation mark: “!O”—a “graphic miming of growth,” with the “seed” of the exclamation point opening into a whole being (“Iconicity” 184). Savo becomes an “Is,” a “poet iS” by finding again and again his “(childlost / so;ul” (or his “so” soul) in his artist persona as a clown. Even though the child is forever lost (a lost soul), the artist clown is found in a feeling of childhood so-ness or littleness in which the self becomes what it does or makes or beholds. Growing is the process of becoming an “Is poet”—of creating a oneness of self, nature, and art. Cummings wrote of this oneness in *EIMI*: “Drunk and becauseless(talking about a cyclone,telling how at last with the disappearance even of impossibility himself found actually himself and suddenly becoming the cyclone;not perishing in and not surviving;Being)the poet Hart Crane was able to invent growth’s likeness” (238/231). Like Savo, Crane invents as he performs “growth’s likeness,” the “so” or ground of one’s soul. Even though Savo the artist can never actually be a child again (he is too expert for that), the child can become an artist. Ten years before Cummings’ poem was written, Gilbert Seldes commented on Savo’s “perfect balance of delicacy and ex-

pertness” and his melding of “technical proficiency and a fantastic imagination” (244).

Returning to the “Lugete” passage in *EIMI*, we can now see that Cummings is mourning not only his failed love, his lost potential child, and his lost actual child—he misses also his own “childlost” soul: he is just a sweaty self “who just a god damned blooming sits who can you babbling brook who imagine no really who no if who anything” (447/426). Who can the brook imagine, for if there is no child, there exists “no . . . anything.” The artist becomes a “who” through performance and making art, finding the child-self as expert artist. In the Savo poem, Cummings charts this self-becoming as a series of transformations from doubt (the question mark after the “i”) to an exclamation of wonder (“!O”), and from “so little” to “growing” a “wi?ng” to “becoming” an “a // -live a / ,bird”—at which point Savo’s first name grows from “j” to “jimmy,” which, if we read the sequence aloud as a child might when spelling out a name, also transforms: “and J / and J I / and J I am / J I am am / J I am am why / Jimmy.”⁶ Savo becomes his name and asserts who he is in performance, just as Cummings asserts his own being with the title of *EIMI*, Greek for “I Am.” The last name transforms as well, as the lower-case “so” is revealed to be part of himself, his name, while the capitals AV imply Savo’s AVian soul.



We can see something of Savo’s transformation into his child selves in Cummings’ painting of Savo and in the extraordinary still photos of Savo’s act by Gjon Mili, from 1942. The text itself moves from statements about Savo to the stuttering expansion of his first name to a final “o” opening with a parenthesis on the unpronounceable mystery of the final punctuation

marks: from writing to naming to the silence of gesture. These punctuation marks go from most final (period) to most expectant (comma). Like Savo himself, the poem expands from a little man to the “infinite” suggestiveness of scattered bits of punctuation (bits of paper he scattered of the stage).

In the mid-1950s, Cummings re-imagined his father’s sermon on childhood as a sonnet called “from spiralling ecstatically this”:

from spiralling ecstatically this

proud nowhere of earth’s most prodigious night
blossoms a newborn babe:around him,eyes
—gifted with every keener appetite
than mere unmiracle can quite appease—
humbly in their imagined bodies kneel
(over time space doom dream while floats the whole

perhapsless mystery of paradise)

mind without soul may blast some universe
to might have been,and stop ten thousand stars
but not one heartbeat of this child;nor shall
even prevail a million questionings
against the silence of his mother’s smile

—whose only secret all creation sings (CP 714)

Just as his father’s sermon on childhood proclaims each child as divine and wishes that “every family looked upon itself as a Holy Family,” raising a “Messianic” child, so too Cummings’ sonnet is clearly about the nativity, emphasizing as his father does the transcendence of “the humblest new born babe” (8, 16). Cummings’ poem may also be a description (an *ekphrasis*) of a painting of the nativity, for the eyes and bodies of the people, angels, and beasts who gaze at the blossoming child are described as “imagined” by some artist. (Perhaps the painting that the poem describes is one of El Greco’s nativity scenes—Cummings’ own nativity painting does not seem to fit the details of the poem.) In addition, Kennedy writes that the poem was “probably inspired by some meditations on the meaning of new

life after Nancy gave birth to Ioanna, the first grandchild to come along since the reunion of father and daughter” (*Dreams* 463). So the child in the poem is both real and imagined, both mundane and divine. The imagined beings in the poem are surrounded by “the whole // perhapsless mystery of paradise,” and thus even though some “mind without soul” (who is none other than our “god damned” friend Reason) “may blast some universe / to might have been” (may detonate an atomic bomb, or may abort a potential child), the child of the imagination cannot be killed because imagination is divine. And at the end of the poem, Cummings introduces the Virgin Mary as a muse figure whose smile is the “only secret” that “all creation sings.” The miracle of rebirth, the blossoming of the self from the “proud nowhere [or “now here”] of earth’s most prodigious night” enables the child-soul of the artist to sing of “all creation.”

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Notes

1. The two page numbers used throughout are from the two versions of *EIMI* in the bibliography. The first number represents the page number in the 1997 Liveright edition, and the second number represents the page number in the 1958 Grove Press edition.
2. Thanks to my colleague William Levitan for patiently explaining how to translate this line.
3. Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (197).
4. Houghton Library, Harvard University, Notes: Camp Devens, bMS Am 1892.7 (70) folder 2, sheet 13, verso.
5. In “the(oo)is” (CP 740), Cummings also writes of “gone” child who nevertheless “is.” See also “who are you, little i” (CP 824).
6. Somewhat similarly, Etienne Terblanche, in his recent book *E. E. Cummings: Poetry and Ecology*, finds meanings in this incremental growing of Savo’s first name, but not as a childlike spelling. He writes: “The ‘j’ presents Jimmy Savo, and the ‘i’ the poetic speaker” (149). In addition, “the compound ‘jim.jimm / ;jimmy’ contains the faintest traces . . . of the following; jim is being just as i am. . . . A similar trace that can be inferred homophonically reads jim-and-me [jimmy]” (150).

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