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Infinite Images: Mirrors as a Symbol of Continuous Rebirth in E. E. Cummings' Poetry

Sheridan L. Steelman

I

The fact that Richard S. Kennedy included the word “mirror” in his title *Dreams in the Mirror* (1994), a biography about Edward Estlin Cummings, should tell his readers something about the importance of this image. We are assured of Cummings' interest because he wrote at least fifteen poems containing the words “mirror” or “mirrors” and another fifteen referring to “face” or “faces” (McBride 229, 490). As children, we are all interested in looking in mirrors, if only to see or even ponder our actual reflection. According to the principles of physics and the law of reflection, images are formed by reflected light, “produc[ing] both real and virtual images” (“Mirror”). Reflection involves a change in direction of the light ray, creating an angle that the light ray makes with a normal line drawn to the surface of the mirror. The angle of incidence (face to mirror) equals the angle of reflection (mirror to face).

Cummings, however, was not solely interested in exact images of self when he wrote his poetry. In fact, in the introduction to the 1938 *Collected Poems*, he refers to this type of science as the “parlourgame of real unreality” (CP 461). We can assume then that when he writes about actually looking into a mirror, he is referring to the figurative meaning of looking more deeply into “self.” We may not be able to use the mirror as the literal window to the soul, as Cummings suggests in his statement “open your soul as if it were a window” (*Miscellany* 297), but we can look beyond the mere physical reflection that only a mirror can offer. Cummings does, however, offer his readers a sort of key that might help unlock the mysteries of this symbol. We may be able to begin our journey with his poem “look” (CP 1002). “I do not recognize / as myself this which I find before / me in a mirror” (lines 18-20). In other words, Cummings may see his reflection, but he is not able to “see” what he is feeling. “Feelings,” he believes, are what “not a single human being can be taught” (*Miscellany* 335). Cummings' ideas about poets who share their feelings through words actually build upon his ideas about rebirth. Like feelings, rebirth is a process, one that continues throughout life and one that we *must*, if we are true to ourselves, continue to nurture. The mirror, then, a way of allowing the light to reflect

an image, symbolizes not only the continuous circuitous movement between self and image, but also our continuous inward search. Using the mirror image, Cummings shows us how the search for self is an infinite circular process of rebirth that facilitates the mystery of growth.

In one of Cummings' earlier poems (written in 1914; revised in 1916) he makes several references to mirrors:

the hours rise up putting off stars and it is
dawn
into the street of the sky light walks scattering poems

on earth a candle is
extinguished the city
wakes
with a song upon her
mouth having death in her eyes

and it is dawn
the world
goes forth to murder dreams....

i see in the street where strong
men are digging bread
and i see the brutal faces of
people contented hideous hopeless cruel happy

and it is day,

in the mirror
i see a frail
man
dreaming
dreams
dreams in the mirror

and it
is dusk on earth

a candle is lighted
and it is dark.
the people are in their houses
the frail man is in his bed
the city

sleeps with death upon her mouth having a song in her eyes
the hours descend,
putting on stars....

in the street of the sky night walks scattering poems
(CP 67)

On a literal level the poem describes a walk through the city streets, an acute observation that includes the fading stars as dawn begins to light the horizon. As the city awakens, a long day of manual labor begins. The observer describes the seemingly contradictory faces of the people as “contented hideous hopeless cruel happy” (line 15). The implication is that these workers, representatives of all humanity, are a complex salad of deliciously different yet homogeneous parts. The following line, “and it is day,” is set off by two spaces (above and below), indicating a pause to reflect that this day is probably like any other. These are days perhaps taken at face value: we awaken; we work; we eat; we sleep—all except one “frail” man. Unlike the world, which murders dreams, the “frail man” (18) looks in a mirror, dreaming. Could it be that the words “dreaming” and “dreams” are what sets the man or his self apart from the rest of the world? If we consider that Cummings sees himself as a poet, perhaps what he is seeking in the mirror is the continuous interchange between creation and self. In other words, Cummings can be born again and again as both himself, the poet, and as poetry, the art.

According to Rushworth M. Kidder’s brief analysis of this poem, “poems are made at twilight and unpoetic reality intrudes during the

day” (28). Perhaps this is why Cummings divided many of his poems into two “mirrored” sections. This poem is divided into two halves, each containing five stanzas of varying yet patterned lengths. The first half, dawn, contains stanza lengths of three, five, three, four, one. The second half, dusk, contains stanza lengths of six, two, five, three, one. We also notice other images or lines mirrored in both halves. Dawn, of course, is mirrored as dusk (lines 2 and 24); “the world” (10) is also mirrored as “the city (29); and the third and thirty-third lines are unusually semantically mirrored. At the beginning of the poem in the line “into the street of the sky light walks scattering poems” (3), the poems are “scattered” by the light of day, implying that ideas are falling apart willy-nilly. Even though the city has awakened “with a song upon her” (7), the light of day is not enough to *feel* poetry. No matter how hard the “frail man” (18), Cummings, dreams, his is a passive existence. Cummings himself writes in “An Imaginary Dialogue Between An Author and A Public,” printed on the book jacket of *Him* (1927), that for many people “‘life’ is a verb of two voices—active, to do, and passive, to dream” (quoted in *six* 64). We see the mirror image of this line at the end of the poem, but this time “*night* walks scattering poems” (my emphasis, line 31), a change in perceived power. In the evening, then, mirrors are used for dreaming and darkness descends. The natural light of the stars allows the poet his freedom to feel, to create, and to “be.” Our author becomes one with the night and as one entity, they “scatter” poems.

Indeed, if Kidder is correct in his statement that “there is much that cannot be grasped by limiting our study to syntax and semantics alone” (8), then the mirror image of the two halves of “the hours rise up putting off stars” cannot be ignored. Two processes are taking place here. First, we see the “waffle iron” effect of folding the poem in half so that we see two different ideas mirror each other syntactically and structurally. Second, and with equal importance, we see the physical mirror image lit by the lone flame of a candle. According to Cummings, this is enough. In an interview with Harvey Breit in 1950, Cummings said, “A poem, a painting, lives in itself” (161).

If this is true, then the poem is actually reflected in the mirror, thus obscuring the lines between author and art. As the light of the candle refracts from the mirror, a continuous image of art and artist is reflected and thus born. Hence, the mirror becomes a symbol of rebirth.

Not only is the mirror a reflection of our physical self, but also a win-

dow to the poet's soul. In *The Enormous Room* (1922) Cummings paints a picture in words of the Machine-Fixer, a Belgian who had the misfortune of "ha[ving] a soul" (100). This miserable creature suffered all of the injustices at the hands of M. le Surveillant at La Ferté and was therefore seemingly reduced to a base animal state, such as a rabbit, mole, or hyena. "But if, by some fatal, some incomparably fatal accident, this man has a soul—ah, then we have and truly have and have most horribly what is called in La Ferté-Macé by those who have known it: La Misère" (100).

Cummings may have been speaking tongue-in-cheek, but he knew the truth: that the Machine-Fixer's miserable condition was worsened by the fact that he could "feel." His soul (feelings turned inward) made these inexcusable injustices almost impossible to bear. The anguish of prison was intensified by his inability to shoulder the weight of his oppressors, not because his physical being could not handle the conditions, but because his emotional or "inner" self was too vulnerable. Bouts of pitiful crying and sorrow opened the window of his soul for all to see.

Cummings refers to the very window in the following poem:

Hello is what a mirror says
it is a maid says Who
and(hearing not a which)replies
in haste I must be you

no sunbeam ever lies

Bang is the meaning of a gun
it is a man means No
and(seeing something yes)will grin
with pain You so&so

true wars are never won (CP 570)

An initial reading reveals that a young girl is looking into a mirror and, seeing her own reflection, asks, "Who are you?" Indeed, if *quickly* answered, the answer is simple: "You." This is not a "Mirror, Mirror, on the wall / Who is the fairest one of all?" kind of question. In this case the mirror is a material object that will bring neither sorrow nor happiness to any fair maiden. The key lies in the single line, "no sunbeam ever lies" (5). The

implication here is that the sunbeam's light creates the image seen in the mirror. Perhaps, then the light is what is needed to see deeper than a mere reflection, to see past the outer covering and into the soul. To support this reading, we can look at a "sister" poem "no man,if men are gods;but if gods must" (CP 562) wherein the poet is called upon to "solve the depths of horror to defend / a sunbeam's architecture with his life" (lines 11-12). These two lines depict light as truth, something to be defended and honored. As such, we see that if we exchange "truth" for "sunbeam" in "Hello is what a mirror says," we find that *truth* is indeed the opposite of *lies*.

The second half of "Hello is what a mirror says" parallels the first half in that the relationship of a gun to war is analogous to the relationship of a mirror to reflection. Cummings is asking the reader, however, to pause and consider the internal wars that plague people, such as the Machine-Fixer, every day. The line "You so&so" (line 9) refers to the essence of someone who IS, a person who may feel like the Machine-Fixer, who may suffer the internal wars of the soul, and who may look in the mirror and see past the outer layer and discover what is really there. Again, this inward search for IS may not be an easy task, but a necessary process to reach this level. In his introduction to *Collected Poems*, Cummings describes this process as rebirth.

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. (CP 461)

These words tell us that Cummings believed in rebirth as the only avenue to growth, and this rebirthing could be attained through the knowledge of "self." The mirror symbol becomes one way of describing this process.

In his pamphlet *E. E. Cummings' Aloofness, an Underlying Theme in His Poetry*, Kenneth Attaway discusses Cummings' attitude toward the understanding of self. Attaway reasons that Cummings "accepted only the most elemental concepts of human behavior, where the connotations of love, spring, and dying form the basic pattern of his child-like response to external stimuli" (19). In Attaway's view, Cummings does not accept "thinking" as viable response to any situation because he considers "feeling more real than thought" (19); therefore, people should be more concerned with feeling. Although some people might argue that human beings reduced to mere feelings would be rendered static, Cummings may have a point. In "A Poet's Advice to Students" (*Miscellany* 335) he speaks hon-

estly about the connections between thinking and feeling and being “nobody but yourself”:

This [concept] may sound easy. It isn't.

A lot of people think or believe or know they feel—but that's thinking or believing or knowing; not feeling. And poetry is feeling—not knowing or believing or thinking.

We are, after all, capable of “spouting off” about what we know or think we know. Cummings is more concerned with the continuous process of feeling in the NOW, that absolute essence of being in touch with the core of existence. We *are* able to access “feeling” but not through expert teaching or learning in a book. Intelligence is not a matter of memorizing lines in classical poetry, although I suspect that Cummings did this with ease. The most *real* war we humans will ever fight is the one he was referring to in the last line of “Hello is what a mirror says,” the battle we must never surrender, that of finding the open window to our soul and of asking, “Who?” This is the connection Cummings magically makes between the first and second halves of this poem. He uses the mirror image at the beginning to show us the folly of looking at mere reflections and then ties this idea to his parenthetical “(seeing something yes)” (line 8). This seeing is the opposite of meaning in line 7: “it is a man means No.” However, looking deeper to find “self” may provide the means to an end: the ability to *feel*, to *become* art, which is the essence of IS. Cummings spent his adult life writing about “feeling.” He did this by examining and re-examining “self.” He looked *through* his own mirror and with the help of refracted light, achieved continuous rebirth.

Just as in “the hours rise up putting off stars and it is” (CP 67), “Hello is what a mirror says” also makes use of a mirrored image structurally. This poem can also be divided into two halves, each containing two stanzas with the same patterned number of lines, four and one. If separated and placed side by side, the two stanzas could be matched horizontally. In each half, with the exception of the single line separated from the longer four-line stanza, the lines all contain six words each. The two single lines are shorter (four and five words respectively) and therefore poignant. The connection between these two lines, “no sunbeam ever lies” (5) and “true wars are never won” (10), actually confirms the idea of light playing a role in the search for self.

This search facilitates the mystery of growth in several ways. First, the mere existence of human beings is dependent on the birth process. If we

agree that birth is not only physical but also spiritual, then we can also postulate multiple births. The physical birth lands us here on Earth; the spiritual birth keeps us grounded. Second, the spiritual birth or the birth of the soul, can, according to Cummings, happen more than once. Perhaps he is saying that each time we are born, we come closer to our own truth and this truth allows us to feel. The mirror symbol, then, creates the avenue by which we can traverse this journey. The destination is self or the essence of IS and the goal is *to feel*. This transcendence is cyclical. It may not happen once or even seven times seventy times. The point is that the cycle is continuous and that the process allows growth.

II

The mirror image also symbolizes “becoming.” This idea is best explained by Bethany K. Dumas’ article “E. E. Cummings in the Twenties” in which she details how Cummings’ early life impacted his life in the twenties. She notes that many Americans might have considered Cummings a failure if success in life is tied too much to financial gain.

But that is part of the paradigm; he was an artist, a man, a failure, and he did proceed, so much that progress and becoming became really his *raison d’etre*. One can ask no more of an artist. (375)

Dumas refers to Cummings’ own words in *Him* (1927) (I.ii) where the character Him is pacing and muttering to himself, “An artist, a man, a failure, MUST PROCEED” (13). Although she does not *emphasize* (and should have) that Cummings’ idea of “becoming” is far beyond a *raison d’etre*; the gerund *becoming* actually transcends its noun status and becomes a verb, the verb IS. The state-of-being verb “to be” implied in the term “d’etre” is not the flexible, supple verb IS. Cummings was thinking of the essence of IS as a journey, one that he traveled so intensely that he actually *became* the journey, even when he lived in a society whose values did not coincide with his own.

Perhaps a more accurate description of this idea of “becoming” is found in the critical essay “The Whole E. E. Cummings” by Patricia Buchanan and Tal-Mason Cline. The authors have looked at the same passage in *Him* and emphasize the importance of growth through continuous movement.

Passionately aware and concentrated, the individual kicks those three facts—artist, man, and failure—out from under himself and stands on air above the wire which was his for-

mer limitation. In other words, the man discards his conscious roles and concentrates his awareness in a “timeless moment” of oneness with the thing that he loves, a moment of relationship which seems eternal, therefore is outside of time. Through this experience the individual realizes his own illimitability and strives to *PROCEED again and again*. He grows. (my emphasis, 61)

These authors should be commended for depicting their vision of space and for showing how this domain, albeit infinite, can also be finite. We may, perhaps, imagine a moment similar to taking a conscious instant, which is made up of senses, feelings, motion, and, yes, even thoughts, and placing this instant on the point of a timeless needle. Naturally, this is thinking outside of the box, but this is indeed how Cummings’ poetry often operates—within the spectrum of the “finite infinite.” This idea of a specific time within the realm of timelessness is most evident in a revealing sonnet from *No Thanks*:

that which we who’re alive in spite of mirrors
(have died beyond the clock)we,of ourselves

who more a part are(less who are aware)

than of my books could even be your shelves
(that which we die for;not when or unless
if or to prove,imperfectly or since

but through spontaneous deft strictly horrors

which stars may not observe;while roses wince)
that which we die for lives(may never cease
views with smooth vigilant perpetual eyes
each exact victim,how he does not stir)

O love,my love!soul clings and heart conceives

and mind leaps(and that which we die for lives
as wholly as that which we live for dies)

(CP 386)

As the first line suggests, Cummings is talking about people who are really alive versus those who are merely breathing. He is actually referring to more than one type of mirror here. The first type is the more literal hand-held mirror, the place we look to see our physical image. This type of mirror is also referred to in “the hours rise up putting off stars and it is” and “Hello is what a mirror says.” The second type of mirror is the “trick” mirror, the kind used by illusionists. “ ‘It’s all done with mirrors’ was a quip which, according to Edmund Wilson, Cummings used regularly” (quoted in Kidder 107). Evidently, Cummings realizes that eyes can deceive and that “what you see” may not always be “what you get.” A third type of mirror may also be seen in “*that* which we who’re alive in spite of mirrors” (my emphasis)—the window to the soul that is open, and should a person be willing to look, he or she might see love clinging. Cummings notes that *we* “(have died beyond the clock)” (line 2), indicating that time is not of the essence when we talk about soul. Beyond clocks and “mirrors” (1), the actual window to the soul is not part of any time zone, a place where physical beings and souls are interchangeable in the “here and now,” or in a timeless dimension. Either way, Cummings depicts a finite infinite or a moment of movement that can only be described as soul. The first half of the poem alludes to life transcending material objects such as clocks, mirrors, books, and shelves. These are actually insignificant “trickery,” *things* of the physical realm that are commodities and thus insignificant. In the second half of the poem, he shows us how we can transcend the *things* we know as life. Death, perhaps is the only way to live. If we consider a spiritual death, the one he describes as “spontaneous deft strictly horrors / which stars may not observe” (lines 8-9), we may be born again with more “vigilant perpetual eyes” (10), eyes that truly see into the soul and thus truly feel. He sums up this idea in the final couplet in a celebration of new life by rejoicing (“and mind leaps”) in the fact that only by dying can we truly live. This spiritual death is not an exact moment in time, however, but a process that can only be achieved by giving up the “meaningless.” Yes, Cummings is showing us an infinite rebirth process, one that facilitates the mystery of growth.

Structurally, this poem, unlike the two poems previously discussed, is patterned in such a way that a mirror, limited to light beams and therefore both finite and infinite, could never capture. The pattern in this poem grows to a crescendo and then tapers to a point. The first four lines state that the two lovers are “more a part . . . of ourselves [each other] than my

books could even be [a part of] your shelves.” However, the extreme syntactic dislocation creates a sense that even though the lovers are spiritually together, they are physically apart: “who more a part are.” Cummings plays on a paradox of the English language, in which “a part of” signifies togetherness, while “apart from” means separation. The words “a part” and “apart” function as a kind of distorted mirror that reflects back opposite meanings. The rest of the poem expands the basic phrase “that which we die for” until the alive lovers of the first line die and are reborn in the last two lines. The end of the poem presents what Buchanan and Cline refer to as the self-found man: “Artists, lovers, worshippers, anyone who succeeds in a loving and total identification with matter, man or God, transcends his former self and grows” (61). The couplet reveals what the end result may be for anyone who dares to feel, “liv[ing]/ as wholly” (lines 13-14). Cummings puns on the words “wholly” and “holy” to describe what a poet who IS feels. An artist who is “whole” is able to create art as an expression of entire soul. An artist who is “holy” is able to transcend the realm of the finite and reach the immeasurable infinite. Cummings gives us something to think about, something to dream about, something to write about. He wrote in “Fair Warning” that “somebody number one is a poet. Actually he is alive. His address is: Now” (*Miscellany* 306). We all may be striving for poet status but barely moving past a “somebody.”

III

Although Cummings includes the word “mirror” in only fifteen poems, he refers to the idea of birth, death, movement, tension, and art in many of his writings. Moreover, the visual structures in many of his poems help him to make a “point,” if only to visually tease us or to make us think. Some of his poems use the “waffle-iron” format where the poem can be folded in half to achieve symmetry. Others can be “cut” in half and lined up horizontally to parallel or reflect a mirror image. Cummings uses a myriad of other visual tactics to achieve patterns with letters, spaces, and punctuation. Some of his visual poems mirror the meaning, such as in the famous poem “l(a)” (CP 673). In this poem we only see the letters that make up the words “a leaf falls loneliness” (lines 1-9). But the way the letters are arranged on the page beautifully and silently depict a lone leaf falling from a tree and landing horizontally at the bottom of the page. This effort at visualization is a magnificent gesture that offers the reader something to *watch*. Poems are normally word structures that readers ponder, discuss, and explicate. In “l(a)” Cummings offers us a continuous moment in time, one that

we can experience simply by watching the beauty of the letters sway, break away, and then fall. The moment is magic up until the moment when we feel compelled to turn the page.

Some of Cummings' visual poems are what I refer to as his "shard" poems. These poems are those that resemble shards of glass, shapes that, when outlined, form a triangle that points to the right side of the page. One example is "hush" (CP 600) where words are grouped to form two "mirrored" triangles. He includes a single line in the middle of the poem, a line that parallels the horizontal line that helps to form the right angle of each triangle. Each triangle becomes half of the "waffle-iron" and folding on the single line of poetry allows each triangle to mirror the other. The poem "n // ot eth" (CP 725) is similarly structured, forming two smaller triangles.

n

ot eth
eold almos
tladyf eebly
hurl ing
cr u

mb

son ebyo
neatt wothre
efourfi ve&six
engli shsp
arr ow

s

The letters "mb" (line 7) form the single line sandwiched by two blank spaces. This form is perfectly symmetrical in that the poem begins and ends with a single letter. Moving vertically down the lines from the top and back up to the top (from the bottom), we first see five letters separated by a space. At the top of the page the letters are separated after the second letter, but in the twelfth line the space appears after the third. The number of let-

ters and spacing does not seem to line up unless we see the pattern as a reverse mirror image. This technique is used in consecutive lines. For example, the letters in line three form “eold almos,” mirroring its sister line eleven, “engli shsp,” in reverse. This type of patterning is more subtly arranged in “why” (CP 724). The poem consists of a twenty-five-line elongated triangle, the thirteenth acting as the “fold.” The first and last stanzas contain one syllable per line; the second and eighth contain two syllables per line; the third and the seventh contain three, and so on. The visual implications of triangular shards of glass may be interesting, but is that all Cummings was trying to accomplish? Perhaps the key is in his poem “pieces in darker” (CP 623).

pieces(in darker
than small is dirtiest
any city’s least
street)of mirror

lying are each(why
do people say it’s un
lucky to break one)
whole with sky

If we take out each parenthetical comment in each stanza, what remains is “pieces of mirror lying are each whole with sky” (lines 1, 4, 5, 8). The pieces of mirror could be poetry or even souls. Because Cummings believes that he *is* his poetry, the pieces then could be IS. The hypothesis that mirrors are a symbol of rebirth is supported if we think of our essence or soul, even fragmented, as reflected as *whole* by the universe. Amazingly, we can see ourselves reborn by looking into the window of our soul and this rebirth then becomes whole or new as reflected by all that is around us. The concept is intriguing, especially if we take this idea one step further. Does Cummings use this idea of rebirth or reflection in his shard poems? The answer is yes.

In “n // ot eth” (CP 725) the single crumbs hurled by an “old almost” (line 3) lady could be similar to the scattered poems in “the hours rise up putting off stars and it is” (CP 67). Note that not only are the crumbs in “n // ot eth” doled out singly, but also the sparrows that may be eating the crumbs are also counted out one by one. This visualization of humanity as fragments or pieces is seen as *one* moment in time, one image

made up of parts. Similarly, in “why” (CP 724) we see a lady sewing at an open window. Cummings refers to her fingers as “fly[ing]/ instead of dancing” (lines 10-11). The movement of her fingers is similar to the hurling motion in the previous poem. The author, however, cautions his readers about “flying fingers” or anything that might keep us from noticing the beauty of the world. Each poem presents individual pieces (crumbs, birds, fingers) that are reflected as whole or beautiful to the soul if we take the time to *see*. The poet incorporates pattern, form, and meaning to show us the mystery of growth, a growth only achieved by rebirth and perhaps our only road to IS.

Cummings’ mirror images permeate his poetry. He admits that no two people interpret any one poem the same way, but he does occasionally give us a roadmap, especially in the letters he wrote to his friends, family, and readers. One particular letter, written to a Miss Copley in 1956, explains his reasoning for using a mirror in “Hello is what a mirror says.” First, he elucidates the details of a girl who looks in a mirror and asks “Who?” Cummings says that “the impatient girl concludes I” (*Selected Letters* 247). The remaining lines of the first stanza are self-explicated when Cummings surmises that the mirror will reveal that “only the-surface-of-life is what-really matters,” a statement that he says later in the letter is “absolutely untrue.” What *is* true is that the “mirror hasn’t deceived her—she’s fooling herself.” The indifferent mirror is merely an object dependent on light. Thus the reflection is what allows the girl to actually *see*. The second stanza ties to the first in that Cummings uses the war image to depict a man-versus-man conflict. This type of conflict can be settled with hateful words or even with the heavy handedness of a gun. The true war Cummings is alluding to, of course, is that inner war, the man-versus-himself conflict. Again, he reminds us that the mirrors worth anything are the ones that help us see through to our souls, those mirrors that allow us to glimpse the “true” wars that we may never really win. We must look to the light for light for self-knowledge, for rebirth, for the mystery of growth.

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