

2004

E.E. Cummings' Fluid "Objectivity": A Deep Ecological Response to Michael Webster's "The New Nature Poetry and the Old"

Etienne Terblanche
North-West University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring_cummings

Recommended Citation

Terblanche, Etienne (2004) "E.E. Cummings' Fluid "Objectivity": A Deep Ecological Response to Michael Webster's "The New Nature Poetry and the Old"," *Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*. Vol. 13, Article 16.

Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring_cummings/vol13/iss1/16

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

E.E. Cummings' Fluid "Objectivity": A Deep Ecological Response to Michael Webster's "The New Nature Poetry and the Old"

Etienne Terblanche

"Then shall come to pass what my poet said: 'Nature is not fixed but fluid.'"

—Emerson, "Prospects"

1. Introduction/ contextualization

This paper embodies a response to Michael Webster's article entitled "E.E. Cummings: the New Nature Poetry and the Old" (*Spring* 9 [2000]).¹ The paper takes its starting point Webster's conclusion that Cummings was "enough of an ecologist (ahead of his time) to see the interconnectedness that should exist among all living things" (121).² This idea recalls Norman Friedman's emphasis on the Buddhist aspects of Cummings' poetry (33, 34, 173)—if we accept that Buddhism, and Taoism especially, are inherently ecological.

A strong case could be made for the evident links between Taoism and ecology, and deep ecology in particular—see, for instance, Fritjof Capra's book *The Turning Point* and Martin Palmer's article "Chinese Religion and Ecology."³ Such is the extent of the link between Taoism and deep ecology that Lao Tzu's text the *Tao Te Ching*, which appeared approximately 2,700 years ago, is considered a classic by the deep ecological movement (Drengson & Inoue 284).

Before responding to Webster's essay, I wish to offer a brief "typology" of Cummings' readers. This typology is necessary, given the complex differences and overlappings frequently shared by Cummings readers. This "typology" is offered for the sake of convenience and contextuality, and should not be taken as an exhaustive treatment of the subject. With this in mind, the typology will be presented in metaphorical, "quantumpoetical" terms.

2. A brief "typology" of Cummings' readers

In "quantumpoetical" terms, Cummings' more objectifying type of reader will tend to pierce the "waves" (lyrical or other kinds of wholes) in Cummings' poetry until the "particles" (autonomous or separate constituents) of his work have been sorted out beyond flux. His lyrical or "rhetorical" works will appear to this type of reader as less intense forms of Cummings' visual and other forms of experimentation and fragmentation. In certain instances, this type of reader may overstress the "objective" point of view in dualistic terms, and dismiss Cummings' work as "con-

ventional”—examples would include Edmund Wilson and Helen Vendler, however passionate their responses to Cummings may have been.

The more lyrical type of reader will be inclined to follow the “particles” of Cummings’ work until these appear as—or “make”—“waves.” Cummings’ lyrical or “rhetorical” works, such as most of the sonnets, will appear to this type of reader as the poet’s “natural” mode. His extremely fragmented works will appear as challenges stretching one’s ability to reach a “whole” reading, which will frequently be richly rewarded. In exceptional cases, the fragmentation will appear too extreme, interrupting the process when “either the poem or the reader fails” (Logan 89).

Cummings does allow both these pathways into his work, and a more detailed study of Cummings’ work in relation to Daniel Albright’s 1997 book, *Quantumpoetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot and the Science of Modernism*, is called for. Sadly, Albright does not mention Cummings.

As Friedman wisely observes, there are many “Cummingses” in the reading public, and although some readings may appear more authentic or interesting, no single “correct” reading is possible (172). Concomitantly, it is not possible to categorize any given reading of the poet’s work in strict accordance with my introductory typology. One must discover one’s own relation to the poet and express it to the best of one’s ability.

Cummings’ inclusivity, manifested in the many roots which he did manage to artfully accommodate within his project—whether Freudian, comical, ecological, classical or modernist—is reflected in the open-endedness and inclusivity of his potential readership, varying as it does from waitresses and nurses to poets and various scholars. This is relatively unusual breadth of readership should be celebrated.

3. Webster’s essay and the deep ecological nature paradigm within Cummings’ poetry

Against the backdrop of this typology, this section of the response will focus on the vast and complex (but not complicated)⁴ issue of Cummings’ Taoist / deep ecological strategies, a discussion which will be aimed at shedding further light on the ways in which Cummings does and does not fit into the old and new nature paradigms described by Robert Langbaum.

According to Webster, Cummings “would add movement” to the new nature paradigm (110). This is echoed by one of Cummings’ earlier critics who expressed admiration that the poet gives us “speed” (Brown 39). But Cummings’ emphasis on dynamism, growth, and becoming (in the nominal sense of beauty as much as in the verbal sense of being increasingly integrated with what “surrounds” one), acts as one

of several deep ecological strategies which the poet employs consciously or subconsciously.

To the Taoists and deep ecologists, dynamism is inherent to the cosmos and nature: it is the miracle of the continuation or dynamically balanced “hanging together” of nature through the extreme—and continuously “being-unified”—forces or tendencies of yin and yang. (It is therefore of crucial importance that the extremes of yin and yang are always viewed as *tendencies* within Taoism, and not as static and opposing categories. It is of further importance that yin and yang, as tendencies, are not arranged hierarchically.) In Western thinking this continuous “hanging together” of nature is too often dismissed as “mere coincidence” or as a kind of truism. In fairly recent years, however, reverence for nature’s intrinsic dynamism has led to deep ecological notions like the following:

We have come to realize that there are no static structures in nature. There is stability, but this stability is one of dynamic balance, and the further we penetrate into matter the more we need to understand its dynamic nature to understand its patterns (Capra 19).

Cummings’ emphasis on dynamism anticipates deep ecological concerns, and at some point it should be mentioned that Cummings anticipated much of the import of those dynamic relationships upon which ecological sustainability are based. This anticipation is reminiscent of the Ezra Pound’s notion that artists act as the “antennae” for society and are able to sense cardinal developments early on, a notion which reappears in the deep ecological thinking of Gary Snyder (Pound 58; Bowers 122). Cummings’ deep ecological sensibilities, which are underpinned by the prominence of dynamism in his work and outlook, are further accentuated by additional deep ecological strategies in his work. These strategies include the following:

1) **Co-incidence (or synchronicity or simultaneity) in Cummings’ poetry.**

Taoist ecological concerns are based on a law of co-incidence which is expressed most clearly in the ancient *I Ching* (Book of Changes), upon which Lao Tzu’s thinking is based, as is much of the thinking of his followers, such as Chuang Tzu. Great interest is paid to the apparently random co-existences or co-events within nature, such as the moon reflected in water, or the wind blowing through grass – these “mere coincidences” are viewed as highly significant because they emulate the co-incidence, or even co-operation, of yin and yang forces such as shade and light, or soil and thought, within nature’s consistently unifying and dynamic balance.

In Cummings’ poetry, this law of co-incidence is reflected in the poet’s relentless exploitation of co-incidences within English, such as the fact that the words “now” and “here” are merged (unified) into the word “nowhere,” a co-incidence that is exploited, for instance, in the poem “Beautiful” (CP 713). In the riddling conclusion

to his essay, Webster discusses this poem in ecological terms (121). According to Cummings, this is no “ordinary coincidence,” for within nature one’s immediate surroundings—one’s immediate “now” and “here”—do act as the gateways to one’s experience of the whole (the “all” or “everything”). Paradoxically, now and here do also act as gateways to “nowhere,” which continues to be more than any specific locality, detail, thought, or split second and is in this sense non-specific and all-pervading, as well as supremely relational.

2) **Cummings’ yin tendency.** Lao Tzu and Capra stress the possible re-emphasis or re-emergence of the yin complement within yang-overdriven, contra-ecological societies such as our own excessively “progressive” one. This complex issue could be summarized as follows: “female” or yin complements of (or tendencies within) the dynamic balance of nature are suppressed or ignored within such “progressive” societies. These complements or tendencies include intuition, emotion, darkness, the moon, water, etc. In contra-ecological “progressive” societies these tendencies are suppressed or blocked, moreover, in favour of yang tendencies—which, however, are then not viewed as tendencies, but as separate and superior categories—such as reason, analysis, competition and the sun.

An ecological stance would entail renewed awareness of the complementary truth of yin tendencies. It is possible that Cummings consciously or subconsciously implements the yin tendency when he stresses the innocence (or complementary truth) of tendencies and phenomena such as the moon, darkness, death, emotion, integration, earth and water. This is the case in numerous possible examples within his work, and in the sonnet “whose are these(wraith a clinging with a wraith)” (CP 639) discussed by Webster. The innocence of blackness and integration are important motifs within this poem and these will be taken up in the remainder of this paper.

3) **Transgressing boundaries.** In Cummings’ poetry, we find a consistent meaningful transgression of rationalistic, grammatical or traditional boundaries—as well as the barriers between self and other. Boundaries are (therefore) viewed as *osmotic* by the poet. This osmotic nature of boundaries allows for radical, dynamic mergence between apparent opposites such as male and female, or self and nature. This sense of mergence is carried into Cummings’ “ungrammar”—grammatical boundaries appear to be just as osmotic in the poet’s work. For instance, in the sonnet “i thank You God for most this amazing/ day” (CP 663), words such as “yes” and “most” are (mis)placed into highly significant “incorrect” syntactical positions, transgressing familiar grammatical confines and re-establishing new, often unifying, significances.⁵

4) **Cummings’ dynamic unity.** Cummings unifies apparent opposites and remains supremely aware of relationality within language and within nature. The three strategies above evidently tie in with this one. A more specific stratagem belonging within this framework is Cummings’ propensity to cross-stitch opposites in

order to “equal them out.” For example, in one of his most canonical poems, “my father moved through dooms of love” (CP 520), one encounters the cross-stitching of opposites such as depth and height, or love and hate in order to reveal the unifying or healing sense which is found only within the centre of one’s being, and which continues to be “more than all.”

5) **Beyond the signifier.** Paradoxically, signs may carry one beyond the limitations of knowledge into a more profound sense of the *unity* maintained within nature—that is, the continuing dynamic balance between extreme (yin and yang) forces within nature. (Dynamic unity, moreover, into which one is radically included as a human being.) This paradox is expounded by James J.Y. Liu in his notes on Taoist theory in *Chinese Theories of Literature*. Through poetic expression, words have the ability to carry one into a state beyond the confines of knowledge and indeed beyond the confines of signs themselves—this is the paradox. The individual signs in such poetry are compared by the Taoists to a triple-meshed trammel net used to catch a fish. Once the fish—or that eluding “whole” essence of unity within nature—has been “caught” via the poem, the net is of no further consequence; that is, the individual signs do not matter any more. Viewed from a deep ecological perspective and based on one’s experiences of reading Cummings, it seems likely that this paradox does play a role in his poetry.

One’s intuition that Cummings anticipated deep ecological concerns is confirmed by the following considerations:

- 1) Lao Tzu is one of a select group of authors mentioned directly within Cummings’ poetry (CP 553).
- 2) Cummings was known for his interest in Chinese art forms (Welch 109).
- 3) Friedman considers “his” Cummings among the many possible “Cummingses” to be a “Zen Monk” (173).
- 4) Cummings’ “whole” leanings are confirmed by his haiku sensibilities (explored by Michael Dylan Welch).
- 5) The remarkable frequency with which critics of Cummings’ poetry express admiration for the poet’s connectivity, inclusivity, “synesthetic genius,” “synergy,” etc., further underlines the possible wholeness of his poetry.
- 6) Finally, that New Critical or dualistically inclined critics tend to misplace Cummings’ ecological sensibilities serves as “negative” affirmation of the poet’s ecological rootedness.

I will now engage in a more extended discussion of Webster’s article, looking at it from the perspective of Cummings’ deep ecological or “whole” tendencies. Webster focuses on two issues especially: (1) he shows the ways that Cummings does or does not fit into Robert Langbaum’s elucidation of the new nature paradigm, and (2) following Emerson’s view that nature is “no sentimentalist,” he outlines particular methods adopted by Cummings to avoid sentiment and the pathetic fallacy (108-

For me, Cummings' deep ecological tendencies allow his poetry to successfully steer between and breathe beyond any *fixed* (or static, dislocated, dualistic) sense of "objectivity" on the one hand, and, on the other, the sentimentalism of merely projecting one's subjectivity onto nature such as is manifested in the pathetic fallacy.

Beginning with the issue of "objectivity": essential differences exist between the logocentric (Western) and ecological conceptions of "objectivity," as Welch asserts in terms of haiku (104). Certainly, sorting out differing views of objectivity is a complicated task, but one seldom discussed aspect of this issue is the question of boundaries and one's view of their nature. The Western conception of "objectivity" tends to stress opposition, and, under a cloud of apparent "neutrality," disguises the hierarchical placing of "male" aspects like rationality and analysis above "female" ones like emotion and integration. (Cf. Derrida, Capra, and Hawkes.)

This hidden hierarchy tends to go along with an extremely autonomized view of the nature of boundaries in general. As such, boundaries would be viewed as sealed-off, impermeable, and largely self-enclosed. A modernist example of this view of boundaries in relation to the nature of the individual can be found in a quote from F. H. Bradley that T. S. Eliot includes in his notes to *The Waste Land*. According Bradley (and perhaps Eliot), "my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others that surround it" (73). Such a view of boundaries leads to stasis or "monumentalism." I will therefore refer to this kind of impartiality as "*fixed* objectivity."

In contrast, the deep ecological view of "objectivity" sees boundaries as osmotic. This view allows for the vast, continuing wholeness consisting of dynamic relationships in which—as Barry Commoner puts it in his "first law of ecology"—"Everything is connected to everything else" (quoted in Rueckert 110). That is, pliability and osmosis are prerequisites for dynamic wholeness or the continuing spontaneous and emergent order of an ecological system.

One might ask, how would these notions be "objective"? The objective, non-sentimental aspect of this view may be formulated as follows: one's particular desires and thoughts do not matter in a sentimental sense within the larger scale of things. That is, relationality and dynamism are weighted beyond overblown perceptions of the individual subject and subjectivity in terms of what I will call "*fluid* objectivity."

In terms of fluid objectivity, I can agree with Webster that Cummings' poetry, like nature, is not essentially sentimental. The problem is how to formulate this intuition within the available terminology. It appears to me that the fluid objectivity described above may provide such a formulation, because it approximates one's

experience of Cummings' poetry as neither entirely "objective" in the fixed or standard sense on the one hand, nor as sentimental in an extravagantly subjectivist sense on the other.

Cummings deflates in several ways the universalist (and in this sense overblown) perception of subjectivity or "selfhood" that is paradoxically carried within a fixed Western sense of "objectivity." As Webster shows, Cummings succeeds in "reducing the pretensions of the human ego" (116). At the same time Cummings expansively broadens the proportions of the human or ecological self in terms of one's relationships with and embeddedness within everything. Considering sentimentality and "objectivity," Cummings therefore appears to fit the new nature paradigm in a wholly unique, and primarily deep ecological manner.

Following these observations, I may have something to add to Webster's reading of the poems. Webster begins his analysis with the acute observation that Cummings' animal poems deal with smaller creatures (111). Cummings' overall concern with the "little" can be associated with a similar accent found in Lao Tzu's text (56). According to Lao Tzu, being aware of smallness and being in accord with nature go hand in hand. In a variety of poems Cummings stresses the "little" in relation to nature; see for example, "little man" (CP 393), "in Just- / Spring" (CP 27), and "i am a little church(no great cathedral)" (CP 749), which, among other things, is a masterpiece of humility and empathy. Welch also sees Cummings' mindfulness of the little as one of the haiku aspects in the poet's work (98).

Webster continues his essay with a reading of Cummings' famous grasshopper poem and its more neglected companion, one of the poet's mouse poems. Among other considerations, Webster deduces that Cummings perhaps "takes the pathetic fallacy to an extreme" in the grasshopper poem, observes that the "S" and the "a" "lie outside the left and right hand margins" of this poem, and cautions that the accompanying mouse poem should not be overlooked (112-114).

Each of these observations can be correlated to deep ecology. The pathetic fallacy in the grasshopper poem does reach an extreme: if language is improperly rearranged and familiar grammatical patterns distorted to a substantial degree, a more essential awareness of nature in its self-assertive and kinetic mode—actualised in the leaping grasshopper—may emerge. This tendency in Cummings' poetry to transgress and rearrange inherited linguistic confines, or to stress and indeed *follow* the interfusion that these confines allow, is graphically illustrated in the "S" and "a" which point beyond the margins of this poem. In other words, they emphasize that nature's movement can not be contained in thoughts or signs when these are arranged non-creatively in conformity with orthodox grammatical or typographical structures or margins.

Of course, the paradox remains that this sense of nature which lies beyond our

conception is (after all) indicated by means of signs. Perhaps in this sense Cummings' particular transgressions of barriers and margins of all kinds serve little purpose beyond reminding us that nature is so inclusive, all-pervading, and dynamic, and indeed includes each of us to such an extent, that even our best attempts at "encapsulating" nature's essences are bound to fail—and that these failures are quite significant in and of themselves. The grasshopper's leap exceeds all the possible margins we may wish to impose on its essence, but in exposing this, language may act as the medium (and no more than the medium) which reveals this.

This would represent an extreme deep ecological form of the pathetic fallacy. As such, this "form" of the "fallacy" would not be sentimental, however, and would not imply the bothersome sentiment and projected subjectivity associated with the pathetic fallacy that might cloud proper cognizance of nature's essential and conscious otherness. Rather, the implication would be that one is included in this consciousness—even beyond "meaning".

The accompanying mouse poem, "mouse)Won" (CP 397), further illustrates a deep ecological perceptiveness within Cummings' poetry. The integrative and "still" mode of nature depicted in the mouse poem balances the self-assertive, kinetic mode of nature that is expressed in the grasshopper poem. In Taoist terms, these poems balance yang (self-assertion/ action/ leaping grasshopper) and yin (integration/ "non-doing"/ dead mouse) tendencies within nature.

Death is frequently and fearsomely portrayed as the ultimate integrating force within nature in Cummings' poetry. It is the only motif in Cummings' "secret code" which rivals spring in terms of the frequency of its occurrence. The accompanying mouse poem confirms the notion that death is viewed positively by Cummings, along with the yin forces of containment and darkness. As Webster states, the dead mouse is "wholly contained" (114).

This is significant for ecological reasons: as Capra declares, one of the contra-ecological aspects of our yang-overdriven society is the denial of death (145). Death would then be the mundane accident which abruptly and disruptively ends the unstoppable upward line of materialistic "success" and "progress" of our lives; neither a "good" death nor the positive, albeit awe-full, aspects of death (such as the idea that it acts as a gateway to timelessness, for instance) are considered.

But as Cummings knows, "death is no parenthesis" (CP 291). Through homophonic co-incidences in the English language, Cummings stresses that in having died, this mouse has become "one" (re-integrated) and has "Won" in the process, as Webster notes (115). In dying, it is victorious, and its "smile" seems to indicate that it "knows" that death is positive, even wonderful or mysterious.

mouse)Won

derfully is
anyone else entirely who doesn't
move(Moved more suddenly than)whose

tiniest smile?may Be
bigger than the fear of all
hearts never which have
(Per

haps)loved(or than
everyone that will Ever love)

The question mark following the mouse's smile in this poem may therefore act, first, as a graphic depiction of the appearance of the smile and, second, as a reminder that those who ask the "more beautiful question" will always receive the "beautiful answer" (CP 462). And, certainly, the implication would be that this "answer"—however much one may naturally fear it—is death / integration. The sense of doom or natural fear surrounding death is also viewed positively in several instances within Cummings' poetry—to name just two examples among many—the "incomparable / couch of death" which is portrayed as the earth's "rhythmic lover" (CP 58), and the Death that takes the "blueeyed boy" in "Buffalo Bill 's" (CP 90).

Webster discusses a second mouse poem, and one is indeed struck by the way Cummings "carries 'empathy several steps further' into the life of the other" (115). In contrast to the standard dualistic conception, in this poem the mouse becomes observer and interpreter, and the human presence becomes—from the perspective of the mouse—the questioned or even questionable "object":

Me up at does

out of the floor
quietly Stare

a poisoned mouse

still who alive

is asking What
have i done that

You wouldn't have

(CP 784)

The mouse implicates and questions the human being's drastic and interfering "par-

icipation” in nature’s ecological processes, “reducing the pretensions of the human ego” (116). The mouse seems to be pointing out (in its stare as much as in its question) that our objective view of nature has ironically turned us into (alienated) objects.

The question “What / have i done that / You wouldn’t have” can be interpreted in two simultaneous ways: (1) What have i (the mouse) done that you (the human) did not like (would not *have*)? and (2) What have i (the mouse) done that you (the human) would not have done, too?⁶ Thus the all-too-familiar hierarchical and dualistic categorisation according to which humans are the rationally superior observers and animals the mute “observed” objects, is creatively cross-stitched in this poem: the mouse is at least as much an observer as the human is, and is conscious of human interferences with nature. And the human, through the eyes of the mouse, is at least as much a “part of” or even an “observed object within” nature as the mouse may be. These notions of reciprocal awareness and the intrinsic values of nature are deeply ecological to the core. Once again, these notions are neither of the fixed “objective” variety, nor sentimental in the sense that melodramatically projected sympathy for the dying mouse is entertained.

The next poem analysed in Webster’s essay, “whose are these(wraith a clinging with a wraith)” (CP 639) again confirms Cummings’ positive view of integration and the so-called “dark” forces within nature. This is done in relation to one of Cummings’ profound and prolific themes, love. Cummings was early in implementing the Freudian notion of the unifying links between sex, mergence and death. Mergence, dissolvance or unity between self and other (including male and female lovers, and human beings and nature) are suggested in this sonnet. To quote only the sestet:

and never have breathed such miracle murdered we
whom cannot kill more mostful to arrive
each(futuring snowily which sprints for the
crumb of our Now)twiceuponatime wave—

put out your eyes,and touch the black skin
of an angel named imagination

To Webster’s excellent “rescrambling” of this poem I would add that the waves can not kill the lovers *again*. Since the lovers have already been “murdered” – that is, radically integrated beyond the male/female dichotomy—through the integrating role of love.

In a typically playful and riddling fashion, Cummings takes his transcendence of dualities further by referring to each wave as “twiceuponatime.” Each of the two lovers perceives each wave—each wave is therefore perceived “twice.” But they do so in

the unison of their love, a love which does actually entail tasting the imaginary world of “If”—“My soul / tastes If as some world of a spark”—and therefore recalls the fairytale phrase “once upon a time.” By jamming the phrase “twice upon a time” into one compound structure, Cummings further hints at the unison between the lovers: although they obviously see each wave from two separate perspectives, they do so within the collective unity of their love for one another, which means that every wave is also perceived “once” only⁷.

As Webster states, “small and beautiful counters big and sublime” (117) within this sonnet, but perhaps not in a completely contradictory or oppositional fashion, for “small and big” and love lead to integration with awe, or lead to *touching* “the black skin / of an angel named imagination.” When a lover closes her or his eyes, he or she is immediately in touch with darkness; quite literally, of course, but also quite imaginatively and innocently. Here one seems to be dealing with another example of the yin tendency within Cummings’ poetry.⁸

In the final three poems he discusses, Webster emphasizes Cummings’ growing awareness of the inclusivity of nature and the relationality between self and other within nature. In the poem “Beautiful” (CP 713) the phrases “here is now,” “here is snow,” here is “everywhere,” and now and here is “nowhere,” all co-incide.

Beautiful

is the
unmea
ning
of(sil

ently)fal

ling(e
ver
yw
here)s

Now

This ties in with the deep ecological actuality that one’s immediate (and seemingly small) surroundings relate one to the all in the sense of everywhere and nowhere. Greatness is therefore innately tied up with smallness, contrary to what one’s egotistical desires for “majorness” may tell one.

Webster also points out that Cummings enjoys an overwhelming alertness to

the idea that nature is an inclusive and all-pervading Person, a “Who,” something Cummings was aware of since early childhood (Parekh 64). Webster concludes that Cummings was “enough of a modernist to avoid a too-easy use of the pathetic fallacy, but he also was enough of a Romantic to believe that nature and animals possessed a personality which he could address directly” (121). In other words, Cummings is neither so sentimental that he simply interferes with nature by projecting subjectivity onto nature, nor so “objective” in a fixed sense that he feels removed from nature’s processes and personality. Cummings certainly takes nature personally, but in a humble, Taoist way—and therefore, one would deduce, both sentimentality and extremely dualistic, logical “objectivity” and dislocation would be viewed as unnecessary complications in the poet’s view.

4. Conclusions

Cummings’ poetry is not only about the “interconnectedness that *should* exist among all living things” (Webster 121, my italics): it equally concerns the interconnectedness which does, already, continue to exist within nature in terms of nature’s ultimately delicate balancing of extreme forces such as light and darkness, and the multitude of creatures and elements into which one is included; one is part of the fearsome and delicate dance of nature, and one interferes with this balance to the detriment of one’s survival and one’s innermost homeostasis. As Cummings writes in the interesting notes provided in Webster’s appendix: “for namelessness equals just what means immediate this brooklike sweet Whom, just the instantaneous everyness which blossoms in this occult opening Here” (122). From an ecological perspective, one unravels this statement as follows: now and here link one to that “instantaneous everyness” (or dynamic all) which is the Person of nature, who remains nameless or ultimately beyond the capturing capabilities of the sign.

This recognition does not mean that Cummings writes a poetry of determination or scholastically insists on a kind of “lesson” in deep ecology. This “quality” does not exist in Cummings’ genial and even playful *poetical* enactment of his deep ecological sensibilities. Distinctly Western and modernist qualities such as fragmentation and reassembly, attempting to express the inexpressible, and an abundance of metaphors, juxtapositions, oxymorons, etc., are central to Cummings’ engagement with deep ecological “objectivity” and inclusivity.

Finally, in relation to the main focus of Webster’s essay—Langbaum’s paradigm and the pathetic fallacy—I agree that Cummings does not interfere with nature’s consciousness in terms of sentiment. But I suspect that Cummings would have been inclined to add that in our great way, should we become small enough, we are integrally part of this consciousness, and as such, our consciousness of nature’s consciousness is superseded in imperative aspects by nature’s consciousness of ours.

To Cummings, unlike the Taoists proper, this fluid objectivity does not entirely

exclude a personal deity, the “You” which Cummings addresses or portrays in poems such as “i thank You God for most this amazing/ day” (CP 663) and “no time ago” (CP 648). The comical, Dantean, or Christian dimensions of Cummings’ poetry are related to his Taoist/ deep ecological tenets in a creative and authentic manner—something which deserves further critical attention.

But Cummings, like the Taoists or like Job in the Bible, seems to have dismissed a certain moralistic and anthropocentric “formula” presented as a personal deity along with a “too-easy” implementation of the pathetic fallacy. Among other things, one may therefore conclude that Cummings has struck the poetical balance between God as a Person and the unsentimentality and inclusivity of nature as a “Who”—he has struck the balance between human integrity and the open-endedness of nature, as well as between “red grace” (concrete and empathetic flesh-and-blood human existence) and “green grace” (nature’s ecological and aquatic flow).

—North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
NTLJET@puknet.puk.ac.za

Notes

- 1 I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Webster for his technical guidance and generosity in the instructive process which lead to this response which nevertheless does embody my ideas.
- 2 Taking our current ecological crisis into account, it would appear that Cummings’ ecological sense is still ahead of the times.
- 3 Deep ecology may be contrasted to commercial environmentalism on the following basis: according to the deep ecologists, every creature, element and force within nature enjoys intrinsic value over and above their exploitable values—see Drenghson & Inoue and Arne Naess. It would be safe to assume that Taoist tenets—which are most profoundly expressed in Lao Tzu’s work—are shared by deep ecologists such as Naess, Capra and C.A. Bowers.
- 4 In accordance with Naess’ differentiation of these terms, I am adhering to the notion that nature—and, for the most part, Cummings’ poetry—reveals order which continues to emerge spontaneously from the chaos of natural complexity, but that humans may interfere with and *complicate* this issue in terms of hierarchy, exploitation and stasis—see Naess (5-6).
- 5 See my “The Osmotic Mandala: On the Nature of Boundaries in E. E. Cummings’ Poetry.”
- 6 I am indebted to two non-scholars for making me aware of this second possibility

in an informal discussion of this poem. Sometimes Cummings makes one wonder if there exists such an animal as an “ordinary” reader.

7 In Lao Tzu’s text, in addition, the purifying and unifying abilities of water are literally praised (29, 57, 63), and in Cummings’ Freudian moments, he consistently underlines the fact of unity beyond dualities (Cohen 594; *Miscellany* 127).

8 Although certain patterns, motifs or tendencies often recur in Cummings’ poetry, they normally do so within slightly variant contexts.

Works Cited

- Albright, Daniel. *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Bowers, C.A. *Critical Essays on Education, Modernity, and the Recovery of the Ecological Imperative*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1993.
- Brown, Slater. “Review of *Tulips and Chimneys*.” *Broom* 6 (1924): 26-28. Rpt. *Critical Essays on E. E. Cummings*. Ed. Guy Rotella. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984. 38-39.
- Capra, Fritjof. *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture*. London: Flamingo, 1982.
- Cohen, Milton A. “Cummings and Freud.” *American Literature* 55.4 (1983): 591-610.
- Cummings, E. E. *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*. Ed George J. Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1994.
- . *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised*. Ed. George J. Firmage. New York: October House, 1965.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. G. Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- Drengson, Alan & Inoue, Yuichi, eds. *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995.
- Eliot, T. S. *Selected Poems*. London: Faber & Faber, 1982.
- Friedman, Norman. *(Re)Valuing Cummings: Further Essays on the Poet, 1962-1993*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1996.
- Hawkes, Terrence. *Structuralism & Semiotics*. London: Methuen, 1977.
- Langbaum, Robert. *The Modern Spirit: Essays on the Continuity of Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Literature*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1970.
- Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching (The Richard Wilhelm Edition)*. Trans. H. G. Ostwald. London: Arkana, 1987.
- Liu, James J. Y. *Chinese Theories of Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1975.
- Logan, John. “Six of One and Six Hundred of the Other.” *Critical Essays on E.E. Cummings*. Guy Rotella. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1984: 86-91.
- Naess, Arne. “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement.” *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*. Ed. Alan Drengson & Yuichi

- Inoue. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995: 3–9.
- Palmer, Martin. “Chinese Religion and Ecology.” *Spirit of the Environment: Religion, Value and the Environmental Concern*. Ed. David E. Cooper and Joy A. Palmer. London: Routledge, 1998: 15-29.
- Parekh, Pushpa N. “Nature in the Poetry of E.E. Cummings.” *Spring: the Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society* 3 (Fall 1994): 63–71. Available online at: <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/issue3/Parekh3.htm>.
- Pound, Ezra. “The Teacher’s Mission.” 1934. *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Ed. T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1968. 58-63.
- Rueckert, William. “Literature and Ecology.” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996: 105–123.
- Terblanche, Etienne. “The Osmotic Mandala: On the Nature of Boundaries in E. E. Cummings’ Poetry.” *Spring* 10 (2001): 9-22. Available online at: <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/issue10/Terblanche10.html>.
- Webster, Michael. “E. E. Cummings: The New Nature Poetry and the Old.” *Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society* 9 (2000): 109-124. Available online at: <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/issue9/Webster9.htm>.
- Welch, Michael Dylan. “The Haiku Sensibilities of E.E. Cummings.” *Spring: The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society* 4 (October 1995): 95–120. Available online at: <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/Welch4.htm>