

Cummings, No Bliss, Robespierre, Optimism

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The present short text is also a calling card or an example of the kind of piece that I believe Zeteo would best be publishing now. For more in this regard, see the Addendum.

now air is air, and thing is thing:no bliss
of heavenly earth beguiles our spirits

Or so, E.E. Cummings wrote in the poem that begins with these words. From a Marxist, *Communist Manifesto* perspective, we might be said to be making progress (or to have been making progress in the 1950s when Cummings published the poem). Religion, superstition, ecstasy in the rearview mirror, we *Homo sapiens sapiens* find ourselves at last compelled to face with sober senses, our real conditions of life.¹

And this thanks to the extraordinary genius, the unstinting rationality, and seemingly courageous sight of modern science. Our

miraculously disenchanted eyes
live the magnificent honesty of space.

A bit regrettable, that disenchantment, and of course we have gotten carried away —

as if whole supreme this complete doubtless
universe we'd (and we alone) made

But allow me to propose that we did make it. Cummings's 1950s, bliss-less, honest universe was the product of our science, of its mathematics. Even honesty has been the creation or virtue (however honored in the breach) of a particular people—traders—who are now not situated as they once were, and thus neither is honesty.²

But—the World Wars and his experiences in the First World War notwithstanding—Cummings (1894-1962) had such a fundamental optimism, or perhaps exuberance is the better word. (And not only for him, but also for the Surrealists and others “inspired” by the First World War.) As I read Cummings's “now air is air” poem, the rationalism and solipsism of the scientific age will one day be replaced by a higher and seemingly final, gladly somnolent stage. The closing lines speak of

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a deeper magic: that white sleep wherein
all human curiosity we'll spend
(gladly, as lovers must) immortal and
the courage to receive time's mightiest dream

Grammar (order) and clarity have broken down here because the poet is speaking of something we *might* be able to glimpse, but certainly are not ready to understand: how our science will give way, and we will, gladly, merge with the larger universe—not of our creating or bloated with virtue—time's mightiest dream.

It should be noted that a decade earlier, in the midst of the Second World War, Cummings's view of such a dream (in the closing stanza of “what if a much of a which of a wind”) was hardly sunny:

what if a dawn of a doom of a dream
bites this universe in two,
peels forever out of his grave
and sprinkles nowhere with me and you?
Blow soon to never and never to twice
(blow life to isn't:blow death to was)
—all nothing's only our hugest home;³

Below I will give the whole “now air is air” poem for readers to wrestle with on their own.⁴ My February 2018 reading is my February 2018 reading. I would only here add two more comments:

(1) Few poets dare take on (or make room for?) subjects as large as those of this poem, and few poems have been able to cover so much ground—epochs and light years—with such an economy of means. Bravo Mr. Cummings!

(2) As the shadows of the twenty-first century lengthen, the exuberance or optimism of our predecessors seems more and more striking. In addition to Cummings and other poets, I have been reading in the speeches of *L'Incorruptible*, The Incorruptible, Maximilien Robespierre. Robespierre led the French Revolution as he did while believing, among other things, in the goodness of the common people and in the possibility of national unity (as opposed to endless class warfare), and in the possibility of a triumph of virtue. In his last speech, delivered two days before he was killed, he spoke of his belief in the existence of pure, sensitive souls.

There does exist a tender, but imperious and irresistible passion . . . a profound horror of tyranny, a compassionate zeal for the oppressed, a sacred love of one's country, and a love of humanity still more holy and sublime, without which a great revolution is no more than the destruction of a lesser by a greater crime.⁵

This is so much more optimism than I, with my 2018 sober senses and the increasing estrangedness of relations among our kind, am usually able to muster. We find ourselves now in the Dark Ages of capitalism?

In the second stanza of “what if a much of a which of a wind,” Cummings — keeping pace with the Manhattan Project?—writes:

what if a keen of a lean wind flays
screaming hills with sleet and snow:
strangles valleys by ropes of thing
and stifles forests in white ago?
Blow hope to terror; blow seeing to blind
(blow pity to envy and soul to mind)
—whose hearts are mountains, roots are trees,
it’s they shall cry hello to the spring

Yes, this is hardly a happy poem, yet it gives evidence of an underlying faith. We might even call this seeing the glass as half full: even after unprecedented fury and destructiveness, spring must come again, and even we humans will still have a home, albeit “all nothing”—“that white sleep wherein / all human curiosity we’ll spend . . .”

Addendum

Zeteo is ever interested in pieces that call attention to old or new texts, art, music, etc.—work that the public and its culture mavens are ignoring. We prize, too, pieces that reflect a writer’s active and enthusiastic engagement with reading, be it of graffiti, classics, websites, scholarly work. While we like personal, autobiographical moments in texts, we do not publish personal essays.

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Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

By 2050—earlier, probably—all real knowledge of Oldspeak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron—they’ll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be.

Endnotes

¹ From the standard translation of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* (The Communist Manifesto):

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

² The curious might see Limerick 105, from [The Limericks, Part III \(Animals, Capitalism, the News, First Impressions\)](#), Montaignbakhtinian.com, Summer 2017.

Truth, honesty and justice have had their historical hour,
Have been superseded by some new language of power.
Fake news and drug research—parodies of old forms
Like courts where the rich make rule of law squirm.
The poor do others' time, and bitterness, liberated, flowers.

∩ Lines rooted in lines from Theodor Adorno, "Zur Dialektik des Takts" (On the dialectic of tact), *Minima Moralia*, 1951: "Hat doch Takt seine genaue historische Stunde. . . ." Working from E.F.N. Jephcott's translation: Politeness had its precise historical hour. Now fallen into irreparable ruin, the convention lives on only in the parody of forms, an arbitrarily devised or recollected etiquette for the ignorant.

³ The whole of "what if a much of a which of a wind," first published in *Poetry*, July 1943:

what if a much of a which of a wind
gives the truth to summer's lie;
bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun
and yanks immortal stars awry?
Blow king to beggar and queen to seem
(blow friend to fiend: blow space to time)
—when skies are hanged and oceans drowned,
the single secret will still be man

what if a keen of a lean wind flays
screaming hills with sleet and snow:
strangles valleys by ropes of thing
and stifles forests in white ago?
Blow hope to terror; blow seeing to blind
(blow pity to envy and soul to mind)
—whose hearts are mountains, roots are trees,
it's they shall cry hello to the spring

what if a dawn of a doom of a dream
bites this universe in two,
peels forever out of his grave
and sprinkles nowhere with me and you?
Blow soon to never and never to twice
(blow life to isn't: blow death to was)
—all nothing's only our hugest home;
the most who die, the more we live

⁴ Cummings "now air is air" poem in its entirety:

now air is air and thing is thing: no bliss
of heavenly earth beguiles our spirits, whose
miraculously disenchanting eyes
live the magnificent honesty of space.

Mountains are mountains now; skies now are skies –
and such a sharpening freedom lifts our blood

as if whole supreme this complete doubtless
universe we'd (and we alone) made
– yes; or as if our souls, awakened from
summer's green trance, would not adventure soon
a deeper magic: that white sleep wherein
all human curiosity we'll spend
(gladly, as lovers must) immortal and
the courage to receive time's mightiest dream

⁵ Maximilien Robespierre (1758 - 1794), « Discours de 8 Thermidor » (26 July 1794), [French text](#). Also found online, this [rather rough English translation](#).