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Philip L. Gerber

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Kidder:

I guess the thing that matters most in that you have to say right at the outset is that Cummings spent more time painting than he did writing. The people who knew him and people who knew his habits and knew the way that he behaved knew that that's really what he did most of his time. Which is not to say that the poetry was a kind of an offshoot of that or something that didn't matter. Obviously that was terribly significant to him. But what interests me and what has for a long time are the relationships between these two things and the way you see for example those relationships emerging when you look at a portrait like this and you think about how many poems he wrote that are also in a sense self-portraits.

You find him standing in front of the mirror either literally or in front of the mirror of his- of his typewriter as he's a writer and saying, "Who is this strange person inside? What is this, what's this me that I have? This this famous little lowercase I? How does it work and how does it look at the world and what sense does it make of things out there?" Finally I guess that's what matters to me is the fact that there's somebody who could do both who can either paint or write and is constantly choosing to do one or the other and finally is choosing to do more painting than he is writing.

Brockport Writers Forum in a continuing series of discussions with leading literary contemporaries presents a conversation with Rushworth Kidder. An authority on e.e. Cummings both as a poet and a painter, who has broken new ground concerning the relationships between e.e. Cummings' verse and his paintings. Rushworth M. Kidder teaches American and British literature at Wichita State University. Discussing Mr. Kidder's works and hosting today's Writers Forum is Philip L. Gerber, professor of English at the State University of New York, College at Brockport.

Rush, Welcome to the Writers Forum.

Thanks Phil.

I'm thinking of your opening remarks about Cummings painting more than he wrote and thinking that considering this is a fact we know it is a fact that so little has been done with the painting end and of all the people who have the few really who have done something on Cummings as the painter, you probably have done more than anyone else. I think it would be interesting to hear how you got into this what got you into Cummings as a painter to begin with?

Well, I guess actually I don't mean this to be facetious but I got into it by way of Dylan Thomas. I had finished a book on Thomas and I have been looking at Thomas' religious imagery. And along the way I was struck by the fact that Thomas was one of the few poets and Cummings as one of the others that I knew who knew how to write poems of praise without making them corny or sentimental or trite or just you know stupid, without being nineteenth century and all the bad connotations of that word. I said I suppose that's where I knew that I wanted to start working with Cummings because it seemed to me there was no point investing a good number of years of your life in somebody whose work you didn't really care much for. And I just started doing some reading and discovered that Charles Norman, in his biography of Cummings has lots of things to say about Cummings, and spends about eight pages talking about Cummings as a

painter, and yet in those eight pages he says Cummings painted more than he wrote. So, I thought well I want to find out about this so I got my way over to the library and began to look up the stuff where there was nothing and I mean nothing. Norman had said it in those eight pages and there was nothing else that anybody seemed to know.

And I got thinking about that that was in the fall of '72. I had been asked at that point to apply for one of those summer stipends that the National Endowment For the Humanities gives. And I thought this is something I really want to get into. Well it was as though I guess from that point on I was just sort of being led by the hand and in the right direction because I filled out that application and the deadline for it was November and I didn't learn until January that for the first time in history and the last time in history about nine hundred of Cummings paintings were all together in one place being catalogued and for sale. So I quickly wrote off to the endowment and said look this is even more important than I thought it was. Let me include this little statement in my application. Well the thing ultimately was funded and that was that was how it started I spent that summer looking into that collection of paintings interviewing people and at the end of that I wrote my first article I look back on that now and I think my gosh that I sure wish I had I wish I knew then what I know now before I wrote that article and yet it was a it was a necessary thing to do and it got a lot of stuff on the record.

What collection was this you're speaking of here?

Well it was a it's a been a curious thing Cummings as died in 1962 and he left his estate to his widow and his estate. I guess I was you need to back up a little bit - Cummings as a as a New Englander born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, raised in one of the one of the fine families of Cambridge. His father was, as you know, a minister and former faculty member at Harvard. And Cummings came from a great tradition of that kind of aristocracy in a sense, but also the other side of it was this wonderful tradition of the New England savers. You know the people who will not throw away anything who fill their attics with old broken rakes and all that kind of stuff because it just might come in handy. Midwest has them also.

Well I guess they do. I guess maybe, it's just a maybe, something distinctly American or maybe it's just distinctly human I don't know. However it was, Cummings ended up being one of those people who didn't save his old rakes and stuff. But I'm convinced that he saved nearly every piece of paper he ever wrote on and every painting and sketch that he ever did. Well the result of that was that when he died he had crates, literally of papers and paintings and all of that stuff a lot of it stored away in the barn at his summer place that he left to his widow. When she died in 1969, she left that material to Cummings daughter and the daughter made various dispositions of it. Some of it went to Harvard finally. There's a good bunch of it at Texas right now. The paintings she didn't really know what to do with so she gave them away to a charitable organization that she wanted to support. It's a children's camp in Barrington, Rhode Island of all things and it's a place where her own daughter, Cummings' granddaughter that would have been, went. And the camp then all of a sudden gets this bequest sort of arriving in the mail here in are crates containing 1645 paintings by one of America's foremost poets. You know and these and the good people at the Luethi Peterson camp in Barrington said you know, what we do with this? So they commissioned the

Gotham Book Mart in New York to make a selection and a catalogue those things for the purpose of selling it. And they went through there it was a Herculean task going through all of that stuff and picking out the ones that they wanted to sell. But they did that and that's the discovery that I made in the fall of '72. But all that was going on right at the point when it had first occurred to me that somebody ought to look into this in a serious way.

Well tell me where did those paintings go that were for sale? Did they go collectively or individually, do you know where they went?

In fact, kind of off the record, if you want to good investment you might get yourself down to New York and buy one there are so many of them still to still be somewhere still being sold.

I don't suppose, I don't know, but I would imagine perhaps they've sold a couple of hundred by now. But remember, that's only about half the collection in the other 745 of them, did that come out right?

They're you know hanging in the camp.

Well I wish I could say they were hanging. The problem is there's they're stored in moving crates at this point simply because the camp - and we've tried all kinds of ways you approach the National Endowment for the Arts and that's a problem because they don't they don't look at Cummings as a painter and we approach the National Endowment for the Humanities and that's a problem because Cummings is a painter not a not a poet and we're interested in the humanities, they say. So there's that's the difficulty in there and I just wish we could get some kind of support to help preserve those they are moving crates in an attic in a humid climate and they're just sort of going to pieces.

Where are the other Cummings works, the paintings then? Are they collected here and there?

They're collected here and there and in fact we're sitting in midst of a great bunch of them. Right now the collection the you've just acquired here is the largest. As far as I know the largest single private collection that there is in the country. I think I've not seen a lot of the others but I know of people who have ten or a dozen that kind of thing but I don't think anybody has the numbers that you have now. So that really puts you in -

How many would there be all together, have you any idea? Are there any records?

I figured, no, uh. Well no, that's the thing. If there were records it would have made things a lot easier, you know it's a question of building the record as you go along. I think I've probably seen a couple of thousand, (A couple of thousand?) at this point.

What does Harvard have? [inaudible]. Well Harvard has a most incredible collection of papers and there again I guess that's significant that Cummings comes from this family of savers. He not only saved a lot of stuff which his widow then sold to Harvard but his parents also saved every letter as near as I can tell that he ever wrote home and then I'll only save the letter because Cummings didn't always date them but they saved them in the envelop with the postmark on it. So there's this marvelous record that starts I think see it starts in 1916 which is the year that Cummings gets his master's degree from Cambridge and finally moves out of the house and therefore has occasion to be writing home. It starts from there and it goes run up, right on up until Cummings' mother dies in the late forties.

What a record.

It's a marvelous record. It's an amazing record not only of what Cummings is doing because he has a curious relationship with his parents. Every once in a while he's kind of hiding some of the things that he's doing. But he's very forthright about others and he will tell you without telling you what the painting is all about he will say today I sat down and I painted from noon until ten o'clock on my painting of the bridge. You know and this is in 1918 or '17 that he makes that comment so you scurry around and you try to find what could that painting have been. You know that that kind of thing. What would Harvard have been the way of artwork for someone interested in that angle?

Well Harvard has a collection of..Harvard has a catalog of all the things they have and it's two large bound volumes, which go through pretty much listing-listing individual letters. Well no I shouldn't say that. The letters for example, are listed in one line saying 240 letters to his mother. That kind of thing, so you can imagine how many things there are in a catalog because that many things per line. One of the lines I memorized this number, because the delights me so much. One of the lines says sketches 9269 sheets.

9000.

And that's just one entry that doesn't count the sketch books which are the kind of things that he took around I guess the way somebody's takes an Instamatic around Europe nowadays. He took a sketchbook around them and he was constantly recording what he saw. Little tiny things. Sometimes a little bit larger and they're just full of sketches as well. So they must have, by a conservative estimate perhaps 12,000 images. By Cummings?

By Cummings.

And what would Texas have along that line?

Texas has a number of those things as well. Some of the things that went to the Gotham and were then bought by Texas, came out of Marion's estate. They have nowhere near as many. Harvard really got them got the best of the thing. Which I think Marion, his widow, felt was right because of course that was all of his ties were.

Do you know of any other interesting private collections?

Well I like to think that the one that I've slowly built up is of interest to me.

And to others I would imagine.

And to others I guess. Partly because it was the kind of thing that when I got into it I realized that this is this is quite apart from being I suppose valuable it's so darn much fun to have these things around and to be able at a reasonably inexpensive price because nobody knew that he was a painter in those days. Just to be able to acquire.

So you do have some of paintings by him?

So along the way I picked up a few paintings by him and that was the heart of an exhibition that I circulated. Must be three or four years now to various universities in New England.

You know all this work you've been doing for the last several years in preparation for your book on Cummings and his paintings - you must have had some interesting experiences that you want to tell us about.

Yeah, I have and I guess I want to begin by saying that I've run into probably the nicest bunch of people that I can imagine [That always helps.] running into in these ways. They've just been wonderful, especially I guess the people that I've run into in Barrington, who are with the camps. And others who are not in this regard of course

professional art historians or literary people or anything like that. One's a doctor, and one I think is retired, and one's a lawyer and they're just they're a good group of people who are the board of directors of this camp. But I do recall and I think I probably told this to Mrs Drew at one point after my first visit there. She invited me down. She was the one who happened to be the one who had enough attic space to accommodate all of these crates of paintings and I wrote to her and said "Can I come and see these?" and she said, sure we'd love to have you, so I came down. I think ingratiated myself with her because when I was done I borrowed her vacuum cleaner and I cleaned up the floor. My wife has taught me very well the things you say to and one needed to do that. Because a lot of these paintings are done on cardboard it's the kind of shirt cardboards you get back from the laundry with your you know your shirt wrapped around them there were days apparently when Cummings couldn't afford a canvas. And I have the feeling he did a lot of laundry he does a lot of pictures on the shirt board.

Well, I guess that's true.

Maybe he borrowed from his neighbors.

Maybe he did. You know the ones the ones that come back during the war in the 40's had stamped on the back in purple ink please return this to the laundry. You know that was how desperate people were about cardboard, hangers, and all that. You know that that does help to date them. But they're going to pieces of course you know and you take them out of those crates and corners break off you know and there's flecks of painting all over the floor. You know and it's just that it's a sad thing to see. Anyway I did her the service of cleaning it up. But she then, I got in there very early, I had drove down from Boston in the morning down to the it's the Providence area that's not too far and I had started in the quite early. And along about twelve o'clock I was beginning to think to myself I'm getting kinda hungry, you know and I wonder I wonder what's up I mean I wonder whether I should go and get myself a hamburger in town or something like that. And 'long about twelve thirty this voice came up the stairs and said my husband be home in about an hour and we'll have lunch so I thought. I would get through that so I labored away and tried to lose myself in the paintings, which as I recall was successful and about one thirty she called for lunch. I suppose I must have shocked her because I think I was down there instantly. You know well it turned out of all things that she and her husband were on diets. And I was served a piece of lettuce about this big and small pieces of cheese and one sardine.

That was your lunch.

That was my lunch. And there were a lot of crackers. I think I never made such a good meal on crackers in my life but you know all of these all of these little things that keep kind of intermingling with the thing and I guess that's finally what I what I come back to as an interest in Cummings. Cummings was constantly coming across circumstances like that. But he had the capacity as a poet or a painter to leave it to leave it in better hands really then a narrative between the two of us about that kind of thing to take it and see that as an image for the way humanity worked with with one another and all that and to elevate it into something that finally became art.

And what about Cummings's family or friends? You must've had some interesting contacts with them.

Yeah I did. I did. I interviewed a marvelous fellow in New York - Bill O'Brien, whose name comes up in the collective, in the Selected Letters. A couple of letters in there to him. And Bill, when I interviewed him was, Well he was a contemporary of Cummings and Cummings was born in 1894 and they'd spent a lot of time in New York together in the in the heydays of the 20's they'd gone up to Harlem in the evening and they'd ridden home after a night of carousing, as you know, as the dawn was coming up on the back end of a milk wagon, a horse drawn milk wagon. Going all the way from Harlem up on 125th street, excuse me, all the way down to the Village. take all night. where they lived, sort of singing and carousing all of you home and then the milkman just kind of plodding along and not minding these two bums.

When would it be perhaps?

I think that would probably be in the early '20s or maybe in around 1926. There's a period in there from about 1921 to '24 or so when Cummings is basically out of the country. He's in Paris where everybody else is at that time, of course. But that would have been in the in the early '20s. Anyway, I talked to Bill. And he was a sweet fellow I just he just sort of turned on the tape recorder and he just talked. He must have gone on for about three hours with fascinating kinds of things in an apartment in New York, hung with a lot of Cummings paintings.

What a source.

He really was, he was just delightful but he gave me an insight into a number of things about Cummings. He told me a lot about Cummings's summer place up in the country where he had visited. Which was of course just everything to Cummings in many ways. I mean that was really where his heart was in that summer place. But he also told me that he himself, Bill, had worked for M.G.M. for about 25 years and all of a sudden in 1952 or '53, I can't remember, he got a call from his supervisor saying "that's it - you know no more job, I'm sorry you're fired." Well Cummings at that time held, was holding really for the first time in his life an extended job. Cummings worked once in 1917 for three months in a book firm in New York. After that he did nothing but paint and write for the rest of his career until he was appointed in 1952 as the Norton lecturer at Harvard. And all that consisted of was that he would agree to give six lectures which are now published as "i" you know as little lower case i. Six non-lectures. And he'd be paid ten thousand dollars for that. And he took the money and he put in the bank because by then he was just beginning to earn enough on royalties that he could make ends meet without it. And three or four days later after I heard about Bill O'Brien he called him up and said, Bill I understand you've had a misfortune and you don't have a job. Bill said, yes. And Cummings said, well I've been doing this thing with Harvard and they've been paying me this monumental sum of money and I don't know what to do with it and I just put in my bank account and it's yours if you need it.

What generosity.

It really is. It's a marvelous thing and you know there's the other side of him apparently he could - I think Bill was also one to told me this. When intruders would come up - up the Joy Farm in New Hampshire. They'd find their way up the road thinking, here's the home of a great famous poet, he was not above getting out this old pistol that he had lying around and firing it off into the trees to scare the intruders off. And, of course, in some of his satires, in his poetry, he can just be brutal

on people. As he is on FDR, for example. He had that side of him, as well, but a tremendous kindness.

It makes him more interesting he's got these different facets. He's a kind of big personality.

It really does and that of course shows up and in so many of his paintings and things.

You've worked with James Sibley Watson, who's given the present collection to the Brockport Foundation.

Yes, yes, I have and he's been he's another one of the people that you know could get in that list of just tremendously kind [Another contemporary!] and interested people. Watson was, Watson, of course, along with Scofield Thayer, was the founder of what in my opinion, and I guess in many people's opinion, remains one of the finest of the of the literary magazines and journals in this period. Of course I'm talking about The Dial.

I'm sure you are right.

The Dial had a long history and it really started in one form or another back sort of in the in the late, in the 19th century. I don't know what happened to it around 1917 but it ceased publication. And at that point Watson and Thayer, whom Cummings had known at Harvard, picked it up and they both were people of enough independent means that they weren't really concerned about whether it was a money making operation. They simply set out with a very clear and you know it's sound such like like such a lucidly simple goal. We're going to publish the best literature, the best art, the best of modern history, the best of modern psychology, sociology, all of those things. But it's going to be the best, because there's no getting around that. If we have to pay a lot for that, we'll pay a lot for it. If it costs us a lot to put a lot of photographs of these pieces in the magazine we'll do it. The point is we're going to set out and produce one of the best magazines.

And I think they succeeded.

And I think they succeeded; in the nine and a half year run that it had from 1920 to 1929. You know I mean the list of people they picked up was just incredible.

[Sherwood Anderson.] Sherwood Anderson.

[Marianne Moore.] Marianne Moore.

They had Picasso stuff. [Picasso]. They had John Marin stuff. [Marin. Gaston Lachaise]. Lachaise was in there and of course, Cummings! I mean they found Cummings about the time that Cummings found them they found Cummings. It was just a marvelous relationship. The very first issue in 1920, Cummings is in there with a bunch of poems and four line drawings. That must be almost his first publication in a magazine. Well I think it well he had published a lot as an undergraduate at Harvard. And then he had been part of that curious book called Eight Harvard Poets in 1917 which included John Dos Passos and Stuart Mitchell and people like that. Mitchell later became editor of, the managing editor of, The Dial so we had a lot of contacts there. But you know it was it was a lot more than contacts that got him into that business because you don't, when you're setting out with those kinds of standards. You don't publish the drawing of a friend of yours alongside Picasso's stuff unless you're doing sure about the caliber of your friend's drawing.

They had good taste.

They really have good taste. Yeah, both Watson and Thayer you know as I can tell had the kind of an eye that can look at a thing and either say



eh, or say that's it. And Cummings account of Thayer going through and picking out the line drawings is spectacular. Cummings would do them in pencil and he do thousands of them literally thousands of them I think. And I think I've probably seen a couple of thousand of the ones that he did get around 1922. The ones that are still at Harvard.

Watson, uh Thayer, then would sort of peer over his shoulder and say-you go through fifty, get a bunch and say no and all of a sudden, that's the one. I like it. That's the one we want. Cummings would then labor over that put it on the grid, ink it, expand it into a larger drawing. [Oh, that's how the line drawings came to be produced, is that right?] That's how the line drawings came to be produced.

I see. They picked out the rough and he did [that's right] out of this sea of roughness that he had that. That I think they found something that appealed to them.

Right.

And that's why Cummings so desperately needed people like Watson and Thayer around him. He was, he was so prolific and I hate to say this, because it sounds kind of it sounds kind of contradictory but -it's almost as though he were so prolific that he never found time to be a very good critic. He never really bothered to distinguish I guess, in a lot of his things. That's that's been one of the accusations which has stuck and I think with some merit, to his poetry, since the beginning that he could have published two thirds as much as he did and still have been the first rate poet he is. But there's so much in the collected poems that you think well, it would have been nice to come out later as a sort of juvenilia, of interest to scholars perhaps later. But why is it in there? I think the same thing with his poems, with his paintings, and with his drawings. There is so much there that he needed he needed that eye, needed a Watson.

We've been talking about these paintings. Let's take a look at some of them that we have with us from the collection that's come to the Brockport Foundation now. For instance, this this large abstract over here which I would guess has something maybe to do with the cubist influence. But I'm sure you know more about it. How about that?

Well, I guess you bring up the business of influence and that's a that's a very interesting point. Cummings, really got turned on and all cranked up about art because a friend of his at Harvard, Foster Damon, who then went on to be one of the notable Blake scholars, took him to the 1913 Armory Show when it came to Boston. And Cummings saw all this stuff and then it was just sort of astounded by it. Cummings had been drawing and drawing very well, I must say since he was six or eight or ten, as his father had before him. His father was also very good sketcher. But that really caught hold of Cummings. He then... He read pretty carefully a very curious book by Arthur Jerome Eddy called "Cubists and Post Impressionism" published in 1914. Then he read very carefully a very good book by Willard Huntington Wright called "Modern art, its tendency and meaning," or something like that. And he picked up from that I think really three significant influences. He got to know cubism pretty well. He got to know what the Fauves were up to. And he got to know what the Futurists were up to. And you look at a painting like that, especially in all of the full color that it has, and you realize well that's not that's not cubism. The one thing that cubism

did was to reduce the palette to an almost monochromatic thing. But in a sense it's what the Fauves were up to with those marvelous combinations of color.

And it all kind of convoluted. [Right!] I see mushrooms in there somewhere.

Right! Well, you see all kinds of things in there and you realize too that-that only having come from the Cubists and the Fauves, he never could have done that without what the Futurists were talking about, in terms of motion and energy and dynamism and the worship of the of the electric station and all of that kind of stuff.

Did he have names for this kind of picture?

He did; he had a series of ones and that. Maybe something that's what I would like to do as a scholar someday is to find out all of the ones that he named in in two series. One is a noise series and one is a sound series. [That looks like noise to me.] That looks like noise. We know about sound, about noise number thirteen because that was published in The Dial. We know about sound number five because as I recall that is at Worcester right now with a collection that used to belong to Scofield Thayer. At the Worcester Art Museum. And this I strongly suspect as being one in that series. [So you go by analogy then?] Yeah you really do. Almost all of Cummings' paintings I think are basically representational.

Really? This one?

Well. That's why I said almost. [OK. OK.]

And I guess when I, when you come back to the sound and noise ones you finally say well maybe not. Maybe this is really the attempt, at a visual transcription, of an oral impact of something that hits your ear and you try to do with color and light, you know the sort of the color organizing.

You come from the title perhaps if you if you're sure that's one of the titles work from there. [Well I guess so.]

Yeah. Maybe.

One of the early reviewers, who was being facetious at the time, parodied Cummings' paintings by talking about such titles as 'soft shell crab defending its mother,' which is a marvelous notion all of the - Right - mix up of stuff of course that wasn't one of the titles.

Why do you suppose that he didn't put titles and dates on some of - this is an early one?

That's an early one, yes.

Young artists often are very proud to put their name, dates. [Right, right.] He doesn't.

He doesn't and as I think about it now in terms of what we've just been saying you know it may well have to do with that sense of his being so prolific and never quite knowing whether any of the things that he had were really paintings or sketches. I mean was this something which was finally going to be let out to the public and therefore ought to be a name or was this a test piece for some later piece. [I see.] I don't know whether he himself was ever sure of that.

Maybe so, so busy on the paintings concentrating that he didn't have time to stop and name them.

He'd give them names when he had to, when they went into exhibitions and he started exhibiting in 1919.

But now it's very hard to make the correlation we have the catalogues, exhibition catalogues, and it says well if you're here in the Society of Independent Artist exhibition in 1923 there was you know for Example: Sound Number Four.

But then- Where were one two and three?

Where one two and three? Where is four? Yeah. Where do you find - is that four? Maybe that's four. Right. [Oh, I see, they didn't have it photographed.] They didn't have it photograph. [Maybe that's four.] So who knows?

It might be interesting to compare the second painting with the first. They're very similar and still they're very different. But what do you have to say about this?

Well there of course you get you move away from the purely abstract kind of thing into something that's that really by contrast is quite recognizable. I make that to be about four dancers, nudes. Belly dancers perhaps he had a lot of drawings of them and references to that. What date would that be roughly maybe?

Well I wish I knew. I would I would suspect that that's probably in the very early 20's, maybe '20, maybe '21 before he went to Paris, maybe '19 something like that. He's working in that kind of genre in those periods the thing that interests me about that of course is that it has a lot to do with Picasso's Demoiselles D'Avignon. The whole business of getting a collection of the ladies together in various states of nudity in various relationships to each other and approaching each one in a kind of a different way so you're not just repeating five different forms across the canvas, as Picasso doesn't either. You know goodness you've got one of them upside down in there! [Yes.] You've got that kind of brown arm sweeping up there that. Looks like something out of Gauguin. You've got some very strange things operating in there.

It is an interesting color combination there.

It is and you know that that business you mention the colors on the left hand side, the green against the red. A lot of his, in his unpublished notes there are all kinds of studies that he does about the relationships between complementary colors and what that does to the one color how the how in the presence of its opposite or its complement - one color takes on a lot more brilliance you than the other. Of course that's something that the painters know well but it's the kind of thing that I see him experimenting with a lot of the time he's not willing to take those kinds of things on faith. And he fiddles around with that all the time.

I've heard that painters often deliberately avoid putting the complimentary color side by side but he does it there. The red and the green.

Yeah right. Well of course Matisse does that kind of thing a lot. And that's why I say you can't account for this simply by looking at what cubism was doing. You can in terms of the, well as I say with with then with Demoiselles D'Avignon, but that's such an early cubist piece that that hardly counts but in terms of the flattening of the forms, you can. I mean everything there is brought right up to the surface and there's this constant sense that the painting is overlapping itself. You try to get into that into the background and you find there's something like that white arm across there it keeps pulling you out forward. Yeah it does.

It's as though it's as though the intention is not to build a painting which recedes in space, but which starts with a flat surface and comes out at you. You see what I mean. And that's and you try to trace certain

forms and say Now this is part of the body. And then that part of the body disappears into something just sort of blends itself into something else and you're not quite sure where you are.

When I first look at that picture I see only the design and then I begin to see the four or five dancers and then after I look at it longer I again see only the design.

Right! That's it's interesting you should say that because I think that in many ways that's the thing that Cummings was after. He liked dancers, obviously; he liked the subjects that he was dealing with. But primarily and underneath it all, I think there was a concern for the design, for composition, for how you relate this mass to that mass, how you get your lines going in a certain direction and that you know when you look at his poems that's something going on in there too. Of course he's talking about certain subjects in his poems but what comes out beyond that is all the linguistic interplay. The consciousness that what matters here is the way that words work, as well as what goes on in the outside world where people are.

Now, is there any relationship that you see there between the poems and this painting?

Well... I hesitate to say specifically because I don't think Cummings worked that way. And this I guess what I'm about to say is, is pretty tentative. The one thing that I, that I do know at this point is how much I don't know about all these things. [Yeah.] And I think I'm probably the only one who knows how much I don't know. But what I realized, I think, is that Cummings was good enough at both of these arts to have the choice in the presence of a particular visual or sensory impulse to have the choice of saying I'm going to make this into a poem or I'm going to make this into a painting and having both those areas at his command, I don't think he had to overlap so much. I don't think he ever set about doing a painting of a poem. I think he tended to reserve them for different kinds of things.

One of the interesting experiences I've had in dealing with these paintings and talking with people who know Cummings's work and so on. Is that invariably they expect a correlation between the paintings and the poetry this is even before they've seen that paintings. Yeah. They have in their mind something which corresponds to the typographical experimentation in the poetry and they see some of these paintings and they're taken aback by the fact that as you say he did paintings on one side and the other side he did the poetry and perhaps they were separate they did not bridge- [Right.] -that closely. [Right, well.] And so- [One of the things]- The pictures are not the illustrations of the poems.

No, they're certainly not illustrations of the poems but you know. It is true that he borrowed an awful lot of the technical things from his painting and got that into his poetry and I think that finally is what makes him as important as he is in the twentieth century. I think for example that. In the in the teens in this century the painters, frankly, were way ahead of the poets. When the Armory Show came along, poetry had done nothing like that. [They were first.] Poetry was still kind of lingering along in the fantasy kind of stuff and just the sort of vapid verse, really. The painters had really gone all kinds of --

I recall reading it when they were Armory Show went to Chicago, its biggest boosters where the poets who were gathered around Harriet Monroe

in Poetry Magazine. [Right.] So [Yes they were.] But they were you know, catching up.

You read Poetry Magazine in 1913, I spent some time looking through that. And it really is is by our standards, even by the standards of the 20's and 1925, very pedestrian, very old fashioned. [They had a long distance to go.] They really did and that's the thing. Cummings had the capacity to translate what the Cubists and the Futurists and the Fauves were doing and to first of all bring that into his own painting and then to make that leap into poetry and that put him so far ahead of so many of his contemporaries. When it came to splitting up words and you know dissolving images into different parts and trying to move away from a sense of reception - of recession and depth and a formal field of vision which was meant to imitate something that's out there, you know.

Well now, these are early, OK, they're very abstract and so on. Let's move on to another painting which is quite different. For instance this little love painting over here which is one of Mrs Quackenbush's paintings, lent to us. This is much more representational. [Right.] And probably not too much time occurring between the abstract paintings and this. Do you have some remarks about this painting?

This one, just a single nude. With the red head in the red shoes and all that. It's a shocking kind of painting really it's surprising not so much for what the body of the woman is doing, except that it's sort of sitting there with that kind of come on leer to it. But to all the ways that the colors work in a painting like that. You look at the at the inventiveness, the sheer exuberance I guess of that background. You see in that painting, as you see quite often in a lot of his paintings, a kind of a vertical axis that divides that into two parts. So there's colors and the arrangement of things on the right is a very different sense of what goes on on the left. There are some that are even better at this in that they extend the axis right up to the top of the painting and the background behind the head is also divided that way. But once you get that sense of things, once you realize that Cummings is quite often working on this two-part sort of bipolar distinction in things, you find that in a lot of his poems as well. You find that he quite often works halfway through a poem with one image, shifts in the middle, and gets into something else. Or he's playing two things off against each other, constantly throughout a poem.

So kind of basic correlation, which doesn't show on the surface. [Yeah.] A kind of deep correlation between the writing and the painting.

I think [I mean] that's it. There's of course in this one there is a superficial one there all those poems really early volumes about Fran and Marge and the rest of them.

When would this be done do you suppose?

I would put that in the mid-20's and I can't be more specific than that. That's done I believe on that shirt cardboard. That's the shirt cardboard and you can tell that simply by the shape, eight and a half inches by eighteen inches. Seems to be what the shirts were wrapped in those days. And that is a good clue. [Right that's, that's the clue.] You know. And it was again the red and the green, very raw colors- [Right.] -Splotted there.

And just that sense of - you know, "here I am just kind of boldly sitting there and and what are you going to make of it Mr. Painter?" You know sort of that "how do you like your blue-eyed boy, Mister Death?" That last line of Buffalo Bill is just wham! Here it is!

Here it is. I notice when you get some distance in this painting again it fades into a design.

That's right. Yeah I suppose that's true of all good paintings in a way, isn't it? Like for example of the painting next to that which I find a very interesting thing in all kinds of ways.

Yes, that's very representational. You know you can see every figure in it.

Right. You can you can count up the figures, you can...

Would it be done in the same period?

I think it probably would. I think we're in that sense you see we're coming off that earlier painting that we looked at the one that reminded us of Demoiselles D'Avignon. And we we're coming into the business of the of the dancers, per se. And I guess one thing that one ought of say to frame all this, is that there is a basic progression in Cummings' work from, and this is surprising it was surprising to me to realize it's surprising to a lot of people, from very abstract things at the beginning of his life into a very representational at the end of his life. He turned it in a way that you wouldn't expect an experimentalist to turn. Yeah.

Right. He turned much more towards representation and you find this charted really through the 20's by the end of the 20's he's really pretty much out of his abstract phase and this is nice because it's right it's sort of in the middle here again it's the it's the design and the shapes and the colors that predominate and it's just it's the fun that he has too with, with just sort of images of things like, Toulouse-Lautrec. Where you see that little gray head down in the foreground looking right at actually that appalling color.

There all by itself right front, different from the rest.

Right, there is that that one one of Lautrec's Moulin Rouge paintings, has that vivid sickly green face in about the same position right down at the at the front of the thing. Very strange.

I've seen photographs of the life of the 20's it remind me of this already. Also seen recent movies of the 20's. It seem as if they're imitating this type of thing, with the crowded action in the angles of these dancers.

Right. Right, well he he caught really the sense, and you notice the way he sets his frame? There's no sense here that he has picked out a set piece and put it in its own special context to focus on. He's let the frame lop off the action right, right, part way through.

Where it might extend on either side make it clear that -

You've just got one ear, you see over here on the left of this guy or this I guess this girl over here. You don't know what this girl down in the in the lower right hand corner is up to, and this fellow in front. I suppose he must be dancing with somebody else who's finally so far in front in the painting that you can't see her. It's just this sense that here I am dropped right in the middle of experience. Not crafting the experience the way I want it, but just, wham.

Let's, let's move to a very interesting portrait. Now this one was not identified in the collection. It had no title, no date, anything like that but you tell me this is Scofield Thayer.

Yeah that's Scofield Thayer. I really don't have any question about that for for a couple of reasons. One is that particular cupid's bow mouth that he's got that shows up in you know all of the drawings and all the paintings that are identifiably Thayer. And the other is that raised

left, his left eyebrow. Which is has that kind of point to it. Every time Cummings did him, that's how he came out. And one of the, one of the things that gave me the best clue to this is a series of drawings in the Houghton Library at Harvard, where he begins with a fairly representational sketch of Thayer and then as pages succeed he reduces it to, oh couldn't be more than ten or twelve lines. Just very sketchy. In fact if you didn't have the label Scofield Thayer you wouldn't really be sure that it was supposed to be a portrait of a human face but the things that survive that abstraction are that mouth, the cupid's bow mouth, and that raised eyebrow. [Those are the clues.] And those are really the clues. I think that's what Cummings was focusing on.

When would you say that was done?

I would put that probably in the early 20's. That may be one that Cummings could have done in Paris when he was there in 1922 or 1923 because Thayer was also over there.

Did Cummings know Thayer before Thayer worked on The Dial?

Yes, he had known him at Harvard. They weren't classmates I don't believe but he had known of him there, I suppose through Watson some way. But yes they really came into The Dial, came into the 1920's knowing one another. And Thayer, as I say, was invaluable also in terms of supporting Cummings. There's a letter at one point to Cummings writes home to his mother and says that Thayer has picked out four of my paintings which he really likes for which I am to receive six hundred dollars. Now in those days that's an awful lot of money. [Oh yes we know that!] Well and, for a man who's supporting himself doing nothing but painting and writing that's, that's an invaluable kind of friend.

You wonder out of how many paintings these four were picked.

Yes! Right well there must have been there must have been dozens of them!

Well, you have a letter right now in your exhibition which is a letter that Cummings wrote to Hildegard Watson in 1935 which talks about four or five hundred paintings that I have in crates upstairs here in my apartment. So by that time he had that many. He'd just been going on with... The thing that interests me about this painting is that it's he talks to, in a letter to his father, about his crazy quilt technique. The sort of patchwork business I guess of picking up all kinds of colors and working them into the face. And it's Cubist and yet it isn't, and it's Fauve and yet it isn't. There is so much of the the interplay of colors and yet somehow the whole thing works. Somehow you look at that face and you don't say my gosh how can anybody paint somebody green around a nose like that it looks like he's going to be ill. You don't say that all, you say yes I I see it working against the other colors, I see the sense of depth that's needed there. The sense of coolness and the recession up in the forehead where it's green right below the part and then the redness coming forward above the eye. You see that working and it gels somehow!

We have a picture here which does have a title. The first one we've come to with a name! It's called The Paris Rooftops and this again is slightly different from anything we've seen before. Is this a later painting? That's a later painting that can be pretty clearly identified, although he doesn't identify it on the canvas, as 1933. And here once again from a lot of his other sketches which show this very same scene in Paris. Looking out of his window across the rooves and the sketches that he dates then. What interests me and I think what interested him about this painting was the sky. [Oh yes.] That's really where his heart was. That's what catches your eye when you look at it.

Right. And the rest of it is there in a sense because it has to be but also compositionally because that that balcony kind of leads you back into the painting. But the buildings themselves are really rather drab and not particularly interesting. The light is un-directional and there's no sense of shadows. [The sky is dramatic.] But the sky itself that's where his heart was. [Yes.] That whole business of the of the sunsets and...

You used this in the writing for The Georgia Review.

Yes, I was trying to make a point about that. I was I guess I was trying to warn myself and other people off the quick assumption that one can make a connection between poems and paintings. Because people seem to want to take this painting and connect it with a poem that first appeared in 1925 which is entitled "Paris; This April sunset" and it goes on from there and is talking about the colors. It's full of the colors like mauve and reds and violets and things, and it describes what that sunset is doing. But. After all the very fact that you have a poet who is willing to talk in a poem about something which he also does in a painting. That's no grounds to say that there is any kind of parallel between the two. I think some of the things we've touched on earlier about the structural relations here are much more significant than simply some kind of a superficial relationship based on subject matter alone that would connect this to some other poem.

Well then he had two residencies in Paris the 20's, early in the 20's, in this residency.

Well he had a number of them actually. He kept going back. Right. And some of his most interesting letters, I suppose because he had the time to write them, are written aboard ship as he would go back and forth in those days. Writing home to his parents about what he was doing. And that can be pretty well traced because of the letters, that the chronology is pretty clear in there. This one, he was in Paris having won a Guggenheim in 1933. Which he immediately took and went to he went to Paris with and spent the time, as near as I can tell, probably mostly painting and doing some of the writing.

Do you know, would this be a view from his studio window or would he position himself somewhere where this...?

No, I think I think as I recall from his sketches this is a view from his studio window. And I say that because there are a number of sketches from the Paris days that back up and show you the frame of the window, you see. And then back again further and you go inside of the apartment with that very sky scape and the large cathedral which I think is probably Notre Dame. Although I'm not sure.

That's where it pays to be familiar with a great number of his works and sketches, paintings.

It does indeed and that's one of the, one of the valuable things about that record. One of the things that I found most useful in fact about the sketches is that even the ones that can't be dated you can often get a good guess at because of the watermark of the paper that he was using to sketch on. And I guess my assumption has been that nobody who sketches as much as Cummings does pays a great deal of attention to where he buys his paper and he certainly never tries to buy the same kind and he probably uses up a ream paper before he goes out and buys another. So for example you, when you get several of the sheets with that watermark, that have a date on them I think you can be pretty confident that most of the stuff on that watermark is from those years. [Detective work.] Well yeah and



it's been helpful for me to make that connection and to make a list of about. I've got a list of some 25 or 30 water marks that show up in the Houghton Library that are really helpful.

It interests me that in this, the painting of the Paris rooftops, his color is so much more gentle than anything we've looked. Almost pastel-y. Even the reds are gone, you have the orange roof there, I believe it's a roof.

Well he knew and was working consciously with the Cézanne's palette and you see that coming up in the orange and the green in there, in the middle of that that painting for example. And he was generally I think as he went along he was getting away from some of the earlier wilder, colorful things.

Well, we have this this rather stormy but maybe essentially rather gentle sky at the same time, let's look at another sky here we have a really exuberance sky. It's a sunset, right? [A sunset.] Where is that happening?

That's happening behind Mount Chocorua, which is the main the sort of blue point there right underneath the prominent lines of the of the sunset. The gray stuff above that is the lowest layer of cloud I take it. And then above that is all the pyrotechnics of that, of the sunset. [Pyrotechnic is the right word there.] Well it really is a, they were apparently just spectacular sunsets. Cummings had a summer place in New Hampshire which had been in the family, really since he was about six. It was called Joy Farm by the mere accident of the fact that had been owned by the Joy family before they bought it, but it was of course a perfectly fitting name for it. [Oh, it was a Joy family that was?] An accessory, yes.

I see. It was called Joy Farm. It was high up on a hill and it commanded this very view of Mount Chocorua in the White Mountains. And Cummings would go there usually in May and he would leave in October. It was unheated, of course, and the water froze in the winter if you left it on, so he couldn't stay there all winter.

And he split his career pretty much for almost all of the years of his life from about 1930 on between about six months in New York in his apartment there and six months at Joy Farm. Friends who visited him said he had two rules when they came to visit Joy Farm. One was that you had to be back on the porch of Joy Farm at sunset because the sunset was just so spectacular. And the other one was that no matter what was going on in the conversation among friends at ten o'clock, promptly, Cummings would get up an excuse himself. He didn't care who stayed. You could stay and talk as long as you wanted but he had work to do and he would take himself off to his study and he'd begin doing that work he would write then journals, poems, whatever he was doing, for the next four hours or so go to bed very late, very early in the morning. Sleep most of the way through the morning, get up and spend the daylight hours painting. And that was the schedule that he evolved that's why I'm so sure when you say is that a sunset- [Yes.] -I can say yeah that's that's no sunrise not only because- [You know the direction.] -You know the direction you know enough of Cummings habits to know that he probably didn't see too many sunrises in his life.

You know I think a sunset must be one of the most difficult and dangerous things for a painter to undertake. You have this explosion of color and what do you do with it, without getting out of control? And this is I was just on the borderline in my thinking. I think that's right. Anymore

fireworks would be too much. [Right.] You know, beautiful, beautifully expressive picture. Right. I think he contains it so nicely with that piece of blue right up in the left that sense of a frame almost creeping in the way John Marin would use it. [Quiets it somehow.] To shrink things in. [Caps the-] It does, and it holds it together in a way that that without that it would simply get lost it would kind of explode off the, off the paper I guess. It's a difficult thing to do because he's got to work so rapidly to get the color by the time he lays his first color on the tints have changed in what he's looking at and it's a challenge to get back to it. So that he was at Joy Farm in the summer for most of his life?

For most of his life, yes.

Is that where he died?

That's where he died in 1962, yeah. And a number of his later poems of course pick that up; in fact you can almost figure by some of his subjects where he was when he was writing the poem. A lot of them are winter poems. Obviously New York kind of poems, city poems, poems about people, satires quite often. Things that are slightly unpleasant. A lot of the later summer poems are animal poems, poems about porcupines, and blue jays and things like that.

~~[So you know that's Joy Farm.]~~ And you know that's what he's doing. He's looking right out his porch and there's a porcupine and that's the thing that starts the thinking process.

He mentions that in this letters too, he's seen the porcupine, or he's seen the beaver, or whatever. Right, yeah. You know.

He had a tremendously affectionate relationship with-

We have none of his and I have seen his animal paintings. Did he do animal paintings?

He didn't really, no. He did, well, he did a lot when he was very very young, when it was a little child. But as far as I know I think of any animal paintings that he did except he may have done some portraits. He did a lot of portrait work. Sort of the way Renoir painted dogs and things like that, he may have done.

What's become of Joy Farm?

Joy Farm has become a National Landmark a matter of fact. It is still a private home.

Is it preserved?

No, it's not, not essentially. It's a private home but it has that designation of being a National Landmark. I don't know what that...

It's privately owned but-

It's a privately owned place and I don't know what that implies. Have you visited there?

Yes.

I've seen the- unfortunately, the day I was there was a terribly foggy day and I never got a look at Chocorua, but I've seen the setting and the old well sweep in all of that.

Do you happen to know, is it changed much or?

I don't think it has, I don't think there, I don't think the people who own it are consciously trying to preserve what Cummings had but they know the value of it and one of their, one of the things they struggle with I think is a lot of people who come and try to find it and want to see it and all that. And they they like to have their privacy, so I think they try to preserve it that way.

Well let's move uh, indoors to this final painting that we have here is an interior, obviously. It has that window, flowers, a hat on the table, buildings. Is this moving us back to New York?

This is moving us back to New York. I'm pretty sure that's painted from his Patchin Place address. He had a house on Patchin Place, which is a little cul de sac down in Greenwich Village. And apparently owned the whole, where he rented the whole business right from top to bottom and the top studio the top floor was his studio. Where apparently very few people went. Not even Marion very often as I as I understand it. And that's where he did a lot of his painting during the winter and he did such a bunch of painting, there's a, in one period I think it's in the 40's. He is, he takes to dating everything as I said in that period and there are- There is one month when if you just check the dates of the paintings that you know exist he must have been producing at least one a day. Almost every day, you can find it.

Oil paintings?

Oil paintings.

That's right.

That's fantastic.

And he puts like March 12th on one and March 14th on another and so forth. And just constantly going, going through the bunch. [Working all day long.] Steadily. Working all day long I would think and then probably once again reserve in the evenings for his writing.

This would be his hat in the painting?

That's his hat in the painting. That hat, last time I knew, it was for sale at the Gotham Book Mart.

What about the table?

I don't know about the table, and the flowers no doubt are gone. But you remember the title of his first book of poems? Tulips and Chimneys. Yes. And all of the contrasts that that implies [Oh, yes.] between flowers and between pleasant natural things and hard man made things. Between colorful things and drab things; between something that that suggests reproductive capacity I mean I thought the flowers is what's going to produce the seed. And something which suggests just getting rid of all the junk that society doesn't want blowing it up the chimney. All of those kinds of things are implied I think right here. But what interests me about this painting is the almost conscious attempt to work against several other artists. There's a Cézanne painting which is very much like this there, are some Van Gogh traces in his outlining of things. And of course Cézanne would have liked the way I think that hat doesn't sit on the table. There's no way when you extend the curve of that table around that that hat's going to stay there. It's going to fall off. [Yes, I've been waiting for it to drop.] Right! That's it. And that's a, maybe that's a good way to end, with this particular painting. Cummings has that marvelous comment that he pencils into a bunch of unpublished notes at Harvard where he says, Cézanne did not paint the visual aspect of lemons. He painted the noise each lemon would make if it fell off the table. Painting the noise of the thing. Yeah.

What strikes me about this painting is that the colors are all rather muted, quite muted. [Right.] Except for some things in the foreground. The thing that really impresses you, catches your eye, and I'm sure it must have intended, is the bunch of flowers that you almost want to reach out and embrace. [Sure.] And makes me think of his use of flowers in the poems to represent youth and springtime and love. Notice that all the good things in Cummings are connected somehow with flowers in the season of flowers. And I don't know

whether this is a winter painting... It must be an early spring I would guess.

It was early spring I would think. Those are tulips.

Yeah, uh, he's brought in flowers indoors to capture that feeling of life in the broad sense, exuberance. Everything that he ties up with the with the, uh, tulips and the iris, whatever this is here. Roses I think?

Well it's... I guess that brings us back to where we started, with the notion of Cummings as somebody who really knew how to be joyful in his poetry. Apparently in his life as well and and certainly in his paintings. Just that sense of brilliance.

It comes through, doesn't it?

It really does.

So you can find these correlations even though you can't say this this painting and this poem are matches to each other. You can say the essential Cummings is coming through here just as it comes through these poems.

Sure.

And even with the great variety that we've seen here. Yeah.

This is probably an appropriate spot for us to finish. Thank you very much, Rush Kidder, for being with us today on the Writers Forum.

Thank you, Phil.

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