

i & my parents

Nonlecture One

Let me cordially warn you, at the opening of these so-called lectures, that I haven't the remotest intention of posing as a lecturer. Lecturing is presumably a form of teaching; and presumably a teacher is somebody who knows. I never did, and still don't, know. What has always fascinated me is not teaching, but learning; and I assure you that if the acceptance of a Charles Eliot Norton professorship hadn't rapidly entangled itself with the expectation of learning a very great deal, I should now be somewhere else. Let me also assure you that I feel extremely glad to be here; and that I heartily hope you won't feel extremely sorry.

Ever since many of you didn't exist I've been learning and relearning, as a writer and as a painter, the significance of those immemorial maxims "one man's meat is another man's poison" and "you can lead the mare to water but you can't make her drink." Now-as a nonlecturer-I am luckily confronted by that equally ancient, but far less austere, dictum "it's an ill wind which blows nobody good." For while a genuine lecturer must obey the rules of mental decency, and clothe his personal idiosyncrasies in collectively acceptable generalities, an authentic ignoramus remains quite indecently free to speak as he feels. This prospect cheers me, because I value freedom; and have never expected freedom to be anything less than indecent. The very fact that a burlesk addict of long standing (who has many times worshipped at the shrine of progressive corporeal revelation) finds himself on the verge of attempting an aesthetic striptease, strikes me as a quite remarkable manifestation of poetic justice; and reinforces my conviction that since I can't tell you what I know (or rather what I don't know) there's nothing to prevent me from trying to tell you who I am-which I'd deeply enjoy doing.

But who am I? Or rather-since my drawing and painting self concerns you not at all-who is my other self, the self of the prose and of the poetry? Here I perceive a serious problem; as well as an excellent chance to learn something. There'd be no problem, of course, if I subscribed to the hyperscientific doctrine that heredity is nothing because everything is environment; or if (having swallowed this supersleepingpill) I envisaged the future of so-called mankind as a permanent pastlessness, prenatally enveloping semi-identical supersubmorons in perpetual nonhappiness. Rightly or wrongly, however, I prefer spiritual insomnia to psychic suicide. The hellless hell of compulsory heaven-on-earth emphatically isn't my pail of blueberries. By denying the past, which I respect, it negates the future-and I love the future. Consequently for me an autobiographical problem is an actuality.

Inspecting my autobiographical problem at close range, I see that it comprises two problems; united by a certain wholly mysterious moment which signifies self-discovery. Until this mysterious moment, I am only incidentally a writer: primarily I am the son of my parents and whatever is happening to him. After this moment, the question "who am I?" is answered by what I write-in other words, I become my writing; and my autobiography becomes the exploration of my stance as a writer. Two questions now make their appearance. The first-what constitutes this writing of mine?-can be readily answered: my writing consists of a pair of miscalled novels; a brace of plays, one in prose, the other in blank verse; nine books of poems; an indeterminate number of essays; an untitled volume of satire, and a ballet scenario. The second question-where, in all this material, do I find my stance as a writer most clearly expressed?-can be answered almost as readily: I find it expressed most clearly in the later miscalled novel, the two plays, perhaps twenty poems, and half a dozen of the essays. Very well; I shall build the second part of my autobiography around this prose and this poetry, allowing (wherever possible) the prose and the poetry to speak for themselves. But the first part of my autobiography presents a problem of another order entirely. To solve that problem, I must create a long-lost personage-my parents' son-and his vanished world. How can I do this? I don't know; and because I don't know, I shall make the attempt. Having made the attempt, I shall tackle my second problem. If either attempt fails, I shall at least have tried. And if both attempts succeed, I shall (by some miracle) have achieved the impossible. For then-and only then-will you and I behold an aesthetic self-portrait of one whole half of this and no other indivisible ignoramus As Is.

Some, if not most, of the distinguished members of this enlightened audience are now (I suspect) internally exclaiming "alas. We come here expecting that a poet will lecture on poetry; and the very first thing the so-called poet does is to tell us he hasn't the slightest intention of doing so. Next, the so-called poet indulges in a lot of pretty corny backtracking; all of which proves exactly nothing, unless it's that as a draughtsman he doesn't know his gluteus maximus from his olecranon. Finally (adding injury to insult) the so-called poet graciously announces that we may expect him to favor us with a description of his prepoetic career, and then-as if this weren't bad enough-with

a bevy of largely prosaic tidbits which have occasionally escaped him in the course of the last three decades: because only in this manner can he possibly understand who he is today. Why in the name of common sense doesn't the poet (so-called) read us some poetry-any poetry; even his own-and tell us what he thinks or doesn't think of it? Is the so-called poet a victim of galloping egocentricity or is he just plain simpleminded?"

My immediate response to such a question would be: and why not both? But supposing we partially bury the hatchet and settle for egocentricity-who, if I may be so inconsiderate as to ask, isn't egocentric? Half a century of time and several continents of space, in addition to a healthily developed curiosity, haven't yet enabled me to locate a single peripherally situated ego. Perhaps I somehow simply didn't meet the right people, and vice versa. At any rate, my slight acquaintance with senators pickpockets and scientists leads me to conclude that they are far from unselfcentred. So, I believe, are all honest educators. And so (I'm convinced) are streetcleaners deafmutes murderers mothers, mountainclimbers cannibals fairies, strong men beautiful women unborn babes international spies, ghostwriters bums business executives, out and out nuts cranks dopefiends policemen, altruists (above all) ambulancechasers obstetricians and liontamers. Not forgetting morticians-as undertakers (in this epoch of universal culture) prefer to denominate themselves. Or, as my friend the distinguished biographer M R Werner once subrosafullly remarked, over several biscuit dubbouches "when you come right down to it, everybody's the whole boxoftricks to himself; whether she believes it or not."

Now let me make you a strictly egocentric proposition. Assuming that a so-called lecture lasts fifty minutes, I hereby solemnly swear to devote the last fifteen minutes of each and every lecture to nothing but poetry-and (what's more) poetry for which I am in no way whatever responsible. This will leave me only thirty-five minutes of any lecture to chatter unpoetically about myself; or (now and again) to read part of a poem-perhaps an entire poem of my own. The unpoetical chattering will begin with my parents and proceed to their son, will touch upon selfdiscovery; and then (at nonlecture number four) will shift to an exploration of EECummings' stance as a writer. By contrast, the poetry readings will run clean through all six lectures; forming a strictly amateur anthology, or collection of poetry which for no reason or unreason I dearly love. In the course of my six halfhours of egocentricity I shall (among other deeds) discuss the difference between fact and truth, I shall describe professor Royce and the necktie crisis, I shall name professor Charles Eliot Norton's coachman, and I shall define sleep. If you ask "but why include trivialities?" my answer will be: what are they? During my six fifteenminute poetry readings, I shall only try to read poetry as well as I don't know how. If you object "but why not criticize as well?" I shall quote very briefly from a wonderful book, whose acquaintance I first made through a wonderful friend named Hildegarde Watson-a book whose English title is Letters To A Young Poet, and whose author is the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing to be so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them.

In my proud and humble opinion, those two sentences are worth all the soi-disant criticism of the arts which has ever existed or will ever exist. Disagree with them as much as you like, but never forget them; for if you do, you will have forgotten the mystery which you have been, the mystery which you shall be, and the mystery which you are-

*so many selves(so many fiends and gods
each greedier than every)is a man
(so easily one in another hides;
yet man can,being all,escape from none)*

*so huge a tumult is the simplest wish:
so pitiless a massacre the hope
most innocent(so deep's the mind of flesh
and so awake what waking calls asleep)*

*so never is most lonely man alone
(his briefest breathing lives some planet's year,
his longest life's a heartbeat of some sun;
his least unmotion roams the youngest star)
-how should a fool that calls him "I" presume
to comprehend not numerable whom?*

And thus we arrive at the parents of a longlost personage, who is these parents' child.

By way of describing my father, let me quote a letter and tell you a story. The letter was written by me to my good friend Paul Rosenfeld; who used it in an essay which graced the fifth number of that ambiguously entitled periodical *The Harvard Wake*:

*I wot not how to answer your query about my father. He was a New Hampshire man, 6 foot 2, a crack shot & a famous fly-fisherman & a firstrate sailor (his sloop was named *The Actress*) & a woodsman who could find his way through forests primeval without a compass & a canoeist who'd stillpaddle you up to a deer without ruffling the surface of a pond & an ornithologist & taxidermist & (when he gave up hunting) an expert photographer (the best I've ever seen) & an actor who portrayed Julius Caesar in Sanders Theatre & a painter (both in oils & watercolours) & a better carpenter than any professional & an architect who designed his own houses before building them & (when he liked) a plumber who just for the fun of it installed all his own waterworks & (while at Harvard) a teacher with small use for professors-by whom (Royce, Lanman, Taussig, etc.) we were literally surrounded (but not defeated)-& later (at Doctor Hale's socalled South Congregational really Unitarian church) a preacher who announced, during the last war, that the Gott Mit Uns boys were in error since the only thing which mattered was for man to be on God's side (& one beautiful Sunday in Spring remarked from the pulpit that he couldn't understand why anyone had come to hear him on such a day) & horribly shocked his pewholders by crying "the Kingdom of Heaven is no spiritual roofgarden: it's inside you" & my father had the first telephone in Cambridge & (long before any Model T Ford) he piloted an Orient Buckboard with Friction Drive produced by the Waltham watch company & my father sent me to a certain public school because its principal was a gentle immense coalblack negress & when he became a diplomat (for World Peace) he gave me & my friends a tremendous party up in a tree at Sceaux Robinson & my father was a servant of the people who fought Boston's biggest & crookedest politician fiercely all day & a few evenings later sat down with him cheerfully at the Rotary Club & my father's voice was so magnificent that he was called on to impersonate God speaking from Beacon Hill (he was heard all over the common) & my father gave me Plato's metaphor of the cave with my mother's milk.*

This, I feel, is an accurate sketch of Edward Cummings, Harvard '83-except as regards his neighbourliness. He certainly had "small use for professors" in general; but with the particular professors around him his relations were nearly always amicable and in certain cases affectionate. The neighbour whom my father unquestionably preferred was William James; and it's odd that I should have forgotten to mention so true a friend and so great a human being. Not only is it odd: it's ungrateful-since I may be said to owe my existence to professor James, who introduced my father to my mother.

Now for the story.

Thirty-five years ago, a soiled envelope with a French stamp on it arrived at 104 Irving Street, Cambridge. The envelope contained a carefully phrased scrawl; stating (among other things) that I was interned in a certain concentration camp, with a fine friend named Brown whom I'd met on the boat going to France-he, like myself, having volunteered as an ambulance driver with Messers Norton (not Charles Eliot) and Harjes. Immediately my father-than whom no father on this earth ever loved or ever will love his son more profoundly-cabled his friend Norton; but Mr Norton hadn't even missed us, and consequently could do less than nothing. Next, through a mere but loyal acquaintance, my father set the American army on our trail; forcefully stipulating that my friend and I must be rescued together. Many days passed. Suddenly the telephone rangtop brass demanding Reverend Edward Cummings. "Hello" my father said. "This is Major Soandso" an angry voice sputtered. "That friend of your son is no damned good. May even be a spy. Unpatriotic anyhow. He deserves what's coming to him. Do you understand?" "I understand" said my deeply patriotic father. "We won't touch Brown" the sputter continued so it's your son or nothing. And I guarantee that your son alone will be out of that hellhole in five days-what do you say about that?" "I say" replied my father "don't bother." And he hung up.

Incidentally, the major bothered; and as a result, my friend Slater Brown is also alive.

Let me only add that while my father was speaking with the American army, my mother was standing beside him; for these two wonderful human beings, my father and my mother, loved each other more than themselves-

*if there are any heavens my mother will(all by herself)have
one. It will not be a pansy heaven or
a fragile heaven of lilies-of-the-valley but
it will be a heaven of blackred roses*

*my father will be(deep like a rose
tall like a rose)*

standing near my

*(swaying over her
silent)
with eyes which are really petals and see*

*nothing with the face of a poet really which
is a flower and not a face with
hands
which whisper
This is my beloved my*

(suddenly in sunlight

he will bow,

and the whole garden will bow)

-as for me, I was welcomed as no son of any king and queen was ever welcomed. Here was my joyous fate and my supreme fortune. If somehow a suggestion of this illimitable blessing should come to you from me, my existence here and now would be justified: otherwise,-anything I may say to you will have not the slightest significance. For as surely as each November has its April, mysteries only are significant; and one mystery-of-mysteries creates them all:

*nothing false and possible is love
(who's imagined,therefore limitless)
love's to giving as to keeping's give;
as yes is to if,love is to yes*

I shall not attempt a description of my mother. But let me try to give you a few glimpses of the most amazing person I've ever met. She came of highly respectable Roxbury stock: so highly respectable (indeed) that one of her distinguished forbears, the Reverend Pitt Clarke, withdrew his grown son by the ear from what we should consider a painfully decorous dance. Nor did Clarke respectability stop there. When my mother's father, who was in business with his father-in-law, affixed (on one occasion) the latter's name to a cheque, that worthy not only sent his son-in-law to the Charles Street jail but obliterated his name from the family archives. My mother told me that all during her childhood she supposed that her father had been hanged. She also assured me that she grew up a shy-or (as we now say) neurotic-girl; who had to be plucked from under sofas whenever friends came to call; and this statement I found almost unbelievable, though she could no more have told a lie than flown over the housetop. For never have I encountered anyone more joyous, anyone healthier in body and mind, anyone so quite incapable of remembering a wrong, or anyone so completely and humanly and unaffectedly generous. Whereas my father had created his Unitarianism (his own father being a Christian of the hellfire variety) she had inherited hers; it was an integral part of herself, she expressed it as she breathed and as she smiled. The two indispensable factors in life, my mother always maintained, were "health and a sense of humor." And although her health eventually failed her, she kept her sense of humor to the beginning.

It isn't often you meet a true heroine. I have the honour to be a true heroine's son. My father and mother were

coming up from Cambridge to New Hampshire, one day, in their newly purchased automobile-an aircooled Franklin, with an ash frame. As they neared the Ossipees, snow fell. My mother was driving; and, left to herself, would never have paused for such a trifle as snow. But as the snow increased, my father made her stop while he got out and wiped the windshield. Then he got in; and she drove on. Some minutes later, a locomotive cut the car in half, killing my father instantly. When two brakemen jumped from the halted train, they saw a woman standing dazed but erect-beside a mangled machine; with blood "spouting" (as the older said to me) out of her head. One of her hands (the younger added) kept feeling of her dress, as if trying to discover why it was wet. These men took my sixty-six year old mother by the arms and tried to lead her toward a nearby farmhouse; but she threw them off, strode straight to my father's body, and directed a group of scared spectators to cover him. When this had been done (and only then) she let them lead her away.

A day later, my sister and I entered a small darkened room in a country hospital. She was still alive, -why, the head doctor couldn't imagine. She wanted only one thing: to join the person she loved most. He was very near her, but she could not quite reach him. We spoke, and she recognized our voices. Gradually her own voice began to understand what its death would mean to these living children of hers; and very gradually a miracle happened. She decided to live. "There's something wrong with my head" she kept telling us faintly; and she didn't mean the fracture of her skull. As days and nights passed, we accidentally discovered that this ghastly wound had been sewn up by candlelight when all the town lights went out at once. But the head doctor had no intention of losing his patient-"move her?" he cried "impossible! It would kill her just to sit up, and several centuries wandered away before we found a method of overruling him. When the ambulance arrived, ready to transfer my mother to a big Boston hospital, she was sitting up (fully dressed and smiling) by the entrance-door. She admired the ambulance, conversed cheerfully with its chauffeur, and refused to lie down because by so doing she'd miss the scenery en route. We shot through towns and tore through cities. "I like going fast" she told us; beaming. At last came the goal. After an interminable time in an operating room-where (we learned later) she insisted on watching in a hand mirror whatever was happening, while a great brain-surgeon removed a piece of bone and carefully cleansed the wound-up came my mother in a wheelchair; very erect, and waving triumphantly a small bottle in which (at her urgent request) he'd placed the dirt and grime and splinters of whose existence his predecessor had been blissfully unaware. "You see?" she cried to us, smiling "I was right!"

And, though the wound had later to be reopened, she came out of that hospital in record time; recovered completely at home in a few months-attending, now and then, a nearby meeting of The Society of Friends-then boarded a train alone for New York, and began working as a volunteer for the Travellers' Aid in the Grand Central Station. "I'm tough!" was her dauntless comment when we tried to express our amazement and our joy.

My mother loved poetry; and copied most of the poems she loved best into a little book which was never far from her.

i & their son

Nonlecture Two

You will perhaps pardon me, as a nonlecturer, if I begin my second nonlecture with an almost inconceivable assertion: I was born at home.

For the benefit of those of you who can't imagine what the word "home" implies, or what a home could possibly have been like, I should explain that the idea of home is the idea of privacy. But again-what is privacy? You probably never heard of it. Even supposing that (from time to time) walls exist around you, those walls are no longer walls; they are merest pseudo solidities, perpetually penetrated by the perfectly predatory collective organs of sight and sound. Any apparent somewhere which you may inhabit is always at the mercy of a ruthless and omnivorous everywhere. The notion of a house, as one single definite particular and unique place to come into, from the anywhereish and everywhereish world outside-that notion must strike you as fantastic. You have been brought up to believe that a house, or a universe, or a you, or any other object, is only seemingly

solid: really (and you are realists, whom nobody and nothing can deceive) each seeming solidity is a collection of large holes-and, in the case of a house, the larger the holes the better; since the principal function of a modern house is to admit whatever might otherwise remain outside. You haven't the least or feeblest conception of being here, and now, and alone, and yourself. Why (you ask) should anyone want to be here, when (simply by pressing a button) anyone can be in fifty places at once? How could anyone want to be now, when anyone can go whening all over creation at the twist of a knob? What could induce anyone to desire aloneness, when billions of soi-disant dollars are mercifully squandered by a good and great government lest anyone anywhere should ever for a single instant be alone? As for being yourself- why on earth should you be yourself; when instead of being yourself you can be a hundred, or a thousand, or a hundred thousand thousand, other people? The very thought of being oneself in an epoch of interchangeable selves must appear supremely ridiculous.

Fine and dandy: but, so far as I am concerned, poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality. If poetry were anything-like dropping an atombomb-which anyone did, anyone could become a poet merely by doing the necessary anything; whatever that anything might or might not entail. But (as it happens) poetry is being, not doing. If you wish to follow, even at a distance, the poet's calling (and here, as always, I speak from my own totally biased and entirely personal point of view) you've got to come out of the measurable doing universe into the immeasurable house of being. I am quite aware that, wherever our so-called civilization has slithered, there's every reward and no punishment for unbeing. But if poetry is your goal, you've got to forget all about punishments and all about rewards and all about self-styled obligations and duties and responsibilities etcetera ad infinitum and remember one thing only: that it's you-nobody else-who determine your destiny and decide your fate. Nobody else can be alive for you; nor can you be alive for anybody else. Toms can be Dicks and Dicks can be Harrys, but none of them can ever be you. There's the artist's responsibility; and the most awful responsibility on earth. If you can take it, take it-and be. If you can't, cheer up and go about other people's business; and do (or undo) till you drop.

My own home faced the Cambridge world as a finely and solidly constructed mansion, preceded by a large oval lawn and ringed with an imposing white-pine hedge. Just in front of the house itself stood two huge apple-trees; and faithfully, every spring, these giants lifted their worlds of fragrance toward the room where I breathed and dreamed. Under one window of this room flourished (in early summer) a garden of magnificent roses: the gift of my parents' dear friend "stubby" Child-who (I-learned later) baptized me and who (I still later discovered) was the Child of English And Scottish Ballads. As a baby, I sported a White sweater; on which my mother had embroidered a red H, for Harvard.

Our nearest neighbour, dwelling (at a decent distance) behind us, was Roland Thaxter; primarily the father of my loveliest playmate and ultimately the professor of cryptogamic botany. To our right, on Irving Street, occurred professors James and Royce and Warren; to our left, on Scott Street, transpired professor of economics Taussig. Somewhat back of the Taussig house happened professor Lanman-"known and loved throughout India" as my mother would say, with a pensive smile. She had been slightly astonished by an incident which embellished her official introduction to Mr and Mrs Lannian: the celebrated Sanscrit scholar having, it seems, seized his would-be interlocutor's hand, yanked her aside, and violently whispered "do you see anything peculiar about my wife?"-then (without giving my mother time to reply) "she has new shoes on" professor Lanman hissed "and they hurt her!" I myself experienced astonishment when first witnessing a spectacle which frequently thereafter repeated itself at professor Royce's gate. He came rolling peacefully forth, attained the sidewalk, and was about to turn right and wander up Irving, when Mrs Royce shot out of the house with a piercing cry "Josie! josie!" waving something stringlike in her dexter fist. Mr Royce politely paused, allowing his spouse to catch up with him; he then shut both eyes, while she snapped around his collar a narrow necktie possessing a permanent bow; his eyes thereupon opened, he bowed, she smiled, he advanced, she retired, and the scene was over. As for professor Taussig, he had a cocker spaniel named Hamlet; and the Taussig family always put Hamlet out when they played their pianola-no doubt the first law of economics-but Hamlet's hearing was excellent, and he yodelled heartrendingly as long as the Hungarian Rhapsody persisted. Genial professor Warren's beautiful wife (whose own beautiful name was Salome Machado) sometimes came to call on my maternal grandmother; and Salome always brought her guitar. I remember sitting spellbound on our upstairs porch among apple-blossoms, one heavenly spring afternoon, adoring the quick slim fingers of Salome Machado's exquisite left hand-and I further remember how, as Salome sang and played, a scarlet tanager alighted in the blossoms; and listened, and disappeared.

One of the many wonderful things about a home is that it can be as lively as you please without ever becoming

public. The big Cambridge house was in this respect, as in all other respects, a true home. Although I could be entirely alone when I wished, a varied social life awaited me whenever aloneness palled. A father and mother-later' a sister-two successive grandmothers and an aunt (all three of whom sang, or played the piano, or did both, extremely well) and one uncle, plus three or four hearty and jovial servants, were at my almost unlimited disposal. The servants-and this strikes me as a more than important point-very naturally enjoyed serving: for they were not ignobly irresponsible impersons, they were not shamelessly overpaid and mercilessly manipulated anonymities, they were not pampered and impotent particles of a greedy and joyless collective obscenity. In brief. they were not slaves. Actually, these good and faithful servants (of whom I speak) were precisely everything which no slave can ever be-they were alive; they were loved and loving human beings. From them, a perfect ignoramus could and did learn what any unworld will never begin to begin to so much as suspect: that slavery, and the only slavery, is service without love.

After myself and my father and mother, I loved most dearly my mother's brother George. He was by profession a lawyer, by inclination a bon vivant, and by nature a joyous human being. When this joyous human being wasn't toiling in his office, or hobnobbing with socalled swells at the Brookline country club, he always became my playfellow. No more innocently goodhearted soul ever kissed the world goodnight; but when it came to literature, bloodthirsty was nothing to him. And (speaking of bloodthirstiness) I here devoutly thank a beneficent Providence for allowing me to live my childhood and my boyhood and even my youth without ever once glimpsing that typical item of an era of at least penultimate confusion-the uncomic nonbook. No paltry supermen, no shadowy space-cadets, no trifling hyperjunglequeens and pantless pantherwomen insulted my virginal imagination. I read or was read, at an early age, the most immemorial myths, the wildest wild animal stories, lots of Scott and quantities of Dickens (including the immortal Pickwick Papers), Robinson Crusoe and The Swiss Family Robinson, Gulliver's Travels, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea, poetry galore, The Holy Bible, and The Arabian Nights. One city winter I floated through chivalry with Mallory and Froissart: the following country summer-we had by then acquired a farm-I dressed as a Red Indian, slept in a teepee, and almost punctured our best Jersey cow with a random arrow; in emulation of the rightful inhabitants of my wrongful native land.

A gruesome history of the Tower Of London had been conscientiously compiled by a prominent British prelate, endowed with what would now be termed sadistic trends; and suddenly this fearful opus burgeoned in our midst. Every night after dinner, if George were on deck, he would rub his hands and wink magnificently in my direction and call to my maiden aunt "Jane, let's have some ruddy gore!" whereupon Jane would protestingly join us in the parlour; and George would stealthily produce the opus; and she would blushfully read; and I would cling to the sofa in exquisite terror. We also read-for sheer relaxation-Lorna Doone (with whom I fell sublimely in love) and Treasure Island (as a result of which, the blind pirate Pew followed me upstairs for weeks; while for months, if not years, onelegged John Silver stood just behind me as my trembling fingers fumbled the electric light chain).

Out of Brookline's already mentioned country club, I readily conjured a gorgeous and dangerous play-world: somewhat resembling the three ring circus of the five Ringling brothers; and dedicated by dashing gentlemen to fair ladies and fine horses and other entrancing symbols of luxurious living. George had not been bom into this fashionable cosmos, but he loved it so much that he learned to smoke cigars: and if he hadn't learned anything, the cosmos would certainly have welcomed him for his own abundant self's sake. His own abundant self wrote vers de societe; which he recited at orgies or banquets-I was never sure which-but also, for my benefit, chez lui. And no sooner had George discovered my liking for verse than he presented me with an inestimable treasure entitled The Rhymester-opening which totally unostentatious masterpiece, I entered my third poetic period.

Poetic period number one had been nothing if not individualistic; as two almost infantile couplets, combining fearless expression with keen observation, amply testify. The first of these primeval authenticities passionately exclaims

*O, the pretty birdie, O;
with his little toe, toe, toe!*

while the second mercilessly avers

*there was a little farder
and he made his mudder harder*

but, alas! a moribund mental cloud soon obscured my vital psychic sky. The one and only thing which mattered about any poem (so ran my second poetic period's credo) was what the poem said; it's so-called meaning. A good poem was a poem which did good, and a bad poem was a poem which didn't: Julia Ward Howe's Battle Hymn Of The Republic being a good poem because it helped free the slaves. Armed with this ethical immutability, I composed canticles of comfort on behalf of the griefstricken relatives of persons recently deceased; I implored healthy Christians to assist poor-whites afflicted with The Curse Of The Worm (short for hookworm); and I exhorted rightminded patriots to abstain from dangerous fireworks on the 4th of July. Thus it will be seen that, by the year i gooo, one growing American boy had reached exactly that stage of "intellectual development" beyond which every ungrowing Marxist adult of today is strictly forbidden, on pain of physical disappearance, ever to pass.

The Rhymester diverted my eager energies from what to how: from substance to structure. I learned that there are all kinds of intriguing verse-forms, chiefly French; and that each of these forms can and does exist in and of itself, apart from the use to which you or I may not or may put it. A rondel is a rondel, irrespective of any idea which it may be said to embody; and whatever a ballade may be about, it is always a ballade-never a villanelle or a rondeau. With this welcome revelation, the mental cloud aforesaid ignominiously dissolved; and my psychic sky joyfully reappeared, more vital even than before.

One ever memorable day, our ex-substantialist (deep in structural meditation) met head-on professor Royce; who was rolling peacefully home from a lecture. "Estlin" his courteous and gentle voice hazarded "I understand that you write poetry." I blushed. "Are you perhaps" he inquired, regarding a particular leaf of a particular tree "acquainted with the sonnets of Dante Gabriel Rossetti?" I blushed a different blush and shook an ignorant head. "Have you a moment?" he shyly suggested, less than half looking at me; and just perceptibly appended "I rather imagine you might enjoy the m." Shortly thereafter, sage and ignoramus were sitting opposite each other in a diminutive study (marvellously smelling of tobacco and cluttered with student notebooks of a menacing bluish shade)-the ignoramus listening, enthralled; the sage intoning, lovingly and beautifully, his favorite poems. And very possibly (although I don't, as usual, know) that is the reason --or more likely the unreason--I've been writing sonnets ever since.

En route to a university whose name begins with H, our unhero attended four Cambridge schools: the first, private-where everybody was extraordinarily kind; and where (in addition to learning nothing) I burst into tears and nosebleeds-the other three, public; where I flourished like the wicked and learned what the wicked learn, and where almost nobody cared about somebody else. Two figures emerge from this almost: a Miss Maria Baldwin and a Mr Cecil Derry. Miss Baldwin, the dark lady mentioned in my first nonlecture (and a lady if ever a lady existed) was blessed with a delicious voice, charming manners, and a deep understanding of children. Never did any demidivine dictator more gracefully and easily rule a more unruly and less graceful populace. Her very presence emanated an honour and a glory: the honour of spiritual freedom-no mere freedom from-and the glory of being, not (like most extant mortals) really undead, but actually alive. From her I marvellingly learned that the truest power is gentleness. Concerning Mr. Derry, let me say only that he was (and for me will always remain) one of those blessing and blessed spirits who deserve the name of teacher: predicates who are utterly in love with their subject; and who, because they would gladly die for it, are living for it gladly. From him I learned (and am still learning) that gladness is next to godliness. He taught me Greek. This may be as apt a moment as any to state that in the world of my boyhood-long, long ago; before time was space and Oedipus was a complex and religion was the opiate of the people and pigeons had learned to play pingpong-social stratification not merely existed but luxuriated. All women were not, as now, ladies; a gentleman was a gentleman; and a mucker (as the professorial denizens of Irving and Scott streets knew full well: since their lofty fragment of Cambridge almost adjoined plebeian Somerville) was a mucker. Being myself a professor's (& later a clergyman's) son, I had every so-called reason to accept these conventional distinctions without cavil; yet for some unreason I didn't. The more implacably a virtuous Cambridge drew me toward what might have been her bosom, the more sure I felt that soi-disant respectability comprised nearly everything which I couldn't respect, and the more eagerly I explored sinful Somerville. But while sinful Somerville certainly possessed a bosom (in fact, bosoms) she also possessed fists which hit below the belt and arms which threw snowballs containing small rocks. Little by little and bruise by teacup, my doubly disillusioned spirit made an awe-inspiring discovery; which (on more than several occasions) has prevented me from wholly misunderstanding

socalled humanity: the discovery, namely, that all groups, gangs, and collectivities-no matter how apparently disparate-are fundamentally alike; and that what makes any world go round is not the trivial difference between a Somerville and a Cambridge, but the immeasurable difference between either of them and individuality. Whether this discovery is valid for you, I can't pretend to say: but I can and do say, without pretending, that it's true for me-inasmuch as I've found (and am still finding) authentic individuals in the most varied environments conceivable. Nor will anything ever persuade me that, by turning Somerville into Cambridge or Cambridge into Somerville or both into neither, anybody can make an even slightly better world. Better worlds (I suggest) are born, not made; and their birthdays are the birthdays of individuals. Let us pray always for individuals; never for worlds. "He who would do good to another" cries the poet and painter William Blake "must do it in Minute Particulars"-and probably many of you are familiar with this greatly pitying line. But I'll wager that not three of you could quote me the line which follows it

General Good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite, & flatterer

for that deeply terrible line spells the doom of all unworlds; whatever their slogans and their strategies, whoever their heroes or their villains.

Only a butterfly's glide from my home began a mythical domain of semiwilderness; separating cerebral Cambridge and orchidaceous Somerville. Deep in this magical realm of Between stood a palace, containing Harvard University's far-famed Charles Eliot Norton: and lowly folk, who were neither professors nor professors' children, had nicknamed the district Norton's Woods. Here, as a very little child, I first encountered that mystery who is Nature; here my enormous smallness entered Her illimitable being; and here someone actually infinite or impossibly alive someone who might almost (but not quite) have been myself-wonderingly wandered the mortally immortal complexities of Her beyond imagining imagination

*O sweet spontaneous
earth how often have
the
doting*

*fingers of
prurient philosophers pinched
and
poked
thee
,has the naughty thumb
of science prodded
thy*

*beauty .how
often have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and*

*buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive
gods
(but
true*

*to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover*

thou answerest

them only with

spring)

-later, this beyond imagining imagination revealed a not believably mountaining ocean, at Lynn; and, in New Hampshire, oceaning miraculously mountains. But the wonder of my first meeting with Herself is with me now; and also with me is the coming (obedient to Her each resurrection) of a roguish and resistless More Than Someone: Whom my deepest selves unfailingly recognized, though His disguise protected him from all the world

in just-

*spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman*

whistles far and wee

*and eddyandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring*

when the world is puddle-wonderful

*the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing*

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

*it's
spring
and*

the

goat-footed

*balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee*

this Turbulent Individual Incognito must have rendered his disciple even less law-abiding than usual; for I vividly remember being chased (with two charming little girls) out of the tallest and thickest of several palatial lilac bushes: our pursuer being a frantic scarecrow-demon masquerading as my good friend Bernard Magrath, professor Charles Eliot Norton's gifted coachman. But why not? Then it was spring; and in spring anything may happen.

Absolutely anything.

i & selfdiscovery

Nonlecture Three

In the course of my first nonlecture, I affirmed that-for me-personality is a mystery; that mysteries alone are significant; and that love is the mystery-of-mysteries who creates them all. During my second outspokenness, I contrasted the collective behaviour of unchildren with the mystery of individuality; and gave (or attempted to give) you one particular child's earliest glimpse of a mystery called nature. Now I shall try to communicate clumsily, no doubt, but honestly certain attitudes and reactions surrounding the mystery of transition from which emerged a poet and painter named EECummings.

As it was my miraculous fortune to have a true father and a true mother, and a home which the truth of their love made joyous, so-in reaching outward from this love and this joy-I was marvellously lucky to touch and seize a rising and striving world; a reckless world, filled with the curiosity of life herself; a vivid and violent world welcoming every challenge; a world worth hating and adoring and fighting and forgiving: in brief, a world which was a world. This inwardly immortal world of my adolescence recoils to its very roots whenever, nowadays, I see people who've been endowed with legs crawling on their chins after quote security unquote. "Security?" I marvel to myself "what is that? Something negative, undead, suspicious and suspecting; an avarice and an avoidance; a self-surrendering meanness of withdrawal; a numerable complacency and an innumerable cowardice. Who would be 'secure'? Every and any slave. No free spirit ever dreamed of 'security'-or, if he did, he laughed; and lived to shame his dream. No whole sinless sinful sleeping waking breathing human creature ever was (or could be) bought by, and sold for, 'security.' How monstrous and how feeble seems some unworld which would rather have its too than cat its cake!"

*Jehova buried,Satan dead,
do fearers worship Much & Quick;
badness not being felt as bad,
itself thinks goodness what is meek;
obey says toc,subm it says tic,
Eternity's a Five Year Plan:
if Joy with Pain shall hang in hock
who dares to call himself a man?*

For the benefit of any heretical members of my audience who do not regard manhood as a barbarous myth propagated by sinister powers envisaging the subjugation of womankind, let me (at this point) cheerfully risk a pair of perhaps not boring anecdotes.

Back in the days of dog-cat-dog-my first anecdote begins-there lived a playboy; whose father could easily have owned the original superskyscraper-de-luxe- a selfstyled Cathedral Of Commerce, endowed with every impetus to relaxation; not excluding ultraelevators which (on the laudable assumption that even machinery occasionally makes mistakes) were regularly tested. Testing an ultraelevator meant that its car was brought clean up, deprived of safety devices, and dropped. As the car hurtled downward, a column of air confined by the elevator shaft became more and more compressed; until (assuming that nothing untoward happened) it broke the car's fall completely -or so I was told by somebody who should know. At any rate, young Mr X was in the habit not only of attending these salubrious ceremonies, but of entering each about-to-bedropped car, and of dropping with it as far and as long as the laws of a preEinsteinian universe permitted. Eventually, of course, somebody who shouldn't know telephoned a newspaper; which sent a reporter: who (after scarcely believing his senses) asked the transcender of Adam point-blank why he fell so often. Our playful protagonist shrugged his well-tailored shoulders-"for fun" he said simply; adding (in a strictly confidential undertone) "and it's wonderful for a hangover."

Here, I feel, we have the male American stance of my adolescence; or (if you prefer) the adolescent American male stance of what some wit once nicknamed a "lost generation": whereoflet me hastily append-the present speaker

considers himself no worthy specimen. My point, however, isn't that many of us were even slightly heroic; and is that few of us declined a gamble. I don't think we enjoyed courting disaster. I do feel we liked being born.

And now let me give you my second anecdote: which concerns (appropriately enough) not a single human being whose name I forget, but a millionaire mishmash termed The Public.

Rather recently-in New York City-an old college chum, whom I hadn't beheld for decades, appeared out of nowhere to tell me he was through with civilization. It seems that ever since Harvard he'd been making (despite all sorts of panics and panaceas) big money as an advertising writer; and this remarkable feat unutterably depressed him. After profound meditation, he concluded that America, and the world which she increasingly dominated, couldn't really be as bad as she and it looked through an advertising writer's eyes; and he promptly determined to seek another view-a larger view; in fact, the largest view obtainable. Bent on obtaining this largest obtainable view of America and America's world, my logical expal wangled an appointment with a subsubeditor of a magazine (if magazine it may be called) possessing the largest circulation on earth: a periodical whose each emanation appears simultaneously in almost every existing human language. Our intrepid explorer then straightened his tie, took six deep breaths, cleared his throat, swam right up, presented his credentials, and was politely requested to sit down. He sat down. "Now listen" the subsubeditor suggested "if you're thinking of working with us, you'd better know The Three Rules." "And what" my friend cheerfully inquired "are The Three Rules?" "The Three Rules" explained his mentor "are: first, eight to eighty; second, anybody can do it; and third, makes you feel better." "I don't quite understand" my friend confessed. "Perfectly simple" his interlocutor assured him. "Our first Rule means that every article we publish must appeal to anybody, man woman or child, between the ages of eight and eighty years-is that clear?" My friend said it was indeed clear. "Second" his enlightener continued "every article we publish must convince any reader of the article that he or she could do whatever was done by the person about whom the article was written. Suppose (for instance) you were writing about Lindbergh, who had just flown the Atlantic ocean for the first time in history, with nothing but unlimited nerve and a couple of chicken (or ham was it?) sandwiches-do you follow me? "I'm ahead of you" my friend murmured. "Remembering Rule number two" the subsub went on "you'd impress upon your readers' minds, over and over again, the fact that (after all) there wouldn't have been anything extraordinary about Lindbergh if he hadn't been just a human being like every single one of them. See?" "I see" said my friend grimly. "Third" the subsub intoned "we'll imagine you're describing a record-breaking Chinese flood-millions of poor unfortunate men and women and little children and helpless babies drowning and drowned; millions more perishing of slow starvation: suffering inconceivable, untold agonies, and so forth-well, any reader of this article must feel definitely and distinctly better, when she or he finishes the article, than when he or she began it." "Sounds a trifle difficult" my friend hazarded. "Don't be silly" the oracle admonished. "All you've got to do, when you're through with your horrors, is to close by saying: but (thanks to an all-merciful Providence) we Americans, with our high standard of living and our Christian ideals, will never be subjected to such inhuman conditions; as long as the Stars and Stripes triumphantly float over one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all-get me?" "I get you" said my disillusioned friend. "Good bye."

So ends the second anecdote. You may believe it or not, as you wish. As far as I'm concerned, it's the unbelievable-but also unquestionable-selfportrait of a one hundred and one percent pseudoworld: in which truth has become televisionary, in which goodness means not hurting people, and in which beauty is shoppe. just (or unjust) how any species of authentic individualism could stem from such a collective quagmire, I don't-as always-know; but here are four lines of a poem which didn't:

*(While you and i have lips and voices which
are for kissing and to sing with
who cares if some oneeyed son of a bitch
invents an instrument to measure Spring with?)*

As regards my own self-finding, I have to thank first of all that institution whose initial I flaunted unknowingly during my very earliest days. Officially, Harvard presented me with a smattering of languages and sciences; with a glimpse of Homer, a more than glimpse of Aeschylus Sophocles Euripides and Aristophanes, and a deep glance at Dante and Shakespeare. Unofficially, she gave me my first taste of independence: and the truest friends any man will ever enjoy. The taste of independence came during my senior year, when I was so lucky as to receive a room by

myself in the Yard-for living in the Yard was then an honour, not a compulsion; and this honour very properly reserved itself for seniors, who might conceivably appreciate it. Hitherto I had ostensibly lived at home; which meant that intimate contacts with the surrounding world were somewhat perilous. Now I could roam that surrounding world sans peur, if not sans reproche: and I lost no time in doing so. A town called Boston, thus observed, impressed my unsophisticated spirit as the mecca of all human endeavors-and be it added that, in this remote era, Boston had her points. Well do I recall how our far from hero (backed by the most physically imposing of his acquaintances) dared a stifling dump near Howard Street, denominated Mother Shannon's; and how we stopped short, to avoid treading on several spreadeagled sailors; and how my backer, with irreproachable nonchalance, exchanged a brace of dollar bills for two tumblers of something even viler than honest Jack Delaney served during soi-disant prohibition; and finally how, having merely sampled our nonbeverages, we successfully attained Scollay Square-to be greeted by the dispassionate drone of a pintsize pimp, conspicuously stationed on the populous sidewalk under a blaze of movie bulbs and openly advertising two kinds of love for twenty-five cents each. Moreover that distant Boston comprised such authentic incarnations of genius as Bernhardt, whose each intonation propitiated demons and angels; Pavlova, who danced a ditty called Nix On The Glowworm into the most absolute piece of aristocracy since Ming; and a lady of parts (around whose waist any man's hand immediately dreamed it could go three times) named Polaire. Those were the days (and nights) of The Turkey Trot and The Bunny Hug; of Everybody's Doing It, Alexander's Ragtime Band, Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly, There's A Little Bit Of Bad In Every Good Little Girl, On The Banks Of The Saskatchewan, and Here Comes My Daddy Now (O Pop, O Pop, O Pop, O Pop). Nothing could exceed the artistry of Washington Street bartenders, who positively enjoyed constructing impeccable Pousse-Cafés in the midst of Ward Eights and Hop Toads; nor could anything approach the courtesy of Woodcock waiters, who never obeyed any ring but your own and always knocked twice before entering. I am further indebted to Boston town for making me acquainted (and in no uncertain manner) with the sinister splendors of censorship. One evening, The Old Howard would be As Is; the next, you guessed you were embracing a funeral. When Miss Gertrude Hoffman brought her lissome self and her willowy girls to Boston, they and she were violently immersed in wrist-and-ankle-length underwear. A local tobacconist drew jail for selling a box of cigars adorned with the usual gauzily appressed but unmistakably symbolic females-and vainly did an outraged lawyer object that his client was happily married. Meanwhile, watching-and-warding Mr Sumner's matchless collection of indecent items constituted a favorite topic of conversation with high and low alike. But if the predations of puritanism astonished me nearly forty years ago, I was recently more than amazed to learn that you cannot now show a woman's entire breast in any American moviehouse unless she isn't (to coin a plagiarism) white. Verily, democracy unquote is a strange disease: nor (I submit) can any human being help sympathizing, in his or her heart of hearts, with the bad bald poet who sings

*come(all you mischief-
hatchers hatch
mischief)all you*

*guilty
scamper(you bastards throw dynamite)
let knowings magic
with bright credos each divisible fool
(life imitate gossip fear unlife
mean
-ness,and
to succeed in not
dying)*

*Is will still occur;birds disappear
becomingly;a thunderbolt compose poems
not because harm symmetry
earthquakes starfish(but
because nobody
can sell the Moon to The)moon*

Let us now consider friendship.

Through Harvard, I met Scofield Thayer; and at Harvard, Sibley Watson-two men who subsequently transformed a dogooding periodical called The Dial into a first-rate magazine of the fine arts; and together fought the eternal fight of selfhood against mobism, the immortal battle of beauty against ugliness. It would not even slightly surprise me to learn that most of you have remained, till now, quite unaware of the existence of these literally heroic individuals and of their actually unparalleled achievement. Never have I seen courage and courtesy, taste and intelligence, prodigious patience and incredible generosity, quite so jealously mistrusted or so basely misprized or so savagely detested as by The Dial's detractors. Even today, more than twenty years after this true and noble adventure's culmination, the adventurers' chastisement continues-through such a conspiracy of silence on the part of America's intellectual gangsters as would be ludicrous if it were not abominable; nor will that chastisement begin to diminish while general good outflanks minute particulars and spiritual treachery is the order of the day.

At Harvard (moreover) I met Stewart Mitchell, who soon became editor-in-chief of our university's only serious undergraduate magazine-The Monthly-and was subsequently managing editor of The Dial; John Dos Passos, through whose devoted efforts a dangerous compilation known as Eight Harvard Poets appeared; and S Foster Damon, who opened my eyes and ears not merely to Domenico Theotocopuli and William Blake, but to all ultra (at that moment) modern music and poetry and painting. Nor can or do I forget Theodore Miller; who gladly brought me such treasures as the exquisite

*lugete, o Vencres Cupidinesque
et quantumst hominum venustiorum*

of Catullus; the sublime

*labuntur anni; nec pietas moram
rugis et instanti senectae
afferet, indomitacque morti*

of Horace; and Sappho's magically luminous invocation

[greek quotation from Sappho]

but the token of whose most memorable kindness was a volume combining poems and letters by that glorious human being who confessed

*I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections,
and the truth of Imagination.*

Whereupon-deep in those heights of psychic sky which had greeted my boyish escape from moralism-an unknown and unknowable bird began singing.

After Harvard, I thank (for selfdiscovery) a phenomenon and a miracle. The phenomenon was a telemicroscopic chimera, born of the satanic rape of matter by mind; a phallic female phantasm, clothed in thunderous anonymity and adorned with colossally floating spiderwebs of traffic; a stark irresistibly stupendous newness, mercifully harboring among its pitilessly premeditated spontaneities immemorial races and nations

by god i want above fourteenth

*fifth's deep purring biceps,the mystic screech
of Broadway,the trivial stink of rich*

frail firm asinine life

(i pant

*for what's below. The singer. Wall. i want
the perpendicular lips the insane teeth
the vertical grin*

*give me the Square in spring,
the little barbarous Greenwich perfumed fake*

*and most, the futile fooling labyrinth
where noisy colours stroll . . . and the Baboon*

*sniggering insipidities while. i sit, sipping
singular anisettes as. One opaque
big girl jiggles thickly hips to the canoun*

but Hassan chuckles seeing the Greeks breathe)

in New York I also breathed: and as if for the first time.

The truly first of first times was (however) still to come. It arrived with a so-called war. Being neither warrior nor conscientious objector, saint nor hero, I embarked for France as an ambulance driver. And as my earliest taste of independence had been excelled by the banquet which I later sampled among Manhattan's skyscrapers, so was that banquet surpassed by the freedom which I now tasted:

*Paris; this April sunset completely utters
utters serenely silently a cathedral*

*before whose upward lean magnificent face
the streets turn young with rain*

two realms, elsewhere innately hostile, here cordially coexisted—each (by its very distinctness) intensifying the other—nor could I possibly have imagined either a loveliness so fearlessly of the moment or so nobly beautiful a timelessness. Three thousand oceanic miles away and some terrestrial years before, a son of New England had observed those realms bitterly struggling for dominion: then, as a guest of verticality, our impuritan had attended the overwhelming triumph of the temporal realm. Now, I participated in an actual marriage of material with immaterial things; I celebrated an immediate reconciling of spirit and flesh, forever and now, heaven and earth. Paris was for me precisely and complexly this homogeneous duality: this accepting transcendence; this living and dying more than death or life. Whereas—by the very act of becoming its improbably gigantic self—New York had reduced mankind to a tribe of pygmies, Paris (in each shape and gesture and avenue and cranny of her being) was continuously expressing the humanness of humanity. Everywhere I sensed a miraculous presence, not of mere children and women and men, but of living human beings; and the fact that I could scarcely understand their language seemed irrelevant, since the truth of our momentarily mutual aliveness created an imperishable communion. While (at the hating touch of some madness called La Guerre) a once rising and striving world toppled into withering hideously smitherens, love rose in my heart like a sun and beauty blossomed in my life like a star. Now, finally and first, I was myself. a temporal citizen of eternity; one with all human beings born and unborn.

Thus through an alma mater whose scholastic bounty appeared the smallest of her blessings—and by way of those even more munificent institutions of learning, New York and Paris—our ignoramus reaches his supreme indebtedness. Last but not most, I thank for my self-finding certain beautiful givers of illimitable gladness

*whose any mystery makes every man's
flesh put space on;and his mind take off time*

and so we turn to poetry.