

## Tyger Time: e.e. cummings on Conscientious Objection<sup>1</sup>

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The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction, according to the poet William Blake—one oft-quoted aphorism among many from a long and entertaining list of “diabolical” and paradoxical proverbs in his prose work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.<sup>3</sup> One has to think that Blake, a great Romantic poet of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, is recommending, paradoxically, feeling as a basis for thought, feeling in particular as a basis for knowing what one knows about the moral world. Pay attention, he’s saying, to what makes you angry. There’s something to learn from rage that no careful formal education is likely to teach. When it comes to poetry, it’s honest wrath, not careful study, that points to truth.

Here’s a modern poem which honors the tygers: e. e. cummings’s wrathful “i sing of Olaf glad and big.”<sup>4</sup> Cummings (1894-1962), of course, is a well-known and influential modernist. His experiments with spelling, visual presentation on the page, and quirky punctuation (like avoiding capitalization—once radical, now a cliché of the e-mail age) opened up space for experiment for other poets and in many ways epitomized modernism. His relatively simple, baldly stated themes were powerfully expressive and clear, making him accessible to a popular audience.

*i sing of Olaf glad and big  
whose warmest heart recoiled at war:  
a conscientious object-or*

*his wellbelov’d colonel(trig  
westpointer most succinctly bred)  
took erring Olaf soon in hand;  
but--though an host of overjoyed  
noncoms (first knocking on the head  
him) do through icy waters roll  
that helplessness which others stroke  
with brushes recently employed  
anent this muddy toiletbowl,  
while kindred intellects evoke  
allegiance per blunt instruments--  
Olaf (being to all intents*

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<sup>3</sup> *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* was written between 1790-93. Among other well known paradoxical proverbs found there are: “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom;” and “One law for the lion and ox is oppression.”

<sup>4</sup> From *The Complete Poems: 1904-1962* by e. e. cummings, Liveright, NY

*a corpse and wanting any rag  
upon what God unto him gave)  
responds, without getting annoyed  
“I will not kiss your fucking flag”  
straightway the silver bird looked grave  
(departing hurriedly to shave)*

*but—though all kinds of officers  
(a yearning nation’s blueeyed pride)  
their passive prey did kick and curse  
until for wear their clarion  
voices and boots were much the worse,  
and egged the firstclassprivates on  
his rectum wickedly to tease  
by means of skilfully applied  
bayonets roasted hot with heat--  
Olaf(upon what were once knees)  
does almost ceaselessly repeat  
“there is some shit I will not eat”*

*our president, being of which  
assertions duly notified  
threw the yellowsonofabitch  
into a dungeon, where he died*

*Christ(of His mercy infinite)  
i pray to see; and Olaf, too*

*preponderatingly because  
unless statistics lie he was  
more brave than me: more blond than you.*

Psychoanalysts can hardly fail to note that Olaf is both an objector and “object” of psychosexual abuse—and better (and more *American* in the best sense) than his abusers. This poem invites us to political rage. Psychoanalysts know the paradox of rage. We’re a careful and studious bunch, ever appropriate, and generally careful in our politics. But still we know the importance of feelings, however harsh and painful, when feelings point to truth.

“Olaf,” although written in the 1930s, sings of the current political climate. Yes, these are complex times, the ethical issues are complicated—there’s a place for study, for the horses of instruction. But for many of us, this summer of 2008 is tyger time. It’s a time when torture is an instrument of government policy; a time when the President throws “yellowsonofabitches” into dungeons; a time when, moreover, otherwise good and thoughtful and well-instructed people—many in our own APA—are all too willing to kiss that fucking flag.

