

CHAPTER FOUR

FUTURISTIC TENDENCIES IN E. E. CUMMINGS: POETRY, PAINTING, MOTION

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The title of the paper, especially the part after the colon i.e., “poetry, painting, motion” posits the possibility of transfer or metamorphosis, between words and pictures; literature is not temporal, nor is painting only spatial. Cummings’ experimental poetry tries to blur boundaries and experiment with spatial poetry or temporal painting producing poems whose sounds we have to see and whose shapes we have to hear. Cummings is both a painter and a poet, and in dealing with his art, the two fields are in close relation to each other, or the two might actually be one field, as he himself wanted to be understood; “my poems are essentially pictures” (Norman 123). Cummings’ works are both poems and pictures and need readers who are capable of moving between the verbal and the visual literacy. This paper shows this by focusing on the influence of the Italian art movement of Futurism in the artistic work of E.E. Cummings, mostly in the creation of a sense of motion and dynamism. Studying the influence of this avant garde movement on Cummings reveals new aspects of his poetry that are interesting to analyze. Like the Futurists, Cummings also wanted to capture on the page the great mechanical noisy and dynamic world in all its fragmented impressions by manipulating language and its expressive powers.

He was not fashioning his poetry simply in the context of literary tradition, but was also bringing into poetry the many advances which, through Cubism, Futurism and other developments in art, had radically altered visual taste in the first decades of the 20th century. Many critics and reviewers are quick to point out

that Cummings is a visual poet. Although he still made his poetry out of words, Cummings also borrowed as much as he could from the visual arts without abandoning his responsibility to language. This is because he believed that poetry is not only words and punctuation but also “the matrix of empty space in which they hang” (Kidder 257). It is hard to find someone other than Cummings who looked as deeply into the interrelations between these arts as he did.

Early in his career, Cummings expressed his admiration for various forms of “The New Art” as he called the Modernist avant garde movements in his Harvard commencement address. Of the Modernists whose technique he studied during this period are Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Henri Gaudier-Brezeska and the Futurists, especially the American Futurists: Joseph Stella and John Marin. Cummings admired Picasso’s “elimination of the trivial, pretty and charming” and his directly “conveying sensations of weight, solidity, depth (hugeness)” (qtd. in Cummings, 1969, 58). Cummings was so touched by Picasso that he devoted an entire poem to the painter, concluding “you hew form truly” (Cummings 1925, 195). But Cummings disliked Cubism’s ponderousness and stasis: Cubism created a “cold and frozen grammar” and administered “an overdose of architecture to the human form,” he complained. Futurist dynamism nicely compensated Cubist stasis. According to Cummings, “Bella and Duchamp paint the fact of motion” (Kennedy 180).

Cummings met Stella in 1919, and even before that, he had ample opportunities in his teens to study Stella’s great work —*Battle of Lights: Coney Island* (1913-14) (Fig. 1). Cummings explains that the painting’s “tumult of lights and tracks, rides and people, perhaps inspired (him) to go to Coney Island in 1918 to capture color and motion” (Cohen 1987, 47). In the eyes of art critics, this painting seemed to be one of the first ones produced in the United States which was capable through its audacity and its formal achievement, of rivaling European avant-garde paintings. The picture is not so much an urban view as a psychological landscape, the pictorial transposition of sensations felt by the artist. In fact, the painting expresses the energy and dynamism that the Futurists extolled in their manifesto. The serpentine lines, the circular forms, and curves prefigure a similar emphasis on spirals and movement in Cummings’ “Noise Number 13” (Fig. 2). Like Stella’s painting, Cummings’ “Noise Number 13” has curves and angles that foster motion. The curves develop into spirals, spheres and angles that form edged planes. The spiral is dynamic, and the viewer is thrust into a dynamic vortex in constant motion. In fact, the painting applies the two principles that the futurists focus on in their paintings. First, the sense of motion; every single item in the painting moves and contributes to the creation of a dynamic sensation. Secondly, there is an attempt to place the spectator in the midst of the painting, and this is done by the creation of a three dimensional state, so the viewer feels he/she is

looking through the pictures, not at the pictures, gaining new sensations and new emotions.



Fig. 1. Stella's Battle of Lights: Coney Island.



Fig. 2. In Cummings' Noise Number 13.

Many of Cummings' line drawings also show clearly a sense of movement: Cummings drew about dancers caught in mid-step, strippers in wild undulations, and acrobats and clowns in a circus. All these capture motions or actions which in the next second will change. The sketches show this sense of movement, in the same manner as Futurists conveyed movement. Among these drawings is a particular one which depicts Charles Spencer Chaplin (Fig. 3). This drawing reveals Cummings' talent in creating motion. The movement is seen in Chaplin's forlorn shuffle, his legs and feet seeming to fold into each other; his tragicomic nature in the rose and cane, the smile in the bent head, and the dexterity he has in balancing the rose and in seeming to come toward the viewer with his top half, while moving away with his bottom half. However, Cummings adds his own aesthetics in that he creates this motion by inserting a comic or satirical feeling into the drawing. His fluent line fuses several features of the comedian. His sketches are similar to the Futurist paintings which are studies in motion. An example of these is by Balla called "Leash in Motion" (Fig. 4), which is a light-hearted study of a dog trotting along in a flurry of scampering legs and wagging tail.

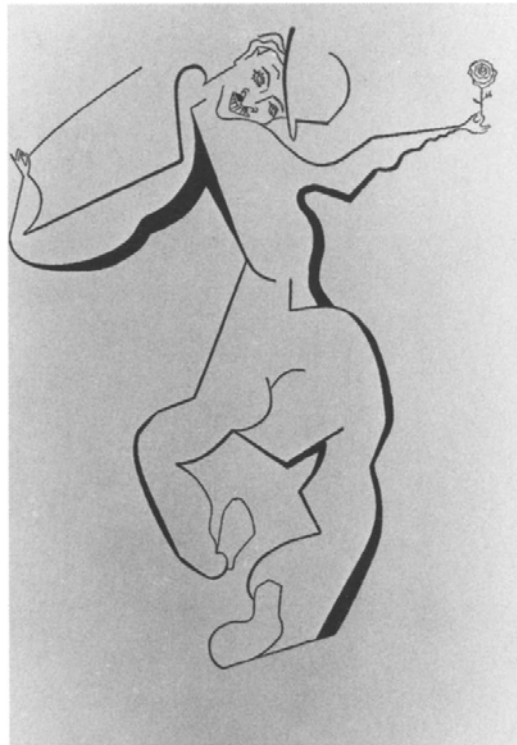


Fig. 3. Cummings' Charles Spencer Chaplin.



Fig. 4. Balla's Leash in Motion.

Cummings' poetry also shows clearly the influence of Futurism. There is evidence that Cummings had been acquainted with Marinetti's theoretical and poetical writings and took notes from them. The following are some of Cummings's notes about futurism which clearly demonstrate the things that caught his attention:

Futurism: same propositions as to literature (as in paintings)
Use only infinite form of verb giving sense of continuity of life
Abolish adjectives
Abolish adverbs
Abolish punctuation (use certain accentuating & directing signs)
Abolish "I", replace it by the matter
Fancy initials, use 3-4 different inks. Use italics for rapid sentences, capitals for violent ones. (Cohen 1987, 160)

Cummings considers the conventions of spelling, punctuation and typography as archaisms no longer applicable to modern poetry, and that the field of language is open and elastic so that the writer is free to be as radical as his sensibility demands in improving methods appropriate to his purpose and his moment in history. Among all the sensuous qualities that inform Cummings' poetry, motion is probably the most prominent. The different devices that he uses in his poetry are all means to motion. Even in his few comments on his poetry, Cummings gives prominence to motion: "at least my theory of technique, if I have one, is not very

far from original, nor is it complicated. Like the burlesque comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement" (Cohen 1987, 240). As in all of the Futurist's poems, motion runs through Cummings' aesthetics as cause, effect, form and content. Cummings believes that stasis is only an appearance. Everything is really in motion. One note in *Him* expresses this so well: "tensions are the essence and technique of being" (Cohen 1987, 195). This call for tensions is similar to Marinetti's call for action and motion:

Up to now, literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the moral leap, the punch and the clap. We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. (12)

Tensions, stresses and strains all interrelated are obvious characteristics of Cummings' poetry, as he says: "a painting, a poem should be like a pile of jackstraws: a heap of strains, of stresses, enormous and minute" (Cohen 1987, 153). The idea of motion fills Cummings' verse from theme to form. First, Cummings loved to aim his poems at moving objects: birds wheeling overhead, a mouse scampering across the floor, a grasshopper going flips, a cat suddenly leaping, even mountains dancing. The slower cyclical motions of nature also caught his eyes: winter melting into spring, evening yielding to twilight, and twilight fading into night. His is an imagery of dynamic quality: a moon waxing or waning, a star appearing and disappearing, an ocean ebbing and flowing, a tree darting across the sky, or the arrival and departure of rain or snow storm. These elements constitute a process. That is why Cummings uses present participles like "dying" and "making" a lot since they refer to processes, while nouns and past participles refer to fixities, like in the words "death" and "made." This is exactly what the Futurists called for in their poems: an impression of mobility and vitality is essential in art, and it has to be exhibited through the use of language.

Here is an example of a poem which shows how Cummings captures motion through a precise image:

Spiral acres of bloated rose
 Coiled within cobalt miles of sky
 Yield to and heed
 The mauve
 Of twilight (who slenderly descends)
 Dauntingly carrying in her eyes the dangerous first stars
 People move love hurry in a gently

(*Complete Poems* 93)

The poem shows movement through the use of words such as “yield,” “coiled,” “descends,” “move” and “hurry.” The whole poem also has a thematic motion. It shows how evening is yielding to twilight, and so Cummings uses an imagistic method to render the most subtle changes in the twilight sky. Yet, he is not an Imagist poet; the clarity and precision of fixed words is counterbalanced by the movement of signs and the moving image advocated by Cummings. “Impressions” in *Tulips and Chimneys* comprise five segments of a cycle. In “the sky a silver,” the disappearing late afternoon sky reveals the first stars and low lying moon of evening; then “Writhe and” presents the fragmented perspective of a sunset dissolving into “dimensionless” night; the third poem in this cycle is “I was considering how.” The poem begins with the night stars and ends with the “stale shriek” of an alarm clock. The last poem is “stinging,” which moves from the late afternoon gold on church spines through the sunset rise of the bells to the dream of the night. Cummings plays with color changes to enhance this magical movement of time from gold to silver and at last to rose (Cummings 1990, 56-64). When the reader goes through these poems chronologically, he/she feels that each forms a part of a quasi cinematic progression.

Like the Futurists, Cummings also wanted to make the poems themselves move. Therefore, he drew on this ability of language to encode spatial information throughout the sentence by using syntax and word selection to draw our attention to the malleable spaces he forms in his poems as he plays with spatial representation, especially motion. The most important elements are the use of parts of speech that create motion such as verbs, adverbs, and typographical innovations, which create rhythm and tempo through the manipulation of the narrative line and textual shape.

Starting with parts of speech, we can say that verbs are the most important parts of speech used by Cummings to create movement. In fact, Cummings always reiterated that while verbs create movement, nouns create stasis. The most efficient way to inject life into one’s writing is to pay attention to one’s choice of verbs. Writers can use verbs to create movement, perform, stir things up and move around. They excel all other words in their power to restore life to lifeless prose or poetry. They add energy and vitality to sentences and help one write economically. That is why the verb was synonymous with energy for the Futurists, and so other parts of speech suffer by comparison with verbs. Nouns, especially abstract nouns, represent things and thus imply stasis. Similarly, while verbs convey action, adverbs generally work more dexterously than adjectives in conveying movement. Cummings’ interest in verbs produced some concrete results in his poetry. He

distinguishes, for example, between vivid strong verbs that are self-sufficient, such as “jerk, dash, spurt, lumber” and more general weak verbs that require adverbial support for clarity, such as “fly” or “run.” Strong verbs radiate the same energy as angular lines in a painting. The following poem about Picasso shows how Cummings sought to infuse the syntax with verbal motion:

Picasso
you give us Things
which
bulge:grunting lungs pumped full of sharp thick mind

you make us shrill
presents always
shut in the sumptuous screech of
simplicity

(out of the
black unbunged
Something gushes vaguely a squeak of planes
or

between squeals of
Nothing grabbed with circular shrieking tightness
solid screams whisper.)
Lumberman of The Distinct

your brain's
axe only chops hugest inherent
Trees of Ego, from
whose living and biggest

bodies lopped
of every
prettiness

you hew form truly

(*Complete Poems* 195)

The poem contains verbs used as nouns in order to increase the sense of movement. The words “screech,” “squeak,” “squeal” and “screams” infuse the poem with action despite the fact that they function grammatically as nouns. Also, the poem contains a lot of action words, like “chops,” “lopped,” “hew,” “bulge,”

“pump,” and “gush.” These fill the poem with a dynamic quality. The originality of the poem is in how Cummings uses the metaphor of woodworking to highlight Picasso’s achievement: the painter (Picasso) can “hew form truly” by using “the brain’s axe.”

Another technique used by Cummings to enhance motion and speed is the use of adverbs instead of adjectives: “the slowly town” (330); “loosely voices” (34); “your suddenly smile” (253); “my proudly life” (201). The use of adverbs instead of adjectives enhances the idea of a process rather than a state. For example, “slowly train” conveys the image of a train moving slowly; it is in the process of moving now. An example of how Cummings changes language to celebrate vitality and motion is his interesting distinction between the terms “dying” and death.” Linguistically speaking, “death” is a noun and “dying” is a gerund. For Cummings, they take many connotations as this poem demonstrates:

dying is fine)but Death

?o
baby
i

wouldn’t like

Death if Death
were
good:for

when(instead of stopping to think)you

begin to feel of it,dying
's miraculous
why?be

cause dying is

perfectly natural;perfectly
putting
it mildly lively(but

Death

is strictly
scientific
& artificial &

evil & legal)

we thank thee
god
almighty for dying
(forgive us, o life! the sin of Death

(*Complete Poems* 604)

Death for Cummings is “strictly scientific” because it is the state when the heart stops moving and the body starts to rot. It is “artificial” because it carries with it social rituals like funerals and services. It is “evil” because it symbolizes sadness and is misfortunate, but it is “legal” because it represents the acceptable end of the cycle of life. “Dying” on the other hand suggests a movement, a change, and a visible transformation. That is why it is “perfectly natural” since it is part and parcel of life, and one accepts it as the cycle of life. That is why it is “lively.”

In the following poem “sunlight was over,” Cummings creates motion through verbs, basic spatial words which indicate direction, like the prepositions “under,” “over,” “around,” etc., and words indicating perspective as if the reader has to see the poem as well as read it in order to understand it. These words fill the poem and help create movement.

sunlight was over
our mouths fears hearts lungs arms hopes feet hands

under us the unspeaking Mediterranean bluer
than we imagined
a few cries drifting through
high air
a sail a fishing boat somebody an invisible spectator,
maybe certain nobodies laughing faintly

playing moving far below us

perhaps one villa caught like pieces
of a kite in the trees, here
and here reflecting
sunlight
(everywhere sunlight keen *complete*
silent

and *everywhere* you your kisses your *flesh* mind *breathing*

beside under around myself)
by and by
a fat color reared itself against the sky and the sea
...finally your eyes knew
me, we smiled to each other, releasing lay, watching
(sprawling, in
grass upon a
cliff) what had been something
else carefully slowly fatally turning into ourselves...

while in the very middle of fire all

the world becoming bright and little melted.

(Complete Poems 350)

In this poem, Cummings and his beloved are lying on the grass looking over the Mediterranean sea. They notice the colors of the sunset over a villa. The process is so magical to them and to the reader as Cummings mixes spaces (the sea, cliff, village, and sky), direction words (sunlight was over; under the Mediterranean, she is breathing beside under around him; laying in grass upon a cliff), and verbs and adverbs of motion (drifting, playing, moving, becoming, laughing faintly). The last line is suggestive: the world around them is not fixed but “melted,” and not even finally melted but “becoming” or in the process of melting. Just as the colors of the sky are changing into sunset and dispersing reflections of sunlight, the world is also in a sort of flux and constant change.

Cummings also makes typographical distortions to create motion. Although Cummings’ famous typographical innovations in one sense came out of the free verse movement and owe much to Pound and Apollinaire, they owe more to his own painterly vision. The only difference being that the typewriter served as his paintbrush. In fact, the typewriter, with its delineated print, its precision of placement, and its mechanical regularity, adds to Cummings’ visual dislocations. Cummings often manipulates spacing and lettering as if they were stage directions indicating where pauses and emphases should come in the reading, so he is able to regulate motion by controlling the lightness and rapidity, the heaviness and the slowness of the reading. In fact, the line becomes the controller of motion: it impedes or creates motion. As the poem unfolds temporally, the narrative line conveys motion through its pace, accelerations and retards, and at the same time, it exits in space, and so it also creates a visual dimension. Therefore, linear spacing and pace work couple in perfect synchrony to create motion and intensity by

controlling the visual form and the thematic development as well as the reader's perception and experience of it.

An example of a poem which shows how typographical distortions are not made randomly, but have semantic meanings is the poem about the grasshopper entitled "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r." The poem defies oral reading, as it has to be experienced like a painting: visually. Cummings makes the subject of his poem; i.e., a grasshopper leaping, the experience of both seeing and reading simultaneously.

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r

who

a)s w(e loo)k
upnowgath
PPEGORHRASS
eringint(o-

aThe):l
eA
!p:

S a

(r
rivInG .gRrEaPsPhOs)
to

rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
,grasshopper;

(Complete Poems 250)

Cummings' poem comes across initially as being disjointed, somewhat chaotic, but on a second reading, it shows quite starkly that there is order and meaning to be drawn from its scattered structure. Visually, the poem shows the motion that the grasshopper itself displays, bouncing back and forth between lines and words, and the sensation the eye feels in keeping track of the words is the sensation one would feel in following the insect's movements, which Cummings is describing as upgathering, leaping, disintegrating, and rearranging. This effect is partially produced by the fact that the syllables of "grasshopper" are rearranged four times (including the normal spelling); partially by the distribution of parentheses, punctuation marks, and capitals; and partially by the joining, splitting, and spacing of words. As the reader gropes and fumbles his/her way along this jumble of syllables and letters, the mind is gradually building up the connections which normally obtain among them: "The grasshopper, who, as we look, now upgathering into leaps, arriving to become, rearrangingly, a grasshopper." Furthermore, the word

“grasshopper” itself, whose eleven letters behave like the grasshopper itself, wildly hops around in the poem, leaping lines, and landing in the middle of a word or a sentence. This reflects how the grasshopper is leaping wildly and suddenly about, landing in unrecognizable positions, and escaping before the eye can see it. Even the title of the poem, I suggest, has hopped from its proper place to line 7 (“The”) and line 15 (“grasshopper”) thus disguising the fact that the poem has the fourteen lines of a sonnet.

The poem is a picture of the movement rather than a description of the movement of the grasshopper. First, the insect gathers itself for the leap, and then in the middle of the leap, it explodes into the capitalized and more easily pronounceable (PPEGORHRASS). Here, the letters have drawn closer to their final form: the word begins with three properly ordered letters from “hopper” and ends with four from “grass,” but the two parts of the word are still inverted. Then the grasshopper jumps, a motion indicated by the spread letters of the word “leaps,” and settles solidly on the word’s final S, so far toward the left, which is actually a space beyond the margin line, as though the insect overshot. A long pause seems indicated by the distance from the S to the *a* beginning the next word (arriving) at the extreme right, and once again the grasshopper hops and lands in a different position: “gRrEaPsPhOs.” Here, the letters begin to sort themselves out: the lower-case letters (leaving out the *h*) spell grass, and the capitals (read backwards and restoring the *h*) spell *hopper*. Then it rearrangingly becomes *grasshopper*. This poem deals with how things are defined. Until it jumps, the insect that Cummings makes the subject of this poem is just a r-p-o-p-h-e-s-a-g-r —it is undefined in the sense of its name. The world comes together only when the definition is complete. The poem also dramatizes the act of looking at the grasshopper and not realizing what it is; the grasshopper may be camouflaged in the grass as the word “grasshopper” is camouflaged in the first line until it leaps into the air and into attention and recognition. Cummings offers three spellings before arriving at the final correct one. The poem appears as a random littering of letters, which seem to be at first sight simply signs that are incomprehensible, but when recomposed and rearranged, they become meaningful.

The poem also shows how the mystery is resolved concerning concrete poetry in general. That which looks most unlikely is simply rearranged; so we have to be patient, let it leap, and it will suddenly and gracefully appear to make sense. That is why we can say that Cummings’ typographical effects are genuine expansions of the possibilities of language. The motions of a grasshopper are suggested by various permutations of the letters in “grasshopper” and other typographical gestures. Typographical jumbling, dispersion, rearrangement and

finally, stability, enact the transformation of the motionless grasshopper into a leaping blur of energy, which suddenly comes to rest.

Another example of how Cummings splits words to create motion occurs in this poem about the falling of the leaf:

1(a

le

af

fa

ll

s)

one

l

iness

(*Complete Poems* 673)

I think this poem is considered the most beautiful poem that Cummings has ever created. Cummings' poem is actually untitled, but the first line of the poem is generally used as such for reference. As a title, it does set the standard within the reader's mind about what they are about to read, as the rest of the poem is equally disconnected. The language employed in the text is only vaguely reminiscent of a language, as the words used are dissected and scattered across the page, adding visual accompaniment to the text.

Reconstructed, the text of the poem is simply this: *L(a leaf falls) oneliness*. On a literal level, the poem is a description of a leaf, one leaf falling. The fall of the leaf itself is indicated through the internal pattern of the lines which suggests a leaf drifting downward from a tree. In fact, the letters are scattered down in an alternating pattern of consonants and vowels as if it demonstrates how the leaf is drifting to and fro. In fact, the last line, which is the longest, may indicate a heap of leaves already fallen. However, for its absolute simplicity, the poem appears ambiguous for sheer lack of obvious connotations; as readers, we are given a single, aesthetically significant metaphor with no philosopher's stone with which to decipher, except the reader's own baseless assumptions and intuitions of the author's intent. The metaphor is very clearly stated, so we can assume that everything the author has wanted us to know can be found within the text.

Symbolically, a falling leaf can suggest many things. First, the journey of the leaf is reminiscent of the cycle of life —released from the holds of sprouting youth: it falls and falls until ultimately finds its place of rest. Secondly, it can also be seen as representing any journey that one must undertake within their lifetime. As the metaphor is encased within the word “loneliness,” we might assume that the journey of life, the single leaf falling, is a solitary, lonely event. Since “loneliness” begins before the leaf falls, it could be understood that it is universal so far as life is concerned; that is, loneliness exists before and after our life, and we can therefore not escape it. This also relates back to the idea of cycles, as the falling leaf is part of the seasonal cycle —announcing the summer’s end and winter’s approach—; if loneliness is inherent to the human life cycle, then we must understand our journeys as solitary events through which we cannot rely on others for completion. Thirdly, a leaf falling also has ramifications upon our individuality as we leave the confines of childhood. So long as the leaf remains attached to the branch —a metaphor for complete dependence of youth upon its parents— it needn’t make decisions of any particular consequence; nor must it make any relevant distinction between itself and other leaves of the branch. As adulthood sets in, and maturity brings with it the pains of living deliberately, a melancholy sense of detachment is prevalent in the contrast between that which we have known as truth in childhood, and that which we come to understand as reality in adulthood. Before and while the journey of life lived deliberately begins, there is a deep sense of loneliness pervasive throughout.

Cummings makes full use of the visual medium by unilaterally expressing his meaning. The poem is composed of three words only: *leaf*, *falls*, *loneliness*. E. E. Cummings’ “l(a” embodies the feeling of being alone. In every aspect —its form, the division of its stanzas, and the imagery of the leaf— the poem concentrates its attention on solitude. By dividing the words into “l(a // le / af / fa // ll / s) / one / l // iness,” Cummings’ poem emphasizes the separateness that a person feels when alone. The very word —ie. “loneliness”— and phrase —ie. “a leaf falls”— have been separated; no longer a group of letters joins together to form words, individual letters stand comparatively alone. Some, like “l” are literally solitary; others, such as “le,” “af,” and “fa,” cling together in apparently meaningless syllables. Shattering these words into their component parts creates the sensation that, like the leaf, these letters drift, lost and alone.

The deliberately fragmented structure creates other “lonely” resonances. For example, the recurrence of the number *one* emphasizes solitude. Cummings is able to convey it by the numerous appearances of the word *one*. First, the shape of the poem is a number *one*. First line, we have the number 1 and the indefinite article (a). Then, in the second line (le) indicates the indefinite article in French

which refers to (the). Besides, the two (11), that are part of the word falls, are also two ones. Line seven spells the word one. Line (8) isolates the number (1). The final line suggests both the 1st person pronoun (i) and a lower case Roman numeral (one). In having not only the form of the poem but the very letters in the poem refer to “one,” Cummings’ “l(a)” enhances the lonely imagery within that shape.

Inasmuch as noiselessness conveys the sensation of being alone, the poem’s unpronounceable form works with its central image to draw us into solitude. Though almost all poetry must be read aloud to be fully understood, this poem defies the reader to speak it: “l(a)” offers only the sounds of silence. Instead of tripping the tongue over “le,” “af,” and “fa” or stumbling into vowel-less clusters like “ll” and “s),” one lets the poem sit silently on the page. In collaboration with the image of a falling leaf, the poem’s literally unspeakable structure strands the reader in a quiet, solitary stillness. Although it is a clever way to represent loneliness, the very cleverness of the poem works against the reader’s ability to experience loneliness. Instead of bringing us emotionally nearer to the solitary leaf, this 22-character poem forces the reader to assemble its meaning, establishing a cool, analytical relationship between “l(a)” and its audience. Of course, the beauty of the poem would have been lost had Cummings only written “a leaf falls:/loneliness.” In analyzing this poem, Friedman believes that Cummings “creates a kind of complex ideogram, using unusual line breaks to give his poem at once a feeling of the action and visual picture of that action’s symbolic sum” (133). Moreover, Bradford believes that “our awareness of how temporal language can describe or signify a relation between an event and a feeling is fused simultaneously with a verbal representation of that process” (21). What these two critics say is true: Cummings is able to fuse the conventions of interpretation that separate poetry from the visual arts. The abstract signifier (the letters) is converted into a concrete signified. The words and letters are transformed into a falling leaf.

From my experience in teaching such poems, I find that Cummings’ poems challenge the creativity of students, but it also presents them with certain problems. Until they realize that it is up to them to help create the poem, they are more often than not somewhat baffled by the poem which presents itself, and that is why I always try to make them realize that the design of the poem, which they can enjoy simply as itself on one level, is really an invitation to explore its “interior” structure; once they understand that, they experience a new active and creative way of reading-perceiving —that is infinitely rewarding. Hence, students should be encouraged to be patient with innovative writings and try to discover the mode of reading which the text demands in order to be able to naturalize them and make them meaningful.

In *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), Jonathan Culler asserts that to study the literary modes of writing, one should concentrate on “the conventions” which guide “the process of constructing meaning.” That is to say, we try to understand “an *écriture*” or mode of writing that the author adopts and the function he/she gives his language (133). To achieve this, readers follow certain strategies of reading to assimilate or interpret a text —i.e., to “bring it within the modes of order which culture makes available”(134)—, and this is achieved by talking about the text in “a mode of context which culture takes as natural” (137). Thus, the structure resides not in the texts themselves but in the set of rules we follow (unconsciously perhaps) when we read. Consequently, poeticalness lies not in the poem as much as in “the conventions” which operate when we read on the assumption that a text is a piece of poetry.

Culler believes that readers tend to “naturalize” and “recuperate” the strange in the text. When we “naturalize” a text, we restore literature to its communicative function. Culler gives this process many names: “recuperation,” “naturalization,” “motivation” and “vraisemblabilisation.” “Naturalization” is the process of bringing “the deviant within a discursive order” and makes it seem natural (140). “Recuperation” stresses the notion of “recovery,” of “putting to use” (141). “Vraisemblabilisation” is another term used in literary theory to refer to this reading strategy. It emphasizes the importance of cultural models of the “vraisemblable” as sources of meaning and coherence (142). Besides these terms, this process of interpretation has been given other names in literary criticism. The Russian Formalists call this process “motivation,” which for them is the process of justifying items within the work itself by showing that they are not arbitrary or incoherent but quite comprehensible in terms of functions which we can name.

Culler’s emphasis on the conventions of reading and the role of the reader is similar to Roland Barthes’ interest in the reader and the act of reading especially as the latter talks about “writerly” or “scriptable” texts to which much of modern literature belongs (20-30). These texts offer us the joys of cooperation and co-authorship because they involve us in the dangerous activity of creating our world now together with the author, as we go along, as well as, they require us to look at the nature of language itself. It is the reader who is responsible for finding the probable from the improbable and discovering the truth of any given text. What is important is the person’s linguistic competence which is “a tacit” knowledge of the rules of construction and the synchronic literary conventions that enable him/her to recognize and produce works of literature. The structure is not in the system underlying the text but in the system underlying the reader’s act of interpretation. I think we can safely assume that concrete poems which will be discussed here are “writerly” texts because much is unsaid by words while a lot is hinted at, by

paintings which exist in the poem as signifiers waiting for the reader to decode their meanings or signified.

The role of the reader is essential in decoding or naturalizing the text and in revealing the mystery. The reader participates in the production of meaning since he/she has to find one way or another to approach this new mode of writing. Man is a *homo significans*, a creature who gives sense to things, and probably this is why we enjoy such poems after all. This mental tendency derives from the emergence of human beings as language animals, *homo pictor*; creatures constituting themselves and also their universe by symbols of their own making. These experiments typically result in unusual "visual constructs" that impede, deflect, and otherwise coax the readers' eyes out of their habitual, left-to-right, top-to-bottom progress through a text. The predictable "flow" of the old free verse line thereby gives way to a "multi-dimensional" field of unexpected movements, arrests, connections, and disjunctions. It is because of these elements that the readers are given a sense of "bliss" or "jouissance," a special kind of pleasure from these "writerly" texts.

Both Cummings and the Futurists were alike in that they both tried to inject life into literature by various typographical manipulations and both created vitality and movement in their artistic creation. However, while Futurism was a movement linked with the glorification of war and somehow was associated with politics and war, Cummings' poetry had two functions: like the imagists, he wanted to show a heightened awareness of a seemingly insignificant scene or object: he is able to create a relationship between his subjects and his readers by increasing our awareness of things and by capturing some essence of existence with vitality and aliveness. Cummings wrote about love, birth, growth, dying, the seasons, flowers and nature. That is why we can say that unlike the futurists, Cummings recognizes a system of values that still exists in the world. His creed does not depend upon political or philosophical ideologies. Cummings also was an excellent satirist, and he wrote about the things he detested such as hypocrisy, cruelty and exploitation. For example, satires of advertising, advertisers, machines, money, businessmen and other concepts of mass production seem to predominate in the volume *is 5*, published in 1926. For most part of these poems, Cummings ridicules the superficial values Americans pride themselves on. In his essay entitled "From Bad Boy to Curmudgeon: Cummings' Political Evolution," Cohen traces the development of Cummings' career from the playful lyricist of the 1920s who valued open-mindedness and independent thought to the dogmatic curmudgeon of the late years who enjoyed shocking the middle class, opposed militarism and hated any form of organized authority which exerted power on his freedom in thinking and writing; Communism and the American bourgeoisie (Cohen 1987, 87).

Cummings is not a schoolboy or trifler playing with forms, and his techniques are not simply gimmicks. We might call him *avant gardist* because he has taken a completely idiosyncratic attitude toward the conventional techniques of writing verse. Of course, there will always be persons who disagree with this attitude, but we cannot deny that these are innovative ways by which poets express their attitudes, feelings or impressions. After all, all these poets had something to say about war, life, loneliness, love, etc. These poets also prove that experimentation is important in poetry, as Pound says: "willingness to experiment is not enough, but unwillingness to experiment is mere death" (149). In other words, experimentation may not be a guarantee of excellence, but it is considered to be an essential element which keeps poetry vivid and fresh.

Cummings proves that the manner of expression is inseparable from what is being expressed. Those critics or poets who claim that poetry is only great when it has a meaning are wrong because even nursery rhymes, which may be made of confusing and unintelligible clusters of words, do have meaning and do perform a function: to get the child to sleep, for example. We memorize the rhymes not for what we understand from them but for what remains delightfully incomprehensible. What I am trying to say is that the absence of explicit meaning in poetry is not as odd as it may appear. We do not ask for the meaning of sunset; we appreciate its beauty without asking. We do not ask for the meaning behind a beautifully crafted necklace, nor do we question the message behind a beautiful landscape or a symphony. We enjoy these pieces of art for the beauty and excitement they provide. Similarly, we can appreciate a poem even if it presents us with no apparent message. Whether or not experimental poetry is a temporary or a permanent evolution of linguistic art form is unpredictable and beside the point because the poem will go where it needs to go, rather than where it is man's spiritual need for it to go. If it needs to return to more complex grammatical structures, it will. But right now it seems to need to go to the foundations of meaning in language, to convey its message in forms akin to the advanced methods of communication operating in the world of which it is a part, and to be seen and touched like a painting or a piece of sculpture, not to be always shut away between the dark pages of a book. This need is being more and more felt throughout the world.

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