

E. E. Cumming, a Case of Experimentation

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Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question

—e. e. cummings—

I

Duly catalogued, classified and respectfully relegated, E. E. Cummings, a “constant challenger”,⁽¹⁾ seems yet to survive his once bewildered audience. With other moderners, his main challenge, by intention and in principle, was admittedly that of ‘future against past’, an eternal theme, yet E. E. Cummings, by intuition and in practice, presents a unique challenge, to which ‘poetry’ is responsible.

In an obsessed search for the ultimate expression, he subjected himself to a radical experimentation in poetry never attempted in English language since the day of Tristram Shandy in fiction. The notorious “violence done to language” and to typography has been registered as another novelty to versification ... a poetic ‘Columbus’ egg’ so to speak.

Poetry being an affair of ‘expression’, his experimern^tation in expression quite unwittingly unlocked the closets that contained ‘skelton of the family’ —by exploring for the horizon of expression, he quite inadvertently exposed poetry to the vacuum.

We are here exclusively concerned with the interpretation of his experiments in view of poetry at large.

II

“A modern of the moderns, he displays a seventeenth century obsession with desire and death; part Cavalier, part metaphysician... a thinly disguised and

(1) Untermeyer, Louis, *Modern American Poetry*, Mid-Century Edition, p. 508.

wholly unashamed romantic poet⁽²⁾", says Louis Untermeyer implying that Cummings is only another of the poets who puts old wine into a flashy new bottle and sells it as new liquor. Obviously Cummings was less interested in remoralizing 'poetry' than was he bent upon revolutionalizing only the 'expression' of it — he inherited 'poetry'. After all no poet can be so thoroughly a revolutionary as to abandon poetry without ceasing to be a poet, and E. E. Cummings, by intention, remains a poet.

The greater irony is, however, that his experimentation went too far although "it is often true that only by going too far can we find out how far we can go"⁽³⁾, and our task is to speculate what is the circumstantial significance and the logical consequence of the experiments which were carried beyond the purpose.

His experimentation and attainment in expression, the whole technicality of it all, was such that it induces "an imagination that merges the thing described with the way of describing it", an illusion if not a confusion, which was "his method"⁽⁴⁾.

The confusion is critical. There is a semantic problem of human communication in general and thereupon poetry is fatally dependent. We seldom confuse or identify, for an instance, the urge to strike a man, the very act of striking, and the pain on the part of the victim, but oftener in literary observation of factors and process of our verbal communication.

The confusion causes an illusion of independence and freedom of poetry, namely "the personality of the poem itself; that is, its quality of independence from both the reader and the poet, once the poet has separated it from his personality by making it complete... a new and self-explanatory creature"⁽⁵⁾ ... the accepted credo of the modern poetry.

In the subsequent discussions "his method" will be studied in view of the respective function contributory to the independence of poetry.

(2) *Ibid.* p. 509.

(3) Eliot, T. S. "The Third W. P. Ker Memorial lecture", *The Music of Poetry*, 1942, in John Hayward, *T. S. Eliot Selected Prose*, p. 64, 1955.

(4) Rodman, Selden, *100 American Poems*, p. 22, 1948.

(5) Graves and Riding, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, 1927, quoted in Untermeyer, *op. cit.* p. 22—23.

First, by way of induction, we shall view poem 276 from the collection *NO THANKS* :

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r
 who
 a)s w(e loo)k
 upnowgath
 P P E G O R H R A S S
 (aThe) : l eringint(o-
 eA
 !P :
 S a
 (r
 rIvIng .gRrEaPsPhOs) to
 rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
 ,grasshopper ;

This baffling piece is perhaps the extremity of the Cummingsian Pugatory where we see the affairs in their radicals. The poem, if it cares to be called by that name, seems to be created and presented thus in order to occasion in us an impact "equivalent to" that which we might receive from a boistrous, rampant hustle-bustle, the vital and mysterious flight, the intense presence and the irregular insect movements of a swarm of grasshoppers, visible and invisible, in an open field. This is a new kind of creation upon a printed page, not exactly a piece of drawing nor of poetry.

We notice in this piece a thorough visualization of sense appeal, close to drawing yet remaining to be literary by dint of sheer use of typed letters, an absolute absence of syntax and grammatical coherence to intimate the content if any, impossibility to memorize, to read aloud or to convey in any other form but as presented and so on. In a word, all is for an effect that can be accomplished only thus ... no equivalent, a perfect independence.

This, perhaps, is what MacLiesh meant when he said "Poetry should not mean/but be". Whether should we approve or disapprove of this as a poem, one thing is clear, that he created this as a poem of his own norm.

And most likely it is a trite to ask here how can one control the effect his creation will affect in the audience when it is given such a complete independence

and rendered to sheer accident, and whether art of language can outgrow language, and the expression become the expressed.

III

The most conspicuous of his oddities is his insistent employment of typographical innovations ever since his early poetic works in nascent Dada-instilled freaks, which gradually grew into a "private convention of expression" of his own,

The never-aging, incorrigible, untiring poet so meticulously set his mind upon contriving and experimenting with typograpy that the typography itself became the integral and the ultimate of his poems. To quote again from T.S. Eliot, "the true experimenter is not impelled by restless curiosity, or by desire for novelty, or the wish to surprise and astonish, but by compulsion to find, in every new poem as in his earliest, the right form for feelings over the development of which he has, as a poet, no control."⁽⁶⁾ And how true was Cummings as an experimenter? The answer may not be inferred from the product alone, although more often he is accused of being too much given to snobery and artificiality.

We are here less concerned with the actual cases and kinds of the tricks he invented and applied, or with classifying and interpreting them than with the speculation over the circumstantial significance thereof.

Typographical irregularities especially, among other derangements in syntax and grammar etc., seem to be the inevitable expression for the poet at each occasion ... any free junction or disjunction of words or use of any symbols available on a typewriter key-board could be accepted as long as they are to be read as musical scores are, but his experiments went beyond the limit too often to be occasional and certainly too far to be instrumental. Perhaps Cummings was the first who made the typography of the printed verse the inseparable attribute of the verse, "the personality of the poem".

Whether intended or not, this is odd in many ways. The oddity itself gets into one's eyes, but more significant is the fact that poetry is, in a sense,

(6) Eliot, T.S., (from the editor's Introductory Essay to) *A Choice of Kipling's Verse*, 1941, quoted in John Hayward, *op. cit.* p. 86.

adultrated...poetry, as an art of language, thus accomodating that which is not essentially language-equivalent. And the experiment leads to a question 'can poetry, thus adultrated, still be poetry?'. Here is another example in milder tone, poem 302 from *New Poems*.

so little he is
 so.
 Little
 ness be

 (ing)
 comes ex
 -pert-
 Ly expand : grO

 w
 i
 ?n
 g

 Is poet iS
 (childlost
 so ; ul
)foundclown a

 -live a
 , bird
 !O
 & j &

 ji
 &
 jim, jimm
 ; jimmy
 s :
 A
 V
 o(

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 ,

Here we hold our tongue, simply because we could not read it aloud, but how strange it is to feel a distinct impact of the poem with its rhythm and the wake the last several lines do insinuate so much without a word! Perhaps this is

not a poem, but it certainly carries what poetry legitimately carries.

IV

His often quoted lines from poem 180, which, though it does not demonstrate very much of a-grammatical feature of his poems, reads :

since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you ;

Different from obscurity of many poems of ordinary cast, his is one almost helpless. Firstly we have some mild grammatical distortion, exploiting analogy within the realm of ordinary syntax and verbal convention. This includes the free interchange of parts of speeches, joining and disjoining of words etc.

Then we have the general disregard or absence of syntactical context including the banishing of grammatical coherence and dismembered system of utterances.

Since all the clues to the punctuation are as misleading as precarious in his versification, the reader is forced to be alert and at the same moment to surrender his ordinary practice of grammatical apprehension and comprehension, which Cummings ironically calls "unthinking". The sentence and its subordinate units are no longer a consistent body of expression in his scheme, and instead, a psychological unit of sensation coincides with the unit of expression. Grammatical consistency, if ever observed, seems to govern only within such single body which does not stretch beyond several lines.

Finally there are many devices intended to impair the grammatical inertia to operate. Irrelevant, unpredictable fission and fusion of words, dismembring of grammatical suffix and prefix and scattering of them in regressive order or any other imaginable position, interposing of periods and commas, treacherous capitalization of unexpected parts of words . . . with which almost all of his poems are spattered and for which there is no special need of quotation.

In poem 69 he superbly grafts French dialogue in to English background, a

stock technique for many other apres-guerre poets and perhaps a truer description of the cosmopolitan air of the period, yet there is, in this case, a poignant mockery of the poet at the begotten dependence of the “mostpeople” upon linguistic comprehension for poetic appreciation.

If we consider these experiments, or mere tricks, as mere technical inventions, these certainly are a dissipation for a lost purpose. However, the circumstantial significance of his experimentation in defiance of grammatical perception is rather foreboding: it not only challenges the convention of typography but also the nature and the state of actual language as a human behavior. We do actually hear and speak incoherent words clearly understanding and expressing, and when we think and feel in words, they scarcely form a grammatical whole.

The rather blind experimentation of Cummings, with some others, silently opens the way for further questions about the language-poetry relationship: poetry inclined to be independent of language. Is it language failing or poetry outdoing language?

Language is basically auditory in perception which involves time, and poetry, at least of Cummings, seems to attempt at neutralizing time in language continuum. The a-grammatical expression, being one of the devices to accomplish the effect, prevents progressional exposition of the meaning and prompts the instantaneous comprehension of independent meaning and sensation as words (or sounds and vision) reach the audience. It also gives a “sudden” revelation over the entirety at critical moments, for an instance, at the last word or line.

The grammatical anarchy presupposes an order based upon pre-grammatical reality, which E. E. Cummings seems to have attempted to exploit and imitate.

V

E. A. Poe “would define...the Poetry of words as the Rhythmical Creation of beauty⁽⁷⁾”, and the sense of rhythm in linguistic phenomena is also connected with psychological time. When exposed to meaning-carrying flow of sounds reaching us upon the single-track linear dimension of time, rhythm will occur with recurrences

(7) Poe, E. A., *The Poetic Principle*, “Modern Library”, p. 389, 1951.

of any common denominator of speech feature within the given span of utterance. The present perception is referred back to the memory and referred forward to the anticipation; tention and relaxation caused by anticipation-fulfillment fluctuation becomes a rhythm.

However, when we step aside from this linear-dimensioned perception, and obtain sensations from the stimula-source spread over two-dimentional space, we are defying time. E. E. Cummings not by intention, but by intuition, spread the language and its rhythm over timeless space. Though not the optimum specimen for the illustration, poem 221 is quoted from anthology *W* :

n(o)w
 the
 how
 dis(appeared cleverly)world
 iS Slapped; with; liGhtninG
 !
 at
 which(shall)lpounceupcrackw(ill)jumps
 of
 THuNdeRB
 1oSSo! M iN
 -visibly mongban(gedfrag-
 ment ssky? wha tm)eani ngl(essNessUn
 rolli)ngl yS troll s(who leO v erd)oma insCol
 Lide.! high
 n, o ; w :
 theraincomIng
 o all the roofs roar
 drownInsound(
 &
 (we(are like)dead
)Whoshout(Ghost)atOne(voiceless)O
 ther or im)
 pos
 sib)ly as
 leep)
 But l!ook—
 s
 U
 n : starT birDs(1EAp)Openi ng
 t hing ; s(
 —sing
)all are aLI(cry all See)o(ver All)Th(e grEEEn
 ?earth) N,ew

The “dis (appeared cleverly) world”, may simultaneously denote, the earth which has deprived of its essence of an inhabited world, hence dis-world, the world so unreal and transfigured, while it is qualified, reflectively as one once appeared clever, and how has it cleverly disappeared. Up to this line, the words are all in lower case and hence subdued in order to strike it hard with “is slapped”, which is emphasised by irrelevant capitalization.

“lightning” is jerkily disturbed by two irregular G's in higher case, then another ebb in small-letters in a continuation in anticipation of the sudden register of thunder blossom, the lightning, then the droning is echoed in capitalizations in the ensuing lines for a while.

“high now the rain coming”, the configuration of the typography, suggesting the fall of rain drops and its direction of descent and the receding thunder and unusual quietness which spreads over the earth and its population with a mystical potency.

Then suddenly emerges “s”, which a while unrecognizable, but no sooner the “sUn” emerges, the one-ness of it is visualized in the paramount isolation of U among the scattering fragments, as if among the cloudlets. Then the boistrous chirping and twittering of birds are heard whose here-and-thereness is given notes by the whimsical capitalization.

Finally every phenomenon on the revived earth becomes animated with living tribes but they are united inseparably..... the parenthesis serve to form verbal and imageric constituents of the line indiscriminate and united. And the world so entirely metamorphosed in green attire to be wondered at, hence a question mark, and how utterly, strikingly, it is New!

The traditional stanza forms and verse typography in print or otherwise seem almost too demur against what the above sample demonstrates in its full vigor. And whether visual or auditory, the sense of ordinary rhythm is very often shattered in Cummings' poems. In many instances, Cummings' lines are not only irregular, but are a-regular where no anticipation is possible. In such poems of his, as the one quoted, the unpredictable, ever precarious abruptness of the progress of the expression will not let us settle, but, instead, irritates and even alarms.

The suspense and surprise is an immediate sensation to the reader quite independent of the actual content of the lines. Sudden termination of a line, abrupt encounter with unexpected stimuli to a surprise, etc., are in themselves live sensations. The tension caused by such suspense and surprise may be set ambush along the lines in such a way that it would support the sense and the

rhythm of the contents simultaneously. Since it is impossible to surprise an audience which is conditioned to anticipate surprise, a skillful and rhythmical interchange of irregularity and regularity is found no less effective than it is necessary.

In contrast to the boisterous sample quoted above, here quoted is another poem in which the moon is described. This is poem 277, in which we observe the round moon in the sky gliding in the way we see her in multi-exposed photograph or cubist painting of smooth movement of the moon in O's in capital, while down below we see ragged square buildings and the sky-line in which all o's are reduced to lower case, perhaps the windows reflecting the moon above.

mOOn Over tOWns mOOn
 whisper
 less creature huge grO
 pingness

 whO perfectly whO
 fLOat

 newly aOne is
 dreameat

 oNLY THE MooN o
 VER ToWNS
 SLoWLY SPRoUTING SPIR
 IT

VI

It is an irony that the most modern and artificial type of poetry should be written in such a racy colloquialism as one exploited by E. E. Cummings. Yet it seems predestined that "Every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself, as a return to common speech"⁽⁸⁾. It is so basically because the use of colloquialism is always something more than the matter of diction and stylistics to a poet ... it is the exposition of his poetry. It is his attitude and approach to his audience toward a new poet-poem-reader relationship.

Colloquialism as a mode of exposition may mean an affectation of un-

(8) Eliot, T. S., "The Third W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture", *op. cit.*, p. 58.

affectedness, an assumption of a conduct while it is an effect-calculating performance. Colloquialism, besides its directness in appeal and reference, eliminates 'artifice for its own sake', if spontaneity is everything for sincerity of a conduct. It naturally reduces the aesthetic distance involved and strengthens the illusion of the situation where the reader is actually being talked to.

Once this is established, it follows the course of further abandonment of formality in assumption at least, if not real. It dispenses of its verbal conventions in favor of psychological actuality to support what is to be called "subjective monologue"⁽⁹⁾.

Subjective monologue may soon take the reader along to "interior monologue"⁽¹⁰⁾ in which he is to find a random transcription of poetic experiences as registered in words in the state preceding the expression, i. e., before they are consciously organized by the poet for verbal expression in conformity to the convention. This is more impressionistic than abstract in its technique.

Here the reader identifies himself no longer with the imaginary listener, but with the protagonist, the poet, with whom he shares the stuff beyond and before the expression; here is a possibility for an ultimate sympathy and the reader willingly takes the detached performance for a personal and even private conduct of the poet.

After all, the reader is in the presence of the poem, and not in the presence of the poet or the situation the poem is laying out. The use of ultra-colloquialism in diction and syntax, concurrently with other devices, serves in establishing the illusion of actuality, the existence of the poem apart from what it is about. Perhaps poem 152 may be quoted, though not an astounding example, for a typical subjective monologue developing into interior monologue.

look at this)
a 75 done
this nobody would
have believed

(9),(10) Wells, H. W., *New Poems from Old*, p. 186—189, 1940.

(11) All the verses of E. E. Cummings quoted in this paper including the epigraph are from *Collected Poems, E. E. Cummings* Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York.

would they no
kidding this was my particular

pal
funny aint
it we was
buddies
i used to

know
him lift the
poor cuss
tenderly this side up handle

with care
fragile
and send him home

to his old mother in
a new nice pine box

(collect

VII

Admittedly E. E. Cummings is not the only and the first that attempted the experimentation and it could have been even incidental to his poetry. We only assert that the basic obsession with which he proceeded in his poetic efforts were valid. His radical experiments, thanks to his enthusiasm and dexterity, transcended to be sheer inventions and even anticipated the ultimate poetry.

His youthful adventure in typography, mangling of syntax, visualized rhythm and uses of extreme colloquialism etc., are major scopes explored and the results thereof seem to define 'poetry' against vacuity.

While poems will not acknowledge the possibility of being rendered into any other way and form than they are—a distinctive nature of poems, poetry also seems unique in its affected unity and identification of the described and the description — a short-circuted communication of experience. And by dint of such inherent nature, poems are given independent individual "personality" and become "self-asserting existence".

Through literary dissipation, impudent iconoclast that he was perhaps, E. E.

Cummings served his Muse in her cause of poetic independence.

Poetry, as a human expression, has two terms of analysis, i.e., as conduct and as performance, and the affected, or natural, fusion of spontaneity and aesthetic independence is more of the character of poetry than of other types of art. E. E. Cummings' experimentation and its results stand enigmatic at the very apex of the two phases of poetry, the absolute human expression in language.

Poetry, thus demands and deserves the scale of accomplishment and values of its own, and the concept and practice of poetry must be defined by and in its own terms. And finally, when we have completed the experiments in all kinds of possibilities in the expression of poetry with E. E. Cummings, we confront a question: 'Is language, after all, servicable tool for poetry?' and how can we save this question from being self-contradicting? We have our question.