

# Interactions – The Bulletin of I.A.W.I.S. No. 13, November 1994

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## Martin Heusser

### *An Eyeful of Silence: The Poetry of E. E. Cummings*

On October 14th, 1994 the American modernist E. E. Cummings would have celebrated his 100th birthday. His writing, in particular his poetry, gave powerful impulses to the literary scene of his day and continues to do so even now. Cummings retrieved typography from oblivion as a poetic dimension of the written page for American and English poetry.

The fundamental importance of the typographical dimension of E. E. Cummings' language is not surprising in the light of his biography. Although primarily known today as a poet, he probably painted as much as he wrote. In the Cummings papers at Houghton, besides his literary notes and manuscripts we find more than ten thousand pages of pencil-drawings, and his estate comprises about 1600 oils and watercolors. The number of his published poems, one may remember, amounts to roughly one thousand. [1] Cummings, therefore, appropriately referred to himself as "poet & painter," and to his poems as "poempictures."

Cummings has restored the visual dimension to the printed word – a facet that began to dwindle away after Gutenberg's introduction of movable type in the fifteenth century. In his *poempictures*, Cummings rediscovered the printed page not only as an aesthetic stimulant, but also as a supplementary information channel. With its help, he can superimpose shapes, outlines or patterns on his writing. The letters "O" and "o," for instance, may thus become icons of the full moon, and semicolons turn into representations of the crescent of the moon, while in one particular poem ("t,h;r:u;s,h;e:s"), commas, semicolons and colons are imitative of the spots of a real thrush.

Yet, for all the deviations Cummings' typography contains, it is still remarkably conventional. The letters as minimal units, for instance, are never touched. There are no crossed-out, rotated, or partly obliterated letters-not even misaligned ones. With the exception of a single instance, CP 265, which is rotated ninety degrees counterclockwise, the poems as a whole are also always oriented horizontally. Unlike Apollinaire, Cummings does not exploit any other arrangement than that, such as placing a line or word vertically, at an angle, or along an arbitrary path, a circle, a square, or a wavy line. [2] Similarly, he never uses anything but letters, numbers, parentheses and punctuation. There are no drawings, no lines, no illustrations, and no pictures.

Essentially, his Cummings' exploitation of typography allows him to attain a substantial compaction or compression of the meaning of his written text. By superimposing visual elements onto the language, he is able to reinforce, undercut or complement his linguistic message, creating interferences that could not be realized in any other way.

These distinctive features manifest themselves primarily in his lyrical work, as in the following late nature poem, which was published posthumously in 1963 as number 42 of 73 Poems:

*n*  
*OthI*  
*n*

*g can*

*s*  
*urPas*  
*s*

*the m*

*y*  
*SteR*  
*y*

*of*

*s*  
*tillnes*  
*s*

At first glance, this does not seem like much like a poem. Not only is the text before our eyes devoid of any conventional poetic form – even the language itself seems to put itself out of the reader's reach. It is only after some scrutiny that we recognize the simple statement behind the apparently random arrangement of letters: "Nothing can surpass the mystery of stillness." By disregarding the conventional distribution of upper and lowercase letters, and by recklessly ignoring traditional word boundaries, Cummings alters the visual appearance of his statement so completely that it is not recognizable at all as an English sentence at first. Instead of the expected linguistic structure, we find a bafflingly intricate visual complex. Closer inspection reveals that "nOthIng" consists of a multitude of artfully interwoven symmetries.

In fact, symmetry seems to be the key to of the poem's structure – "nOthIng" is brimming with symmetries and correspondences of all sorts. The fifteen lines of the poem consist of two halves, symmetrically arranged around "the m" of line eight. Each of these halves comprises two groups of three lines, which are in turn arranged symmetrically around a center line ("g can" and "of," respectively). Finally, those threeliners are themselves symmetrical, as they consist of a (relatively) long middle line preceded and followed by a single letter.

Yet even the most perceptive interpretation of the appearance of this poem will invariably fail to attribute a specific meaning to these correspondences, their number or their particular arrangement. Cummings' use of symmetries, here as elsewhere, aims to create a strong, almost purely aesthetic impression in the reader. The poem is not supposed to be *understood* but to be *felt*. In fact, the visual

appearance of these lines is supposed to blur the reader's vision, as it were, in order to render rational understanding ineffectual. For, as Cummings states in a letter to his sister, "the more we know, the less we feel."

Dyed-in-the-wool transcendentalist that he was, Cummings was convinced that no serious understanding of the world could be attained except through the contemplation of nature and its beauty. As it was for Emerson before him, this splendor is, for Cummings, an expression of God's presence in creation. It is, therefore, inexplicable, forever beyond the reach of the rational mind. For the Transcendentalist, the only way to gain access to, and take part in, this divine nature is, as Tony Tanner puts it, "through the innocent eye" (21). For Cummings, this innocence is embodied in the uninstructed, untainted eye of the child. He insists that not only *his*, but *all* poetry should be read with children's eyes, that is, without the intention to anatomize the words on the page. Clearly, the symmetries in Cummings' poetry are an echo of the mystic beauties of nature, whose purpose is, as Emerson explains, to "delight in and for themselves" (*Nature* 12).

Cummings' typography, then, is characterized by an inherent heterogeneity. On the one hand, there is the poet's intention to convey specific supplementary meaning on a visual level; and on the other, there is the introduction of a purely aesthetic or perceptual element that is not meant to be analyzed rationally. For the interpretation of the visual dimension of his poetry, this means that we must allow for the simultaneous presence of competing or even contradictory readings, and never yield to the temptation to suppress one interpretation in favor of another in order to achieve hermeneutic oneness. That is precisely what Cummings means when he defines poetry as "the temperature at which opposites fuse" [3] and reminds us that "what is to a logician Contradiction is to a poet his daily bread." [4] Poetry is a mystery, Cummings' insists, "an eternal se-cret" which will never yield up its meaning to become "something," least of all an object suitable for rational or "scientific" investigation. [5] The typography of his poems is thus also a visualization of his conviction that all "efforts to analyze her [i.e. poetry's] appearance must always fail." [6]

Hence, we will invariably find in Cummings' verse not only artful order but also an incessant tendency toward anarchy, most frequently in the guise of fragmentation, rupture and dissolution. Lines are broken apparently purely at random, words are torn apart by engrafted letters, words or even whole sentences, and punctuation marks appear in the most unexpected places. All of Cummings' visually oriented poetry is informed by a de-structuring of shape, structure and order, which, to borrow a coinage by Rudolf Arnheim, one could call catabolic. [7] It is a tendency towards disorder that Helen Vendler has noticed, and which she describes as an especially strong "disintegrative impulse" (323). But strong as the catabolic undercurrents in Cummings' language may be, the apparently chaotic typography ultimately always yields meaningful linguistic statements. This inherent obliqueness is an apt metaphor for his Neoplatonic-Christian notion of creation, his conviction that there is, behind the "real" world of our sense-perception, another realm, that of actual reality, to which we have no direct access.

## THE MYSTERY OF STILLNESS

Eclipsed by the striking typography and hidden behind the artless simplicity of its statement, the linguistic dimension of "nOthIng" is almost effaced. In the limpid diction of a Japanese Haiku, Cummings states a very personal experience – an experience, however, which simultaneously claims universal appeal in the absoluteness of its wording: "Nothing can surpass the mystery of stillness." [8] Here, we find two closely related, sometimes even synonymous key terms of Cummings' transcendental world picture: "mystery" and "stillness". The word "mystery" stands for maximum significance or perfection, and is reserved for those things the poet considers relevant in human life: love, beauty, dreams and silence.

Mysteries are of exceptional importance for Cummings, because they defy comprehension: “a mystery isn’t anything which can be known.” Cummings regards the intellect as man’s greatest enemy, because it prevents him from perceiving the essential – i. e. metaphysical – realities of his existence. Since these realities are accessible only to transcendental experience, they are mute in terms of intellectual perception. That is why Cummings claims in the Houghton notes that “all good things are speechless” and “deep communication is silent”. [9]

Mysteries have a paradoxical double nature: they are speechless and most eloquent at the same time. It is this eloquent silence that Cummings seeks in nature in order to imitate it in his own poetry. [10] In the short lines of “nOthIng”, this paradoxical form of communication appears in two guises: as “stillness” and-in absolute form, as it were-as “nothing.” Occupying a dominant positions at the beginning and at the end, the two words enclose the poem, creating an atmosphere of emphatic silence. In this tranquillity the immeasurable cosmos and the presence of God are revealed to the poet as to a mystic.

The word “silence” itself, incidentally, is the other cardinal reference in Cummings’ vocabulary to the paradox of eloquence in muteness. When the poet happily states over and over again that “silence sings,” he means that the expressive powers of silence far surpass those of ordinary language. Silence is coequal and coextensive with the primeval state from which all things stem, and to which all things will return. Silence is part of the unknowable and of the unknown, part of the “archi”, the beginning; silence is part of the primary matter from which both the world and man are made. In the perfect stillness of a sunset, the poet experiences the long-lost Ur-silence in a sort of transcendental flashback:

*(silently all then known  
things or dreamed become un-*

The ungrammatical construction “all ... things ... become un-” underlines the extraordinary quality of the experience and expresses the poet’s aporia through its very incorrectness: what he would like to say cannot be put into language. Characteristically, Cummings presents silence as the complete neutralization of rational thinking (“known things”) as well as of feelings (“things ... dreamed”). What he experiences turns his mind into a *tabula rasa*, expanding the narrow human field of vision and bringing about his mystic union with nature.

The notion of eloquent silence plays a major part in Cummings’ nature symbolism. It is primarily associated with meteorological phenomena, most frequently with snow and rain. Poem 41 from 95 *Poems* illustrates this correlation and designates the eloquence of silence with a typical neologism, “unmeaning”:

*Beautiful*

*is the  
unmean-  
ing  
of(sil*

*ently)fal*

*ling(e  
ver  
yw  
here)s*

*Now*

Similarly full of “unmeaning” are other natural sounds—the rush of the wind or the rustle of leaves. The sound of falling raindrops, though barely perceptible, carries deep meaning. Untranslatable into “ordinary” language, it stands for “always” and “nowhere,” the tangible presence of the universe, the “kosmos”, God’s creation. Even in his early work, Cummings associates the “the great dim deep sound of rain” with cosmic harmony. “Deeply completely conscious,” he hears in it things inexpressible in human language. Like the “primal warblings” for Emerson or “the carpenter’s stretched cord,” the “Blouaugh” of the sea-lion for Williams, or the voices in the wind which “Have shapes that are not yet fully themselves” for Stevens, the sound of the rain means and at the same means not time for Cummings. [11]

## NOTES

[1] The most recent edition is George James Firmage’s Centenary Edition, which includes bibliographical references and an index: E. E. Cummings, *Complete Poems 1904-1962. Revised, Corrected, and Expanded Edition Containing All the Published Poetry*. New York: Liveright, 1994.

[2] It is techniques like these which are exploited by many of Apollinaire’s “Calligrammes” (1913-1916), among them “Paysage” (170), “Lettre-Océan” (183), “Voyage” (198-9), “Il Pleut” (203), “La colombe Poignardée et le jet d’eau” (213) or “Loin du pigeonnier” (221).

[3] The unpublished fragments, notes and manuscripts are quoted from the E. E. Cummings Papers, Houghton Library at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. All references to these writings are made as: Houghton notes. The numerical code that appears in such references designates the Houghton call number. Plain numbers in parentheses or brackets refer to the volume, and numbers preceded by # to the sheet number (where applicable). This reference is to bMS Am 1892.7 (90, #55).

[4] bMS Am 1892.7 (90, #113).

[5] bMS Am 1892.7 (91, #1).

[6] bMS Am 1892.7 (91, #1).

[7] The term derives from the Greek “katabállo” – “to throw down, overthrow” (Liddell-Scott, *A Greek – English Lexicon*). Arnheim’s definition is from *Entropy and Art*. He uses the term as “a broad, catch-all category, comprising all sorts of agents and events that act in an unpredictable, disorderly fashion and

have in common the fact that they all grind things to pieces” (27-8).

[8] Cummings was intimately familiar with the concept of the Haiku. He gained much of this knowledge from R. H. Blythe’s *Haiku*, which was lent to him by John Cage and from which he copied 16 densely typed pages of notes.

[9] bMS Am 1892.7 (90, #432).

[10] In Cummings’ eyes, his own creativeness as a poet is a reflection of creation itself “God is the 1st poet,& Nature is His poem” (bMS Am 1892.7 [90, #130]).

[11] Emerson, “The Poet,” (*Essays* 224 and 226); Williams *Collected Early Poetry* (quoted in Hillis Miller, “The Still Heart: Poetic Form in Wordsworth” [302, later included in *The Linguistic Moment*, 67]); Stevens, *Collected Poems*(191).

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