

Some Aspects of E. E. Cummings' Language

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(Received October 6, 1997)

Of the body of Cummings criticism, two essays in particular have tried to address the issue of Cummings' use of language: Blackmur's "Notes on E. E. Cummings' Language," and Maurer's "Latter-Day Notes on E. E. Cummings' Language." Published twenty-four years apart, Blackmur first asserted that Cummings' language makes him an incoherent poet, difficult to follow and understand. While it took twenty-four years to "defend" Cummings, as Maurer's essay adequately does, Maurer's essay still lacks weight in the sense that many of Blackmur's objections still remain undefended. Maurer's essay brings new light to *how* Cummings uses language, but with Blackmur's assertions still evident, it is difficult to obtain a well-rounded view of Cummings' language in light of his poetry and in light of the man. It is the hope of this paper to show that the inconsistencies and oddities that characterize Cummings' style make him one of the more original, if not enjoyable, poets of the 20th century.

Blackmur's Thrill of Substance

Of the two, Blackmur is the more critical of Cummings and his approach to language. Summarized as a "kind of baby-talk" (Blackmur 124), Cummings is treated as a minor poet by Blackmur. Minor in the sense that Cummings chose a limited subject matter, chiefly wonder, joy, love, and societal criticism, and even worse, clouded his subjects in a mess of over-used nouns and verbs mixed with a hodgepodge of grammatical hype:

Excessive hyphenation of single words, the use of the lower case ' i ', the breaking of lines, the insertion of punctuation between letters of a word, and so on, will have a possible importance to the textual scholarship of the future; but extensive consideration of these peculiarities today has very little importance, carries almost no reference to the *meaning* of the poems. Mr. Cummings' experiments in typography...are dangerous only because since their uses cannot readily be defined, they often obscure rather than clarify the exact meaning (of the poem) (Blackmur 110).

Blackmur's assertion does carry some weight. Cummings' musings with grammar

and diction is what first marks him as unusual. And anybody interested in understanding Cummings, or any poet for that matter, after a quick first reading will surely find Cummings impossible to read. However, isn't *re-reading* poetry one of aims of the art? Blackmur's black-and-white philosophy of poetry allows no room for experimentation, let alone Cummings' quirky originality, so it is only natural Blackmur would find Cummings' work "unintelligible."

Unintelligible in that to Blackmur, in order for a poet to bring meaning to a poem, there must exist an equivalence between the poem's language and the poem's object. The poem ranges from the relationship between the words and feelings to the relationship between the poet's intelligence and field of experience. Words express a desired feeling and this feeling originates from the poet's intelligence and experience. Using this philosophy as a means of evaluation, Blackmur goes on to find fault after fault with Cummings.

Cummings' next offense is his lack of imagination. Blackmur is particularly struck by the "sameness" among Cummings' work, particularly the "vagueness of image and a constant recurrence of words" (Blackmur 110). For example, in *Tulips and Chimneys* and *&*, Blackmur counts that Cummings uses the word "flower" forty-eight and twenty-one times, respectively. From this, the reader understands that to Cummings, "flower" is an important image and uses that image to convey a feeling. However, the word is used so much that the reader becomes lost in its purpose and meaning: the experience escapes the reader:

"The question is, whether or not the reader can possibly have shared the experience which Mr. Cummings has had of the world; whether or not it is possible to discern, after any amount of effort, the precise impact which Mr. Cummings undoubtedly feels upon his whole experience when he uses the word" (Blackmur 111).

This is a good example of Blackmur's poetic philosophy conflicting with Cummings. Blackmur is looking for concrete feelings and ideas. The poet's experience and intelligence should be concrete before writing and this defined attitude should then be conveyed using concrete words, words that help the reader identify with the poem and the poet. But because Cummings "weakens" his poetry by using such a vague image as a flower as the center of his poetry, his poetry also becomes weak. "It is not the mere frequency of the use that deadens the word flower into an idea; it is the kind of thought which each use illustrates in common" (Blackmur 112). By seldom stating what flower, the content of the word vanishes. It has no inner mystery, only an impenetrable surface.

So far we have seen that Cummings' grammar and abstractness weakens his poetry. This then leads to the crux of Blackmur's analysis of Cummings: that while within Cummings' own private world of abstraction he is a good poet, to the outside world, to the general reader, Cummings is ineffective:

"...when in any poem the important words are forced by their use to remain impenetrable, when they can be made to surrender nothing actually to the senses—then the poem is defective and the poet's words have so far deceived him as to become ideas merely. Mr. Cummings is not so much writing poetry, as he is dreaming" (Blackmur 112).

Maurer and "a kind of baby talk"

Maurer's essay offers Cummings the much-needed room he deserves, but falls short of the mark concerning an analysis of the *language* of Cummings. Rather, Maurer defends Cummings style and linguistic freedom from Blackmur's harsh attack by explaining three unique ways in which Cummings' conventionalized his style. These conventions, once understood, help make Cummings' poetry much more coherent, but in terms of language and how Cummings employed its use, much more needs to be said.

The first convention Maurer asserts is Cummings' child-like way of forming language. Child-like in the sense that Cummings refused to lay down his poetic principles or set aside his personality in order to write like the "everydayman." This observation obviously touches upon Cummings' poetic philosophy, marking the biggest difference between Maurer's and Blackmur's critique of Cummings. Maurer carefully considered Cummings' personality and how it influenced his use of language, where Blackmur simply considered Cummings' poetry apart from the poet. It is generally agreed that Cummings' first book, *Tulips and Chimneys*, proved well that Cummings does understand rules and traditions. Indeed, Cummings exemplifies the ideal that any decent poet must first demonstrate an understanding of convention before he throws them all to hell. But beyond this book, Cummings "has always wanted his reader to drop all the accoutrements of the grammarian and the rhetorician that he may be wearing as protective clothing and to approach his poems, as it were, naked and unafraid," much like a child approaches the world (Maurer 137). And with this approach, Cummings quite literally invented a language, complete with its own grammar, with which he could express his ideas on his own terms:

"What (Cummings) asked of his reader is, as always, the frank approach of a child, and it is this attitude which he himself takes to his mother tongue and to its tenets and rules. He fashions language as a child would, merely practicing what he preaches. He divested himself of the literate adult's prejudice against such things as double negatives, redundant superlatives and comparatives, and non-dictionary words" (Maurer 139).

Of the numerous linguistic tricks Cummings pulls, his unique use of prefixes and suffixes stand out the most, for they are usually the first thing that a new-comer to Cummings finds frustrating. Much like a child, Cummings constructed his language by means of analogy, forming the past tense of irregular verbs by adding the *-ed* suffix (*runned*, *swimmed*), and forming all comparatives or superlatives by adding the

normal-*er* or-*est* (*beautifuler, chiefest*). Cummings also doubles the meaning of some words, like *last*, which is already a superlative, and saying *lastest*. And just a child will often make his/her point clear by repeating negatives and superlatives three times over, so does Cummings. The following from *I x I* is a good introduction to Cummings' peculiarities:

which is the very
 (in sad this havingest
 world) most merry
 most fair most rare
 ...the livingest givingest
 girl on this whirlingest
 earth?

Why you're
 by far the darlingest (*I x I*, L : 420).

It is obvious to see that Cummings is giving unusual weight to normally common and plain words. Words that, if left alone and unmanipulated, would lose their new significance and remain hidden behind the poem's persona.

A final "childlike" technique Cummings used is word coinage. This aspect of Cummings' poetry would later become one of his hallmarks that set his work far apart from other poets, in which he was able to transcend the ordinary, restricting meaning of words and create completely new ideas. Maurer adequately illustrates this point:

In a latter book, however, Cummings took the same prefix, *un*, and added it to a word in such a way as to form a pun: in *manunkind*. Here attention is focused on what is not present; but by placing *un* in the middle of the word he in effect changed the suffix *kind* to the adjective *kind* and ended with the quite normal adjective *unkind* modifying *man*. The result is not merely a coined word; it's a new idea, which happens to be an apt and concise expression of one of Cummings' convictions" (141).

Of his other conventions, the combining of two or more words to form a new one is the least frustrating and easiest to untangle. Quite often these words appear to be missing a hyphen or possibly a typo. Simple to correct and understand. But their "newness" helps Cummings promote his language ideals. For instance, the printing of several words together is one way Cummings adds a commentary to the words without having to rely on other word, a sort of efficient criticism. By saying "poorbuthonest workingman," Cummings implies that words have become a cliché. More so, Cummings also often introduced new concepts into his poetry by juxtaposing two words with completely different images. Such "new" words as *flowerterrible* and *timeshaped* indeed slow the reader's understanding of the poem. But, as Cummings' so often asserted, this characteristic of unconventional juxtapositioning helps keep his readers in a state of wonder, making them think twice about the words they use and the empty

meanings words can convey.

Again it is important to note that Maurer's essay is a defense against Blackmur's treatment of Cummings, and rarely does Maurer support Blackmur's ideas. However, both share the same opinion when it comes to Cummings' final characteristic of language: his use of metonymy. Metonymy is based on reducing objects rather than comparing them: an object associated with a thing is substituted for the thing itself (*crown* for *king*), or a corporeal object is used to represent an abstract concept or idea (a *heavy thumb* for *dishonesty*). Blackmur reduced Cummings' metonymy to the mere "thrill of substance," arguing that within Cummings' poetry "the substance of the metonymy is never assigned to anything:"

"When Mr. Blackmur says that Cummings' metonymy contains only the 'the thrill of substance', he means that in the case of such a word as *flower*, one of Cummings' metonymical vehicles, the substance-flower-is there but the idea of which it is a reduction is neither present nor ascertainable. If the reader receives a 'thrill' from such a word as *flower*, well and good; but Mr. Blackmur asserts that a thrill is all he will receive" (Maurer 148).

In Cummings' use of metonymy, he has taken an abstract word and made it stand for a host of ideas. However, when Blackmur's essay was published, Cummings metonymy had not matured, therefore, Blackmur's 'thrill of substance' is not applicable to the body of Cummings' work. The new thrill is not found in the substance of Cummings' metonymy but in the uniqueness of its use. Within his work, Cummings makes words metonymical reductions for a whole set of concepts, and in a way is creating an easy cipher of meaning, understandable but not completely so at first sight.

In comparing the surprisingly different opinions Blackmur and Maurer have about Cummings, it is amazing to note just how far literary criticism had progressed in twenty-five years. In short, Blackmur's philosophy of literature interferes with his critical analysis of Cummings. A hard, definitive style may have been necessary back in the mid-thirties, but as Maurer has shown, if one is to accurately assess any poets worth, consideration of his/her personality is a must. In this light, Blackmur's ideas are not wrong just too narrow: he left no room for Cummings to be himself. Maurer on the other hand has shown just how gifted Cummings can be as a poet. Allowing room for Cummings' "childish" world, it is obvious that his inconsistencies and quirks are intelligible and deserve to be read with as much attention as any other poet's work.

Works Cited

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