

Cummings and Modernism

MATTHEW Main

Department of Chemistry,

Faculty of Science.

Okayama University of Science.

Ridai-cho 1-1 Okayama 700-0005, Japan

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E. E. Cummings's image as a poet, even to this day, remains quite unclear. On one hand, there is a group who places him in the Romanticist tradition with his chief aim being love and its transcendental boundaries. On the other hand, there are those who find Cummings incomprehensible and thus label him an obscure, avant-garde poet. For the man himself, the latter group would have suited Cummings just fine, but because the two groups exist, considering both perspectives may prove beneficial if we are to find Cummings's accurate place in 20th century literature.

Certainly, both groups, from here out simply referred to as the Romanticists and the Modernists, have a valid argument, for within the scope of Cummings's work, there does indeed exist elements of both schools. He is romantic in his simplicity and in his symbolism: love, nature, the good, and the innocent. Yet, much like Yeats, Eliot, and Auden, Cummings is modern in his rebellion against analytical thinking, scientific analysis, and the capitalistic morals of middle-class life. In fact, his devotion to himself as "supersubject," and his dedication to stylistics sometimes sets Cummings too deep within the Modernist camp. However, rather than cut and divide his quirks into the groups of haves and have-nots, a look at how these two different characteristics work together will clarify his poetic intentions.

First, let us consider how Cummings separates himself from the modernist tradition and the reasons behind this separation. Subjects, for example, differ greatly in content and in treatment. Both Cummings and the Modernists share an interest in the futility of modern life (or to Cummings, everyday life), but where he sees it as a object of satire, they see it as a subject of tragic dilemma. Where Cummings writes about spring's happiness, the Modernists discuss its sorrows. In fact, until his death, Cummings remained one of the few poets to write love poems, straight-forward and serious, for the sake of love. Not only could the Modernists not write about love, but they also couldn't write about any other personal emotion without wondering or justifying how the Individual is to be reconciled with Society. From this outstanding difference, we see that Cummings was not a poet bitten by doubt. As Friedman notes, "(Cummings's) love hasn't a why or a because or an although: it exists for no reason and for that reason

cannot be doubted. It is self-contained, self-sufficient, self-creating, and altogether apart from cause and effect.” (161). In a word, whole.

Another characteristic that sets Cummings apart from the modernists is his vision of reality; namely, how he perceives the world and how the world is to be acted upon. The modernist's view of the world is dark. Life is complex and truth, while capable of being embodied, can rarely be known. Reality is fleet and it is the poet's job to capture either such fleetness or the emptiness it leaves behind. As Eliot explains in his famous essay, “The Metaphysical Poets:”

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning (163).

From this we see that the modernist's view of poetry is a complicated balancing act. The left hand holds the idea that poetry's end need not be for the purpose of personal utility or rational conformation. This idea cheapens poetry, pushing it away from its higher goal of truth. And yet, while the right hand balances this higher truth, truth to a modernist must possess a usefulness of its own, another kind of truth. Truth, then, for the modernist, is not limited to tangible facts, much like science adheres to, but also includes those values which rise from the person, the personal, in search of truth. As Whitehead so briefly said:

What is wanted is an appreciation of the infinite variety of vivid values achieved by an organism in its proper environment. When you understand all about the sun and all about the atmosphere and all about the rotation of the earth, you still may miss the radiance of the sunset. There is no substitute for the direct perception of the concrete achievement of a thing in its actuality. We want concrete fact with a high light thrown on what is relevant to its preciousness (163).

In this view, reality is a multi-faceted thing and no single approach can ever fully grasp its whole. If the purpose of poetry is to give us glimpses of reality, then it cannot adhere to any concrete, single attitude. Yeats touched upon this idea when he said, “Man can embody truth, but he cannot know it” (163). How then, did the modernists deal with this complexity, how did they express it? To begin with, there is the expressive power of language: connotation, suggestion, irony, ambiguity, and ways in which these powers may be increased. Second, the concern of diction and rhythm, over tone and texture. Third, the use of figures of speech and symbolism to increase

meaning and to access deeper, more primitive levels of consciousness. Forth, the dismissal of logic and reason for the purpose of preserving the connectivity of poetry. And finally, the modernists employed a new concept known as the Mask, the idea that the poetic speaker is conceived of as containing the poet's opposite persona, a form of self-mockery. In this way, the poem becomes disassociated from the poet and objectified.

For example, the persona in Yeat's, "Sailing to Byzantium," while setting his sights towards immortal heights, can still at the same time see his futility, he is "but a paltry thing,/A tattered coat upon a stick" (161). Another example can be found in Pound's, "Mauberley:"

'I was
And no more exist;
Here drifted
An hedonist' (393).

Or in, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot's famous poem where the persona, while playing with the idea of heroism, still cannot escape his mediocrity:

And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid (484).

Or as Auden's persona says in, "September 1, 1939," drawing a conclusion about love as the cure of all evils:

May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame (89).

In each poem we find the persona at war with himself, a characteristic double-view. Reality is complex, hence, poetry must be complex. Tension, conflict, reconciliation of opposites, ambivalence, paradox: these are the hallmarks of modernist poetry. As Friedman so pointly puts it:

What is said in the poem is not what it 'means,' for what it means is inseparable from the way it is said. When all is indirect, the reader has to infer the meaning for himself, and since he must make such inferences on the basis of the total context, then it may be said that the meaning is separable from that context. Thus a prose paraphrase can never equal a poem, for it is precisely

the way in which a poem's meanings are embodied that gets left behind in the abstraction which is paraphrase. So it is said that poetry is what is lost in translation" (164).

However, Cummings's approach to reality, his picture of the world, is different from that of the modernists and so his poetic techniques vary in their nature and function. The use of language is a good place to expound upon this difference. For the modernists, everyday life is approached as "a reality." But for Cummings, his life his thought of in terms of "a world." In the introduction to *The Enormous Room*, Cummings remarks: "I live in so many (worlds): which one do you mean?" In which he responds: "I mean the everyday humdrum world, which includes me and you and millions upon millions of men and women." Cummings's point here is that if one can let go, lose rather, the "humdrum" thinking of the everyday world, they will gain the understanding of the three dimensional world. This world to Cummings, comprised of you, me and us, the first, second, and third dimensions, is a place without conflict, compromise, or contradiction. For Cummings, it becomes the world of possibility and hence the source of all values. Referred to as magic, dreamlike, mysterious, and miraculous, in short, this world gives meaning and significance to our otherwise everyday humdrum existence.

Evil for Cummings also exists, even so much so as to poison his world, but evil for him is the absence of mystery. Unlike the modernists view, who see evil as something inherently part of the universe, something that can only be put down or put aside, but never done away with, Cummings's view of evil is that which has been corrupted, for example, innocence to experience. The cure for this evil is love. While not the same, both love and evil still exist within the same world, and so Cummings sees reality as a single thing. His world is complicated but his vision of it is not complex.

Having a simpler view of reality compared to the Modernists, Cummings's view of poetry is also correspondingly simple. His base is the lyric and the satire, from which comes two main themes: the persona who persuades the lover to surrender to love, or the persona who criticizes the "everydayman" for blindly following what society deems fit. Poems "54" and "77," from *Complete Poems* illustrates these ideas.

you shall above all things be glad and young.
For if you're young, whatever life you wear

it will become you;and if you are glad
whatever's living will yourself become.
Girlboys may be nothing more than boygirls need:
i can entirely her only love

whose any mystery makes every man's

flesh put space on; and his mind take off time

that you should ever think, may god forbid
and (in his mercy) your true lover spare:
for that way knowledge lies; the foetal grave
called progress, and negation's dead undoom.

I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing
than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance (66)

when god decided to invent
everything he took one
breath bigger than a circustent
and everything began

When man determined to destroy
himself he picked the was
of shall and finding only why
smashed it into because (93)

These ideas, along with landscapes and seasons, open for Cummings gates leading to the infinite, to another kind of truth. And from these two poems we can also see that Cummings's problem with reality is the opposite of the modernist's: where they use a complex poem to express a complex reality, Cummings treats a simple reality (love or unlove) in a complex way. This complexity is an attempt to awaken us from our humdrum existence and to help us see in a fresh new way what might be considered an ordinary, everyday thing. There are many themes, which over the years have become cliches, and it is these cliches which the modernists avoided. However, just because Cummings's subject matter deals with everyday life, it doesn't mean that his poetry is trifling. On the contrary. It is a central modernist belief that poetic excellence derives not from the poem's subject but from its treatment of the subject. And if Cummings has not shown interest in the modernist Mask; in the ugly, the shocking, and the sordid; in symbolism and mythology—all modernist conventions—then at least he has outdone and separated himself from the modernist's movement with his possibilities of language.

Cummings is a linguistic gymnast, employing in his poetry, just to name few: grammatical shifts, syntactic disarrangements, free-verse experiments, and the mingling of different levels of diction. Aside from these he also excelled in unconventional usage of punctuation and capitalization as well as typographical displacements. These devices help the reader understand, through experience, the nonsensical world of cliches—love, seasons, friendship, etc. “To change the word order radically, for

example, or to break words typographically, prevents the reader from following a sentence rationally and consecutively, so that when he does see the pattern he grasps it all at once rather than abstractly from point to point" (Friedman, 166). Such techniques rather than communicate meaning, provoke insight. Thus, Cummings's challenge of poetry is to say in a new and insightful way what has already been said before. The subject of one of his poems may sound familiar, but when finished with the poem the reader is made to look at the subject from a completely point of view. When Cummings's talks about love in poem "92," from *Complete Poems*, on the surface it may sound like a broken record, but deep down the whole idea is held together with entirely different principles. Not only does he feel what he is writing about, but he also talks about it an entirely fresh way:

i carry your heart with me (i carry it in
my heart) i am never without it (anywhere
i go you go, my dear; and whatever is done
by only me is your doing, my darling)

i fear

no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) i want
no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true)
and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart) (766).

What keeps this poem from being ordinary is its distinct language: the delicacy and balancing of phrasing; the purity of tone; and the careful adherence to sonnet form. Further more, such words as "world" and "fate" and the tree-root-bud imagery imply an intense mystical view of life. What we once thought was familiar turns out to be ineffable.

However, this trait of Cummings, the task of expressing the inexpressible, is where Cummings curiously joins himself with the modernists. For the modernists, the ultimate aim is to achieve a vision of the fleeting moment. As it is fleeting, it is timeless, and thus, the modernists are left with the problem of how to capture in one moment such a huge idea. This is a kind of truth which not even science can reproduce, as it can never approach the immeasurable and the intuitive. However, it is exactly the

poet, with his vision, that can comprehend the immeasurable and the intuitive. Understood in this light, the modernist movement, often criticized for being too dark and negative, takes on a new meaning. For example, in the conclusion of Yeats's, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul:"

When such as I cast out remorse
 So great a sweetness flows into the breast
 We must laugh and we must sing
 We are blest by everything
 Everything we look upon is blest. (172)

Or the conclusion of Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

Quick, now, here, now, always—
 A condition of complete simplicity
 (Costing not less than everything)
 And all shall be well and
 All manner of thing shall be well
 When the tongues of flame are in-folded
 Into the crowded knot of fire
 And the fire and the rose are one.

Or the conclusion of Stevens's "Sunday Morning:"

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
 Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
 Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
 And, in the isolation of the sky,
 At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
 Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
 Downward to darkness, on extended wings (284).

While these modernist strive for some vision of wholeness, a world beyond their own, Cummings too is looking in the same direction, resulting in the perception of a direct, concrete thing. Poem "48" from *Complete Poems* shows this well:

someone i am wandering a town (if its
 houses turning into themselves grow

 silent upon new perfectly blue)

i am any (while around him streets
 taking moment off by moment day
 thankfully become each other (one who
 feels a world crylaughingly float away

leaving just this strolling ghostly doll
 of an almost vanished me (for whom
 the departure of everything is real is the
 arrival of everything true) ad i'm

no (if deeply less conceivable than
 birth or death or even than breathing shall

blossom a first star) one (720).

However, while Cummings and the modernists may both be seeking the same thing, their still lies a major difference between the two. For the modernist, they must struggle to reach their goal, while for Cummings, he goes directly for it without circumventing or musing any other possibilities. Both Cummings and the modernists struggle with two main issues: first the second and third dimensional worlds, and second, how those worlds are to be transcended. For the modernists, the two dimensional world is the world we live in everyday, with the three dimensional being the goal of life, the reason for writing poetry. Via poetry, another means of transcendentalism, the poet can escape from the second dimension into the third. However, for Cummings, the two dimensional world is the immortal world in which we may grasp the fleet third dimensional world of understanding. Both worlds are a part of the same whole, with the second dimension being more obvious. Through poetry—another form of feeling or transcendentalism—Cummings, and his readers, can access the third dimensional world more freely.

“The modernist objection to Cummings is based on the modernist assumption that the affirmative vision has to be earned” (Friedman, 171). This idea sums up succinctly the tension that exists between Cummings and the modernists. From a modernist point of view, Cummings is naïve and sentimental because his “affirmation,” his world of values and ideas, came early and stayed late. From his first book to his last, he never stepped out beyond his subject matter or concern. Indeed, unlike most modernists like Yeats, Eliot, and Auden, Cummings’s poetic career was marked by by unclimax. Not anti-climax as in a let down, but *unclimax*, meaning no such thing existed. His poetry took off like an arrow and flew steady against the horizon, neither falling or rising. For Cummings, there was no typical struggle from dark to light. He was born knowing what he knows, and thus, has been labeled an adolescent.

But is this label too extreme. Compared to the modernist Mask which the modernists

hide behind, Cummings is quite mature and straight-forward. He is not concerned with maturity because he knows that is the first step towards commercialization. There is no Tragic Vision weighing him down because he is certain that we do indeed create our fate. And he has escaped from the shackles of failure, seeing it as a means of freedom and thus embracing it from the start of his career. The City and Mankind don't interest him because he knows that once put together, the two lose their identity and eventually act out of abstractions, rather than pure thought. And finally, Cummings dismissed culture along with success because he knows that if it doesn't come naturally, it's not worth having. Friedman assessment of Cummings's "situation" is worth looking at:

His is not a poetry about us and our Situation. And isn't there something more difficult after all in such a poetry, a poetry which comes telling us we can be different? Isn't it easier, more faddish even, to write of Exile and Alienation and the Symbol? More condescending to show us images of our own ambivalent and anxious selves? More flattering to assure us that affirmations *are* difficult, and that they are to be achieved, if at all, only—later? Isn't there something finally sentimental, irredeemably melodramatic even, in insisting upon the darkness which must precede and accompany our vision of the light? Doesn't this attitude justify us to ourselves, telling us what we are instead of what we might become? Isn't the divided self in manifest danger of becoming in turn a stock response, the modern cliché (172)?

If we are to follow common thought and believe that Cummings is both a romanticist and a modernist, we may be admitting that we really don't understand Cummings as well as we would like to believe. Indeed his poetry has characteristics of both, but both schools of thought, eager to claim Cummings as their own, have missed the idea that perhaps the essence of his poetry is where it intertwines both movements. His romantic intentions are uniquely modernistic, for example, celebrating love with a garbled grammar and diction, and his modern intentions are childishly romantic, transcending the flux of life, via a flower, with no struggle, no strife. As Stevens, in "Sunday Morning," tells us, the transcendental cannot be final:

Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
 In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else,
 In any balm or beauty of the earth,
 Things to be cherished like the thoughts of heaven (282)?

Cummings's "71", from *Xaipe*, shows us that only the finite can be found in the infinite:

luminous tendril of celestial wish

(whying diminutive bright deathlessness
to these my not themselves believing eyes
adventuring, enormous nowhere from)

querying affirmation; virginal

immediacy of precision: more
and perfectly more ethereal
silence through twilight's mystery made flesh—

dreamslender exquisite white firstful flame

...new moon! as (by the miracle of your
sweet innocence refuted) clumsy some
dull cowardice called a world vanishes,

teach disappearing also me the keen
illimitable secret of begin (669)

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