Poem-painter: E. E. Cummings' Artistic Mastery of Words

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Source: *Spring*, October 2002, New Series, No. 11, Poems, Poets, Poetics (October 2002), pp. 79-88

Published by: E.E. Cummings Society

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43915133

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Introduction

From a child's first days in school, she is taught to seek the differences among objects. Kindergarten teachers distribute worksheet after worksheet of "Which one is different?", asking children to select the picture that does not belong. While searching for the lone vegetable in the group of fruit, or the solitary amphibian among mammals, these youngsters absorb, however subconsciously, a discriminatory standard that they will later apply to the world around them. Seeking the triangle in the matrix of squares, for example, perpetuates the idea that difference must be discerned at once, and this may be extended to conclude that a different person, thing, or idea does not necessarily "belong" in society.

This alienating standard, however accurate it may be about primarily superficial differences, fails to accurately judge most things. The illogical and superficial standards of racism and sexism support this idea. Societies have been advised constantly, "don't judge a book by its cover." We are told to evaluate things based on more than their outward appearances or how they may look "on paper." However, many poetry critics do exactly that. Laudatory of standard poetic verse, these critics denounce poetry which varies from the accepted norms of punctuation, spacing, capitalization, or other variables in appearance. Critics such as these rarely proceed beyond the appearance of the words to attempt to grasp the meaning of nontraditional works.

One of the United States' most important writers, E. E. Cummings, is one such poet who, especially in his early years as a poet, received relentless criticism from the literary community for his revolutionary style. Various critics have asserted that Cummings' poetry has little real meaning, and is a "disaster of modern poetry" (Coblentz 50). These critics, however, must have failed to truly analyze Cummings' works in the context of his life, because upon further analysis, one can see the impact created by Cummings' life on his work.

In order fully to appreciate E. E. Cummings' poetry, one must not only analyze the poems themselves but also examine Cummings on a different level. To provide a clear analysis of the multifaceted characteristic of Cummings' poetry, then, I will first elaborate on Cummings' family life. Then I will detail his life-changing experiences in college which contributed to his writing style. Finally, and most importantly, I will discuss the effect of his painting career in the writing of *No Thanks*, his most avant-garde work. In doing these things, I hope to elucidate the true value of Cummings' works and the multifaceted background that has contributed to the creation of his poetic masterpieces.

The Cummings Family in Cambridge

Born October 14, 1894, to Rebecca Haswell Clarke and Edward Cummings, Edward Estlin Cummings grew up in a sound environment, both intellectually and domestically. First, his hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts was a very "self-conscious" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 9) community. Besides being the home of noted authors such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell Lowell, Cambridge contained Harvard University, known not only as the oldest university but the best in the country. In fact, many Cambridge citizens regarded Harvard President Eliot as a much more important figure than "Mr. Cleveland or Mr. McKinley" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 9).

The Cummingses lived at 104 Irving Street, a "huge, three-storied" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 9), "eighteen-roomed" (Dumas 16) ". . . structure with thirteen fireplaces, situated on the point where Irving and Scott Streets come together, not far from Harvard Yard" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 9). E. E. – or Estlin, as his family called him in his youth – felt very comfortable in his home, especially because his father had told him that he had built the house "in order to have you in" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 9). Nevertheless, the Cummings house was always bustling with activity: after all, it housed not only Estlin, his sister Elizabeth, and his mother and father, but also a grandmother, one uncle, and a few servants (Dumas 16). Young Estlin enjoyed the company of his "harmonious arrangement" (Kennedy, *E. E. Cummings Revisited* 11), and growing up in a model family proved to be a fortunate set of circumstances for Estlin and Elizabeth.

Richard Kennedy notes that "The Cambridge of 1894 was an ideal place for a boy to grow up—that is, if his parents were of old New England stock and his father was . . . a professional man of standing" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 9). Indeed, Cummings had both. His father had recently been appointed as a professor of sociology at Harvard. As time progressed, he reached a position of great respect in the Greater Boston Area, and he left Harvard to become the Unitarian Minister of the South Congregational Church (Kennedy, *Dreams* 10). Besides being an important and prominent member of society, however, Edward Cummings also cherished his family bonds. He enjoyed the time he spent with his children, and to them seemed to be "a combination of a scoutmaster and a friendly uncle rather than a minister" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 14). Since his major hobbies included carpentry and masonry, he showed them how to use tools, he made things for them, and allowed them to help him; he would often even tell Estlin and Elizabeth stories while doing these things.

Edward Cummings had a forceful impact on Estlin's development, primarily by providing an example of "power, success, and excellence" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 14) in his own life, creating an atmosphere in which Estlin's unique personality emerged. However, he also affected and helped shape E.E. Cummings the poet. Because of the constant verbalization involved in being a minister, Edward Cummings experimented with different ways to say what he wanted to say. He loved to play with words, and his sermons usually included many puns, altered proverbs, mottoes, slogans, and other

rhetorical avenues to attract or surprise the minds of his listeners. He particularly instituted metaphors and large, controlling images, as demonstrated by the titles of his sermons: "The Picture Puzzle of the Universe," "Mud Pies," and "Spiritual Perennials," among others (Kennedy, *Dreams* 15). This emblematic view existed actually as a common New England frame of mind, but Edward Cummings went beyond this to create allegories; these included "Invisible Barriers or the Bird in the Window," "The New Year Bank Account," and "The Elevator or the Ups and Downs of Life." (Kennedy, *Dreams* 15).

Edward Cummings' wordplay, then, contributed much to the poetry of E. E. Cummings, who himself toyed with words and conventional definitions in his poetry. The most important aspect, though, of Edward Cummings' existence was that he created a happy environment for his son. As E. E. Cummings later recounted in a lecture at Harvard, "no father on this earth ever loved or will love his son more profoundly" (*i :six nonlectures* 9).

Equally responsible for Cummings' pleasant childhood, however, was his mother, Rebecca Haswell Cummings. Not only was she a "jolly, stout, warm, motherly person" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 15) who dearly loved her children, her family also had a rich literary history. In fact, Anthony Haswell, a third cousin, wrote political ballads during the American Revolution, and her great-great-aunt Susanna Haswell wrote the first American novel, *Charlotte Temple* (Dumas 11). Rebecca Cummings herself loved poetry and kept a journal of favorite verses, in which she included poems by writers such as William Shakespeare, Elizabeth Browning, and William Wordsworth. She read nursery rhymes and jingles to Estlin at a very early age, and she sang and played platters on this music box; this helped develop his sense of rhythm (Kennedy, *Dreams* 36). She taught her son to read and write, and continued to read stories and poems to him every day (Dumas 11), hoping for him to follow in the family's literary tradition to become something like Longfellow, the poet whose poems were highly revered in Cambridge and memorized by students at school. Her efforts paid off soon enough, as Estlin recited his first rhyme when he was three: "Oh my little birdie oh / With his little toe, toe, toe!" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 36). Under his mother's instruction, young Estlin could write a brief letter by the time he was six years old, and began a diary shortly after (Kennedy, *Dreams* 28). He also composed verses for Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Christmas, birthdays, national holidays, and for other events (Kennedy, *Dreams* 36). The extent of Estlin's literary knowledge at such a young age highlights Rebecca Cummings' efforts; she allowed her son to grow verbally and helped begin his career as a poet from his early days.

While Rebecca Cummings seemed to give him the fundamental tools for becoming one of America's most famous poets, and Edward Cummings appeared to help hone his mastery of the spoken language, both of them contributed to sustaining his career. They served as a backbone to him in his later years, as well; when, for example, in 1935, no publishing company would accept Cummings' *No Thanks* for publication, his own mother published it for him through a friend's publishing company, the Golden Eagle Press. Even in times of frustration, then, the family did

not sacrifice its close-knit relationship.

A Stylistic Change: "English Versification"

E. E. Cummings studied in various scholastic environments as a child and adolescent; he was home-schooled in his earlier years, then attended a private school, several public schools, the Agassiz school, the Peabody School, and finally the Cambridge Latin School (Dumas 21-22). Throughout these years, he studied several languages: Greek, Latin, and French. Though he faltered in mathematics, he developed a firm grasp of the Romance languages he was studying, in addition to a mastery of the English language.

Harvard University proved to be a catalyst, poetically, for Cummings. In 1911, at the age of seventeen, he finally began attending Harvard. Besides the intense study of the classics for which he had prepared at the Cambridge Latin School, he also took a variety of other classes, including a class called "English Versification" which proved to be decisive for his writing style. In this class, his professor, Dean LeBaron Briggs, gave the students several exercises to experiment with and imitate various poetic styles in all metrical varieties. Cummings was "loosening up" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 93) as a result of these exercises, and his revolutionary style began to take shape. Furthermore, some of the students in his class were editing one of the college's literary magazines, the *Harvard Monthly*. These students, such as Sibley Watson, Scofield Thayer, and S. Foster Damon, introduced Cummings to various forms of modern art: French Symbolist poetry, the works of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, the music of Satie, Stravinsky, and Debussy, and the art of Cézanne (Kennedy, *Revisited* 16), among others. The art of the modernists excited Cummings, and the modern movement changed his outlook on literature, from the highly structured classics he had been studying to more daring and creative styles. He joined his new friends to participate in the publication one of the college's literary magazines, the *Harvard Monthly*, whose editorial board he eventually joined (Liukkonen 1). In addition to the *Harvard Monthly*, its rival journal, the *Harvard Advocate*, published many of his poems as well.

By the time Cummings graduated *magna cum laude* in 1915 (Dumas 22), he had experienced a wave of change. Now fascinated by avant-garde art, modernism, and cubism, he reflected this interest in his Harvard commencement address, which he entitled "The New Art." In it, he commended modernism as practiced by Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and Pablo Picasso (Kidder xxv). Slowly becoming known as a "conspicuous member of the avant-garde, an arch-experimentalist, and a bohemian" (Friedman 72), his first published poems appeared *in Eight Harvard Poets* in 1917, an anthology that featured Cummings as well as seven of his college friends.

Not only was Cummings' poetic style changing and gaining recognition, he was also developing a new interest: painting. Though Cummings had been doodling and drawing from his childhood, he now began incorporating elements of the modernist styles into his painting.

Turning Words into Pictures

Throughout his life, E. .E. Cummings was artistically prolific; in addition to his poetry, he produced a ballet version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and continued to paint. In his early years out of college, however, he began to recognize himself primarily as a "poet&painter" (Cohen 14). Indeed, E. E. Cummings was "as much a painter as a poet" (Kidder 3). Both Cummings' painting career and his career in poetry indicated an initially positive outlook. He frequently exhibited his paintings in his early years, from 1916 to 1927, at events such as the yearly exhibitions of the Society of Independent Artists, the Penguin, and other Modernist galleries. He also drew simple line drawings for the *Dial*, a respected journal of modern arts and ideas of the Twenties (Cohen 14). While presenting his pictures in this professional manner, he made contacts with prominent Modernists of the time, such as Albert Gleizes, Joseph Stella, and Walter Pach. His works also received major attention from the journalists of the time. Even his line drawings in the *Dial* "kept company with the likes of Picasso, Braque, Derain, and Lachaise, and were seen by a readership obviously sympathetic to Modernism in all the arts" (Cohen 14). Cummings' paintings were gaining recognition in major ways.

Though Cummings did receive an amount of critical attention as a painter, this career failed to sustain itself. Milton A. Cohen explains that "his painting was increasingly eclipsed by his poetry" (Cohen 14). As a painter, Cummings competed with thousands of artists with a style similar to his, and to an unpracticed eye, his work did not differ greatly from the other artists of his time. As a poet, however, Cummings' revolutionary style gained recognition because of its singularity. His poems, which were being increasingly recognized, stirred more controversy and conversation than his paintings. By the end of the Twenties, even though he still considered himself "primarily a painter" (Kidder 117), he was already better known as a poet and writer. The disparity between his "increasingly abstract poetry and increasingly representational art puzzled critics . . . and led them to assume that poetry was Cummings' vocation, painting his avocation" (Cohen 15). This idea seemed to sap Cummings' painting talents, as he began to focus more intently on his poetry. As Cummings paid more attention to his poetry career than his ultimately unsuccessful painting career, he brought the feel of his paintings to his poems.

The visually artistic aspects of Cummings' poetry can be best detected in his *No Thanks*, a book of poetry finally published through his mother because of the Great Depression's effect of lower sales for Cummings' previous book, *Eimi*. 1935's *No Thanks*, "dedicated" to those companies who refused to publish his work, was by far the most revolutionary that he had ever written, progressing toward "experimental forms" (Kidder 106). In addition, because his own mother oversaw its publication, the poems mostly remained in Cummings' desired format; this provides for a greater accuracy when dissecting his poems today. Moreover, the entire book is representative of Cummings' mind, the mind of a painter; he even arranges the poems in the book in a specific way, outlining each of them in a v-shape progression, which he called a

"schema."

Not only does the entire scheme and organization of *No Thanks* rely on a certain artistic structure, it also features several of Cummings' most famous masterpieces, including "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r," which offers several variations of the word "grasshopper" before arriving at the normal spelling. Cummings' "idiosyncratic" arrangements are actually manifestations of his visually artistic side. Cummings, then, carried over many ideas from his art to his poetry: a sense of immediacy, the idea of "function follows form," the placement of feeling over rational thinking (Friedman 108), and the dramatic shaping and spacing of lines.

E. E. Cummings was greatly affected by the idea that paintings held a sense of "immediacy" that touched the observer all at once. Cummings himself recounted one such occasion in a letter to a friend. Walking down Fifth Avenue one day in New York, he saw in a gallery "'La Montagne Sainte Victoire,' which had been the frontispiece" in a book he had read. The picture seemed to capture him. It "made him dizzy, made him feel a whirling nausea. The picture 'touched' him" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 180). Similarly, in his own works, Cummings attempts to capture the immediacy that prevails in visual art; he seems to believe that the sense of immediacy contributes to the overall absorption of any poem (Kennedy, *Revisited* 95). He transfers the immediacy of paintings, which, as the cliché goes, can convey "a thousand words" in one glance, to poetry, whose "thousand words" usually take much longer than an instant to comprehend. To create this sense of immediacy, Cummings uses not only the meanings of the words, but their appearances as well, as he demonstrates here in "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r":

```
                        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;

    (CP 396)
```

In the poem, Cummings visually illustrates a grasshopper's leap, the grasshopper literally rearranging and re-arriving on the page in its correct form. Cummings reveals much more about the poem this way. Instead of using traditional phrasing, spacing, and spelling to arrive at the meaning, he catalyzes the reading experience of his poem by using his non-traditional style to transmit the meaning of the poem almost as a painting, through the feel of immediacy and "spontaneous and accidental nature" (Cohen 15).

The reason that both paintings in general and Cummings' poetry in particular evoke a feeling of immediacy is that both embody the idea that "function follows form"; that is, that design is more important than its application. As Slater Brown explains in his review of *Tulips and Chimneys*, "the spatial organization of color has become the durational organization of words, the technical problem that of tempo . . . Logic and all its attributes of grammar, spelling, and punctuation, become subservient to the imperial demands of form" (27). The rearrangement of the words and atypical spacing that Cummings institutes in his poetry are analogous to the variety of colors and planes he would use on a canvas.

Above all, Cummings' "philosophical commitment to feeling over thinking" (Cohen 73) encompasses both the idea of immediacy and of "function follows form." Cummings expresses his idea that "feeling is first" throughout his poetry. He does this on a surprisingly simple level with vocabulary, but with this vocabulary he treats words as having a positive or negative value (Fairley 5). Cummings constructs a world of associations; he assigns to words "a coherent set of values, an integral idea, a new rationale of thinking, feeling, and living" (Fairley 5). Consequently, although the feeling experienced by the reader depends on the prejudgments he or she possesses regarding the words, the immediacy of the feeling remains nonetheless. The reader can ascertain by their manner of opposition Cummings' intended positive or negative values:

> love's function is to fabricate unknownness
>
> (known being wishless;but love,all of wishing)
> though life's lived wrongsideout,sameness chokes oneness
> truth is confused with fact,fish boast of fishing
>
> and men are caught by worms(love may not care
> if time totters,light droops,all measures bend
> nor marvel if a thought should weigh a star
> —dreads dying least;and less,that death should end)
>
> how lucky lovers are(whose selves abide
> under whatever shall discovered be)
> whose ignorant each breathing dares to hide
> more than most fabulous wisdom fears to see

(who laugh and cry)who dream,create and kill
while the whole moves;and every part stands still: (CP 446)

In the above poem, Cummings upsets some of our "systematic meaning relations and replaces them in many instances with new sets of synonyms and antonyms" (Fairley 5). Cummings contrasts love and death, the natural and the artificial, the individual and the society, and dream and reality. He highlights "love" as the most important aspect of life, which he describes negatively as often being "lived wrongsideout" and in "sameness"—"dream" and "create" are also, in Cummings' philosophy, contrasted with "kill." He relies, then, not only on an esoteric philosophical frame of mind, but by associating words with each other, he also creates a feeling that readers grasp at once while reading the poem.

In addition to putting feeling above all in his poetry, Cummings also visually structured his poems in an artistic pattern. Besides "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r," there are other poems in *No Thanks* whose appearance on the page models the action in the poem. Cummings had a "distinctly painterly" notion of planar structure. Milton A. Cohen shares an excerpt from E. E. Cummings' 1921 travel notebook:

Poetry is [the] Art of Form
placing of ideas next to each other
to produce impression or expression
(inward) (outward) (211)

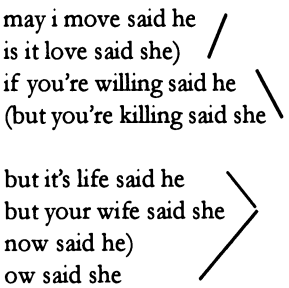
The most prevalent shape that Cummings' poems took was that of a diagonal. Of all lines, he considered that the most dynamic; in fact, he employed it in his early abstract painting (Cohen 190). Poetically, diagonals offered two possibilities: used separately, they create individual motions of rising and falling, but when used in a sequence, they form a zigzag that can parallel thematic and aural rhythms (Cohen 190).

One of the poems in *No Thanks* especially illustrates this idea in its progressive diagonals:

(let's go said he
not too far said she
what's too far said he
where you are said she) (CP 399)

In this poem, "may i feel said he," a woman and a man are exchanging words while committing adultery. The excerpt above demonstrates the use of diagonal spaces (I have drawn a line to indicate the "slope of the idea"). Not only does the action progress in the stanza with an increasing level of discomfort (noted by the eventual lengthening of lines), the "slope" of the stanza also moves downward, seeming to indicate a negative progression in the poem. Additionally, the climax of

the poem represents the steepest diagonals, as seen here:



This actually helps the immediacy of the poem as well, with a sort of visual representation for the apex of the poem.

Cummings, then, seems to have sculpted his poems mindful of many aspects of art. The use of a sense of immediacy, the idea of "function follows form," the placement of feeling over rational thinking, and the dramatic shaping and spacing of lines all contribute to the existence of *No Thanks* as a great work of poetry that is highly representative of Cummings' "Post-Impressionist" painting style. Having understood the effect that his painting created on his poetry, his creativity and ingenuity should not be slighted by critics who misinterpret their misunderstanding as a sign that his poetry is impenetrable.

In order to fully appreciate Cummings, one must look extensively into his family history as well as his art of painting. Cummings' complex ideas stem from his mother's encouragement that he be a writer, his literary and painterly connections, and his life experiences. While critics of the time asserted that he was "mad," "sophomoric," or "dirty" (Dendinger xiv), they simply could not move past the fact that his works were revolutionary. Indeed, they were; however, he seems not to have consciously made the decision to be a "revolutionary" or "avant-garde." Cummings only built on the literary talents his parents helped coalesce in him, taking in the poetry exercises of a single college class, and fusing this knowledge with his experience of art. In doing these things, he formed a style that was inherently his, and though it may have seemed impenetrable to some, or childish to others, it was indeed not automatic or merely traditional.

Conclusion

Regardless of whether E. E. Cummings intended or did not intend to become one of the most influential poets in our time, he certainly has become such a figure. E. E. Cummings' work has left me with a renewed admiration for words themselves on a very basic level, and the magnificent power they can wield.

—Cambridge, MA

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