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An Investigation of E. E. Cummings's Poetics Through His Individualist

Politics

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Introduction

The present work seeks to demonstrate the existence of two parallel threads in the social commitment of American poet E. E. Cummings (1894-1962.) On the one hand, he overtly denounces customs and ideologies by adopting the genre of satire. On the other hand, his poetic experimentations emerge as a means to demystify the ideological assumptions embedded in the structure of language responsible for a distorted and partial perception of reality.

By defining the inherent characteristics of satire as a genre, with a particular emphasis on its persuasive nature, the first chapter seeks to underline the poet's communicative intention, from which emerges a conception of poetry as a particular form of commitment. On the other hand, the chapter shall also define Cummings's political identity by exploring the main extra-literary events which occurred during his career, and which have profoundly influenced the themes of his poetry and his own political evolution. His career spans over more than forty years, starting approximately in coincidence with World War I and coming to a close in 1962, the year of his death. The theme of his satirical works, which include two prose volumes, a significant portion of his poetical works and a few minor writing, demonstrate a great awareness of the social context. However, the evolution of his political identity is not straightforward, as it involves inconsistencies, disillusions and renegotiations. Yet, there seems to be an underlying thread guiding him to apolitical maturity. Throughout his career the poet remains faithful to an Emersonian individualist and anti-authoritarian stance, one

founded on self-reliance and independence of mind, and on a skeptical

attitude towards all kinds of collectivist ideologies. Accordingly, he conceives

an ideal society with no authorities and no hierarchies.

The argument advanced by Chapter 2 derives from a question

prompted by the previous chapter: If the poet has defended his point of view

on many aspects of society so vigorously and extensively through satire, why

should he attach a different purpose to his experimental works? Since both

must spring necessarily from one poetic principle, his formal experiments too

must have a social intention. Therefore, once the poet's ideological position is

defined, along with the particular conception of poetry that he developed, the

second chapter assumes that his technical experiments perform some kind of

social function as well as satire does. Fully consistent with his political credo,

his technique focuses on the search of a poetic diction constructed so as to

allow a more complex and neutral presentation of reality, by challenging the

limits imposed by the linearity inherent to language. By applying faithfully the

Poundian principle of "condensation," early Cummings conceives iconic

typographic devices, whereas in a later phase he introduces new strategies that

overcrowd linear meaning by emphasizing associative relations between

words. Among these additional meanings, antithetical one attract a special

attention.

The poet's ultimate goal seems to be the unearthing of all those

meanings which are excluded from the linguistic chain in some way or

another. While his typographic devices characterized most notably his early

production, in later phases of his career he progressively abandons those

devices that affect the visual (paralinguistic) aspect of poetry and show a growing interest in the manipulation of linguistic structures. In particular, his devices spring from the necessity to discover or create morphological and syntactic ambiguities, and to emphasize connotation over denotation. The chief strategies he employs to accomplish his goal are the use of punctuation or blank spaces to foreground words within words, or morphological derivation (most notably zero derivation,) and syntactic inversions. The resulting poetic diction is a complex array of linear, visual, and associative meanings. Therefore, Cummings's poetics is one of inclusion (to achieve wholeness) and a reversal of linguistic hierarchies.

Chapter 3 seeks to analyze the implementation of these principles on the level of discourse. Given the inclusive character of his poetic language, his vocabulary does not exclude obscenities and politically incorrect words and phrases. For this reason he would incur in a life-long struggle with censors, not only to defend his freedom of speech, but chiefly to back up his claims regarding the very aesthetic principles that support his poetry. He saw both repressive and preventive censorship as strongly opposed to his poetics as they seek to impose a partiality on the wholeness of reality as presented in his works. Likewise, in a wider sense the standard variety of la language imposes a linguistic and ideological homologation on dialectal and idiolectal varieties, by repressing them. Accordingly, Cummings's poetry lets these "minor" varieties and the discourse of the oppressed speak through his poetry, thus subverting the hierarchies inherent to society, most notably by parodying

official discourse. Among his targets are the discourses of salesmanship, of politics, and science. In his view, they share some fundamental features.

The epilogue presents some final considerations about the poet's definition of "artist." According to Cummings, the real artist must be a failure by definition. This particular statement seems to epitomize accurately his life-long effort to expose the unacceptable aspects of reality that are removed from both language and society.

Chapter 1. Satire

1.1. Satire and commitment: The persuasive function of poetry

In his book <u>On the Discourse of Satire</u> Paul Simpson defines satire as a discursive genre that implies three subjects: the satirist, the satiree (the audience,) and a satirized (the target of satire) (Simpson 8.) Satire also presupposes a negative judgment on the target's behavior or reasoning, and a simultaneous attempt on the part of the satirist at persuading the reader. Therefore, satire is inherently persuasive in that it aims at influencing the reader. Furthermore, according to Northrop Frye's definition, "satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear" (Frye 223,) and "demands [...] at least an implicit moral standard" (224.) In other words, by presenting the target's ethical principles as faulty, or denouncing a hypocritical behavior, the satirist advances his own point of view, and makes his system of values manifest. To defend his position on either an individual's hypocritical behavior or the costumes of a whole society, the satirist must necessarily expose his own standard.

In his famous discussion of the topic, Wyndham Lewis claimed that "the best satire is non-moral" (Lewis, The Greatest Satire is Non-Moral 85,) but conceded that not all great satire is non-moral (Ibid.) However, by "moral" he seems to mean "reactionary" or traditionalist, and consequently conceives the traditional satirist as a "moralist" (88.) Yet, the satirist's implicit argument is not necessarily reactionary, nor inherently subversive. Being inherently political and yet not polarized, the satirist can be either subversive or reactionary with respect to dominant values. However, when the satirist

castigates a hypocritical behavior his point of view is paradoxically reactionary and moralizing, as it assumes the existence of a shared system of beliefs that is deliberately transgressed by the satirized.

We shall see how the above definitions apply to the poetry of E. E. Cummings. Satire plays a significant role in his oeuvre, both in verse and in prose. It castigates and derides either a specific individual, a human type, or a reprehensible social behavior, and can allude to particular events or debate wider themes. Although almost absent from his first published collection of poetry, satire becomes a structural necessity in subsequent collections. Both his longer prose works, a prison diary (The Enormous Room) and a travel diary (EIMI,) are markedly satirical in tone and scope. A host of shorter satirical sketches were published in The Dial and in Vanity Fair, and were later collected in A Miscellany (1958,) and A Miscellany Revised (1965.)

Having produced such numerous works of satire, he demonstrates a willingness to expose publicly his own beliefs and his personal judgments on various aspects of society. More importantly, in satires he asks the audience to contemplate his point of view and ultimately be persuaded. Much of his poetry begs a reconsideration in the light of this: being a persuasive genre, satire provides a valuable insight into his ideas regarding poetry and its function. Although the poet's early speculations on the nature of poetry were mainly aesthetic—as demonstrated by Milton Cohen through a careful reading of his early manuscripts—subsequent volumes reveal a progressive move towards an active social commitment. As Chapter two will seek to demonstrate, by deriving necessarily from the same conception of poetry that

informs his satire, the aesthetic principles that guide his formal experiments pursue the same goal. His satire reveals the existence of a strong connection between his poetics and his personal worldview. Indeed, in satire points of view on extra-literary issues are necessarily presented in an artful manner. Since the poet devotes a significant portion of his production to the exposition of his ethical convictions, the it becomes hard to deny an equal intention in his non-satirical and more "serious" works. The present thesis supports a view of the artist as socially committed in his satirical and non-satirical works alike. Consistently with this view, Cummings's artistic persona is visibly and constantly reacting in overt or covert polemics to some aspect of society, and his satire bears more straightforwardly the traces of his commitment. Although centered on the individual, Cummings appears to assume an active social role for the artist. Accordingly, a significant part of his satirical works is pervaded by social and political commentary, thus demonstrating a conscious awareness of the historical context.

On the other hand, he paid great attention to both general and particular political issues. The targets of his satire are either specific individuals, human types, social mores, or faulty political ideologies. Poems expressing more general statements reveal the existence of a structured system of values. Indeed, the ethical principles that support his satire can be traced to a coherent and systematic thought. More ambitious attempts at providing a total vision find expression in his longer prose works, or in each volume of poetry considered as a whole. For the rest, Cummings's preference for shorter forms does not necessarily imply an episodic thought. However seemingly

fragmented, his satirical poems are more the result of a highly compressed style than occasional epiphanies of a coherent worldview.

Outside his literary works, Cummings does not show any remarkable interest in defining his political identity until late in his life. One may also seek more direct points of contacts between the poet and political doctrines by tracing the readings he went through, but the search would produce little results. Rather, his political identity appears to have developed spontaneously in reaction to the events he witnessed directly—first and foremost during World War I—or indirectly. For this reason his political identity reveals contradictions, inconsistencies, and reconsiderations. Nonetheless, by considering his oeuvre as a whole, there appears to be a leading thread.

As the sign of this process left more evident marks in his satirical writings, the present chapter will seek to define Cummings's political stance through an analysis of the most relevant instances of the genre. Subsequently, Chapter 2 will investigate the poet's social commitment as it emerges from his formal experiments and how these latter relate to the particular political identity that will be defined in the next pages. Cummings's poetry can be shown to follow the pace of extra-literary events, such as World War I, the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe, and the consequent policies adopted by the American Government. Accordingly, the themes of his satire reflect his reactions to these historical events and more general speculations of political nature. Extending over more than four decades—from the mid-1910's to the early 1960's—the age in which his career unfolds determines the themes of his poetry from both perspectives. The next sections will discuss some of the

most recurrent political themes in Cummings's satires, namely war,

totalitarian and collective forms of social organization, democracy, and the

individual.

     1.2. "i sing of Olaf glad and big": War

     Ironically, Cummings's career as a writer is intimately related to war.

As Landles correctly points out, there is no clear evidence of his anti-militarist

stance before and during World War I (Landles 53,) but he certainly became

one soon afterwards. However, his later pacifist stance cannot be derived from

a first-hand experience in war since, due to fortuitous circumstances, he never

saw the front. Like many other young American writers that would be defined

as the <u>Lost Generation</u>, the poet enrolled in the Norton-Harjes Corps as an

ambulance driver and embarked for France in 1917. The events that followed

were to become the subject of his first solo publication, <u>The Enormous Room</u>.

The book was commissioned by his "superpatriotic" father, who planned to

send a copy to each congressman to denounce publicly the violation of human

rights on the part of the French Government. The book owed its success to a

fundamental misunderstanding regarding its nature. For many readers it was a

remarkable realist account of the war events (34-35.) Yet for the author the

book was neither a historical document nor a public denunciation of the evils

of war, but a tale of the oppressed individual, and of his progress towards the

discovery of the Self. As a prison diary, the book reveals some insightful

statements regarding the condition of the individual under the oppressive

power of governments. The narration starts with an account of the author's

Parisian days, and his unexpected arrest for espionage. Surprisingly, as soon

as he is arrested, the author comments: "An uncontrollable joy gutted me […] I was myself and my own master" (Cummings, The Enormous Room 18.) Once transferred to the "enormous room" of the prison, the author and his mate B. agree that "this is the finest place on earth!" (50, 85.) However paradoxical these statements may appear, they bear a striking resemblance with Thoreau's definition of prison:

> Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison […] the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor.

The passage from Civil Disobedience casts some interesting light on Cummings's sympathetic attitude towards the detainees. The poet feels free inside the prison because the outside world is inhabited by human beings that live their lives carefully abiding by the rules of society. Those that inhabit the prison are thus "free" individuals. Indeed, he discovers a great deal of humaneness and freedom among the detainees at La Ferté-Macé. Neither of them had relinquished their particular way of being, or had otherwise surrendered to the homogenizing forces of society. They were thus unashamedly nonaligned with the standards of civilization, and despite the State's efforts to correct them, they remained "incorrigibles" (125.) The language they speak—each one in his own dialect and with his own idiosyncrasies—is the language of individuality, which clearly reflects their rejection of social norms. From the encounter with these specimens of a repressed portion of society, Cummings ultimately learns to question "those unspeakable foundations upon which are builded with infinite care such at

once ornate and comfortable structures as La Gloire and Le Patriotisme"

(128.)

The discovery of this obscure and obscured side of humanity was to

have a lasting effect on Cummings's conception of society and of public

authority. Poems began to appear in his collections which depicted

marginalized individuals with a sympathetic attitude, such as "nobody loses

all the time" (Complete Poems 237,)[1] "?" (243,) "a man who had fallen

among thieves" (256,) and satires attacking successful and powerful

personalities. The war experience left indelible marks upon the poet's

production under another fundamental aspect. His first manuscript, yet to be

published, now contained a section titled "La Guerre." Along with a few light

satires directed at the prudery of the American Middle Class, more biting

poems began to appear which dealt with war and chauvinism. Eventually, in Is

5 (1926) satire found its place into a structure that was to repeat itself

consistently in all subsequent collections, "a tendency to begin

dirty(world:sordid,satires)& end clean(earth:lyrical,lovepoems)" (Cummings,

Selected Letters 261.)

War remained a major theme, even in times of peace. The constant

presence of the war theme in his poetry reveals a genuine social commitment,

and a view of poetry as a tool of social activism. Among his best war poems is

"i sing of Olaf glad and big" (CP 340,) the story of a conscientious objector

who refuses to perform patriotic gestures as kissing a flag or going to war.

The poem further combines militarism with positivistic ideology ("unless

statistics lie he was / more brave than me:more blond than you") to point out

that Democratic power may use coercive methods as mercilessly as totalitarian regimes. In these early satires, targets were more generic, whereas later ones would be directed at specific public authorities, and allude to real historical events: where one early poem blames a generic "Humanity" for the evils of war, his later poems accuse governments, public orators, and statesmen of perpetuating chauvinistic or otherwise deadly ideals.

As his works reveal, Cummings's pacifism seems to spring less from Christian ethical principles than from a growing anti-authoritarian and anti-government stance. As testified by the first of two pieces he wrote in defense of Ezra Pound, he defined the State as inherently related to war:

> An artist doesn't live in some geographical abstraction, superimposed on a part of this beautiful earth by the non-imagination of unanimals and dedicated to the proposition that massacre is a social virtue because murder is an individual vice (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 313.)

By parodying Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, he substitutes each assumed truth with his own version. Thus "nation" becomes "some geographical abstraction," "conceived in liberty" becomes "superimposed," and the proposition "that all men are created equal" becomes "that massacre is a social virtue."

Surprisingly, two poems written in his mature years contradict the portrait of the poet as a life-long anti-militarist. On the occasions of the Soviet invasion of Finland (1940) and Hungary (1956,) Cummings denounces the US Government for failing to intervene in defense of the two nations. The two

poems, "o to be in finland" (CP 641,) and "THANKSGIVING (1956)" (CP 711,) depict the US Government as busy minding its own business, either as an "uncle shylock not interested" or as an Uncle Sam who "shrugs his pretty / pink shoulders you know how / and he twitches a liberal titty / and lisps "i'm busy right now."" These cases, however, are exceptions, and do not come unexpected. In the meantime a new illuminating experience had urged a redefinition of his political beliefs—a trip to Soviet Russia. Eventually, the strong aversion to Communism that he developed in 1931 got the best of his enduring pacifism. Nonetheless, the two poems demonstrate once again his willingness to use poetry as a means to give expression to his personal convictions.

1.3. "red-rag and pink-flag / blackshirt and brown": Totalitarianisms

Due to a growing mistrust of public authority, Cummings's views on totalitarian forms of governments are quite unsurprising. Under a totalitarian regime, be it Fascism, Nazism, or Communism, the individual enjoys no freedom at all since the State controls every aspect of the public and private sphere. When satirized, Totalitarianisms are merely ridiculed on the basis of their respective colors: (CP 497)

>red-rag and pink-flag
>
>blackshirt and brown
>
>strut-mince and stink-brag
>
>have all come to town
>
>some like it shot

and some like it hung

and some like it in the twot

nine months young

However, Fascist regimes provoked less ferocious satirical attacks than did Communism. His personal judgment on Mussolini was less based on the latter's totalitarian inclinations than on the latter's promotion of such ideals as progress and efficiency:

> Signor Mussolini has invented nothing. He has simply [...] borrowed from America her most unworthy credo (the utterly transparent and lifeless lie: Time is money. [...] Already Italia is up to America's tricks of "progress" and "morality" (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 168.)

Likewise, Hitler and the Nazis did not attract much attention. Except for satires of wider topic, where Hitler and "brownshirts" symbolize the totalitarian State, there are no specific references or treatment of the subject.

On the other hand, Cummings's attitude towards Communism remained ambivalent until 1931. A satire appeared in Is 5 (1925) is an account of a demonstration he probably witnessed in Paris (CP 273):

> 16 heures
>
> l'Etoile
>
> the communists have fine Eyes
>
> some are young some old none

> look alike the flics rush
>
> batter the crowd sprawls collapses
>
> singing knocked down trampled the kicked by
>
> flics rush(the
>
> Flics,tidiyum,are
>
> very tidiyum reassuringly similar,
>
> they all have very tidiyum
>
> mustaches,and very
>
> tidiyum chins,and just above
>
> their very tidiyum ears their
>
> very tidiyum necks begin) (1-15)

By punning on "eye," the poem depicts Communist protesters as unique individuals ("none look alike"), as opposed to the undistinguished mass of "flics," the French policemen, who are "reassuringly similar."

Apparently, since the Revolution of 1917 Russia had attracted the attention of all those intellectuals from Western Capitalist nations for providing a real alternative to liberal capitalism that had imposed a materialist ideology on all aspects of social life. Moreover, the Soviet State's attention to culture and education-related policies, the experiment appealed particularly to American and European artists and writers. Some friends of Cummings's had even visited Russia and had reported enthusiastically about their experience (Kennedy, Dreams in the Mirror 306-307.) Cummings, who valued art and

poetry above all, showed particular interest in his friends' accounts. As soon as he could, he travelled to Russia to see for himself.

However, much to his chagrin the poet would return bitterly disillusioned and for finding just another society oppressed by a totalitarian State, a ubiquitous bureaucratic apparatus, and an overpowering propaganda—indeed, much more oppressed than any other Country he had ever visited. The diary he had kept in his trip was published in 1933 under the title EIMI, Greek for "I am." In one of his lectures at Harvard in the 1950's he would define the book as: "the individual again;a more complex individual,a more enormous room" (Cummings, i: Six Nonlectures 65.) The book was much praised by Ezra Pound both as one of the best achievements in Modernist prose satire (together with Joyce's Ulysses and Wyndham Lewis' The Apes of God) and a last and final blow at Communist ideology (Pound, E. E. Cummings Examined n. pag.) Nonetheless, after the Russian experience Cummings's understanding of political matters would be more defined. First and foremost,his attitude towards Communism changed permanently. He became a ruthless anti-Communist, intolerant to any form of collectivism, and would remain so for the rest of his life.

Accordingly, a poem published in the 1930's testifies to the radical change of attitude towards Communism (CP 413.) Possibly the closest poetic equivalent to EIMI, the poem's strong contrast to "16 heures" is the most evident symptom of the radical readjustment in the poet's political views:

> kumrads die because they're told)
>
> kumrads die before they're old

(kumrads aren't afraid to die

kumrads don't

and kumrads won't

believe in life)and death knows whie

(all good kumrads you can tell

by their altruistic smell

moscow pipes good kumrads dance)

kumrads enjoy

s.freud knows whoy

the hope that you may mess your pance

every kumrad is a bit

of quite unmitigated hate

(travelling in a futile groove

god knows why)

and so do i

(because they are afraid to love

Yet one question remains: why did the poet return to the United States?

Indeed, why did he live his whole life in the United States, if he loathed

virtually every aspect of its society? Somehow there was a compatibility

between his stress on the uniqueness of the individual and the relative freedom

conceded to the individual in American Democracy. American society is

entirely founded on individualism, but its particular dominant form is economic in nature. Hence, this compatibility was a mere approximation.

However, back in the United States he would find a growing State power. Due to the economic depression, the 1930s saw a dramatic growth of state power. Consistently with the anti-Communist stance he acquired in Russia, Cummings joined the chorus of critics of the New Deal. His poetry and prose writings of this new decade contain not only attacks directed at those responsible for the new policies (Franklin D. Roosevelt above all,) but also at the more general left-wing leanings of intellectuals, writers, and artists. Once again, Cummings found himself on the opposite side of a dominant ideology. As a consequence of the ostracism he endured in these years for both his aesthetics and his politics, during the 1950's he would endorse the McCarthyite witch-hunt (E. E. Cummings, Selected Letters 223, 228.)

According to his new conception of social relations, society is sharply divided into two main groups: a few individuals on one side, and an indistinct collective mob on the other. As defined by Cummings, Collectivism—which he would also call "altruism" as in the poem quoted above (line 8,)—is that kind of society where everybody minds everybody else's business (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 168.) In Cummings's poetry only "I," singular "you," and "we" have positive connotations. "We" carries positive overtones as long as it includes two individuals only. It is never a collective "we." The remaining part of society is either defined "mostpeople" or "mob." In a pseudo-mathematic equation, Cummings defines social relations as "we sans love equals mob" (CP 803.) The group dehumanizes individuals either by

turning them into machines, as in "a kike is the most dangerous" (644,) or by

blurring away their uniqueness "all groups,gangs,and collectivities—no matter

how apparently disparate—are fundamentally alike" (Cummings, i: Six

Nonlectures 31.) Collectivism is either personified and caricatured as having

animal qualities ("Huge this collective pseudobeast,") or lacking human

features entirely: "mrsandmr collective foetus" (461.)

     A new phase in Cummings's social commitment began. It was the age

of what he came to nickname the "Nude Eel" (410.) This time his targets had

names and official statuses. He would parody Franklin Roosevelt's famous

speech on "The Four Freedoms" as "it's / freedom from freedom / the

common man wants" (635.) Indeed, it must have appeared paradoxical to him

that a statesman should promote freedom. Aside from strictly political

reasons, his progressive indignation in the 1930's depended upon a sudden

decline in recognition, and on the growing divide between his aesthetics and

the new emergent conceptions of literature, particularly the new ideologized

utilitarian poetry. The poems he tried to publish in the mid-1930's ("his most

experimental work" according to Friedman) was rejected systematically by all

publishers, and published—with the financial support of his mother—in 1935

as <u>No Thanks</u>. The poem "american critic ad 1935" (901) epitomizes both his

anger against liberal intellectuals, and the style of satire he adopted during

these years:

        american critic ad 1935

        alias faggoty slob with a sob in whose cot

tony onceaweek whisper winsomely pul

ling their wool over 120 mil

lion goats each and every one a spot

less lamb

    :nothing in any way sugge

stive

    ;nothing to which anyone might possibly obje

ct (1-9)

Aside from gratuitous insults, the poem accuses critics of being deceitful ("pulling the wool over 120 mil / lion goats,") and of failing to write anything that might provoke the reader's reaction—apparently antithetical to his own poetic principles.

From a political point of view, as we have seen, Cummings's writings present many violent attacks at all forms of collectivism and totalitarianism, but his conception of democracy is far more controversial. It is in the negotiation of the meaning of democracy that his anti-authoritarian character emerges more poignantly, and the positive aspects of his vision are stated more coherently.

1.4. "the many on the few": Democracy

All things considered, it is easy to see why an artist should abhor totalitarianisms. Less transparent, on the other hand, are the reasons that led

Cummings to criticize violently democratic forms of government, provided

that Cummings's anti-democratic leanings are not unique when placed into the

wider context of Modernism. Yet, contrary to those among his contemporaries

who flew towards more authoritarian societies, Cummings still showed a

preference for the American social system. For this reason his conception of

democracy is far from unambiguous. In fact, do his satires criticize democracy

per se, or the American Liberal Democracy? In other words, was he assuming

the values shared by all Americans and pointing at their hypocrisy, or was he

pointing out some faults in the democratic system as such? Much surprisingly,

the poet appears to view democracy as a double-sided word. Accordingly, the

words "democracy" and "democratic" may have positive connotations in one

text, and negative ones in another.

What emerges from his writings is first and foremost an ongoing

questioning of the assumptions implied in the idea of democracy. In several

passages the word "democracy" is either cautiously enclosed in quotation

marks, preceded by the phrase "so-called," or defamiliarized through other

devices. For instance, in the second part of the satire "a salesman is an it that

stinks Excuse" (CP 549) the word is split across the line and further

interrupted by a commercial disclaimer:

> a salesman is an it that stinks to please
>
> but whether to please itself or someone else
>
> makes no more difference than if it sells
>
> hate condoms education snakeoil vac

uumcleaners terror strawberries democ

ra(caveat emptor)cy superfluous hair

or Think We've Met subhuman rights Before (8-14)

As in most satires, Cummings condenses within one poem a series of attacks directed at seemingly unrelated ideas. In this case a cynical politician who sells promises for his sole benefit is indistinguishable from a greedy salesman advertising products. Democracy, education, and human rights are therefore devalued and listed amidst household appliances and commodities.

In the "Introduction" to <u>Collected Poems</u> (1938,) the poet emphasizes other important aspects of the idea of democracy:

> The plusorminus movie to end moving,the strictly scientific
>
> parlourgame of real unreality,the tyranny conceived in
>
> misconception and dedicated to the proposition that every man
>
> is a woman and any woman a king,hasn't a wheel to stand on.
>
> (461)

By alluding again to Lincoln's famous speech, the poet turns democracy into a mere "scientific parlourgame"—suggesting a democracy made of numbers—and "tyranny." Either way, the statement makes it clear that this kind of democracy is in all respects a form of <u>government</u>. The quotation that serves as a subtitle to "POEM(or" (803,) appears much to the point, in that it provides further insights into Cummings's mature political stance:

> POEM(or

> "the divine right of majorities,
>
> that illegitimate offspring of the
>
> divine right of kings" Homer Lea) (1-4)

Incidentally, the poem also exposes the poet's increased interest in readings of strictly political topic. In this case, the quotation is from Homer Lea's The Valor of Ignorance (1909,) reissued in the United States in 1942. The intention here is rather straightforward: it aims at emphasizing the arbitrary legitimacy of democracy as a form of government. In a letter to his sister Cummings states his point more clearly: "With every serious anarchist who ever lived,I assume that "all governments are founded on force"" (Cummings, Selected Letters 223.)

However, in the "Introduction" to Collected Poems, just a few lines below the passage quoted above, Cummings provides a more serious and positive definition of democracy that contrasts neatly with the ones reported so far. Using the metaphor of a ghost (apparently a parody of the Marxian "spectre") the poet describes simultaneously the individual and democracy:

> He is a healthily complex,a naturally homogeneous,citizen of
>
> immortality. The now of his each pitying free imperfect
>
> gesture,his any birth or breathing,insults perfected inframortally
>
> millenniums of slavishness. He is a little more than
>
> everything,he is democracy;he is alive:he is ourselves. (CP 461)

As the description points out, this ideal of democracy is not founded on a majority, but it is all-inclusive, and paradoxically "is ourselves." According to this point of view, the poet's own democracy is regarded as tightly linked to

one's self—the individual. Fundamentally, Cummings formulates an ideal democracy which is based on no external authority—a society based on self-reliant individuals.

A more extensive treatment of the subject is to be found in "A Foreword to Krazy," written for the 1946 edition of John Herriman's collected comic strips. Taking the characters as symbols for conflicting worldviews, Cummings delineates his own understanding of social dynamics. His synopsis of the story is very simple: it is the story of a cat "who is never so happy as when egoist-mouse, thwarting altruist-dog, hits her in the head with a brick" (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 323.) Finally, in one of the clearest passages, he defines democracy as

> a struggle between society (Offissa Pupp) and the individual
> (Ignatz Mouse) over an ideal (our heroine)—a struggle from
> which, again and again and again, emerges one stupendous fact;
> namely, that the ideal of democracy fulfills herself only if, and
> whenever, society fails to suppress the individual. (327)

The individual is an essential element for a true democracy. Democracy should not be a "tyranny of the majority" or a "government of the people, by the people, for the people" based on statistics and votes. It is significant that Cummings uses frequently the word "mostpeople" as an epitome of what he most loathes in society. "Mostpeople" is at the same time a mass of indistinct individuals and a majority—a dominant worldview that imposes consensus and homologation on individuals and outlaws those who refuse to abide by the established rules.

1.5. "his royal warcry is I AM": The Individual

The difficulty in pinpointing the poet's political identity is due in part to his unaligned position with either fascisms or communism. The tendency on the part of critics and reviewers to pigeonhole Modern artists according to the two dominant ideologies of the period between the Wars simply cannot account for Cummings. His credo shares nevertheless some major features with most Modernists—the rejection of Capitalist values and the primacy of art. A short letter to Kenneth Burke epitomizes the great confusion surrounding his political positions:

> I unquestionably am the infraintrafabulous preprotofascistic Ogre of the Cowcatchus,who devours Pink prosemites for breakfast & yellow liberals at lunch & black democrats with his dinner. Good Freudians were quick to suggest that my superego suffers from subneolithic trends;while middleoftheroad Marxists are not slow to accuse me of sinister&dextrous deviation. Possibly needless to add,I have been found guilty of the misdemeanor known as lace-majesty(or making light of Einstein)& convicted of the crime entitled happy-us-coppers(or openly avowing a predilection for David at the expense of Goliath.) (Cummings, Selected Letters 248)

Perhaps misled by a fundamental misunderstanding of the poet's aesthetical premises and by his manifest iconoclastic character, more often critics have dismissed him as an anarchist, and consequently as an eternal romantic rebel. Albeit unfounded, the label shows some relevancy in the light

of a more serious understanding of anarchism, i.e. as a structured ideology.

Where <u>anarchy</u> denotes "chaos" and carries negative overtones, <u>anarchism</u> is a

political doctrine based on the ideal of a society with no government.

Therefore, the former cannot possibly describe Cumming's aesthetics nor his

political credo. Cummings's poetics—as discussed in the following Chapter—

are defined on aesthetic principles that are antithetical to chaos, in that they do

not seek to attack the rules of language and of poetic composition as such.

Likewise, since he does not reject the idea of democracy per se, but provides

his own definition for it (a society based on self-reliant individuals, as

opposed to one based on domination either by force or consent,) the term

<u>anarchy</u> does not accurately describe his politics. <u>Anarchism</u>, on the other

hand, may better fit Cummings's anti-authoritarian and individualist stance, as

he recognizes one's own self as the only legitimate authority, and the only

source of moral judgments. Yet, Cummings defines himself an anarchist only

in a few instances, and generally uses the term rather loosely. The letter

quoted above also subtly suggests that he may be more easily definable by

what he rejects—authority (Goliath, majesty, coppers,) science (Einstein,)

Communists and "pink" liberals—and that he may share some occasional

tracts with both left and right ideologies (sinister&dexterous.)

  According to the same Manichaean bias, critics seem to agree that the

poet moved progressively towards more conservative politics in his mature

phase, beginning approximately from his trip to Russia. However, his

campaign against leftwing intellectuals and liberals in general originated from

their reliance on the State—an ideology that called for more State intervention

in the life of citizens. Obviously, to more superficial readers, his distrust of

State authorities meant rightwing conservatism. Rather, in his later years the

poet seems to have lost faith in the possibility of a reformation and salvation

of the society of which he had been part, although he had tried hard to rescue

it from degenerating into a society of oppressors and oppressed. In his last

years he sought refuge in the simplicity and harmlessness of nature. The

themes of his later works all testify to this gradual change. Furthermore, in a

letter to Francis Steegmuller the poet makes a distinction between his satires

and his lyrical poems as "world:sordid,satires" and "earth:lyrical,lovepoems"

(Cummings, Selected Letters 261,) by simultaneously defining world (to

which he attaches negative connotations,) as opposed to earth (with positive

connotations.) Clearly, where the former denotes to society, the latter denotes

nature. Viewed in relation to the main argument supported by the present

chapter, the poet's retreat from society may also indicate an admission of

failure to bring about any change, notwithstanding the indefatigable

commitment he had demonstrated. His last manuscript, published

posthumously as 73 Poems (1963,) contained the poem "for any ruffian of the

sky" (CP 774,) an antiwar poem which highlights the contrast between the

deadly ways of man (based on power and force and epitomized in the military

aircraft,) and the innocent indifference of nature (symbolized by a small

kingbird asserting his unrepeatable uniqueness):

> for any ruffian of the sky
>
> your kingbird doesn't give a damn—
>
> his royal warcry is I AM

and he's the soul of chivalry

in terror of whose furious beak

(as sweetly singing creatures know)

cringes the hugest heartless hawk

and veers the vast most crafty crow

your kingbird doesn't give a damn

for murderers of high estate

whose mongrel creed is Might Makes Right

—his royal warcry is I AM

true to his mate his chicks his friends

he loves because he cannot fear

(you see it in the way he stands

and looks and leaps upon the air)

Notwithstanding the final recognition of his failure, through satire

Cummings had attempted to expose publicly his political beliefs and his

judgments on various aspects of society. As a persuasive genre, satire

provides a valuable insight into his ideas regarding the function of poetry. One

might speculate, at this point, about the possibility that this conception could

apply as consistently to his experimental poetry, in which social commitment

manifests itself predominantly on the formal level. The next chapter seeks to

demonstrate that Cummings's poetic technique is intentionally designed to

provoke readers' reaction, and to provide them with new eyes to perceive

reality.

Notes

[1] Cummings, E. E. Complete Poems. New York: Liveright. 1994. Hereafter abbreviated to CP.

Chapter 2. Language: Wholeness and Reversals

2.1. Introduction: The Grammar of Activism

By way of reviewing the main themes in Cummings's satirical verse and other miscellaneous writings, the previous chapter drew a portrait of the poet as strongly committed. It further defined his particular political stance as anti-authoritarian and individualist. However, one may ask how social commitment relates to formal experimentation and, more specifically, to the particular conception of language he embraces. In other words, how can we claim that, aside from more direct thematic choices, his poetry equally serves his social agenda? And how does it reflect his anti-authoritarian stance? The present chapter claims that the fundamental principles governing Cummings's poetics reveal an intention analogous to his persuasive writings.

As Michael Webster points out, linguistic experimentation implies a social critique: "E. E. Cummings […] created his idiosyncratic visual poetry primarily as an attempt to present an individual vision which simultaneously creates and critiques his readers' sensibilities" (Webster, E. E. Cummings and the Reader 223.) One is reminded of T. S. Eliot's 1945 essay on "The Social Function of Poetry," where he contends that "the duty of the poet, as poet, is only indirectly to his people: his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve, and second to extend and improve" (9,) and that poetry "affect[s] the speech and the sensibility of the whole nation" (12.) Likewise, in a well-known passage from Canto XCVI Ezra Pound claims that "If we never write anything save what is already understood, the field of understanding will never be extended" (Pound, Cantos 659.) In this particular sense, poetry

must—by its own nature—explore the limits of language while still remaining within the limits of communicability.

To anticipate one of the main points of this chapter, Cummings's polemically inclusive poetics does not aim at creating a complacency in the reader, but at exposing the socially unacceptable at all levels. For instance, the heterogeneous nature of American society surfaces through Cummings's relativist point of view in the first section of Is 5 (1925,) titled "Five Americans," which portraits five prostitutes. In this sense, to bring to the surface the hidden from view is not the result of a merely aesthetical program, but it becomes indeed a political assertion. At a deeper level, by foregrounding the excluded, all socio-ideological stratifications of language gain equal status.

In order for poetry to have social implications, it must not be cryptic or devoid of intelligible meaning. Cummings's intention as a poet was to communicate with readers, to convey his message properly and even guide them towards a correct interpretation. Hence, the poet's alleged ungrammaticality requires a better qualification. Since a mutually agreed-upon conception of grammaticality is the fundamental condition of communication, the poet's estranged diction can only tolerate deviation to a certain extent. As Martin Heusser observes, "[w]e never find in Cummings explicit meaninglessness as a dominating principle. The difference between Cummings and a Dada artist is that Cummings may totter hard on the brink of incomprehensibility—carefully avoiding to fall over" (Heusser 245.)

Despite all myths surrounding the deviant nature of his poetic style, evidence shows that his poems are thoroughly intelligible. Unlike the intentional opacity of some provocative avant-garde literature, Cummings does not dispense with cohesion nor with coherency. His poetic language is not simply the product of a struggle against the rules of grammar as such. In fact, he does not exactly <u>break</u> the rules of language. Rather, as Isabelle Alfandary points out, he can only bend them and play with them (Alfandary 95.)[1] Yet, Cummings's language conveys the impression of being forever on the brink of ungrammaticality. One may deduce, more accurately, that what the poet questions is acceptability. Alfandary is forced to conclude that Cummings's writing can only tend asymptotically towards an "outlawed grammar"[2] (Alfandary 86.) Therefore, he does not reject grammaticality <u>tout court</u>, but forges a language that is not perfectly aligned with the standard.

Surprisingly, Cummings's poetry reveals an exceptional care in the syntactic construction of sentences. His language is crafted as to be intelligible: nothing is left to chance. His impatience with young writers asking him to comment on their manuscripts results at least twice in the sort of advice one would expect from a genuine purist of the language: "why not learn to write English? It's one of the more beautiful languages. And(like any language)it has a grammar,syntax,etc:which can be learned" (Selected Letters 222.) In another letter he writes:

> if you seriously want to write a language,you must first of all
>
> learn the grammer [sic] of the language. Somewhere there's a
>
> book called somebody's Handbook of English Usage(or some

such) & you've got to find that book out & master(sic)its

contents: a tough job,if the author's worth his salt. (Selected

Letters 263)

It is undeniable, however, that Cummings breaks words. He seems to

assume, with the Futurists, that only a manipulation of the signifier can bring

to new life a stale language. Linguistic manipulation, in this sense, acquires a

precise function that does not have an end to itself. According to Joseph Korg,

all Modernists' technical innovations "were not mere stylistic ventures, but

deviations which transformed consciousness by altering the syntactic,

structural and lexical foundations of language, and the premises embodied in

them" (Korg 11.) In Cummings, the preoccupation with the medium and the

awareness of the political implications of language manipulation resulted in a

poetry that also includes and emphasizes all excluded elements—a language

of wholeness in which hierarchies are either subverted or blurred. The present

chapter will therefore investigate the origins and motives of Cummings's

idiosyncratic way with words.

2.2. Linear and Visual: Poems for the Eye

Language is not a neutral and transparent medium: it is pervaded by

deep-seated tacit assumptions. According to some conceptions of language, its

inherent linearity impedes a neutral representation of reality, thereby forcing

the individual to accept some fundamental beliefs, so that they appear

universal, natural, or immutable: "conventional syntax and vocabulary silently

insinuate[s] assumptions about time, space, matter, causality, the mind, the

self and other elementary concepts" (Korg 9-10.) Since language is the main

medium of communication among humans, it also plays a great role in the perpetuation of culture-specific and ideological presuppositions.

For Modernist writers the linearity of alphabetical languages is responsible for the restraining of cognitive and perceptive possibilities. Moreover, the linear progression of alphabetic languages cannot account for a more complex reality where things and events do not obey the laws of causal and temporal subordination. Since it reproduces the illusionary linearity of time, the linear progression of language is artificial. Hence, it impedes authentic perception of those events that take place simultaneously. From the artist's viewpoint, linearity creates a veritable obstacle to the conveyance of full meaning and to a neutral representation of reality. By way of quoting a short passage from Foucault, Korg perfectly encapsulates the concept:

> Foucault perceives that an effort to recover the truths that lie behind the façade of language has been going on in recent times, but he locates it in exegetical writing, which undertakes the tasks 'of disturbing the words we speak, of denouncing the grammatical habits of our thinking, of dissipating the myths that animate our words, rendering once more noisy and audible the element of silence that all discourse carries with it as it is spoken.' (Korg 11)

In order to overcome linearity, Modern experimental writers devised a variety of strategies: Gertrude Stein experimented with automatic forms of writing, which included fragments, obsessive repetitions and absence of punctuation, whereas Marinetti promoted the abolition syntax (ataxis.) Later

radical movements would found their poetics on the eradication of logical

coherence (Surrealists,) and on the elimination of meaning tout court (Dada.)

The visual arts provided further possibilities. In painting, a work is perceived

immediately in its totality, and the complex relations between the represented

objects are not necessarily given, but rather assembled through "direct-

analogical, not logical-discursive juxtaposition of elements" (Campos,

Pignatari and Campos n. pag.) Modernist writers shared the belief that an

emphasis on the visual elements of language could help overcome its

handicaps. Predictably, Fenollosa's seminal study on the Chinese character,

divulged by Ezra Pound in 1919, had a great impact on the poetic researches

of the subsequent decades. Although only in part ideographic, the Chinese

character seemed to allow a more neutral and condensed medium of

communication, by combining imitative features with phonetic ones. It

approximates the ideal of an unmediated language.

Cummings shared with Modern artists a feeling of dissatisfaction and

obsession with the linguistic medium. In his commencement address,

delivered at Harvard in 1916, he praised Stein's Tender Buttons, Cubist

painting, and a host of other avant-garde artists, generally favoring a dialogue

among the arts, beyond the particular differences dictated by their respective

media, in particular between visual and verbal arts. The contribution of visual

art was crucial to young Cummings. The equal importance he acknowledged

to painting and writing—he would define himself "an author of pictures,a

draughtsman of words"—materializes first and foremost in one aspect: poem

length. Poems that stretch over two or more pages occur very rarely in his

volumes. The single-page layout underlines the poem's unity and favors a

Gestalt perception of its internal equilibrium. More importantly, his first

encounter with Pound's poetry turned into a revelation. Commenting on

Cummings's reaction to "The Return," Richard Kennedy writes:

> Pound's placing a word alone in a line or beginning a line
>
> partway across the page […] was sufficiently unusual to have
>
> awakened a visual response in Cummings. He reported that
>
> Pound's treatment of a classical subject in an oblique and
>
> allusive way moved him, but that the arrangement of the page,
>
> "the inaudible poem—the visual poem, the poem not for ears
>
> but eye—moved me more."[3] (E. E. Cummings Revisited 20)

Here the "inaudible poem" clearly denotes all those elements that are

lost as soon as the poem is spoken. Cummings saw so many expressive

possibilities in this basic principle that it came to permeate his whole oeuvre.

In his poetry, the typographic layout always contributes to the general

meaning. A significant number of poems are intended "for the eye alone":

words overlapping and parenthetical statements inserted in the midst of a

word practically prevent the poem from being spoken. Most poems, however,

combine audible and visual elements into an indissoluble mixture. This latter

type of poems can only be recited at the expense of meaning conveyed by the

spatial organization. Finally, only in a limited number of instances the spatial

arrangement functions as mere rhythmic guidance. Yet none of his poem is for

the ear only. Even when adopting a fixed form as the sonnet, he strives to

disengage it from its conventional layout, by introducing visual elements such

as indentation and spacing, by breaking a line in halves or into more subunits,

or by disregarding the conventional stanzaic patterns, as in the following

poem from the "Sonnets-Realities" section of <u>Tulips and Chimneys</u> (1923)

(Complete Poems 119):[4]

      by god i want above fourteenth

      fifth's deep purring biceps,the mystic screech

      of Broadway,the trivial stink of rich

      frail firm asinine life

                  (i pant

      for what's below.   the singer.   Wall.   i want

      the perpendicular lips the insane teeth

      the vertical grin

               give me the Square in spring,

      the little barbarous Greenwich perfumed fake

      And most,the futile fooling labyrinth

      where noisy colours stroll....and the Baboon

      sniggering insipidities while. i sit,sipping

      singular anisettes as.   One opaque

big girl jiggles thickly hips to the kanoon

but Hassan chuckles seeing the Greeks breathe)

Like most Modernist poetry, therefore, early Cummings's relies heavily on extra-linguistic sources of meaning. The debt his poetry owes to visual art surfaces at different levels, from the overall appearance of the poem on the page to the iconic use of typography. This aspect would be of fundamental import to the development of concrete and visual poetry.[5]

In some cases the stress on pictorial technique becomes self-referential, as in "Buffalo Bill 's," one of the poet's highest achievements, and possibly his best-known poem. It demonstrates the centrality of technical skills to his poetics through a blend of rhythmic, visual (imitative) and metaphoric meaning. The poem therefore functions as a statement of aesthetic principles while simultaneously providing a perfect sample of his ability. It was probably composed in 1917, the year of William Cody's death (Kennedy, Dreams in the Mirror 129,) and first published in The Dial in 1920 (Dilworth 174.) A few years later, the poet included it in the "Portraits" section of Tulips and Chimneys (1923.)

> Buffalo Bill 's
> defunct
>   who used to
>   ride a watersmooth-silver
>   stallion
> and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat
>   Jesus
>
> he was a handsome man
>   and what i want to know is
> how do you like your blueeyed boy
> Mister Death

Doubtless the poem's lasting popularity is owing to the portrayal of an American celebrity, and to the whole set of connotation he carried: the thriving age of world fairs, success, stereotypical masculinity, and frontier individualism. Moreover, the plain language stands out as a rather accurate sample of colloquial American English. The voice in the poem would seem to fit any American who, in his childhood, regarded Buffalo Bill as a hero. Despite the poet's contempt for the worship of celebrity and entrepreneurship, there is hardly any doubt about his encomiastic intention. A number of articles Cummings wrote for <u>The Dial</u> and <u>Vanity Fair</u> in the 1920's pointedly testify to his fondness of circuses, burlesque shows, and other forms of popular entertainment. Norman Friedman sums up his understanding of the poem as follows:

> No one is more critical of the hollow aspects of American culture than Cummings, but I doubt whether he thinks Buffalo Bill is one of them. He has always loved the circus and its performers: the whole poem is a celebration of deathless skill, a

skill which, like all good art, transcends mortal limitations.

(Friedman, Pan and Buffalo Bill 672)

Unfortunately, Friedman does not write further. His short passage, however accurate, fails to provide convincing textual evidence to support his argument. In fact, substantial elements in the poem seem to support the possibility that the poem imitates, ekphrastically, the skillfulness of the American adventurer.

A number of critics see an ambiguous attitude—if not entirely ironic—towards the subject, and have cast doubts on the poem's encomiastic intentions. In particular, by focusing on the negative connotations conveyed by the adjective defunct, Louis Budd claims that "[t]he poem's attitude is epitomized in the word 'defunct'" (Budd n. pag.) Yet, all other attributes of Buffalo Bill ("handsome" and "blueeyed") hardly display negative overtones. Admiration is further manifest in the compounded adjective describing the stallion ("watersmooth-silver,") which suggests at the same time agility, cold-bloodedness, and appurtenance to royal breed.

Nevertheless, one cannot disagree that "defunct" is the most unusual word of the poem. In one of the two worksheets of the poem reprinted by Richard Kennedy, the word "dead" appears as Cummings's initial choice (Kennedy, E. E. Cummings Revisited 57.) The adjective defunct displays great semantic closeness with dead, yet the two words are not exactly exchangeable. Meaning precisely 'to stop functioning' or 'to be extinguished,' the former has a more limited range of association than the latter, and sounds rather odd when referred to a person. The poem does not however dehumanize

Buffalo Bill, nor degrade him to a business or a fashion. On the contrary, it emphasizes his liveliness. Possibly, the comparison with a machine seems to be more appropriate. The adjective's main function in the poem is to defamiliarize the idea of death. The reluctance to use <u>dead</u> may be further explained by a strictly personal distinction between mere biological death (<u>dying</u>) and <u>death</u>, defined as that particular state of lifeless existence. In this case, Buffalo Bill has merely ceased living. Conversely, the idea of "Death" is <u>familiarized</u> and made human by the title "Mister," and by the challenging tone of the question. By means of personification, Death becomes finite, mortal. Thus Death can be addressed as a person and in a belittling tone. This may suggest that the voice speaking in the poem could be the poem itself. Being eternal, Art can address Death as a peer, and eventually defy it.

Being the result of calculated condensation—with only 47 words in 11 lines—the poem stands in one page, allowing a better perception of the whole. For the same reason, each word is loaded with meanings that exceed their denotative and linear ones. On the visual level, the poem features a number of significant devices that would become the trademarks of Cummings's style: indentation, absence of punctuation, and eccentric wording, which constitute the "silent poem." Furthermore, emphasis is given to chosen elements through capitalization and position. Thus, "Buffalo Bill," his "stallion," "Jesus," and "Mister Death" are given each an entire line (Dias 6-7.) Except for "stallion," they also occupy the first, central, and last line. "Jesus" is also the farthest to the right on the page, representing, according to one interpretation, the hero at the apex of his career (Cohen 217.)

More importantly, punctuation is noticeably absent. As a result, syntax relies on two conjunctions (lines 6 and 9,) one relative pronoun ("who,") and line breaks. The final question mark has been omitted to emphasize the rhetorical nature of the question. The marked absence of punctuation also conveys the feeling of uninterrupted flow peculiar to spoken language. The slight syntactic inconsistency between lines 2 and 3 reflects accurately the casual errors of unrehearsed spoken language, but it appears more the result of a deliberate inversion of clauses to emphasize the first statement (Buffalo Bill 's / defunct.) This turns the relative clause into a parenthetical, but parentheses have been replaced by indentation. Likewise, smoothness and rapidity of motion are conveyed by the unspaced sequences of words in line 6, namely "onetwothreefourfive" and "pigeonsjustlikethat." These represent the most daring typographic device in the poem, each deriving from the fusion of a sequence of words. The syllabic symmetry between the shots and the pigeons conveys precision of performance, i.e. one for one (Funkhouser)[6] as well as the rapidity with which the shots occur. The monosyllabic nature of each number further emphasizes the fast rhythmical sequence.

The colorful language of the poem also draws attention unto itself. The deft turns of phrase, the linguistic stunts, and the dynamic and agile diction translate, in words, Buffalo Bill's skills. Despite the lexical limitations imposed the colloquial register, the poet demonstrates how spectacularly he is able to translate into language the dynamism of a Wild West Show, as skillfully as Buffalo Bill would break clay pigeons.

A less experimental poem than "Buffalo Bill 's," "since feeling is first"

(CP 291) casts some interesting lights upon Cummings's conception of

language and typography:

since feeling is first

who pays any attention

to the syntax of things

will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool

while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,

and kisses are a better fate

than wisdom

lady i swear by all flowers.   Don't cry

—the best gesture of my brain is less than

your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other:then

laugh,leaning back in my arms

for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis

The poem exploits a typography-related terminology as a metaphor to describe a poetics of sensualism, as opposed to intellectualism, by paradoxically constructing it as an argumentative text (Friedman, The Art of his Poetry .) The poem is based on a series of oppositions. Words carrying positive connotations (feeling, kiss, Spring, flowers, etc.,) contrast sharply with terms associated with intellectual and logical reasoning (since, paragraph, parenthesis.) The fourth line seems to wink an eye at the reader who has just stopped to disambiguate the syntax of the sentence, having no punctuation to rely on. The best explication of the poem's significance is possibly an early note of the poet reported by Cohen: "Thinking [. . .] imposes order ("syntax") and limits ("parenthesis")—both arbitrary" (Cohen, PoetandPainter 81.) But the central concept of the poem is "wholeness," a word that is significantly repeated twice. Being a pun on "holy," and simultaneously alluding to "hole," the word condenses meanings that are, in a way, antithetical—holiness ("holy") and possibly sex ("hole.") The word "wholly," by its very polysemous nature, epitomizes Cummings's entire poetics, as the next section will illustrate.

2.3. A Whole Language

Cummings's uniqueness among Modernists depends upon a substantial difference. His research into poetic language develops along two main lines: the visual <u>and</u> the linguistic. As we have seen, the places great emphasis on the visual aspect of poems, as a means to achieve a synaesthetic effect. By emphasizing the visual, he does not aim at uprooting linear meaning entirely, but seeks a balanced combination of linguistic and visual elements. However,

his peculiarity lies in the search for a more complex poetry, which should be capable of including both the audible and the visible, both the linear and the associative. In other words, Cummings devised strategies to further enhance the communicative potential of poetry from <u>within</u> language, by amplifying what Saussure calls "the associative relations" between signifiers, and forcing them to come into full view—concretely—on the page.

According to Saussure, words combine in <u>syntagmatic</u> relations to convey coherent meaning. Syntagmatic relations produce sentences by developing linearly along a horizontal axis. Conversely, <u>associative</u> relations (or paradigmatic,) do not follow a consecutive progression, but coexist simultaneously, and can be based either on shared acoustic images or on mere analogies between signifieds:[7] "a word 'will unconsciously call to mind a host of other words' down the vertical axis" (qtd. in Easthope 38). As Antony Easthope further observes,

> a signifier (e.g. a phoneme) is <u>there</u>, present for the subject in the syntagmatic chain only as a result of the absence of others against which it is differentially defined […]; meaning can be intended along the syntagmatic chain only because associated signifiers offering themselves from the paradigmatic axis are held aside. (Easthope 37)

Associations, therefore, are not spelled out—they are unconscious and highly subjective[8] (Saussure 171,) and exist in the mind alone. Indeed, they must remain unrealized linguistically. If they were spoken, the conveyance of coherent meaning would be compromised. With an insightful wordplay that is

impossible to reproduce in English, Isabelle Alfandary sums up the point: "Grammar speaks (<u>dit</u>) and forbids (<u>interdit</u>): as soon as it starts forbidding, it paradoxically authorizes to speak"[9] (Alfandary 87.)

Cummings's estranged poetic diction is constructed as to include as many meaningful elements as possible, rejecting none of the "host of other words" that each word calls to mind (Saussure .) In order to accomplish this move, he must expose those relations that multiply meaning, which would otherwise remain eclipsed by the linear unfolding of language. Thus, Cummings unearths this hidden language, authorizing the invisible signifiers to speak (on the page) as "loudly" as the visible ones. However analogous the implications, Cummings's felicitous insight owes more to the stream-of-consciousness technique adopted by Joyce in <u>Ulysses</u> than to a direct influence of Saussure's work. Milton Cohen perfectly captures the point when he recuperates from Cummings's manuscripts

> A revealing note showing how ideas in Molly Bloom's soliloquy "follow in associative sequence, not simply logically." Association moves "with the logic of the Unconscious" "IN ALL DIRECTIONS," for it lacks the conventional punctuation that would "artificially" order ideas into the linear logic of the "thinking" mind. (Cohen, PoetandPainter 162)

In conventional linear reading, the meaning of a proposition is compositional: every new word adds meaning but redefines the previous, by imposing limits on its polysemy. With appropriate devices that multiply the

polysemy of words instead of restricting it, Cummings holds back the reading progression and deviates linearity in all directions. As a main consequence, Cummings's diction impairs normal-speed reading. To the diluted nature of linear language, he opposes an economic but saturated poetic language. By applying verbatim Pound's famous dictum "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (Pound, ABC of Reading 28,) Cummings comes close to an uprooting of linearity. He devises his idiosyncratic diction by unearthing all excluded meanings, and making them disturbingly visible. Therefore, condensation also implies a blurring of the assumed hierarchical relationship between the syntagmatic and the associative.

This aspect of Cummings's style is pervasive that Pound praises exactly this quality in EIMI (1933): "Now in part Mr. Cummings teaches a doctrine which is very ably condensed (dichten, condensare; to write poetry is to CONDENSE)" (Pound, E. E. Cummings Examined n. pag.) A few paragraphs later, Pound captures cogently the associative character of Cummings's language, by declaring: "Now Mr. Cummings writes PROSE, whereof every word tells its story" (Ibid.) Finally, he concludes that "[t]here is in Cummings what the Chinese say with an ideogram" (Ibid.)

When achieved through typographical devices, associative meaning are usually lost in recitation. In some cases, however, typographical elements compromise the linear text to such a degree that the latter becomes unspeakable. Only paraphrasing can restore a coherent sense, yet radically reducing the semantic richness of the poem. For this reason, such poems resist

paraphrasing. But again, Cummings would demonstrate his communicative intention by providing clear explanations about a poem when asked, provided that "explanations […] are certainly harmless,as long as a person doesn't mistake the explanation for the poem" (Selected Letters 260.)

"l(a", the "a leaf falls/loneliness" haiku (CP 673,) one of the best achievements of the poet's mature phase, is perhaps the best example of how an opportune arrangement of merely four words can convey more meaning than a linear sequence:

> l(a
>
> le
> af
> fa
>
> ll
>
> s)
> one
> l
>
> iness

According to interpretations that takes into account its iconicity, the vertical shape of the poem imitates iconically the downward fluttering movement of a falling leaf, which revolves around its axis in lines 3-4 and keeps descending until it hits the ground and gains a horizontal, static position—the last line being also the longest one. However, the poem also allows non-iconic interpretations, whereby linear and non-linear meaning do not cancel each other, but simultaneously contribute to the thematic unity. The linear meaning is only visible to the eye, as the parenthetical clause "a leaf falls" interrupts the word "loneliness" and makes it unpronounceable. Each

word is further split across lines, revealing to the eye alone a number of other words. To read the poem aloud would either shatter the perfect unity and delicate balance of this masterpiece of poetic economy, or neglect all the silent accidental meanings visible to the eye only. In other words, in this case the assumption whereby a poem is better understood if read aloud proves erroneous.

Typography thus plays a fundamental role in multiplying the meaning potential. In fact, the presence of all additional signifiers in the poem is due exclusively to typography. Among the words in the "silent text," critics have identified: "la," the French determiner in the feminine case, "le" (the French masculine definite article,) and "one," which is perfectly visible in line 7. Along this exegetic line, critics have further interpreted the "ll" as two figures ("1") juxtaposed. The plausibility of this interpretation is further supported by the first line, which contains "l" and "a," and lines 7-8. The final line suggests unity if interpreted as "i-ness." Landles further notices that the poem is also number 1 in the volume (95 Poems.) Nevertheless, poem can elicit further associations, and even antithetical ones. If, on the one hand, "la," "le," "1," "one," and "iness" suggest singularity, on the other hand not a single symbol stand alone in a line. Further, the "s)" in line 6 suggests plurality, particularly because it comes right after "ll," which—in its turn—seems to indicate duality. In other words, the poem can provoke infinite associations, and yet the reader will tend to discard the less plausible interpretations, either by contrasting elements within the poem, or by referring to the themes of the poet's overall production.

While in "l(a" iconicity is restricted to linguistic units, in the poem

"one" (CP 833,) published posthumously in <u>73 Poems</u> (1963,) it extends to the

overall shape of the poem, approximating to the peculiar style of Apollinaire's

<u>Calligrammes</u>:

one

t
hi
s

snowflake

(a
  li
    ght
  in
g)

is upon a gra

v
es
t

one

As in "l(a," lineation liberates hidden signifiers, each possessing

denotative as well as associative meanings. Again, through an opportune

arrangement on the page, the eight words of the poem, divided across fifteen

lines, display an unrestrained semantic potentiality. The poem achieves a

perfect mixture of visual elements (imitative shape,) and associative meanings

that complete the univocal (linear) one. As the poem itself seems to suggest,

through the perfect symmetry between first and last line, the theme is oneness.

Beside the last "one," which in fact belongs to the word "gravestone,"

lineation highlights new words: hi, his, a, light, in, vest, es, est, gravest, tone—triggering a process that may have no end.

All Cummings's devices aim at conveying a wholeness of meaning. The repressed surfaces are made visible, and spelled out. From a wider perspective, Cummings's language brings back to the surface all the associations that are removed from it in order to make it coherent (Easthope 36,)—and exposes it. Hence, all elements inhering to the polysemy of words become creative tools in the hands of the poet. In his poetry, Cummings employs both typographic and non-typographic devices to foreground a text which is not absent but eclipsed by the conventional linear-compositional character of language. Techniques becomes a tool to explore the dark side of language. The resulting medium abounds in connotations, marked absences, puns, intentional or accidental slips of the pen, and strange word combinations. Further techniques are employed to foreground words within words: word splitting, parentheses unorthodox capitalization, and virtually all sorts of typographical devices.

2.4. Surprise and the Miracle of Language

At the origin of Cummings's poetics is a statement which we shall use to demonstrate why language manipulation is so central to Cummings. In an early essay on T. S. Eliot (1920,) he wrote:

> By technique we do not mean a great many things, including: anything static, a school, a noun, a slogan, a formula: These Three for Instant Beauty, Art Est Celare, Hasn't Scratched Yet, Professor Woodbery, Grape Nuts. By technique we do mean

one thing: the alert hatred of normality which, through the lips

of a tactile and cohesive adventure, asserts that nobody in

general and some one in particular is incorrigibly and actually

alive" (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 27.)

Accordingly, in the poem "POEM,OR BEAUTY HURTS MR.

VINAL" (CP 228) we find a very accurate application of the principles

defined in the essay on Eliot. In the poem, which satirizes poet Harold Vinal,

makes aesthetic statements by parodying advertising slogans, aesthetic

formulae, breakfast food, brand names, quotations from Browning and

Shelley, and patriotic songs:

i would

suggest that certain ideas gestures

rhymes,like Gillette Razor Blades

having been used and reused

to the mystical moment of dullness emphatically are

Not To Be Resharpened.

…………………….

according

to such supposedly indigenous

throstles Art is O World O Life

a formula:example,Turn Your Shirttails Into

Drawers and If It Isn't An Eastman It Isn't A

Kodak"

In the "Introduction" to <u>Is 5</u> (1926) Cummings defines the poem as "fait," and poets as obsessed with "making" because they do not care much for things "made"": "If a poet is anybody, he is somebody to whom things made matter very little—somebody who is obsessed by Making" (CP 221.) Being mostly a "received" medium, a "made, language is fundamentally conservative, but it although it allows creativity. Yet to accept language as it is and would be to reproduce "ready-made" fossilized ideas. In his essay on T. S. Eliot, Cummings had also spoken about "something inescapably rectilinear—a formula, for example" (A Miscellany Revised 26.)

To this regard, we should note that Shklovsky had an analogous notion of the function of technique. In one passage of his famous "Art as Device" he defines unwittingly Cummings's poetics:

> the artistic trademark—that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that de-automatized perception. A work is created 'artistically' so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception" (Shklovsky n. pag.)

Cummings expressed in his own words Shklovsky's concept of "Art as Device." By quoting a note by young Cummings, Milton Cohen notes how similar the two theories appear: "[...] in the 1920's, Cummings had written that "Perception is related to Un-familiarity" (Cohen, PoetandPainter 223.) However, as Cohen points out, "Cummings could not have known then about

Victor Shklovsky's concept of <u>ostranenie</u> or "defamiliarization," but seems to have gained the same insight and "subscribed to a peculiarly individualistic form of it throughout his career" (250.) But both Cummings's and Shklovsky's statements also reveals an important intuition: that to defamiliarize is also to denaturalize. Since ideology has been defined as that "false belief" whereby social status appears as natural where it is in fact culture-specific or otherwise partial, it follows that to expose the workings of biased views as they are reflected in language, is a political act against unquestioned assumptions, thus asserting the social function of a poet as a clear stance against the notion of "norm" as repressive, be it strictly linguistic or social from a wider perspective, and exposing a tangible link between language and the powers that prohibit by imposing norms. In this sense, poetic device becomes an instrument of demystification. By defamiliarizing a hackneyed medium, Cummings hints that art must entail an element of surprise.

Wrong assumptions about Cummings's poetic style have often resulted in definitions carrying derogatory overtones, such as "bag of tricks" (qtd. in Fairley, E. E. Cummings and Ungrammar 1.) Other early definitions generally dismiss his poetry as mannerist or baroque. Yet, his poetic language is not simply the product of a pastiche of devices. Despite the heterogeneous appearance, they have one common purpose. Cummings's technique, as he explains in the "Foreword" to <u>Is 5</u>, "is very far from original;nor is it <u>complicated</u>" (CP 221, my emphasis.) But the comment must not be interpreted as an ironic understatement. The poet hints at the existence of a

single motif that unifies all devices. In other words, Cummings's forms are carefully disciplined in order to condense more meaning into the shortest space, and his technique affects communication at all levels.

The "Eternal Question And Immortal Answer of burlesk" that he quotes to illustrate his point is perfectly appropriate: "Would you hit a woman with a child?—No,I'd hit her with a brick" (CP 221.) The question contains a potential double entendre that remains unrealized until the final word of the answer is spoken. The unexpectedness of the answer begs a number of insightful considerations. Firstly, it urges a reconsideration of the question, and simultaneously exposes its ambiguous nature. Secondly, what is questioned is the process of disambiguation whereby all potential meanings of an expression are discarded in favor of the only plausible one. Save those cases of manifest or deliberate ambiguity, the linearity of the English language admits only one possible interpretation at a time for words and sentences, context (both linguistic and extra-linguistic) being the chief parameter of disambiguation. If one accepts the idiomatic (non-compositional) meaning in the expression "woman with a child," then the answer sounds rather bizarre. But, once the literal meaning is selected, the answer becomes thoroughly plausible. Indeed, to the speaker of the answer, using a child as a blunt tool is less plausible than using a brick instead.

The principle discussed above may also illuminate the "alert hatred of normality" of the T. S. Eliot essay. Further on in his essay, Cummings had spoken of "the delicate and careful murderings—almost invariably interpreted, internally as well as terminally, through near-rhyme and rhyme—

of established tempos by oral rhythms" (A Miscellany Revised 28.) The third

implication is that such decoding of utterances becomes automatic for those

"drowsy" users of language who regard it as a transparent medium. Only the

poet who is alert and looks at the medium with suspicion can spot such snares

and grasp the full meaning of words. Linearity implies a cause-effect

hierarchical relation between two entities. However, in Cummings linearity is

not uprooted, but manipulated in order for nonlinear meanings to emerge.

Ambiguity is thus the fundamental condition for Cummings's poetics.

All meanings, both linear and nonlinear ones, gain equal importance towards

the achievement of a simultaneity and a wholeness of perception. In more

general terms, it is a poetics that includes the excluded, by refusing to reject

any meanings—a poetics that exposes the "dark side" of language. Words in

Cummings's poetry become ambiguous or polysemous. Hence, his language

is saturated with meaning "to the utmost degree," resulting in a highly

condensed medium (Pound, E. E. Cummings Examined n. pag.) His technique

overcrowds words with all sorts of meanings. Further, ambiguity also entails

an element of surprise and shock, a frustration of expectations. Cummings's

poetic devices are designed to be exhilarating. The surprise of sudden

recognition of the ambiguity occurs only when the wholeness of the

communication process is achieved, and, conversely, ambiguity is a

fundamental condition to the achievement of wholeness. This is why

burlesque comic inversions resonated so much to his poetic investigations.

By way of discussing burlesque theater, in the satirical sketch "You

Aren't Mad, Am I?" Cummings alludes to Freud's essay and concludes that

the fundamental principle of burlesque is analogous to primal words:

"opposites occur together" (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 127):

> "Just as our fair land of dollars and no sense was not always
>
> blest with prohibition, even so language was not always blest
>
> with "opposites." Quite the contrary. A certain very wise man
>
> has pointed out (in connection with the meaning of dreams) that
>
> what "weak" means and what "strong" means were once upon a
>
> time meant by <u>one word</u> [. . .] [I]n burlesk, we meet an echo of
>
> the original phenomenon: "opposites" occur <u>together</u>" (E. E.
>
> Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 127.)

Cohen explains Cummings's concept of "seeing around" (or elsewhere

"knowing around") that he had borrowed from Cubists as follows:

> "A word, for example, might really possess two "sides": a front,
>
> or conventional meaning that one sees and hears (e.g., "Bad"),
>
> and a back, or antithesis, unseen and unheard (e.g., "Good").
>
> The front may leave a semantic trace of the back on the mind [.
>
> . .]" (Cohen, PoetandPainter 69.)

Therefore, among the associative relations elicited by a word,

antithetical meanings attract the special attention of the poet. In a note

reported by Milton Cohen, the poet had annotated: "Meaning=a poise, 2

factors are the heard or Seen word (eg Bad) & the Unseen Unheard (Good) ie,

language based on ANTHITHESES (good-bad)" (Cohen 119.) Cohen

explains how Freud's 1910 essay "The Antithetical Meaning of Primal

Words" resonated with early Cummings's "seeing/knowing around" aesthetic

principle that he had adapted to poetry from Cubist painting. Freud, who in his turn cited Carl Abel as a source, argued that the principle behind the language of the unconscious bears some striking analogies with the vocabulary of ancient languages. According to Abel, in primitive cultures the same word (signifier) signifies simultaneously one concept and its opposite. Disambiguation, Abel added, relied on extra-linguistic elements. In the course of evolution, most words underwent gradual change in order to differentiate opposite signifieds by creating a distinct signifier for each of these. Where Abel had illustrated his argument with the German word "ohne" ("without,") which remains "mitohne" in some dialects, which displays the positive ("mit") as well as the negative ("ohne,") Cummings provides a surprising reinterpretation of the word "nowhere," by transforming it into two antithetical "now here" (CP 709.) "

Cohen has explained the "seeing around" and burlesque principle of surprise by <u>reversal</u> as it applies to early Cummings's abuse of eccentric oxymora. Yet, this device can be seen as one particular instance of the more general purpose of his poetry: <u>to expose the whole range</u> of association between signifiers. Evidence demonstrates how pervasive are these two concepts in Cummings's poetry, at all levels of language, from the typographic to the discursive. The following sections will illustrate how Cummings applies the principles of his poetic technique at sentence level. Chapter 3 will then bring the analysis to the discourse level.

2.5. Devices

So far, we have seen how a linear progression cannot account for all the meanings in language, but it must make a selection. The grammatical process of disambiguation subsequently removes all potential interpretations by tending to establish a univocal link between each word and its meaning. The wholeness of perception is therefore jeopardized by several factors. For Cummings selection threatens wholeness at all levels. Unfriendly reviewers and sympathetic critics alike have reproached Cummings for including in his published books both good and bad poems in an uncritical manner, regardless of quality. The publishers of his first books would often discard a certain number of poems, which he would always manage to get published in subsequent books. However, each one of his published collections was structured as to achieve wholeness and balance. To omit even a small part would have prejudiced both. Each single element becomes equally important in the construction of a whole.

This principle applies to every aspect of his poetics, and has strong implications to his view of society. His poetic devices share one purpose, namely to give visibility to the rejected. An early note condenses in a nutshell his poetic agenda: "we have separated 'eye' and 'I' (vs. eye&i) […] IT IS THE FUNCTION OF 'ART' TO RESTORE THIS WHOLENESS *INTEGRALITY*" (quoted in Cohen 70.) Starting with typography, the following sections will thus review the most salient devices as they work towards the fundamental objectives defined so far, while at the same time

indicating those heterogeneous agents that threaten wholeness, most often repressing typographic eccentricities and taboo vocabulary.

2.6.1. Typography

Typography is not exactly a <u>linguistic</u> level, but a <u>paralinguistic</u> one, in that it creates additional meaning by bridging the gap between the visual and the linguistic. By placing an equal stress on linguistic and paralinguistic elements, the chief function of visual artifices was, for Modernists, to undermine the reader's assumptions regarding the transparent and merely utilitarian nature of language (Korg 192.) The typewriter extended the potentialities of poetic expression, but it set definite limits, as it tended to standardize the visual aspects of texts. Yet, as Korg has it, "experimental writers sensed that if the features of the book which printers normally tried to neutralize could instead be rendered meaningful, they would have the direct force of objects" (191-192.) Mallarmé's "Un Coup de Dés" broke new grounds in the use of the typewriter, making way for later more sophisticated experiments, Cummings being among the most ardent enthusiasts.

Like other modernists, Cummings makes extensive use of typographic devices, in which he saw a means to achieve that plurality on which he set his poetic cause, that is by uniting linear, visual, and associative meaning into a complex whole. With very few exceptions, he composed his poems on a typewriter. But his typographical experiments, from a strictly visual point of view, are far less radical than other contemporary avant-garde poets'. As Heusser points out, "[f]or all the deviations Cummings' typography contains it is still remarkably conventional" (Heusser 243,) the most daring experiment

being "a single instance, CP 263, which is rotated ninety degrees counterclockwise" (Ibid.,) and a single example of handwriting (Ibid.) Due to the relatively small number of typefaces and to other technical limitations, Cummings's devices do not affect type, nor do they defy the conventional horizontal lines, although he uses Greek letters in a few instances.

The most transparent innovation brought about by Cummings is the inclusion of currency symbols, ampersands, numbers, and other mathematical symbols. However strict the limits imposed by the typewriter, Cummings observes that these symbols had never appeared in poetry, at least until Modern literary avant-gardes introduced them. Numbers provide useful shortcuts to their spelled-out counterparts, but their primary function is to surprise the reader by their very inclusion in a poetic context, and to appropriate the language of logics and mathematics for parodic purposes. The poem "there are possibly 2½ or impossibly 3" (CP 514) is a good example of numbers being used in poetry. In the "Foreword" to <u>Is 5</u> (1926,) the poet explains the meaning of the title ("Is 5") as the result of two times two, thus making a sharp distinction between the poet's creativity and the passive acceptance of received truths.

In the poem "Lord John Unalive(having a fortune of fifteengrand" (CP 332) which caricatures a successful poet speaking in British accent for some obscure reasons, the symbol for the British currency "£" and the quotes must be pronounced in order to accomplish alternate rhymes:

> Lord John Unalive(having a fortune of fifteengrand
>
> £

thanks to the socalled fact that maost faolks rally demannd canned

saounds)

gloats

upon the possession of quotes keltyer close

""

aureally(yawning while all the dominoes)fall:down;in,rows

The symbol for the American currency is used in a more surprising fashion in the satirical poem "IKEY(GOLDBERG)'S WORTH I'M" (CP 242), where the poet places it in a paradoxically correct position (i.e. before the amount) and making it rhyme with "COLLARS". Thus, the dollar symbol makes a perfect rhyme with collars even if in print it is not placed at the end of the line. In this case, rhythm further helps the reader towards a correct reading:

IKEY(GOLDBERG)'S WORTH I'M

TOLD $ SEVERAL MILLION

FINKLESTEIN(FRITZ)LIVES

AT THE RITZ WEAR

earl & wilson COLLARS

As in the previous examples, typographic are intended to give preeminence to the visual aspect of words or at least create a temporary disorientation in the reader. In order to draw attention on the visual element of his poetry—often in a provocative vein—his writings present many challenges to pronunciation. His books often have unpronounceable titles, such as W [Viva] (1931,) CIOPW (1931,) EIMI (1933,) 1/20 [One over Twenty] (1936,)

1X1 [One Times One] (1944,) XAIPE (1950,) and an untitled book of prose

satires [Book Without a Title] (1929,) whose title is neither pronounceable nor

invisible.

However, the most significant example remains & [AND] (1925.) In a

letter to his father dated May 22, 1920, Cummings congratulated himself for

the recent publication of five of his poems in The Dial, particularly regarding

his use of the ampersand: "it is a supreme pleasure to have done something

FIRST—and "roses & hello" also the comma after "and" ("and,ashes")are

Firsts," and adding that it was lucky for him to have at his complete disposal a

journal's press that obeyed to his instructions as to "such minutiae as commas

and small i's,in which minutiae my Firstness thrives" (Cummings, Selected

Letters 70-71.)

The ampersand also came to epitomize the rejection of a group of

poem and the consequent amputation of his first thick manuscript, Tulips &

Chimneys, which was published in 1923 as Tulips and Chimneys. The symbol

was later forced back into view as the title of & [AND] (1925) which included

the remaining poems from the manuscript. The title was further reinforced by

the names of the three sections, viz. "A," "N," and "D." Finally, the

ampersand symbol may be viewed, in a certain sense, as an epitome of his

poetics, as it represents active inclusiveness over exclusion and selection.

Given the cardinal role played by typography in his poetry, he would come to

regard misprints and the exclusion of certain "minutiae" as a sort of mutilation

of the work of art, which undermined its wholeness and unity. Indeed, as

Oscar Wilde claimed, "a poet can survive everything but a misprint!" (Wilde n.pag.)

Nonetheless, Cummings's poetry displays an impressive variety of typographic devices which exceeds the mere inclusion of new symbols. They are virtually ubiquitous and take the most diverse forms. Furthermore, each device can perform different functions. Heusser maintains that they always entail an element of heterogeneity (Heusser 243.) According to their function, Cummings's typographical devices can be divided into two main categories: iconic devices, which create associations between language and objects, and devices that generate a proliferation of linguistic meaning by disclosing hidden relations between words.

Cummings's stress on the complementarity of linguistic and paralinguistic elements and the relative opacity of his typographic devices have repeatedly sowed confusion among readers. Those who were interested primarily in the visual aspect of his poetry have tended to stress its iconic character, sometimes beguiled by an overmuch imagination. Further misled by an assumed similarity between Cummings and Apollinaire, some have classified some poems as "shape poems." In fact, among Cummings's published poems one finds very few instances of genuine shape poems, the most transparent example being the poem about a snowflake analyzed in the previous pages. Heusser lists no more than five others. The dedication page of No Thanks (CP 382,) where a list of publishers' names is arranged in the shape of a goblet, is also often included in the number.

Although still consistent with Cummings's poetics of complementarity of visual and verbal elements, in fact the poem's shape rarely reproduces the theme: "Nowhere do we find a plausible ("motivated") relationship between what the poem says (i.e. its "topic," "theme," "content," or "message") and its shape" (Heusser 252.) Furthermore, the typewriter does not permit sophisticated drawing. In those few instances, the poem designs geometrical forms, usually triangular, much in the fashion of Renaissance poets George Herbert and Robert Herrick, or creates a convex or concave angle. These "poempictures" must therefore be intended, if anything, as non-representational paintings. The nature of many other poems is debated, as the shapes described cast serious doubts regarding the poet's intention since they are not straightforward. A further reason justifies the small number of shape poems. A representational imitation of "topic" would exclude all other meanings, or—in pictorial terms—create the illusion of a thematic center. For this very reason, Cummings's poems generally lack a recognizable title. Therefore the iconic function must be sought in lesser discursive units—graphemes and punctuation, and in the use of blank spaces.

In order to overcome the impossibility of reproducing curving shapes on the typewriter, Cummings resorts to alternative strategies, such as the letter o to underline the roundness of the full moon, as in "mOOn Over tOwns mOOn" (CP 383) or parentheses that imitate the crescent moon. In "l(a" (CP 673) parentheses reproduce the curve described by the swaying leaf, first in one direction "(" and then in the opposite ")." Other punctuation marks can

function as iconic devices, as in the poem "t,h;r:u;s,h;e:s" (CP 820) discussed extensively by Martin Heusser (256-259.)

In some cases the marked absence of typographic elements can function as a defamiliarizing device to achieve a specific effect. In the poems "SNO," the snow literally covers the letter "W." In the poem "o pr" (CP 392) eccentric lineation makes each line start with an 'o,' but, after opening the poem, the letter disappears from the left margin, only to reappear occasionally in other positions. Only at the very end of the poem does the reader grasp the iconic function of the 'o,' which apparently represents a baseball being thrown by the President of the United States on the inauguration of the season. In another poem, "ondumonde"" (CP 430,) ellipsis plays two different roles. Here the initial ellipsis obviously indicates the final part of a conversation in French, in which a few phonemes suffice to make the object intelligible. But the device also creates accidentally a nonce word that, by mere phonetic analogy, evokes—however vaguely—the undulating movement of the boxing champion.

It is through other devices, however, that Cummings better exploits the capability of typographic arrangements to convey additional meaning. By doing away with punctuation marks, on which the reader normally relies for a correct decoding of texts, or by carefully misplacing it, the poet creates intentional syntactic ambiguities that he can exploit to condense more meaning into one sequence of words:

       a thrown a

       -way It

with some-

thing sil

-very

;bright,&:mys(

a thrown a-

way

X

-mas)ter-

i

-ous wisp A of glo-

ry.pr

-ettily

cl(tr)in(ee)gi-

ng

 In the poem "a thrown a" (CP 632,) in order for the linear meaning to make sense, words must be unscrambled as follows: "A thrown-away 'It' with something silvery bright and mysterious (a thrown-away Christmas) A wisp of glory prettily clinging (tree.)" The parenthetical clause in lines 7-10, although closed, is continued in the penultimate line. More importantly, lineation brings

to light several other words: the second "a" of line 1 (converted into a noun;) way; very; mys-; X; master; i; and ee (perhaps a reference to the author's name.) New word combinations result from the unearthed words: a thrown 'a,' very bright, a thrown-away Christmas. Lineation also splits something into 'some thing,' by forcing a compositional meaning into a word that has a seemingly non-analyzable meaning ("something.") "X" only approximates the center. Having an even number of lines, the poem has no center, but it is still symmetrical. The last two lines intersect "clinging" with "tree." Only at the end does the reader recognize the object of the poem—a Christmas tree. In order to place equal emphasis on all the meanings produced by lineation, Cummings transforms the "title" of the poem into an interrupted parenthetical that achieves completeness and coherency only at the very end of the poem.

By stressing Cummings's accuracy in the choice and displacement of words, Gorham Munson noted that Cummings "sees freshly. Cummings sees words" (Munson 2,) meaning that he sees words anew and prompts the reader to do likewise. Yet—to reinterpret Munson's phrase—Cummings <u>sees</u> words also in different sense. He sees words even within other words, by questioning or disregarding word boundaries, or by shattering word integrity. In "t,h;r:u;s,h;e:s" (CP 820) lineation and parentheses bring hidden words to the fore:

> notqu
>
> -it-
>
> Eness

dre(is)ams (6-9)

Thanks to line breaks the "-it-" in "quite" becomes visible, whereas the parenthetical "(is)" reveals a paradoxical plural "am." Lineation and stanzas generally create symmetries (as in "a like a") or emphasize words within words, as in "w / here" (CP 493.) Likewise, in the satire "yes but even" (CP 708) a series of interruptions create and at the same time frustrate expectations slowing down the construction of the overall linear meaning:

yes but even

4 or(&

h

ow)dinary

a

meri

can b

usiness soca

lled me

n dis

cussing "parity" in l'hô

tel nor

man(rue d

e l'échelle)

die can't

quite poison God's sunlight

Starting from the top, "4 or" creates the expectation of another number. One has to read further to find out that the expectation is frustrated. The word "ordinary" is interrupted by the parenthetical "(& / h / ow)." The word is recomposed only in line 4, where the "ow" of "how" substitutes the first half of "ordinary" and makes it sound like a dialectal accent (owdinary.) "American" is spit across three lines, revealing the words "a," "meri" (perhaps a deliberate wrong spelling for "merry,") and "can," which makes line 7 read "can be." Other new liberated words are: the nonce-word "usiness" which can reveal some meaning by analogy with "use" and the suffix "-ness," "[l]led me" in line 9; "cussing" in line 11, which creates an amusing contrast with the seriousness of the object of their conversation. "Normandie" is split across three lines, revealing a parallel sentence "nor man die," and the particularly subtle "man(rue d" which apparently underlines again the rudeness of the men. Cummings refuses to grant them any human qualities by splitting the noun "businessmen" and by introducing a "socalled" before "men."

A high number of poems challenge the conventional horizontal unfolding of sentences by developing vertically instead (e.g. "l(a".) Miscapitalization and, conversely, lowercase, are used for emphasis, for quotations assimilated into the text, to signal the beginning of a new sentence

when proper punctuation is absent, but more generally, like lineation, to reveal

other signifiers. Likewise, spacing can be used <u>between</u> as well as <u>within</u>

words to achieve the same effect. Word splitting and spacing within words, as

in "collaps ingly" (CP 331,) create a cumulative meaning by syntactic

ambiguity, as also in "now here" (CP 709.)

   Punctuation is liberated from its conventional syntactic function and is

used as a prosodic or expressive device. In some cases punctuation can even

constitute an entire line of poetry or a whole stanza, such as in the final lines

of "the skinny voice" (CP 72) where punctuation marks are used expressively:

> ?
>
> ??
>
> ???
>
> !
>
>
> nix,kid. (22-26)

   An exclamation mark can even be used to substitute a whole word, as

in "it's jolly" (CP 268.) The poem also features further iconic devices, such as

onomatopoeic sounds, fusion, and capitalization:

>   when the
>
> jolly shells begin dropping jolly fast you
>
> hear the rrmp and
>
> then nearerandnearerandNEARER
>
> and before
>
> you can

!

& we're

NOT (3-11)

Parentheses interrupt the conventional flow of sentences in order to include every significant aspect of an experience. Ezra Pound commented on Cummings's abuse of parenthetical insertions as follows:

> Well old Henry James worried his European readers to death by his parentheses. They are an American habit, they mean something to us and for us as Americans. They mean something more than the one track mind. But they do NOT imply deviation or lack of direction. They are a desperate attempt, no not an attempt, a DEVICE, to avoid leaving out something NEEDED, some part of the statement needed to set down, to register the direction, and meaning. (Pound, E. E. Cummings Examined n. pag.)

However, the most interesting function of line breaks and parentheses is that they create syntactic ambiguities, as in "anguish(clim / b)ing" (CP 278,) and "be // (ing) / comes" (CP 471,) or unexpected juxtaposition of words.

Cummings took great care in disseminating punctuation marks on the page. Laura Riding and Robert Graves demonstrate how, by using punctuation in unorthodox ways, the poet makes it a major carrier of meaning

(Riding and Graves) In Cummings, punctuation abandons its conventional syntactic function, and becomes iconic, expressive, or prosodic. For this reason, Cummings felt compelled to send detailed instructions to typographers, along with explicit recommendations not to modify any single mark, lest the perfect equilibrium of each poem be undermined. The instructions sent to Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos for the translation of the famous "grasshopper poem," "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" (CP 396,) reveal how intricately structured are his visual poems. The poem, one of the most radical experiment in his whole oeuvre, "has a righthand margin as well as a left," but two letters are placed outside the imaginary frame:[10]

```
                        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;
```

   Yet, the typographic aspect as a complement to linguistic meaning cannot account for those poems in which there is little visual. In this latter kind of poems language only seemingly follows a linear progression. In order to distort the linearity of language, in his more mature phase Cummings reverts to devices that manipulate the words from within their grammatical properties.

2.6.2. Structural Ambiguity and Inversion

Cummings's poetry displays a progressive abandon of techniques that imply a reification linguistic signs, while showing an increased interest in their <u>symbolic</u> value, in the search for new ways to liberate the potentialities of English as an alphabetic language. Typographical devices are not entirely rejected, but indentation as a major carrier of visual meaning is replaced by lineation and stanza patterns. Furthermore, stanzas move progressively towards more regular patterns. Word splitting is achieved chiefly through lineation: it occurs more frequently <u>across</u> lines rather than <u>within</u> lines, contributing to the characteristic narrow and vertical shapes that recall Japanese haikus. Generally, the focus shifts from the visual appearance of poems to the structural and invisible features of language—a third dimension of meaning. Poetic devices come to affect the processes of word formation (morphological devices) and the mechanisms that govern the combination of words into sentences (syntactic devices.) In short, this experimental line affects the grammar of language, but—like typographical devices—aim at creating or emphasizing the potential ambiguities of language units (words and sentences.)

Before analyzing Cummings's morphological devices, some necessary distinctions must be made. In the English language words can be constructed from one or more morphemes. A morpheme is defined as "a minimal unit of meaning or grammatical function" (Yule 67.) Depending on their capability of being compounded, a further distinction is made between <u>free</u> morphemes and <u>bound</u> morphemes. Free morphemes can constitute whole words, and are for

the most part <u>lexical</u> morphemes (which possess a proper meaning;) whereas

<u>functional</u> morphemes constitute a closed class which does not normally

inflect, and by definition does not carry meaning but rather perform a

function. On the other hand, bound morphemes are affixes that combine with

lexical morphemes by modifying the word's grammatical category

(<u>derivational</u> morphemes) or inflect it for gender, number, case, tense, etc.,

without modifying its class (<u>inflectional</u> morphemes.) Free lexical morphemes

can also combine with each other into compound words.

  Apart from typography, Cummings's equally recognizable tract are his

eccentric coinages. Norman Friedman and others have analyzed and classified

Cummings's linguistic inventions rather exhaustively. However considerable

the amount of word coinages, Friedman points out that the poet generally

does not coin new words from scratch but by compounding pre-existing

morphemes through a process that is hardly original. We shall briefly review

some of the most significant to see how they relate to Cummings's general

poetic principles.

  We have seen how, through typographical devices, Cummings splits

words chiefly by lineation or spacing, thus atomizing them until they become

non-atomizable, in order to unearth any words within them and increase their

semantic potentiality, as in "hers // elf" (CP 654,) "its // elf" (CP 472,) and

"now // -here" (CP 676.) By reversing the device, however, he also creates a

considerable amount of compounds. Unlike the device of fusion that he had

used in "Buffalo Bill 's" ("onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat,") by

compounding he aims at a different effect. The "Introduction" to <u>Collected</u>

Poems (1938) contains an incredible number of such coins: "mostpeople" (CP 461,) connoting an indistinct mass; "squarerootofminusone" (Ibid.,) indicating an imaginary number, hence "unthinkable;" "standardofliving" (Ibid.;) "mrsandmr collective foetus" (Ibid.;) and finally "the murdered finalities of wherewhen and yesno, impotent nongames of wrongright and rightwrong" (462.) The intention here is to show that, although apparently constituted by more words, these phrases express in fact one single and unproductive concept. By contrast, the text also contains the word "lookiesoundiefeelietastiesmellie" (Ibid.,) which is a cumulative word symbolizing the complexity of the individual. All other words connote quite the opposite, as the concepts they express do not provoke a proliferation of associations.

A more interesting type of devices operates at the morphosyntactic level—or word grammar—wherein derivational morphemes are liberated from arbitrary combination constraints. Derivation can create ironic hyperboles, as in "hyperexclusively ultravoluptuous superpalazzo" (461,) or perform new functions. One of the most frequent types of coins by derivation are produced by affixes of negation such as "un-" and "non-." The function of "un-" is to keep the root word intact in its antonym, thus retaining a shade of the positive concept. Noticing that antonyms do not always have the same form as their counterpart, Friedman points out that "such a device allows the poet to produce a slightly more vivid impression by using the positive root plus the negative prefix, instead of the negative root itself—"unbold" instead of "timid," for example" (Friedman, The Art of his Poetry 106-107.)

As we have seen, in his essay on "The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words" Freud argued that in the process of evolution languages tend to differentiate the two antithetical meanings of the same Janus-like words by creating distinct signifiers. The function of Cummings's "un-" is thus to reverse this process: in the phrase "unanimal mankind" he substitutes "human" with "unanimal" in order to show how despite their belief in evolution human beings still retain an element of animality. By emphasizing antithetical elements inherent to words, the purpose of "un-" is to achieve a balanced wholeness of perception or—in Friedman's phrase—a "delicately hovering effect" (Friedman, The Art of his Poetry 106.)

Both critics and linguists have frequently underlined the extreme liberty and originality of Cummings's use of affixes, as in "wherelings whenlings" (CP 512,) or "warped this perhapsy" (CP 495.) By foregrounding function words and promoting them to the category of "lexical" parts of speech, the primacy of the noun in the hierarchical scale of word classes is subverted: function words are forced to acquire a denotative meaning and—as we shall see in the following section—even connotative ones: "he promotes these lowly grammatical servants to full partners with the words in visually and aurally expressing meaning" (Cohen 96.) As Cohen further notes regarding the application of pictorial techniques to poetry, "Noun-related elements (case, number) receive colorless black-grey-white designations appropriate to their low caste in Cummings's linguistic hierarchy" (Cohen 211.)

Notwithstanding the great extension of possibilities achieved through the manipulation of words, Cummings achieves better results through a particular case of derivation—zero derivation. Zero derivation, "functional shift," "conversion," or in some more traditional sources "anthimeria," is a very productive and widespread rhetorical device in English whereby a word is turned into another part of speech without morpheme additions. This device is particularly useful in metalinguistic statements such as "No ifs, ands, or buts about it" (Spears n. pag.) Zero derivation was used extensively by Shakespeare and Milton to coin new words (Preminger and Brogan 74.) Zero derivation is made possible by the structure of language itself. Generally, it is used to derive verbs from nouns. Cummings's peculiarity lies in having applied it indiscriminately to all categories of words. Part-of-speech categories are "liberated," by taking full advantage of possibilities that are already present to the English language. Indeed his technique, as he states in the "Foreword" to Is 5 "is very far from original;nor is it complicated" (CP 221.) By adding meaning while simultaneously enhancing the economy of language, the device becomes one of the staples of Cummings's mature poetry. However, one could trace the origins of Cummings's usage to his early poetry, where the word "perhaps" interrupts a sentence first as a parenthetical, and later becoming assimilated in the text: "if a(perhaps)clock strikes" (CP 182;) "Spring is like a perhaps hand" (CP 197;) "It / goes rapidly over the perhaps world" (CP 981.)

Apparently, by becoming assimilated in the text, "perhaps" comes to share more of the character of adjectives than of adverbs. In the first lines of

the well-known elegy "my father moved through dooms of love" (CP 520-521) we read "through sames of am through haves of give." Likewise, the poem "darling!because my blood can sing" (CP 580) provides many instances of zero derivation:

> darling!because my blood can sing
>
> and dance(and does with each your least
>
> your any most very amazing now
>
> or here)let pitiless fear play host
>
> to every isn't that's under the spring
>
> —but if a look should april me,
>
> down isn't's own isn't go ghostly they
>
>
> doubting can turn men's see to stare
>
> their faith to how their joy to why
>
> their stride and breathing to limp and prove
>
> —but if a look should april me,
>
> some thousand million hundred more
>
> bright worlds than merely by doubting have
>
> darkly themselves unmade makes love
>
>
> armies(than hate itself and no
>
> meanness unsmaller)armies can
>
> immensely meet for centuries
>
> and(except nothing)nothing's won

—but if a look should april me

for half a when, whatever is less

alive than never begins to yes

but if a look should april me

(though such as perfect hope can feel

only despair completely strikes

forests of mind,mountains of soul)

quite at the hugest which of his who

death is killed dead.   Hills jump with brooks:

trees tumble out of twigs and sticks;

Unlike other eccentric types of derivation, functional shift can create a syntactic ambiguity. In his analysis of Cummings's word coinages, Friedman comments that: "It functions, therefore, aesthetically and conceptually in signalizing an individual set of values seen freshly through the distortions of the grammatical shift" (Friedman 105.) Yet, the most important aspect of these coinages is their relation to his poetics: the fusion of two ideas into one, the condensing of many meanings into one word. In fact, the transformation of one part of speech into another is never complete. Once converted, the function word or particle keeps an aura of the original meaning. The resulting word is thus both at the same time. Friedman correctly observes that "[s]uch practice creates structural ambiguities when these words are read as adverbs, on the basis of their form, and as adjectives, on the basis of their position" (Ibid.) But this ambiguity, for Cummings must remain unsolved. In order to

be structurally ambiguous, sentences must have "two distinct underlying interpretations that have to be represented differently in deep structure" (Yule 98.) As we have seen, Cummings can create ambiguities by eliminating punctuation as a guide for the reader. The epigram "seeker of truth" (CP 775) condenses typographical and grammatical that sounds like his own poetic and existential manifesto:

> seeker of truth
>
> follow no path
>
> all paths lead where
>
> truth is here

Here the inherent ambiguity forces the reader to reconsider the word-class of "where," which can function either as a relative pronoun (substituting the name of a place) or as an adverb of place, apparently meaning "astray." The poem is a perfect example of "double syntax," "syntactic pun," or "garden-path sentence," viz., a tricky sentence whose surface appearance can be traced back to two distinct deep structures, whose ambiguity depends on an undecidability in part-of-speech parsing. By modifying the two deep structures so that they appear distinct, the ambivalence of the poem can be exposed as follows:

> (1)   Seeker of truth, follow no path, (because) all paths lead here (where truth is.)

(2)   Seeker of truth, follow no path, (because) all paths lead

where, (whereas) truth is here.

By suppressing explicit logical relations (hypotaxis and punctuation,) and providing no clue for disambiguation, the poem admits both interpretations. While the former alludes to circularity—further supported by the poem's structure,—the latter's implicit metaphor suggests that all inherited or ideological ways of interpreting reality (most notably linearity) misrepresent it by leading away from the truth. Either way, one thing is certain: that truth is "here," in one's self.

Since the publication of <u>50 Poems</u> (1940) the much celebrated "anyone lived in a pretty how town" (CP 515) has invited the most diverse reflections by eminent philosophers, linguists, and literary critics, although primarily around the nature of language. This is not a coincidence, since the poem itself points exactly—and insistently—to the dangerous consequences of the deceitful character of verbal communication. Having no signs of typographic experimentation, the poem perfectly demonstrates how words can mean more through the manipulation of their grammatical properties:

anyone lived in a pretty how town

(with up so floating many bells down)

spring summer autumn winter

he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men(both little and small)

cared for anyone not at all

they sowed their isn't they reaped their same

sun moon stars rain

children guessed(but only a few

and down they forgot as up they grew

autumn winter spring summer)

that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf

she laughed his joy she cried his grief

bird by snow and stir by still

anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones

laughed their cryings and did their dance

(sleep wake hope and then)they

said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon

(and only the snow can begin to explain

how children are apt to forget to remember

with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess

(and noone stooped to kiss his face)

busy folk buried them side by side

little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep

and more by more they dream their sleep

noone and anyone earth by april

wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)

summer autumn winter spring

reaped their sowing and went their came

sun moon stars rain

The poem highlights and questions the causal and temporal assumptions built into syntax. Punctuation demonstrates that endings, like death, are mere illusions, as in "since feeling is first" (CP 291,) where "death ... is no parenthesis." In this case, periods marks the end of the first stanza but the poem continues, and the period in the penultimate stanza suggests that the death of any individual leaves nature indifferent. The poem can thus begin again: "Women and men…" Nature does not care whether men think linearly or die, and keeps on alternating spontaneous, causeless events: "sun moon stars rain" in a circular sequence.

As James Paul Gee notes, natural events and human actions are assigned distinct syntactic pattern (Gee, Anyone's Any 129.) Human beings

carry out their actions by imposing syntactic relations upon events. Accordingly, they live by the illusion of linear time. Church bell tolls mark chronological time, measuring and quantifying it, and simultaneously remind people of the existence of an <u>after</u>-world, which forces them to deny their present for blessings to come: they believe in the existence of an "up" (Heaven) and a "down" (Hell.) By saying their "nevers," (prayers,) they deny the sins they have committed in the past, and they promise not to sin again. Their religion is indeed made of prohibitions, proscriptions, rules. However, Cummings's stress is on religion as a belief. In a passage from "Speech from an Unfinished Play: III" (1941) his idea of belief (second-hand ideas) as opposed to see (first-hand perception) can further illuminate this point: "But they <u>believed</u>! My soldiers did not <u>see</u>, no" (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 304. My emphasis.) On another occasion he defines in his own terms the effects of ideological persuasion on the individual:

> A lot of people think or believe or know they feel—but that's thinking or believing or knowing; not feeling. And poetry is feeling—not knowing or believing or thinking.
>
> Almost anybody can learn to think or believe or know, but not a single human being can be thought to feel. Why? Because whenever you think or you believe or you know, you're a lot of other people: but the moment you feel, you're nobody-but-yourself.
>
> To be nobody-but-yourself—in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else—means to fight the

hardest battle which any human being can fight. (E. E.

Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 335)

Therefore, Someones' and Everyones' perception of reality can be only

partial. Furthermore, by laughing their "cryings" they remove their sorrows

(in Freudian terms,) whereas Anyone <u>sings</u> both pleasant and regrettable

aspects of his past: "he sang his didn't he danced his did." He does not deny

or repress the unpleasant sides of life, but sings the "yes" of full acceptance,

as defined by Cummings in "yes is a pleasant country," where the concept of

wholeness is epitomized as "both ... not either" (CP 578):

> yes is a pleasant country:
>
> if's wintry
>
> (my lovely)
>
> let's open the year
>
>
> both is the very weather
>
> (not either)
>
> my treasure,
>
> when violets appear
>
>
> love is a deeper season
>
> than reason;
>
> my sweet one
>
> (and april's where we're)

Moreover, a syntactic ambiguity in "laughed their cryings" makes it possible to deduce that they laugh at someone else's sorrows. While Someones hate each other, Noone loves Anyone: "she laughed his joy she cried his grief." Someones' and Everyones' idea of nature is based on non-spontaneous growth, (i.e. agriculture): "they sowed," "reaped." Likewise, all their actions have merely utilitarian ends ("busy,") which derive from a linear conception of time: "hope," "then": temporal conjunctions imply a progression. Their mutual relations ("marriage") are both institutionalized and based on the assumption that human beings can <u>own</u> each other, as opposed to Anyone's and Noone's "love." Cummings's own idea of love does not imply possession:

> all knowing's having and have is(you guess)
>
> perhaps the very unkindest way to kill
>
> each of those creatures called one's self so we'll
>
> not have(but i imagine that yes is
>
> the only living thing)and we'll make yes (10-14) (CP 528.)

If one sees Anyone as a whole individual as opposed to Someones and Everyones, who are blind to the obscure aspects of reality, then Barry Marks' intuition that "They are concerned about what "everyone" is saying, doing, and thinking" is reinforced by line 6, where "at all" could be interpreted in a non-idiomatic sense (i.e compositionally,) meaning not "little," but "partially" where they should have cared for him "as a whole." In this sense the inversion in "cared for anyone not at all" indicates that "Women and men" <u>did</u> care for

Anyone, but not as a <u>whole</u> individual. This contrasts with "anyone's any was all to her," meaning that each part of him—iconically indicated by the first part of the word anyone—meant everything for her. Therefore, she appreciates him as a whole human being, with all his contradictions. This interpretation is further supported by the phrase "all by all" in the penultimate stanza.

Meanwhile, children are learning to repress emotions ("down they forgot as up they grew") and once they become adults, they too live in a time marked by church bells ("Women and men(both dong and ding)") There is here a bitter and subtle satirical thrust at education. As Cummings would write in "Re Ezra Pound," "This is a free country because compulsory education" (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 312.) Through education, children are taught to perceive reality through biased and partial categories. The absence of punctuation in the line "one day anyone died i guess" also makes it possible to interpret "died" as a transitive verb with "i guess" as the object, casting a new light on the meaning of death. Therefore, to die also means "to kill guessing." Before undergoing education, children "can only guess" again and again—they do not rely on ready-made truths—because they can "forget to remember." Yet, while Anyone and Noone can die because they "lived," Someones and Everyones are condemned to an eternal death-in-life.

On the other hand, the natural flow of time is not chronological. Since natural events do not bear syntactic (logical) relations, they are merely juxtaposed: "spring summer autumn winter" (line 3,) "sun moon stars rain" (8,) "autumn winter spring summer" (11,) "stars rain sun moon (21,) "summer autumn winter spring" (34,) "sun moon stars rain" (36.) Natural events occur

spontaneously, they are not <u>caused</u>—they just happen: "the gay / great happening inimitably earth" (7-8) (CP 663.) In a famous early poem the "sweet spontaneous /earth" (CP 58) is indifferent to philosophers' "doting fingers," to scientists' "naughty thumb," and to the buffets and squeezes of theologians—and answers "them only with // spring." Nature thus happens regardless of human efforts to fit it into their logical reasoning: "not for philosophy does this rose give a damn..." (CP 262.) Hence, nature also eludes scientific quantification: "who cares if some oneeyed son of a bitch / invents an instrument to measure Spring with?" (CP 262.)

The strange language of "anyone lived in a pretty how town" reflects the two conflicting conceptions of time. Read linearly, the poem is still communicative: it narrates a banal story of a couple living in a town. It is through slight alterations of syntax that many other meanings surface: thus indefinite pronouns become definite; intransitive verbs become transitive, auxiliary verbs (isn't,) adjectives (same,) and adverbs (never) can become objects. While Someones and Everyones can only do their dances, the linearity inherent to language cannot account for sentences like "he dance his did." The former ones cannot see the harmony of opposites that pervades the world because their very language imposes an arbitrary order on things and events, and consequently establishes hierarchies. While the linear progression of language admits one meaning for each word by eliminating all ambiguities, one can achieve wholeness only by searching for meaning in other directions: for example, "deep by deep." By strictly adhering to rules, the individual will never be able to interpret reality through his own eyes. In "A Poet's Advice to

Students," Cummings exposes his conception of poetic language as it relates to the uniqueness of the individual:

> As for expressing nobody-but-yourself in words, that means working just a little harder than anybody who isn't a poet can possibly imagine. Why? Because nothing is quite as easy as using words like somebody else. We all of us do exactly this nearly all of the time—and whenever we do it, we're not poets.
>
> (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 335)

If the linear progression of language is responsible for the perpetuation of false assumptions regarding the order of things, by merely inverting the order of words in a sentence, the poet demonstrates how a different perception of reality is possible. As in "anyone lived in a pretty how town," the precondition for a converted word to preserve its meaning while performing a new function is to usurp another speech part's category and the "slot" normally assigned to that specific class. In other words, the condition for zero derivation is that word order pattern of sentences remain unaltered.

Since the English language is partly synthetic (inflectional,) but predominantly isolating, the morphology of the word alone cannot determine how it will be used in a sentence. For this reason, the part of speech class of some words cannot be deducted from the word itself, but by its position in the sentence: syntax relies primarily on prepositions and word order. Therefore the poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town" requires a conventional word order in order to make sense. Yet, part-of-speech category and morphological elements allow a relative freedom in word order. Cummings devised ways of

conveying meaning by extending syntactic inversion, which is already

allowed by the language itself. The great liberty he concedes himself at the

syntactic level has been perhaps the most debated issue among both linguists

and literary critics. Many among them have dismissed his poetry as

ungrammatical, whereas others were enthralled by it for the same reason. In

the poem "Me up at does" (CP 784) word order is so intricate that it seems

random, but a more attentive scrutiny reveals that it is only ostensibly so:

> Me up at does
>
> out of the floor
> quietly Stare
>
> a poisoned mouse
>
> still who alive
>
> is asking What
> have i done that
>
> You wouldn't have

Here syntax enjoys much more freedom than the usual, but the

puzzling reaction of the reader is due to an extreme deployment of

conventional poetic inversion. In his analysis of the poem, Bivens concludes

that "poems by Cummings, G. Manley Hopkins, and others contain many inversions which violate the parameters proposed [here] […] We find sentences […] which are scrambled" (Bivens 24.) However, Noam Chomsky has correctly pointed out that the syntactic structure of the poem "poses not the slightest difficulty or ambiguity of interpretation, and it would surely be quite beside the point to try to assign it a degree of deviation in terms of the number or kind of rules of the grammar that are violated in generating it" (Chomsky 228.) Similarly, Friedman acknowledges Cummings's exceptional ability in keeping "the elements of a fairly involved sentence suspended almost indefinitely without losing his firm grasp on its structure" (Friedman, The Art of his Poetry 109,) and adds an interesting explanation about the possible origin of the poet's experimentation with word order:

> Cummings, who was taught Greek and Latin in high school, writes English as if it were an inflected language, as if his words had case endings, as if the grammatical function of words in our language did not depend upon their position in the standard subject-verb-object sequence of our basic sentence structure. (Ibid.)

However accurate, Friedman's deduction cannot account for more radical cases, where word order apparently reflects some more obscure structure that defies even the most attentive eye. In at least one case, "hair your a brook" (CP 613,) the rhyme scheme seems to provide the only discernible explanation for word order inversion:

> hair your a brook

(it through are gaze

the unguessed whys

by me at look)

swirls to engulf

(in which in soft)

firm who outlift

queries of self

pouring(alive

twice)and becomes

eithering dreams

the secret of

But how then shall one interpret a poem such as: "nonsun blob a" (CP

541)?

nonsun blob a

cold to

skylessness

sticking fire

my are your

are birds our all

and one gone

away the they

leaf of ghosts some

few creep there

here or on

unearth

As the poems discussed so far demonstrate, Cummings never degenerates that easily into ungrammaticality, and these last two poems are undeniably highly structured and carefully constructed. Although thematic inversion can justify in part the emphasis conferred to topical words at the beginning and at the end of lines, it cannot account for all inversions. Neither can T. S. Eliot's definition of poetic diction as "that perpetual slight alteration of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations" (Eliot, Philip Massinger 117) suffice as an explanation, as it is most probably concerned with full lexical words.

One thing is certain—that the poem interrogates the reader. And the questions the poem seems to ask may be: can words in a sentence dispense with linearity without jeopardizing communication? Is the conventional linear arrangement the only way to produce meaningful sentences? Indeed, can a sentence convey additional meaning if its elements are shuffled so that the least number of syntagms is recognizable? In order let the reader freely compose the single meanings of words into a whole without the guide and restraints of syntax, the poet chooses not to provide disambiguating clues. As this interesting case demonstrates, words do not need to be in any order whatever to convey meaning. It is a legitimate example of norm violation, but

it does not violate the communicative principle. Here the compositional nature of sentence meaning follows an alternative path, letting the reader merely <u>guess</u> the removed logical links. Cummings carefully arranged in (dis)order to mean whatever the reader can guess among the infinite associations triggered by each word.

2.6.3. Denotation and Connotation

The previous section has analyzed the particular devices Cummings uses at the morphological and syntactic level, by placing the stress on the function and modes of zero derivation, or functional shift. The process of functional shift has several important repercussions on the semantic level. Since lexical words are expected to possess a meaning as well as a grammatical function, through zero derivation function words can display a character that remains hidden when they are used as mere logical links between words and clauses. Function words are usually regarded as elements which have little or no lexical meaning (<u>kenemes</u> or <u>functors</u>) (Cuddon n. pag.) But as the poet promotes lower parts of speech to full lexemes, he achieves a new result. Therefore, these words too can provoke associations. Cleanth Brooks had already noted that in the language of poetry "the connotations play as great a part as the denotations" (Brooks, The Language of Paradox 5.) Cummings does not by any means discover connotative meaning, but he discovers that function words too can possess one.

Once emphasized, this meaning exposes the subtle ideological nature of function words. Words like <u>why</u>, <u>where</u>, <u>when</u>, <u>because</u>, <u>perhaps</u>, <u>if</u>, <u>yes</u>, <u>shall</u>, <u>didn't</u>, <u>am</u>, <u>was</u>, <u>I</u>, <u>you</u>, <u>we</u>, etc. acquire new lives and reveal how

culturally and ideologically biased they are. Indeed, they are the very

linguistic instruments through which unquestioned assumptions are

perpetuated. Relying on function words, syntax can only provide a heavily

biased and partial presentation of reality. But by defamiliarizing them, the

poet questions them and makes the reader do likewise. As it is used in the

poem "when god decided to invent" (CP 566,) the word "because," for

instance, becomes a noun:

> 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

On first reading the poem, the negative connotation conveyed by

"because" is apparent. Yet, by becoming a noun it is objectified so that one

can see that the function it has conventionally as a conjunction is not neutral,

although speakers often take it for granted that phenomena happen "because"

somebody or something has <u>caused</u> them. Surprisingly enough, God's all-

inclusive breath, which includes positive, negative, important and unimportant

alike, contrasts with the ordering thought of man. Man differentiates between

past and future and by cause and effect, failing to see the miracle of the

whole—the balance of opposites.

The poem "wherelings whenlings" (CP 512) is a more direct attack at

people whose biased thinking prevent them from perceiving the world as a

whole. They are particularly accused of falling prey to the logicality of

language and to the artificial perception of reality according to the principle of

spatial linearity ("where") and of time/cause hierarchy ("when,") and at the

same time of syntactic subordination ("where," "when," "if," "unless,"

"because"):

> wherelings whenlings
>
> (daughters of if but offspring of hopefear
>
> sons of unless and children of almost)
>
> never shall guess the dimension of
>
>
> him whose
>
> each
>
> foot likes the
>
> here of this earth
>
> …………………………
>
> whycoloured worlds of because do
>
>
> not stand against yes which is built by
>
> forever & sunsmell (1-8, 28-30)

The poem makes a clear distinction between the implied "they" and "him." As in "anyone lived in a pretty how town," they can never <u>guess</u>. Cummings uses the words "guess" and "feel" in place of "know," and opposes "earth" to "worlds." Here again the function of "because" has shifted and given negative overtones. The words "if," "hopefear," "unless," and "almost" are not merely objectified but <u>personified</u>, becoming thus more vivid. "If" and "unless" indicate syntactic subordination—hence logical thinking—but also uncertainty. In particular, as opposed to "almost," "unless" reveals itself as a compound of "un-" and "-less." "Almost" and "-less" stand in clear opposition to the idea of wholeness. Further, by compounding hope and fear into "hopefear," Cummings plays on the connotative value of two words that have approximately the same denotative meaning. Denotatively, they both imply the existence of a future, but their uses depend mostly on the subject's attitude towards it. By compounding them, Cummings shows both sides of the coin. Similarly, "why" and "because," appear in the same line not only because they always happen together in language, but also because they spring from the same faulty conception of reality.

The poet's personal attitude towards each word is clear. He forces negative or positive connotations on words whose value is often assumed as neutral. However, connotations—that is the set of values associated to a sign—can be shared or private. Some words have a recognizable and accepted value which is culturally shared. The values of words like "forever" and "never," "yes" and "un" are transparent. In the poem beginning "yes is a pleasant country / if's wintry" (CP 578) the association of "yes" to "pleasant"

and of "if" to "wintry" are hardly surprising. In other cases, such as in "mostpeople," this value depends on the poet's strictly personal system of beliefs (meaning "mob,") and indeed the opposite of what is culturally expected.

Either way, the poet heightens the connotative meanings of a word over its denotative one because they are not univocal, since their interpretation involves a great deal of subjectivity. So while "dying" acquires a positive overtone in the poet's philosophy, "death" has a negative one:

> dying is
>
> perfectly natural;perfectly
>
> putting
>
> it mildly lively(but
>
> Death
>
> is strictly
>
> scientific
>
> & artificial &
>
> evil & legal) (CP 604: 10-18)

Likewise, "to think" is associated with scientific reasoning and unspontaneous perception, whereas "to feel" is associated with unmediated reaction and to subjectivity. Connotation is not merely descriptive, or neutral,

but loaded (Crystal 170.) Therefore, whether one considers connotations

private or shared, one thing is certain—they are heavily biased. But unlike

Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, who declares, "When I use a word, […] it means

just what I choose it to mean" (Carroll 72,) Cummings is not aiming at

opacity, but at exposing the unstated assumptions (myths) behind words. As

Roland Barthes put it:

> Denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under
>
> this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the
>
> connotations (the one which seems both to establish and to
>
> close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends
>
> to return to the nature of language, to language as nature.
>
> (Barthes, S/Z 9)

Accordingly, Cummings appropriates the values attached to each word

and either subverts them through irony, or uses them to his own purposes. In

this sense, Cummings demystifies the objective nature of words, by exposing

the arbitrariness and the cultural bias—and the resulting hierarchies—implied

in words and their sub-units, thus demonstrating the falsity of their assumed

universality. In Cummings's mature poetry there is an increasing use of

adjectives of size that subvert the hierarchy implied in fundamental binary

oppositions, describable in terms of conceptual metaphors as PLURAL IS

BIG / SINGULAR IS SMALL, that MULITITUDE IS MORE THAN THE

SINGULAR INDIVIDUAL, and, more specifically, that THE STATE IS

ABOVE and THE INDIVIDUAL IS UNDER, THE MANY ARE MORE

IMPORTANT THAN THE FEW, or, more generally, inverts the spatial

metaphors whereby the dominated is under the dominant. In his writings thus abound those elements on language that express the concept of size, number, position, such as adjectives, or such pre-modifiers as "super-," "hyper-," "infra-," "sub-."

One early definition of the individual reads: "[…] an inconceivable vastness which is so unbelievably far away that it appears microscopic [...] something more unimaginably huge than the most prodigious of all universes—[...] The individual." ("Introduction" to <u>The Enormous Room</u>.) Through a series of burlesque reversals, or—in the words of Norman Friedman—"unreservedly making big things look small" (Friedman, The Art of his Poetry 47)—a President becomes "the microscopic pithecoid President" (CP 266,) the State is defined as a "Huge […] collective pseudobeast" (CP 544,) or a "sub / human superstate" (CP 803;) Democracy becomes "the // great pink / superme / diocri / ty of / a hyperhypocritical D / mocra / c" (CP 635.) The ideal of progress is ironically described as follows:

> o pr
>
>> gress verily thou art m
>>
>> mentous superc
>>
>> lossal hyperpr
>>
>> digious etc (CP 392: 1-5)

In "dead every enormous piece" (CP 561,) there is no ironic hyperbole, but the customary concepts regarding the dimensions of individual and State, as well as dominant conceptions of time measures, are inverted. Cummings provocatively brings the individual to the top of the social hierarchy:

> dead every enormous piece
>
> of nonsense which itself must call
>
> a state submicroscopic is—
>
> compared with pitying terrible
>
> some alive individual
>
>
> ten centuries of original soon
>
> or make it ten times ten are more
>
> than not entitled to complain
>
> —plunged in eternal now if who're
>
> by the five nevers of a lear

Much in the same fashion, the poet creates paradoxes whereby the individual is viewed as possessing an innumerable plurality of identities, whereas the collectivity is shallow and two-dimensional—condemned to sameness. While a word such as "mostpeople" can have positive values for people living in a democratic society, for Cummings it carries the most negative associations: "souls are wholes not parts / but all these hundreds upon thousands of / people socalled if multiplied by twice / infinity could never equal one" (CP 510.) Similarly, the reversal is applied to the concept of time: "As for a few trifling delusions like the "past" and "present" and "future" of quote mankind unquote,they may be big enough for a couple of billion super mechanized submorons but they're much too small for one human being" (A Miscellany Revised 313.)

Coherent with both his political and his aesthetic views, Cummings prizes the "small" over the big, or, in his own words, shows "a predilection for David at the expense of Goliath" (Selected Letters 248.) The latter metaphor finds many applications in his poetry. There are innumerable instances of the mythical struggle of the positively connoted minuscule hero against the evil giant. Among the poetic subjects that symbolize the individual in his smallness and uniqueness many belong to the realm of nature: birds, mice, cats, leaves, or similarly small creatures. In "mouse)Won" (CP 397) a mouse is depicted as courageous, and metaphorically big. Its uniqueness is underlined by the "Won" of "wonderfully" which puns on "one," and the "Be" of "maybe," thus possessing a deeper personality than the shallow people who have never loved:

> mouse)Won
>
> derfully is
>
> anyone else entirely who doesn't
>
> move(Moved more suddenly than)whose
>
>
> tiniest smile?may Be
>
> bigger than the fear of all
>
> hearts never which have
>
> (Per
>
>
> haps)loved (1-9)

The ideological and cultural bias of shared connotations creates hierarchies that eclipse minoritarian and individual points of view. For Cummings these are not adequately represented in language. Exploiting the subjective nature of connotative meaning, he demonstrates that language can be forced to release the unspoken and unspeakable elements of communication. On the structural level the linear unfolding of syntagmatic relations removes large amounts of information. If such an enormous portion of reality is excluded from language, the presentation of reality is necessarily partial. The linguistic medium does not provide a neutral and faithful account of reality unless it is manipulated.

However, exclusions in language do not occur only on the structural level only. As a social practice, language presents further "excommunications," which reflect more clearly the exclusion of individuals or groups from power. This is more evident in cases of linguistic policies where the imposition of a standard prescription-oriented variety outlaws dialects and idiolects, and other forms of creativity. By imposing standardization, sameness and univocity, official prescriptions work towards the suppression of the plurality of voices, and consequently of dissenting perspectives.

As we have seen, Cummings's poetic technique aims at producing ambiguities and polysemy. Another equally significant achievement of Cummings's poetry is the questioning of language as it is used socially as a means of exclusion, through the imposition of certain discursive practices. His satirical works are often spoken through a plurality of voices. The function of

voice appropriation on the part of Cummings (citations, allusions, and parody)

fulfills again the fundamental principles of his aesthetics, by including all

elements and dismantling the implied hierarchies. The next chapter will

provide an analysis of satires that welcome the voice of the other.

Notes

[1] "Du caractère assertorique de la langue, il n'est pas possible de se défaire, mais seulement de jouer: c'est le sens de cette parade agrammaticale que tente le poète sans l'ambition de l'emporter, mais avec l'espoir de générer du sens neuf et singulier."

[2] "La grammaire hors-la-loi vers laquelle tend asymptotiquement l'écriture d'E.E. Cummings n'est jamais qu'une tentative, un effort, une tension." My translation.

[3] Kennedy's passage is based on Cummings's "Notes for nonlectures," bMS Am 1823.4 (104.)

[4] Cummings, E. E. Complete Poems. New York: Liveright. 1994. Hereafter abbreviated to CP.

[5] In their "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" (1958,) Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos indicated Cummings as one of the "Forerunners" of their movement for having brought about "atomization of words, physiognomical typography; expressionistic emphasis on space" (Campos, Pignatari and Campos 70-71.)

[6] According to Linda Funkhouser, however, the device's function is not even rhythmic, but merely iconic, each syllable representing a gunshot, thus reflecting the rapidity of the shots rather than suggesting speed in reading (Funkhouser .)

[7] "L'association peut reposer aussi sur la seule analogie des signifiés *(enseignement, instruction, apprentissage, éducation,* etc.), ou au contraire, sur la simple communauté des images acoustiques" (Saussure.)

[8] "On voit que ces coordinations sont d'une tout autre espèce que les premières. Elles n'ont pas pour support l'étendue; leur siège est dans le cerveau; elles font partie de ce trésor intérieur qui constitue la langue chez chaque individu. Nous les appellerons *rapports associatifs*" (Saussure 171.)

[9] "La grammaire dit et interdit: commençant par interdire, elle authorise paradoxalement à parler." My translation.

[10] Reproduced in the online version of SPRING: http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/proof1.html. (Retrieved Feb. 19, 2011.)

Chapter 3. Discourse

3.1. Lexicon and Censorship

Finally, it is easy to see why Cummings should have welcomed the most diverse vocabulary into his poetry—from refined poetic diction to utter obscenities—in order to accomplish a complex equilibrium. In a section discussing censorship in Modern literature Chris Baldick regards the battle for the liberalization of sex as "a continuation of the great inclusive project of realism, which in principle welcomes into literary representation every aspect of life, however indecorous or unpleasant" (Baldick 374.) Partaking of the widespread desire to break sexual taboos, the poet's iconoclastic character coupled with his aesthetic principles to produce a poetry aimed at emphasizing the repressed elements in language over the accepted ones by increasing their visibility.

While his early erotic poetry treated sexual topics in oblique ways, his subsequent works progressively introduce more explicit terminology. An avid reader of Freud, Cummings was particularly concerned about the exclusion of sex-related topics from communication. In an effort to liberate poetic expression from norms of social acceptability, he includes virtually any kind of morally reprehensible vocabulary, especially in his satirical verse. As a consequence, in several occasions he would ran up against the barrier of censorship.

In democratic nations like the United States censorship was fought chiefly around issues of prurience and obscenity. Strictly political censorship

was not enforced in the United States until the McCarthy era. Unsurprisingly, Cummings's invectives against Presidents or other public authorities never attracted the attention of censorship, although a number of his satires accused or ridiculed important personalities in a straightforward way: the poem "the first president to be loved by his" lampooned President Harding for his grammatical errors; "F is for foetus(a" was a clear assault on Franklin Roosevelt, and "why must itself up every of a park" accuses Eisenhower publicly. Even so, starting from the 1930's the threat of political censorship became the topic of many of his writings. When for diverse reasons it became harder for him to get a book published, he would accuse both publishers and leftwing intellectuals of a subtle attempt at censoring his works, by comparing their ways to the coercive political censorship enforced in totalitarian regimes such as Soviet Russia, "where an artist—or any other human being—either does as he's told or turns into fertilizer" (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 321.)

In a letter in which he explains the motivations for his indifference towards McCarthyism the poet defines himself a long-time victim of the "witch hunt" of censors (Selected Letters 228.) In fact, he had first experienced the consequences of repression of free speech during World War I in France, when mail inspection cost him a confinement to the detention camp of La Ferté-Macé on a charge of espionage. Moreover, his private correspondence demonstrates awareness of the enforcement of the Comstock Laws back in the United States, which had made it illegal to mail indecent

matter.[1] Yet, despite the frequent and explicit attacks directed at public authorities—both in his letters and in his published poetry—he hardly ever felt the menace of censorship on strictly political grounds. Moreover, he would only indirectly experience the effects of repression, that is through the self-censoring prudence of publishers. Although he would often encounter resistance from publishers, his works would always manage to bypass the claws of censors through opportune camouflages of the most audacious passages. In fact, as Gerber notes, "Not one of his many books fell beneath the censor's axe" (Gerber 199.)

Nevertheless, as expected, he cultivated a provocative and even retaliatory attitude toward all limitations on free speech. One censor even earned an explicit mention in one of his satires (CP 265,) namely John S. Sumner, head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice during the 1920s, who was responsible for book-burning and for fining publishers who marketed objectionable books. The latter's terrible fame among writers increased after he pursued legal action against the editors of The Little Review, who had serialized Joyce's Ulysses, resulting in the banning of the novel in the United States. In Cummings's ironic statement Sumner embodies the spirit of an epoch on a par with prohibitionist Andrew Volstead and the notorious moralizer J. R. Mann:

> the season 'tis,my lovely lambs,
>
> of Sumner Volstead Christ and Co.
>
> the epoch of Mann's righteousness

the age of dollars and no sense.

As an article by Robert Tucker and David Clark testifies, Cummings's battle against censorship was an enduring one. In 1954 the Literary Society of the University of Massachusetts persuaded him to make a recording of a number of his poems on the subject of freedom for a series titled <u>New England Anthology</u>, which was to be broadcast nationally over a radio network. Of the thirteen poems that Cummings recorded, two were deemed unfit for broadcasting, namely "i sing of Olaf glad and big" (CP 204,) which featured the words "fucking" and "shit,"[2] and the epigram "a politician is an arse" (CP 550.) Upon receiving the offer that the recording be released with "provisions regarding decency of language" (Tucker and Clark 240,) Cummings answered with a categorical rejection, as he would always do in such cases. The story reported by Tucker and Clark testifies to the fact that Comstockian censorship was essentially moral and, most importantly, that it was chiefly concerned with the suppression of pornographic vocabulary, expletives, or other explicit obscenities. In other words, it was more concerned with language use at the word level, rather that with the overall meaning of a text (Gerber 180.)

The struggle against censorship characterizes his literary career from the very beginning. The facts preceding the first American edition of <u>The Enormous Room</u> offer some interesting insights into the relation between his poetics and censorship. Cummings's manuscript was revised by his father, and further edited by the publisher in order to remove any obscene words and

phrases. The author promptly protested that not only the corrections had altered the work, but that they had suppressed the most important aspect of it. According to him, the bowdlerized version had lost the most innovative tracts and consequently his Modernist character. In a letter to his publisher dated May 14, 1922 Cummings complained about the numerous omissions and misprints: "If the portraits omitted were in any way inferior,there might be some(damned little by Jesus)excuse. They are NOT below,and are—in fact—considerably ABOVE,the average in the mutilated book-as-it-stands" (Selected Letters 87-88.) But perhaps the most revealing statement in the letter is "I had this carefully regulated" (Ibid., my emphasis.) As the word "regulated" indicates, the suppression of whole sections had disrupted the balance and the internal cohesion of the work as a whole. One may further notice the intentionality of the reversal operated by the author: the suppressed sections—evidently unpublishable—were "ABOVE" and "NOT below."

In other words, the author's protest focused on the publisher's misunderstanding of the aesthetic principles on which the book was constructed, as the author had given more visibility to the sordid and unacceptable aspects of the narrated events. As a consequence, Cummings's challenging attitude towards censorship must not be seen as a mere challenge to the law per se—an allure of the forbidden—but as stemming from a necessary aesthetic incompatibility, and a will to defend his aesthetic tenets. As each part is essential to the whole, censorship mutilates the calculated equilibrium of a work of art. If a word is suppressed, a poem loses its strength.

Likewise, when a whole poem is cut out of a book, the balanced structure of the whole and the relations between poems are compromised. Moreover, the presentation of a complex reality would cease to be neutral.

Provided that obscene language was of fundamental import to his aesthetics, in some extreme cases a retaliatory attitude would prevail. According to some reviewers, there are at least two poems in which the poet amasses an unnecessary amount of obscenities. Defined by Heusser as an unwitting example of typographic device for being written by hand on a separate page in the holograph edition of No Thanks, the poem "the boys i mean are not refined" (CP 427) contains, such lines as "they do not give a fuck for luck," or "they do not give a shit for wit," and "they / … / masturbate with dynamite." The opening lines of a satire directed at President Franklin Roosevelt read: "F is for foetus(a // punkslapping / mobsucking / gravypissing poppa" (CP 635.)

While Kidder justifies the first one as "the poet's often articulated preference for vigorous vulgarity over social refinement" (Kidder 117,) for Friedman there is mere invective in such poems as "F is for foetus" and no art at all—the poem is "angry without wit […] and this is not art" (Friedman, Growth of a Writer 163.) The latter's statements imply in some oblique way that censorship promotes poetic device and art. Gerber's judgment about Cummings's use of obscenity is analogous: "The poem is funny, yes, but Cummings's sense of wit, usually so dependable, seems to have deserted him here, leaving little more than an overly extended chunk of outhouse graffiti"

(Gerber 199) The point made by Gerber and Friedman is that censorship promotes artful concealment, thus paradoxically enriching the poem. In a topical passage that bears some relevance to the present discussion Celia Marshik reaches the same conclusion, by arguing that censorship influenced the works of James Joyce in a direct way: "the modernism we know owes many of its trademark aesthetic qualities […] to censorship" (Marshik 6.)

However, this conception of art as "artful concealment" is hardly new. In "Art as Device" Shklovsky explained that "an erotic object is usually presented as if it were seen for the first time" (Shklovsky) to the point where "[e]ven erotic images not intended as riddles are defamiliarized ("Boobies," "tarts," "piece," etc.)" (Shklovsky .) Here Shklovsky seems to contend that even explicit obscenities are the product of defamiliarization. To be sure, Cummings used technical devices as artful escamotages to beguile censors— and most successfully, for that matter. Some of his best achievements are perhaps due to such preventive measures, as the lines "her / flesh / Came / at // meassandca V // ingint // oA // chute" (CP 99,) or in "the / g. o. w. is full of)delete" (CP 411.) Even when using conventional poetic euphemisms, he obtains original results:

> (dreaming,
>
> et
>
>   cetera,of
>
> Your smile
>
> eyes knees and of your Etcetera) (CP 275: 22-26)

In this respect, some stanzas from the poem "the way to hump a cow is not" (CP 500,) a satire on demagoguery, provides interesting insights:

> the way to hump a cow is not
>
> to get yourself a stool
>
> but draw a line around the spot
>
> and call it beautifool
>
> ………………………
>
> to vote for me(all decent mem
>
> and wonens will allows
>
> which if they don't to hell with them)
>
> is hows to hump a cows

Fred Schroeder gives a correct interpretation of the poem by pointing out that it "offers three sets of alternatives and in each case the honest solution is totally obscene, while the dishonest solution is proper, noble, and evasive" (Schroeder 473.) If, however, one sees the politician's dishonest ways as an allusion to poetic devices, then Cummings's negative attitude towards the politician also applies to evasiveness in poetry. Accordingly, the devices used in the poem affect words of diverse nature, but obscenities stand out clearly. Therefore, the principle whereby a word "made strange" releases additional meaning does not apply in the case of taboo vocabulary. Being by their own nature repressed—hence not abused—taboo words demand liberation rather than further concealment.

On one last occasion Cummings received more serious critiques for publishing unacceptable material. Even though it was a critique, the case is noteworthy, as it triggered a symposium of critics debating on the acceptability of the language that was used in two poems from the collection *XAIPE* (1950.) The accusations regarded the alleged use of racist epithets in "one day a nigger" (CP 622) and "a kike is the most dangerous" (CP 644.) However not strictly political, political correctness can be nonetheless a sort of censorship—especially for Cummings's desire to include all possible language in poetry with no exceptions. The first poem, aside from the use of the word "nigger" does not seem to entail any negative judgments:

> one day a nigger
>
> caught in his hand
>
> a little star no bigger
>
> than not to understand
>
> "i'll never let you go
>
> until you've made me white"
>
> so she did and now
>
> stars shine at night

The second poem, however, is not as straightforwardly neutral:

> a kike is the most dangerous
>
> machine as yet invented
>
> by even yankee ingenu

ity(out of a jew a few

dead dollars and some twisted laws)

it comes both prigged and canted

This second poem had already undergone a first editing because the last line originally read "it comes both pricked and cunted." Interestingly, the obscene words had been cut, whereas "kike" had not. But one of Cummings's reactions to the critiques he received can be found in a letter:

"two poems [...] which a "friend" & "critic", who saw XAIPE in ms,did his very worst to dissuade me from including... on the ground that the word "nigger"(like the word "kike")would hurt a lot of sensitive human beings & create innumerable enemies for the book. Of course I said tohellwith him" (Selected Letters 210.)

Commenting on the poem in a letter to musician David Diamond, Cummings defends the point by demonstrating that the poem's argument was perfectly in keeping with his contempt for groups as such:

"regarding anti-miscalled "semitism"(or as mon ami DJGrossman asked,how about the Arabs?)our nonhero's stance couldn't be more definite. Anti- & pro- "Semitism",he feels,are tails & heads of one&thesame coin;which coin,pour moi, most emphatically isn't legal-tender. Why? Because "all groups,gangs,and collectivities—no matter how apparently disparate—are fundamentally alike"(i, page 31)& what matters

to me is UNIQUENESS. Thank God,there's only one

Michelangelo!" (Selected Letters 250.)

It appears from his explanation that, however provocatively he might

have used the word, it was necessary to create a contrast between a "jew" and

"kikes," as an attack directed more at American dominant values, chiefly

centered on wealth and power, than to ethnic groups. In short, Cummings

seems to suggest that when words are outlawed, they cannot be used even in

provocative attitude. However, the most remarkable aspect of this issue is that

the critics that condemned Cummings ended up acting exactly as the

repressive censorship he tried very carefully to escape for the publication of

his previous collections. The accusers cared more for one particular word than

for the overall meaning and intention of the poem.

In his short intervention in the symposium, William Carlos Williams

defended Cummings more on strictly poetic grounds than for their friendship,

by claiming that: "We give the artist freedom requiring only that he use it to

say Whatever He Chooses to Say." (Williams, Artist Must Have Freedom)

Williams' stress on the need for unhampered freedom in art, especially in

language, demonstrates his full understanding of the Modernists' aesthetics of

realism, but there is at least one further reason for Cummings's angry attitude

towards censorship that perhaps apply more accurately to his poetry, in that

limitation of freedom conflicts apparently with his political principles. As

Tucker and Clark point out, the public function of a censor is to prevent the

audience from experiencing and judging for itself a work of art (Tucker and

Clark 244.) Furthermore, by interfering with the communication of values through a work of art, censorship prevents the artist from fulfilling his obligations to society. In fact Cummings's main aesthetic tenet (wholeness) and his existential principles (direct experience and self-reliance) stand in strong opposition to any authority that filters reality and condemns the individual to a partial and ideological perception.

3.2. Idiolect, Dialects, and the Standard

Iain Landles has already noted the "carnival of languages" in The Enormous Room (Landles 66.) Cummings's poetry displays a similar variety of languages. The "melting pot" of Cummings's poetry includes: Black English, the New York dialect, foreign-accentuated American English, British English, French, a heavily accented French spoken by a Americans, Italian, and dead languages such as Greek and Latin. Of course, not all languages are spoken in the same text as they are in The Enormous Room: some poems reproduce the language of one particular individual, with his own idiosyncrasies. In some other cases, the accent of a particular ethnic group is featured. But in some cases a number of voices speak together, each in its own language. Yet, one cannot always deduce with certainty Cummings's attitude towards the portrayed individuals only on the basis of their speech. The use of dialect does not imply any derogatory intentions, but aims at portraying an individual through his own characteristic way of speaking. In fact, most of the poems that feature dialect depict the subjects in their uniqueness. The poem "oil tel duh woil doi sez" (CP 312) probably does not imply any judgments

but is an iconic presentation of the difficulty of understanding the incoherent

and strongly accented talk of a drunk American soldier in France during

World War I (Chott 45):

>
> oil tel duh woil doi sez
>
> dooyuh unnurs tanmih eesez pullih nizmus tash,oi
>
> dough un giv uh shid oi sez.   Tom
>
> oidoughwuntuh doot,butoiguttuh
>
> braikyooz,datswut eesez tuhmih.   (Nowoi askyuh
>
> woodundat maik yurarstoin
>
> green?   Oilsaisough.)—Hool
>
> spairruh luckih?   Thangzkeed.   Mairsee.
>
> Muh jax awl gawn.   Fur Croi saik
>
> ainnoughbudih gutnutntuhplai?

                          HAI

>
> yoozwidduhpoimnuntwaiv un duhyookuhsumpnruddur
>
> givusuhtoonunduhphugnting

Written in what is called "eye dialect," the real text is

incomprehensible unless recited, but the written text silently reveals a "host of

other words" and multiple associations. The words are either split or run

together to reproduce exactly the rhythm of the original, along with such

subtler features as dropped h's, and the dialectal pronunciation of "er" as "oi."

The last two lines are particularly entertaining as they stress the ignorance of

the man ("youse with the permanent wave and the uku-something or other,")

and because they render the expression "fucking thing" unrecognizable.

In "now dis "daughter" uv eve(who aint precisely slim)sim," (CP 238)

the dialect contrasts strongly with the high register signaled by the

euphemistic devices and phrases, which indicate a paradoxical avoidance of

directness :

> now dis "daughter" uv eve(who aint precisely slim)sim
>
>
> ply don't know duh meanin uv duh woid sin in
>
> not disagreeable contras tuh dat not exacly fat
>
>
> "father"(adjustin his robe)who now puts on his flat hat

However, a second observation must be made. The use of dialect in

Cummings becomes a political statement when we consider Bakhtin's

conception of language. Provided that "a certain latitude for heteroglossia

exists only in the 'low' poetic genres" (Discourse in the Novel 286-287,)

Bakhtin claims that "every language [...] is a point of view, a socio-ideological

conceptual system of real social groups and their embodied representatives

(411.) In order to achieve wholeness, Cummings works towards an effective

inclusion of the other's voice, as to include, with their language, their

perspective. Therefore, to explore the dark side of language also means to

explore all subaltern discourses. In this sense, the functionality of dialects in

the poetry of Cummings is twofold. On the one hand, Society would not be

represented as a whole if the only voice speaking were the author's. On the other hand, it realizes Cummings's reversal principle, the principle whereby the suppressed must return into view with special emphasis. As with other features of Cummings's poetry, such as the absence of titles, very few "shape poems," and recognizable "subjects," dialects also make possible a better equilibrium in poetry by reflecting non-official and thus de-centered points of view. As Cohen observes, "one sees peripheral objects better once "the vision of the center of sight has been suppressed" (Cohen 87.) This principle works indeed both aesthetically and politically. By using Bakhtin's definition of "dialect" as opposed to "standard," Alfandary comments:

> Dialects and other non-standard varieties are expressions of
> what Bakhtin calls the "centrifugal" forces of language that
> naturally resist the "centripetal" forces that aim at the
> imposition of a unitary language (the language of authority,) by
> outlawing the former ones. (Alfandary 90, 109)

Therefore, Cummings's poetics of wholeness achieves completeness with heteroglossia. The next section analyzes Cumming's appropriation of the other's voice, and—consistent with his conception of society and the power relations between institutions and oppressed individuals—Cummings appropriates the discourses of others to either foreground those who are not fluent in dominant discursive practices, and those who use it as a means to achieve success in society. Moreover, the assumed absence of the poet's voice

from the borrowed discourse permits a neutrality in the presentation of reality. In these cases Cummings adopts the point of view of the excluded other.

3.3. Appropriation and Parody: Politicians, Scientists, and Salesmen

As defined in the Chapter 1, Cummings's aversion towards collectivist ideologies and statesmen resulted in a huge number of satires, especially against Communists, Totalitarian States, and that particular section of society which he names "mostpeople." However, Cummings's critiques did not spare his own country's society and government. Indeed, the first satirical attacks were hurled at the prurient American Middle Class, one of the best achievements being "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls" (CP 115.) Cummings was fully immersed in American culture, which he observed with great attention, and of which he was harshly critical. In his mature phase he became even more conscious about the dynamics of society and the power relations among different groups. Perhaps more severely than his judgments regarding Europe and Russia, his critique of American society and Government continued till the end of his life and career. But his understanding of society is more artful and entertaining in parody than in poems in which he lashes out angrily at his "enemies."

His parodic satire is pervaded by the voices of all groups: official discourse and its active "servants," subaltern groups, and individuals. It is in such satires that he achieves a wholeness in the presentation of society. Through his poems he lets the voice of the "minority" speak as loudly as the majority. Indeed, official discourse is always and unrelentingly parodied. His

satirical attacks at American culture become more effective and subversive when he appropriates and mocks the voice of power groups.

According to Bakhtin's definition, the double-voiced, or polyphonic voice can be either convergent or divergent (Bottiroli 317.) In Cummings's poetry the other's word appears under various forms with different intentions. It can be already a second-hand word when it symbolizes unquestioned consensus. Fixed expressions, advertising and political slogans, etc. are all inherently "quotations." Such uncreative uses of language are unconsciously double-voiced convergent (consensual) discourses. The speaker quotes them without being conscious that he is quoting. In a sense, the word of the other has totally taken over the subject and speaks through it. As Richard Kennedy puts it, "[Cummings] expressed powerful opposition to any social forces that would hinder uniqueness, forces such as conformity, groupiness, imitation, and artificiality" (Kennedy, E. E. Cummings n. pag.)

The sonnet "why must itself up every of a park" (CP 636) exemplifies Cummings's awareness of the discursive practices through which faulty assumptions are perpetuated. In this case the poet's anger speaks against the glorification of war casualties and the legalization and justification of murder.

> why must itself up every of a park
>
> anus stick some quote statue unquote to
>
> prove that a hero equals any jerk
>
> who was afraid to dare to answer "no"?

quote citizens unquote might otherwise

forget(to err is human;to forgive

divine)that if the quote state unquote says

"kill" killing is an act of christian love.

"Nothing" in 1944 AD

"can stand against the argument of mil

itary necessity"(generalissimo e)

and echo answers "there is no appeal

from reason"(freud)—you pays your money and

you doesn't take your choice. Ain't freedom grand

　　The poem is a scathing satire on the policies adopted by the American Army during World War Two, and on war generally. The ideas presented in the poem may be considered paradigmatic to his socially committed poetry and consistent with his strongly anti-authoritarian point of view, and ultimately invite consideration of the some aspects of his poetics. Where at one level the poem is overtly political, on a deeper level it highlights the poet's concern for linguistic creativity as opposed to dominant normative and homologizing discourse.

As a satire on war, the message contained in the poem is indubitably straightforward. The first two stanzas ask a question about the significance of war memorials. Unscrambled, the first two lines read: "why must some so-called 'statue' stick itself up every anus of a park?" The question implies a critique of foolish patriotism, a sarcastic put-down of the custom of building war memorials. Here memorials are clearly less the symbol of the nation's ingratitude to its dead than a true offence to those who actively refuse to participate in it. Thus the first two stanzas question contemporary conceptions of the heroic, by undermining and ridiculing the celebration of war heroes as the worship of fear-crazed "jerks." The intention behind the word "jerk" is straightforward: it serves as a burlesque reversal of the hero. By reversing the equation, the hero becomes "afraid," a totally inappropriate quality for a hero. But the poet blames the soldiers themselves for their non-choice—whether they are volunteering or being coercively drafted.

Cummings's idea of hero is closer to a conscientious objector rather than a soldier because while the former makes a choice, the latter is "afraid to dare" to choose. These two stanzas can be further compared to "i sing of Olaf glad and big" (CP 340,) a poem about a conscientious objector tortured by soldiers and military officers because of his obstinate attachment to his ideals. The parallel is made even more relevant by the veiled allusion to torture by impalement in lines 1-2, brought out by Mary de Rachewiltz in the Italian version, "perché si deve in ogni parco impalare // una tra virgolette statua […]" (E. E. Cummings, Poesie 221.)

Although "anus" cannot be defined as a proper obscenity, but a scientific, hence presumably neutral diction. As an unusual word choice, "anus" calls more attention to itself, becoming more vivid and obscene when referred to a park. The word, further emphasized through syntactic inversion and meter, reverses the register of the poem and subverts the solemnity of words hero and statue. The function of the statue is to remind citizens that killing becomes a pious act only when the state decides so. The state builds memorials in order to remind citizens that whatever the state commands should be assumed as truth. The third stanza contains the poet's ironic answer to the question, a sarcastic depiction both of obedient citizens as obedient free individuals and also of the state. The state has replaced moral authority and has subverted the meaning of "love" by blurring the irreconcilable distinction between love and killing.

In the next stanza a quotation from "generalissimo e" (General Dwight D. Eisenhower) is echoed back by one from Freud, and two final sarcastic remarks conclude the poem. The first quotation is excerpted from a statement issued by Eisenhower on December 29, 1943 (but probably made public a few days later, in 1944) on the problem posed by monumental buildings and other historical treasures in the bombing of Italian cities during World War Two. The context in which Cummings read the statement is the following:

> If we have to choose between destroying a famous building and sacrificing our own men, then our men's lives count infinitely more and the buildings must go. But the choice is not always so

clear-cut as that. In many cases the monuments can be spared

without any detriment to operational needs. Nothing can stand

against the argument of military necessity. That is an accepted

principle. (Report of the American Commission for the

Protection and Salvage of Artistic Monuments in War Areas

100-101)

The source text brings to light the quotation's veiled reference to

monuments that do not have the same patriotic function as war memorials.

But by taking the quotation out of its original context, Cummings emphasizes

the danger of such a generalization—the assumption that military interests

have the primacy over everything else. The date emphasizes the temporality,

hence the ideological bias behind the truth between quotes. Gen. Eisenhower

is given the epithet "generalissimo," an Italian word meaning simply "the

commander in chief of the army."

However, this title is used more specifically to refer to dictators such

as Franco and Mussolini, or any other military officer who has obtained power

by a coup, consequently suspending constitutional rights. But for Cummings

there is little difference between forms of government, either democratic or

totalitarian. Ironically, dictatorship was exactly what the American general

was fighting against. By giving him ironically too much importance, through

the polysyllabic and pompous title, it caricatures the ignorant statesman who

holds "military necessity" more important than art. It also reveals a trace the

miles gloriosus, thus reinforcing the presumptuousness implied in the word "jerk."

The juxtaposition of two quotations from a military and a learned man (Freud) creates a sharp contrast. The quotation from Freud claims that Reason of state, despite its name appearance, is irrational. Eisenhower had concluded that "that is an accepted principle," i.e. cannot be explained and does not need explaining through reasoning, being self-evident. It becomes an unquestionable dogma. The final couplet contains Cummings's considerations on freedom, in the form of two idiomatic expressions. By deliberate misquoting "you pays your money and you takes your choice," the expression, meaning originally 'it's entirely up to you,' comes to imply that there is no great difference between the two alternatives. This essential ambiguity gives perhaps more credit to the ironic tone of the last two lines. "Ain't freedom grand" equally reflects the speech of an uneducated person that also works well as slogan for the 'American way of life.' As in the case of "love," by these last lines the poet is implying that the word 'freedom' has lost its original meaning and is used for something quite the opposite of it: freedom without choice. These lines also complete the series of comic reversals of high and low values that are peculiar to satire, by equating: heroes and jerks, killing and Christian love, Freud (man of intellect) and Eisenhower (man of war,) and freedom and money.

One may infer that Cummings not only criticizes the particular US administration of 1944, and questions the allegedly democratic form of

government, but calls into question the state <u>per se</u>, as a force that works

against the interest of the individual. Consistent with this view, the first stanza

of a short poem included in <u>(CP 561)</u> reads:

> dead every enormous piece
>
> of nonsense which itself must call
>
> a state submicroscopic is—
>
> compared with pitying terrible
>
> some alive individual (1-5)

The dichotomy state vs. the individual is here expressed more overtly

and distinctly, whereas in "why must itself up every of a park" the poet is

concerned more with a discussion of the individual's freedom against public

authority.

At a deeper level, the poem can be read as an attempt at calling

attention to the techniques used extensively in it (quoting,) and on the

language (idioms, quotations, clichés, proverbs, etc.)—hence, on how

authority uses discursive practices to normalize and naturalize the very

language by which the justification of slaughter, in this case, is naturalized

and made acceptable, and, by contrast, how creative uses of language can

demystify these assumptions. The poem contains a number of words that

describe the communicative process—words such as "prove," "answer,"

"forgive," "says," "argument," "answer," "appeal."

Cummings is clearly aware that certain reprehensible human

phenomena like war are made acceptable through the creation of fixed

expressions that work as thought shortcuts, thus turning strongly ideological

points of view into unquestioned truths. As Jacob Korg puts it, "Language

[…] is essentially conservative, a structure of consensus, a fabric held together

by a vast number of historical and communal agreements" (Korg 7.)

Borrowings occupy one extreme of language variation. Accordingly, all

'borrowed' language in the poem has an ironic twist to it. At this subtler level,

the poem is therefore still concerned with individual freedom, but in a

different way—freedom to reject dominant discourse by speaking

'differently.' A speculation on the plausibility of this second level is borne out

of observing how the poet defamiliarizes language as a way of directing the

reader's attention to the very medium, whose transparency is put into

question.

Communication takes place between various subjects. The poet

appropriates the discourses of these heterogeneous voices and let them speak

with each other. The function of a statue is to remind (being a "monument",

from the Latin monēre, 'to remind' or 'to warn') as well as "to prove" (lines

2-3.) Its communicative function is thus also persuasive. More to the point, by

building concrete memorials, the state metaphorically turns an idea into

stone—attempting to present an idea as eternal, unquestionable. A "jerk" fails

to answer "no" to the drafters. The state says "kill," i.e. orders its citizens to

kill (a directive speech act,) but also performs a declarative speech act, by

which the act of killing becomes "an act of christian love" if the state declares

so. Likewise, "military necessity" becomes an "argument," another type of

persuasion; and an echo answers by asserting that there can be "no appeal from reason." To appeal is to make a request—another directive speech act. Consequently, the poem's emphasis on the linguistic medium and on the technique used extensively in it (borrowing) is made purposely explicit.

The poem presents different types of quotations and different quoting devices, each representing a distinct voice. The poem depicts a normal situation where everybody is quoting everybody else. Between parentheses is enclosed the first quotation of the poem, "to err is human, to forgive divine" (lines 6-7,) a line from Alexander Pope's Essay on Criticism (1711,) who was his turn quoting in part from the Latin "Errare humanum est perseverare diabolicum" attributed to Seneca the Younger. The parentheses merely separate it from the surrounding text as an incidental clause. Parentheses are used in this case as a device to attain simultaneity of thoughts. Cummings relineates the borrowed text and, by enjambing it, establishes a symmetry, and an opposition between "forget" and "forgive," and perhaps between get and give as well. Also, "forgive" is made to rhyme with "love," creating a meaningful inconsistency within the poem's regular rhyme scheme.

The remaining 'traditional' quotations in the poems are in lines 9-11 (from Eisenhower,) and 12-13 (from Freud, although here Cummings quotes the "echo") discussed extensively above. Both are enjambed, but the former is also interrupted by a different voice. In the number of quotations one may still include the phrase "an act of christian love." Line 8 is also a cliché from religious discourse, and the last two sentences of the poem, which, as the

proverb in lines 6-7, are in the public domain and require no quoting marks. They should be thought of as routine customs of quoting, the sort of phrases that one learns to repeat and that are often language-specific. More briefly, they symbolize the common man quoting another common man in free indirect speech, as it were.

Although undistinguishable from those discussed so far, the poem features a further set of quotations equally marked by quoting marks. They exemplify (imaginary) plain direct speech. The "no" in line 4 is a hypothetical answer given by a hypothetical speaker, whereas "kill" is uttered by a personified "state." The poet has seemingly reserved for himself a distinct voice, and a distinct device for quoting: the words "statue," "citizens," and "state" are written between spelled-out quotation marks. The three words display special emphasis, but they can be considered quotations since the poet disowns them. This form of quoting bears some similarities to Cummings's use of the scornful modifier "socalled," or "self-styled," by which he implies that he rejects any authority on what follows. In this particular sense, he is also borrowing them from another's discourse. However, by placing them between ironic quotation marks, the poet's voice questions the assumptions they represent for others.

By enclosing words in scare quotes Cummings makes them ambiguous and polysemous. For official discourse the meaning of "citizens," "state," and "statue" is unquestionable, naturalized and unambiguous. For the State, war memorials are "art." Further, it imposes a name upon citizens with which they

are forced to call themselves (implying freedom.) To be sure, the three words are supposed to carry positive connotations. Likewise, for official discourse "killing is an act of Christian love." But the official discourse contrasts strongly with the individual's values: for the individual a hero equals a jerk, war monuments are more public offences than art, etc. As for 'citizen,' Webster's lists three relevant meanings: "one entitled to the rights and privileges of a freeman," "a native or naturalized person who owes allegiance to a government and is entitled to protection from it," and "a civilian as distinguished from a specialized servant of the state." The stress in all three definitions is on the necessity either of freedom or of receiving protection from the state. This is exactly why Cummings seems to suggest that a better denomination is needed for people under the authority such as he describes it. Whatever the form of government--whether democracy or dictatorship (from Lat. dictare, frequentative of dicere, to say)—the state "says / "kill,"" i.e. dictates (also from dictare, to assert, to say, to prescribe) to kill.

In one of his best-known epigrams, Cummings misspells the word citizen as "sit / isnt's," (CP 548) as though he felt the need to manipulate the signifier to make it reflect a somewhat manipulated meaning or a widespread improper use, an abuse of the word. Citizens are thus merely supposedly citizens; they are rather 'subjects.' 'Subject' is defined as "one that is placed under authority or control," and differs from a 'citizen' in that he "owes allegiance to a sovereign power or state," without being entitled protection in exchange. In his last book of poetry Cummings would point out that the

difference between a free citizen and a subject is only a deceptive illusion, by

quoting from Homer Lea: "the divine right of majorities, / that illegitimate

offspring of the / divine right of kings" (CP 803.) But the citizen is also

subjected to the state's dominant discourse through a language that precedes

him. As Iain Landles observes in his chapter on The Enormous Room:

> Cummings' use of language emphasizes the difficulty of
>
> conveying meaning through language—particularly 'official'
>
> meaning which […] becomes the dominant language so that
>
> Cummings' text becomes the 'other' voice in resistance to
>
> 'official' discourse. (Landles 80-81)

The citizen as such—or subject, for that matter—is also linguistically doomed,

or, as Leonard Diepeveen puts it in a discussion of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

poet Barren Watten that also fits here, "language (and the people who use it)

are socially determined" (Diepeveen 162.)

The first three lines of a famous Cummings poem read: "kumrads die

because they're told) / kumrads die before they're old / (kumrads aren't afraid

to die," (CP 413) in which the possibilities of combining each line with

another to make a syntactically acceptable proposition are innumerable and

disorienting. Some may of course be also interpreted as complete within one

line. For example, by assuming that the first of the three lines reported above

has an enjambment at the end (the conjunction 'that' being implied) one

reader may interpret the second clause as a subordinate.

Yet one cannot help feeling the syntactic ambiguity, reinforced by the parenthesis, in the phrase "kumrads die because they're told)." Another reader may as correctly read the three lines as a list. The possibility of an alternative syntax is due to the natural linearity of the processes of reading and semantic compositionality. Whatever the interpretation, the poet has achieved his purpose: that of making a second possibility flash through the mind of the reader for at least one moment. Here and elsewhere, Cummings seems to discharge himself of any authoritative interpretation of the syntax and leaves it to the reader. He creates these kinds of syntactic trompe-l'œils in many of his poems.

Much in the same manner, in the sonnet "why must itself up every of a park" the main clause in the first proposition is rearranged so intricately that the subject is in the final position preceded by "quote", thus deceiving the reader into thinking that the word "quote" might be the subject (in this case a noun, a synonym for 'quotation.') Such reading would not impair nor contradict the overall "correct" interpretation, since memorials often carry some solemn patriotic quotation appended. Likewise, a linear process would lead to reading lines 5-6 as "quote citizens unquote might otherwise / forget(to err" without affecting the overall meaning, until such possibility is denied by the later occurrence of a closed parenthesis.

More to the point, a striking analogy between the two poems just discussed would be suggested by the first line alone, "kumrads die because they're told)." To obey is deadly. To reproduce dominant discourse by

borrowing is deadly, too. To be merely mediums through which official discourse reproduces itself is like being dead: Cummings speaks elsewhere of "shaped waxworks filled / with dead ideas" (CP 248.) The speaker becomes a tool in the hands of State power. But the state kills the individual in two ways: by sending him to war and by imposing its discourse (indeed its language) upon him, by saying (dictating.) For this reason, Cummings also insists on choice. Authority alienates the individual from the right to judge for himself— ergo, to choose—by underlying that it constitutes a theft ("you pays your money")—indeed, citizens give their lives in war for the state and are not rewarded, as further remarked by the final ironic "grand."

As Leonard Diepeveen points out, in Cummings's poetry "many users of […] quotations speak in clichés" (Diepeveen 21) and "the texture of one's speech indicates the depth of one's thought." (Ibid.) Such ideas are metaphorically "dead" because the authority that has produced them--whether public, literary, or linguistic authority—resides in the past. They are borrowings from a vast corpus of past speeches. For instance, some politicians' empty rhetoric, built out of mere juxtaposition of clichés, reflect such second-hand or borrowed ideas, as in another quoting poem of Cummings's, ""next to of course god america i" (CP 267.) However, Cummings does not believe that "all language is a borrowed collection of different voices," (Diepeveen 165) nor that "all uses are quotation" (163) (My emphases.) For him, only a certain kind of language denotes ready-made ideas, whereby words function as the smallest packages of pre-assembled

worldviews, and larger fixed units of language act as shot-cuts for expressing worn-out thoughts invariably, although he certainly feels the dangers to which such practices would lead in the long run. Cummings felt the need, as a poet, to make a difference, by creating, i.e. by <u>making</u>. For this reason linguistic creation and re-creation are essential to Cummings's poetics, as is visible both throughout his whole literary production and his writing process. The result is an incessant need for "bending, breaking, twisting, mending, reshaping" (Kennedy, The Emergent Styles, 197)—what Richard Kennedy defines as Cummings's "Hephaestian" style.

The poem starts with a highly idiosyncratic sequence of words, whose syntactic order is so intricately woven that, at first glance, the sentence may appear ungrammatical. However, the sentence "why must itself up every of a park / anus stick some quote statue unquote […]" features a series of inversions that are not uncommon in poetry. Here Cummings uses a quite traditional poetic inversion, but takes it to the limit, adding complicatedness to sentences. These inversions are not random, but the result of a careful rearrangement. He plays another trick to the reader's expectation of linear progression. One needs to read the sentence through the end before establishing the syntactic function of each word. However, Cummings suggests that the semantic content can be grasped regardless of syntactic order. What makes it look so haphazardly made up are devices: an enjambment, the words "quote" and "unquote," which interrupt both the syntax and the meter, and the slight syntactic ambiguity discussed earlier.

Even though it can be found to be a mere case of poetic inversion, the poet's intention is to make it appear newly-minted, unique. It is indeed the only original sequence in the poem, a skillfully designed sentence that symbolizes a challenge to both syntactic and social order.

In the poem "why must itself up every of a park," Cummings makes a political statement about language, by using provocatively quotations, idioms, a cliché and a proverb (all borrowed bits of language, in some way or another) as they constitute the most highly prescribed and uncreative uses of language, behind which ideological assumptions lurk, and laying them against his own idiosyncratic and originally crafted sentence.

However, while the other's ventriloquism is positive ideological consensus—defined by Bakhtin as convergent double-voiced discourse, the poet's ventriloquism is often parodic (divergent double-voiced discourse.) Being borrowed language, the former betrays second-hand ideas or automatized thought, whereas when appropriating an official voice, the poet subverts its intentions through parody. The first parodies in the poetry of Cummings occur very early, in the section "Portraits" in Tulips and Chimneys (1923.) As portraits, they present the object through his own words and his own <u>particular</u> voice—a particular type of direct discourse. These are quite neutral. But in the course of his career, he becomes aware of the mechanisms whereby official discourse forces its own worldview on people through fixed expressions that function as shortcuts for thought, or unquestionable truths. At the beginning of the short play "Anthropos, or The Future of Art" three

"infrahuman creatures" named "G," "O," and "D," are deciding upon a deceitful slogan to gain approval from the subdued mob (E. E. Cummings, Three Plays & a Ballet 117 et passim.) While talking to each other in slang expressions such as "Spit it out," "Come clean," "Make it snappy," "Shake a leg," etc., the three creatures go over possible phrases, such as "Save your sorrows for tomorrows" "Get wise to yourself," and some pervaded by bourgeois ideology like "Time is money," "Nothing succeeds like success," and eventually agree upon "Evolution." Cummings's poetry provides further instances of the accommodating power of formulaic expressions. One of his best-known satires, "next to of course god america i" (CP 267) involves the parody of an official voice:

> "next to of course god america i
>
> love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh
>
> say can you see by the dawn's early my
>
> country 'tis of centuries come and go
>
> ……………………………….
>
> He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water (1-4, 14)

The poem quotes the chauvinistic speech of a public orator who speaks by clichés and other borrowed bits of language. It opens with the assumption, underlined by "of course," whereby the three elements must be in an unquestionable hierarchy, "i" being the least important. The speaker's ventriloquism continues for thirteen lines with verses from the national anthem "oh say can you see," from the popular patriotic song "My Country,

'Tis of Thee." The first line may also allude to the verse "who more than self their country loved" of another popular song in praise of patriotic self-abnegation. The speaker assumes that the texts he quotes are so worn-out that a few words for each suffice. The last line thus seems to imply the orator's own weariness in repeatedly hurrying through the clichés at every speech.

Likewise, other short poems synthesizes Cummings's distrustful attitude towards representatives of authority. The most condensed judgment on the category of populist demagogues is the epigram "a politician is an arse upon / which everyone has sat except a man" (CP 550,) which defines clearly the mimetic ability of politicians but at the same time a lack of identity. In another poem—a haiku—Cummings appropriates and manipulates the politician's words as to reveal a double intention (CP 548):

applaws)

"fell

ow

sit

isn'ts"

(a paw s

The first line exposes the contradictions derived from the false beliefs imposed upon the citizens, who are unaware of the fact that they are applauding the authority for doing something against their own interests,

namely imposing laws. Without Cummings's manipulations the poem would describe the mere official version of a public speech, and it would not display all connotations associated with such "public figure i.e. windbag" (Selected Letters 267-268.) The speech thus reveals the speaker's greediness ("paw") while pretending to be "a man of the people." The citizens, who obey authority blindly, by applauding, and seating themselves, are transformed by the official discourse embodied in the speaker's voice into non-existent beings, "isnt's."

The speeches parodied by Cummings often feature clichés for ideas of progress, and a dogmatic faith in science, as if it were a religion. Cummings's aversion to scientific discourse derives from a disagreement on the conception of time. As we have seen in the previous chapter, a linear conception of time implies a cause-effect hierarchical relation between two entities, and for the sterile disputable objectivity, that is partiality, of its language. Hence Cummings's impatience with Science, epitomized in his particular idiosyncratic use of the word "because," as in the short poem "when man determined to destroy / himself he picked the was / of shall and finding only why / smashed it into because." Yet Cummings also regards science as a salesman trying to persuade customers, as in the "Introduction" to Collected Poems (CP 461):

> "Life,for mostpeople,simply isn't. Take the socalled
>
> standardofliving. What do mostpeople mean by "living"? They
>
> don't mean living. They mean the latest and closest plural

approximation to singular prenatal passivity which science,in its

finite but unbounded wisdom,has succeeded in selling their

wives"

Indeed, the language of mathematics and science is argumentative, in

that it tries to convince people of its objectivity, while substituting established

and incontrovertible logical explanations to the people's right to interpret

reality through their individual eyes. In the morality play "Santa Claus,"

science is again personified and portrayed as a cunning salesman (first

disguised as Death) trying to sell people something inexistent, such as a

wheelmine, symbolizing the illusionary nature of scientific descriptions of

reality. Science is further associated with salesmanship in the "Introduction"

to Collected Poems, and to death in the lines "Death // is strictly / scientific /

& artificial & // evil & legal" (CP 604.) It is also opposed to miracles and

mystery, two among the most recurrent concepts in Cummings's poetics. Such

quasi-ubiquity of science in Cummings's satirical poems is crucial to

understand the poet's stress on the spontaneity of nature: science is what

works against nature, or something to which nature is indifferent:

> like Death,S[cience] is fundamentally a depersonalizing
>
> leveller(47)whereas I stand for individuality or personal
>
> uniqueness as against sameness or standardization(31-32)—
>
> that,so far as I'm concerned,mystery is the root & blossom of
>
> eternal verities(11,43,82,110)while,from a scientific
>
> standpoint,eternal verities are nonsense & mystery is something

to be abolished at any cost—that for me nothing impersonal or measurable matters(68,110)but for science measurability & impersonality are everything. (Cummings, Selected Letters 265.)

In other words, science provides answers ("because") whereas mystery elicits questions ("why.") It is also easy to see why Cummings refers to Einstein's "Theory of Relativity" as "A.Stone&Co's unpoem" (Vowles n. pag.) The language of scientific discourse is cleansed of polysemy and ambiguities, as it is based on <u>terms</u> rather than on <u>words</u>. Terms are signifiers that have a univocal relation with their signifieds. A univocal term or phrase is one which has only one possible meaning. Thus, in scientific discourse there can be no language play, nor subjectivity, and, being strictly denotative, it is dehumanized (Crystal 170.) This fundamental characteristic shows it as diametrically opposed to poetry. Cummings parodies the language of science by using arithmetical expressions as in some of the titles of his books. He reverses the operation of division in "one's not half two. It's two are halves of one:" (CP 556.) Elsewhere he uses mathematical expressions: "we sans love equals mob" (CP 803;) and demonstrates the absurdity of quantifications in the poem beginning "there are possibly 2½ or impossibly 3 / individuals every several fat / thousand years" (CP 514.) Furthermore, scientific discourse stresses the importance of <u>thinking</u> over <u>feeling</u>, and can cause a numbness which is both physical and metaphorical. By appropriating heterogeneous voices, the poem "everybody happy?" (CP 791) parodies science and

exemplifies the process of consensus forging. The deep analogies between

science and democratic participation are epitomized in the word "number."

> everybody happy?
>
> WE-WE-WE
>
> & to hell with the chappy
>
> who doesn't agree
>
>
> (if you can't dentham
>
> comma bentham;
>
> or 1 law for the lions &
>
> oxen is science)
>
>
> Q:how numb can an unworld get?
>
> A:number

However short, the poem weaves a remarkable number of veiled and

explicit allusions and condenses different targets into one attack. Apparently

the targets are Bentham's utilitarian philosophy, democracy, and the

quantifying discourse of science. Furthermore, Cummings condenses several

meanings into words and phrases. The first line is a catchphrase borrowed by

vaudeville star Ted Lewis (Lane 91.) In the text, as in the actor's shows, the

question prompts an automatic affirmative answer. In the poem the answer is

"WE-WE-WE," a pun on the French for "yes." By answering the question, the

speakers simultaneously refer to themselves. The three "WE"'s are separated

from each other but fundamentally repeat the word "we." Through

Cummings's anti-collectivist point of view, the words become synonymous

with homologized mob, wherein individualities are blurred.

The next two lines obviously allude to the conception of democracy as

"tyranny of the majority." As Webster points out, this line also "echoes the

counting-toes nursery rhyme "This little piggy."" (Webster, Notes) As Gary

Lane has further demonstrated, the nursery rhyme alludes in its turn to the

Thomas Carlyle's derogatory definition of Jeremy Bentham's doctrine, viz.

"pig philosophy" (Lane 91.) Bentham, whose name appears in line 6 claimed

that "the greatest happiness of the greatest number was the proper measure of

right and wrong" (Ibid.)

Lines 6-7 play on Bentham's name and the political slogan "if you

can't beat them, join them" (Webster, Notes .) Lines 7-8 are based on of

Blake's famous dictum "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression," where

apparently "science" has substituted "oppression." Finally, with a punch-line

that puns on "number" (comparative form of "numb" and "number",) the

poem exposes the subtle relation between the science of quantity and physical

numbness, while also alluding to democracy—derogatorily reduced to a mere

struggle on the number of votes.

The poem works at a deeper level in that it shows how official

discourse forges consensus by imposing assumptions on the impartiality of

numbers. The "chappy" who "doesn't agree" represents minority in the

democratic system, which is symbolically silenced in the poem. The excluded

are also either unhappy or unsuccessful, and comprehend those who refuse or are unable to speak the "official" discourse. The veiled allusion in lines 5-6 to "if you can't beat them, join them" suggests the assumption whereby to be in the minority is an unprofitable venture.

By contrast, the homologizing effect of official discourse makes its subjects entertain the "false belief" that they're happy, by compelling them to give automatic answers. Further, "WE-WE-WE" is in fact the "yes" of ideological consensus. As a personal pronoun, the function of "WE" is far more revealing. In Althusserian terms, ideology "interpellates" individuals as subjects (Althusser 170-177.) In other words, the subjects are called into being by the question asked by Democracy. Finally, Carlyle's discussion of pig-philosophy further illuminates the concept of domination implied in the poem, by considering the hypothesis of universal suffrage where—paradoxically—the right to vote is used against the voters:

> "The votes of all creatures […] ought to be had; that you may
>
> "legislate" for them with better insight. "How can you govern a
>
> thing," say many, "without first asking its vote?" (Carlyle 268.)

Therefore, the assumed infallibility of science forces agreement disregarding dissenting points of view. If for a scientist the individual is little more than something to be measured, and for politicians means one vote, for a salesman it means profit. These three seemingly different types of people are in fact related by their discursive practices. In salesmanship, as in politics and in science, language is used as a means of persuasion: to sell, convince,

propagandize, prove, or perhaps deceive, and that is why Cummings sees no distinction among them. The existence of such analogies are not entirely arbitrary: economic discourse in American society is so pervasive that the verb "to buy" has come to mean "to believe," or "to be persuaded" by an idea.

Here seems to be one fundamental contradiction between Cummings's political vision and his social commitment: the discourse of satire is as persuasive as the discourses of salesmanship, politics, and science, which partake of the more general category of "selling," in that satire too seeks to manipulate people's behavior. Yet paradoxically the goal of Cummings's satire is to persuade people to reclaim their autonomy of judgment, and to distrust those who try to persuade, albeit in good faith. Hence, if one is persuaded by the discourse of the other, they are overcome by the other's ideological standpoint:

> that you and i'd be quite
>
> —come such perfection—
>
> another i and you,
>
> is a deduction
>
> which(be it false or true)
>
> disposes me to shoot
>
> dogooding folk on sight (CP 798: 22-28)

On the other hand, the business of science, statesmen, and salesmen is to persuade by constituting the subject according to their own purposes: the public authority turns individuals into voters and "citizens;" science turns

them into unspontaneous "thinking" subjects; and salesmanship turns them into consumers. In "a salesman is an it" (CP 549) the statesman is indistinguishable from a salesman: "a salesman is an it that stinks ... / ... whether it's president of the you were say / or a jennelman name misder finger" because it makes no difference "if it sells / hate condoms education snakeoil vac / uumcleaners terror strawberries democ / ra(caveat emptor)cy superfluous hair / or ... subhuman rights."

Salesmanship, like politics and science, has its own specific discursive features, that Cummings unfailingly parodies in his satires. Like a modern-day culture jammer, he adapts advertising slogans and brand names to new contexts for ridicule, and to subvert their original intentions. In the satire "POEM,OR BEAUTY HURTS MR.VINAL" (CP 228) the United States are reduced to a nation of founded on materialism, where Abraham Lincoln's name echoes Lydia Pinkham (a famous marketer of remedies against menstrual pains,) and the word "just" becomes part of canned food cooking instructions:

> take it from me kiddo
>
> believe me
>
> my country,'tis of
>
> you,land of the Cluett
>
> Shirt Boston Garter and Spearmint
>
> Girl With The Wrigley Eyes(of you
>
> land of the Arrow Ide

> and Earl &
>
> Wilson
>
> Collars)of you i
>
> sing:land of Abraham Lincoln and Lydia E. Pinkham,
>
> land above all of Just Add Hot Water And Serve— (1-12)

Among the favorite targets of Cummings's satire salesmanship stands out not only because it is indicted with causing all the evils of a consumerist society, and for creating a culture of selling which reinterprets all social institutions—as for example Bruce Barton's The Man Nobody Knows (1925,) which reinterprets the figure of Christ—but because selling is a general term that the poet applies indiscriminately to all relations that imply a commodification of human beings. Accordingly, even prostitution is regarded as a mere business: "these hips were made for Horizontal Business" (CP 130.) The play "Santa Claus" testifies to the poet's bitter judgment on the effects of salesmanship on society. In the play Santa Claus is "sick at heart" because people do not want free gifts, but will buy anything.

At the bottom of a society pervaded by market fundamentalism lies the idea of success. Individual success is gauged predominantly in terms of wealth, defining subjects according to their position with respect to either production or consumption. Yet economic success and social prestige seem to overlap: success can be viewed as the ability to reproduce dominant behaviors and live comfortably by middle class values—hence exhibiting willingness to take part in the social hierarchy by worshipping and aspiring to celebrity.

3.4. "why are these pipples taking their hets off": Celebrity and success

Having deep roots in American Culture, success is one of those naturalized myths that produces and reproduces standards against which the individual must be measured. Among the set of values that accompany success is the work ethic, which Cummings treats in a group of poems. The Puritan work ethic pervades language through expressions such as "to know where one's next meal is coming from." To this regard, and consistent with his aversion to scientific progress, Cummings states clearly his anti-work perspective in the poem "if i" (CP 475):

> if i
>
> or anybody don't
> know where it her his
>
> my next meal's coming from
> i say to hell with that (1-5)

Being an artist and a poet throughout his all life, Cummings is perfectly aware that carmina non dant panem, but refuses to take part in any production process, and instead devotes his life to art, less as a profitable activity than a means for exploring the self. The poet conceives economic security as a foolish compromise—indeed a distorted conception of life. In "economic secu" (CP 477) he questions another naturalized principle of Western Civilization, as economic security happens to be one of the

strongholds not only of capitalism, but of all societies based on the

accumulation of wealth:

> economic secu
>
> rity" is a cu
>
> rious excu
>
>
> se
>
> (in
>
>
> use among pu
>
> rposive pu
>
> nks)for pu
>
>
> tting the arse
>
> before the torse

    The poem seems to parody the alleged transparency of dictionary

definitions, signaled by the phrase "in use among." Much in the fashion of

Ambrose Bierce's <u>The Devil's Dictionary</u>, Cummings redefines the assumed

righteousness of "economic security." The irony implied in the quotes is put

off until the second line to emphasize the surprise effect. While the rhymes

announce the final vulgarity by echoing the French "cul" and possibly "pue,"

as in "ça pue" (it stinks,) the last two lines allude to the expression "to put the

cart before the horse," which indicates preposterousness. But by substiuting

"cart" and "horse" with parts of the human body, Cummings also implies

that—according to "purposive punks"—physiological needs are more

important than feelings, although a trace of the original expression contributes

to the meaning.

The compromises implied in the work ethic emerge more clearly from

another short poem, in which the voice speaks the point of view of "failed"

social subjects. Like Cummings himself, these individuals stubbornly refuse

to "sell" themselves for money:

> my specialty is living said
>
> a man(who could not earn his bread
>
> because he would not sell his head) (1-3)

"To sell" is indeed a keyword in the discourse of Capitalism.

Cummings's poetry provides many instances of the contrast between the

culture of selling and buying, and individuality—something that cannot be

sold nor bought: "one generous child- / man / -god one eager / souldoll one /

unsellable not buyable alive / one i say human being" (CP 523-524;) "the

greedy the people / (asifascanyes) / they sell and they buy…" (CP 801;) and

"nobody / can sell the Moon to The)moon"(CP 452.) The point of view of

misfits contrasts more strongly with the successful or those who live by the

old illusion that anyone can succeed in the American economic system, and

worship celebrities or the very idea of celebrity. Their common denominator

is the embodiment of success, and they are often celebrities, whether well-

known individuals or stylized types: wealthy capitalists, as in

"IKEY(GOLDBERG)'S WORTH I'M" (CP 242,) statesmen, athletes, or otherwise famous. The short satire "meet mr universe(who clean" (CP 645) ridicules the materialistic values of a society in which recognition is accorded for futile aspects:

> meet mr universe(who clean
>
>
> and jerked 300 lbs)i mean
> observe his these regard his that(sh)
>
>
> who made the world's best one hand snatch

The poem parodies a sports commentator in the act of calling attention on the physical qualities of Mr. Universe. However, the "qualities" of Mr. Universe become mere dehumanizing "quantities" in the commentator's language. What we learn about the man is that he can easily lift 300 lbs and that the measures of his body are extra-ordinary. Cummings uses a rather accurate sports terminology in order to reproduce faithfully the context: "clean and jerk" and the "one-hand snatch" are two kinds of weightlifting contests. The man is further dehumanized because he does not have a voice of his own, but can only be "observed" and "regarded" as an object.

The satire "?" (CP 243) displays instead an intricate heteroglossia of voices, providing a good example of Cummings's mimetic ability, while on the other hand questioning the meaning of social hierarchies:

> ?

why are these pipples taking their hets off?

the king & queen

alighting from their limousine

inhabit the Hôtel Meurice(whereas

i live in a garret and eat aspirine)

but who is this pale softish almost round

young man to whom headwaiters bow so?

hush—the author of Women By Night whose latest Seeds

Of Evil sold 69 carloads before

publication the girl who goes wrong you

know(whereas when i lie down i cough too

much).   How did the traffic get so jammed?

bedad it is the famous doctor who inserts

monkeyglands in millionaires a cute idea n'est-ce pas?

(whereas,upon the other hand,myself)but let us next demand

wherefore yon mob

an accident?somebody got concussion

of the brain?—Not

a bit of it,my dears merely the prime

minister of Siam in native

costume,who

emerging from a pissoir

enters abruptly Notre Dame(whereas

de gustibus non disputandum est

my lady is tired of That sort of thing

The poem is ultimately a satire on the cult of celebrity and indirectly on gossip journalism. Four questions and answer make up the poem, triggering as many replies and private considerations by a recurrent voice. The questions are constructed as to make an oblique joke on the Five W's of journalism—why, who, how, where(fore)—while its function is degraded to gossip or reporting trivial events.

Burlesque reversals are fundamental to the poem effect. The appearance of any VIP in a public place provokes exaggerated reactions. Yet, the comic aspect of surprise about the unnatural and excessive reactions of the "mob" towards celebrities is completed by a series of burlesque inversions at the level of register. Thus the King and Queen are presented by a gratuitously formal lexicon (alighting, inhabit,) in stark contrast to "live" and "eat" (mere physiological functions.) While they descend from a "limousine" and stay at the Hôtel Meurice, whose French names connote elegance, the voice complains that he lives in a garret, and eats "aspirine." Even minor typographical details contribute to the effect: the circumflex stress makes the

Hotel "more" French, in a way, whereas the "e" added to "aspirin" results in a shift in stress that is supposed to make it sound more French, to imitate and mock the elegance of "limousine." In the second stanza, the author of best-sellers who builds his fame on trite stories pervaded by bourgeois prudery is recognized by a voice speaking in the typical hyperbolic idiom of publicists.

The third stanza presents "the famous doctor who inserts monkeyglands in millionaires," namely Serge Voronoff (Gillyboeuf 44.) Through a crude description of the doctor's experiment, the lines emphasize his greedy purposes. In the fourth stanza a voice asks in perfectly anachronistic language the reason for such gathering of people.

The second stanza also introduces the sexual element by innuendos, through words such as "seeds," and "69,"which is continued in the remaining stanzas with "lie down," "monkeyglands" (a pun on "glans,") and "hand," which is interrupted by a parenthesis, possibly alluding to masturbation. Finally, the sexual allusion of the third stanza is more explicit: playing on a literal translation of the Parisian cathedral, "enters abruptly" acquires a different meaning. Finally, the pseudo-euphemism "pissoir" concludes the register reversals.

On a different level, the poem presents a wide range of linguistic and dialectal variation: formal register, French language, advertising jargon, Irish ("bedad" for "by God,") archaic diction, a Latin expression improbably pronounced by some common man, and colloquial American English. This heteroglossia reflects the context: the traffic and several other elements reveal

that the settings are public places. However, there is an implied hierarchy among these voices, in that some VIPs are greeted with hysterical group behaviors and others deserve reverence (hats off, bow.) In defining menippean satire, Bakhtin emphasized its carnivalesque character. The definition may apply to this poem:

> The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people. This is a very important aspect of a carnival sense of the world. People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square. (Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics 122-123)

At one end of the hierarchy stands the underdog whose voice marks an antithetical social status by an adversative clause "whereas…" and who refers to himself with a lowercase "I." The underdog is also ill and is rejected by his lady (last line.) But among all the surprised reactions to the unnatural behaviors exhibited, the first one (line 1) surprises, in its turn, the reader.

Written in a Krazy Kat-like idiosyncratic spelling, the disarming naïveté of the remark questions the very concept of authority and of all social norms of reverence, while simultaneously casting doubts on the value of success and celebrity. The question—also implied in the title—seems to be: why is everybody supposed to know these people and why are they famous?

In neat opposition to successful people stand the unsuccessful, those who refuse to adjust to the norms or to the dominant discourse of the society they live in, or those artists who do not bargain freedom for success, nor they betray their art for economic security. These excluded, "non-heroes," or failed individuals speak through many other poems. Joe Gould provides one example of such "delinquents": a Greenwich Village bohemian, educated at Harvard, who rejected the values of contemporary society altogether, along with education, was famous for claiming to be writing "An Oral History of Our Time." Further, as we have seen, all the inmates of The Enormous Room partake of this category of people. From this perspective a few polemical poems against do-gooders and reformers find a logical explanation within Cummings's political vision, for they seek to recuperate and bring back on the right path people who are "lost." Further evidence is provided by Cummings's refusal to endorse a proposal for the "rehabilitation" of Ezra Pound after the trial: "if you're trying to render the poet respectable,that's an insult;because no poet worth his salt ever has given or ever will give a hangnail for social respectability" (Selected Letters 255-256.) Coherent with his principles, Cummings attacks do-gooders because, by a distorted reasoning, they

constantly try to "save" these people from their condition, by trying to

"educate" them to the principles of a supposedly correct social behavior.

Norman Friedman aptly catches the point in stating that:

> Critics who say Cummings is being inconsistent in satirizing
>
> the politicians who would help these very hoboes he
>
> sympathizes with are entirely missing the point [...] The mistake
>
> is for the Reformer to try to make the tramp respectable, the
>
> Negro white. (The Growth of a Writer 76-77)

Cummings sides with these failed and incorrigible individuals against

the homologizing forces of the "majority." On many occasions he refers to

himself as "our unhero" (Six Nonlectures 30,) "our far from hero" (48,)

"nonhero" (79,) "our heroless" (E. E. Cummings, Selected Letters 208,) or

"this infrahero" (230.) His aversion to the ideal of both economic and social

success as a measure of individuals' aptitude for denying their uniqueness by

siding with the majority had a deep influence on his conception of "artist." By

way of drawing the logical conclusions of the present analysis, the epilogue

shall discuss the poet's definition of the artist as failure.

Notes

[1] At least one of his letters shows the signs of cautionary reticence: "Cave Censeur—je ne parle plus…" (Cummings, Selected Letters 60.)

[2] The two words had been already suppressed from the first publication of the volume until they were restored in <u>Collected Poems</u> (1938.)

Epilogue: The Artist between Success and Failure

> What do you call yourself? painter? poet?
> play-wright? satirist? essayist? novelist?
> Artist.
> But not a successful artist, in the popular
> sense?
> Don't be silly.

In the imaginary dialogue contained in the "Introduction" to the 1934 edition of The Enormous Room Cummings declares that the artist must not seek a wider recognition, but a deeper one. Immersed in a social context— "The Land of dollars and no sense"—whose dominant values praise those who succeed in business by egoistically overstepping the other in order to gain a higher status in the social hierarchy, with a last paradox Cummings defines the true artist as having nothing to do with success. While he had used defamiliarizing devices to disrupt presumably monolithic ideas and struggle over the meaning of such terms as "democracy," "freedom," and "civilization," he enfranchises the meaning of art from the status of profession through a dramatic reversal. Yet his idea of success reveals again many nuances depending on the circumstances in which it is defined.

In an article appeared on Vanity Fair in April 1927, "The Agony of the Artist (with a capital A,)" he draws a neat distinction between "the ultrasuccessful artist," who works either as an advertiser or as a portrait painter for the wealthy, the platitudinous "academician," whose success is measured on the basis of his skills in reproducing or imitating "something else" accurately, and finally the "Artist (with a capital A)," who "has nothing to do with success" (E. E. Cummings, A Miscellany Revised 189.) In the

essay, the artist's failure depends on the widespread assumption that genuine

art cannot be American: "once an Artist is found guilty of being a native of

the richest country on earth he must choose between spiritual prostitution and

physical starvation" (192.) The implied provocation is that the task of the

artist is not like any other profession. The success of an artist cannot be

judged on the basis of the economic wealth he is capable of earning.

However, the artist also accepts failure on strictly aesthetical grounds.

In his play Him (1927) the protagonist keeps repeating to himself "I am an

Artist, I am a Man, I am a Failure" (E. E. Cummings, Three Plays & a Ballet

11.) By way of explaining the meaning of this statement, he compares the

artist to an acrobat attempting an extremely complicated—impossible—task.

The artist, therefore, cannot succeed, but "MUST PROCEED" nonetheless

(11.) "Him" is a playwright who describes himself as "patiently squeezing

fourdimensional ideas into a twodimensional stage" (10) It is also a

description of Cummings's aesthetic principles: the same goal motivates his

painting, his poetry, and his plays. In all three cases the poet faces the limits of

a two-dimensional support in which he tries to "squeeze" the whole of reality

and of himself. What the canvas is to the painter, the page is to the poet, and

the stage is to the playwright.

Further, by noting the poet's progressive estrangement from society

and a consequent search for refuge in nature, Chapter 1 concluded the analysis

of Cummings's social commitment with the admittance of another kind of

failure. Despite his life-long effort to denounce the coercive forces that

alienate individuals from themselves, the ideological partiality inherent to the

linguistic medium, and the blindness of a consensus-based society towards

dissenting points of view, Cummings eventually conceives people as

hopelessly condemned to perceive reality through the eyes of all forms of

authority, through coercion, education, and subtler means of persuasion.

Cummings's lowercase "i" epitomizes the transitoriness of the

individual with regard to nature, his deliberate marginality and aloofness from

literary movements, and his refusal to assume dominant and established

worldviews. We have seen that in the poem "anyone lived in a pretty how

town" the artist defines himself as an "anyone" while others arrogantly claim

to be "someones." As James Paul Gee has noted, "any can occur in negative

sentences" or in questions (125.) Therefore, Anyone cannot claim to have a

definite identity. It is rather a question, implying a willingness to understand,

which can never be answered definitely. For the same reasons that informed

his poetics, he eschewed any proper and definite categorization. The poetics

of de-centering to emphasize the marginalized elements of reality and society

may apply to his "many selves."

The present study has placed the stress on the social and aesthetic

aspects of his poetry, from which emerges the picture of a committed and

staunch individualist, but at the same time a socially committed experimental

poet, who deliberately chose to become a writer for the few. But again—

paradoxically—the deeper we understand his art, the wider will be the

recognition.

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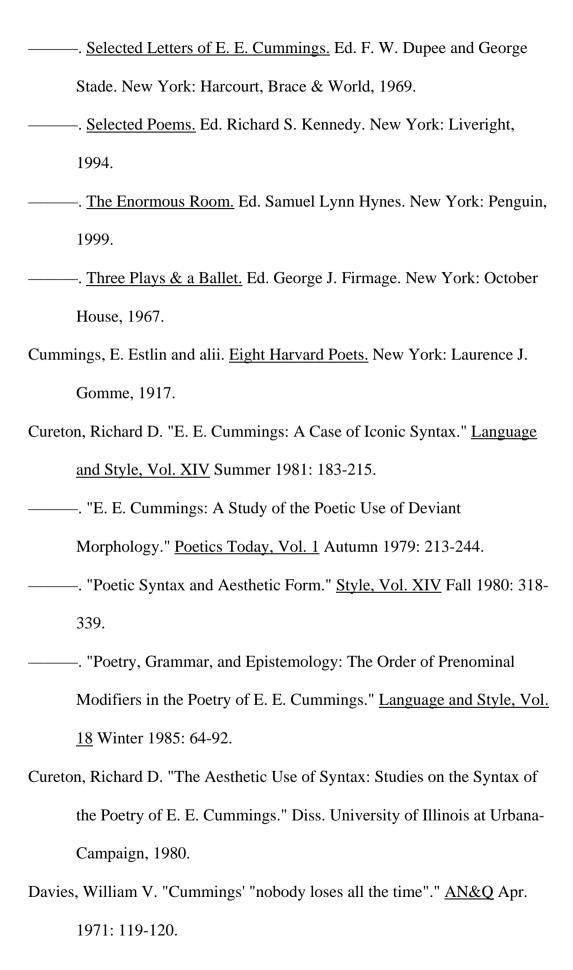Crivelli, Renzo. "E. E. Cummings: La Poetica del Movimento." Studi

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