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Emily Williams

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Poet and critic Randall Jarrell calls E. E. Cummings a “magical bootlegger . . . of language, one who intoxicates us with a clear liquor no government has legalized with its stamp” (qtd. in Alfandary 118). Cummings’ craft with language establishes him as an entertaining and provocative poet, one whose innovations to word and sentence form make his poetry easily distinguishable. His artistic independence and meticulous determination led to nearly twenty volumes of verse, a novel and a handful of plays over his lifetime (1894-1962). Despite an initial lack of public appreciation for his work, Cummings persevered, and his craft with language—at times the cause of criticism—eventually won over audiences.

Cummings grew up in the intellectually fertile world of the Harvard community, which, coupled with his parents’ respect for his creative endeavors, cultivated his abilities from a young age. He collected literary knowledge to reference in his work and received encouragement in his youthful ventures into poetry. He studied formally and informally with brilliant minds while crafting his own styles. Richard S. Kennedy, Cummings’ biographer, outlines three main styles within Cummings’ work: “lyric and mythic”: songs, archetypes, rhythms of life and nature; satyric: “criticism of folly or vice,” ranging from a voice of “gentle mockery” to “ruthless invective” (125); and Modernist (Cummings’ own term, which Kennedy thinks of as Hepheastian): craftsmanlike, “bending, breaking, twisting, molding, reshaping” visual arrangement (126). These standard forms facilitate Cummings’ trademark playfulness with his topics and his language.
Cummings’ style brought him only limited income. Audiences in the 1930s, when his work was gaining recognition, misunderstood and disapproved of his adventurous style and provocative presentation of subject matter. But by the 1950s, readers had gradually warmed up to his quirks of language, and he was much sought after for reading tours. Newspaper and journal reviews from the 1950s are overwhelmingly positive: writers seem enchanted with Cummings’ zany personality, poetic taste, and theatrical presentation. Poet John Russell McCarthy calls Cummings a “clown and scholar” (qtd. in Dendinger 270) and recommends that those who previously misunderstood him give his work a chance.

Cummings hints at an explanation of himself and his poetic theory in *i : six non lectures*, originally delivered at Harvard, 1952-1953. He claims that his poetry shapes his personality (an inversion of the typical assumption about poetic creativity). “The question ‘who am I?’ is answered by what I write—in other words, I become my writing” (4). This writing that, in a sense, creates its creator celebrates “all that is living—above all, nature and the individual self. . . [and] bitterly satirize[s] any attitude or person that [Cummings] believe[s] prevent[s] man from being himself, such as totalitarianism, progress, security, and scientific explanations” (*Literary Cavalcades* qtd. in Dendinger). Poets often disapprove of such philosophies, which seem to disregard poetic significance. But Cummings works to provide alternatives to the concepts he dislikes by writing about “three mysteries: love, art, and selftranscendence or growing” (81). While these topics are not groundbreaking, they represent basic issues in life, and his poetic craft in presenting them captures the reader’s interest.

Norman Friedman sees Cummings as a diverse poet, one who “exhibits a surprisingly wide variety . . . [and] dexterity” in his work (37). However, critics argue that
the creative style of his poetry outweighs the substance of his topics. Haskell S. Springer determines that “[Cummings’] ideas are not trite, but are, for the most part, unexceptional, and derivative rather than original” (1). Yet Cummings’ cleverness lies not in his arguments, but in his art. Those who approach his poetry from a stylistic perspective rather than a philosophical perspective might find that how Cummings composes his poems captivates our attention as much or more than a clever argument; Cummings draws us in with his craft.

However, Cummings’ craft can go too far. His clever tweaking of form, from the syntax of lines to the letters of the words themselves, can become stale with overuse. Some poems so disorder traditional form that they cannot be read as poetry, but must be rearranged like puzzle pieces on the page in order to discover the overall picture. While the Modernist, rejoicing in this “making new” of old forms, might applaud the avant-garde nature of such linguistic complexity, others might set aside such poems in favor of those more easily attainable.

Although Cummings’ structure can seem frustratingly complex, he works with simple concepts and creative language that can still captivate a general audience. While his form occasionally veers towards a puzzle-like construct, his substance remains worth attention because of his clever wordplay. He resists the Modernist urge to quantify subjects through complex analysis, while deviating from the greater simplicity of lyric topics by keeping himself distanced from his subject and experimenting with forms. His chief distinction as a poet is his ability to express simple truths of life with surprising, creative language, enhancing his topics with his unparaphrasable craft.
The Modernist tradition to which much of Cummings’ work belongs revolves around a sense of creative genius; the poet is believed to speak inspired truth undiscovered by former, less progressive cultures. In the Modernist mindset, “things of the past, traditional modes, [are seen as] impediments to authentic genius” (Downing 82). While poets like T. S. Eliot still valued tradition, most modernists felt that art and society were progressing away from the less enlightened ideas and expressions of the past. Poets and artists expected their cultured mediums to lead the public toward intellectual and social advancement. Supriya M. Ray describes the Modernist artistic mindset as the perception of “the world as fragmented . . . [but of] art as a potentially integrating, restorative force, a hedge against . . . cacophony and chaos” (397). Modernist poetry often seeks to bring resolution to conflicts in life: to provide answers to cultural confusion through art.

Cummings manipulates form into its own resolution, but does not always integrate opposing ideas. Since his poetry relies more on style than substance, the conflict for the reader can develop out of tricky syntax or fragmented words rather than philosophical quandaries. One of his better-known puzzle poems demonstrates the effect of this fragmentation of language:

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The complexity for the reader to resolve is solely linguistic. When untangled, the poem presents a simple image of a leaf falling amidst loneliness. One cannot even be sure where to read the word “loneliness” in the sentence fragment that the poem, rearranged, would form. The form of this poem reinforces its lonely atmosphere. Topics like loneliness can be difficult to vocalize, and Cummings literalizes this difficulty. Critics applaud the way the Cummings uses form to bring meaning to otherwise simple poems like this one. Friedman argues that although Cummings has gained a reputation for being more of a light, playful poet, he incorporates ideas in subtle ways, sometimes through his seemingly idle questions or tricky grammar. Emily Essert agrees that “Cummings’ poetry is deceptively difficult, and that he creates this difficulty for the same reasons that other Modernists do so: to revitalize language, and to shock readers into awareness and participation” (197). Modernist difficulties—such as the necessity of rearranging letters and syntax—encourage the reader to participate and generally provide rewarding satisfaction for the effort of reading.

Despite the Modernist elements of Cummings’ poetry, some strictly Modernist thinkers hesitate to count Cummings as one of them. Friedman notes:

1 Whenever I discuss Cummings’ poetry I draw from his *Complete Poems: 1913-1962.*
The modernist objection to Cummings is based upon the modernist assumption that the affirmative vision has to be ‘earned.’ . . . His career is not marked by that climax of spiritual conversion found in the careers of poets like Yeats, Eliot, and Auden . . . He did not struggle through the darkness toward the light. He was apparently born knowing what he knows. And thus he is called a perpetual adolescent” (171).

Cummings’ lack of any dramatic transformation or maturation in his life and work causes some readers to question his authority as a Modernist poet.

The Romantic or Lyric camp to which some of Cummings’ poems belong emphasizes the individual’s experience of nature. Charles Altieri’s definition of Romantic thought splits into branches of “symbolist” and “immanentist” between Coleridge and Wordsworth:

Where the symbolist [Coleridgean] poet seeks to transform nature into satisfying human structures, the immanentist [Wordsworthian] poet stresses the ways an imagination attentive to common and casual experience can transform the mind and provide satisfying resting places in an otherwise endless dialectical pursuit by the mind of its own essences and of Transcendental realities. (17)

Immanentist poets approach the natural image in the hopes that it will elevate them and their readers to the sublime, while symbolist poets combine the natural image with imaginative constructs. Cummings often reworks the natural images he portrays to fit his form or purpose in a Coleridgean manner.
One of Cummings’ Romantic poems, “in time of daffodils (who know),” blends the immanantist perspective of finding inspiration in nature with the symbolist habit of molding nature into an imaginative form. While he celebrates nature’s beauty, Cummings ascribes human wisdom to the flowers through the ideas they supposedly “proclaim” (4). This poem also contains hints of the Modernist fascination with paradox, although it hints at postmodern poetry by presenting conflicting concepts without seeking any kind of resolution. Cummings presents the need to let go of one extreme to achieve the other: “forgetting if, remember yes” (9); “remember seek (forgetting find)” (12). This enables the paradox that “time from time shall set us free” (14). Cummings incorporates multiples styles of poetic thought to transform a simple, common topic: spring, the “time of daffodils” (1).

While Romantic poetry often includes lyric works, lyric poetry extends beyond the Romantic style. Even some of Cummings’ Modernist poetry maintains a lyric form. Tilottama Rajan argues that “pure lyric is a monological form” (196), one which considers its subject from just one perspective: that of the speaker. Any characters with whom the speaker interacts are left voiceless; we see them only as the speaker does. Although the Romantics occasionally incorporate multiple voices, as with the multiple authors of *Lyrical Ballads*, Romantic poetry tends toward the pure lyric.

In most of his poems, Cummings views his topic through the lens of a personal, monologic speaker. This voice causes the signifier to overwhelm the signified, obstructing multiple perspectives in lyric fashion. Cummings’ speakers, predominantly male, address the subject in their poems with little consideration for how another perspective might inform the situation. Ironically, this lyric speaker gives Cummings’ poems an authoritative
feel that reinforces the Modernist ideals of much of his poetry. This monologic lyric voice isolates the speaker, glorifying the individual perspective.

While Cummings generally maintains a monologic voice, his poetic techniques consistently refresh this single perspective. In the narrative poem “in heavenly realms of hellas dwelt” Cummings uses a sardonic narrator to convey ironic humor and reappropriate myth in a Modernist fashion. This poem tells the story of Hephaestus, the lame blacksmith, and his crafty revenge of his wife Aphrodite’s affair with Ares, the god of war. Cummings subtly ridicules Ares. He describes this handsome god of war as "a fighter to his eyelashes" (4). Eyelashes have a feminine connotation that counters the image of a potent, masculine warrior. Cummings invites the reader to picture Ares with alluring eyes instead of powerful limbs. His clever phrasing subtly turns a dramatic scenario into a humorous look at human nature.

The tone of voice that Cummings uses enhances the element of humor in this poem. It begins like a heroic saga; the “heavenly realms” (1) of Zeus provide us with the image of grandeur and beauty, the land of the gods. Yet Cummings juxtaposes these elevated elements with the casual tone of a folk ballad, showing the comic effect of the idealized brought low by their own foolishness. Throughout the poem, he alternates between the lofty language of epic adventure and a conversational tone that suggests gossip among friends about the latest celebrity scandal. Phrases like “as you’ll shortly comprehend” (6), “look around you, friends and foes” (39), and “flee one another like the pest” (31) bear this casual, familiar tone. In contrast, he uses elevated language by describing sex as “the deed of joy” (15), and using phrases like “our illustrious scientist / petitions the celestial host / to scrutinize his handiwork” (25), and “thus did immortal jealousy / quell divine generosity”
Lofty phrasing appears somewhat foolish alongside practical, ordinary language that communicates clearly with a sense of familiarity. This paradox of voice sets us up for a paradoxical point.

Cummings incorporates a paradoxical moral, a hope for “logic thwart[ing] life” (38). It seems counterintuitive to want life to be thwarted, even by something so lofty as logic. Breaking his train of thought—“and thus— / but look around you, friends and foes” (38-39)—Cummings draws our attention back out to our own situations instead of permanently attributing the virtues or vices he just described to any particular character. This technique endows the stanza with more universal implications.

“in heavenly realms of hellas dwelt” fits into the category that Kennedy calls “lyric and mythic”—songs, archetypes, rhythms of life and nature (125)—which seems to fit with a symbolist Romantic category. It also maintains a lyric monologic voice; the narrator expresses one perspective on the story without the opinions of the characters involved. However, the structure of this poem feels more like a Modernist twist on neoclassical subject matter than Romantic, with its paradoxical twists and its love of lore.

The flirtatious “may i feel said he” incorporates multiple views through dialogue, stepping away from the typical monologic voice:

(may i touch said he
how much said she
a lot said he)

why not said she (4-7)

This cunning poem explores a sexual encounter from both male and female perspectives. Cummings expresses the way each partner views intimacy without any outside narration.
The progression from tentative flirtation to climax employs internal rhyme with consistent “said he,” “said she” end stops; it might sound like a nursery rhyme without its adult topic. This tension between form and content expresses the tension of the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of human sexuality. The cleverness of Cummings’ form challenges the monologic voice of many of his poems.

In a more typical voice, “i like my body when it is with your / body” explores the topic of sexual intimacy from one perspective. The male speaker celebrates his lover’s body, and the effect it has on his, with an awareness of how sex enlivens the whole being. The body “is quite new a thing. / Muscles better and nerves more” (2-3). This fragment makes the speaker sound as though he is distracted by the pleasure of the moment; Cummings’ irregular syntax enhances his subject.

The form is one of Cummings’ tweaked sonnets, which often disregard rhyme scheme or regular scansion, yet retain a fourteen-line length and a turn at the end. In this case, the turn is subtle, but shifts the focus from the body of the lover to the lover herself: “and possibly i like the thrill / of under me you so quite new” (13-14). Cummings shows that sex can lead to renewal for both partners—this “quite new[ness]”—instead of being an end in itself. The final line emphasizes the condition of the other person rather than just the speaker’s preoccupation with her body.

Gillian Huang-Tiller notes that while other modernist poets struggled to “make new” the sonnet form, Cummings succeeded in an almost postmodern way:

Cummings dissects his sonnets as a modernist poet would do for free verse—through fragmentation, collage, word splitting, word joining, typographical play, pastiche, parody, and idiosyncratic punctuation, along
with a perpetual consciousness of modernity and a penchant for mockery.

(157)

These techniques keep Cummings’ sonnets from lapsing into formal predictability; each one is unique.

In “hate blows a bubble of despair into,” another of his tweaked sonnets, Cummings shows us a more complex side of relationships. He discusses fear, which “buries a tomorrow under woe / and up comes yesterday most green and young” (3-4). Living in fear obstructs a holistic perspective on life, making us yearn for the familiarity of yesterday at the expense of optimism about the future.

In contrast to this stark reality, Cummings argues that pleasure and pain both fall short: “life’s only and true value neither is / love makes the little thickness of the coin” (7-8). This message is nothing surprisingly new, but it reiterates the importance of love using creative language and a reworked poetic form. The turn brings this sonnet from general to personal: “how much more than enough for both of us / darling. And if i sing you are my voice,” (13-14). Cummings, having set up the way love endows life with meaning, credits his darling with enabling (and becoming) his voice, a significant admission for a poet to make. His voice produces his art; without love he could not create. Cummings expresses this philosophy in *i: six nonlectures*: “I am someone who proudly and humbly affirms that love is the mystery-of-mysteries (110).” This mystery enables creativity, which for Cummings is primarily expressed through poetic voice(s).

Some of Cummings’ poems might be seen as lacking a voice altogether: their complex, jumbled form makes them impossible to read out loud. In fact, the reader can
only draw meaning from them by reassembling the scattered pieces of words, mentally altering the text. “tw” presents this disorder:

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Rearranged, this poem may be read: “two old once upon a (no more) time men, sit, look, dream.” But without mentally manipulating the letters to form the right words, the reader might read a meaningless jumble. The reader must also dissect syntax to arrive at the fullest meaning of the poem.

Cummings plays with the idea of age by placing “no more” before “time,” suggesting that these men are near the end of their lives. He also hints at a loss of purpose; these men could dream once upon a time, but no more. But the reader must glean these insights through imposing his or her own voice on the word fragments. This unspeakable form emphasizes the subject matter of “tw.” Things like the loneliness and directionlessness of these old men cannot be properly vocalized, so we are forced to wrestle with the poem in order to read it at all. Our struggle echoes the struggle of these men; we all assemble meaning, the readers from the fragments of words in the poem, and the old men from the fragments of their former dreams. Gorham B. Munson argues that “Cummings’ use of experimental methods for the expression of traditional lyric themes marries form and content rather than divorcing them” (qtd. in Rotella 2). Here, the difficulty of reading reinforces the difficulty of losing sight of dreams in old age.²

² I do not mean to imply that old age necessitates a hopeless or dreamless state, but that in “tw,” Cummings presents these old men as “sit[ting], look[ing] and dream[ing] (no more).” The way I have rearranged the text to make increased syntactic and grammatical sense
Similarly, “n // ot eth” is difficult to read. It bumps letters ahead to the next word: “the old almost lady feebly” becomes “th / eold almos / tladyf eebly.” Reading such a poem out loud results in nonsensical sounds running together to hint at words; it lacks a clear voice. Yet Cummings can manipulate tone even without voice. His puzzle style poems express a playful tone through their letter manipulation. At times, this tone contrasts with the subject matter, demonstrating an ability to find amusement in life, even about uncomfortable topics. Creativity is key: Cummings enjoys even unpleasant subjects because he approaches them with a playful and imaginative perspective. Through his puzzle poems, we gain further access to the creative mind of the author because we have to participate in rearranging the fragments to find meaning. We sense the author behind the form, without the cloaking mediation of voice.

In contrast with this voiceless poetry that must be reassembled with the eyes, some of Cummings’ work is all voice with little visual clarity. In “oil tel duh woil doi sez” Cummings transcribes the sounds of slurred speech which must be read aloud to be decoded. “Oilsaisough” (7) becomes “I’ll say so” and “dooyuh unnurs tanmih essez pullih nizmus tash” (2) becomes “do you understand me, he says, pulling his mustache.” We learn the cause of this accent when the speaker admits, “Muh jax awl gawn” (9): “my jack’s all gone.” His drunken state collapses his words into contorted sounds that our ears must realign. Our eyes can barely make sense of this poem without the help of our ears; voice is crucial.

Cummings takes on a new voice in his war poems, including his famous, “my sweet old etcetera.” This poem portrays different responses to war and the soldier-
speaker’s anger at his family’s ignorance. He blames “Aunt Lucy” (2) for her know-it-all attitude, “tell[ing] you just / what everybody was fighting for” (4-5). His father “used / to become hoarse talking about how it was / a privilege” (15-17) to fight. The speaker writes off all these incomplete perspectives with the term “etcetera,” repeated many times for emphasis. The turn of the poem comes when the only glimpse of the soldier’s life shared is:

 meanwhile my

 self etcetera lay quietly
 in the deep mud et

cetera
(dreaming, et
cetera, of
Your smile
eyes knees and of your Etcetera) (18-26)

Just as the horrors of war have been domesticated for those back at home, sexual fantasies have taken on the harshness of war for soldiers. The bitterness that the word “etcetera” gains throughout this subtle rant is intensified with the capitalization and context of the last line (Thorpe). This poem falls more clearly into a Modernist category by emphasizing form through line structure and spacing. It partially breaks free from the monologic voice
by including clips of family reaction, although these responses are still presented from the bitter perspective of the soldier.

Having experienced war firsthand, Cummings captures an insider’s bitterness at the destruction and death it produces. In “next to of course god America i,” Cummings explores the psychology of American patriotism in war. This sonnet begins with jumbled clips of American anthems: “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” (2-4). This theme reemerges with “thy sons proclaim your glorious name by gorry / by jingo” (7-8). Gorry, spelled with two r’s, visually echoes “worry” (5) while stretching out the idea of the gore of battle. “By jingo” turns an exclamatory phrase into a reminder of jingoism: extreme and aggressive patriotism in war. From there, Cummings plunges into more direct accusations:

why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-
iful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead   (9-12)

The sarcastic “why talk of beauty,” challenges the assumption of “America the Beautiful,” yet another patriotic anthem. The image of the soon-to-die soldiers as lions honors them; they behaved bravely, despite following a faulty duty proscribed by jingoistic leaders. The unending campaign for America’s “glorious name” (7) leads only to “heroic happy dead” (10). The turn of this sonnet questions the reader: “then shall the voice of liberty be mute?” // He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water” (13-14). This conclusion recognizes the humanity of the speaker, whose speech left him thirsty. The rapid drink of water shows a need to calm the passion stemming from his message, or
perhaps the nervousness of confronting the status quo in what may not be an appreciative audience. The final question—“then shall the voice of liberty be mute?”—demands participation from the reader. An extra line of blank space accentuates the importance of “He spoke.” (14), which is followed by a rare period and another gap of white. These poetic elements highlight the importance of speaking. Cummings includes this as a note of hope amidst the bitter bleakness of war he portrays. We need not wait to see if this message has been spoken; the voice of liberty is not mute. The key is to speak, through whatever voice one has at one’s disposal, which for Cummings is generally poetry.

In “the bigness of cannon,” Cummings approaches the topic of war from the perspective of size and sound. The cannon have “bigness” (1), while “death’s clever enormous voice” (4) sometimes comes into contact with “fists of huger silence” (9). “vivid noiseless boys” (11) are compared to “ripe unspeaking girls” (15). In the face of the chaos of war, silences carry more weight. Each word for a lack of noise carries different connotations. The use of “silence” feels normal, but instead of an absence, we picture it with a forceful fist. Noiseless implies that the boys would normally be making noise, but the fists of silence restrain them. The “unspeaking girls” are similarly expected to be speaking, which makes their state of “unspeaking” more noteworthy. Richard D. Cureton comments on Cummings’ use of “un- plus verbal base forms,” arguing that “words such as unteach and ungrow force the reader to concentrate on only those aspects of the meaning of teach and grow which can be reversed” (223). The boys could reverse their noiselessness in almost any way, while the girls would have to speak in order to break their unspeakingness.
Another war poem, “it’s jolly,” uses the same sarcasm and bitterness through a different speaker, whose repetition drives home the panic of being on the front lines. The word “jolly” is used nine times, often in combination with “odd,” which forms a cheery expression for questioning life. Yet instead of the normal usage—one might say it’s jolly odd that it rains while the sun is shining—Cummings twists the phrase to apply it to the unnatural violence and destruction of war.

Cummings’ manipulation of sound emphasizes the panic of the situation and contrasts with the ironic uses of “jolly odd.” “you / hear the rrmp and / then nearerandnearerandNEARER” (4-6). The lack of spacing indicates the frantic pace of the battle and the lack of time for the speaker to react or in any way change his fate. The “rrmp” of “jolly shells” (4) increases in volume, as demonstrated by the capitalization of the last “NEARER.” From this crowded line Cummings drops back to the slight lines 7-9:

and before

you can

!  
The exclamation point serves for the moment of terror when all a soldier can do is react, wordless. What happens next is ambiguous: “& we’re // NOT / (oh— / —i say // that’s jolly odd” (10-4). The capitalized “NOT” seems to indicate a fatal explosion, but the speaker’s voice continues. Perhaps the “NOT” mourns friends that were killed, or perhaps he expected to say “DEAD” in its place, but found it “jolly odd” that they weren’t dead yet. Another possibility is that the speaker realizes he is fatally wounded, and his voice trails off into death through the rest of the poem. He mutters variations of “jolly odd” for
the last five lines of the poem. This ironic repetition strengthens the atmosphere of fear and bitterness throughout the poem.

The voices in Cummings’ poems range from poems of accent where voice supercedes visuals like spelling, to visual poems where the reader must impose his or her own arrangement and voice to read the poem at all. His varying voices can carry an array of tones from bitter and sarcastic to lively and loving. Across the body of his work Cummings exhibits stylistic playfulness and experimentation. While his voice changes, his style remains easily recognizable in its displaced syntax, created or fragmented words, and irregular punctuation. R. P. Blackmur argues that these typographical “peculiarities . . . carry almost no reference to the meaning of the poems,” but that a “constant recurrence of words” marks Cummings’ poetry (110). Words like “thrilling,” “flowers,” “unspeaking,” “serene,” and “deliberate” repeat throughout his work (Ibid). Yet when Cummings recycles words, he refreshes them into new images. His craft with language signals to readers that they explore a Cummings poem.

Cummings’ poetic language vivifies his subject matter. Blackmur believes that “Cummings has a fine talent for using familiar, even almost dead words, in such a context as to make them suddenly impervious to every ordinary sense . . . bursting with something very important and precise to say” (116). His word choices convey atmosphere and emotion, although to do so they often jumble syntax. Cureton notes that through his common “deviation from the accepted norms of syntax, lexis, punctuation, capitalization and visual presentation,” Cummings manipulates language into surprising and effective poems (213). Indeed, “few poets have done such violence to language with such unerring poetic success” (213). Friedman finds that Cummings’ delight in the physical world
influences his delight in the practical realities of language and his ability to manipulate it stylistically and syntactically (65).

“Epithalamion,” an early Cummings poem, celebrates spring with vivid imagery and chiming poetic language:

Now is the time when all occasional things
close into silence, only one tree, one
svelte translation of eternity
unto the pale meaning of heaven clings,
(whose million leaves in winsome indolence
simmer upon thinking twilight momently)
as down the oblivious west’s numerous dun
magnificence conquers magnificence. (III.9-16)

Phrases like “svelte translation” and “winsome indolence” mimic the sounds of
“simmer[ing]” leaves, endowing the reader with a feeling of the stately elegance of the place and the magical feeling of fading day. But words assume unusual roles and places in the sentence. Adjectives like “pale” and “numerous” seem almost to have been reversed; “pale” describes “meaning,” an idea, not something visibly colored, while “numerous” seeks to quantify a color. Cummings arranges words to sound out the atmosphere he describes rather than to explain it in logical sentences.

In addition to using words abnormally, Cummings creates words. One also wonders how leaves can be “thinking twilight momently.” Cureton sees this word as part of Cummings’ “deviant morphology”: he “coin[s] . . . adjectives . . . from concrete nouns” (233) as a means of stretching the reader’s imagination. What might it be like, to think
twilight, or to do so momently? A reader might picture the leaves as “simmer[ing]” in their dance because of the approach of twilight, an honored guest to arrive “momently.” This kind of anticipation would be more cumbersome to describe prosaically, but Cummings accomplishes it through tweaking word form and function.

This stanza transforms nature-focused imagery into a symbolist imagination of spring. The earth is personified as an eager mistress of the “sinuous rain which rising from [her] bed / steals to his wife the sky” (I.5-6). The stately Elm arranges their love, with “nod / significant to the ecstatic earth” (I.9-10). The “mad magnificent herald Spring / assembles beauty from forgetfulness. . . . [with] witchery of sound and odour” (II. 1-4). In the rest of this long poem, Cummings infuses nature with characteristics of Greek gods. This entire poem evokes a symbolist understanding of nature, transformed by imagination and clever phrasing into an elaborate celebration.

A simpler nature poem, “the sky a silver,” gives an imagist glimpse of an April evening through resonating language. Alliteration links “silver dissonance” (1-2) with “resolved” (4). “Flutters and flops” (8) echo the “fl” sound, and later “flutters” chimes with “butts” (11), while “stumbling” (7) and “wings” (8) remind us of “fingers” (3). The whole poem consists of one sentence—though characteristically, no punctuation marks it as such—and it builds multiple dependent clauses before the fundamental verbs “flutters and flops” (8), “collides” (9), and “finally, / butts” (10-11). The whole scene is just a moment of watching the sky; nothing happens, except in the metaphors Cummings uses to describe the sky, but the descriptive language carries the reader along into the moment.
From this imagist celebration of nature’s beauty Cummings transitions to a more aggressive side of nature in “when god lets my body be.” Nature absorbs humanity in death in this poem. As the speaker’s imagined corpse decays:

from each brave eye shall sprout a tree
fruit that dangles therefrom

the purpled world will dance upon  (2-5)

This image of life springing from death does not shy away from the graphic; we get the tree with its luscious fruit, but we also see its roots twining through eye sockets. The syntax is ambiguous, implying that either the fruit dances upon the world or the world dances upon the fruit, like a reflection. But the key word, “purpled,” suggests that the speaker imagines seeing the world reflected—and tinted—by the fruit. This stationary position has provided this speaker with a new angle on life, a smaller lens, but he takes advantage of this perspective.³ Cummings still crafts his imagery with fresh and surprising word choices. Closing the poem, Cummings imagines the “bulge and nuzzle of the sea” (14) caressing the speaker’s heart in a comforting, intimate way.

Having noticed how the earth nurtures humanity, Cummings also reproaches those who try to dissect the beauty of nature. The “doting // fingers of / prurient philosophers pinched / and / poked” the earth (“O sweet spontaneous” 4-8), while the “naughty thumb / of science / prodded” (10-11) in an attempt to quantify beauty. Religion is also culpable, as it busies itself “squeezing and // buffeting thee [earth] that thou mightest conceive // gods (16-18). Cummings rejects analytic methods for appreciating the world, and he remains

³ We assume the speaker is male because of his desire for the “maidens” to “lay between their little breasts / My strong fingers beneath the snow” (8-9).
above using such himself. Instead of trying to outline the beauty that philosophers and scientists fail to quantify, he employs metaphor to imagine the mystery of nature:

(but

ture

t to the incomparable

couch of death thy
hythmic

lover

thou answerest

them only with

spring) (19-27)

The last word, “spring,” hangs in the reader’s imagination, where it can produce whatever images he or she most admires about this season.

Cummings plays with alliteration in “O sweet spontaneous.” He uses visual alliteration with “prurient philosophers pinched,” and “scraggledly knees / squeezing” (15-6) echoes the “s” sounds in the title. The word “naughty” when applied to science trivializes it, making it seem like a disobedient child. Meanwhile, the use of “thee” and “thy” and “mightest” exalts nature to a mystical, godlike level. Cummings’ craft with language enhances this poem beyond its somewhat common, Romantic subject: human inadequacy before nature. The mystical earth, according to L. S. Dembo, “responds only to
a more elemental suitor” (176). The metaphor of the death as a lover conveys the integration of death in the cycle of living. This enables Cummings to express the mystery of nature; its beauty comes not just from the blossoming and warming of spring, but from the decay of last spring’s foliage which feeds the new buds. He imagines nature’s balance of life and death as lovers, without analysis or attempted explanation.

Themes of love and death unite again in “who’s most afraid of death?thou,” where Cummings addresses the familiar image of death’s scythe undercutting youth and beauty:

his scythe takes crisply the whim
of thy smoothness. and mark the fainting
murdered petals. with caving stem. (6-8)

Blackmur appreciates the manner in which Cummings transforms this poetic convention into a “rather indirect image combining three unusually sensed words [crisply, whim, and smoothness] for the sake of the thrill the special combination might afford” (120). This language highlights the sound a scythe would make when the swishing “s” sounds in “scythe” and “smoothness” combine with the crunching “sp” in “crisply.” The common motif of flowers is imaged through “fainting / murdered petals. with caving stem”; the blossom of the speaker’s youthful love soon to be sliced by death’s sharp edge. The temporary remedy is to enjoy love today, ignoring the prospect of death: “nearing our hearts’ irrevocable play (13) . . . (and drawing thy mouth toward // my mouth, steer our lost bodies carefully downward” (16-7). Love may not stop death, but it at least redeems the time we have to live.

The theme of love continues in “Always before your voice my soul.” Cummings describes the amazement of young love in regarding the beloved:
Always before your voice my soul
half-beautiful and wholly droll
is as some smooth and awkward foal (1-3)

The image of the gangling foal expresses the inadequacy the speaker feels in facing his beloved. He idolizes her to the point that his “heart smote in trembling thirds / of anguish quivers to your words” (16-8). Cummings uses end rhyme and iambic tetrameter, with the exception of “al-ways.” Opening with a stressed syllable creates a rolling meter that sounds like a song.

The even, four-line stanza form of “somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond” also projects a song-like quality. This poem carries an intimate and tender tone, demonstrating connections between the speaker and his lover. He finds that “in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me” (3); she need do very little to captivate him. Yet later, this line is echoed by: “your slightest look easily will unclose me” (5). To “unclose” seems to mean to open, or at least to release whatever latch prevents openness. In this case, one can read that the lover is opened up to his love, emotionally and verbally, not that he is freed from the attachment of being “enclose[d].”

Cummings continues to play with the image of opening and closing:

though i have closed myself as fingers,
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
(touching skilfully,mysteriously)her first rose

or if your wish be to close me,i and
my life will shut very beautifully,suddenly, (6-10)
The image of the lover as a beautiful blossom is not surprising, but here Cummings looks beyond the lover to the relationship. There are times of closing the self away from its partner, but love continually gives them both the ability to reopen, like rose petals. Cummings also plays on the homograph of close as in near to and close as in shut or to shut. The lovers must learn to navigate the open and closed times in their relationship to be closer to one another.

This kind of imagination accepts the contradictions in life. Just as openness and closedness coexist in love, opposites come together in all aspects of life. We are “rendering death and forever with each breathing” (16). We learn to grow through an awareness of the complexity and contradiction inherent in life. Cummings, when faced with the dichotomies, suggests: “and why not both?” (i: six nonlectures 5). Through the intricacies of his poetry, he aligns opposites such as death and living to express the fullness of the human condition.

His interest in the complexity of life leads Cummings across a range of subject matter in his poetry. He deals with conventional topics such as nature, mythology, love—from established relationships to a twisted sense of violent lust—religion, patriotism, war, and death. These issues develop through themes of growth and beauty, but also through themes of destruction and hate. He often mixes positive and negative themes—for example, poems about sex laced with violence or poems about natural beauty contrasted with a morbid obsession with death. Despite contrasting ideas, each topic comes to life under his detailed language and clever syntactical arrangements.

A topic that presents the complexity of life through the complexity of syntax is that of family. Cummings had a strained relationship with his father for much of his life (while
he viewed his mother as a saint), and the poem “my father moved through dooms of love” represents their struggle. Kennedy mentions that this poem took meditation and thorough note-taking to create, which shows Cummings’ deliberate consideration of his father from various angles (385). He sought to represent the reconciliation that had occurred in their relationship, moving away from his earlier anger at his father’s harsh discipline. Kennedy records Cummings’ remarks on the subject of the poem: “in life [I] had (after revolting against) become friends with my father. . . . I’d won my freedom, & he (being great of soul) had congratulated me!” (385). His appreciation of their improved relationship led Cummings to treat his father with respect, almost with awe, in this poem.

The syntax in “my father moved through dooms of love” can be confusing. One might wonder from the start, what are “dooms of love?” Phrases like “sames of am” and “haves of give” echo this construction (2). Cummings draws together concepts that fail to mesh easily; doom seems to imply the end of love, while giving lessens the state of having. We can even see “sames of am” as opposites in the sense that sameness counters the individual’s state of being, the uniqueness signified by the phrase “I am.” “Griefs of joy” (18) provides a similar pairing of opposite experiences. Taken together, Cummings says that his father navigated opposite states of being with equal grace.

Cummings sees his father as providing roots for the family, establishing them: “this motionless forgetful where / turned at his glance to shining here” (5-6). Places of stagnation and disconnect, described as “where,” develop purpose and comfort under his fatherly influence. We see him comforting children, “some why” (13) and “smallest voice” (15). His presence brings them peace and sleep (14). Robert E. Maurer suggests that the use of the word “why” as the antecedent to the pronoun “her” (14) emphasizes the
confusion that leads to childish tears (147). This creative syntax enhances the concern the father shows to his children.

This father was not just loving to his family, but generous to “foe and friend” (38) more humbly than the equalizing seasons (37). His nature was fully genuine: “his sorrow was as true as bread” (45). The same blunt nature that brooked no other opinion when Cummings was growing up and forming his own opinions was direct in honesty and kindness to those in need. Having attained his freedom, Cummings came to respect his father’s dependable nature instead of struggling against it. The complicated phrasing of this poem reflects the complexity of family dynamics while the creative syntax implies that creativity can transform the difficult into something beautiful.

Cummings also wrote a poetic memorial for his mother, through which he expresses his admiration for her. It begins almost like a thesis, stating its argument: “if there are any heavens my mother will(all by herself) have / one” (1-2). He idolizes his mother’s loving and patient nature. He imagines his father as a “deep” (5) and “tall . . . rose” (6) “standing near” (7) and “swaying over her” (8) in this “heaven of blackened roses” (4). While in life Cummings’ mother was subservient to his often-demanding father, in this vision he waits on her. “he will bow, // & the whole garden will bow” (17-8). Cummings offers this poem to his mother as a tribute for her years of devoted labor in caring for the Cummings family. His regal language expresses her noble spirit and his respect for her.

Most of Cummings’ poems have a first-person speaker that seems to describe his own life. Yet some of his poems fit better into a people-watching category. These poems show interest in the activities of others and describe the scene with a narratorial flair.
While the narrator often reflects on the situation—we see the scene only through his eyes—he generally focuses more on the characters he observes than on his reaction to them. The speaker seems to believe himself to be objective about the situation, but we see only from his subjective perspective. Thus the speaker still gives us clues about himself through what he chooses to notice and how he interprets these findings.

In “now comes the good rain farmers pray for(and)” Cummings observes the lives of those dependent on the nature he so esteems. Instead of looking to rain as a beautiful or powerful form in nature, they look to rain for survival. Cummings starts by portraying the rain as a gift:

\[
\text{now comes the good rain farmers pray for(and)} \\
\text{no sharp shrill shower bouncing up off} \\
\text{burned earth but a blind blissfully seething} \\
\text{gift wandering deeply through godthanking ground) (1-4)}
\]

Cummings intends to evoke the sound of rain with the alliteration of “sharp shrill shower,” and the b-sounds in “bouncing up off / burned earth but a blind blissfully” remind us of the pounding sound of a steady rain permeating baked (or “burned”) clay. Cummings creates a pleasant image of the softening effect of water “wandering” through layers of soil. This rain—this “blissfully seething / gift”—is settling in to nourish the farmers’ crops. Cummings’ language emphasizes the rain’s connection to the soil so we can almost hear its fall.

We get a glimpse of some of the farmers as they rejoice in the rain. “old frank” 6) takes a break from “shifting his life / from which to which” (6-7). He “reaches the barn’s immense / doorway and halts propped up on a pitchfork(breathing)” (7-8). The old farmer
enjoys the rain and the rest; we can almost smell the fresh smell of rain with him as he watches the downpour. In the next stanza, Cummings revisits the scent of rain-washed air from the perspective of “lovers like rej and lena” (9): “looming / darkly a kindness of fragrance opens around / them” (9-11). They respond by “whisper[ing] their joy under entirely the coming / quitenotimaginable silenceofsound” (11-2). Cummings again portrays the sound of rain, the hushed white noise that covers their whisper but sounds paradoxically quiet: a “silenceofsound.” The gift of the rain blesses those who have longed for it with its life-giving moisture as well as its refreshing sounds and smells.

In another people-watching poem, Cummings shows people fascinated by other people (and animals) to an extent that they forget their setting. The scene is a lovely winter evening, described with Cummings’ usual attention to the elegant details of nature:

- it is winter a moon in the afternoon
- and warm air turning into January darkness up
- through which sprouting gently, the cathedral
- leans its dreamy spine against thick sunset (1-4)

Having set this sense of comfortable atmosphere, Cummings goes on to explain the activities of the people he sees. Collectively, they make up “a brittle swoon of centrifugally expecting / faces” (6-7). They are all watching—“devour[ing]” (7)—a street performer. He coordinates the movements of “three cats, / five white mice, and a baboon” (7-8). The “monkey with a sharp face waddling carefully / the length of this padded pole” (9-10) mesmerizes his audience. Meanwhile, the cats are “smoothly willowing out and in between bottles” (14). They “step smoothly / and rapidly along this pole over five squirming / mice; or leap through hoops of fire, creating smoothness” (14-6). The people are amazed at the
control this “always talking / individual, mysteriously witty hatless” (11-2) has over his performing animals.

Cummings paints this scene with careful details, letting the reader picture the event clearly. After learning about the baboon, we find out that he has a “sharp face” and “waddles carefully” along his “padded pole.” We discover that his master has not trained him so well that he can perform free, but he must be chained during his act. This animal trainer is “witty” and “always talking,” so we sense the atmosphere of carnival-like energy. The “hoops of fire” through which the cats “leap,” with “smoothness” add to the fantastical element of the scene. And Cummings does not let the reader forget the backdrop of the great Cathedral, “our lady” (5). Its majesty contrasts with the tricks the animals perform at its feet. Despite its grandeur, it seems to relax and enjoy the show, “leaning its dreamy spine against thick sunset” (4).

Cummings directs our attention back to the Cathedral by addressing it and its namesake simultaneously:

our lady what do you think of this? Do your proud fingers and your arms tremble remembering something squirming fragile and which had been presented unto you by a mystery? (21-3)

The bustle of life outside the stoic building reminds Cummings of the mystery of incarnation. The cathedral represents the religious presence amongst the gathered group; no matter the personal beliefs of each member, Christianity’s reach extends among them all. Cummings’ sees “our lady” Mary’s fingers as “proud” in recognition of the power her son possesses. The baby Jesus is described, like the mice, as “squirming,” and this comparison lends him a sense of helplessness and ignorance not often associated with the
son of God. This language enhances the profundity of Cummings’ musings on the nature
of humanity, clustering around amusement in the shadow of religion.

Cummings’ opinions about religion differed from those of his father, a Unitarian
minister. Cummings focuses less on doctrine and more on a humanist vision of grace in his
poetry. Cummings see varying states of grace for humanity instead of a total state of sin,
yet he recognizes evil and damns it as wholly selfish and human-made, not some kind of
fate imposed by a higher plan (Friedman). This perspective enables him to hold organized
religion at a distance, often criticizing what he finds to be unbelievable.

One of Cummings’ short poems points out the awkwardness of religious devotion
to an inexplicable god:

when any mortal(even the most odd)

can justify the ways of man to God

i’ll think it strange that normal mortals can

not justify the ways of God to man

Cummings uses future tense for the speaker: “i’ll think” (3). This sounds odd, since the
poem feels like the speaker’s opinion in the present. One might read this as “i’ll continue
to think”; the speaker finds it unlikely that he will be convinced otherwise. His topic is a
volatile one. Like the biblical character of Job, people often bemoan their circumstances,
asking “why, God?” And God seems unwilling to formulate a logical answer. The break
between “can” (3) and “not” (4) emphasizes the human inability to comprehend God.
Cummings satirizes how often people can make excuses for themselves; “even the most
odd” (1) can rationalize their actions. So the question that remains unanswered is: why can
God not justify himself to humanity? This question furnishes the poem with a
contemplative force one might not expect from four short lines, while the rhyme scheme
(a, a, b, b) and the repetition create a simple nursery-rhyme atmosphere. Cummings’ form
reinforces his point: even the most innocent and “normal” (3) of us struggle and fail to
comprehend God.

Using a similar pattern of four short lines with extra space separating the first and
last lines, “seeker of truth” presents Cummings’ universalistic impression of truth:

seeker of truth

follow no path

all paths lead where

truth is here

Cummings sees truth as important enough that “all paths” (3) will wind up there, no matter
the process. Cummings advises the earnest “seeker of truth” (1), not to bother following
one particular path, but to rely on whatever path he or she wanders to lead to truth.
Alternatively, one could read that all paths lead to an indescribable “where” (3), while truth
remains back at “here,” where one began. This reading assumes that truth comes through
being oneself and accepting one’s position in life without constantly seeking something
better or truer elsewhere. The ambiguity of syntax echoes the idea of multiple paths to
truth, and leaves the reader with the recognition that, like this poem, truth is more complex
than it may appear.
Content in his perception of truth, Cummings rejoices in the things he sees as gifts. His passion for the beauty of nature inspires a poem of thanksgiving:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes (1-4)

He plays with chiming language, “amazing” chimes with “day,” “leaping” with “greenly,” and “blue” with “true.” The repetition of “which is” creates a rhythm in the fourth line. This slows the reader down in order to experience the combining of “natural” and “infinite” and “yes.” Cummings implies that we must always accept the natural, saying yes to its beauty in infinite ways. He suggests, at least here, that this infinite beauty issues from God, and he mirrors natural beauty with his lovely play of language.

Cummings uses a direct and honest voice in his poems that address religious issues. His tones tend to follow his topics; bitter sarcasm weaves through war poems while playful entendres liven sexual poems. But in poems about truth and grace Cummings remains straightforward in tone, which conveys honest reflection as opposed to any kind of sarcastic mockery or disbelieving challenge. Yet Cummings’ syntax remains complicated in his spiritual poems. The complexity of disordered or mis-modified words creates a sense of depth in these poems which matches their spiritual subjects.

From the spiritual to the sexual, Cummings’ subjects are rarely tied to a specific setting or time. While his war poems drew inspiration from his experiences in WWI, they could as easily refer to any modern war. His poems about nature refresh their meaning every year; leaves continue to fall amidst loneliness. Even his love poems could take place
between any couple in any setting. Lyric verse lends itself to describing the generic experience, but even Cummings’ narrative poetry (which would usually require a more definite setting or background) blends the detailed and the indefinite. We see the scene vividly, but nothing necessitates a specific time or location. This connective quality in his poetry blends well with his lyric style and enables audiences to enjoy his work as much today as when it was published. His specific poetic descriptions often foster general associations, making his poetry readily accessible.

A poem that demonstrates Cummings’ mastery of the specifically-general, “anyone lived in a pretty how town” provides concrete details in an abstract way, so that the story of an entire life belongs to “anyone”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{anyone lived in a pretty how town} \\
\text{(with up so floating many bells down)} \\
\text{spring summer autumn winter} \\
\text{he sang his didn't he danced his did} \quad (1-4)
\end{align*}
\]

This “anyone” in his “how town” is a specific person, but the generality of his name suggests his commonality with all human beings. Through all seasons his life continues normally, with action and lack of it (“his didn’t” and “his did”). He seems to have a jovial spirit, singing and dancing through these daily activities.

Unfortunately, “anyone” seems to be lonely: “Women and men(both little and small) cared for anyone not at all” (5-6). Cummings has fun with this lack of companionship when “anyone” finally finds love: “noone loved him more by more” (12). Now “noone” (no one) is a person, his lover, and she cares about him in the way that no one had before: “she laughed his joy she cried his grief” (14). This language carries over
the sense of generality. “noone” could be any woman, no one extraordinary or notable, just an average person like “anyone.” They make a perfect pair in their anonymity.

Life progresses for “anyone” and “noone.” Intervening stanzas record the normal activities of the townsfolk: marriages and dreams and sleeping and waking. Then inevitably, “one day anyone died i guess / (and noone stooped to kiss his face)” (25-5). As a testimony to their love, “busy folk buried them side by side” (27), just like any normal couple. And like all other people, life goes on without them:

    Women and men(both dong and ding)
    summer autumn winter spring
    reaped their sowing and went their came
    sun moon stars rain (33-6)

Throughout all seasons and weather patterns “someones” and “everyones” (17) continue to follow life’s routines. Instead of focusing on particularly, Cummings observes the commonality of human existence and emphasizes this theme through his language.

For Cummings, the generalizability of life creates its beauty. From a leaf falling (which could be any leaf, any color, any time) to “anyone” and “noone,” to the “svelte translation of eternity,” our lives are connected by similarity. However, he draws attention to this sameness by using surprisingly different language. He fragments words with irregular punctuation and syntax splicing, thus startling readers into a closer examination of his work. He also creates words to express nuances of meaning that would otherwise require sentences of explanation. Friedman agrees that his poetic techniques make his poetry: “His use of symbol, allegory, and paradox amalgamates the abstract and the concrete without fuss and clatter, creating an effect of lucidity, controlled complexness,
vividness, and ease” (97). With this artistic ease, Cummings blends lyric and Modernist styles over a range of topics, becoming what R. P. Blackmur calls “a school of writing in himself” (107). While Cummings works with conventional topics and celebrates their universality, he does so through fascinating and unparaphrasable language. His word-craft establishes his poetic mastery.


