

Karina Lamas Evangelista

M.A. Julia Constantino Reyes

Historia Literaria VII-2

On e.e. cummings

After e.e. cummings' first collection of poems, *Tulips & Chimneys*, was published in 1923 his friend Slater Brown asserted that it was "the most important work of poetry yet published in America" (Beach 102). However, other critics such as Clement Wood thought that cummings' poetry consisted only about "bad grammar and dreadful linguistic inversions" (in Wasserman 157). Although in the second half of the twentieth century the avant-garde movements (Fernández 30), to which cummings' poetry is frequently related, became fairly recognized, the hyperbolic textuality of his poetry is sometimes still regarded as "just verbal experiments, gimmicky puzzles, or linguistic jokes" (Kennedy in Webster 97). These polarized opinions on the poetry of e.e. cummings have caused his absence from "most of the literary histories of the modernist period" (Beach 102) and according to Sarah Wasserman he "would forever remain a controversial outsider" (156).

This atypical modernist was born Edward Estlin Cummings on October 14th 1894 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His mother was Rebecca Haswell Clarke and his father was Edward Cummings, who was lecturer at Harvard and Unitarian

minister (Triem 6). Following the family tradition, e.e. cummings attended Harvard University where he received an “A.B., *magna cum laude*, and an M.A. for English and classical studies” (6). On June 24 1915, cummings pronounced his graduating class speech titled “The New Art,” in which he not only showed the deep internalization of the philosophy of the modernist movement but also his “own artistic philosophies, practices, and ultimately, his individualism” (Wasserman 156). cummings “exacerbated individualism” (Fernández 30) became evident in the textuality of his poetry, which according to Fernández Alvarez “exploits the physicality of the text as the main—sometimes the only means of expression” (29). e.e. cummings exacerbated individualism and hyperbolic textuality was incidentally emphasized by a printer’s error in the first edition of *Eight Harvard Poets*, who set cummings’ name as well as the “I’s” in lowercase (Triem 6).

In 1926 e.e. cummings himself explained, in his characteristic ironic tone, his poetic technique in the Foreword to *Is 5*: “my theory of technique, if I have one, is very far from original; nor is it complicated. I can express it in fifteen words, by quoting The Eternal Question And Immortal Answer of burlesk, viz. ‘Would you hit a woman with a child? – No, I’d hit her with a brick.’ Like the burlesk comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement” (in Triem 10). Although the previous definition seems to be rather cryptic, from the punch line of the explanation-joke it could be inferred an estrangement of the language in order to return to the original elements that make sense in the poetic language. In Triem’s analysis of cummings’ poetry seven poetic devices by which his poetic language is estranged can be identified:

1. Tmesis: or literally “a cutting”. “By the analysis of words into their parts, both syllables and individual letters, and by considered use of space and punctuation marks, as well as by “arranged derangement,” Cummings hoped to extend meaning beyond traditional limits” (10)
2. Space: used to indicate tempo of reading (10)
3. Unexpected use of punctuation signs: “A comma may be used where a period is expected, within a poem or at the end of it, to produce a pause for the reader to imagine what the next action may be. Or commas, colons, and semicolons may be used within a word to arouse new sensations and intuitions” (10).
4. Capital letter: “to focus the reader’s attention a capital letter may be thrust into the middle of a word” (11).
5. Varied use of parentheses: “for an interpolated comment or to split or combine words as a guide to his thought. Frequently they occur, in poem-comparables, to clarify the relationship between two sentences that run simultaneously through the poem” (11).
6. Visual stanza: “in which lines are arranged in reference, not to rhyme and meter, but to a shape reflecting the poet’s thoughts” (12)
7. Word coinage: “He kept already existing root words, joining to them new affixes. In such compounded words the prefixes are familiar enough, but his use of the suffixes -ly, -ish, -est, -ful and adverbs (such as less) in unexpected combinations, a dimension natural to classical and romance languages, produces in English an intensifying of perception”(13).

Taking into consideration the previous poetical devices let us analyze two representative poems by e.e. cummings. The first poem is “in Just-” (1916), which was published in the collection *Tulips & Chimneys*. “in Just-” is the first poem in the section “*Chansons Innocentes*,” which of course alludes to Blake’s “Songs of Innocence.” From the first stanza of the poem the aforementioned textuality becomes evident:

in Just
 spring when the world is mud-
 luscious the little
 lame balloonman

 whistles far and wee

In the first line the capitalization of the adverb “Just” calls our attention to its physicality, by making it different from the words that surround it. As a poetic device, here the capitalization is operating as an emphatic delimitation of the temporal dimension, which is “the beginning of a new season: ‘in Just-/ spring’” (Burns 59). In the second line the lack of punctuation signs is balanced by the space that is indicating not only a pause but also a “tempo of reading” (Triem 10). At the end of this line, which is enjambed with the next one, and in line ten the first variation of the word coinage device appears as compound words, “mud-/luscious” and “puddle-wonderful.” In the first word the adjective luscious gives a sensuous quality to the noun mud, while in the second what gives the earthy “texture” is the noun puddle. With these adjectives the poetic voice is establishing

a sensual setting that will contrast with the apparent “innocence and childhood” (Burns 59) of “eddieandbill” and “bettyandisbel.”

The central figure of this poem, the balloonman, appears in the fourth line as a compound word. The absence of hyphen between the two nouns is clearly a source of meaning that will become significant when compared to “eddieandbill” and “bettyandisbel.” In the case of “eddieandbill” and “bettyandisbel” the word coinage expressed by the agglutination of the names and conjunction is to provide them with movement that will be emphasized with the verb phrases that follow them “come/ running” and “come dancing.” The next line seems to be transitional and it is repeated every time the balloonman appears: “[the] balloonman whistles far and wee.” Regarding the function of this phrase Buck tells us: “If we understand “far and wee” as musically in the tonic key, we can explain why it feels like the place where we relax slightly each time it occurs, the place where we come home to each time the section is repeated” (141).

As I have already mentioned the balloonman is the central figure of “in Just-.” Every time the balloonman appears he is described with a pair of adjectives, while the first time he is qualified as little and lame the second one he is queer and old. These adjectives make him an ominous and defective presence that seems to be prowling around “eddieandbill” and “bettyandisbel.” About this lurking “balloonman” Burns comments:

The balloon man may serve as a reminder of youth’s transience. He is also “goat-footed,” a peculiar detail that cannot be ignored by an interpreter. It can be taken to imply a mythological parallel between the balloon man and

Pan—a god of shepherds, nature, and fecundity. The association of Pan with sexual awakenings perhaps forecasts the day when “eddieandbill” might become “eddieandisbel.” The poem thus focuses on innocence, but contains within it the seed of experience. (59-60)

However, the masculine duo is not exempt of the implied feeling of perversity that permeates the entire poem. For instance, the illicit quality of “eddieandbill’s” piracies diminishes the innocence of their childhood. Finally, after the fourth stanza, in the transitional line, the odd defective balloonman turns into a menacing figure, he is now described by the poetic voice as “goat-footed.” As it was mentioned before, in this final description the balloonman is presented by the poetic voice as a devilish figure similar to Pan. The last time he is mentioned a capital M is thrust in the middle of the noun ironically emphasizing his lack of humanity.

The second emblematic poem by e.e. cummings is “Buffalo Bill’s” (1920) which is part of the “Portrait” poems in *Tulips & Chimneys*. The “disarranged” lines that form this poem can be considered a visual stanza forming an arrow or a bullet (Turner 44). These forms are quite suitable in a poem about an American Old West showman who “shot glass balls and clay pigeons out of the air with amazing rapidity [and who] rode his watersmooth silver stallion at full gallop” (Tompkins 199). The bullet and the arrow can also be operating as ideograms that emphasize the typical cowboy features of Buffalo Bill. In this portrait the poetic voice is commemorating Buffalo Bill’s figure in a childish nostalgic tone. The adjective “defunct” gives the poem a solemn elegiac attitude that later will prove the

meditation ironic. In the fourth line, the poetic voice accurately describes Buffalo Bill's stallion with the compound adjective "watersmooth-silver." This peculiar compound adjective gives movement to Bill's stallion. This feeling of movement given by the agglomeration of words can be observed again in the following line: "and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat." Here the lack of space between the words produce swiftness when the words are uttered imitating the speed of Buffalo Bill's gunshots.

After the agglomeration of words, a space as long as a line is given by the poetic voice to indicate an extended pause. Then at the end of the same line we find the name "Jesus." The lack of punctuation signs pose an ambiguity, is Jesus just an interjection after a long and swift utterance? Or is it the first addressee of the poetic voice? If it is an interjection, it would be a logical expression, like taking a deep breath, after imitating the swiftness of a gunshot. And if it is an addressee then the following line would turn into a bitter complain: "Jesus/ he was a handsome man." In the last line we find "Mister Death" who is the definite addressee of the poetic voice. The gravity of the capitalized noun "Death" is ironically softened by the appellative Mister. Regarding the irony in "Buffalo Bill's" David Ray says:

Bill is at once worshipped and exposed, and blamed for the mode of experiencing he represents...; the great man for whom we have grieved is reduced to the level of fraud, a flash in the pan, a hero of whom one remembers only the blue eyes...The poet triumphs over death by having come to an insight into Bill's fraudulence before "Mister Death,"...The poet has beaten Mister Death to the draw, literally, and leaves the great

destroyer to find out that he has the commonest of food for his worms.

(290)

The irony in “Buffalo Bill’s” can also be observed in the two attributes given to Buffalo Bill “handsome” and “blueeyed.” The previous adjectives are just describing physical and, in some way, vain qualities which now belong to “Mister Death.” Finally, we can say that the poetic sense in “Buffalo Bill’s” comes from the accumulation of estranged utterances, the contrast between the popular image of Buffalo Bill and the critical one of the poetic voice, and the visual stanza.

As a conclusion let us quote Eve Triem: “cummings’ “arranged derangement” was “intended, not to bewilder, but to heighten the understanding”(9). e.e. cummings voluntarily deprive his poetry of the usual devices that give the quality of poetic to a text. However, as we have observed in the previous poems, cummings took advantage of the physicality of the language in order to recover the original sources of meaning, the “bare” words, that are often taken for granted in the poetic discourse.

Works Cited

Beach, Christopher. *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Buck, R.A. "When Syntax Leads a Rondo with a Paint-brush: The Aesthetics of E.E. Cummings "in Just-" Revisited." *Spring*. 18 (2011): 134-159. Print.

Burns, Allan Douglas. *Thematic Guide to American Poetry*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002. Print.

Fernández Alvarez, Xerardo. "Enunciación y Textualidad: Estrategias de Expresión en la Obra de E.E. Cummings." *Atlantis: Revista de la Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Norteamericanos*. 20.1 (1998): 29-45. Print.

Tompkins, Jane. *The West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.

Triem, Eve. *E.E. Cummings*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969. Print.

Turner, Alberta. *To Make a Poem*. San Diego: Collegiate Press, 1992. Print.

Wasserman, Sarah. "E.E.Cummings and 'The New Art'". *Spring*. 16 (2007): 156-162. Print.

Webster, Michael. "Notes for Cummings: A Resource for Students and Teachers." *Spring*. 17 (2010): 96-105. Print.

Appendix

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's
spring
and

the

goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

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