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Genres of Psychological Conflict, Limitation, and Loss in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings

Richard D. Cureton

It has been generally recognized that the most central thing that poetry does has resisted characterization and therefore has been unavailable for generalizing about poetic experience. Essentially, poetry uses all of its materials to create a kind of verbal music, whose textures give us analogues of our sensibilities (perception, emotion, volition, imagination) and therefore, together, the experience of the psychology, or "inner form," of the poetic persona/speaker. As Helen Vendler likes to put it, poetry is not about what happens but about the music of what happens.

Over the last twenty years or so, I have developed a body of theory and analysis, what I call "temporal poetics," that can confront and characterize this verbal music and its associated "inner forms," psychologies, etc.¹ In this "temporal poetics," poetic materials of all sorts (rhythmic, linguistic, rhetorical, symbolic) are fractalized into analogically related paradigms by the qualities of the four components of rhythm (meter, grouping, prolongation, and theme). Then, congruent or conflicting choices from these formal paradigms are arranged in the poem to create the modes, genres, textures, and styles that characterize the formal "music" of the verse. The qualities of the four components of rhythm (meter, grouping, prolongation, and theme) create four sorts of subjective time, what I call cyclical time, centroidal time, linear time, and relative time. With its focus on repetition, similarity, the past, fixity, fallingness, passivity, participation, etc., when it is either the dominant temporality in a poem or spun out into a social and cultural context, cyclical time tends to invoke eternal return, fatedness, community, ecstasy, unity, etc. With its focus on prominence, obligation, proportionality, the present, centering, etc., centroidal time creates a kind of "vertical" order that favors parts and wholes, and therefore things like love, worship, faith, loyalty, service, and the soul/centered self. With its focus on the future, activity, volatility, and implication, etc., linear time encourages things like induction and the scientific method, capitalism, ideologies of social progress, and an ethics of responsibility, self-reliance, self-discipline, and practical intelligence. And with its focus on peripheries, differences, individuality, improvisation, freedom, etc., relative time creates an order that favors things like tolerance, creativity, socialism, and relativism.

These qualities and their internal order can be represented succinctly in what I call the *temporal paradigm*. How poetic materials are organized by the qualities of the rhythmic components in the temporal paradigm can be succinctly presented in what I call the *poetic paradigm*. [For paradigm charts, see Appendix I in the previous Cureton essay “Pararhyme in E. E. Cummings’ ‘Sonnets—Realities’.”]

Over half a century ago now, in his great *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye made quite a bit of progress toward such a quadratic, rhythmically-based theory of poetry when he observed that the major literary genres (song, poetry, prose fiction, and drama) are underpinned by four different rhythms (what he called the rhythms of repetition, association, continuity, and decorum), and when he observed that many other literary structures have a similar four-part organization—literary symbolism (Apocalyptic Imagery, The Analogy of Innocence, The Analogy of Experience, and Demonic Imagery), modes of emplotment (romance, comedy, tragedy, and irony), major tropes (metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony), major types of prose fiction (romance, confession, novel, and anatomy), and major types of poetry and song (charm, outscape, riddle, and in-scape). However, perhaps because he lacked both a detailed theory of rhythm and similarly lacked quadratic theories of both language and literary style, he never explicitly coordinated his many quadratic paradigms in order to mount an argument that they have the same (rhythmic) source. My temporal poetics adds these needed theories of rhythm, language, and style and completes the project.

Over the last twenty years in my teaching, I have developed a series of major author courses on six of the early twentieth century American poets: Frost, Williams, Stevens, Moore, Bishop, and Cummings. These poets are especially interesting to explore with a “temporal poetics.” Perhaps because of their moment in literary history (i.e., at the dawn of a late, if not last, period in a long historical tradition), all of these poets have unusually broad, and therefore conflicted, sensibilities. As a result, in terms of temporal genres, these poets frequently write what I like to call “portrait” poems, poems that contain a balanced, and therefore highly conflicted, mix of all of the temporalities and their associated subjectivities/psychologies. Because of their inclusiveness and complexity, “portrait” poems tend to order their temporalities into coherent patterns, creating dynamic textures that can be related in interesting ways to metaphysical systems (existentialism, idealism, realism, pragmatism, etc.), archetypal modes of emplotment (comedy, tragedy, romance, irony, etc.), and religious and/or literary ideologies (e.g., science, romanticism, and Christianity).²

However, even if they have very full, conflicted sensibilities, most of the early modernist American poets I teach do not write *just* “portrait” poems. In at least some of their poems, for particular purposes, they will also limit their expressed sensibilities to just one, two, or three of the temporalities, often in more static, rather than dynamic ways, to create (1) a single, persistent mood, (2) a focused interaction, or (3) a sense of psychological narrowing/limitation.

A poem with a homogeneous temporal texture has the feel of something that is purely imaginative, purely volitional, purely emotional, and/or purely perceptual—revery, brute action, immediate perception, or strong feeling. Poems with two temporalities highlight conflicts between opposing sensibilities—thought vs. feeling, perception vs. action, action vs. feeling, etc. Poems with three temporalities convey contraction, avoidance, limitation, or loss. The sensibility associated with the omitted temporality is desirable but absent, and therefore the sensibility expressed is lacking, less than whole.

These psychological genres of conflict, limitation, and loss are especially interesting in *Tulips & Chimneys*, because it is the only volume of verse that Cummings’ divides into sections headed by modal/generic/topical titles: Songs, Chansons Innocentes, Orientales, Amores, La Guerre, Impressions, Portraits, Post-Impressions, Sonnets—Realities, Sonnets—Unrealities, Sonnets—Actualities. Many of the poems in the original 1922 version of *Tulips & Chimneys* are exactly psychological genres of this (limited, contracted, conflicted) sort, and therefore there is often a relationship between the psychological genre of a poem and where it appears in Cummings’ own generic groupings in the volume.

Let us number the components of rhythm and their associated temporalities from 1 to 4:

- 4 theme and relative time
- 3 prolongation and linear time
- 2 grouping and centroidal time
- 1 meter and cyclical time

We can then refer to the genres that result from their possible combinations by numbers and (suggestive) names:

Genres of Psychological Conflict, Limitation, or Loss

Poems of One Temporal Mode

- 1 Fish
- 2 Amour
- 3 Wolf
- 4 Revery

Poems of Two Temporal Modes

- 12 Body and Soul
- 13 Wolf and Fish
- 14 Spring and All
- 23 Fall/Redemption
- 24 Kora in Hell
- 34 Snapshot

Poems of Three Temporal Modes

- 123 Renaissance Lyric
- 124 Escape
- 134 Inscape
- 234 Romantic Lyric

A fish poem (1) has just cyclical/physical forms, emblems of touch, the body, and sensation, the most primitive, regressive aspect of our inner lives. A frequent archetype in poetry for an exclusively physical sensibility is a fish. Cummings writes a couple of these poems, but not many. A fish poem might be what Northrop Frye calls a “charm” (278).

An amour (2) has just centroidal/emotional forms, emblems of smell/taste and the centered self. Amours are pure lyrics, love poems, whoever the beloved might be—a man/woman, a god, Nature, a city, a country, an art, an idea, an object, etc. Cummings writes many love poems, but his love poems are never narrowly emotional; they are strongly physical, actional, and imaginative too.

A wolf poem (3) has only linear rhythms, emblems of hearing, volition, and our social lives. A frequent archetype in poetry for a sensibility dominated by the will is a wolf. The major concern of a wolf poem is usually current events, contemporary culture; therefore, its intent is usually satirical/critical. Cummings’ poems about war, politics, and social life are sometimes wolf poems. A wolf poem might be what Northrop Frye calls an “outscape” poem (278).

A revery (4) has just relative forms, emblems of thought, memory, and imagination. Reveries are often psychologically dark (like nightmares), but they can also be zany and bright (like erotic fantasies). In any event, their consistently relative texture makes them unusually free in form—complex, dissonant, improvisational, fragmentary, simultaneous, etc. Cummings' *Orientales* are sometimes reveries. A revery might be what Northrop Frye calls a riddle (280).

A body and soul poem (12) brings together cyclical (1) and centroidal (2) forms, emblems of sensation and emotion, our most basic/primitive psychological faculties. Most body and soul poems are songs. They combine a lively four-beat meter, an emblem of cyclical time, with rhyme, an emblem of centroidal time. This is a traditional genre. Cummings writes many songs, but they always include linear and/or relative forms, too. He never writes poems that are only cyclical and centroidal, perhaps exactly because they are more traditional.

A wolf and fish poem (13) brings together cyclical (1) and linear (3) forms, emblems of body and will, creating a kind of intense, regressive wolf poem that underlines the inevitably dehumanizing effect of social behavior and historical events. A wolf and fish poem has no imaginative or emotional forms and therefore expresses an inner life that has neither scope nor depth, neither freedom nor form. It is just physical action, survival tactics, birth and death. Wolf and fish poems are one of Cummings' favorite genres. Many of Cummings' satires are wolf and fish poems.

A spring and all poem (14) brings together cyclical (1) and relative (4) forms, emblems of thought/memory/imagination and sensation/the body, and therefore considers clashes between things like fate and freedom, transcendence and ecstasy, idea and thing, body and mind, etc. Dynamically, spring and all poems are often poems of rebirth. In terms of subject matter and the seasons, spring and all poems focus on the transition from winter to spring. Spring and all poems are an important genre for all of the major modern American poets, including Cummings. Many of Cummings' portraits are spring and all poems.

A fall/redemption poem (23) brings together centroidal (2) and linear (3) forms, emblems of emotion and will. In Christian terms, centroidal forms are emblems of Eden; linear forms, of Purgatory. So fall/redemption poems mediate between the two. In the West, this is a traditional genre. Cummings hardly ever writes poems of this sort, perhaps for exactly this reason.

A Kora in hell poem (24) brings together centroidal (2) and relative (4) forms, emblems of emotion and thought/imagination/memory and therefore considers clashes between things like the surreal and the ideal, the noble

and the base, art and religion, fidelity and infidelity, freedom and form, etc. Cummings hardly ever writes these poems. For other modern American poets, such as Williams, Kora in Hell poems are a central genre.

A snapshot (34) brings together linear (3) and relative (4) forms, emblems of will/social action and thought/memory/imagination. In a snapshot, some social scene is arrested, framed, and for a moment, bathed in imagination/reflection (as in a photograph). This is also one of Cummings' favorite genres. Many of Cummings' impressions/post-impressions are snapshots.

A Renaissance lyric (123) brings together all of the temporalities except the relative/imaginative, surrounding a focus on emotion (2) with concerns for fate/the body (1) and duty/society (3). This is a traditional genre. Cummings hardly ever writes a poem of this sort, perhaps for exactly that reason.

A Romantic lyric (234) brings together all of the temporalities except the cyclical/physical, surrounding a focus on society/duty (3) with concerns for imagination/thought/memory (4) and the emotions (2). This is also a traditional genre. Cummings writes a few of these poems, but not many, perhaps for exactly that reason.

An escape poem (124) brings together all of the temporalities except the linear/social/real, and therefore gives us the complement of a prosaic engagement with the world. Escape poems are imaginative, emotional, and sensational; they "escape" from the constraints of the useful/practical. Escape poems are one of Cummings' favorite genres. When Cummings is not satirizing social life, he is usually holding forth on the value of what remains—truth, goodness, and beauty; mystical unity, emotional actuality, and artistic transcendence.

An inscape (134) poem brings together all of the temporalities except the emotional (2). Therefore, it usually gives us a fuller, more imaginative (4) and sensational (1) engagement with the social/real (3), while holding the emotions (2) in reserve. An inscape poem might be regarded as a sensuous snapshot, a "touching" photograph. Inscapes are also one of Cummings' favorite genres. Most of Cummings' "realities" sonnets are inscapes, as are many of his responses to nature—snow, rain, fog, wind, lightning, sunrise, sunset, etc.

In Cummings' collected poetry, setting his uncollected and unpublished poetry aside, in my judgment, there are 155 poems that present a limited sensibility of some sort, about 1 in every 5 poems.

One Temporal Mode

1 Fish

- theys sO alive (CP 426; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- the boys i mean are not refined (CP 427; *No Thanks*, 1935)

2 Amour

- None

3 Wolf

- 5 / derbies-with-men-in-them (CP 84; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- here is little Effie's head (CP 192; & [AND] 1925)
- when muckers pimps and tratesmen (CP 405; *No Thanks*, 1935)

4 Revery

- why did you go (CP 30; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- the / nimble / heat / had (CP 76; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- and not old,harry,a (CP 77; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- between nose-red gross (CP 80; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- but observe;although (CP 282; *is 5*, 1926)
- we)under)over,the thing of floating Of (CP 447; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- porkie & porkie (CP 483; *New Poems*, 1938)
- mrs //& mr across the way are kind of (CP 501; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- the silently little blue elephant shyly (CP 516; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- tw // o o / ld (CP 610; *XAIPE*, 1950)
- who(at // her nons- / elf (CP 704; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- silence // .is / a / looking (CP 712; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- n / OthI / n // g can (CP 814; *73 Poems*, 1963)

Two Temporal Modes

12 Body and Soul

None

13 Wolf and Fish

- (of Ever-Ever Land i speak (CP 466; *New Poems*, 1938)

- spoke joe to jack (CP 496; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- red-rag and pink-flag (CP 497; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- the way to hump a cow is not (CP 500; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- of all the blessings which to man (CP 544; *I x I*, 1944)
- ygUDuh (CP 547; *I x I*, 1944)
- a salesman is an it that stinks (CP 549; *I x I*, 1944)
- seeker of truth (CP 775; *73 Poems*, 1963)

14 Spring and All

- the glory is fallen out of (CP 49; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- after five (CP 51; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- of my / soul a street is: (CP 69; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- the dress was a suspicious madder, (CP 74; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- Picasso (CP 95; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- her / flesh / Came (CP 99; *Tulips and Chimneys*, 1922)
- in making Marjorie god hurried (CP 211; & [AND] 1925)
- i like my body when it is with your / body (CP 218; & [AND] 1925)
- she puts down the handmirror. (CP 224; *is 5*, 1926)
- joggle i think will do it although the glad (CP 225; *is 5*, 1926)
- if within tonight's erect (CP 300; *is 5*, 1926)
- sh estiffl / ystrut sal / lif san (CP 444; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- mortals) (CP 536; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- spirit colossal (CP 678; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- Beautiful (CP 713; *95 Poems*, 1958)

23 Fall/Redemption

- i like / to think that on (CP 50; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)

24 Kora in Hell

- unto thee i (CP 35; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- there is a / moon sole (CP 43; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- a- / float on some / ? (CP 571; *I x I*, 1944)
- a total stranger one black day (CP 730; *95 Poems*, 1958)

34 Snapshot

- writhe and / gape of tortured (CP 61; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- i was considering how (CP 65; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- somebody knew Lincoln somebody Xerxes (CP 101; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- beyond the brittle towns asleep (CP 104; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- at the head of this street a gasping organ is waving moth-eaten (CP 109; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- i was sitting in mcsorley's. outside it was New York and beauti- / fully snowing. (CP 110; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- it really must (CP 240; *is 5*, 1926)
- if being mortised with a dream (CP 286; *is 5*, 1926)
- i'd think "wonder (CP 354; *W [ViVa]*, 1931)
- you / in win / ter who sit (CP 355; *W [ViVa]*, 1931)
- nothing is more exactly terrible than (CP 376; *W [ViVa]*, 1931)
- a)glazed mind layed in a/ urinal (CP 388; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- exit a kind of unkindness exit (CP 389; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- the(/ Wistfully (CP 391; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- o pr (CP 392; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- o / sure)but (CP 400; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- go(perpe)go (CP 403; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- IN) (CP 404; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- he does not have to feel because he thinks (CP 406; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- most(people // simply // can't) (CP 412; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- air, // be /comes / or (CP 532; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- applaws) (CP 548; *I x I*, 1944)
- chas sing does(who (CP 611; *XAIPE*, 1950)
- a(ncient)a (CP 616; *XAIPE*, 1950)
- pieces in darker (CP 623; *XAIPE*, 1950)
- snow means that (CP 628; *XAIPE*, 1950)
- a he as o /ld as who stag (CP 703; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- a gr // eyhaire /d(m (CP 705; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- n // ot eth / eold almos (CP 725; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- you no // tice / nobod / y wants (CP 727; *95 Poems*, 1958)

- this / forest pool (CP 759; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- n / Umb a (CP 789; *95 Poems*, 1958)

Three Temporal Modes

123 Renaissance Lyric

- because it's / Spring (CP 782; *73 Poems*, 1963)

234 Romantic Lyric

- goodbye Betty, don't remember me (CP 117; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- Among// these/ red pieces of (CP 278; *is 5*, 1926)
- it is winter a moon in the afternoon (CP 279; *is 5*, 1926)
- supposing i dreamed this) (CP 293; *is 5*, 1926)
- i am a beggar always (CP 299; *is 5*, 1926)
- this is a rubbish of human rind (CP 647; *XAIPE*, 1950)
- a round face near the top of the stairs (CP 813; *73 Poems*, 1963)

124 Escape

- in Just- / spring (CP 27; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- you being in love (CP 296; *is 5*, 1926)
- my darling since (CP 369; *W [ViVa]*, 1931)
- enter no(silence is the blood whose flesh (CP 839; *73 Poems*, 1963)
- mOOOn Over tOWns mOOOn (CP 383; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- nouns to nouns (CP 508; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- these children singing in stone a (CP 525; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- yes is a pleasant country (CP 528; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- o / the round (CP 606; *XAIPE*, 1950)
- the(oo)is (CP 740; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- these from my mother's greatgrandmother's rosebush white (CP 748; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- how generous is that himself the sun (CP 756; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- joyful your complete fearless and pure love (CP 761; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- spring!may (CP 767; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- O the sun comes up-up-up in the opening (CP 773; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- t,h,r,u,s,h,e:s (CP 820; *73 Poems*, 1963)

- but / he” i /staring (CP 823; *73 Poems*, 1963)

134 Inscape

- the emperor / sleeps (CP 37; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- the bigness of cannon (CP 55; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- little ladies more (CP 56; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- being / twelve (CP 70; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- the skinny voice (CP 72; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- Babylon slim (CP 73; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- of evident invisibles (CP 75; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- i walked the boulevard (CP 81; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- between the breasts (CP 85; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- raise the shade (CP 100; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- windows go orange in the slowly. (CP 103; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- any man is wonderful (CP 107; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- at the ferocious phenomenon of 5 o'clock i find myself (CP 111; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls (CP 115; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- when i am in Boston,i do not speak. (CP 116; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- ladies & gentlemen this little girl (CP 118; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- when you rang at Dick Mid's Place (CP 120; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- god pity me whom(god distinctly has) (CP 125; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- “kitty”, sixteen,5'1”,white,prostitute (CP 126; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- she sits dropping on a caret of clenched arms (CP 128; *Tulips & Chimneys*, 1922)
- my smallheaded pearshaped (CP 185; & [AND], 1925)
- i'll tell you a dream i had once i was away up in the sky Blue (CP 196; & [AND], 1925)
- (one!) (CP 201; & [AND], 1925)
- my strength becoming wistful in a glib (CP 204; & [AND], 1925)

- the dirty colours of her kiss have just (CP 205; & [AND], 1925)
- when I have thought of you somewhat too (CP 213; & [AND], 1925)
- if i should sleep with a lady called death (CP 214; & [AND], 1925)
- upon the room's/ silence,i will sew (CP 215; & [AND], 1925)
- a blue woman with sticking out breasts hanging (CP 216; & [AND], 1925)
- when you went away it was morning (CP 217; & [AND], 1925)
- with breathing as(faithfully)her lownecked (CP 223; *is5*, 1926)
- should i entirely ask of god why (CP 227; *is5*, 1926)
- curtains part (CP 230; *is5*, 1926)
- a man who had fallen among thieves (CP 256; *is5*, 1926)
- it's jolly (CP 268; *is5*, 1926)
- lis /-ten (CP 271; *is5*, 1926)
- my sweet old etcetera (CP 275; *is5*, 1926)
- some ask praise of their fellows (CP 292; *is5*, 1926)
- sunset edges become swiftly (CP 346; *W [ViVa]*, 1926)
- how / ses humble. (CP 347; *W [ViVa]*, 1926)
- twi-/ is -Light bird (CP 351; *W [ViVa]*, 1926)
- it)It will it (CP 362; *W [ViVa]*, 1926)
- so standing,our eyes filled with wind,and the (CP 379; *W [ViVa]*, 1926)
- as if as (CP 423; *No Thanks*, 1935)
- !blac (CP 487; *50 Poems*, 1940)
- nonsun blob a (CP 541; *I x I*, 1944)
- plato told (CP 553; *I x I*, 1944;
- maybe god (CP 652; *XAIPE*, 1950)
- l(a (CP 673; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- jack's white horse(up (CP 699; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- Young m / oon:be kind to olde (CP 733; *95 Poems*, 1958)
- enter no(silence is the blood whose flesh (CP 839; *73 Poems*, 1958)

Several conclusions can be drawn from the number and distribution of these poems across the genres. First, the fact that these poems are only 20% of Cummings' corpus is a testimonial to the full sensibilities that most of his poems present. In most cases (80% of the time), in spite of the inevi-

table conflict that this entails, Cummings gets his full self into his poems—body, soul, spirit, and mind. Regardless of outer form, style, or subject matter, almost all of Cummings’ poems are what I call “portrait” poems, full self-expressions/actualizations. While this might not be unusual among his strong poetic contemporaries (such as Moore, Stevens, Williams, and Frost), it might be very unusual in the English and American literary tradition as a whole. Many of the best poems in the language have much more focused, limited aims. As I tried to demonstrate, in “Cummings and Temporality,” my analysis of Cummings’ “somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond” several years ago in *Spring* 16, all of the major poets of this period, Cummings included, devise formal ways of bringing together all of the temporalities in tight spaces (rhythmically, linguistically, rhetorically, symbolically)—heightening their conflicts and contradictions, but reaching toward some workable synthesis, nonetheless: “nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands” (and such like).

Second, if Cummings does limit his sensibilities in a poem, he almost never curtails relative forms, emblems of imagination, thought, and memory. Of the 155 collected poems with a limited sensibility, only 15 neglect relative forms. This is understandable. Relative time is the dominant temporality of the age. These forms underpin a good part of Cummings’ strongest beliefs—in clashing differences and dynamic movement, in art/beauty, in creativity, in individualism, in freedom, in spiritual transcendence, in self-actualization, in loneliness, in vision, etc. For Cummings, any poem that is not doused in a haze of relative forms is much too traditional for his purposes. It sounds too Tennysonian, or Miltonic, or Shakespearean, or whatever. Cummings writes his major prose works (*The Enormous Room* and *EIMI*) in the same relativistic style.

Third, in his poems of limited sensibility, next to relative forms, Cummings is partial to cyclical forms. For instance, in poems with three temporalities and relative forms (234, 124, 134), 69 out of 76 poems limit centroidal and linear forms (134, 124), emblems of emotion and will, rather than cyclical forms (234). Among poems with two temporalities, Cummings also writes quite a few (14) spring and all poems, which contain relative and cyclical forms. Twice, he also writes fish poems, which are exclusively cyclical. This preference for cyclical forms underpins the other pole of Cummings’ major beliefs—in oneness, in nature and the earth, in rebirth, in spring, in the body, in perception/sensation, in touch, in his father’s religion of the star of Bethlehem (Peace on earth, good will toward men), and so forth.

On the other hand, for certain purposes, both Cummings and his major contemporaries have no problem limiting centroidal forms, emblems of

emotion and the centered self, the heart of expressiveness in the traditional lyric. Among his collected poems with a limited sensibility, a full third of them (52) are “inscapes,” which combine cyclical, linear, and relative forms, emblems of body, will, and mind, but hold centroidal/emotional forms in reserve. As I mentioned above, if the subject of these poems are things in nature (fog, snow, rain, sunrise, sunset, lightning, wind, etc.), these “inscape” poems are like “touching photographs.” The poet sets emotion aside while responding as fully as possible in other ways. If the subject of these poems is some social scene, however, the result is a kind of insightful, but heartless, documentary of social conditions and human affairs, a “reality” sonnet. These “anti-lyrical” poems might be the most distinctive genre among poets in the English and American tradition in this historical period, the first half of the twentieth century. As Charles Altieri has claimed, the effect of these poems is exactly a kind “painterly abstraction.” As a painter himself, and as a modern poet strongly influenced by contemporary developments in the visual arts, it is not surprising at all that Cummings is attracted to poems of this sort. The only thing that might be mentioned is the extremity of Cummings’ inscape poems. Because of the strength of his attraction to relative and cyclical forms (visual fragmentation, ungrammaticality, sonic dissonance, simultaneity, ambiguity, complexity, obscurity, etc., on the one hand and iconicity, strong four-beat meters, repetition, compounding, parallelism, alliteration, etc., on the other), many of Cummings’ inscape poems do indeed approach that “babble and doodle,” that stark juxtapositioning of sound and image, that Northrop Frye claimed is at the center of lyric expression (275). Drawn towards the peripheries of the sensibility, without a concern for the effect of this on both representation and voicing, many of Cummings’ poems become unspeakable, if not unreadable, extreme experiments in a decentered, “anti-lyrical” sensibility.

Finally, this review of Cummings’ poems of limited sensibility underlines Cummings’ attraction to hard-edged social satires and poems of (social) escape. The extremity of Cummings’ negative response to the social textures of his time, and perhaps social textures more generally, is remarkable and motivates him to both attack and flee as the occasion demands. Among his collected poems, Cummings writes eight wolf and fish poems and seventeen escape poems—quite a few. It is worthwhile to note that some of these poems are among his best (e.g., “in Just- / spring,” “yes is a pleasant country,” and “(of Ever-Ever Land I speak”).

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Notes

1. For an overview of the rhythmicics that I use to ground my temporal poetics, see Cureton *Rhythmic Phrasing* and “Metrical Reading.” For overviews of the basic principles of temporal poetics, see “Inner Form,” “Language of Poetry,” and “Telling Time.” For how rhythm motivates linguistic form, see “Temporal Theory of Language.” A number of complete formal analyses of individual poems may be found in the following articles: “Temporality and Poetic Form” for Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay”; “Linguistics, Stylistics and Poetics” for Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black-bird”; “Process as Truth” for the opening of Walt Whitman’s “Song of the Broad-Axe”; “Jakobson Revisited” for W. B. Yeats’ “The Sorrow of Love”; “Solitary Disciple” for William Carlos Williams’ “To a Solitary Disciple”; “Rhythmic Process” for D.H. Lawrence’s “To Women, As Far As I’m Concerned”; “Cummings and Temporality” for E. E. Cummings’ “somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond”; “Analysis of Emily Dickinson” for Emily Dickinson’s “I taste a liquor never brewed”; and “A Reading in Temporal Poetics” for Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Map.”
2. For Cummings’ use of textures in the portrait poems in *Tulips & Chimneys*, see Cureton, “Portrait Textures” (forthcoming in the next issue of *Spring*).

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