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**"Baby-Talk" or Artistic Precision:  
Cummings' "Post Impressions" in &[AND] –  
and No Thanks to R. P. Blackmur**

Gillian Huang-Tiller

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R. P. Blackmur's criticism of Cummings in his 1931 essay "Notes on E. E. Cummings' Language" first appeared in the winter issue of *Hound & Horn*, where Blackmur served as editor from 1928-1930.<sup>1</sup> Blackmur included this essay in his first collection of critical essays, *The Double Agent* (1935; hereafter *D*). From the time Blackmur judged Cummings a "childish" (*D* 2) poet and concluded his analysis of what he saw as the non-substantive vocabulary in Cummings' first four collections of poetry with the notorious term "baby talk" (*D* 29), later critics have tended to use this characterization as a starting point for their discussion of Cummings. Blackmur retreated somewhat from this criticism in his review of Cummings' *50 Poems* (1940), acknowledging that his view, "formerly held to an extreme, does not now need to be; it is now but a cautionary reservation" ("Review" 71), and expressing his admiration for Cummings: "I have been one of his admirers for twenty-one years since I first saw his poetry in the *Dial*" ("Review" 70). However, Blackmur re-collected his Cummings essay three more times in the fifties: *Language as Gesture: Essays in Poetry* (317-40, 1952) and *Form and Value in Modern Poetry* (287-312, 1952/1957), indicating that his mind had not changed all that much about Cummings' poetic art and craft, if at all.

The appearance of *Language as Gesture* (reprinted also in London in 1954) after *The Double Agent* ensured Blackmur's reputation as a leading literary critic, but at the same time he drew much scrutiny to his dated criticism of early Cummings, who, after the *Dial* award in 1925, had won more recognition through *Collected Poems* in 1938. By the fifties, Cummings' poetic achievements included five new booksofpoems (including *50 Poems* and *One Times One* during the Second World War and *Xaipe* after) and the Shelley Memorial Award for *I x I* (1944). Blackmur's preservation of his 1931 Cummings criticism (written at the age of 25 or 26) led to two distinct schools of critics: one following Blackmur to condemn Cummings' lack of sophistication, achievement, and "intelligence," and the other finding it necessary to defend the poet from these charges. For example, when Helen Vendler reviewed Richard Kennedy's biography of Cummings, *Dreams in the Mirror* in 1980, she characterized Blackmur's judgment of Cummings as "superlatively unanswerable" ("Poet's Gallery" 12).<sup>2</sup> In his recent re-

view of Susan Cheever's 2014 biography of Cummings, August Kleinzahler rehashed Blackmur's attack on Cummings to lampoon the poet as a "little lame balloonman" (citing "paucity of content," "limited range," and "shallowness"). Though they may not use the phrase "baby talk," both Vendler and Kleinzahler perpetuate the image of Cummings as an immature and anti-intellectual arrested adolescent, a sentimental and romantic egoist (*D* 4). The second group of critics, with a better and more nuanced understanding of Cummings' intrinsically complicated and ironic use of language, has equally defended him from the charge of immaturity and perpetual adolescence. Bernard Stehle, in his memorial essay to Kennedy, refutes what he describes as Vendler's "preposterous claim" and points out that Blackmur's argument has been answered time and again by leading Cummings scholars Norman Friedman and David Forrest, among others (20, 31).

To categorically summarize Cummings' work up to 1931, Blackmur defines criticism as an appreciation based on "the facts about the words [the poet] uses" and "the quality of the meaning his use of these words permits" (*D* 5). Blackmur finds Cummings' use of words "imprecise," rendering his poems more like "notes for a poem," something that can offer "no grounds for apprehension beyond surface" (*D* 3) rather than something "genuinely complete" (*D* 4). Cummings thus fails to live up to Blackmur's criteria to enable a critic or a reader to locate *meaning* in the poem. Blackmur finds that Cummings' "typographical peculiarities" "carry almost no reference to the *meaning* of the poems" (*D* 5). He thus focuses his eloquent indictment of Cummings' vocabulary on two objections: 1) vagueness of imagery, and 2) the frequent recurrence of certain words (*D* 6). For the rest of the essay, Blackmur exhausts about twenty pages inspecting Cummings' use of the word "flower" (which occurs forty-eight times in *Tulips and Chimneys* and twenty-one times in *&*), as well as a few examples of the words "dreams" and "doll" and "candy" (*D* 7, 20). This analysis of "vocabulary" alone based on two or three repeated words becomes Blackmur's *modus operandi* and leads to his ultimate verdict that Cummings' language is "a kind of baby talk" (*D* 29). He regards the repetition of these terms as evidence of a lack of precision on Cummings' part (*D* 28). In his annotated copy of Blackmur's essay, Cummings underlined the word "baby," indicating perhaps that he did not object to the word in certain contexts.<sup>3</sup> However, the alleged lack of precision was something he would have objected to strenuously.

Although Blackmur affirms his role as a fact-finding critic in his essay, he notably dismisses any aesthetic consideration of Cummings' vocabulary. For today's readers, Blackmur's standard of "factual" vocabulary and his one "fallacy" approach to critiquing the sincerity of Cummings' poem-

making seem extremely conventional and limiting in view. Ought words used in a poem be judged only by their appearance in isolation? In his long essay, Blackmur never once closely delves into any of Cummings' poems where the word "flower" appears. And if we consider that Cummings was an experimental modernist poet with classical training in Greek and Latin from Harvard, should Cummings' simplicity with an unadorned word not be considered a deliberate choice? Should not the poet's linguistic deviance and "typographical peculiarities" be taken more seriously as examples of the new art and new poetry?<sup>4</sup> Would not the lack of meaning of any word point to meaning itself? Should an unintelligible or too intelligible word like the recurrent "flower" be conceived as "baby talk"? To judge Cummings' merits or demerits simply because the poet does not comply with Blackmur's "factual" standards for poetic vocabulary, I believe, can only suggest the critic's own failure to understand Cummings and his art of poetry.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Blackmur's one-fallacy reasoning (*D* 13) was a reaction to Cummings' mockery of those critics, including Blackmur himself, who cannot discover or comprehend the artistic value of the poetic object beyond its unorthodox appearance. An easy conclusion would be to fault the artist or the poet for attempting to create his/her private vision and vocabulary. In a parodic essay under the female pseudonym Gwendolyn Orloff in *Vanity Fair*, March 1927, Cummings addresses the detention of Brancusi's sculpture, *The Bird in Space*, as a taxable object by Customs.<sup>6</sup> Through the persona of Ivan Narb, a fictionalized abstract sculptor (very likely an artist like Brancusi, noting that Narb spells "Bran" in reverse), he questioned the appraisal of the artist based on "materialistic considerations" (*A Miscellany Revised* 188). At the conclusion of the essay, Cummings evokes an artist's "privilege to choose" for the "ceaseless revelation" and "unending joy" of art itself:

For example: to the privileged man or woman or child who perceives the secret locked in Ivan Narb's sculpture, a certain vaguely ellipsoidal form of which I am now clearly thinking, is a source of irrevocable bliss, of ceaseless revelation, of unending joy. To someone whose eyes are sealed by materialistic considerations, his same form is merely a potato.

Here, as elsewhere, it is our duty and our privilege to choose. (188)

In his essay "Latter-Day Notes on E. E. Cummings' Language" (*Bucknell Review* 1955), Robert E. Maurer was the first major critic to respond directly to Blackmur's criticism by stressing Cummings' growth

as a writer and the development of a mature style. While acknowledging some “childishness” in Cummings’ word choice, Maurer calls attention to Cummings’ “intricate and difficult” language (especially in his late works) as a deliberate act: “He divested himself of the literate adult’s prejudices against such things as double negatives, redundant superlatives and comparatives, and non-dictionary words” (139). Maurer gives as an example of Cummings’ “childish technique of word forming” (140) a line from *ViVa*: “somebody might hardly never not have been unsorry,perhaps,” (CP 337). Maurer then reaffirms Cummings’ unusual quality of language: “the book [*Tulips & Chimneys*] is so obviously the work of a talented young man who is striking off in new directions, groping for original and yet precise expression” (144).

Likewise, in a 1957 *PMLA* article, Norman Friedman points out the “artistic qualities of Cummings’ poetic language” and “its effectiveness” against Blackmur’s charges of “vague, abstract, impenetrable, private, subjective” language (“Diction, Voice, and Tone” 1036). Friedman’s two major critical studies, *The Art of His Poetry* (1960) and *The Growth of a Writer* (1964) further refute Blackmur and articulate Cummings’ growth and maturity from his early to later works in the 1960s. He writes, “No man who has retained and strengthened the visions of his youth with such singular integrity for almost sixty years can be accused of perpetual adolescence” (*Art* 27). In the 1970s Irene Fairley analyzed the intricacy of Cummings’ ungrammar (along with other book-length studies in the ’70s—Gary Lane, Barry Marks, Bethany Dumas, Robert Wegner, etc.). In his near-thorough study and close reading of Cummings’ language and art, *E. E. Cummings: Introduction to the Poetry* (1979), Rushworth M. Kidder exposes Blackmur’s criticism as a “misinterpretation”:

Cummings uses logic, thought, and a great deal of calculated skill in writing poems which assert that feeling is first. Surely there is a paradox worth investigating here. And surely the investigation must consist of a close and thorough reading of individual poems—word by word, syllable by syllable, and in many cases letter by letter. Such a reading recognizes that there is much that cannot be grasped by limiting our study to syntax and semantics alone. (“Introduction” 8)

However, Cheever’s 2014 biography unwittingly reintroduces Blackmur’s “baby talk” conclusion of Cummings to current critical attention (Preface xii). I don’t think that it is necessary to respond to an outdated criticism, already addressed by many Cummings scholars, as noted above. But when history has been forgotten and when the context of the original usage has not been considered, it seems that a reexamination of the phrase

is in order. On the surface, the casual reader will take the term as unquestionably literal as some of the belittling remarks from “immature” to “shallow” have previously been assumed by Cummings’ hostile critics. The term, however, is not as simple as it seems, and was not simple even when Blackmur first applied it in 1931.

Blackmur’s epithet for Cummings’ language as “a kind of baby-talk” occurs at the conclusion of a long essay in which he associated Cummings with “the anti-culture group,” which Blackmur identifies as “vorticism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism, and so on” (“Notes” 1). To make the context explicit, Blackmur attaches a footnote: “The reader is referred to the late numbers of *transition* for a serial and collaborative expression of the latest form which this group has assumed: the Battle of the Word. [As of 1930]” (“Notes” 1). As if echoing Max Eastman’s 1929 description of such a group forming the “cult of unintelligibility” (632), Blackmur depicts Cummings’ language as “anti-culture” and “Dadaist”: “Mr. Cummings and the group with which he is here roughly associated, the anti-culture or anti-intelligence group, persists to the contrary [of convention]. Because experience is fragmentary as it strikes the consciousness[,] it is thought to be essentially discontinuous and therefore essentially unintelligible except in the fragmentary form in which it occurred” (*D* 13). Next to that passage, Cummings places an exclamation point in the margin as if quite surprised by this assessment (Webster, “Notes in Books”). Near the conclusion, Blackmur seems to reverse his charge of unintelligibility by voicing an ironic sympathy for the poet’s choice: “In a sense, anyone can understand Mr. Cummings and his kind [the “anti-culture” group] by the mere assertion that he does understand,” adding that “Nothing else is needed but a little natural sympathy and a certain aptness for the resumption of a *childish* sensibility” (*D* 28; emphasis added). But the verdict was cast. Blackmur disapproves of this approach by Cummings and by the so-called anti-culture group: “Taken solemnly, as it is meant to be, the distortion by which it exists is too much for it, and it seems a kind of baby-talk” (*D* 29).

In this paper I’ll reconceive what Blackmur means by “baby talk” in its original cultural context and investigate to what extent this term is applicable and justified when Blackmur came to write this essay. First, it seems curious that Blackmur, a critic obsessed with “fact” and “precision,” would refer the reader to the “Battle of the Word” (*D* 1), even though Eugene Jolas titled his 1929 Proclamation “The Revolution of the Word” (Jolas 19), a term reiterated in Jolas’s 1930 issue as well). In addition, declaring that “Mr. Cummings is a school of writing in himself” (*D* 1), while at the same time assuming that Cummings belongs to an anti-cultural group such as the Dadaists seems contradictory. Does Blackmur’s categorizing of Cummings as a member of a so-called anti-culture and anti-intelligence group (based

solely on an analysis of vocabulary), make a meaningful assessment that goes beyond throwing a phrase at Cummings? Can the term “anti-culture group” have an extended life if taken out of its own aesthetic context of the avant-garde in the post-WWI twenties? What were Cummings’ own thoughts on Blackmur’s criticism?

Perhaps we should begin with Dadaism, since Blackmur mentions it in connection to Cummings in the first paragraph of his essay. The term Dada itself derives in all likelihood from the French word for “hobbyhorse.” In its echoic suggestion of an infant language, the term suggests baby talk: “Hugo Ball had already used the word a couple of times in private diary entries the previous month. In this naïve baby talk, the Dadaists found an appropriate expression for their nihilism” (Elger and Grosenick 9). Elizabeth Atkins also links “baby talk” to Dadaism in her study of Edna St. Vincent Millay (69-70).<sup>7</sup> What Blackmur terms “baby talk” in Cummings could be seen as part of the Jolas’s Dadaist proclamation that lyric poetry seeks “a-priori reality in ourselves alone” and that “The writer expresses. He does not communicate” (*transition* 16-17). Webster also notes that Blackmur sought to paint Cummings as a Dadaist: “Blackmur’s essay makes a pretty big deal of Cummings as a kind of Dada follower. But of course, Cummings is more careful than any Dadaist in his language and form” (5/17/2016 e-mail). Cummings did indeed take some inspiration from the group and reached a similar conclusion about the need for a revolution of the word (Cohen 36). For example, before the post-WWI Dadaists, the typescript of his 1915 Harvard commencement address, “The New Art,” shows a distrust of traditional reason and representation in its discussion of Cézanne’s post-impressionist departure from realism:

Cézanne, becoming like his predecessors, dissatisfied with realism, frankly turns his back on the conventions and attempts, in his mature work, a primitive expressiveness of the spirit of his subject. The impressionist rendered the appearance of nature on canvas; with Cézanne this is sub-conscious; what he actually gives us is his reaction in the form of a design, containing only enough realism to suggest the subject, and convincing through its inherent beauty.

The essence of Primitivism, the decorative element, is united with the expressive by Matisse, the greatest name in painting since Monet. . . . presently the genius of the man broke forth in distinctive expressions, combining those decorative and rhythmic elements which are the basis of Post-Impressionism. (MS. “New Art” 3)

In a term paper written for a graduate class in the following year, the nascent modernist Cummings further stressed the necessity of an artist’s free-

dom to respond to his social milieu, extolling a “new artistic creed whose goal is a freedom which shall express the artist’s reaction to the age in which he moves” (MS. “The Poetry of a New Era” 5). But Cummings’ involvement with the Dada group is only tangential: “During that first post-war decade, many of the early poets remained central to the new developments . . . Still others like Stevens & Cummings took independent positions that covered additional areas of structure & vision” (Rothenberg xx). Similarly, quoting Dickran Tashjian, Cohen points out that Cummings never engaged in “artistic destruction for its own sake” as did the Dadaists (*PoetandPainter* 48). Dadaism in its extreme would reject recognizable language itself. Thus “Dada,” as represented by Richard Huelsenbeck, Raoul Hausmann, Hugo Ball, and Tristan Tzara, claimed to speak in the voice of a child (the unconscious) with disgust against the pretensions of civilization and the mind of the adult reason.<sup>8</sup> If Dadaist “baby talk” is applicable to Cummings’ experimental, typographical language, Cummings, as I demonstrate, engaged in a different sort of technique that he defines in the “Foreword” to *is* 5 as “that precision which creates movement” (CP 221).

Like barbarism and primitivism, *baby talk* suggests elementary speech and a lack of polish and finish. George Santayana in his essay on “The Poetry of Barbarism, 1900” singles out Walt Whitman and Robert Browning as “barbarous” poets:

To poetry of barbarism is not without its charm. It can play with sense and passion the more readily and freely in that it does not aspire to subordinate them to a clear thought or a tenable attitude of the will. . . . The power to stimulate is the beginning of greatness, and when the barbarous poet has genius, as he well may have, he stimulates all the more powerfully on account of the crudity of his methods and the recklessness of his emotions. The defects of such art—lack of distinction, absence of beauty, confusion of ideas, incapacity permanently to please—will hardly be felt by the contemporary public . . .

These considerations may perhaps be best enforced by applying them to two writers of great influence over the present generation who seem to illustrate them on different planes—Robert Browning and Walt Whitman. (89)

Santayana adds, “Both poets had powerful imaginations, but the type of their imaginations was low” (112). Equally disapproving of the new art movement and the French avant-garde, the traditionalist critics denounced the impressionists and the post-impressionists as barbaric for their rejection of the academic standards of art. Willard Huntington Wright describes the appalling reception of Cézanne and his work in this way: “he was univer-



sally regarded with disgust and horror and considered a barbarian.” Wright cites a remark from an American painter William Merritt Chase that “Cézanne did not know how to paint” (*Modern Painting* 337). Today, Cézanne is revered as the father of Post-Impressionism. What academic criticism, based on the standards of the past, refused to admit was the stultification of the established form.

In actuality, the terms baby talk, primitivism, and barbarism speak about the language of the new art. In a private conversation about Blackmur and this article, Professor Dolores Warwick Frese of the University of Notre Dame remarked that baby talk is analogous to Dante’s mother tongue—the vernacular he chose for the *Divine Comedy*. An idiosyncratic language not fulfilling the expectations of the established form, she suggested, has an intellectual tradition. Concerning Cummings’ supposed “baby talk,” Maurer calls attention to how Cummings asks from his readers “the frank approach of a child,” adding that this is the attitude Cummings “himself takes to his mother tongue and to its tenets and rules” (“Latter Day Notes” 139). If we stay within the bounds of modern literature, the term “baby talk” connotes an aesthetic deliberation, much as Dante apologizes for using the vernacular tongue, which only cries “mamma” and “babbo,” to describe the pit of hell (*Inferno*, Canto XXXII, line 9). That is, for Cummings, baby talk that rises to his praise of Gaston Lachaise for his “simple” form of sculpture that “completely expresses itself”: “inherently naïf, fearlessly intelligent, utterly sincere” (“Gaston Lachaise” 15). A case in point: on Lachaise’s alabaster bas-relief *The Mountain*, fully ignored by critics in the art show, Cummings comments: “Its completely integrated simplicity proclaims The Mountain to be one of those superlative aesthetic victories which are accidents of the complete intelligence, or the intelligence functioning at intuitional velocity” (“Lachaise” 17). Considering the body of scholarship on Cummings’ use of language in print, Blackmur’s “baby talk” assessment seems to reflect a limited understanding of “intelligence” (*D* 4, 8-9) on the critic’s part.<sup>9</sup> Arthur Jerome Eddy supports this conclusion: “It is most disappointing to hear a man go into raptures over what he cannot explain. . . . But because we do not understand what a man says is no good reason for calling him an ignoramus” (*Cubists and Post-Impressionism* 107-108).

Regarding the “intelligence” of the word, Blackmur proclaims that Cummings’ repetition of “flower” causes the word to “become an idea, and in the process has been deprived of its history, its qualities, and its meaning” (*D* 9). Blackmur’s criteria that a word used in poem “should be the sum of all its appropriate history made concrete and particular in the individual context . . . because the only kind of meaning poetry can have requires that all its words resume their full life; the full life being modified

and made unique by the *qualifications* the words perform one upon the other in the poem” (D 8) are not without merit. But does Cummings truly fail to fulfill these critical expectations? As Blackmur never analyzes any of Cummings’ “flower” poems, passing judgment without analysis is inexplicable. In reviewing *Language as Gesture*, John Crowe Ransom found some of Blackmur’s criticism of Cummings objectionable. Ransom calls attention to how Blackmur views Cummings “scornfully as a member of the ‘anti-culture group’; which always works by ‘a sentimental denial of the intelligence.’ A frequent term is ‘rational imagination,’ meaning the ordering imagination which controls sensibility” (105-06). Ransom further objects to Blackmur’s inconsistent emphasis on “aesthetic rules” (i.e. the “intelligence,” or the “ordering imagination”), while at the same time analyzing poetry as “gesture,” a word that implies a surface flourish rather than an ordering “intelligence”:

It is a simple objection that I make, that I think there is to make, against Blackmur; with the reservation, of course, that I pick him up where he did not perhaps mean fully the inference which I draw from the aesthetic rule he has recited so many times. It is rather as if Blackmur had deceived himself in his analysis of language when he defined the language of poetry as “gesture”; that would seem to be looking at the surface of the thing. (107)

Finally, Ransom adds, “I conclude with another objection associated with this one. I have not quoted the passages where Blackmur on behalf of poetry is discomfited when intruders with a haggard look break into the poem, take hold of the intellectual ideas, the faith, the principle of order, and bear them away to use in their own affairs. He is a little ungenerous in the name of poetry” (107-108). Ransom ends his essay with the question, “Is it not possible for the critic of poetry to forget that there are substantive as well as formal values in the poem?” (108). Should we as readers of Cummings not heed Ransom’s objections to Blackmur in his dismissal of aesthetic and formal values in Cummings’ poetry and instead agree with Blackmur that in Cummings’ language, “there is no inside, no realm of possibility, of essence” (D 16)?

In the following, I examine what Blackmur regards as “baby talk” in some of Cummings’ early poems, especially with the vocabulary “flower” in mind. These poems are part of nineteen collected under the section title, “Post Impressions,” in &[AND].<sup>10</sup> Thomas Selzer accepted six of them for Cummings’ first collection of poetry, *Tulips and Chimneys* in 1923. Cummings published the remaining thirteen post-impressions in & [AND]. For my purposes, the second poem, “riverly is a flower” (now the fourth poem

of Post Impressions, CP 106) and the third, “the wind is a Lady with” (CP 181), provide more than adequate response to Blackmur’s criticism as the word “flower” appears prominently in both poems. Both show Cummings’ concern for the visual impact of his verse. In Cummings’ early work, the presence of a poet and painter informs not only the titles of his poetry sections, “Impressions, Post-Impressions, and Portraits,” but also characterizes the poems. Gorham Munson says as much regarding Cummings’ felicity with language, using a painter’s eye and a writer’s ear: “That eye is keen in noting planes, angles, textures colors, the essential determining features: that ear is expert in reducing the visual booty to cadences” (8). The title “Post Impressions” suggests that the poems must be perceived as “eye/i poems.” Blackmur bypasses all of the section titles related to the new art and focuses only on vocabulary across the first four collections of poems. His semantic analysis, however, says nothing about the visual poetics expressed in Cummings’ own “Foreword” to his fourth collection of poems, *is 5*, or aesthetic argument in Cummings’ first publication, *The Enormous Room*.

The “Foreword” to *is 5* describes Cummings’ view of the role of a poet with an analogy: “Like the burlesk comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement.” He then adds, “If a poet is anybody, he is somebody to whom things made matter very little—somebody who is obsessed by Making” (CP 221). This poet-maker thus prefigures one of Kidder’s rules for readers of Cummings: “Pay attention to context. With Cummings, as with so many poets, meaning develops from relationships among poems, and the reader will do well to examine neighboring poems in deciding among possible interpretations” (14).

Kidder might have added that studying the visual and verbal context within a single poem is just as important as studying “neighboring poems.” To that end, I will first examine the poem, “riverly is a flower,” published in the “Post Impressions” section of & [AND] (1925). Blackmur dismisses the opening line as one of Cummings’ excessive and careless uses of the word “flower,” wanting in meaning (*D* 7-8). He is also unwilling to see the connection between Cummings’ “typographical peculiarities” and meaning: “extensive consideration of these peculiarities to-day has very little importance, carries almost no reference to the *meaning* of the poems” (*D* 5). Is Blackmur’s criticism justified? A careful examination of the word “flower” as it appears in some poems in “Post Impressions” in its linguistic, poetic, and new art context, and in its relation to other words (visually and verbally) and in the poem as a whole shows that Blackmur’s charges of the word’s “imprecision” in meaning and its “unintelligibility” (*D* 28) are unsupported.<sup>11</sup>

Although Kidder does not directly discuss this poem, his appreciation of Cummings' vocabulary in the context of its arrangement shows his disagreement with Blackmur. For example, in his reading of "theys sO alive" (*No Thanks* 43; CP 426), he demonstrates how Cummings "arranges words into a visual counterpart of the subject" (117). Kidder is not looking at the meaning of one word alone, but a poem-picture built by words. Blackmur's standard for vocabulary says as much, but he stops at the surface level when discussing Cummings' use of "flower." I contend that what Kidder concludes about "theys sO alive" could be concluded about "riverly is a flower."

riverly is a flower  
gone softly by tomb  
rosily gods whiten  
befall saith rain

anguish [5]  
and dream-send is  
hushed  
in

moan-loll where [10]  
night gathers  
morte carved smiles

cloud-gloss is at moon-cease  
soon  
verbal mist-flowers close  
ghosts on prowl gorge [15]

sly slim gods stare (CP 106)

To begin with, the image of "riverly is a flower" is reflected and refracted in the poem in multiple ways. For example, notice the 4-4-3-4-1 line pattern and the uneven length of the poem's run-on lines. Also, the alternate strong and weak stresses between two-syllable and one-syllable words are visually linked with wave-like curving at the end of each line if we read down the uneven right edge of words, (flower / tomb / whiten / rain and so on). In line one, we can hardly miss Cummings' unorthodox affixation of "riverly." Although we can dismiss "riverly" as baby talk (like "piggly" or "wiggly"), the unconventional affixation of -ly to "river" only compels Cummings' readers to wonder about the formation of this coined complex word. Subsequently, because of its proximity and complementary relationship to "flower," the word "riverly" directs our attention to a possible linguistic counterpart in "flower" and to its possible two-morpheme formation

yielding “flow-er.” With –er visually encoding a noun, we begin to see a greater precision of the word *flower*, visually flowing into a flower graphically, lexically, and morphologically. “Flower” thus achieves new meaning in its unbecoming and becoming like “riverly.” By foregrounding the a-grammatical suffix –ly in the first line, Cummings deepens the contrast between the visual appearance of the repeatedly used suffix –ly in the next two lines, “gone *softly* by tomb / *rosily* gods whiten” (lines 2-3, emphasis added) and the words’ ambivalent lexical-syntactical function. Furthermore, by inverting the syntax, Cummings generates a complex linguistic and visual metaphor, not just in the syntactic image of “riverly is a flower,” or “a flower is riverly,” but in a new complex term, “riverly flower.” What is a “riverly flower” then? We soon become aware that the “flowing” motion of “flower” in the form of “whitening gods” rolling softly over the tomb, illuminating the poem as a post-impressionist verbal painting of mist at dusk. The first stanza ends with “rain,” achieving the thematic unity of the flowing motion in the conceit of the “riverly flower/flow-er.” And Webster has noted that the adverbial emphasis of the suffix –ly on process allows us to see “rosily gods whiten” as a paradox with the golden sunset whitened by the mist. Harnessing the elements of language and syntax to set the poem in motion, Cummings’ opening line and deviant affixation not only resist reduction to literal “baby talk,” or lack of meaning, but convey exactly what Cummings perceives as “precision that makes movement.”

The next four lines in the second stanza achieve a new level of precision as Cummings ingeniously plays up linguistic overtones against the overall image of silencing to dramatize the immensity of the flowing / flowering mist. A mix of assonantal (“an-”) and consonantal (“-nd”) sound figures—“ang-,” to “and,” to “-end” in “**Anguish** / **and** dream-**send** is” (lines 5-6) amplifies the mixed *sonic* effect of rising mist in juxtaposition to the internal unquiet of the poet’s mind. We find the incongruous noun pair—“anguish” and “dream-send”—connoting opposite emotions and feelings, but treated as one entity subsumed and shushed in the next two lines, “hushed / in” (lines 7-8). The act of silencing signaled in the word “hushed” suggests an involuntary happening that is foreshadowed in the anxious mood “anguish” and in the “lolling” state of dreams at the beginning of the third stanza. With the sibilant “-sh” in “anguish” enfolded into “hushed,” Cummings unfolds a “sound picture” to connote the disappearing landscape under the mist. Like a verbal painting (self-reflected in line 14), one can feel the tension of the silencing mist, conveyed in the two shortened one-word lines, visually suspended in line 8 with Cummings’ use of increasing white space.

The tension is not understood until the unfolding of what is “hushed /

in” in the third stanza. With the image of “moan-loll” intruding upon the silencing act of the growing mist in line nine, a synaesthetic muffling suggests “anguish” and “dream-send” nonetheless defying imposed “hushing” and continuing to be felt. From “riverly is a flower” to “moan-loll,” Cummings’ post-impressionist poem enacts a drama that is both picturesque and sublime. The rain speaks rather biblically [“befall saith rain”], allowing Cummings to embed “be” in the falling. This line also forms a conceit for the mist dense like drizzle, a soft rainfall like “moan-loll.” Hostile criticism often attacks Cummings’ alleged sentimentality and lack of tragic vision. It is hard to justify such criticism in “riverly is a flower” when we encounter the developing mist and the enveloping night arriving as “night / gathers/ morte carved smiles” (lines 10-11). With the sound of rain through trees or “moan-loll” droning below, the eerie, almost gothic, feeling of mists with “morte carved smiles” looming over the gravestones like death-masks mocking life is foreshadowed in the second line as mists “softly gone by tomb.” Taking this post-impressionist poem to be a painterly conceit for the movement of encroaching mists and darkened night subsuming the world, I find that the repeated imagery of mists associated with the landscape of the dead not only articulates Cummings’ *tour de force* precision, but also demonstrates his capacity for tragedy.

When Blackmur accuses Cummings of “imprecise” vocabulary by over-using a word like “flower” and seldom saying *what* flower (*D* 10), he somehow misses the term “mist-flowers” in the same poem as a name for an actual flower (“mistflower” *The American Heritage Dictionary*). In the fourth stanza, Cummings acknowledges his verbal painting of “mist-flowers,” an intelligent pun on the clusters of clouds or mist as if the floating mist is a cluster of “mist-flowers.” Clearly, this transformation of the opening image of “a flower” into “mist-flowers” (line 14) now indeed fills the poem-canvas: “cloud-gloss is at moon-cease / soon / verbal mist-flowers close” (lines 12-14). Further, with the moon gradually obscured by the rising mist, visualized as the disappearing moon glossing the clouds, Cummings adds to the poem the sort of ambiguity and “intelligence” Blackmur and his adherents find lacking in Cummings’ verse. Will the moon be fully devoured? Will the night be forever dark? The complexity or ambiguity of the lines points to a double meaning. Taking up a not fully silenceable “moan-loll” in line 9, Cummings foretells the potential return of the moon and dreams in spite of the “morte carved” landscape that looming mists and a “moon-cease” night frighten.

However, Cummings does not end the poem with certainty or affirmation. In the open-ended concluding line of the one-line final stanza, “sly slim gods stare” (line 16), the alliterative sibilants dramatize the image of the engulfing mist in slow, quiet, and furtive motion of the sublime, god-

like figures (and perhaps the carved figures in the cemetery), watching over the disappearing landscape. Recalling the harsh alliteration-stressed predatory image of “ghosts . . . gorg[ing]” (line 15) in the previous line of the last stanza, along with alliterative counterparts of “ghosts” and “gods” across the white space, the closing line is held in suspended tension as a visual witness to a surreal and spectral presence of lingering mist. To add to his post-impressionistic verbal painting, Cummings crafts the spatial image of “river-ly is a flower” to express a flowing sensation with no punctuation. Where the poem ends, Cummings impresses on our mind’s eye unforgettable “mist-flowers” that flow.

Does Cummings want the reader to see and feel the actuality of nature’s or the world’s meaning beyond just one fact for one reality? Contrary to Blackmur, the word “flower” does not convey “imprecise” meaning if read closely through its placement in lines and in its word formation in relation to other language and poetic elements, including visual and verbal deviance. As Kidder instructs, meaning in Cummings’ poems resides in the “structure of his thought as it appears in the arrangement of his words” (“Introduction” 8). Indeed, Cummings never makes a poem that can be understood by the superficial appearance of his vocabulary. With tension established between light and darkness, motion and stasis, life and death, and between standard and deviant morphology in “riverly is a flower,” this poem embodies everything that Blackmur finds missing in Cummings’ poetry. The post-impressionistic effect in this poem is perhaps also dark enough to satisfy those critics who believe that Cummings lacks tragic vision.

Another of Cummings’ “painterly poems or poem-paintings” of post-impressionism is “the wind is a Lady with” (III), in which Cummings evokes “flowers” for visual-tactile “precision” as movement. The poem follows “riverly is a flower” in Cummings’ 1925 edition of & [AND] and is now the first poem in the first section, “A – Post Impressions,” in & [AND], a restored order that follows Cummings’ archetypal edition of *Tulips and Chimneys* and & [AND] published in 1937.

the wind is a Lady with  
bright slender eyes(who

moves)at sunset  
and who—touches—the  
hills without any reason

(i have spoken with this  
indubitable and green person “Are  
You the wind?” “Yes” “why do you touch flowers

as if they were unalive,as

if They were ideas?" "because,sir  
things which in my mind blossom will  
stumble beneath a clumsiest disguise,appear  
capable of fragility and indecision

—do not suppose these  
without any reason and otherwise  
roses and mountains  
different from the i am who wanders

imminently across the renewed world"  
to me said the)wind being A lady in a green  
dress,who;touches:the fields  
(at sunset)

(CP 181)

The poem describes the nature of the wind through the things it touches, where the wind, analogous to a lady, wakes flowers to aliveness. A parenthetical dialogue informs natural forces in its call and response. The first two-line stanza visually parallels the two "slender eyes," an image that is also visually reinforced by the alliterative *w* in the first line. The open parenthesis in line 2 evokes motion that is enhanced by the reader's eye moving across the white space of the line break through the radical enjambment of "(who//moves)" (lines 2-3). Repetition of "who" (lines 2, 4, 17), along with the word "wind" itself and other words beginning with "w," generates the impression of the motion of the wind—as in Cummings' often anthologized "what if a much of a which of a wind" (CP 560). Indeed, repeated alliterative /w/ and /wh/ words, linking the visual to the audial semi-vowel /w/ sound, incrementally creates the audial onomatopoeic impression of blowing wind (/who/... /who/ ... /who/). In the next stanza, two long dashes join the word "touches" with the preceding and following words, joining the tactile to the visual. Punning on "eyes(who" (line 2) and "i am who" (line 17) generates a sense of circular motion in a multi-dimensional poem; and the parenthetical closing line, "(at sunset)" (line 21) repeats line 3, "at sunset," reinforcing the cyclical pattern. In addition, the repetition of substance words—lady, at sunset, touches—along with the onomatopoeic "who," personifies the wind, which for Cummings ultimately becomes a metaphor for the poet and poem, who and which touches. The precision evident in Cummings' placement of repeated words and images creates motion, reinforcing the poem's theme. It unites the wind with what it touches. With the flowers swaying, the poem evidences the wind's increasing presence through stanzas that incrementally increase from two to three to four lines, renewing its touch like a green lady. It's not unlike a post-impressionist version of the atmosphere that we see in Claude Monet's im-



pressionist painting *Woman with a Parasol—Madame Monet and Her Son*.<sup>12</sup>

Personifying the wind as a lady touching flowers at sunset, the opening lines of the poem (“the wind is a Lady with / bright slender eyes(who // moves)at sunset” lines 1-3) also evoke an image of Lord Byron’s poem, “She Walks in Beauty”:

She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that’s best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:  
Thus mellowed to that tender light  
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies. (lines 1-6)

At first look, Cummings’ “wind” picture-poem may appear to resolve in a romantic image of nature. However, Cummings’ arrangement of words and stanzaic patterns, and his crafting images of renewal from “the lady” to “flowers” in a circular and reciprocal motion into a conceit for the wind “at sunset,” create more than a romantic or sentimental expression. In the poem’s or the wind’s movement, Cummings engages the reader in the act of constructing meaning to feel the precision of a vocabulary that cannot be taken literally as “baby talk.”

Perhaps we should examine one more poem featuring flowers and collected under “Post Impressions,” one that might have added to Blackmur’s disdain. In the eighth poem of this section, “suppose / Life is an old man carrying flowers on his head” (lines 1-2), Cummings refers to “flowers” not only at the beginning and the end of the poem, but also twice in the mid-section of the poem. Considering the poem in terms of post-impressionist painting, I find it extremely difficult to justify Blackmur’s “baby talk” assessment of Cummings’ poetic and painterly gift and craft in language and in poetry.

The poem paints a picture of *life*. As with the two previous poems about the moving *mist* and *wind*, Cummings here resorts to the same lexicon, “flowers,” to capture the motion of life: “Life is an old man carrying flowers on his head” (line 2), but in a different context: “flowers” in the natural setting in the two previous poems vs. “flowers” in a supposed city setting as they are carried on an old man’s head for buyers while he passes by a café (Rudolf Ernst’s painting of *The Flower Vendor*—without the orientalism—comes to mind). Among images of natural “flowers” and the lady Afterwards (line 22) who “likes flowers” (line 24), Cummings paints a stark contrast between a modern young Death unable to appreciate *life* by letting it go by and the old man holding himself on to *life*. Clichés or not, Blackmur did not seem to comprehend how Cummings’ structured multiva-

lent imagery of “flowers” functions as a token of life choice in this allegorical poem. Cummings’ “flowers” are not as identical as Blackmur assumes (*D* 14).

suppose  
Life is an old man carrying flowers on his head.

young death sits in a café  
smiling, a piece of money held between  
his thumb and first finger

(i say “will he buy flowers” to you  
and “Death is young  
life wears velour trousers  
life totters, life has a beard” i

say to you who are silent.—“Do you see  
Life? he is here and there,  
or that, or this  
or nothing or an old man 3 thirds  
asleep, on his head  
flowers, always crying  
to nobody something about les  
roses les bluets

yes,  
will He buy?

Les belles bottes—oh hear  
,pas chères”)

and my love slowly answered I think so. But  
I think I see someone else

there is a lady whose name is Afterwards  
she is sitting beside young death, is slender;  
likes flowers. (CP 189)

It is known that Post-Impressionist art came as a reaction to the Impressionists’ emphasis on the open air setting and interest in capturing a fleeting moment of the scene with light, color, and movement. Post-Impressionists searched for the elemental geometric form and inner and permanent quality of the material (not superficial but deeper sensation and emotion evoked by conceptual ordering that is not representational).<sup>13</sup> Thus imagery such as Cummings’ “flower” is conveyed through the essential word unadorned. Hayden Carruth, writing on direct style for poetry (“Notes on Metaphor” 1982), helps clarify further on natural language:

I wish [R. T.] Smith had written “soar” or “tilt” instead of “caper.” Caper is a word that carries human, emotional, and hence evaluative notations

and it cannot be properly objective. Pound would have used a more original word that was still true to the hawk's identity rather than to the poet's or reader's; or he would have used the plainest words he could find, giving them fullness of original meaning through his remarkable spontaneous strategies of syntax, tonality, and measure. (225).

If Blackmur had reviewed Cummings' vocabulary from a perspective of newness and originality and read one or two "flower" poems in actuality, he might well have reached a different verdict.

Not only is Blackmur's focus on Cummings' vocabulary critically over-determined, disregarding modernist aesthetics in its focus on form and structure of thought into feelings through "unadorned" images in words and typography, he misreads Cummings' intentions by lumping him into the Dadaist camp while misquoting the slogan ("Revolution of the Word") of a magazine that Cummings never submitted his poems to. In a Dadaist context, Blackmur's association of Cummings' experimental language with "baby talk" makes some sense, but his application constitutes a misinterpretation. Cummings is not a Dadaist in the sense of a complete rejection of meaning and the tradition; for him, his experiment seeks to make the tradition new, but Blackmur fails to discern these traits in Cummings, and even says as much: "Even a simple image must be fitted among other images, and conned with them, before it is understood. That is, it must take a form in language which is highly traditional and conventional. The genius of the poet is to make the convention apparently disappear into the use to which he puts it" (*D* 13). In other words, if we take "baby talk" as an artistic expression in the avant-garde context, the term paradoxically can be seen as a fitting description of the new poetry. This paper hopes to accomplish one purpose: to establish a more nuanced context for Blackmur's criticism of Cummings' language as "baby talk."

Finally, I want to leave the reader what I believe to be Cummings' own reply. In his next collection of poems *No Thanks* (his 1935 self-published book of poems and most experimental collection rejected by fourteen publishers), the form and content of poem 67 "come(all you mischief-" (CP 452) strike me as Cummings' best answer to the misleading characterization of his poetry as "baby talk." In this poem, Cummings composes a visually contrary pattern to reverse the "mean / -ness" of his hostile critics and detractors. In the first three stanzas, Cummings challenges the unworld to do its worst to destroy life: "all you // guilty/ scamper(you bastards throw dynamite)" (lines 4-5)—and to destroy art and meaning as well:

(life imitate gossip fear unlife  
mean

-ness,and  
to succeed in not  
dying) (lines 9-12)

Visually reversing the line indentation pattern in stanza four, Cummings announces that his “Is” (or lower case “i”) will continue to Be (“is will still occur” line 13) and that nature will continue to outlive “gossip” and “mean / -ness”:

Is will still occur;birds disappear  
becomingly:a thunderbolt compose poems  
not because harm symmetry  
earthquakes starfish(but  
because nobody  
can sell the Moon to The)moon (lines 13-20; CP 452)

It is ingenious for Cummings to associate unwarranted critical discharge with dynamite-throwing, which is associated here with “harm” and “earthquakes” while it is opposed to “symmetry” and “starfish” (lines 15-16). Or possibly, “harm symmetry” modifies “earthquakes,” and the word “starfish” can be seen as an intransitive verb describing the motion of earthquakes from the epicenter outward, so that Cummings connotes critics and publishers working in concert against him. However, in spite of the booming tremor hitting him like “a thunderbolt,” Cummings pursues his own poetic vision: “a thunderbolt compose[s] poems” (line 14). He remained true to himself and his poetry: “nobody /can sell the Moon to The) moon” (19-20), a line recalling the “life-flowers” carried on the old man’s head. Cummings confirms his confidence in himself as a poet and as an individual in his Feb. 9, 1953 reply to Ezra Pound’s January 30, 1953 letter to Marion Morehouse Cummings: “But re your ‘aint steerable’ tribute anent myself,I thank you heartily:& hope to prove worthy thereof ad in-fin.” (*Letters* 221).<sup>14</sup>

Carrying on his own Moon in *No Thanks*, Cummings reintroduces his artistic vision and precision by “daring” the unadorned word “flower” again at the end of poem 68 “be of love(a little)”, anticipating that the reader will “laugh” with him in “discovery” through such a plain, yet also meaningful thing, like a flower:

(Dare until a flower,  
understanding sizelessly sunlight  
Open what thousandth why and  
discover laughing) (lines 13-16 CP 453)

—University of Virginia’s College at Wise

## Notes

1. This paper was first presented at the 27th Annual American Literature Association Conference in San Francisco, May 25-29, 2016. My thanks to Michael Webster for his helpful commentary on my readings and for his careful attention to details and sources that have strengthened the paper.
2. Vendler's 1973 review, "Poetry: Ammons, Berryman, Cummings," is equally judgmental, seeing Cummings' verse as lacking depth and ambivalence, valuable only for its typographical play, satire, and occasionally clever first and last lines.
3. I thank Webster for his notes from Cummings' copy of Blackmur's essay with pencil markings over Blackmur's disapproving criticism. Here I cite Webster's comment on those markings: "EEC is very alive to the language that Blackmur uses to make his case. The circled words are often pointing to Blackmur's rhetoric of certainty, clarity, and traditional meaning. Often I get the feeling that the emotion that Blackmur sees as a fault is seen as quite positive for EEC" ["Notes in Books (Houghton)"].
4. John Logan questions Blackmur's dismissal of Cummings' typographical peculiarities and defends them in his review of Cummings' *Poems 1923-1954*: "The question is crucial to Cummings, for if it be true that typography is on principle always irrelevant to essential poetic then a large body of his work dearest to his and most interesting to us must fall. And this book will be the occasion of re-opening and examining the whole problem" ("Six of One" 356).
5. Blackmur indeed paid no attention to Cummings' structural distortion as innovation and deliberation. The structure of opposites privileged by new criticism was inexplicably not applied by new critic Blackmur to Cummings' poetry (Friedman, *(Re)Valuing* 73). Kennedy's biography *Dreams in the Mirror*, Milton Cohen's in-depth study of Cummings's aesthetics of early works as *Poet and Painter*, Richard Cureton's stylistic analysis of visual form in *No Thanks* in the 80s, Friedman's collections of essays in *(Re)Valuing Cummings* (1996), and Webster's study of Cummings' iconicity beyond futurism in the 1990s and numerous articles and blogs, followed by the publications in *Spring: the Journal of E. E. Cummings Society* in the last two decades, a collection of new essays in 2007 in *Words into Pictures*, and Webster's new critical entry on Cummings in David Chinitz' *A Companion to Modernist Poetry* (Blackwell 2014), Etienne Terblanche's *E. E. Cummings: Poetry and Ecology* (2012) and Aaron Moe's *Zoopoetics* (2015), along with

Alison Rosenblitt's *E.E. Cummings: Modernism and The Classics* (2016), have effectively refuted Blackmur's judgment of Cummings' language as "baby talk."

6. See Rebecca Beasley's "Brancusi and Utility" in her *Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism* (176-84).
7. Atkins provides a fuller context on "baby talk" and Dadaism in America: "Deliberate infantilism, or Dadaism, as it was called, had already swept like wildfire through the literary circles of Paris and Rome and Vienna and Berlin. Dadaism forbade a poet ever to carry an idea intact throughout a sentence; in fact, it was far better to start without any idea in the first place. Merely to do things with one's mouth was the intention; and there was a genuine conviction behind Dadaism that this was the way back to the irresponsibility and unjaded sensations of childhood and of primitive races. In 1920 Dadaism had scarcely reached America as yet, and on our shores it was never to attain the perfection of utter idiocy, but the impulse toward it was strong enough that the magazines were eagerly publishing the 'poems' of children of three or four years of age, and men of thirty were trying their best to emulate them. Wise old George Santayana looked on with a tolerant smile, speaking up once, however, to remind poets that savages are not rudimentary on purpose and that children are not aware that they are child-like. ... This refusal of children to show the road back to blissful infantile irrationality was crushing. Poets did not know what to do about it. Most of them took another drink and wrote a little more wildly and obscenely (*Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times* 69-70).
8. Dietmar Elger and Uta Grosenick eds., *Dadaism*, 16-17.
9. Blackmur's critical method conveyed through *The Double Agent* was both positively and negatively reviewed by Delmore Schwartz in 1938. According to Schwartz, "Blackmur uses his method upon many of the best contemporary writers of verse and the results are usually such that aspects of the text have been opened up, illuminated, and even augmented by the critic. But, this being said, one must also observe the serious abstraction, incompleteness, and omission involved in Blackmur's whole method" (28).
10. This 1925 edition of & [AND] is a self-published edition that Marianne Moore reviewed in *the Dial* (1926).
11. For Blackmur, Cummings' poetry is "unintelligible" because it "is written as if its substance were immediate and given," and thus results in "a distorted sensibility and a violent inner confusion. We have, if the poet follows his principles, something abstract, vague impermanent, and essentially private" (*D* 28). (Cummings underlines the phrases

- beginning with “distorted” and “abstract.”)
12. The painting is at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC and may be viewed here: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.61379.html>
  13. For discussions of post-impressionism, see Düchting, “Cézanne opts out: The Crisis of Impressionism,” Smith, “Cézanne and the Problem of Form,” and Brettell, “After Impressionism.”
  14. Interestingly, F.W. Dupee and George Stade, editors of *Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings*, speculate that “Blackstone” in quotation marks is a possible reference to Blackmur:

as for “a GOOD poEM”,our unhero modestly declines what Doubtless Thomas once pontifically entitled the gambit. Neither does “Blackstone” [R. P. Blackmur?] cause requisite thrills hereabouts;though he well may amid “the healthy young” (whoever they aren’t). But re your “aint steerable” tribute anent myself,I thank you heartily:& hope to prove worthy thereof ad infin. (221)

Webster pointed out Dupee and Stade’s error in identifying Blackstone as a possible reference to Blackmur (see Greg Barnhisel, “ ‘Hitch Your Wagon to a Star’: The Square Dollar Series and Ezra Pound”). The editors’ mistake, however, shows the pervasive influence of Blackmur’s rhetoric on Cummings criticism as late as the 60s. Cummings nonetheless took negative criticism in stride, something both Webster (e-mail June 7, 2021) and Kennedy have also acknowledged (452). For Pound’s letter and Cummings’ reply, see Barry Ahearn, ed., *Pound/Cummings: The Correspondence of Ezra Pound and E.E. Cummings* (338-339).

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