

2012

## Pursuing a Strategy of Fulfillment: Cummings' Erotic Language

Millie Kidd

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring\\_cummings](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring_cummings)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kidd, Millie (2012) "Pursuing a Strategy of Fulfillment: Cummings' Erotic Language," *Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*. Vol. 19: No. 1, Article 13.

Available at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring\\_cummings/vol19/iss1/13](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring_cummings/vol19/iss1/13)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## Pursuing a Strategy of Fulfillment: Cummings' Erotic Language

Millie Kidd

---

In his book, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, Alan Trachtenberg, referring to the nation's increasing dependence on commercialism, explains that "[a]s the domestic making of goods receded [in the late nineteenth century], city dwellers became more and more enmeshed in the market, more and more dependent on buying and selling . . . their labor in order to buy their sustenance, the network of personal relations, of family, friends, neighbors, comes to count for less in the maintenance of life than the impersonal transactions and abstract structures of the marketplace" (121). Trachtenberg also claims that new technology and forms of mass media and entertainment "began to erode direct physical experience in the world. Viewing and looking at representations and images, people began to see themselves as passive consumers of images and sensations produced by others" (122). Georg Simmel in "The Metropolis and Mental Life," refers to the shifting visual patterns in the city, such as "the constant flow of traffic and trolley cars, the appearance and disappearance of faces and bodies in one's view, and the ubiquitous presence of advertisements" as contributing to the individual's sense of distance, isolation, fragmentation, and depersonalization. To go a step further, it's a simple matter to see how these conditions would have a negative impact on human sexuality.

For many in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Cummings, America had become not only a consumer society where sexuality was reduced to little more than a product for consumption, but additionally, Americans were regarded as passive consumers of mass media and visual spectacle. Their viewing included not only the shifting scenes of the city itself but spectator sports, amusement parks, movies, and, of course, newspapers and magazines.

Trachtenberg notes that, ironically, while people turned to the daily news in an attempt to connect with the larger world, newspapers merely deepened the divide by presenting the world as a "spectacle for consumption" (125). He explains how the typographical form itself, that is, the columns on the page, isolate information and render it remote from the read-

ers' realm of experience. In doing so, the daily newspaper "deadens memory" and trivializes reality by making the world seem mundane and familiar and by placing readers in the role of "consumers" both of the paper's "reality" and its advertised goods (125). In short, the dailies "filtered experience into simple images" for readers to "see" so their experience of the world was artfully distanced and mediated through images and words (125).

Words and language have traditionally been considered separate from "actuality" and treated as simply instruments of reference or conveyance. At the same time, language has also been regarded as the special feature that marks the human mind as apart from and superior over all other species and, consequently, superior over the body—the feature that more closely allies us with the animals. With no great leap of the imagination, one can see how the emphasis on the mind and the abstract over the physical and the concrete would have the effect of distancing people from their own bodies. More recent theorists, however, have recommended that if the mind / body dichotomy is put aside, if language is recognized as material, and if we see ourselves as physical beings connected to one another by an equally physical materiality—language—then we are "no longer isolated minds relating to other isolated minds, but people relating to one another in a society" (Bleich 471).

Many modern writers employed what one critic calls "heightened" language (Lurie 75) and another calls "the play of language" (Matthews) as a response to the deadening, distancing effects of modernity and as a means to reconnect audiences to the sensual. In his book *The Play of Faulkner's Language*, John T. Matthews concludes that Faulkner's language seeks to compensate for a longing, lack, or desire (15). I believe that Cummings, too, pursues a strategy of fulfillment of desire through his use of language.

Because for him "feeling is first," Cummings' poems offer an eroticized contrast to the abstract while presenting a desire for genuine human relationships through intimacy and shared sexual enjoyment. The study of Cummings' language is certainly not a new idea: for about a century now, scholars have looked at Cummings' unique and original use of language as well as typographical, syntactical, and visual devices, so a full review of the scholarship here would be impossible.

My interest here is in exploring how Cummings' use of language in many of his poems moves the reader closer to an actual experience and an awareness of the physical world, the body, and the erotic. I want to show

how the aesthetic experience of reading Cummings' poems creates such demands on readers that we are constantly made aware of the material presence of the words themselves, their physicality, their "thinginess," as well as their semantic meaning and how these challenges lead us back to the actual world and the body.

For example, we are forced to grapple with the unusual letter spacing and punctuation of "i will be" (CP 195); yet the poem allows us to have an experience that partakes of the physical and the bodily.<sup>1</sup> Cummings uses the modern cityscape as a metaphor to communicate the speaker's anticipated meeting with his lover. The chaotic placement of lines and words on the page, the seemingly random use of capital letters and punctuation, the splitting and enjambment of words, and other typographical irregularities mimic the chaos of the modern city as well as the speaker's emotions:

i will be

M o ving in the Street of her

bodyfee l inga ro undMe the traffic of  
 lovely;muscles-sinke x p i r i n g S  
 uddenl

Y            totouch

the curevedship of

Her-

...kIss    her:hands

will play on,mE as

dea d tunes OR s-cra -py lea Ves flut te rin g  
 from Hideous trees or

Maybe Mandolins

l oo k-

pigeons fly ingand

whee(:are,SpRiN,k,LiNg an in-stant with sunLight  
 then)l-

ing all go BlacK wh-eel-ing

oh  
ver  
mYveRyIITle

street  
where  
you will come,

at twi li ght  
s(oon & there's  
a m oo  
)n. (CP 195)

The very first line, indented far to the right and starting with lower case “i,” forces the reader’s eyes to move across the white space, then back again to the left margin for the second line where “Moving” is broken apart; the line drops off abruptly into more white space, forcing our eyes to move back to the left again for the next line. We must continue this back and forth movement throughout the poem, speeding up and slowing down as the lines become longer or shorter, easier or more difficult to follow.

At every line we become aware first of the words themselves, apart from their semantic meaning and context. For instance, the three small words in the opening line gain emphasis and importance by their placement on the far right at what seems to be the end, rather than the beginning, of a line. Then our eyes travel slowly over the first word in the second line “Moving,” which is broken into three sections with “o” isolated from the rest of the word; the spaces in between suggest the motion of walking.

In the third line, a section of each of the words “body,” “feeling,” and “around” is broken off and grafted onto a section of the word following it so that the new hybrid is not immediately recognizable, making us aware of the uniqueness or “thingness” of these ordinary words. Furthermore, the lack of punctuation fuses together sentences so as to create both ambiguity and confusion—i.e., her body feeling around me, and feeling around me the traffic. But the “traffic” is that of “lovely muscles” (visualized in the semi-colon) that “sink expiring” to her anticipated touch. “Expiring” is stretched to reflect the physical movement of the muscles responding to sensual

touching, and the capital “S” at the end of the line startles both speaker and reader as the speaker imagines, evidently, the sudden excitement—indicated in capital “Y” of the sixth line which has been broken off from “suddenly”—of the touch of his lover’s hands interrupted by a kiss (as indicated by the ellipsis). The capital “I” suggests how the kiss boosts his self-esteem from the lower case “i” at the beginning.

In line 11, the image of “scrapy leaves fluttering” is visualized through the typography again, hyphens breaking up “scrapy” and “leaves” and “fluttering,” all visually fragmented by spaces. In line 14, “look” on a line by itself is split apart, the two “oo’s” becoming eyes and the hyphen after “k” pointing in the direction of the pigeons flying overhead. The white spaces before “Maybe Mandolins” indicate the speaker’s pausing to consider yet one more way to describe how the instrument of his body will sound under the playing hands of his mistress (like dead tunes, scrapy leaves fluttering, or mandolins) while the white space before “l oo k-” indicates the shift in attention to the pigeons flying overhead.

All of these strategies connect both reader and speaker to the physical (including physical words) and to the natural world. The speaker’s anticipation of meeting his lover climaxes in the lines beginning with the pigeons wheeling overhead. Critics have suggested that the typography SpRiN,k,LiNg visually mimics the effect of the pigeons as they fly through the sun’s rays. Additionally, when readers encounter the passage in parentheses that separate “wheeling,” we are expected to keep in mind both the wheeling of the pigeons and their effect on the sunlight. However, because of the physicality of the words themselves, we also experience the passage as a crescendo of passion reflected in “whee,” followed by the words of the next stanza that step down the page (oh / ver / mYveRyLitTle). This suggests the speaker’s slowing pulse rate, while all three lines of the next stanza are arranged even with the left margin, indicating a return to steady pulse as the speaker awaits both twilight and his love. The “o’s” in “soon” and “moon” in the last stanza mimic the shape of the moon, and the parenthesis before the “n” of the final “moon” on a line by itself seems to be a smile—the speaker smiling happily in anticipation.

In reading these lines, we are constantly aware of the material presence of the words, even the physicality of the individual letters and punctuations, as well as the semantic meaning of the lines. The city itself is simply a metaphor, and any excitement or life that it has comes from the language. Barry Marks feels that in this poem, Cummings celebrates the contempo-

rary city and that he “implies that human fulfillment, symbolized by fully satisfactory sex experience, depends on a responsive acceptance of modern life” (77). I disagree with this assessment, especially in view of the many other poems in which Cummings clearly critiques the dehumanizing forces of modern life, such as consumerism.

For example, in “she being Brand” (CP 246), Cummings combines the erotic with rollicking humor and irony to condemn the notion that sex and technology are both commodities to be treated in the same way. In another example, “whereas by dark really released, the modern” (CP 132), the lady described is sexually uninhibited at night when she is “by dark really released”—evidently from the strictures and conventions of modern society, as well as from the confining corsets and undergarments that impede her movement and conceal her sexuality:

whereas by dark really released, the modern  
flame of her indomitable body  
uses a careful fierceness. Her lips study  
my head gripping for a decision: burn  
the terrific fingers which grapple and joke  
on my passionate anatomy  
oh yes! Large legs pinch, toes choke—  
hair-thin strands of magic agony  
. . . . by day this lady in her limousine  
  
oozes in fashionable traffic, just  
a halfsmile (for society’s sweet sake)  
in the not too frail lips almost discussed;  
between her and ourselves a nearly-opaque  
perfume disinterestedly obscene. (CP 132)

In these moments of nighttime freedom, she becomes an oxymoron of “careful fierceness,” with a kind of primitive or uninhibited sexuality; her body is aflame and “indomitable.” The description of their passion reaches a climax in the “magic agony” of lines six and seven and the exclamation, “oh yes!” But the ellipsis beginning the last line of that stanza marks a shift in perspective. By day (which is most of the time), the lady slips back into the conventional, presumably sexless, proper lady playing the role assigned

by modern convention. In her limousine, the emblem of the detached elite commercial class, she seems to hold herself aloof from the very people—the “fashionable traffic”—of whom she presumably is one. She and her halfsmile (obviously a fake, like the fragrance of her perfume) are “disinterestedly obscene.” Cummings implies that the rules of conventionality (which he violates in this sonnet by attaching the first line of the sestet to the bottom of the octave) separate the individual from himself / herself. In the daylight world, the speaker’s individuality seems to be subsumed into “ourselves,” so the lady’s conversation takes place between her and herself! The sestet implies that the desire for the erotic and the sensual should be freed of convention and freely expressed, thereby transforming the dead and deadening daytime world of commerce and artificiality.

Cummings’ desire to revitalize the world with the erotic resulted in the perception by many that he was obsessed with sex. To some degree, the view may have been warranted, for he, not unlike other American writers after WWI, saw sexual freedom as way of attacking the establishment. However, as Barry Marks cautions, while Cummings scorned those who cannot give themselves sexually because of their preoccupation with social customs, he had no use either for those who indulge themselves without commitment (86). An example of this might be “twentyseven bums give a prostitute the once” (CP 130):

twentyseven bums give a prostitute the once  
-over. fiftythree(and one would see if it could)

eyes say the breasts look very good:  
firmlysquirmy with a slight jounce,

thirteen pants have a hunch

admit in threedimensional distress  
these hips were made for Horizontal Business  
(set on big legs nice to pinch

assiduously which justgraze  
each other). As the lady lazily struts  
(her  
thickish flesh superior to the genuine daze

of unmarketable excitation,

whose careless movements carefully scatter

pink propaganda of annihilation

(CP 130)

The men ogling the prostitute reduce her to body parts—breasts, hips, legs—and she, on the other hand, struts her stuff, aware of the “unmarketable excitation” she arouses in the men, whom she, too, dehumanizes as cash customers to be enticed by her marketable movements of “pink propaganda of annihilation.” The scene depicts the city as a marketplace for human flesh, where voyeuristic and objectifying behavior serves as a substitute for genuine erotic life.

This perspective of a depersonalizing market society that places greater and greater importance on the visual and the material serves as a useful framework for a discussion of Cummings’ work. Cummings’ penchant for writing about prostitutes and his fondness for burlesque and striptease are well known. His frequent attendance at the National Winter Garden in New York (see, for example, *i:six nonlectures*) provided ample material for his sketches and poems depicting striptease artists. The dancers he enjoyed most, like Sally Rand, were frankly proud of their bodies and their sexuality. The wild comedy and irony around both burlesque and striptease emphasize the fundamental indecency not so much of burlesque but of the censures of modern life that place prohibitions on natural human behavior. In “out of a supermetamathical subpreincestures” (CP 425), the portrait of Sally Rand is contrasted with the abstract (supermetamathical subpreincestures) and with passive mass media spectacles (i.e., “canned” music of Rudy Vallee; movies; radio), which are found lacking because they, unlike Sally, have no physicality, no bodily reality:

out of a supermetamathical subpreincestures  
pooped universe(of croons canned  
à la vallee and preserved goldfishian gestures)  
suddenly sally rand

handsomely who did because she could what the movies try  
to do because they can’t i mean move  
yes sir she jes was which the radio aint (proof

-ing that the quickness of the fand intrigues the fly)

for know all men(χαίρετε)

as it was in the beginning it(rejoice)

was and ever shall be nor every partialness beats one entirety

neither may shadow down flesh neither may vibration create voice

if therefore among foul pains appears an if emerges a joy let

's thank indecent

god p.s. the most successful b.o.fully speaking concession at the recent

world's fair was the paytoilet

Sally, with her sensual moves and “jes was which the radio aint,” offers an eroticized foil to the cerebral abstractions of science or pseudoscience, and the flattened (“pooped universe”) media attempts at the erotic (“movies try to do because they can’t”) serve only to remove viewers even further from first-hand sexual reality.

The poem “sh estiff” (CP 444) serves as another example where the reader has one kind of visual experience while another is being described. Some critics (e.g., Marks 82-83) feel that in this poem, Cummings is drawing a distinction between stripteasers like Sally Rand, whose performance is artistic, and others who are merely obscene:

sh estiff

ystrut sal

lif san

dbut sth

epoutin(gWh.ono:w

s li psh ergo

wnd ow n,

r

Eve

aling 2 a

-sprout eyelands)sin

uously&them&twi

tching,begins

unununun?

butbutbut??

tonton??

ing????

-Out-&

steps;which

flipchucking

.grIns

gRiNdS

d is app ea r in gly

eyes grip live loop croon mime

nakedly hurl asquirm the

dip&giveswoop&swoon&ingly

seethe firm swirl hips whirling climb to

GIVE

(yoursmine mineyours yoursmine

!

i()t)

(CP 444)

However, I think that, while the striptease described here is whimsically perverse, Cummings presents it in a style that is difficult but pleasurable *because* of the sensuality and the difficulty. Such a return to the bodily and the sensual that this poem provided made reading a more powerful and even a more intimate occasion than many readers were able to find in their daily lives. In his visual art, too, Cummings often, especially in his early works, distorts objects, submerges faces, figures, and objects into a design, and breaks apart the human body in ways that require the viewer to reassemble them into a coherent image that we can recognize. In poems like this one, he fractures conventional arrangements of stanzas, lines, and words into smaller units and combines them in new ways. Thus, the language makes it difficult for us to “see” the events being described or follow the thoughts being expressed, but we are constantly aware of the material

presence of the words, and we are actively engaged in their movement and sensuality. Eroticism and desire exist not so much in the spectacle but in the writing itself. To echo Peter Lurie in his essay on Faulkner and the sexualized city, “In the context of modernity that made greater and greater demands of abstraction, calculation, and reason, such a return to the body and the senses can make reading [Cummings] a more powerful and an even intimate occasion” (90).

—Mount St. Mary’s College, Los Angeles, CA

## Notes

1. I am grateful to Michael Webster for pointing out the errata in the 1994 *Complete Poems* in this poem and in “she estiff” below. Please refer to “Notes on Cummings” <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/notes.htm>.

## Works Cited

- Bleich, David. “Materiality, Genre, and Language Use: Introduction.” *College English*, 67.5 (May 2003): 469-75.
- Cummings, E. E. *Complete Poems 1904-1962*. Ed. George Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1991.
- Cummings, E. E. *i: six nonlectures*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981.
- Lurie, Peter. “Faulkner’s Sexualized City: Modernism, Commerce, and the (Textual) Body.” *Faulkner’s Sexualities: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 2007*. Ed. Annette Trefzer and Ann Abadie. Jackson: U of Mississippi Press, 2010. 73-93.
- Marks, Barry. *E. E. Cummings*. New York: Twayne, 1964.
- Matthews, John T. *The Play of Faulkner’s Language*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982.
- Simmel, Georg. “The Metropolis and Mental Life.” *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Trans. and ed. Kurt Wolff. New York: Free Press, 1964. 409-418.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.