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Review of Isabelle Alfandary, *E. E. Cummings, ou la minuscule lyrique*. Paris: Belin, 2002. 128 pp.

Michael Webster

This book states its thesis clearly: Cummings' poetry is "ce qui arrive"—that which happens. What happens occurs to poet, poem, and reader, through the medium of poetic utterance. Alfandary writes that what happens is

. . . ce qui arrive sur la page d'un livre, dans la langue américaine, ce qui arrive à la typographie, à la grammaire, ce qui arrive au vers, entre les blancs, à la voix, dans le silence alentour. Il est ce qui arrive à un lecteur, quelle que puisse être son érudition, qui balaye d'abord son savoir-faire, invalide son savoir, le prenant par défaut, l'interdisent, la laissant parfois sans voix. (11)

. . . what happens on the page of a book, in the American language, what happens to typography, to grammar, what happens to a line, to the white spaces, and to the voice in the surrounding silence. It is what happens to a reader, whatever his education may be, that first sweeps away his self-possession and then cripples his knowledge, finding it at fault, confounding it, leaving it at times without voice.

Of course, the cryptic indications in this passage are amplified later in the book. For example, Alfandary explains "what happens" as the accidents of language that Cummings re-engineers to great visual, verbal, and grammatical effect in his poetry. These "finds" of language, as "as minimal as they are singular," are symbolized in Cummings by the *minuscule*, or lower case letters, which "operate in the sub-basements of writing" and yet "give the poetry of E. E. Cummings its letters of nobility" (12, 13).

Alfandary shows how Cummings shapes and reshapes letters, blank spaces, punctuation marks, grammar—even the "voice" stamped in the letters—into elements of poetry and meaning that often function to check or stop the reader, forcing a slowing or delaying of recognition (32). Cummings' techniques "de-figure the sign to the point of rendering it unreadable," delaying recognition because recognition puts an end to emotion (32). So the reader of a Cummings poem must "unlearn how to read, un-

make the conventional reading reflexes” and thus unite sense and sensation (33). One might say that Cummings forces the reader to attend as never before to elements of reading and of the printed page that normally go unremarked and unseen. When read properly, the poem forces upon the reader an event, a happening, a series of sensations, and even a new way of speaking—a voice that sometimes is the singing of silence.

Though she occasionally interprets complete poems, Alfandary most often prefers to quote two or three lines and then characterize aspects of Cummings’ poetry as a whole. These characterizations offer good directions for further interpretation and excellent food for thought. For example, she points out that though Cummings’ writing is “of the self, [it is] a writing of the event of a singular but not personal self” (50). The taste for elegant abstraction shown here (and elsewhere throughout the book) is a mark of admirable condensation. This is a book packed with suggestive ideas: Alfandary has reduced her two-volume doctoral dissertation to a readable, if dense, introductory volume of 128 pages.

Cummings’ self is implicated in the *minuscule* of the author’s title, which refers to the poet’s preference for small forms, his economy of means, his liking for small things, his “small eye” persona, and to his lower case proclivities. (In French, *minuscule* can mean, as a noun, “lower case letters” and, as an adjective, “small, minute.”) For example, in chapter three, *Du poème comme événement* [“The poem as event”], in a section called “Devenir intraduisible” [“Becoming untranslatable”], Alfandary offers an insightful new perspective on the contrast between Cummings’ use of the lower case “i” in his poetry and his usual practice of signing his name in capitals:

Ce dont chaque lecteur prend acte est de la signature poétique qui constitue cette entorse à la grammaire anglais. La minuscule est une signature poétique et non biographique. Elle ne signe nullement le nom propre du poète mais le pronom de la première personne du sujet des poèmes. La différence est de taille : loin de vouloir faire de son nom propre un nom commun en le minorant typographiquement, E. E. Cummings entend tout au contraire signer le pronom commun d’un sceau singulier. Par un moyen oblique, le poète s’approprie la langue plutôt que de chercher à s’y fondre. (59-60)

Every reader notices this twisting of English grammar that constitutes Cummings’ poetic signature. The *minuscule*, the lowercase, is a poetic signature, not a biographical one. It

signs not the proper name of the poet but the first-person pronoun of the subject of the poems. The difference is one of proportion: far from wanting his proper name to become a common noun, in his typographic minoring, E. E. Cummings intends quite the contrary: to sign the common pronoun with a singular seal. By oblique means, the poet appropriates language to himself rather than seeking to merge with it.

Elsewhere Alfandary explores how Cummings uses the lower case “i” as an indication of the lyric voice and as an implicit rebuke of the grand lyric “I” of the English Romantic poets (36, 115). She notes that the lower case “i” is also a diminished yet rebellious and “no less egocentric” continuation of the American poetic tradition: Cummings’ oeuvre constitutes “a *Song of Myself* in a minor mode” (115-116). Incorporating his own individuality into his poetic language is one method of “becoming untranslatable.” This section title in chapter three comes from a passage in *EIMI*: “implacably negative definition of poetry equals: whatever cannot be translated!” (140/137-38). Poetry cannot be translated into other languages, nor can it be translated into paraphrase or interpretation. A poem remains itself, a living being that partakes of the living individuality of its creator.

However, even though Cummings “gives the impression of speaking an [untranslatable] foreign tongue,” he nevertheless at the same time is “speaking American” (61). This is not, Alfandary says, “making a private use of the mother tongue” but rather, following the theories of Gilles Deleuze, inventing “a *minor use* of the major language” and expressing oneself “entirely” through this “*minor* usage of the language” (Deleuze 109; Alfandary 61). The analogy with musical modes is somewhat inexact: though there are a limited number of musical modes, for Deleuze, language has as many minor modes as there are ingenious authors to discover and explore them. On the other hand, Deleuze’s analogy cleverly balances the roles of author and language in creating a work of art. Writers express themselves entirely, but only in a different, minor mode of the same language common to all. Alfandary follows Deleuze by emphasizing that Cummings’ language is not private because ultimately it is not foreign to the reader—the poem speaks only a kind of *as if* foreign language. But again, there is a balance between private and public here: if Cummings’ language use is not private or foreign, it is certainly sometimes quite idiosyncratic.

Clearly for Alfandary, Cummings’ *minuscule* rebellion functions mainly at the level of language, and it is here that she brings to bear her

training in French structuralist and post-structuralist theory. Cummings' minimalist poems make the present happen not through representation but by presenting linguistic events that enact in language the leap of a grasshopper or the fall of a leaf (50-51). Likewise, though he probably did not read the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, nevertheless Cummings enacts in his poems a confrontation between the spoken and written language (70-71). Again, Alfandary's notion that language games make Cummings' poems almost "unreadable" stems from the writings of Roland Barthes. These theoretical perspectives often result in startling and intriguing insights. For example, Gilles Deleuze's idea that "the event is not what happens (the accident)," but rather it is *within* the "what happens" that we find "the pure expression that signals to us and awaits us" (72). In a similar way Cummings encodes "what happens" in the "events" that are his poems. His "untiring work of rewriting" thus does not deny spontaneity, but rather "aims to capture the untamable contingency of sense" or at least "to experiment with the conditions of its [sense's] apparition" (72). For the reader this means that "it is not possible to seize All the sense [of the poem] in one movement"—but that is because "All the sense doesn't exist" (76).

If the reader of this review finds these thoughts somewhat abstract, I can only agree. However, the insights that Alfandary offers are often worth the heavy intellectual lifting one must perform to appreciate them. On the other hand, sometimes these theoretical perspectives render her interpretations less flexible than might be wished. For example, because she sees Cummings' abstract and cut up words as examples of an "unchained signifier, . . . almost let loose from the signified" ["un signifiant déchaîné . . . presque délié du signifié"] (57), she is inclined to agree with R. P. Blackmur's notion that Cummings sometimes uses words with imprecise and unstable meanings (58; cf. Blackmur 110-112, 116-119). But how much one agrees or disagrees with Blackmur depends on which words one is talking about and in which specific contexts they occur.

Blackmur infamously tarred Cummings "for using familiar, even almost dead words, in such a context as to make them suddenly impervious to every ordinary sense" (116). Blackmur gives examples like "the bigness of cannon is *skilful*" and "enormous rhythm of *absurdity*" (116), and Alfandary seems to agree with him when she says later that Cummings' diction avoids sophistication, employing common words like "moon," "spring," "eyes," "hands," "love," "life," "death," and "time" (89). However, Alfandary's agreement goes only so far: while Blackmur recoils in horror at the

fluidity of meanings, Alfandary rejoices in the freeing of the signifier. As we have seen, she also disagrees with Blackmur when he says that Cummings' language is often too much a prisoner of his "private mind, . . . unknowable, impenetrable, and sentimental" (123). In contrast, Alfandary asserts that Cummings' "language is not a private language, defiant though it may be of the rules of English" (88). These sorts of arguments may need to be kept from becoming abstract semantic debates: as we noted above, sometimes it is difficult to see the difference between a "private" or "idiosyncratic" language use. To remain on this level of generality settles nothing. One can only judge Cummings' language use by looking at each individual word in the contexts of the individual poem and of Cummings' work as a whole.

For example, sometimes simple words like "is," "actual," and "dream" are inflected with idiosyncratic personal meanings; and sometimes these words take on even more specific meanings in certain poems. I believe that most often Cummings' signifiers are more precise than either Blackmur or Alfandary will allow. A word like "is" can move from poem to poem, accreting new inflections of meaning in each poem. Take for example, the capitalized use of the word "IS" in the last line of the sonnet "does yesterday's perfection seem not quite" (CP 414). This poem circles around the feeling of failure of a poet who is dissatisfied with previous work. The poet decides that even if only "eternal mere one bursting soul" "likes it," then men will be at peace and "a man [the poet or his one reader] shall [be or try] which a god sometimes is." And what is that? The poet answers—a slumping failure of an "is" who is nevertheless made upright and alive by language: "I the lost shoulders, S the empty spine." Here, Cummings calls attention to the "IS" inherent in every human, no matter what the failure. The capital I functions on its own, rhyming visually with the slumping shoulders, indicating the hidden yet latent ego, and perhaps signaling a big collective failure of an I, at odds with the lower-case i persona of the poet, who is satisfied after all to touch only one soul. The multivalent sign "IS" (as Norman Friedman says in a slightly different context) "opens out the implications faster than it closes them up" (55).

This interpretation is not far off from Alfandary's idea that Cummings' language "skids" or "slides," forcing the reader to "face what happens, unable to escape his/her interpretive responsibilities" (101, 102). However, no matter how open and tolerant any theory may be of language as a shifting system of differences with no fixed meanings, a theoretical system can only

iron out some of the multi-dimensional language of the poem. Whenever Alfandary makes abstract or categorical statements, she is in danger of ironing out a bit of the poem's complexity. For example, when she says that "poetry, for Cummings, is in grammar, not in the evocative power of words, [it is] in the movement of the verb, not in the stasis of the noun" (89), she hits upon an almost-truth that could be challenged by finding any number of evocative nouns in Cummings' oeuvre. After all, even the most advanced theory can be reductive. That is why it is best (from an Anglo-American viewpoint at least) to approach Cummings' poetry at the granular level of the individual poem where theory is simply one more perspective that serves interpretation. When approaching the poem from below, rather than capping the theory on top, Alfandary's book shines. For example, here is the beginning of her analysis of the lines "l / oo / k" (CP 610): "A pair of eyes, revealed by means of a line break, fixedly contemplate the reader, who does not believe his own eyes The letters seem to address the reader, not without out provocation, with a wink of an eye. As for the poet, he is no doubt quite content with the trick he's played upon the reader in literally opening his/her eyes" (38).

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