

2004

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### Recommended Citation

Grumman, Bob (2004) "The Importance of Technical Innovation in the Poetic Maturation of Cummings," *Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*. Vol. 13, Article 11.

Available at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring\\_cummings/vol13/iss1/11](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring_cummings/vol13/iss1/11)

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## The Importance of Technical Innovation in the Poetic Maturation of Cummings

Bob Grumman

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When I began, this paper was only a vague jumble of as-yet-unwritten impressions. I was pretty certain, however, that I wanted to show how Cummings' technical innovations multiplied and improved as he grew older, and how his poetry—as a result—*matured*. I was reacting against a standard criticism often voiced of Cummings that he did not significantly grow as a poet.

His famous “in Just-” represented, for me, the first—and finest—of his earliest forays away from convention. My favorite poem of his, “(feæ,” I considered representative of his final phase, and indicative of his use of innovative techniques at its best. It appeared in *Xaipe*, 1950, twenty-seven years after “in Just-” appeared in his first collection, *Tulips and Chimneys*. In between “in Just-” and “(feæ” were many admirable poems at various levels of innovation that demonstrated a gradual evolution from the former to the latter.

Or so I thought. In carefully going through Cummings' poetry chronologically, I discovered to my dismay that he had come up with just about all his major technical innovations by his early thirties and did not seem to improve his use of them after he was forty or so. An evolution was certainly apparent, but not a lifelong one. And, while he *did* compose many of his best poems toward the end of his life, he also composed many of them when middle-aged, and younger. This is in no way a criticism of him. Indeed, it seems to me that the main reason he did not “mature” as a poet was that he reached the kind of peak by the age of thirty or so that others—Wallace Stevens, say—did not reach until they were fifty, and had little room for further development. His failure to “mature,” though, *did* mess up my conception of what this paper would do. What could I now write to support its title? After some thought, I decided I would report on the evolution of his techniques anyway, however brief that evolution may have been.

I consider Cummings to have been a major inventor or perfecter of three highly effective, broadly-useful poetic devices. None of these is yet a part of the working equipment of any established poet, but they have been enthusiastically taken up, often without acknowledgement, by the majority of those composing what I call “burstnorm poetry.”

The most overt of these devices is what I call the “visiophor.” It consists of words or letters arranged on the page in such a way as to form an implicit metaphor for what the words involved denote. Cummings' having “a falling leaf” printed down instead of across the page in the first poem of his *95 Poems* of 1958 is a much-

cited example of this. I consider Guillaume Apollinaire the modern inventor of this device, although George Herbert and poets before Herbert used it as well, including, I've been told, certain ancient Egyptians. Cummings was the first full-scale exploiter of "visiophoration" and probably originated more kinds of visiophors than anyone since.

Then there is his (forgive me) "transgrammaticism," or aggressive re-assignment of parts of speech. A famous example is the first line of the twentieth poem of *1 X 1*, "what if a much of a which of a wind," where an adjective and a pronoun are treated as though they were nouns. Other poets had done this, but not methodically or with centrally expressive motives, the way Cummings did. The language poets owe much to this sort of Cummings' sabotage of grammar, but he is just about never named as one of their predecessors, probably because he did it for aesthetic rather than political reasons.

The third of the devices Cummings invented or pioneered is what I call the "infravisation," to stand for any infraverbal poetic device. By "infraverbal," I mean something having to do with elements smaller than words—that is, with letters and punctuation marks and related symbols, as in Cummings' famous grasshopper poem; but his oeuvre teems with other examples of split, fused, or otherwise revitalizingly recast words. And it is to that oeuvre that I will now turn, starting with "in Just-."

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

whistles far and wee

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

when the world is puddle-wonderful

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

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's  
spring  
and  
the

goat-footed

balloonMan      whistles  
far  
and  
wee

(CP 27)

Written when Cummings was in his twenties, this poem employs quite a few burstnorm devices, though relatively simple ones, such as opening up spaces between words to break up sentences. Later, he would put spaces between the syllables of words, or the letters of syllables. The spaces between “spring” and “when” in the poem’s second line, and between “balloonMan” and “whistles” in the fourth-from-last line seem placed there only to slow the reading. The splitting of “Just-spring” and “mud-luscious” at their hyphens hardly does even that. The spaces he uses with “far and wee” do more, though, metaphorically suggesting a slowly fading whistle.

The poem contains two fusional infravisations, “eddieandbill” and “betty-andisbel,” which have great vitality, enacting, as they do, the happy hurry of the pairs of children. Betty and Isabel, in fact, are racing faster than Isabel’s name can be spelled. They are clearly visiophors as well as infravisations. Two other infravisations also occur in the poem, both of them out-of-place capitalizations: the “J” of “Just-” and the “M” in “balloonMan.” Neither seems to me major, although the “M” does a nice job metaphorically emphasizing the balloonman’s growth in stature by the end of the poem. Cummings’ lineation in this poem is adventurous for its time but not so different for me to classify it as innovative.

The next specimen, “inthe,exquisite;” is from *e<sup>s</sup> [AND]*, Cummings’ second collection of poetry, published two years after his first:

inthe,exquisite;

morning sure lyHer eye s exactly sit,ata little roundtable  
among otherlittle roundtables Her,eyes count slow(ly

obstre peroustimidi ties surElyfl)oa t iNg,the

of pieces ofof sunligh tof fa ll l in gof throughof treesOf.

(Fields Elysian

the like, a) sLEEPing neck a breathing a ,lies  
(slo wlythe wom an pa)ris her  
flesh:wakes  
in little streets

while exactly gir lisHlegs;play;ing;nake;D  
and

chairs wait under the trees

Fields slowly Elysian in  
a firm cool-Ness taxis, s.QuirM

and, b etw ee nch air st ott er s thesillyold  
WomanSellingBalloonS

In the ex qui site

morning,  
her sureLy eye s sit-ex actly her sits at a surely little,  
round table among other; little exactly round. tables,

Her

.eyes

(CP 87)

This poem is of interest, beyond its value as a poem, for the number and variety of infravisations it contains. Three words shoved together with a comma inside comprise its first line. Since the line describes a morning, I take it to be a visiophor for the compression night effects and consider much of the rest of the poem's infravisations to indicate the piecemeal expansion of the morning. There is almost too much otherwise going on in the poem due to infravisations to keep up with. Among the highlights are "iNg, the," an anagram for "night," metaphorically still faintly present, in a form we would probably miss if the "N" weren't emphasized; the "disconcealment" of a "porous" from "obstreperous" to capture the limpidity of the girl's eyes in the poem (leaving "obstre" off by itself, conveying—for me—a vaguely foreign (perhaps French?) tone, as well, of course, as obscurity); the physical squirm of "s.QuirM"; and "Her .eyes," before the vitality of which we are brought to a full stop.

In this poem, too, Cummings uses trans-grammaticism in a significant manner for what may be the first time (for him) when in line five he types "of" seven times,

once after every other word in the line. I take its intent to be emphasizing possession—the morning’s sunlight *surely* possessing the world—to use a second word Cummings uses in the poem more than once, and ungrammatically, as in the “surely eye” of line 20.

Two poems from Cummings’ *ViVa [W]* (1931) show advances in the use of parentheses. First, “,mean-”:

,mean-  
hum  
a)now  
  
(nit  
y unb  
uria  
  
ble fore(hurry  
into  
heads are  
legs think wrists  
  
argue )short(eyes do  
bang hands angle  
scoot bulbs marry a become)  
ened  
(to is  
  
seelso  
long door  
golf slam bridge train shriek  
chewing whistles hugest  
to  
morrow from smiles sin  
  
k  
ingly ele  
vator glide pinn  
)pu(  
acle to  
  
rubber)tres(plants how grin  
ho)cen(tel  
und  
ead the

not stroll  
living spawn imitate)ce(re  
peat

credo fais do  
do neighbours re babies

while: (CP 311)

This poem represents quite a large jump in Cummings' use of parentheses. For what seems to have been the first time, he puts parentheses *inside* words, in this case, the words, "humanity" and "putrescence." At the same time, he uses multiple parentheses to weave one unified text through another, to wit: "humanity unburiable foreshortened putrescence" through "now hurry into heads are legs think wrists argue eyes do bang hands angle scoot bulbs marry a become to is seelso long door golf slam bridge train shriek chewing whistles hugest tomorrow from smiles sinkinglly elevator glide pinnacle to rubber plants how grin hotel undead the not stroll living spawn imitate repeat credo fais do do neighbors re babies"—all in between “,mean-” and “while:”. A few of his characteristic transgrammaticisms are here, too: “become” and “is” as nouns, and of course some weird syntax.<sup>1</sup>

Easier to like is “n(o)w,” which celebrates spring rain.

n(o)w

the  
how  
dis(appeared cleverly)world

is Slapped:with;liGhtninG  
!

at  
which(shal)pounceupcrackw(ill)jumps

of  
THuNdeRB  
loSSo!M iN  
-visiblya mongban(gedfrag-  
ment ssky?wha tm)eani ngl(essNessUn  
rolli)ngl yS troll s(who leO v erd)oma insCol

Lide.lhigh  
           n , o ; w :  
                           theraIncomIng  
  
 o all the roofs roar  
                           drownInsound(  
 &  
 (we(are like)dead  
                           )Whoshout(Ghost)atOne(voiceless)O  
 ther or im)  
       pos  
       sib(ly as  
       leep)  
           But llook—  
                           s  
  
 U  
  
           n:starT birDs(IEAp)Openi ng  
 t hing ; s(  
 —sing  
           )all are aLL(cry all See)o(ver All)Th(e grEEEn  
  
 ?earth)N,ew  
   (CP 348)

The poem begins with another set of parentheses inside a word. Among the many infravisations to note here is the half-rhyme of the final word, “N,ew,” with the first word, “n(o)w”—which underscores the change the earth has undergone, from a place where the “o” in “n(o)w” represents a “dis(appeared cleverly) world,” to the revelation of an earth that’s “N,ew,” a capitalized word with a pause extending it, and a free vowel in the middle. The many out-of-place capitalizations strike me as more effective than previous ones, although picked more for what they do visually than infraverbally. Exceptions to this are “n(o)w”/”N,ew,” the disconcealment of “troll” from “strolls” and of “DEA,” or “goddess” from “birDs(IEAp).” Here our reading of the spellings enlarges our experience of the poem more than our simply seeing them does.<sup>2</sup>

To my mind, the best collection of Cummings’ poetry before *Poems 1923-1954* was the much-rejected *No Thanks* of 1935. It starts with the lovely “mOOOn Over tOwNs mOOOn,” one of Cummings’ purest lyrics:

          mOOOn Over tOwNs mOOOn  
           whisper



less creature huge grO  
pingness

whO perfectly whO  
fOat  
newly alOne is  
dreamest

oNLY THE MooN o  
VER ToWNS  
SLoWLY SPRoUTING SPIR  
IT

(CP 383)

Here, out-of-place capitalization is used to heighten metaphorical effect rather than just to break the flow, startle, emphasize, or reveal resonant inner words and fragments of words. The result, in my tentative reading, is a picture of the moon and its reflection, which the moon leaves to become “newly alOne” in the process becoming—and here we have another characteristic Cummings transgrammaticism—“dreamest,” a noun treated as though it were the comparative form of an adjective. By then, the moon, previously dominating the town it floats above, is in turn submerged and dominated by the spirit of the town, awakened and growing organically upward around and beyond the moon.

Poem 9 of *No Thanks* satirizes a modern made-for-media event:

o pr  
gress verily thou art m  
mentous superc  
lossal hyperpr  
digious etc i kn  
w & if you d

n’t why g  
to yonder s  
called newsreel s  
called theatre & with your  
wn eyes beh

ld The  
(The president The  
president of The president  
of the The)president of

the(united The president of the  
united states The president of the united  
states of The President Of The)United States

Of America unde negant redire quemquam supp  
sedly thr  
w  
i  
n  
g  
a  
b  
aseball (CP 392)

The wonderful ad hoc invention of the absent “o” becomes clearly iconic when we realize it is a visiophor for a thrown baseball. What at first may seem like one of Cummings’ trivial sneers at politicians may be seen as more substantial when we take into account his larger comment on the deadness of mediated pseudo-events.

The rest of the poems I’ve taken from *No Thanks* are all purely lyrical. The first, “SNOW” (CP 421), uses most of the kinds of infravisations already discussed but includes such fresh ones as “BYS FLUTTERFULLY IF” and “(endbegi ndesginb ecend),” which are, respectively, a scrambling of “butterflies fully if” (slightly misspelled) and “[desc]nd begin descend begin.” These may be his earliest microherent infravisations, or words rendered nearly incoherent for poetic effect. Despite Cummings’ reputation for obscurity, he rarely used the device, and when he did, it was for metaphorical purposes, as in his famous leaping grasshopper poem. The two here are visiophors for the visual tricks of snowflakes changing direction and form. Also of technical interest in this poem are the transgrammaticisms, of “BYS,” “WITHS,” “AGAINS” and “AMONGS,” an adverb and three prepositions used as nouns, and serving as appositives for “SNOW.”

SNOW  
  
cru  
is  
ingw Hi  
sperf  
ul  
lydesc  
  
BYS FLUTTERFULLY IF

(endbegi ndesginb ecend)tang  
lesp  
    ang  
le  
    s  
    ofC omeg o

CRINGE WITHS

lilt(  
    -ing-  
    lyful  
of!)  
    (s  
r

BIRDS BECAUSE AGAINS

emarkable  
    s)h?  
    y&a  
    (from n  
o(into whe)re f  
    ind)  
nd  
    ArE

GLIB SCARCELYEST AMONGS FLOWERING

(CP 421)

The poem “floatfloatloflf” (CP 431) exemplifies Cummings’ use of microherent infravisations produced by subtracting letters from words or adding letters to “pre-words” as he repeated them, which he seems to have begun using in this collection:

floatfloatloflf  
lloloa  
tatoatloatf loat fl oat  
f loatl ngL  
  
y

&fris  
 klispin  
 glyT  
     w  
         irlErec  
  
 ,  
  
 t,  
 ;d  
 ;;a:  
 nC.eda:Nci;ddaanncciinn

(GLY)

a  
     nda  
         n-saint  
 dancelDan  
 Sai ntd anc

&æ&

—cupidoergosum  
 spun=flash  
 omiepsicronlonO  
 megaeta?  
     p  
         aul D-as-in-tip-toe r

apeR

In this tribute to the dancer Paul Draper, he adds some twists to his device, once—for instance—dropping the “f” from “float” in a series of repeating instances of “float,” suggesting that the floating dancer floats away from himself. In another instance of letter build-up, he suggests a tap dance move by spelling the word “dancing” as “ddaanncciinn / (G.” As for “omiepsicronlonO—megaeta?” I’m aware of the interwoven Greek letters but have not been able to make good sense of them.<sup>3</sup> Note also the visiophorically translocated comma in this poem acting as a pause in mid-air.

The next poem I want to present here makes, I think, Cummings’ simplest but best use of an infravision which both combines and splits words—and, in capturing the swing of bells and their sound, is also visiophorical: the thrice-repeated

pealing of the bells in “(b)” (CP 445). In this poem, I also much like the way “Shoutflowered” suggests the shouts that flower the street being described in another fusional infravision.

(b  
eLl  
s?  
bE

-ginningly(come-swarm:faces  
ar;rive go.faces a(live)  
sob bel  
ls

(pour wo  
(things)  
men  
selves-them

inghurl)bangbells(yawnchurches  
suck people)reel(dark-  
ly(whirling  
in

(b  
ellSB  
el  
Ls)

-to sun(crash).Streets  
glit  
ter  
a,strut:do;colours;are:m,ove

o im  
-pos-  
sibl  
y

(Shoutflowered  
flowerish boom  
b el Lsb El l  
slcry)

(be  
 ll)sbe  
 ll)s  
 b  
 (be  
 ll)sbell)  
 ells  
 (s)bell)s

The final poem I've chosen from *No Thanks*, "birds(" (CP 448), represents the kind of compressed elegance that I do think Cummings "matured" into as he got older:s

birds(  
 here,inven  
 ting air  
 U  
 )sing

tw  
 iligH(  
 t's  
 v  
 va  
 vas(  
 vast

ness.Be)look  
 now  
 (come  
 soul;  
 &:and

who  
 s)e  
 voi  
 c  
 es  
 (  
 are  
 ar  
 a

Again we have repeating-word microherent infravisations, with a “v” growing to “vast” and an “are” diminishing to an “a.” This last is wonderfully metaphoric for me, showing, as it does, the poem’s birds’ voices as a “they” which “are” turning into the unity of an “a.” And ending there—although “a” is the beginning of the alphabet. . . .

From Cummings’ *50 Poems* of 1940, I’ve chosen just one specimen, the very elegant “!blac” (CP 487):

!blac  
k  
agains  
t  
  
(whi)  
  
te sky  
?t  
rees whic  
h fr  
  
om droppe  
  
d  
,  
le  
af  
  
a::go  
  
e  
s wh  
IrlI  
n  
  
.g

I do so for several reasons. One is to point out its foreshadowing of Cummings’ famous falling-leaf poem; a second is to point out the subtle way *its* leaf’s fall from its canopy is visually suggested by the contrast of its description’s narrowness with the wideness of the text above it. And notice the “ago” or chronological past that the fusion of “a” with part of “goes” secretes into the leaf’s whirl! . . . the visual rhyme of “(whi),” “whic” and “wh”; and finally the arrest of the leaf’s whirling by a period, and its revival thereafter.

At this juncture I've come to "(fea" (CP 653), the poem I mentioned at the beginning of my paper with "in Just-":

(fea  
therr  
ain  
  
:dreamin  
g field o  
ver forest &;  
  
wh  
o could  
be  
  
so  
!fl  
te  
  
r?n  
oo  
ne)

All I will call attention to at this time is the incredible softness of the rain suggested as the poem drops to a close by "r?n"—and one of Cummings' typically oblique personifications of something in nature—in this case, rain—by comparing it not to some other object but to a person, "no one."

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## Notes

- 1 The poem depicts some of what happens within the meanwhile, during travel somewhere in France. Although there is a "now" in this meanwhile, Cummings emphasizes the "unburial foreshortened putrescence" of the "humanity" that inhabits this travel world. These people inhabit a world of "hum," noise without meaning, a world of verbs that often fail to connect with their subjects ("scoot," "angle," "slam," "shriek"), a world of stink ("pu") that cannot be called alive, only "und / ead." In the end, people "re / peat" (return to the peat?) their meaningless creeds, their grammar reduced to infantile babble, whether in French ("fais do do" is baby talk for "go to sleep") or English ("re babies"). [Editor's note]



2 Note also how “theraIn” falls “In” the I: “theraIncomIng / o all the roofs roar /  
drownInsound?”. [Editor’s note]

3 The Greek letters omicron, epsilon, omega, and eta, designate the long and short o  
and e in the Greek alphabet. Perhaps Cummings indicates a syncopation of  
lengthened or shortened circular steps? [Editor’s note]

### **Work Cited**

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Liveright, 1994.