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Cummings' Sinister Dexterity: Exercises in Meaning and Unmeaning

Michael Webster

The chief use of the “meaning” of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be (for here again I am speaking of some kinds of poetry and not all) to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog

—T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (144)

unplays need doctoring. But if (as you assume) there exists an “art of directing”, it surely consists in allowing a play to “express” itself i.e. to be (re)born. And if every word of *Santa Claus* is distinctly spoken, by human beings deeply familiar with the American language, my play’s “meaning” won’t even slightly matter

what, by the way, does life “mean”?

—E. E. Cummings, *Selected Letters* (202-203)

I

The quotes above give us a window into the complexities of modernist attitudes towards meaning. Eliot sees meaning (in some poems at least) as a kind of bait to keep the reader’s conscious mind occupied while the poem “does its work” on his or her unconscious mind. Here, the surface meaning, or the plain prose sense of the words, is like a bit of meat, while the work that the poem does happens on an esoteric, unseen level. This latter idea was certainly influenced by symbolist ideals of a “pure” poetry divorced from rhetoric and made of a language whose “sense” is somehow purified of the grosser meanings of “the words of the tribe” (Mallarmé 51-52).¹ Later on the same page, Eliot writes of how he could be deeply devoted to “poetry which I did not understand at first reading; some is poetry which I am not sure I understand yet: for instance, Shakespeare’s.” Here, “understanding” seems to mean not only grasping all the myriad implications and nuances of a poem, whether semantic, metrical, rhythmical, historical, literary, or personal, but also feeling the inexpressible, the absent, the symbol, the ideal that symbolist poetry aims to evoke. So for Eliot, there are two kinds of meaning: (a) the plain prose sense of a poem, used as a diversion for the conscious mind, and (b) the understanding of the totality of a poem’s meanings and suggestions, something which Eliot seems to think may never be fully attainable.

By contrast, Cummings specifically warned readers against trying to understand his play *Him*. “DON’T TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT, LET IT TRY TO UNDERSTAND YOU” (quoted in Norman 223). Cummings’ advice to a future director of his play *Santa Claus*, though equally quixotic, points towards the sorts of meanings beyond plain prose sense that Eliot termed “understanding”: according to Cummings, speaking the words of his play clearly with attention to nuances of accent and meaning will render the “meaning” of the play superfluous. Here, the plain prose sense involves clear enunciation and familiarity with American idioms, but beyond that sense lies something that Cummings refuses to name as “meaning.” In addition, there is an implication that readers and viewers should attend to the nuances of the text while avoiding their own biases and preconceptions. For Cummings, the play itself is alive and thus should be experienced rather than interpreted. As he advised in the note to the play *Him*:

Relax, and give this PLAY a chance to strut its stuff—relax, don’t worry because it’s not like something else—relax, stop wondering what it’s all “about”—like many strange and familiar things, Life included, the PLAY isn’t “about,” it simply is. (quoted in Norman 222-223)

In the context of the play’s life, or “is,” to talk of the meanings or of what the play is “about” is beside the point. To put it another way, this attention to and experience of the text should happen without preconceived notions about genre or interpretation, suppressing what Keats called, in his “negative capability” letter, “any irritable reaching after fact & reason . . .”²² Not so Eliot, who though he would laud attention and experience, seeks full understanding, even if he knows he will never achieve it. However, both Eliot and Cummings assume that something of great importance happens beyond any plain prose meaning and beyond any interpretation, something to do with emotion and sensibility. They chiefly differ in Cummings’ insistence that the work of art is alive. Cummings consistently assumed that poetry attempts “to liberate the actual crisp organic squirm—the IS” (“Lachaise” 19).

But in order to release that squirm of IS, meanings of the poem (or play) must first be understood, as the quote about distinctly speaking “every word” of *Santa Claus* implies. And Cummings’ poetic *practice*—his careful attention to word choice, grammar, syntax, and spacing—bears this out. So despite believing that a poem “IS immeasurably alive,”²³ he nevertheless constructed his poetry in “measurable” (and presumably un-alive) symmetrical and mathematical units and patterns. These patterns place Cummings in good modernist company. Even William Carlos Williams, a far less rigorous formalist than Cummings, could famously write that “a poem is a small (or large) machine made of words” (54). While he avoided machine metaphors, Cummings somewhat paradoxically praised art as “meaningless precision” (CP 402). Evidently, we can assume that the life the poem creates, like all life, cannot really be said to “mean,” while its art lies in its precision. This precision, as readers of Cummings

know, “creates movement” (CP 221), but it also creates meaning. Obviously, the “movement” that precision creates may happen both in the mind and the eye. The life or the IS that every poem releases is not something divorced from the brain.

Moreover, we must understand and interpret both meaningless and meaningful precision in order to feel a poem’s movement and aliveness. We shall see that Cummings’ precise machines made of words are nevertheless “alive,” and that his carefully planned patterns of letters, words, syntax, grammar, and spacing are both arbitrary and motivated, meaningless and meaningful. Furthermore, similar symmetrical and mathematical patterns often take on different meanings in different poems, or if you like, in different life-contexts. New combinations of syntax (ungrammatics), of form (mathematics), and of meaning (semantics) all interact to create new meanings. One example of this sort of interaction is found in a poem called “go(perpe)go” (*No Thanks* #20; CP 403).

II

At the end of this clever but seemingly inconsequential poem, an anteater is admonished to “go to” [pursue and eat] the busily scurrying ants depicted in the rest of the poem. It is well known that the poem parodies the biblical injunction against laziness from Proverbs 6:6: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise” (see Friedman 118). Cummings’ revision of the proverb expresses, as Nat Henry puts it, “a sardonic imperative that should bring the ants a deserved fate for their apparently aimless, inane, and inept industry.” Here is the poem:

	go(perpe)go
	(tu)to(al adve
	nturin
5	g p article
	s of s ini sterd
10	exte
	ri)go to(ty)the(om nivorou salways lugbrin g ingseekfindlosin g motilities
15	are)go to

the
 ant
 (al
 ways

 20 alingwaysing)
 go to the ant thou go
 (inging)

 to the
 ant,thou ant-

 25 eater

Norman Friedman has shown how the poem contains two parallel phrases, one inside the parentheses, one outside:

the parenthetical sentence reads, “perpetual adventuring particles of sinister dexterity, omnivorous always lugbringing seekfindlosing are always inging [in motion],” while the sentence outside the brackets, which is telescoped incrementally, reads, “go to the ant, thou ant-eater.” (118)

The phrase inside the parentheses describes the ants; the phrase outside commands the anteater. This command phrase is built by incremental repetition until complete: “go / go to / go to the / go to the ant, / go to the ant, thou / go to the ant, thou ant-eater.” This “technique of telescopic build-up” (Friedman 120) is used for different effects in various Cummings poems. To cite just four examples, in “as if as” Cummings combines the device with progressive capitals to show how the rising sun gradually defines and reveals the world: “mmamakmakemakesWwOwoRworLworld” (CP 423). He uses the device in regressive fashion in the first line of “floatfloatloflf” (CP 432), while he shows regression and progression together in “sh estiff” (CP 444):

unununun?
 butbutbut??
 tonton???
 ing?????

Here, a stripper’s decreasing number of fastened buttons is mirrored by the audience’s increasing anticipation and curiosity.⁴ And in a poem called “fl” (CP 488), the sequence “ccocoucougcoughcoughi // ng” imitates the hacking, repetitive coughs of Bowery bums in the early morning.⁵

In the anteatr poem, the telescopic build-up of the “go to the ant” phrase serves to emphasize the repetition of short words and syllables that characterizes the poem. For example, the word “go” is repeated six times, while the word “to” appears five times and the word “ant” four times. In addition, the syllables “in” or “ing” appear no less than 10 times, twelve if we count the inversion “ni” at the end of line 8 and the beginning of line 12. These inversions point to another aspect of these repeated syllables and words: they are arranged in symmetrical patterns, sometimes in a mathematically precise mirror symmetry as in the “unbuttoning” stanza above. Besides lines 8 (“ini”) and 12 (“nivorou salways lugbrin”—note the 7 - 7- 7 letter count), lines one [“go(perpe)go”], seven, (“s of s”), thirteen (“g ingseekfindlosin g” yields “g in . . . in . . . in g”), twenty-two [“(inging)”], and twenty-four (“ant, . . . ant-”) are obviously and almost obsessively symmetrical.

If we look at the stanzas of “go(perpe)go,” we see that they are arranged in a mathematically symmetrical pattern as well: 1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1. Richard Cureton calls these sorts of stanza-line patterns “palindromic form” (267). This stanzaic symmetry mirrors in many ways the various forms of balance and symmetry found in individual lines. As far as I know, Cureton is the only critic to notice how many of the lines in “go(perpe)go” feature balanced symmetries (271-272). To the list above we can add the doubled “pe” in line one [“go(perpe)go”], the vowel-two consonants-vowel pattern in lines 3 and 10 (“adve” and “exte”), the “n . . . n” in line 4 (“nturin”) (in some ways mirrored in line 12), the “tilit” in the middle of “motilities” (line 14), and the “aling . . . ysing” of line 20. It seems certain that these little word and syllable particles have a meaning beyond their lexical and semantic ones: the crowds of identical or nearly identical letters and syllables surely represent a swarm of ants. In addition, Cureton suggests that “perhaps these compulsive symmetries iconically render the ants’ (and Man’s) compulsive busywork” (272, my emphasis).

Once we look at the context provided by other poems from the same volume, however, we can remove Cureton’s “perhaps.” For example, one poem satirizes the compulsive busywork of a “little / mr Big / notbusy / Busi / ness notman” (CP 389), while another asks a “little man” to “halt stop forget relax” (CP 393). In addition, the two poems that immediately follow our anteatr poem (*No Thanks* 21-22) amplify this critique of busywork and conformity by warning of the dangers to individuals who get caught up in mass movements and mass thinking. Poem 21 is a satiric epigram that purports to be an elegy (“IN . . . MEMORIAM”) for “all those who got / athlete’s mouth” in the shifting political climate of the 1930s (CP 404). Poem 22 tells us to “beware of politisions” and “folks with missians” and asks us to pity an anti-Semitic “fool” who seems to confuse left and right, communism and fascism, while following both systems at once: he likes his steak “all ried” (red) but “hate[s] the juse” (CP 405).

Looking at “go(perpe)go” in light of the critique of mass politics that surrounds

it, we notice how often these symmetrical “particles” of identical or nearly identical letters and syllables appear at the beginnings and the ends (or the left and the right) of many lines in the poem. We can see now that the mass busywork and conformity of the ant-particles depict a confusing, yet disciplined form of mass politics. Cummings’ description of the ants as “adve // nturin / g p / article // s of s / ini / sterd / exte // ri . . . ty” gives us a precise indication of his views on such politics. *Sinister* is an adjective in Latin meaning *left*, while *dexterity* is one of several English words from the Latin *dexter*, or *right*. The pattern of left / right identical particles tells us that left or right, communist or fascist, these ants are all quite similar, and they will all be eaten by the not-lazy, most diligent monster of modern totalitarianism. Ant-like individuals are literally sucked up into the digestive tract of the modern mass state. We can be sure that Cummings means for us to pay attention to the political implications of *dexterity* and *sinister*, for according to McBride’s *Concordance* of Cummings’ published poetry, these are the only uses of the words in the entire corpus (170, 687). In addition, the words are clearly implicated in the mass politics of left and right when they appear in *Eimi* (1933): “what crispedged flatness does a dexter comrade-hand meet in sinister comrade-trouserpocket’s darkness? 1 ticket(given by Turk as I fled toward another darkness,a different tomb)” (244). These sentences occur right after Cummings has ascended from the death and darkness of Lenin’s tomb, from the belly of the anteater, as it were.⁶

The ants’ left-right dexterity is sinister in at least two other ways. One has already been alluded to: despite the seeming randomness of the word-particles on the page (i.e., of the ants’ behavior), almost every particle fits into a symmetrical pattern. Moreover, these symmetrical “particles” of individual ants turn out to be a collective—organized according to a single principle—and they are much the same at both the left and right ends of the spectrum. Sinister dexterity indeed! And from the point of view of the anteater, the poem becomes a parable of absolute absorption, a story in which the ever-increasing imperative sentence of the anteater (the long snout of the state) finally gobbles up the seemingly random but actually standardized, left-right marching, “inging” ants. The furious activity of the ants is ultimately contained and controlled by the parenthesis that encloses them and the unseen monster that devours them.

Remember also that it is the poet’s “sinister dexterity” that ultimately created this poem. Cummings has found a way to fragment the surface of the poem while retaining various “sinister” and “dexterous” structures and patterns beneath that surface. Beyond the sameness and conformity of the ants, there is a dexterous and clever poet, an individual and inventive “maker,” who creates these fragmented but symmetrical structures. Seemingly meaningless fragmentation has actually been organized by the poet into precise and meaningful structures that convey the movements of the ants, the increasingly threatening imperatives of collectivism, and the dangers of becoming absorbed in mass politics.

III

A second poem from *No Thanks* uses similar iconic symmetries but for different semantic ends or effects. According to Richard Cureton, this poem (CP 449), features many lines that are “obtrusively symmetrical in one way or another” (270). However, this poem is not about the sameness of mass political movements, but the unity of being

	Do.
	omful
	relaxing
	 -ly)i
5	downrise outwrithein- ing upfall and
	 Am the glad deep the living from nowh -ere(!firm!)exp- anding,am a fe
10	-rvently(susta- inin gness Am
	 root air rock day :you;
15	smile,hands
	 (an- onymo -Us

Let’s note some of the poem’s symmetries: line 5 features a “downrise” and “out . . . in,” while the next line has a 3-6-3 letter pattern. Lines 8 [“-ere(!firm!)exp-”], 11 (“inin”), 13 (“root air rock day”), 14 (“:you;”), and 15 (“smile,hands”) all form perfectly symmetrical letter or character patterns. And the linguist Cureton notes that line 17 “presents an *o*-nasal-*y*-nasal-*o* palindrome” (271). Cureton sees “little local motivation” for the “elaborate visual symmetries” (271) in this poem, but here I find I must disagree with my distinguished colleague. In contrast to the anteatr poem, which stresses the sameness of the seemingly random, the symmetries in this one stress the *fusion of opposites*. For example, the speaker, or “I” of the poem, somehow “downrise[s]” while “outwrithein / ing” and “upfall[ing].” His “(!firm!)” expansion “inin” tells us how—he is not only “exp- / anding,” but also “anding” with another human being in sexual union. This “anding” occurs in line 9, shortly after line 7,

much the longest at 9 syllables. This long line is, of course, iconic of what Cummings elsewhere termed “a stiffened exquisite” (CP 46).

Experienced readers may wonder why this line ends with “nowh” instead of “now”—why doesn’t Cummings break the word “nowhere” into “now / here” as he does elsewhere? But instead of emphasizing “now” and “here,” the poet breaks the word after the “h” to refer to a different time frame: “-ere”—time-honored poetic diction for “before,” or in this context, foreplay. After line 10, the poem’s lines rhythmically contract and expand until they achieve the one-syllable conclusion of “-Us.” After the “anding” of line 9, it seems for a moment that this union will make the “i” into “a fe[male],” but we discover that “i . . . am a fe // -rvently . . . :you;”—and in the end, the “i” of line 4 and the “you” of line 14 combine to become “(an- / onymo / -Us,” or “an Us” with a symmetrical “onymo” in the middle. “I” and “you,” subject and object, self and other, have merged to become a symmetrical “anonymous” “Us.” And yet they are not anonymous—the name for this third, alive being is “-Us,” as is shown by the previous line, “onymo,” an easily-decipherable descendant of the Greek word *onoma* [Aeolic *onuma*], or *name*.

If we trace the capital letters throughout the poem, we find that instead of following the still-familiar suggestion to “do it,” this couple prefers to “Do . . . Am . . . Am . . . Us.” The slang term “do it” was common in the 20s: Cummings may have had in mind the 1928 Cole Porter hit “Let’s Do It,” or he could have been thinking of the marketing of Clara Bow as Hollywood’s “it” girl (see Kammen 173; see also the end of *No Thanks* 60, CP 444). Instead of “it,” this couple does *being*, producing a third being named “Us” from their love-union. Despite superficial similarities, there is a great difference between the left-right “inging” of the ants and the third-producing “inin” of the lovers. The repetitious “in”s and “ing”s of lines 4, 8, 12, 13, 20, and 22 of “go(perpe)go” refer not to any sort of sexual union but to the sameness of the atom-like ant-particles, their perpetual to-ing and fro-ing, and their eventual absorption into the anteatery.

Instead of particles absorbed and gobbled into a mass, the lovers in “Do.” create a new being that is also one with nature: Cummings wrote that this poem is about “a-lover-&-Nature-&-his-beloved,all interpenetrating.”⁷ By “doing Am,” the “i” of the poem becomes “root air rock day / :you;” uniting the opposites of *doing* and *being* and producing the third entity, “-Us.” In his 1927 “Imaginary Dialogue” on the jacket of *Him*, Cummings instructs his interlocutor on how to create a third “voice” *between* active and passive, doing and dreaming:

And so far as you’re concerned “Life” is a verb of two voices—active, to do, passive, to dream. Others believe doing to be only a kind of dreaming. Still others have discovered (in a mirror surrounded with mirrors) something harder than silence but softer than falling; the third voice of “life,” which

believes itself and which cannot mean because it is. (quoted in *six* 64 and in Norman 210)

Life is a third “voice,” or way of being, a state beyond meaning or unmeaning, a state of transcendence of the everyday. If a poem is to come alive and speak with the third voice of life, then the words and silences (iconic spacings), meanings and unmeanings, mathematical form and spontaneous expression must fuse to speak that voice. And this fusing can only happen in the reader’s heart and mind. As Cummings wrote much later (and underlined in red) in his 1957 drafts for the never-delivered “California lectures”: “P[oetry] is that temperature at which opposites fuse” (see Kennedy 460-461).⁸ This notion of the “third voice” is also prevalent throughout Cummings’ nature and love poetry, and can be seen even at the end of his life when he is writing a poem about sex and nature that manages also to become a small parable of evolution to the third state:

wild(at our first)beasts uttered human words
—our second coming made stones sing like birds—
but o the starhushed silence which our third’s (CP 844)

In each line the voiceless is given voice: first beasts speak, then stones sing, and the voice in the third line speaks with a “starhushed silence.” When read aloud, the plain prose meaning of the last phrase, “which our third is,” can be transformed into: “but o the starhushed silence which *are thirds*” — a punning illustration of how poets can create in language a fusion of opposites, a third voice.

As with the technique of telescopic build-up and decrease, the device of symmetrical lines has different uses in different contexts. Even in a single poem, the same syllable particles can take on slightly different meanings. For example, in “moon over gai” (CP 384-385), the syllables “inging” in the “crowds mov / -ing ing ing” and the “girl)sing / -ing ing(ing)” convey sight and movements of crowds and the echoing sounds of a singer. Moreover, the contexts that create meanings in Cummings’ various devices are not limited to individual poems. We have seen how the two poems that follow “go(perpe)go” pointed us to a political meaning for the left-right symmetries of the poem. Moreover, comparisons and contrasts among poems throughout Cummings’ *oeuvre* can show how subtly the poet varies or even changes completely the meanings of his devices. But how should we read a poem when contexts and other meaning-finding strategies fail, when the poet’s devices seem to have no meaning beyond an arbitrary pattern making, or what Cureton calls “mediaeval numerology” (269)?

Well, perhaps some devices and patterns are meant to be just that: arbitrary. After all, if art is “meaningless precision” (CP 402), then some precise devices may be simply meaningless. However, the poem that contains this phrase also indicates that

artistic precision may be meaningless only to those who, like the protagonist of the poem, never demand rebirth before dying and whose lives are never “swallowed”—in an Emersonian moment—by clouds. And indeed for Cummings, the deepest meanings are found in living moments that are beyond “meaning.” As Gary Snyder says, “the other heart of Buddhist experience is something that can’t be talked about. . . . It’s an inner order of experience that is not available to language. Language has no words to talk about it. When you put it into words, you lose it; so it’s better not to talk about it” (21).

The two other instances of the word “meaningless” that I have found in Cummings’ published poetry both refer to nature: respectively, to thunder (CP 348) and a star, “morsel miraculous and meaningless” (CP 456). We might say that Cummings wishes that his poems were as miraculous and meaningless and alive as a work of nature; hence the mysterious patterns. Certainly these patterns are a way of imposing a formal control and order over a riot of visual and verbal fragmentation. Martin Heusser reinforces this argument when he points out that Cummings may simply be building into his poetic structures an echo of what transcendentalists see as the inexplicable and mysterious beauty of nature’s structures (254). Cummings himself always maintained that poetry is “a mystery” (*six* 82), not at all to be completely explained by the logic of critics (see also Heusser 255). However, “mystery” must never become an excuse for lazy reading. Experience has taught me that many connections between content and form become apparent only after the most in- and extensive study of a poem and all its contexts. Indeed, the form often *makes* the content, as we see, for example, in words that are split in order to reveal new words.

According to Richard Cureton, some devices, like visual letter-icons (e.g., using an “o” for the full moon and a right parenthesis [)] for a crescent moon) can become “Cummings clichés, and many wince at their interminable repetition” (255). However, this paper has attempted to show how reading one poem against another, or one poem with others in a group, can reveal individual differences and nuances of meaning. For example, even the most repeated of “Cummings clichés”—the isolated “i,” can have radically different meanings in different contexts.⁹ That doesn’t mean that sometimes these devices are more successful than at other times. Cureton finds the micro-iconicities (at the letter and word level) of *No Thanks* to be far more successful than the macro-iconicities that break up the “flow of the language” or “phonological prosody” of an entire poem (265, 277). To some extent, I can sympathize with this view. For example, “go(perpe)go” seems a better poem to me than “Do,” partially because it contains a narrative drive (and even suspense), despite the fracturing of words and interleaving of two different phrases.

We should also remember that Cummings was still experimenting with his visual-verbal craft in *No Thanks*. I would imagine that if one were to examine the later poems, one would find fewer breaks in sentence and phrase flow and fewer collec-

tions of isolated a-syntactic nouns and adjectives such as we see in “brlght” or at the end of “Do.”: “root air rock day) / :you; / smile,hands // (an / onymo / -Us.” One would also find that Cummings works his a-syntactic effects into poems of fewer words with more tightly controlled visual effects, as in the famous “l(a)” (CP 673). There is also a sense, however, in which Cummings’ visual poems are a new sort of poem in which considerations like “the flow of the language” are secondary at best. Cummings’ splitting of words into un-meaning and new-meaning fragments parallels his interest in verbal and mathematical pattern making. Both are ways of making a poem move and come “alive,” making it become a complete being, a phenomenon of nature that means and un-means because it is. It may be an irony that it takes intense interpretive and analytical skills to decode this being, but then again, maybe not: anything natural and alive is also complex and mysterious. I have offered different meanings for many of the mathematical and symmetrical devices in these two poems, but even in these two the reader may still find many areas of unmeaning. (The stanza forms of both poems seem arbitrary, for example.)

So the question remains, what to do about the unmeaning aspects of Cummings’ poems? Or how does mathematical symmetry relate to spontaneity or “life”? I have several answers:

1. Patterns and symmetries create not only movement but additional meanings as well.

2. Unmeaning patterns like palindromic stanza forms are ways to impose a formal control and order over a riot of visual and verbal fragments.

3. Unmeaning patterns mirror the mystery of nature, at the same time creating a strong opposition between what are supposedly spontaneous, living poems and their calculated mathematical structures. Many of these oppositions in Cummings’ poems are meant to be resolved into a third term, as happens when two “doomfully” relaxing lovers become an “-Us.” This is an old mystical theme, the coincidence of opposites, or making two opposites into one whole. Cummings’ “meaningless” symmetrical shapes and letters point to this transcendence of opposites, or what Ralf Norrman calls “wholeness restored” (11-14). The reconciliation of opposites is, as Cummings said (quoting S. Foster Damon) of poem 73 in *95 Poems*, “the secret which every mystic tries to tell” (*Letters* 261).

4. In that poem, the speaker asks his love to climb “from some loud unworld” into “a cloverish silence of thrushsong” (CP 745). The lovers re-find their radically innocent, whole selves while leaving “space and time” for “the now and here of freedom.” On one level, the poem is simply an invitation to make love. This lovemaking is to take place somewhere in the mountains, happening in the natural world while escaping from the unworld, whose meaning is characterized as a “most rightful wrong.” In other words, these lovers are a more mystical and abstract version of the doomfully relaxing couple in CP 449. Here, Cummings’ mysticism takes on a more Buddhist tinge, especially when the lovers “will becauseless ultimate / earth accept and primeval whyless sky.” Here, the secret can only be told in abstract riddling

language because it cannot be told in any other. Here the thrush-song is silent. A more concrete example of the deep unsayable meaning to be found in unmeaning nature can be seen by looking at the poem “Beautiful” (CP 713):

Beautiful

is the
unmea
ning
of(sil

ently)fal

ling(e
ver
yw
here)s

Now

Here snow is everywhere, and also here [it “here’s”] and Now. It may almost be seen as “very where” or “very here now”—but not quite, because the snow (and Cummings’ fragmentation on the page) removes and adds and suggests definition and meaning. The snow moves into “Now,” but only via manipulating the meanings of words.

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Notes

- 1 In his sonnet to Edgar Allan Poe, Mallarmé wrote that the poet’s task was “Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu” [“To give a purer sense to the words of the tribe”] (50-51).
- 2 Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21, 27, 1817.
- 3 Letter to Norman Friedman, June 25, 1955. Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.1 (55) folder 1.
- 4 The poem “brIght” (CP 455) employs a similar diminuendo and crescendo effect, this time with the question marks gradually revealing the word “star” and concealing the word “bright.” But in “brIght” the decreasing and increasing mystery and curiosity are on a much more transcendent level.

5 Other poems (all from *No Thanks*) feature the device: in “o / pr” (CP 392) the device imitates the echoing effects of a public address announcement at a ballpark. In the sonnet “that which we who’re alive in spite of mirrors” (CP 386), the phrase “that which we die for lives / as wholly as which we live for dies” gradually increases in the first line of each quatrain, completing itself only in the concluding couplet. In this poem, the device functions as a “progressive unveiling of [the] central idea” (Everson).

6 Cummings does use the word “dexterous” once in a non-political context, in line 17 of the very early “Puella Mea” (CP 20). In a 1935 article called “Exit the Boob,” Cummings compares fascism and communism to the two sides of a coin named “dictatorship.” After deciding that the coin itself has no value, he advises his reader that the best choice when faced with such false currency is a third one: to “grin, baby, and . . . walk” (290).

7 Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.1 (55) folder 1.

8 Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (90), folder 42, sheet 434.

9 See my “Poemgroups in *No Thanks*,” pp. 13-16, 24-25.

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