

# The Formal Deviant: The Innovative Features of E. E. Cummings's 'next to of course god america i'

*C.B. Viner, Faculty*

*christopher.viner@westcliff.edu*

## **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the modernist American poet, E. E. Cummings, and his experimentations with the traditional sonnet form in poetry. E. E. Cummings was influenced by cubism and used the principles of this form to stylize his poetry. He changed the nature of the sonnet form, as seen in his political poem and satire, 'Next of course god america i', which this article will explore through close reading and literary analysis.

*Perfectly beautiful is (Cummings, 1923, p.15)*

*The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (Eliot, 1921, p.6)*

The immediately recognizable visual quality of E. E. Cummings's poems is a result of his ingenious decision to transmute the stylistic principles of European modern art movements—predominantly cubism—into poetic practice. The most innovative and distinguishable poetic features—namely, the tendency for lower-case typography, the omission of punctuation, and the syntactical disturbance (by means of grammatical displacement)—have the effect of fracturing the surface of his subject, creating a multifaceted image, in which his reader, in Norman Friedman's (1960) words, "grasps... all at once" (p.10).

The scientific and industrial surge in the nineteenth century in America and Europe, and its further expansion in the early twentieth century, aided Cummings practically. There were now many avant-garde artistic movements available through more efficient methods of production and transportation links; although, paradoxically, the principles of such a surge, namely, the belief in homogeneity, and the loss of confidence in a 'soul' or 'self', were principles Cummings opposed. Ideologically, he is in a traditional lineage of visionary romantics and rebels who retained the importance of feeling at the dawn of the new mechanical age; William Blake, Charles Baudelaire, and John Ruskin all share the principles of Cummings's rebellion. In the poem, 'Next to of course god america i', an almost machine-like monotone juxtaposes with the speaker's *human* feeling of nervousness, exposing the unnatural tension at work between forcibly orchestrated propaganda—represented in the subject's speech—and the human beneath the governmental product of a mechanical and increasingly sterile epoch.

In opposition to rationality and homogeneity—and to realism—various avant-garde movements, such as cubism and futurism, flowered in Europe, and particularly, in Paris. Whilst a student at

Harvard, Cummings befriended S. Foster Damon who introduced him to a number of contemporary European influences not cited on his university reading list, such as Achille-Claude Debussy, Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky, and the first anthology of imagist poems, Ezra Pound's *Des Imagistes* (1914). In 1913, Damon took Cummings to the Armory Show, which showcased the works of some of the most exciting modernist artists, including Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and the 'father' of cubism, Paul Cézanne, with whom Cummings became obsessed.

In 1918, Cummings became less enthusiastic about cubism, distrusting its "cold and frozen grammar" (Cohen, 1990, p. 60), and eventually yearned for fracturing and fusion, combined with "that precision which creates movement" (Cummings, 1926, p. 1).

His vision of poetry from a painter's perspective, the cubist influence, and a yearning for language to *move*—channelled through traditional form—resulted in a new style; a radical hybridity was forged by utilising an avant-garde mode (cubism) in an historically-established form (the sonnet).

Cummings's disturbance of syntax comprises a large portion of his method. The prism, with its complex spectrum of colours and multiple sides, which fuse together to form a centre of light, or 'truth', is a fair analogy to the principles of modernism and is the poet's "symbol of all art" (Kennedy, 1994, p. 39). Cummings ruptures syntax and dislocates language, predominantly, by morphing adjectives, adverbs and verbs into nouns, rearranging words in a clause, and omitting punctuation. This innovation explodes language into a myriad of potential currents of meaning. For example, one could read the adjective 'early' as a noun, in, "say can you see by the dawn's early" which would give some syntactical sense to the following (theoretical) clause, "my / country 'tis of centuries..."

The lack of punctual markers provides a dissonance, causing a spectrum of potential meaning. The hauntingly idiosyncratic nuances that can be fathomed from this syntactical disturbance is one of Cummings's most sophisticated successes; through it, the reader explores their individuality,

and thus, reaffirms it. By omitting punctuation, the readerly position is one of an *interior* vantage within our most idiosyncratic readerly faculties; we reclaim 'i' and press into the text our own intuitive cadence, idiosyncratic rhythms of being, of *is*.

For example, the poem's lack of punctual address in the first line gives licence for the reader to fathom multiple meanings (Friedman, 1996). The word 'america' in "god america i", for instance, could be construed as a metonymic term, indicating the audience in front of the political speaker. Furthermore, the listing aspect of 'god america i' may be representative of the state's ethically-unsound hierarchy of importance: 'god' first, 'america' second, and its citizens—the small 'i's' that comprise the country—last. Alternatively, it could indicate state power, on an international political scale, but more so symbolically, representing the untouchable nature of the government itself by its citizens: the 'god' that is 'america', connoting totalitarianism, and anti-democratic values. Indeed, the 'god america' that through a system of propaganda after declaring war on Germany on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1917 sent its citizens to a mindless, "roaring slaughter". Cummings's message, later, is less ambiguously compacted into his subject's speech, "they did not stop to think they died instead". Conformity kills; not thinking for oneself, not *growing* into an individual, but instead, succumbing to homogeneity is the most dangerous way for one to live.

Cummings's fusion of individualism, Platonic dualism, the principle of *growing*, or rather, making, and the childhood vision informs his practice. Friedman (1972) states that Cummings possesses "anarchist beliefs", and his poetics apply "anarchist techniques" to form (p. 2). Cummings views authority as a live predator, which vanquishes individualism and transforms human potential into homogeneity. In *The Enormous Room* (1922), he observes: "the police... swooped upon their helpless prey with the indescribable courage which is the prerogative of policemen the world over" (Cummings, 1922, p. 104). The enemy to Cummings's principles of 'feeling first' and individualism are manmade socio-political tools that homogenise and institutionalise the

government, the army, and social conformity—his objects of satire.

The acceleration of the speaker's speech is achieved through omission of punctuation and lower-case typography, portraying the subject's nerves and hypocrisy. Punctuation is used sparingly to raise questions on the ambivalence of authority, national identity and statehood officialdom. The apostrophe at "land of the pilgrims'...", for example, not articulated aloud, means Cummings is able to play on the ambiguity of this line, and its two meanings, i.e. 'america' is a land in which there are pilgrims and also a land belonging to pilgrims.

Capitalised letters, which are used after a stream of jingoistic clichés (the reference to the American national anthem, to Macbeth, America's patriotic song, 'My Country, Tis of Thee', etc.) at the end of the speech, combined with a countering of terse punctuation, reinforce the figure's recital speed. Acceleration is also achieved through 'telescoping', seen at line 14: "in every language even deaf and dumb" (Ahearn, 1996, p. 17).

Politicians, then, are seen as almost inhuman, antithetical to authenticity and individuality. However, in the poem, the ostensible politician's nerves are what humanises him. Behind the mask of uniformity and propaganda is a human being in a compromising position, which is finally hopeful. The subject is *not* a tyrannical member of authority, with no faculty for compassion but a fumbling charlatan coerced into a propagandist tool by a dehumanizing system of government. The figure's nervousness, therefore, innovatively portrayed by, for example, the cubist effect of syntactical fracturing and fusing is finally what makes Cummings's satirical target, not the speaker, but the system by which even the speaker himself is controlled and exploited. The fact that the political figure is uneasy about what he is saying—nervously requiring a "glass of water" post jingoistic rant—exposes the hypocrisy of the government's search for new military recruits.

If Pound's poem, 'The Return,' provided Cummings with, in his words, "[the rudiments] of my writing style," then Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life* (1881), provided him with his favourite form (Cummings, 2015, p. 40). The

sonnets in *House of Life* were the reason he'd been, "writing sonnets ever since" (Dickey, 1912, p. 214).

Giacomo da Lentino invented the sonnet during the *duocento*. Cummings's sonnet is also historically bound; he scores the ancient tradition of the sonnet by imposing his anarchist techniques within it. In one sense, Cummings's defacement of such a noble tradition as the sonnet—of which William Shakespeare and William Wordsworth, for example, are major players—is analogous to his allegiance to the avant-garde, over his (lesser) adoration of historical form and even the canon itself, as a symbol of aristocracy, or conservative hierarchy.

That the sonnet, as Oppenheimer states, "is the first lyric of self-consciousness, or of the self in conflict" is fitting—since the authenticity/homogeneity power-struggle in the poem reflects Cummings's anxieties of originality (Oppenheimer, 1989, p. 110).

In his pressing of eccentric experimentation into traditional (sonnet) structure, Cummings's paradoxes become transparent; his classical education and avant-garde influence, his want to please his conservative father, his tendency for radicalism, his belief in the infant's vision, and the concept of *growing*, all work to inform a style that pivots on oppositional forces. Cummings's aporia is seen in his title choice for the Harvard lectures in 1952 as *i:six nonlectures*.

Cummings is also in some respects, *unoriginal*. For example, the meter of the poem, with some ambiguities in the first two lines and metrical inversions to a trochaic rhythm, is predominantly in regular 'heartbeats' of iambic pentameter.

The rhyme scheme during the octave is Shakespearian: *abab cdcd*, and the rhymes themselves are relatively full, e.g. 'i' and 'my', 'oh' and 'go'. Rhyming innovations become apparent during the sestet, however, unless Cummings uses an unusual scheme of *efgfeg*. Furthermore, some rhymes in the sestet are more innovative. The tmesis that occurs at line 9, for example, 'beaut-', sets up an inventive rhyme with 'mute' in the penultimate line. Typographically, this symbolises the government's breaking of the 'beautiful' in half.

The volta at the penultimate line and conclusive line of the narrator's observation, is a unique feature. However, there is also a turn—which structurally subscribes to the sonnet's origin and its observation/response dynamic—between the octave's end, and line nine which begins the sestet and ends in a question, representing authoritarian dangers on personal liberty: "then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"

This anxiety of authenticity is the cause, happily, of his most innovative features: the lower-case typography, the omission of punctuation, and the genuinely radical disturbance of syntax, which comprise Cummings's "literary cubism" (Kennedy, 1923, p. i). His innovation was one of re-appropriation, taking a painterly movement and imposing it on traditional form. Cummings's artistic energies were stylistic. It is through traditional form that he practices poetical stylistic deviance. Indeed, he possesses a strong respect for form, and particularly the sonnet, making Paul Muldoon's comment in 1914, that Cummings is "less iconoclastic than has often been supposed—including by himself" very apt (Muldoon, 2015, p. 7). Technically, however, his ingenious exportation and transmutation of cubism into a literary one by means of stylistic innovation, is highly original. He took a stylistic leap of faith, crossing artistic modes and the Atlantic, and with it, he changed the 'face' of the sonnet. Cummings's experimental risks are something from which a new generation of poets are still learning.

The Black Mountain School, the Beat movement, and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, have all taken stylistic elements from Cummings's technical anarchism. Furthermore, his influence can be traced even today, in contemporary British poetry especially. Sam Riviere's collection, *81 Austerities* (2012), for example—winner of the Forward Prize for best first collection—uses hardly any punctuation, is printed in mostly lower-case lettering, and disturbs conventional syntax in similar ways to Cummings, and with similar results.

Stylistically, Cummings is a strong contender for the most innovative poet in the canon—he remains an individual, an 'i'.

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