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## The Stuff of Expression: Interpreting Cummings' Creative Thought through Steven Pinker's *Mentalese*

Adam C. Vander Tuig

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That E. E. Cummings classified himself a poet-painter fails to capture the extent to which he served not just as an experimental poetic and visual artist but, by the end of his career, a linguistic innovator as well. In moments of creative synthesis, Cummings deftly collapses different formats of mental representation—focusing on one in particular—into a singular mode of printed expression, work that more intimately and accurately reveals to the reader the stuff of Cummings' creative thought. While decades of scholars, both critical of and receptive to Cummings' work, have illuminated the poet's many distinguishable singularities, psychologist Steven Pinker's ideas on language and thought may offer a more appropriate description and elucidation of what Cummings was truly able to achieve in much of his most experimental work.

As Gloria Anzaldúa states, "Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes the analytical consciousness" (qtd. in Bizzell and Herzberg 1594). Much of Cummings' experimental poetry operates precisely in this way, and what it ultimately uncovers is much more than anomalous, iconoclastic modernism. "People do not think in English or Chinese or Apache" says Pinker, "they think in a language of thought" (*Language* 81). The language of thought to which Pinker refers—and the essence of what I will argue Cummings tries to capture on paper—is what Pinker calls "mentalese," the "language of thought in which our conceptual knowledge is couched" (*Mind* 90).

Through some of Pinker's major ideas on language and thought, this paper will explore some new implications of the poet-painter's desire and ability to capture what might be, in fact, a series of unambiguous portraits or maps of creative thought, printed maps of the poet's own mentalese. Rereading Cummings through Pinker's work promises not only to bring about new ways of reading, regarding, and appreciating Cummings' poetry, it uncovers new insights as to the aim and essence of this poet-painter's artistic endeavor, as well as his poetic comments on, and contribution to the discourse regarding the constraints and restrictions of traditional artistic

representation and the ways in which readers experience and perceive it.

Before reevaluating Cummings' work by way of Pinker's mentalese, it is first necessary to understand the origin of Pinker's term. In *How the Mind Works*, Pinker acknowledges that we human beings "have several different kinds of data representations in our heads;" in fact, "the human brain uses at least four major formats of representation" (89). The first of the four is the visual image, "a template in a two-dimensional, picturelike mosaic" (89), a format the poet-painter often utilized throughout his career. The second is a phonological representation, what Pinker describes as "a stretch of syllables that we play in our minds like a tape loop, planning out the mouth movements and imagining what the syllables sound like" (89). Whereas phonological representations play an integral part in our short-term memory, again, this second format is another that Cummings no doubt made use of as he considered the sound and silence, rhythm and cadence present in his work, and that the reader employs as he or she commits to memory lines of particular interest or enjoyment.

The third format is grammatical representation, the hierarchical tree of word symbols that include everything from nouns and verbs, phrases and clauses, morphemes and phonemes (90). It is this hierarchical tree from which human beings pull to create and organize sentences (90). And finally, the fourth format is what Pinker refers to as mentalese. He describes this fourth format as "the mind's lingua franca, the traffic of information among mental modules that allows us to describe what we see, imagine what is described to us, carry out instructions, and so on" (90).

In terms of this fourth format, there are two points of vital importance one must understand before rereading Cummings' work. First is Pinker's assertion that one's mental representation "does not have to look like English or any other language; it just has to use symbols to represent the logical relations among them, according to some consistent scheme" (*Language* 78). Pinker reminds us that many famous thinkers across several different disciplines "insist that in their most inspired moments they think not in words but in mental images" (70). British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, wrote that "visual images of scenes and words once appeared involuntarily before him in a dreamlike state," images that gave birth to his most famous poem (70). Novelist Joan Didion begins novels with "vivid mental pictures" and sculptor James Surls originates his work in his mind's eye, "watching the images roll and tumble" (70). Even scientists Watson and Crick made their most famous

discovery after it came to them in images (71).

But while “internal representations in an English speaker’s mind don’t *have* to look like English,” Pinker allows that “they *could*, in principle look like English—or like whatever language the person happens to speak” (78). The idea that mentalese could look like English is not only crucial in terms of rereading Cummings’ poetry, it is one of the truly distinguishing features of Cummings’ creative thought. Whereas some think in scenes, some in mental images, some in melody, it seems the very currency of Cummings’ language of thought was often a singular combination of words, parts of words, and typographical symbols.

The second point of vital importance when applying Pinker’s mentalese to Cummings’ work, and the more significant of the two, is that mentalese is “the medium in which content or gist is captured” (*Mind* 90). The essential term, here, is gist. “When you put down a book, you forget almost everything about the wording and typeface of the sentences and where they sat on the page. What you take away is their content or gist” (90).<sup>1</sup> Cummings had to have understood this—so much so, I would argue, that his most experimental work attempts to present his audience with a much more efficient journey into the stuff—or should we say, the gist—of his creative thought.

Pinker acknowledges that sometimes “it is not easy to find *any* words that properly convey a thought” (*Language* 58). “Language is notoriously poor, for instance, at conveying the subtlety and richness of sensations like smells and sounds. And it would seem to be just as inept at conveying other channels of sentience that are not composed out of discrete, accessible parts” (Pinker, *Thought* 276). In one of his most visually involved poems, “n(o)w” (CP 348), it becomes clear that Cummings not only agrees with Pinker, but illustrates Pinker’s point precisely.

As many of Cummings’ poems do, “n(o)w” clearly delights in the newness and freshness of spring and focuses on themes of restoration and rejuvenation. The promise of a new world unborn, symbolized by the protective womblike parentheses in the first line, is delivered by the end of the poem, and with it the hearty bloom and blossoming of a lush “earth) N,ew” (CP 348):

n(o)w

the  
how  
dis(appeared cleverly)world  
iS Slapped:with;liGhtninG  
!

at  
which(shal)lpounceupcrackw(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.!high  
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 !look—  
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

Simultaneously as it promises a new world unborn, the same parenthetical “o” in the first line reveals a hidden unworld, a “dis-world,” that alludes to the same afflicted and barren landscape with which the modernists were so concerned. Typical modernist underpinnings and typical Cummings artistry are both subtly revealed again in lines 10 and 11 [“ment ssky?wha tm)eani ngl(essNessUn / rolli)ngl yS troll s(who leO v erd)oma insCol”] where Cummings has cleverly disguised the Italian word “nessuno” meaning “no one” or “nobody,” though Cummings himself would likely use the term “mostpeople.” Those particular lines then read, roughly translated, “what meaningless nobodies rollingly stroll(s) whole over domains collide high” (CP 348).<sup>2</sup>

But beside Cummings’ preoccupation with spring and rejuvenation and the typical modernist undertones of disillusionment and disorientation—all, indeed, salient fixtures in much of Cummings’ work—a rereading of the poem, one that applies Pinker’s concepts of mentalese, reveals a striking correlation between Pinker’s understanding of what mentalese might look like on paper, and the typewriter acrobatics Cummings has included in this very poem.

For example, in lines 4-5 Cummings attempts to capture the instantaneous surprise, and even to some degree, the violence of a flash of lightning (CP 348):

iS Slapped:with;liGhtninG

!

Each of the four distinguishable words included in line four, Pinker would argue, are connected to “an entry in a mental dictionary representing the abstract idea” of a slap or of a flash of lightning (*Mind* 86). Pinker asserts that human beings “have a level of representation specific to the concepts behind the words, not just the words themselves” (86). So, then, in the moment when the recognizable words trigger those abstract entries in a reader’s mental dictionary, suddenly “everything hooked up to the entry [is] instantly available” (86).

But Cummings is not necessarily attempting to activate the abstract ideas in the reader’s mental dictionary, he is trying to more closely expose those in his own. Look at the first capital “S” in line four and the way it emphasizes the lowercase “i” immediately preceding it; that “i” begins a progression that includes the following colon, semi-colon, and exclamation

point (i ; !). This slap of lightning is so fierce, so sharp and sudden, that it overturns the “i” into the concluding exclamation point. In addition, this sequence creates an acceleration of movement in the line and an imagistic intensification of the exclamatory flash and emotion it records.

More importantly, though, if one’s mentalese were to consist of words and typographical symbols—as we know Pinker allows, and as I believe Cummings’ does—these lines, in combination, become a more direct, more illustrative, more precise and penetrative representation of the abstract concepts active in Cummings’ mental dictionary in the moment of creative thought that gave birth to this part of the poem. Instead of composing lines that satisfy traditional grammatical, punctuational, and syntactic expectations, leaving the reader to a gist that may or may not encapsulate what Cummings attempted to recreate, Cummings instead favors a more immediate, more accurate, and more direct print recreation of his mentalese.

One could make the same case for the middle of line 12 (CP 348):

n , o ; w :

Within the context of a poem that chronicles a budding new earth’s short, but irrepressible and monumental passage from pregnant nascency to rebirth—especially if we compare this line to the first line of the poem—it is easy to see how the two typographically enhanced “nows” represent a thought-world deeper, more broad, and more forceful than the few concepts, however abstract, that the single word “now” implies alone. What is more compelling, though, is the notion that the communication between poet and reader that takes place is not the result of conventionally linear, linguistic sequencing, but rather the result of Cummings revealing with precision and accuracy the combinatory stuff of his creative thought.

For a much more provocative correlation, however, one must look to lines 21-26 and 30-34 of the poem. In *The Language Instinct*, Pinker addresses five reasons why “English (or any other language people speak) is hopelessly unsuited to serve as our internal medium of computation” (78). The fifth of five problems he calls synonymy and uses the following four sentences to illustrate his point:

Sam sprayed paint onto the wall.

Sam sprayed the wall with paint.





poetry leads to new readings of this poem as well as countless others. In this case, for example, Pinker needs only a horizontal axis whereas Cummings makes use of both a horizontal and vertical, which adds dimension to the latter. (The language of mathematics is particularly emphasized with the subscript letter “i” that Pinker uses in his example, a subscript that inevitably leads the reader to thoughts of our “small-eye” poet.) Pinker has included one parenthetical unit inside another—something Cummings does as well—in order to suggest a kind of order of operation, but he does not use parentheses to split words or eliminate space. Cummings implements all of these. His internal “(are like)” softens the referential “(we dead)” so as to leave room for the possibility of rebirth, a process that the earth does for itself automatically. Splitting words and eliminating spaces with parentheses is clearly a modernist impulse; humans cannot help but find ways—in this case, typographical—to fragment the otherwise natural, perpetual, abiding restorative processes of the planet.

What is more notable here than any close reading of this particular poem is what Cummings is able to achieve in a much larger sense. “To get information into a listener’s head in a reasonable amount of time, a speaker can encode only a fraction of the message into words and must count on the listener to fill in the rest” (81). Cummings, however, has not taken pains to encode a fraction of any message. He knows that many “people have poor memories for the exact sentences that gave them their knowledge,” that we remember better the gist of what we have read (*Thought* 149). And so he closes the gap between limitation and possibility by giving us a better map for arriving at the gist of his own creative thought, a combination of linguistic and visual art that leaves the reader with blueprints that far surpass iconicity.

Cummings is most concerned with conveying the single, unutterable event synonymous with each of a reader’s individual reworkings of his poem, and so he gives us an early representation of mentalese that closes the gap between limitation and possibility. The marked resemblance between Pinker’s representation and Cummings’ poetic lines suggests that our poet is much less concerned with a reader’s attempt to come by the most appropriate, accurate, or supreme reading of any individual poem; he instead gives the reader a design that more immediately allows a reader to access his mentalese and from there adheres to an asymptotic law of increasing returns, by which the gist of his creative thought crystallizes in the reader’s mind further over time.

Of the transaction between writer and reader Pinker writes:

When a speaker sculpts a word into a truly unconventional sense, the hearer doesn't effortlessly mold her mental entry around it to recover the literal meaning. Rather, there is friction between the speaker's square peg and the listener's round hole, and that friction *itself* conveys information in a parallel stream. Indeed, a predictable clash between a speaker's new use and a hearer's fixed meaning is what gives language much of its piquancy and fun. (*Thought* 119)

So, too, is the case above when a poet sculpts a poem into a truly unconventional sense. When that poet is Cummings, much of the information this friction conveys leads the reader to the essence of his mentalese.

"Can we catch innovators in the act of stretching the language?" (74) Pinker asks. "It happens all the time," he says, and adds that "a real language is constantly being pushed and pulled at the margins by different speakers in different ways" (74). Similarly, in terms of poetry and methods of poetic expression, Cummings, indeed, becomes an innovator in his own right by stretching, pushing, and pulling the ways in which one might best come to allow the reader to inhabit his consciousness, the ways in which one may best render in print the stuff of his creative thought.

—*Omaha, Nebraska*

## Notes

1 Pinker seems to forget here that poetry was invented at least in part as a mnemonic device: rhythm, meter, rhyme, repetition, and (I would argue) visual placement are all devices designed to make words memorable and even unforgettable. [Editor's note]

2 This line also contains the nonce words "troll," "who," "leO" [a lion?], and "erd" ["earth" in German].

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