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Robert Dorsett

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SOME NOTES ON CLASSICAL METER, TECHNIQUE, AND CUMMINGS' INNOVA- TIONS IN *1x1*

Robert Dorsett

By classical meter I mean the convention practiced by most English poets up to modern times but which was ultimately derived from the Greek. Chaucer was the first major English poet to master it and had available French models; Italian writers, such as Dante and Boccaccio; translations of Ovid; some English precursors; the Latin hymnal; and other sources. This convention, however, was commonly practiced and subsequently passed down, only during the late sixteenth century, after the English language was standardized, and after the advent of the Renaissance, when new classical texts were available for the first time. This method for forming the poetic line relies on accent, which is, at least in part, a function of loudness and pitch, and which, for any particular word, can be looked up in a dictionary. It is, of course, more complicated; different syllables, although accented, are less or more so; however, the meter is an abstract pattern which does not take into account these differences. Attempts to use quantity or duration of sound, as in the prosody of Latin and Greek, was attempted in the sixteenth century by the Areopagus group (including Sidney) and later by such poets as Bridges, but was mostly abandoned, ostensibly because of the natural tendency for the English line to be dominated by accent. In addition, there is in English poetry an intrinsic and complicated rhythm which arises naturally from the organic summation of semantic emphasis, alliteration, mono or polysyllabism, assonance, consonance, accent, etc., and which is not dependant upon convention. These two aspects can be counterpointed, which is felt as a tension, and which liberates tone, irony, and drama, giving a remarkable flexibility within a set convention. This was the gift especially of Sidney and Spenser, since the texts of Chaucer were long obscured until the mid-nineteenth century by an ignorance of Middle English pronunciation and the value of his final "e."

The first line of Cummings' poem XIX from *1x1* is an example:
"when you are silent, shining host by guest" (559).

Here, a descending rhythm occurs, initiated by the first foot, which is ambiguously trochaic and carried on by the two similar disyllabic, falling words separated midfoot by a strong caesura. Scansion, however, is entirely compatible with an ascending, or iambic, rhythm.

In Shakespeare's sonnets there is much of this; the midfoot caesura, however, is less usual, often used for a more pronounced rhetorical effect as well as a rhythmic one:

But be contented: when that fell arrest (#74)
O, that you were yourself! but, love, you are (#13)

The principles are the same, and Cummings proceeds with much variation. For example, let us consider poem XXXIX:

all ignorance toboggans into know
and trudges up to ignorance again:
but winter's not forever, even snow
melts; and if spring should spoil the game, what then?

all history's a winter sport or three:
but were it five, i'd still insist that all
history is too small for even me;
for me and you, exceedingly too small.

Swoop (shrill collective myth) into thy grave
merely to toil the scale to shrillness
per every madge and mabel dick and dave
--tomorrow is our permanent address

and there they'll scarcely find us (if they do,
well move away still further: into now (CP 579)

This sonnet is Shakespearian, with stanzas rhyming abab, cdcd, efef, and a final couplet, rhymed aa: there is a semantic turn occurring somewhere in the first strophic interspace and a more dramatic turn in the second interspace, setting off the sestet, which is

emphasized further by the spondee and a mid-foot caesura in line nine. The iambic expectation set up by the first eight lines makes the variations of line nine more striking. Compare Shakespeare's sonnet #73, where the rhythm of line four resists the meter:

That time of year thou mayest in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

There is genius in Cummings' adaptations which reflects not only the Romantic practitioners but also the sixteenth century, as well as the odd combination of old diction with a relaxed American idiom. Tension is also produced by the play of the metrical unit, here the pentameter line, against the semantic rhythm, produced by clever phrasing and enjambment.

The following lines from *Paradise Lost* illustrate how rhyme would interfere with this flow, which is at once flexible and marmoreal, by breaking the lines into tesserae, as in Pope.

He added not; for Adam at the news
Heart-struck with chilling gripe of sorrow stood
That all his senses bound: Eve, who unseen
Yet all had heard, with audible lament
Discovered soon the place of her retire:
(Book 6, lines 263-7)

Cummings, however, uses enjambment in new ways; when he impedes it with rhyme, as in IV, and then breaks through, the effect is startling:

of all the blessings which to man
kind progress doth impart
one stands supreme i mean the an
imal without a heart. (CP 544)

Here there is both an enjambment and none: 'man' belongs to the

first line, and 'kind' to the second, or 'mankind' can override the line. It is ambiguous whether 'to man' is an iamb or 'mankind' is a spondee. In addition, there are semantic relationships engendered by rhyme; the linkage of man with animal, as well as the rhetorical emphasis on the first syllable of animal, is perfect.

In VIII, enjambment is used for an ironic and comic effect:

"fell
ow
sit
isn'ts" (CP 547)

As is common in modern poetics, Cummings frequently uses enjambment without rhyme, and often does so midline. However, since Cummings is so exact in the rest of the poem, it has a more modulating effect, as in XLII:

sunlight? Yes
(always we have heard them sing
(CP 582)

At times the enjambment takes over and the metric value of the line seems lost, as in XIII:

plato told

him:he couldn't
believe it(jesus

told him;he
wouldn't believe
it)lao

tsze
certainly told
him,and general
(yes

mam)
sherman;
and even
(believe it
or

not)you
told him:i told
him;we told him
(he didn't believe it,no

sir)it took
a nipponized bit of
the old sixth

avenue
el;in the top of his head:to tell

him (CP 553)

The number of lines in each stanza expands from one to five and then contracts back to one. There is perfect rhetorical control: 'sixth/avenue/ el' is strongly accented not by meter but placement. When Cummings wants the language to move faster, he lengthens the line: 'in the top of his head'. There are two anapests here, which are known to be fast. However, it is not the meter that determines the overall form.

It has always occurred to me that punctuation has two purposes: rhythm and clarity. Neither has anything to do with rules. Cummings has liberated punctuation's rhythmic and formal effect. Not only is every letter important, as in Blake's famous dictum, but also every comma. A lack of a period at the end leaves an openness, as if someone held the middle pedal down at the end of a piano piece. The beginnings of lines are not capitalized as is the convention, because, often, when he uses a capital letter, he does so for accent or to set off a pun, as in poem IX.

a salesman is an it that stinks Excuse

Me whether it's president of the you were say (CP 549)

He uses both enjambment and parenthesis in XXXIII: "open green those / (dear)/worlds of than great" (CP 573). The second line in the following example, from poem LII, seems to lift from the page: "life is more true than reason will deceive / (more secret or than madness did reveal)" (CP 592). Enjambment and dropped punctuation give a strengthened accent, in XLIV: "so sky so / .wish" (CP 584).

In number XLV, the missing open quote of the first line is found in the beginning of the last line, giving relief to the rhythmic and semantic suspension. These parallelisms, with or without punctuation, are an integral part of Cummings' method: "i think you like" and "my home ionian isles" (CP 585).

Variation of line weight, by which I mean a combination of visual length and reading duration, is varied in Shakespeare. Here, in sonnet three, he maintains the strict metrical pattern but varies the weight by using polysyllabic words and light accents. "For where is she so fair whose unneared womb / Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?"

In *1x1*, however, the lines are weighted more evenly, due perhaps to the desire to maintain a visual form as well as semantic parallelisms. It is a shibboleth, nowadays, that poems can only be realized when read aloud; however, only by looking and reading silently can someone perceive the visual beauty of poems and the tension between their form in time and their form in space. Number XXIX shows much of Mr. Cummings' technique.

let it go--the
smashed word broken
open vow or
the oath cracked length
wise--let it go it
was sworn to

go

let them go--the
truthful liars and
the false fair friends
and the boths and
neithers--you must let them go they
were born to

go

let all go--the
big small middling
tall bigger really
the biggest and all
things--let all go
dear

so comes love (CP 569)

This is the balance of a ritual dance. The first lines of each strophe progress from 'it' and 'them', to the final 'all', and, as is commonly seen in his work, the line parallelisms create poems within the poem. The last and penultimate lines of each strophe together become: "was sworn / to go; born / to go; dear / so comes love".

It is common for intelligent young poets today to feel as though the credibility of their art is being threatened. On one hand, formalism seems to mean the passive use of inherited rules and traditional forms, which is increasingly becoming vulnerable to criticism as a canon; on the other hand, a rejection of that formalism seems to leave no alternative but the loose expression and weak line ends dependant upon a variable caesura seen in most magazines. I believe Cummings had an answer. Why he is not used more as a model is, perhaps, due to his virtuosity; it is just that his act is too hard to follow.

Berkeley, California