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# POST-STRUCTURALIST CUMMINGS

Ian Landles

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Major criticism of Cummings falls into two periods. The first dates from Norman's *Magic Maker* (1958) until Kidder's *Introduction to the Poetry* (1979). The second period starts with Rotella's *Critical Essays* (1984) and ends with Heusser's *I Am My Writing* (1997). Pre-1958 criticism has not been ignored here, but that criticism was made up of reviews, articles, and essays – some of it important, but largely lacking depth and by now forgotten – this I term minor criticism. What this criticism did was to establish Cummings as a figure worthy of discussion, whether positively or negatively.

The first major period is mostly an attempt to establish Cummings' literary reputation, and implicit in most of this criticism is a charge of 'defending' Cummings from hostile critics. From Friedman's important *The Art of His Poetry* (1960) onwards, Cummings criticism always contained a section which refuted allegations of immaturity, lack of development, typographic nonsense, and romantic subjectivity. Certainly if this criticism is read closely what emerges is the feeling that other agendas (i.e. the 'canon' and Cummings' placing within it) seem to inhibit the actual criticism itself. An example of this 'defensive' criticism can be seen by contrasting it with Leavis' *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932). Leavis doesn't so much 'defend' Eliot, but revels in his obvious stature as a major poet. Leavis concentrates upon the work, not the reputation, critical reception, or 'worth' of Eliot. It could be called "offensive" criticism.

However defensive this first major period was, it did ward off the more ludicrous criticism against Cummings. Despite this, however, Cummings is still not recognised as the major poet that many believe he is. The defensive work of this first period, whilst doing its job in safeguarding Cummings for the future, did not progress Cummings' case any further from when it started. This is a point many would argue with, but a point that can be best illustrated by reflecting upon the second period of Cummings criticism –

or rather the lack of criticism in this second period.

In the twenty years since Kidder's book, only five other critical books on Cummings have been published. Rotella's *Critical Essays* contains fourteen actual essays (the rest being reviews), and of these only Rotella's own essay is written after 1979. Both Friedman's *(Re)Valuing Cummings* (1996), and Kennedy's *Revisited* (1994) return to something previously discussed. As good as these books are, they are not offensive books. Both, occasionally, slip back into the habit of defending Cummings, and perhaps most importantly, ignore current developments in critical theory. Cohen's *Poet and Painter* (1987) takes Cummings criticism a step further, but the book is not intended for anyone other than the Cummings scholar, for it is too specialised and focused for the general reader. It is, however, despite some reservations, the first "offensive" book of the period. It concentrates upon the work, and brings to light important insights on Cummings' early development. More pertinently, it collects many of Cummings' pictures – drawings and superb colour plates—a side of Cummings, which even today, does not receive the attention that it should. That leaves us with Heusser's *I Am My Writing*. This can be called the first truly complete offensive book. It by and large ignores the defensive mode of criticism, brings Cummings up to date critically by using post-structuralist theory, and provides insights into Cummings that are fresh and new. Perhaps the only reservation about this book is that Heusser's central premise (that the creation of text is the creation of self) echoes back to Lane's *I Am* (1976). However, the work is so progressive, that this criticism is almost irrelevant. What is important here, is its timing.

Heusser's book comes at a time when all of Cummings' works are being re-edited and re-issued, with a recently published biography, concordance, a new volume of letters, and a magazine devoted to Cummings, the future has never looked so bright. All that is missing is the criticism. The offensive criticism. What I should like to do is to present a brief analysis of Cummings, using post-structuralist theory, to show that Cummings' work, when treated without the defensiveness of previous criticism, is more rel-

evant now than at any other time since its initial publication. Perhaps my analysis will pave the way for future, innovative Cummings criticism.

### Otherness

To Mikhail Bakhtin, an utterance only acquires meaning in relation to the utterance of an other. That is, all utterances ought to anticipate the word of the other. Words thus become dialogized – shot through with anticipations of, and rejoinders to, the word of an other. Dialogism, then, is not solely polyphony of voices within the text, but also the anticipation by the author, through his/her words, of the reader's response. To carry this through, the author becomes the *mise-en-scène* of the text – an empty space where the drama takes place.

swi(  
across!gold's

rouNdly  
)ftblac  
kl(ness)y

a-motion-upo-nmotio-n

Less?  
thE  
(against  
is  
)Swi

mming

(w-a)s  
bIr

d, (CP 429)

This famous poem contains nearly all of Cummings' techniques: grammatical deviation, punctuation deviance, ellipsis, word splits, unconventional use of parenthesis, word coinage, and an unresolved ending. Drawing heavily upon the first period of major criticism on Cummings, a process I shall only attempt this once, we find the following insights to this poem: The severely limited language refers only to the most basic of information – a descriptiveness of colour, shape, speed, and direction. It will be noted that there are no subjective words in the poem, and this leads us to the first question: who, and where, is the 'I'? As such, the poem shows affinities to many Japanese Haiku poems. Since there is no subjectivity in the poem, there is also no spiritual dimension or metaphorical illusion other than those brought to it by the reader. All we have here is an ambiguous description of sorts, a description not dominated by an authorial voice. Clearly, the impression is that of something moving very fast, so fast that the first word struggles to be clearly enunciated before it has to be qualified. Speed is further communicated by the first parenthesis, the lack of clear syntactical relationships, and by the '!'.

Throughout the poem, qualifiers are used successively to adjust the initial impression. Thus "ness" and "Less?" are used to modify previous words, as if the first impressions weren't quite right. This qualification stems from the sheer speed of the incident and highlighted by the subtle change in tense from "is" to "was" in the space of two lines. The poem attempts to represent motion, speed, and 'Aliveness' without freezing the moment in a static framework, hence the amount of deviant grammar and syntax. Indeed, the poem could be seen as a sort of shorthand. The poem ends on an unresolved, highly ambiguous ",", suggesting that the bird has flown away, but also that its impression remains in the consciousness of the observer. It can also suggest a continuance of action – that this isn't an isolated moment, and that the world continues after the event.

Such insights have been recognised by previous critics and they are by no means exhausted by the selection above. However, to link this poem to Bakhtin, we must firstly note the Bakhtinian

principle that the author, in a dialogic text, does not necessarily have the final word. Here, the comma suggests that the final word is left for the reader to create. This surrender is in perfect keeping with the missing "I" of the poem. What also becomes evident here is the amount of work that the reader has to do to extract a meaning of sorts from the poem -- and as we have seen, not just from the poem, but with what happens outside the poem as well. It is inconceivable that Cummings was not consciously thinking of the reader when constructing lines like: "RouNdly / )ftblac / kl(ness)y". Cummings does no work for his reader -- he anticipates that s/he will make his/her own connotations, interpretations, and conclusions. Instead, he provides us with the facts, scrambled though they may be. Even the techniques Cummings uses are subjectively interpreted by the reader as related to the words of the poem.

Bakhtin said: "Each image is subject to the meaning of the whole ... Through its participation in the whole, each of these images is deeply ambivalent, being intimately related to life-death-birth" (149). These "images" are the possible interpretations, and the "life-birth-death" is the writing of the poem (life), the reading of the poem (death), and the interpretation of the poem (birth). This poem does not exist without the active participation of the reader. It cannot be read casually, or without attention. It cannot succeed without the reader's input and reconstructive abilities. In short, this poem, like so many other Cummings poems, was written anticipating the other/reader.

### **The Pre-Deconstructed Poem**

Those familiar with the work of Jacques Derrida will be aware of his conclusions that speech is the site of Presence and that Presence is the necessity of western metaphysics. "Meaning," then is determined by Presence, which in turn is equated with "truth." Writing is inferior to speech because it depends upon Absence. Thus its characteristics oppose Presence, and metaphysical thinking has to eject it or subordinate it. Writing, to operate, doesn't need the author's presence or consciousness:

The absence of the sender ... from the marks that he abandons, which are cut off from him continue to produce effects beyond his presence and beyond the present actuality of his meaning, that is, beyond his life itself. . . . To write is to produce a mark that will constitute a kind of machine that is in turn productive [and that the writer's disappearance] will not prevent [it] from functioning. (Derrida, *Margins*, 313, 316)

The same, however, applies to the reader:

All writing, therefore, in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence; it is a break in presence, "death", or the possibility of the "death" of the addressee. (ibid 315)

To Derrida, writing cannot be writing unless it can function in these two absences. Presence is unsustainable. However, let us look at Cummings in terms of these conclusions.

l(a

le

af

fa

ll

s)

one

l

iness (673)

There is much to say about this famous poem despite its brevity. Indeed, so much has been written about it that an entire book on it could be compiled – no small feat for four words. Let me add to the debate.

What is apparent instantly is that the four words do not constitute a grammatical sentence. "Meaning" is not present semanti-

cally – once again, the reader has to bring meaning to the poem. Cummings' voice seems absent, and he offers no link, association, or comment upon the words/two phrases. As with "swi(" Cummings anticipates that the reader will have to work for meaning in the unchecked free play of connotations, associations, symbols, and metaphors that can be found in this poem, subjectively, by the reader. Again, Cummings fully anticipates that the reader will reconstruct the poem both grammatically and semantically. By withdrawing from the poem, Cummings allows the reader the freedom to create his/her own reconstruction of the poem based on individual interpretations – a rewriting of sorts. The reader becomes the author. In decoding the poem, reconstructing it to find meaning, which semantically isn't present, the reader creates something new – a subjectivity not present on the page. The consequence of this is that now no single interpretation is possible, but rather each time the poem is read, even by the same reader, something new is found – Bakhtinian "life-death-rebirth." This multiplicity of meanings suggests the movement Cummings searched for – an "Aliveness" that rejects the static, fixed framework of traditional poetry.

However, the most important repercussion is that now the reader has become the author: the absence of the writer has been replaced by the presence of the reader/author. Writing has presence. Let us take this a step further. Derrida has always resisted the defining of Deconstruction. To him it is not a method, technique, or critique. To attempt to define Deconstruction leads the critic to the obstacles that Derrida has placed in its path (Norris 18). Deconstruction has nothing to do with interpretation, but rather: "... must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses ... [It] attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight ..." (*Of Grammatology* 158, 163). Deconstructive reading, then, attempts to uncover the unconscious rather than the conscious dimensions of the text. It looks for evidence of gaps, breaks, fissures, and discontinuities of all kinds. In short, it attempts to show disunity in texts, which underlies the assumed unity of that text. Without 'defining' Deconstruction, we



can show some of the working mechanisms of it, the practices used by critics in Deconstructive reading. Although not definitive, this list gives us some idea of what the critic looks for:

Contradiction/Paradoxes

Shifts/Breaks in – Tone

Viewpoint

Tense

Time

Person

Attitude

Conflicts

Absences/Omissions

Linguistic Quirks

Aporia

Let us turn to Cummings.

nonsun blob a

cold to

skylessness

sticking fire

my are your

are birds our all

and one gone

away the they

leaf of ghosts some

few creep there

here or on

unearth (CP 541)

It is not my intention to dwell on previous readings of this poem. There are plenty, and each adds to the poem's mystery. However, I would like to turn to Friedman, who writes that: "... the reader must relocate for himself the parts of this sentence into their normal syntactical pattern, he must receive these impressions piecemeal and hold them in the balance until he explores their pattern, which is then perceived all at once" (*Art* 109). This is perhaps the most astute

way of decoding a Cummings poem, but notice the reliance upon "relocat[ing]" or reconstructing and subjectively interpreting the poem. The poem is inherently resistant to interpretation. Words are coined and placed to jar and clash against continuity. Ambiguity abounds everywhere because of the deviance of the grammar and syntax, making semantic analysis almost impossible.

Meaning can only be subjective in the face of such multiplicity of interpretations. Returning to the list of mechanisms of Deconstruction, we can see how this poem exhibits so many of these items. There are many contradictions/paradoxes – "sticking fire", "nonsun", "skylessness", "unearth". Tense changes too – "sticking fire" to "gone/away". Who is the speaker? What is his/her attitude/viewpoint? Is the tone objective or subjective? Obviously conflict occurs grammatically, syntactically, and semantically, and ellipsis dominates the poem. As for linguistic quirks, isn't Cummings famous for this, and has he ever been so brutal before? Finally, just what are the patterns of this poem? Autumn, loss, or sex? If any organising concept is sought for, it soon becomes apparent that it can be dissected. Furthermore, the poem is circular ("nonsun" to "unearth") and refutes linearity. It rejects an authorial viewpoint, and, most importantly, a logocentric dominance.

If the effect of a Deconstructive reading is to show the disunity of an apparently unified text, then reading this poem causes the Deconstructor a problem. That is, many of the mechanisms of Deconstruction are already present in this poem. In other words, Cummings has written this poem exhibiting the same effects that Deconstructive reading seeks for in other texts. This poem cannot be Deconstructed since its very success depends upon its Deconstructiveness. It is a Pre-Deconstructed poem.

We have here an example of art containing and enacting future critical methods, which makes Cummings relevant today. In our post-structuralist world, which has demolished the unified, grand narratives, we pick over the pieces of what's left. Cummings is one of those pieces – an important piece, for he played with language in the same spirit that today's critics destroy our preconceptions. There is no need to defend or justify Cummings. What he

achieved was important then as it is now. I suggest that it is only now that we have the language and the mechanisms with which to explore Cummings' work and techniques. Hopefully, with all the foundations in place, Cummings criticism will pick up pace again. This brief study has shown just how much is left to discover in Cummings' work, for the field is as yet unploughed. Let us hope, then, that this is the way forward.

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