

VOICE AND SILENCE IN E. E. CUMMINGS' POETRY

Isabelle Alfandary

"Japanese poetry is different from Western poetry in the same way as silence is different from a voice" (Houghton bMS Am 1892.6 [94]). Such an aphorism is not to be found in a critical essay but in a college paper entitled "The Poetry of Silence" in which a student discusses the comparative forms and techniques of traditional Far-East and twentieth-century modernist poetries. The author of the paper was E. E. Cummings when he was a college student at Harvard University in the years immediately before World War I. Even as a young man and poet, E. E. Cummings had already connected voice and silence. Indeed, the relationship between silence and voice became fundamental in his poetry. How different is silence from voice is the question I would like to ask of Cummings' poetry.

E. E. Cummings' poems are filled with references to silence and voice. In *is* 5, section Four (1926), the poet, interestingly enough, gives an account of his poetic activity in these words:

some ask praise of their fellows
but i being otherwise
made compose curves
and yellows, angles or silences
to a less erring end)

myself is sculptor of
your body's idiom:
the musician of your wrists;
the poet who is afraid
only to mistranslate

a rhythm in your hair,
(your fingertips
the way you move)
the

painter of your voice—
beyond these elements

remarkably nothing is....

(CP 292)

The poem, as Cummings suggests, is a composition of silences among such other different things as "yellows," "curves," and "angles." E. E. Cummings was at least partly a modernist poet, as Norman Friedman argues in his essay "Cummings and the Modernist Tradition" (16). Just as he was a modernist painter in Kandinsky's and Picasso's wake, silence is poetic matter in his poetry as colors or shapes in his painting. More than just a poetic means, silence is a poetic end, may be even "a less erring end" as the poet ironically remarks. Of course, Cummings did not devise the notion but to some extent discovered or rediscovered it. Christopher Columbus did not invent America either. And indeed silence is this long-ignored and new-found land, the impossible and engulfed continent the poet reaches. It is just as if Cummings' poetry took up a lost and forlorn object in Western poetry. Now why had silence been silenced? If the poet-to-be did not give the answer, at least he raised the question and came to the conclusion that Western poetry—especially the romantic poets whom Cummings admired and to whom he owed his early inspiration and more—had overinvested the voice to the detriment of silence.

But of course, it would be impossible to think of a voice without thinking of silence, for the two are undoubtedly inseparable. Only the connection between the two is problematic—what our college student referred to as their "difference." The reference to silence hardly ever comes without that of voice because silence implies voice just as voice does silence. Yet silence does not logically contradict voice in Cummings' mind. We could even say (taking up one of Cummings' well-known phrases devised on the occasion of a fictitious interview he gave to himself and in which he related his painting to his poetry [*Miscellany* 316]) that the two even "love each other dearly." Silence is a prerequisite for the voice, a space for it to invest, a resonance chamber in which to reverberate. In silence resounds voice, in voice silence is present. Poetry consists in turning the invisible—silence or a voice—into perception and presence.

Silence is experience. And that may be the reason why it usually comes up equally as an adjective, an adverb, or a noun in E. E. Cummings' poems. Silence is a quality, or even more, emotion itself. It may either qualify a noun ("silent shoulders"), be a qualified substantive ("nervous and accurate silence" [CP 114]), or be presented as a quality in itself ("she smelled of silence" [CP 208]). Of course, silence is a quality the senses perceive even if we cannot properly name it. And indeed, the poet hardly ever uses the word "silence" alone. But silence is not completely unknown to us even though it remains almost unnamed. How would we be able otherwise to understand the phrase "she smelled of silence" without having at least once felt it? Unspeakable, silence is not imperceptible but can only be attained by indirect means. One of them is synesthesia. Silence is more than just an idea or a thing, it is a phenomenon, a form for emotion to occur. Being an abstraction, as is always the case with abstraction in Cummings' poetry, does not prevent it from being

essentially tactile. The abstraction of silence is more than perceptible —it is purely sensuous.

If the very words of "silence" and "voice" are repeated throughout the poems and tend to compose a recurrent motive, a literal *ritornello*, silence and voice are not only evoked as words or values but performed as poetic events. But what do voice and silence have in common after all? Silence as well as the voice are unspeakable. Both are located on the margins of language, on the two ends of the linguistic field. And Cummings as we know was highly interested in limits and frontiers, being fond both of exploration and transgression. Silence is in fact beneath linguistic expression, while the voice is beyond it. Although the voice can be heard even in the silence of a speechless reading, it can by no means be uttered. If the poet can "utter a tree"(CP 114) and effectively does in one of his poems, all he can do is utter words but never the voice itself. For the voice exceeds sound and phonetics.

Paradoxically, reading gives access to the voice, the poetic voice, even though the reading is silent, or maybe precisely because it is silent. In most cases, at least as far as visual poems are concerned, the reader does not have the choice but to read in silence, to utter the syllables and eccentric letters in order to re-compose the dismembered words and syntagms, to literally chew them to re-articulate what has intentionally been dislocated. Only mute speech makes it possible for the reader to recover meaning and sound at the same time. If the voice does not exclude the sound, it cannot be reduced to it. The voice is in fact sound but also contrast. If Chinese characters inspired the young author of "The Poetry of Silence," it is precisely because as a monosyllabic word, each character "differs from its neighbor not only in phonetic sound but also in pitch and 'tone'" (Houghton 1892.6[94]). The poem is thus to be read as a score, as an alternation of differences. The written sign eventually releases its intensity in the surrounding blankness of the page. As paradoxical as it may sound, the voice is beyond the reach of language, just as silence is said to be "beyond the mystery of rhyme" (CP 143) in one of the "Sonnets—Unrealities".

The pictorial equivalent to silence and voice that keeps coming up in Cummings' texts on his painting as well as in his poetry is color. In a love poem, the poetic voice invites the beloved to come closer and enjoins her : "live with me in the fewness of / these colors; / alone who slightly / always are beyond the reach of death // and the English" (CP 358). Color as well as silence is unspeakable, sheer difference that can only be imperfectly qualified and impossibly uttered, pure emotion that can only be experienced without being named. The comparison between silence and colors is not gratuitous at all, for the poet constantly associates disparities of what he acknowledges as the fundamental mysteries as well as basic resources of his art.

The unspeakable is precisely the region the poet&painter is to explore, the territory he tries by all means to capture. The more unspeakable a concept is, the more Cummings works at defining it. Definition is the alternative to the

most problematic utterance of silence. As metaphysical poets were before him, Cummings is very fond of definitions. Silence is, moreover, one of Cummings' favorite conceits, together with love, life and death.

silence

.is

a

looking

bird:the

turn

ing;edge, of

life

(inquiry before snow

(CP 712)

In this brief and intense poem from *95 Poems* (1958), silence is defined through two remarkable images I would like to dwell upon. First of all, "the looking bird" symbolises the potentiality of the voice unactualized. The underlying metaphor that has been displaced is that of the singing bird: the looking bird is the bird literally "unsinging". The poet actually forged the adjective that comes up from time to time in the poems, especially in a poem on silence (CP 839): "enter no(silence is the blood whose flesh / is singing)silence:but unsinging." Now "the looking bird" makes it possible to understand the adjective "unsinging," which the poet did not devise thoughtlessly. The negation is here the only linguistic possibility for expressing silence. If we know what singing means, then we may have a chance to understand its transgressive negation, "unsinging." Neither figures of speech nor linguistic games, even though witty or powerful, will ever convey the universal meaning of a voice or silence. For they are a matter of private experience and of singular comprehension.

As for the second image, "the turning edge of life," it refers to the unlikely point where speech ceases, the unimaginable passage where speech turns into speechlessness, that no one can experience unless it is already too late to testify. These two images are literally beyond representation. The looking bird and the turning edge of life can hardly be met. They challenge not only conventional representations but the faculty of imagination itself. Is a looking bird still a bird? Can the turning edge of life still be called life? To express silence, the poet has to work on the limit of representation to adjust to the nature of its escaping object. The image is here more than just an artifact. Displacement is the only way to express silence, if such thing be possible at all. Since silence is what cannot be articulated, it has to be experienced otherwise.

Still, silence partly resists definition. For silence is self-sufficient as the full stop at the beginning of the second line clearly demonstrates. Silence is in itself a sentence that hardly needs any verb. The punctuation mark, however, draws an invisible line between silence and "is." The "is" is, by the way, a major concept in E. E. Cummings' poetry and really what his poetry is about. The "is" is what happens.

What the speaker cannot pronounce may be heard, what the mouth cannot utter can be seen. Even imperceptible sounds can be perceived on the flat surface of the poem just as a "dead leaf stirring makes a crash" the poet mentions in a late poem devoted to silence (CP 839). So why not silence itself? Where the voice stops at the end of a line or even within a line, silence can be encountered, almost heard as an echo of it. Silence is, after all, hardly less audible than a snowflake, a raindrop, or a falling leaf that are scattered on the page. The poet himself points out the analogy between silence and snow, which constitute the first and last words of the poem. This poem may to some extent be considered a visual one, for its last line is followed by a huge blank: "inquiry before snow" announces a white downpour, a visual snow that effectively occurs and covers the rest of the page. In spite of its performative and prophetic power, the voice eventually ends in silence that it can foretell but is unable to rival.

To express silence as well as voice, Cummings resorts to the eye. The most efficient way to render the unspeakable is to make it visible. Exchanging senses through synesthesia or crossing domains makes it possible for the poet to express what cannot be represented. Vision is the most appropriate sense available for fulfilling this complicated requirement. Why? Because the eye sees even what the mouth cannot articulate, and to some extent it can touch what language cannot reach. And in fact, the reference to silence is not only to be encountered in Cummings' poetry but also in his painting. Silence apparently plays a decisive role in Cummings' aesthetics. In a personal note, the poet&painter (as he liked to call himself and to be called by others), surprisingly enough, referred to silence as the core of the pictorial emotion as well as the cause of his urge to paint and linked it explicitly with color: "To start with I have a strong desire to paint, by 'a desire to paint' I mean an impulse to feel before me a good deal of color. . . . Eventually, soon or late, color begins, a particular chromatic instant roots gradually upon a certain moment of silence. I turn to my paints, catch with every possible speed the visitor, and place him where he most desires to be, place him wheremost he will devour the silence." And Cummings insistently gave a clue to the interpretation of his painting, which is quite surprising if we consider his well-known reluctance to explain his technique: "When I say wheremost he will devour the silence I am indicating the fundamental significance of my painting." Silence stands thus on both sides of the pictorial scope and process.

Now why does color involve silence? Because colors are unspeakable. Language is unable to convey the chromatic emotion. Color is beyond the

realm of articulation and words. For colors are neither signs nor symbols; they do not represent, do not mean anything. And yet colors speak to the senses, the mind, and the body altogether. But this language cannot be formalised, for its syntax is not systematic. And because you do not recognize a color, you cannot name it. Silence is consequently derived from the impossibility of color to be properly voiced. Color is sheer emotion. And as Cummings' poetry and painting constantly demonstrate, emotion lasts only as long as recognition can be postponed. Color is, according to Cummings, what is edgeless: "Colors . . . are exempt from the taxation of recognition" (Houghton 1892.7 [68]). An edge is indeed what makes a sign or a shape distinct and likely to be recognized. It is with painting just the way it is with language. As soon as words or forms are perceived, then emotion originating in the unknown, what Cummings calls "the invisible", has lapsed. That is why Cummings' painting and poetry attempt to delay as much as they can the conditions and the time of recognition.

Silence and color are to be devoured, for they cannot be articulated. Sigmund Freud, whom Cummings had read extensively, remarks that the same organ is meant for two antagonistic activities: eating and speaking. Oral satisfaction is the end of painting and may be the end of poetry too. Whenever words cannot be spoken or read, they are likely to be visually devoured.

If silence cannot be outspokenly uttered, it has to be expressed using inarticulate means. The realm of inarticulateness is the eye. Silence is materially made visible on the page by being metonymically identified with the surrounding blank space, as is the case here. On the canvas, or on a page, silence is a matter of space and surface, of infinite space and of unrecognizable surface. The written text plays here a decisive role. Without the physicality of writing, silence could not be properly conveyed. Then, reciprocally, the vocal part should not be underestimated either, for the voice enables the reader to decipher the mute hieroglyphs of the page and to turn them into speech. However, muteness essentially differs from silence, for muteness implies a dead letter while silence does not imply a letter at all. Silence is neither want of language, nor inability to speak, but the unspoken.

Cummings' poems are filled with silences made visible: blanks between words, between syllables or even letters, are encountered more than just occasionally. Language is thus pierced with silence which does not remain confined to the limits of the written text. If silence is unspeakable by definition, the experience of silence, and the expression of silence, will take place on the page visually within the poem as well as on the margins. The poet was used to checking and double-checking the visual and material aspect of the poems for that purpose: his correspondence with his publisher as well as with his personal typesetter Samuel A. Jacobs is full of what may be considered minor typographical details, or even worse, the symptoms of some unknown form of obsession: the typographical obsession. But there is nothing pathological about it. Silence is performed so; the poet needs to make sure that the conditions of the performance are under control. Punctuation marks especially matter since

they interrupt the voice but also prefigure the unspeakable. A comma, a colon, or a semi-colon, as in "silence / .is", can be seen but hardly spoken. Of course, Cummings could not help playing from time to time with them and replacing the punctuation marks by their names in black and white on the page. Part of the obsession of what he calls "that precision which creates movement" (CP 221) can be related to the urge to attain the unspeakable, to express silence and voice, to render rhythm. For rhythm is the alternation of voice and silences, a fabric of differences called a poem.

But let's come back for a minute to the "is" of the definition poem. What happens really is both voice and silence, for what happens is rhythm. Thin, forlorn and lyrical, the voice resounds in the immensity of the silent page. The voice cannot be reduced to the first person singular, nor to the poetic instance, not even the lower case "i." In fact, it transcends the division between subject and object, and all forms of categories. A singular voice is what brings the poem together and generates the poetic emotion and eventually what is idiosyncratic in E. E. Cummings' poetry. It unifies the poem beyond syntactical disruptions and visual games of all sorts. In fact, the voice is what goes on whatever the discontinuities of syntax or typography might be, whatever the threat of silence, solitude and loss may be, and even though it seems to be on the verge of fading.

The lyricism of Cummings' poetry, which is almost everywhere acknowledged, has its roots deeply in the echo, visual and oral, of the voice reverberating in the silence of the page. I would like to conclude with the second stanza of one of the more moving love sonnets E. E. Cummings ever wrote, "it may not always be so," for it exemplifies to perfection the attitude of the voice towards silence:

if this should be,i say if this should be—
you of my heart,send me a little word;
that i may go unto him,and take his hands,
saying,Accept all happiness from me.
Then shall i turn my face,and hear one bird
sing terribly afar in the lost lands. (CP 146)

—*Université de Paris X-Nanterre, France*

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