

E. E. Cummings' "Melopoetics": A Transdisciplinary Approach

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Music as Pure Gesture

Ample scholarly attention has been devoted to the interrelations of E. E. Cummings' verbal art with the visual arts and with the ideas that motivated the literature of the period. These studies are vital for our understanding of the poet: they place Cummings' art in relation to the avant-garde and show that the poetics that Cummings invents is a melting pot of modern artistic concepts. E. E. Cummings himself describes his artistic stance as being characterized by the "Making obsession" (is 5, "Foreword," CP 221) and frequently refers to himself as a "*faiseur*,"²¹ a French neologism meaning 'maker of things.' This poetics has implications that scholarship has left partly unexplored. The present essay advances the case that the analogy of modern music plays another decisive role as a structural principle of Cummings' verbal art. It seeks to determine Cummings' "melopoetics,"²² that is, the nature of the kinship between his poetry and "the *other* time art."²³ The coming sections study how Cummings' assimilation of the concept of 'the music of poetry' finds life in his poetic sound paintings. The argument is furthered by a discussion of the poet's rhythmic appropriation of the condition of music and concludes with examples of his impressionist poetic musicality and unique typographical 'eye music.'



Figure 1: Staff Notation by E. E. Cummings

Writings dating back to the formative stages of Cummings' poetics reflect his ability to perceive likeness behind differing artistic concepts. In a note written while in the U.S. Army at Camp Devens, Massachusetts, in 1918, Cummings points out that "to distinguish in the vivid plastic tumult [of the modern arts] certain vital musical gestures is (to speak frankly) thrilling."⁴ He adds: "I may as well avoid misunderstanding by giving these vital musical gestures their proper names. They are:

- Brancusi (Princess Bonaparte)
- Fischer (window) the Melodic Gesture
- Ezra Pound (ἄωριον) [doria]⁵

The best of Matisse (before he imitated Matisse)
..... the Harmonic Gesture

- Eliot (Preludes & Rhapsody)
- Schoenberg (5 Orchestral Pieces)⁶ the Orchestral Gesture
- The Woolworth Building⁷
- Parade, Till, L'après-midi, & Petroushka—Ballet Russe⁸

As this list of verbal, visual, and musical artworks suggests, Cummings was profoundly aware of what he himself envisioned as the "New Art."⁹ He evidences his analogous reasoning when subsuming the collage of artistic concepts under a three-fold musical principle. Certain kinds of sculpture, architecture and poetic ideas are Melody, he argues. The paintings by Matisse are Harmony and some of Eliot's poetry, modern music and, again, modern architecture are lined up with the Orchestra. The musical ideas that Cummings puts forth speak a specific language; they are "Gestures," a term that Cummings uses as a substitute for spoken language: "There is no such thing as the spoken word. To read is words. We speak a gesture."¹⁰ And in its purest form, Gesture denotes music:

GESTURE

A Gesture may occur variously
The simplest G is when
1) a language which i do not understand is

A Gesture may be
1) *pure*
 (a) *music*
 (b) painting which does not suggest or inspire recognizable shapes
 a) NB – a color cannot be recognized. Only a shape.
 (c) language when i do not understand it. Either spoken
 written (where the alphabet is incomprehensible)

For the poet, music is the purest and most absolute form of artistic expression. His distinction of three degrees of complexity (when moving from “the Melodic Gesture,” to the “the Harmonic Gesture” and, finally, to the “the Orchestral Gesture”) displays his familiarity with the medium. In fact, in a note entitled “comparison—the unheard(in music&poetry),” he asserts:

we may, simplifying, say as follows –

A Melody (1 dimension) ... given a single timbre and no accompaniment ... e.g. – FLUTE SOLO
IS LIKE A LINE which goes UP AND DOWN (considering c, d, e, f, g, a, b, as one on top of another – e.g. staff notation) d, c which JUMPS or GLIDES (c-b-e-f-g-a-b-c)

A Harmony (2 dimensions ... given a single timbre but melody with accompaniment ... Chords
is as if you get MASSES (black and white, or single colour)

a symphony. Combining 1&2 with timbre-fighting, INCLUDES COLOUR¹²

Cummings recognizes that the idea of melody in music involves movement (“up and down,” “jumps” and “glides”) along the surface line of a group of harmonies, harmony being the more sophisticated element in musical studies. He attributes to the orchestra or symphony the highest degree of complexity.

The Discipline of Musico-Poetic Studies

Contemporary comparative textual-musical investigations are engaged in mediating conflicting claims about the impossibility of a connection between poetry and music on the one hand, and the notion that poetry is forever approximating musical expression on the other. Although the history of the relations between music and poetry stresses the mutual contingency of the two arts, critics realize that music and poetry are structurally distinct media. That they actually arose from common historical sources, and were once unified, is largely forgotten (cf. Hardré 534). The Greeks’ organic vision of the arts as a mnemonic technology comprising dance, music, poetry, and elementary education—referred to as *môusike* or the “Art of the Muses”—was superseded by the division of this unified model into performed music, music theory, poetry, and rhetorical theory during Roman times (cf. Winn 804). In the Middle Ages, monks and poets began to provide words for pre-existing liturgical melodies, and the troubadours, who were composer-poets writing in the vernacular,

extended this practice. Poetic form was becoming increasingly important. The Italian Renaissance madrigal school, quite contrarily, developed modes of musical “word-painting,” that is, of “develop[ing] a number of harmonic and melodic [...] conventions for setting words dealing with weeping, dying and so forth” (Winn 805); they were criticized by the proponents of musical humanism, who believed that musical rhythm, in order to arouse the passions more effectively, should not be independent but follow the rhythm of a given poem. It was the function of music, they thought, to give life to the text. Although vocal music continued to be employed in the eighteenth century, instrumental music slowly began to assert itself. The development of the tonal system gave music a grammar and meaning of its own. Parallel to the ensuing distinction between musical and poetic syntax as autonomous entities, Romantic poets sought the possibility of “musical poetry,” while some composers, for example Richard Wagner, under the influence of Romantic ideas about music, accepted literary influences (Winn 805). Late nineteenth-century composers also pursued partly literary aims when composing so-called ‘program music.’ The French symbolist conception of ‘*l’art pour l’art*’ involved a fascination with music and the belief that, in its use of sound and rhythm, poetry should seek to approximate music. In the twentieth century, the new system of composition devised by Arnold Schoenberg again led to the impossibility of describing music in linguistic terms and vice versa.

Critics of music and literature thus realize that their subject of analysis often lies beyond musical and poetic syntax and that determining the nature of the margin-line between the “lower limit speech” and the “upper limit music” is an enticing venture.¹³ These obstacles notwithstanding, they have inaugurated a tradition that seeks to show by what means poetry may approximate musical expression. One critical interest, among others,¹⁴ focuses on the evocation, imitation, or approximation of music in literature. It seeks to unravel the mystery inherent in the concept of the ‘music of poetry’ by looking at the ways in which verse imitates musical acoustics. It is argued that the effectiveness of poetry can be attributed to the musical models of onomatopoeia, rhythm, accent, pitch, and timbre. Structural parallels between the sister arts involve the more difficult description of inner correspondences, such as the likeness between the fugue and Paul Celan’s *Todesfuge*, or the manifestation of musical themes of variation and contrast in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The imitation of pre-existing musical works with words is the most frequent form of music in literature. “Verbal music,” as it is called, is a “transposition d’art,” or, in other terms, involves “any literary presentation (whether in poetry or prose) of existing or fictitious musical compositions: any poetic texture which has a piece of music as its ‘theme’” (Scher 13). The following sections demonstrate the ways in which these findings are consonant with Cummings’ melopoetics.

Cummings’ Sound Poetry

A balanced view of the condition of poetry holds that the aural and written modes in a poem are of equal importance. Neither sound patterns, nor structured

formal relations alone constitute the primary mode of expression in a poem. According to such a view, a poem is an “ontologically bivalent entity” (Brogan 1172). Nevertheless, the view that ‘poetry is sound,’ i.e. that the written text is meant to represent sound, and that words on the page are only a notation, as in music, has always exerted a strong hold on the minds of poets. Why should this be so? The French symbolist poets discussed “La Poesie pure,” that is, pure and absolute poetry which is achieved by converting the merely representational in poetry into pure expressiveness, into what the romantics would have labeled the Absolute, Infinite, or Ideal. Pure and perfect expression in poetry easily leads to the analogy with music, which is regarded as the purest of arts by the Symbolists and their future advocates (including, as it were, E. E. Cummings). The Symbolists sought to imitate the “esoteric” condition of music by transmitting the meaning of a poem only indirectly—symbolical and metaphorical relationships are preferred over representation—and by consequently increasing sound and rhythmic effects (cf. Peacock 161).

Possessed by the Socratic demon of language, Cummings used sound in specifically musical ways. For him, sound and image were equally related: “what corresponds, in the audible, to the visible-unit or ‘image?’ Obviously: the sonal unit, a noise or sound. [...] aural factors?—pitch(high-low)intensity or muchness-of(loud, soft or faint)timbre(moo, cooing, yelp, crow, etc.)”¹⁵ As previous studies have shown, Cummings used the material of his linguistic experiments to paint ‘picture poems.’ Notice, too, that he used them to compose sound poems.

Cummings approached sound patterns on a level that precedes the signified, dividing words and using syllables as a composer uses notes.¹⁶ He went as far as trying to achieve a common linguistic sign for both musical and linguistic sounds. In his important study of the early stages of Cummings’ stylistic development, Richard S. Kennedy discusses the poet’s experimental flirtations with musical structure. Kennedy points out that in the poem “two brass buttonsoff” Cummings tries to match poetic and musical sound qualities: “[he] lined up a series of fourteen vowel sounds and arranged the words of a dialogue in columns underneath them, each syllable placed according to its sound” (“Emergent Styles” 186). But ultimately Cummings has to admit the impossibility of proving their structural equivalence. He realizes that

in Music, the other time-art, every note has a *fixed* place in the staff

Note: in Music [~~words crossed out, illegible~~] there are (12)units which differ in pitch,¹⁷ corresponding to the(19)vowel sounds; BUT the representation of the occurrence of any&all these units by a common symbol,whose form(or picture)changes only to portray prolongation,confers a [~~3 letters crossed out, illegible~~] suitability to horizontal progression, which does not exist in the case of fait where the sounds(units) are presented by visible equivalents(generally speaking), calling for vertical progression [sic]¹⁸

In the same note he concludes that only when the “*nature* of each unit (with reference to its use as a key) is known” can the “*faiteur*” reach “harmonic perfection.”

This extensive preoccupation with the sound properties of his poetic material illustrates the poet’s longing for musical perfection. In countless poems, sound plays a vital role, and the onomatopoeic effect of the use of light alliterative and consonantal timbre in the lines “little hoppy happy / toad in tweeds / tweeds / little itchy mousies” (CP 28), or the rough sound color inherent in the “rasp and graze of splintered // normality / crackle and / sag / of planes clamors of / collision / collapse” (CP 61), are just a few obvious examples. Cummings’ visual sound color in

n(o)w

the
how

dis(appeared cleverly)world

iS Slapped:with;liGhtninG

!

(CP 348)

and the synaesthetic sonorous rhythmic effects created at the beginning of his prose poem “my eyes are fond of the east side” (CP 187) are also worth noting. The latter is a visionary journey through the realm of colors: first of actual colors—that Cummings, the painter, is so familiar with—and then of instrumental tone colors. It is yet another experiment that seeks to establish a correspondence between color and tone:

greens and helplessbaby blues and stic-ky chromes and prettylemons and
virginal pinks and wealthy vermilion and breathless-scarlet, dark colours
like ‘cellos keen fiddling colours colours cOoler than harps colours
p r i c k i n glike piccolos thumPing colours like a bangofpiano colours
which,are,the,flowery pluckings of a harpsichord colours of Pure percus-
sion colours-like-trumpets they(writhe they, strugglinweird chords of
humorous,fury heapingandsqueezing tum-bling-scratchingcrowd ingworming
each by screeching Each)on either side the street’s DarkcOOllonGBody
windows,are. clenched. fistsoftint.

TUMTITUMTIDDLE.

(CP 187)

Cummings’ Expressive Syntactic and Typographic Rhythms: Verbal Music and Jazz

Moving on to a more complex level, we find that Cummings’ melopoetics is grounded in rhythmical expressiveness. Aesthetic theory regards prosody as the profoundest musical element in poetry. Similar to the Symbolists’ emphasis on the internal metaphorical structuring of poetry and consequent approximation of musical expression, aesthetic theory transposes the merely metrical meaning of prosody

onto a metaphorical plain. According to such a view, rhythmic form in poetry goes beyond metrical language and even conceptual meaning. It does so by imaging the *Stimmung* of a poem and by being expressive of its emotion: “[a] poem is a symbol in which idea, experience, and attitude are transmuted into feelings; these feelings move in significant arrangements: rhythmically” (Gross 8). Feeling moves not in measured but in a felt time sequence that is akin to musical duration. These final pages focus on the rhythmical and metaphorical expressiveness of one of Cummings’ lyrics. It leads to locating the *Stimmung* or transcendent metaphorical meaning of the poem and its musical implications. Finally, the essay concludes with a meditation on Cummings’ typographical rhythms, as exemplified in one of his jazz poems.

Throughout his writings, Cummings-biographer Richard S. Kennedy repeatedly compares Cummings’ poetry to the oeuvre of the French composer Claude Debussy (1862-1918).¹⁹ He argues that the title of the poetry section “Chansons Innocentes,” contained in Cummings’ first book of poems, *Tulips & Chimneys*, is taken from a “group of Debussy piano pieces” (*Selected Poems* 2). Most poems from this section recall childhood. But since the title “Chansons Innocentes” nowhere appears in Debussy’s oeuvre, Kennedy can only be referring to Debussy’s *Children’s Corner* (1906-8). In *Dreams in the Mirror*, Kennedy again mentions the similarity. He argues that “the opening image [of the poem ‘the sky a silver’] presents the April morning as if it were a Debussy ‘Impression’ for the piano” (235).

This analogy is extended by claiming that the poetic texture of “the sky a silver” (*CP* 60)²⁰ gives a musical representation based on the same theme, namely Claude Debussy’s short piano piece, “The Snow is Dancing” (*Children’s Corner*). It is what Steven Paul Scher calls “verbal music,” and reproduces the effect that the short impressionist piano piece has on the listener; music is thus experienced through literature, the ultimate goal of such an experiment being a “transposition d’art” (cf. Scher 13). The following discussion of the poem aims at making its music heard.²¹

A first survey of the significant rhythmic arrangements in “the sky a silver” via accentual scansion – the strong beats of a poem approximating the rhythmic beats of musical rhythm²² – shows that the rhythmic curve of the poem is characterized by: a) discontinuity, b) a variation of beats denoting rhythmic acceleration, and c) a staccato ending. These rhythms emphasize the representation of the expressionist poem: atmospheric light conditions announce a spring shower, the raindrops dance jerkily in the sky and finally mingle with the ground. In Debussy’s piano piece “The Snow is Dancing,” the tiny motif of the falling snow is equally carried by a rhythm that modulates the speed of the dance of the snowflakes, creating strikingly similar tempos. The poem reads as follows:

the sky a silver
dissonance by the correct
fingers of April
resolved

into a
clutter of trite jewels

now like a moth with stumbling

wings flutters and flops along the
grass collides with trees and
houses and finally,
butts into the river (CP 60)

The initial metaphor of the clouds that are pregnant with rain (“the sky a silver / dissonance”) is rhythmically segmented into three heavy beats that, in addition to the caesuras, give the impression of discontinuity. The dissimilar metaphor “correct / fingers of April” and the lacunae that encapsulate the word “resolved” trigger the transformation of ‘dissonance’ into ‘harmony’—the jerky dance of the raindrops begins. From now on, the overall flow of lines is impeded by caesuras so as to render the jerky moth-like dance of raindrops. An abrupt staccato ending (“and finally, / butts into the river”) puts an end to the rhythmic speed in the last stanza.

The progress of Cummings’ impressionist ‘pictures’ is toward the fulfillment of sensuous ambitions: his tropes (the metaphor of the dissonant sky, the simile of the fluttering and flopping moth) move close to the spirit of the Wagnerian “total work of art.” Wagner advised Symbolist poets and Impressionist painters to refine their responses to the world and to “exteriorize hidden dream states” (*Encyclopedia* 945). Cummings followed this path. The shadowy and incomplete form of Cummings’ perception suggests the ideal of musical form, its stabilized written lines ascending to the invisible secretive language of music.

To locate the measure by which the rhythm of Cummings’ modernist “Hephaestian”²³ poems move is difficult. As is the case in many of Cummings’ modernist poetic experiments, his prosody does not make itself readily available for regular scansion. In many cases, it is replaced by “typographical prosody”: Gross notes that “[n]ot only does he [Cummings] break down the line into visual shapes and give the separate word rhythmic autonomy, but he fragments words themselves. Each letter of the alphabet assumes importance in the rhythmic scheme” (120). Thus phrase segments, separate words, syllables, letters, punctuation marks and even blank space are given rhythmic autonomy. This opens up a vast amount of expressive possibilities, often forcing us to “‘see’ sounds and ‘hear’ shapes” (Gross 121). The elaboration of jazz rhythms in Cummings’ poetry is one of them. The following final example is again a ‘transposition d’art’: the text reproduces actual jazz tunes. Musical jazz techniques step from the page and reach the reader’s inner ear:

matopoeic “Bam- / :do) / ,chippity.”

The present study throws light on the openness of E. E. Cummings to the expressive potential of his material. It shows that music in the poetry of E. E. Cummings is not a musicality that solely rests upon the surface of melodious and well-sounding versification. Cummings’ art induces the cross-disciplinary reader to dig deeper into the levels of his language. This leads to the recognition of the poet’s truly ingenious use of the very atoms of written language to compose sound poems, to reproduce jazz tunes, and to transcend the “fixed staff” of words altogether.

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Notes

- ¹ In his essay “E. E. Cummings: The Emergent Styles, 1916,” Richard S. Kennedy points out that Cummings “would sometimes speak of a *fait* instead of a poem and refer to an artist as a *faïteur*” (184).
- ² This term refers to the comparative discipline of ‘musico-literary studies,’ and is used by Lawrence Kramer in his essay “Dangerous Liaisons: The Literary Text in Musical Criticism” (159).
- ³ Cummings uses this expression as a substitute for music. bMS Am 1823.7 (23), item 142, ‘Notes, poems, drawings.’ Italics are added.
- ⁴ bMS Am 1892.7 (70), item 76, folder 8 of 8, ‘Notes: Camp Devens.’ Richard S. Kennedy gives a slightly different version of Cummings’ list of “gestures” (*Dreams* 179). For references to the Cummings papers at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, the call number is given, and, if available, the item number, an indication of the folder in which the manuscript belongs and a description of the type of manuscript. I should like to express my thanks to Leslie A. Morris, Curator of Manuscripts in the Harvard College Library, for permission to quote from these papers. Thanks also go to the staff members of the Harvard Libraries for their friendly assistance.
- ⁵ Cummings is most likely referring to Constantin Brancusi’s abstract sculpture “Princess X” (1920), a portrait of an imaginary person in a visibly phallic form. It created a scandal, after which Brancusi was forced to withdraw the sculpture. Johann Michael Fischer (1692-1766), a German architect, was one of the most creative designers of late Baroque and Rococo churches in Southern Germany. His construction of fanciful windows was one of his trademarks: “The major elements of Fischer’s churches are a centralized ground plan, with round-off interior angles, interconnecting spaces, and rhythmically undulating patches of lush decoration, the whole being brilliantly lit by windows” (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 795). The Greek expression ‘ta Doria’ refers to the Dorian way of life. The plural ‘to Dorion’ means a special type of musical harmony, which the Dorians employed. Pound’s poem “Ἄωρια” appears on page 64 of *Personae*.
- ⁶ Cummings refers to Henri Matisse (1869-1954), the French painter known for his

pursuit of expressive color, T.S. Eliot's poems "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," and the Austrian-American composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), who is regarded as one of the greatest musical innovators of the twentieth century. He is famous as the formulator of the Twelve-Tone System of composition, a method called atonality. Atonality marks the absence of functional harmony. In Schoenberg's compositions, this structural element replaced musical solutions based on the tension between melody and rhythm. "Five Orchestral Pieces, Opus 16" (1909) is one of his most important atonal compositions.

⁷ The Woolworth Building was the tallest in the world before the Empire State was built in the late '30s. (See "at the ferocious phenomenon of 5 o'clock" [CP 111].) Headquarters of the 'Five-and-Ten' variety store chain in New York City.

⁸ Eric Satie's (1866-1925) unconventional musical compositions exerted a major influence on twentieth-century music. His art is closely related to the Dada and Surrealist movements in art. His ballet *Parade* (1917) anticipated the use of jazz materials as Igor Stravinsky and his contemporaries used them. Kennedy notes that E. E. Cummings witnessed the "premier of Eric Satie's *Parade* with Cubist sets by Picasso. When the audience booed Satie's ballet, Cummings got angry and shouted abuse at the crowd" (*Dreams* 140). "Till" refers to the tone poem "Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche" (1849-95) ["Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks"], by the German Romantic composer Richard Strauss (1864-1949) which depicts the adventures of the fourteenth century rogue Till. "L'après-midi" refers to the symphonic poem "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune" (1894) ["Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun"], by the French composer Claude Debussy (1862-1918). Igor Stravinsky's (1882-1971) compositions are a touchstone of modernism. Kennedy notes that Cummings "went to Les Ballets Russes and saw Stravinsky's *Petrouchka* [sic] more than once" (*Dreams* 140).

⁹ This is the title of Cummings' twenty-seven-page term paper written in 1915 at Harvard University. It displays his wide knowledge of the avant-garde arts. The essay was published in part in *Miscellany Revised*, pp. 5-11.

¹⁰ bMS Am 1823.7 (25), item 74, folder 4 of 11, 'Notes, poems, drawings.'

¹¹ bMS Am 1823.7 (25), item 69, folder 3 of 11, 'Notes, poems, drawings.' Italics are added.

¹² bMS Am 1823.7 (25), item 70, folder 3 of 11, 'Notes, poems, drawings.'

¹³ In his long poem *A*, Louis Zukofsky writes:

I'll tell you.
About my *poetics* –

Music

f

Speech

An integral
Lower limit speech
Upper limit music

No? (p. 138)

- ¹⁴ They include: a) the complex artistic conditions under which the symbiosis of music and literature produces vocal music, for example the opera, the German *Lied*, the oratorio and the cantata; and b) the study of the manifestation of literature in music, as is the case with program music (cf. Steven Paul Scher, "Literatur und Musik — Entwicklung und Stand der Forschung," 11-14).
- ¹⁵ bMS Am 1823.7 (25), item 182, folder 9 of 11, 'Notes, poems, drawings.'
- ¹⁶ In a telling note Cummings remarks: "[H]ow about getting movement by dividing words, i.e. — composing by syllables" [bMS Am 1892.6 (45), item 1].
- ¹⁷ Cummings refers to the intervals of the scale of C major which has 12 pitch sounds / intervals.
- ¹⁸ bMS Am 1832.7 (23), item 142.
- ¹⁹ Claude Debussy developed a highly original system of harmony and musical structure that expressed in many respects the ideals to which the Impressionist and Symbolist painters and writers of his time aspired.
- ²⁰ This poem appears in *Tulips & Chimneys* in the section entitled "Impressions."
- ²¹ It is recommended that the reader listen to the Debussy's piano piece "The Snow is Dancing." See Works Cited for bibliographic information.
- ²² A procedure which is proposed by Northrop Frye in his essay "Lexis and Melos": "To read poetry which is musical in our sense we need a principle of accentual scansion, a regular recurrence of beats with a variable number of syllables between the beats. This corresponds to the general rhythm of the music in the Western tradition, where there is a regular stress accent with a variable number of notes in each measure" (173).
- ²³ Richard S. Kennedy calls Cummings' style "Hephaestian" because "Hephaestus was a craftsman, and in working at the forge he was engaged in bending, breaking, twisting, mending, reshaping" (Kennedy, "Emergent Styles, 1916" 197).

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