

Teaching E. E. Cummings

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I have a Ph.D. in linguistics, with a specialty in stylistics. But about twenty years ago, I also started teaching an introduction to poetry, and over the last five years or so, I have been shifting most of my teaching in this more literary direction, developing a collection of major author courses on various modern poets (Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, etc.), working toward a more general, survey course in modern poetry. For my Ph.D. in linguistics, I did a dissertation and collection of articles on Cummings' syntax, so I have naturally included Cummings in this pedagogical project. I have now taught my major author course on Cummings many times, about once a year since the fall of 2002.

One of my motivations for developing a collection of major author courses is that courses of this sort, in my department at least, have disappeared entirely, and I thought I might fill in this growing gap in the curriculum in ways that others were no longer interested or able to do. If poems are going to read as poems, that is, for more than just their historical and ideological materials, the teacher and the students must share some critically productive poetics. For some time now, this requirement has been a problem, though. At some point in the history of literary studies, it became generally recognized, I think, that the New Critical approach to poetic interpretation, which dominated the reading of poems for the first half of the twentieth century, is crucially limited, if not fundamentally unsound. For those whose primary literary interest is in poetry, this rejection of New Critical approaches to the poem has been both a frustration and an opportunity, a frustration that encouraged most to turn away from poetry entirely, but an opportunity for a few to work toward a new poetics. I have usually viewed myself as contributing to this scholarly tradition. From 1975-1985 I worked largely on poetic syntax. From 1985-1995 I worked on poetic rhythm. And for the last ten years I have worked on integrating these two and other concerns (sound, rhetoric, meaning, context) into a full poetics. I now use this poetics in all of my classes, including my major author courses, such as my course on Cummings.

I like to call my poetics, "temporal poetics," because it is a theory of poetic form based on a theory of time, a kind of temporal logic, in the phi-

losophical sense. The poetics builds analogies between quadratic paradigms of linguistic, rhetorical, and semantic forms in poetry, as these forms share qualities with the four major components of rhythm, what music theorists like to call meter, grouping, prolongation, and theme. (See “The Temporal Paradigm” in Appendix I for the qualities that define the four temporalities. See “The Poetic Paradigm” for the analogical relations these temporalities establish between mind, world, and language.) To the extent that a poem's form is textured by the qualities of one or another of these components of rhythm, it builds up a distinct temporality, what I like to call cyclical time, centroidal time, linear time, and relative time. Each of these temporalities, I claim, underpins, in an ideal way, a distinct psychological faculty, or mode of being. Cyclical time is physical/sensory; centroidal time is emotional; linear time is volitional; relative time is cognitive/reflective. Individual qualities within each of these temporalities, as they are embodied in a wide range of forms, define the thematics of a poem. The goal of interpretation, given this poetics, is to bring out this rhythmic / temporally-based thematics.

This poetics is especially useful in exploring the sensibilities of the great modern poets, such as Cummings, because most of these poets have very broad, conflicted sensibilities. In fact, given their narrower, culturally bound sensibilities, this is often the objection critics have with these poets. To the frustration of most critics, Cummings is a mystic, a Romantic, a hard-nosed social critic, and a brilliantly original aesthete—all in one. An intensely conflicted sensibility of this sort is not at all impossible; it is just enormously rare, given the general population. Therefore many critics find Cummings’ sensibility unreal. They can’t get a handle on it ideologically. But then again, this is just Cummings’ point. He is a person, not a thing; a living (sensing, feeling, creating, imagining) being, not an ideology.

In his best poems, Cummings gets his whole sensibility in a consistent and concentrated way into his rhythms, language, rhetoric, and symbolism.¹ Even in its local texturing, the poem is not just sensuous or emotional or creative, or imaginative, but all four at once, and in a uniquely balanced and integrated way. My temporal poetics can explore exactly how this is done. In essence, it is a complete and coherent stylistics for poetry.

In addition to providing a poetic stylistics and thematics, this temporal poetics also makes available detailed treatments of genre and textual development. When a poet gets all of his sensibility into a poem in a balanced and concentrated way, I like to call the poem a “portrait” poem. In many

cases, poets explore more limited moods and/or emotional dynamics, though. They write in just one temporal/formal mode or another. Or they pit one mode against another, leaving the other two modes in the background. Or these include three modes, but exclude one mode. Or they begin a poem in one mode and then shift systematically through other modes, ending the poem in some opposing mode. And so forth.

Early in his career, Cummings recognizes these generic distinctions explicitly, by his groupings and labelings. Some of these genres are primarily isolated modes. For example, in *Tulips and Chimneys*, the poems labeled *Chanson Innocentes* are tilted toward the cyclical/physical; *Amores*, toward the centroidal/emotional; *La Guerre*, toward the linear/actional; and *Orientale*, toward the relative/imaginative. On the other hand, the *Impressions* tend to be portrait poems that go through full cycles of the temporalities, with different starting points; the *Portraits* usually juxtapose the cyclical/physical joltingly and paradoxically with the relative/imaginative; the *Post-Impressions* mix the linear/actional and the relative/imaginative; and the *Sonnets Unrealites, Realities, and Actualities* mix centroidal/emotional forms with imaginative, actional, and physical textures, respectively.

This poetics can also be used to understand and explore Cummings' other writings—his plays, prose fiction, fairy tales, etc. For instance, each of Cummings' four fairy tales concerns itself primarily with one or another of these temporalities. "The Old Man Who Said Why" is concerned with relative time; "The House that Ate Mosquito Pie" with linear time; "The Elephant and the Butterfly" with centroidal/lyric time; and "The Little Girl Named I" with cyclical time, with the four animals that "I" meets in this fourth tale (elephant, horse, cow, and pig) forming a further fractalization across these temporalities. Many of the characters that appear in *The Enormous Room* can also be read poetically, as emblems of one or another of these temporalities. For instance, the character traits of the four prostitutes that play such a prominent role in the novel—Celina, Lena, Renee, and Lily—closely follow the qualities of the four temporalities. Celina is physically impressive; Lena, emotionally strong; Renee, socially slick; and Lily, old beyond her years. The four walls of the rotating stage in *Him* can be interpreted in similar ways, as can the odd gibberish of the Weirds and the psychological contrasts between Me, Him, and Him's other personas (the man in the mirror and the man with the green eyes). The art object that is slowly revealed in *Anthropos* also steps through the four temporalities, from cyclical to relative. First, an outline grows. Then planes begin and

tones build. Then masses coalesce and volumes poise. Then color weaves.

Ultimately, this quadratic array of temporalities can be used to understand Cummings' entire artistic project: Be! Grow! Dare! Dream! I am a man. I am an artist. I am a failure. Proceed!

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Note

1. See the analysis of “somewhere i have never travelled,gladly beyond” in Cureton’s article “Cummings and Temporality.” [Editor’s note]

Works Cited

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Appendix I

The Temporal Paradigm

Temporal Features	Cyclical	Centroidal	Linear	Relational
event-event relation	similarity	difference-in-similarity	similarity-in-difference	difference
temporal figure	occurrence repetition succession	correspondence prominence proportion	transition direction implication	connection distinction simultaneity
subject-subject relation	participation	obligation	cooperation	freedom
subject-event relation	subjective	objective-in-subjective	subjective-in-objective	objective
semiotic relation	icon	emblem	index	symbol
cognitive process	reaction passive	affection recip- rocal	creation active	exploration improvisatory
clock time orientation	past	present	future	relative
relational scope	proximate	local	regional	global
event position	initial	medial	final	peripheral
curve of energy/ stability	fall	rise-fall	fall-rise	rise
structural volatility	fixed	constrained	volatile	free

The Poetic Paradigm

<i>Psychological and Neurological</i>				
Temporality	Cyclical	Centroidal	Linear	Relational
sociobiology	colonial invertebrate	social insect	higher mammal	human
neurology	hind/reptilian brain	mid/mammalian brain	left cortex	right cortex
faculty	perception/body	feeling/emotion	will/action	memory/thought
sense	touch	smell/taste	hearing	sight
vision	primal sketch	full sketch	1 ½ D	3-D
phylogeny	australopithicus	homo habilis	homo erectus	homo sapiens
ecology	mineral	vegetable	animal	human
ontogeny	child	youth	adult	elder
psycho-pathology	manic-depressive	psychosis	neurosis	amnesia

Historical and Cultural

Temporality	Cyclical	Centroidal	Linear	Relational
Western Culture	Ancient (-1100)	Medieval/Renaissance (1100-1750)	19th Century (1750-1900)	Modern (1900-)
philosophy	formism	organicism	mechanism	contextualism
economy	hunting/gathering	agriculture	industry	information
religion	polytheism	monotheism	naturalism	humanism
social economy	tribalism	feudalism	capitalism	socialism
settlement	city	state	nation	world
social status	family/kinship	state/peer	class/citizen	comrade
writing	orality	chirography	typography	cybernetics
logic	conduction	deduction	induction	abduction
temporality	past/traditional	present/apocalyptic	future/utopian	relative/pragmatic
government	monarchy	aristocracy	republic	democracy
spatial art	sculpture	architecture	painting	photography
temporal art	dance	music	literature	film
social ethic	communal fate	personal duty	social progress	individual rights
personal ethic	4 wisdom	faith	intelligence	creativity
	3 justice	obedience	responsibility	spontaneity
	2 temperance	charity	self-reliance	tolerance
	1 courage	purity	self-control	flexibility

Literary and Rhetorical

Temporality	Cyclical	Centroidal	Linear	Relational
genre	epic	lyric	narrative	dramatic
work	song	poem	prose fiction	play
reader position	language	character	audience	author
creative process	dictation	revelation	discovery	creation
trope	metaphor	synecdoche	metonymy	irony
sound scheme	alliteration	assonance & rhyme	consonance	pararhyme
grouping	fall	rise-fall	fall-rise	rise
meter	tetrameter	pentameter	variable	free
divisioning	stanzaic	paragraphed	chaptered	arranged
prolongation	extensional	chiastic	anticipatory	fragmentary
syntactic scheme	anaphora	antistrophe	epistrophe	symploce
discourse	paratactic	logical	temporal	dialectical
semiotic relation	iconic	emblematic	indexical	symbolic
structure	repetition	pattern	process	network
position	initial	medial	final	peripheral
figuration	opposition	unity	uncertainty	multeity
	contrast	resolution	ambiguity	difference
pattern	concentric	geometrical	a- symmetrical	multi- dimensional
process	repetitive	contoured	dynamic	static
	proleptic	climactic	anticipatory	anti-climactic
	contradictory	closed	blurred	open
	fixed	shaped	directed	undirected

Prosodic and Syntactic

Temporality	Cyclical	Centroidal	Linear	Relational
level	paralanguage	prosody	syntax	semantics
word stress	weak	tertiary	secondary	primary
prosodic foot	moraic foot	syllabic foot	dipodic foot	word
prosodic hierarchy	clitic phrase	phonological phrase	tone unit	utterance unit
syllable	onset	rhyme	nucleus	coda
intonation	fall	rise-fall	fall-rise	rise
syntactic level	word	phrase	clause	sentence
sentence relations	complexing	rank shift	cohesion	transformation
cohesion	repetition	substitution	pronominalization	ellipsis
rank shift	compounding	incorporation	subordination	parenthesis
case	subjective	genitive	objective	[oblique]
sentence types	simple	compound	complex	compound-complex
	declarative	exclamative	imperative	interrogative
transformation	preposing	postposing	discontinuity	fragmentation
speech acts	statement	exclamation	command	question
complexing	apposition	conjunction	correlation	comment
clause constituency	subjectivization	predication	transitivity	qualification
clause constituents	subject	predicator	complement	adverbial
clause pattern	intransitive	copular	transitive	adverbial
transitivity	mono-transitive	complex-transitive	ditransitive	adverbial
mood	indicative	subjunctive	imperative	infinitive
adverbial	adjunct	subjunct	conjunct	disjunct
phrase structure	head	modifier	complement	specifier

Prosodic and Syntactic cont...

Temporality	Cyclical	Centroidal	Linear	Relational
word class	noun	adjective	verb	adverbial
phrase type	noun	adjective	verb	adverb/prep
verbal functions	voice	aspect	modality	tense
voice	passive	middle	active	causative
aspect	perfective	imperfective	progressive	perfect
tense	past	present	future	relative
modality	necessity	obligation	probability	possibility
word formation	compounding	derivation	inflection	conversion
function words	conjunction	interjection	pronoun	specifier
conjunction	coordinating	subordinating	correlative	comparative
reference	generic	specific	definite	proper
person	3rd	1st	2nd	generic
number	generic	singular	plural	mass

Semantic and Thematic

Temporality	Cyclical	Centroidal	Linear	Relational
archetypal themes/ images	earth	sun	stars	moon
	spring	summer	autumn	winter
	earth	water	air/wind	fire
	morning	noon	evening	night
	child	youth	adult	elder
	spring	brook/stream	river	lake/ocean
	heaven	Eden	purgatory	hell
	white	green/yellow	red/brown	black/blue
	mineral	vegetable	animal	mental/ virtual
	east	south	west	north
	sunrise	day (light)	sunset/dusk	dark
	gut	heart	hand/foot/ arm	head
	seed/bud	flower/leaf	fruit	branch
	dew	rain	clouds	snow
	asexual	homosexual	heterosexual	bisexual
	one	two	three	four
	quantity	quality	relation	manner
	body	feeling/soul	action/will	memory/ thought
	touch	taste/smell	hearing	sight
	with	from	into	away
	gold	silver	bronze	iron/lead
	awaken	daydream	doze	sleep/dream
	mother	son	father	daughter
	gluttony	lust	sloth/greed/ anger/pride	envy
	foundation	walls/roof	door	window
	kitchen	dining room	living room	bedroom
	pig/bear	dog/lion	horse	bird/cat
	maze	circle	line	spiral
God	Christ/Son	Holy Ghost	Anti-Christ/ Satan	

Semantic and Thematic cont...

Temporality	Cyclical	Centroidal	Linear	Relational
archetypal themes/ images	King/ President	church	legislature	courts
	body/child	garden/farm/ house	city	mind/ personality/ art
	athlete/ general	saint/priest	ruler/senator/ judge	artist/ performer
	beginnings	middles	ends	peripheries
	wall	steeple	room	tower
	cell	tissue	organ	system
	stone	wood	steel	plastic
	mountain	valley	plain/moor	forest/woods
	grass	flower	bush/hedge	tree