

## Pararhyme in E. E. Cummings' "Sonnets—Realities"

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### I

Whether to praise or blame, critics usually stress how E. E. Cummings *differs* from other modernist poets. Most of Cummings' more admired contemporaries write poems whose sensibilities reflect their times (self-conscious, complex, pragmatic, secular, conflicted, alienated, cosmopolitan, loveless, tragic, intellectual, etc.) and develop languages that aspire to the transparent naturalness of conversation. But Cummings is a Zen mystic, a New England transcendentalist, a Renaissance love poet, and a post-modern individualist (all in one!), who fashions one of the most artificial and opaque poetic languages in literary history. Cummings differs sharply from other modernist poets both in what he says and how he says it, critics tell us; and therein lies his fame—or blame.

In general, this critical response to Cummings is justified, but we might add this caveat: while most of Cummings' poetry is indeed the very complement (or reverse image) of his contemporaries, early on in his career, Cummings did indeed explore the sensibility of his time with relatively standard poetic means, if but for a moment, and if only to reject it in order to be and do something else entirely.

The center of this more conventional historical moment in Cummings' career is the twenty-one "Sonnets—Realities" at the opening of *Chimneys* in the original 1922 *Tulips & Chimneys* manuscript (CP 115-135). While it is uncharacteristic of Cummings, these twenty-one poems from his college years and shortly after neither go beyond his world nor satirically reject it; but like most of the poems of his modernist contemporaries, they dwell in it, and in doing so, give us a taste of its emotional and spiritual texture.

Both the emotions explored in these sonnets and the scenarios ("objective correlatives") used to explore these emotions are typically modern—the irrelevant emptiness of bourgeois life, the riotous energies of the modern city, the loveless physicality of modern relationships, the undirected/driftng movement of modern music and dance, the repulsive looks and crass behavior of underworld prostitutes and thugs, etc. The techniques that Cummings uses in these twenty-one sonnets are also conventionally modernist, rather than idiosyncratic—revisionary sonnets with scrambled rhymes and rearranged, disproportioned structures; awkwardly unpredicta-

ble metrical variation; clashing, mawkish diction; complex, wandering syntax; etc. These early “realities sonnets” have little of the odd grammatical visual experimentation that is characteristic of Cummings’ poetry as a whole.

One of the technical devices that Cummings shares with his major contemporaries in these sonnets is an intense use of parahrhyme, a kind of inverted anti-assonance, which varies vowels between repeated consonants (e.g., *slip-sloop*), rather than varying consonants around repeating vowels (e.g., *hope-note*). With its fluctuating centers and echoing peripheries, parahrhyme is dissonant and decentered. It is a sound pattern with its heart torn out. Cummings’ “realities sonnets,” as well as much of the modernist verse of Cummings’ major contemporaries, explore the texture of just such a “heartless” psychology and social scenario.<sup>1</sup>

## II

Parahrhyme has a range of forms and effects. First, because of the complexity of the syllable template in English, which can have as many as three consonants before the vowel (as in *sprite*) or four consonants after the vowel (as in *sixths*), there are many more forms of parahrhyme than the simplest case where one and only one consonant appears before and after the vowel (as in *soil-sill-sale-sole*); and these more complex forms can and do appear wherever there is any parahrhyme at all. In fact, these many types of parahrhyme are so frequent that poets can use long strings of parahrhymes to “smear” the text with dissonance. In addition to the simple type of parahrhyme, where the onsets and codas of syllables both have and share one and only one consonant (as in *sill-sale*), a long string of parahrhymes may feature consonants that are not shared, either in the syllabic onset (*cellar-squalor*) or syllabic coda (*souls-soil*), or both (*schools-smell*). (For example, study this group of parahrhymes from Book III part III of William Carlos Williams’ *Paterson: assailant-corpuscule-cellar-squalor-scallop-steal-accelerated-solid-solarium-swale-solitary-silence-still-schools-smell-stool-salmonella-soil-selenite-salt-snail-sill-sale-Merselis-silver-spells-souls-small-syllable-sole-selah-self-schoolman-smiled-skulls-saloon*.) Notice that multiple consonants may be shared, either in the syllabic onset (*squalor-scallop*) or in the syllabic coda (*schools-souls*), or both (*schools-skulls*). Second, because of this multi-dimensional complexity, parahrhymes can form long overlapping and interlocking chains such as *stem-skimmed-sound-cider-beside-some-sight-struck-spiked-sticking-scent-essence-strangeness-blossom-cellar-instep-sleep-describe*, in which form “a” can be a parahrhyme to form “b” and form “b” to form “c,” but not form “a” to form “c,” and so on and so forth (as in *stem-skimmed-sound-scent-spiked*).

Like all sound schemes, pararhyme can also achieve a variety of effects. First, there is just the brute sound of the scheme, which while just phenomenal and therefore hard to describe and appreciate, is palpable and perhaps best termed “dissonant.” Second, because of difference, dissonance, irony, and the relation between pararhyme and peripheries, in my temporal poetics, pararhyme is a reflex of relative time, which is the product of the qualities of the rhythmic component, theme. In relative time, pararhyme is analogically related to things like modernism/20th century, vision, memory, imagination, thought, adverbs, complex sentences, democracy, freedom, spontaneity, creativity, free verse, irony, drama, parenthesis, questions, hypotheticals, disjuncts, relative tenses, the perfect aspect, generic person, negation, winter, snow, night, moon, elder, chimney, smoke, fog, spirals, discontinuity, undirected motion/wandering, forest, black, sky, ocean/sea, blue, etc., many of Cummings’ favorite poetic themes. Third, as with rhyme and alliteration, pararhyme can knit up the linear flow of a text, giving it arcs of anticipation and satisfaction, as potential pararhymes are introduced and then linked up in satisfying ways with subsequent pararhymes. Finally, like all sound schemes, pararhyme can have thematic effects. Words that are linked in sound become linked in meaning, and these linkages need not be harmonic, they can also be dissonant. Examples of all of these effects will be illustrated in what follows in this essay, so I will not reproduce these examples here.

The most well-known use of pararhyme appears in the end-rhymes of many poems of Wilfred Owen, e.g., *blade-blood*, *flash-flesh*, and *leads-lads*, in “Arms and the Boy” (Owen 131):

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade  
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;  
Blue with all malice, like a madman’s flash;  
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-leads  
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,  
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,  
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.  
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;  
And God will grow no talons at his heels,  
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

Emily Dickinson is one of the great pioneers of this sort of line-final pararhyme, for example, the *outlived-Lead* pararhyme in lines 10-11 of #341, “After great pain, a formal feeling comes” (Dickinson 162):

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—  
The Nerves sit, ceremonious, like Tombs—  
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,  
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round—  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—  
A Wooden way  
Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

This is the Hour of Lead—  
Remembered, if outlived;  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—  
First – Chill – then — Stupor – then the letting go—

At the same time, it should be underlined that this sort of line-final pararhyme is rare—and justifiably so. Pararhyme, being decentered, does not help phrase the text, building up coherent constituent structures and parts within parts, as rhyme does, but rather picks up and amplifies ironies, unexpected dissonances, clashes in sensibilities, and the general free flowing, improvisatory structures of memory, imagination, and thought. While it is seldom noticed, this more randomly distributed, line-internal pararhyme has been a major part of English poetry from the beginning, for example, the dense texture of pararhymes in the more dramatic, conflicted sonnets, such as #14 and #47, of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* (Sidney 141-142, 188).

14

ALAS, have I not pain enough, my friend,  
Upon whose breast a fiercer Gripe doth tire  
Than did on him who first stale downe the fire,  
While *Love* on me doth all his quiver spend,  
But with your Rhubarb words you must contend  
To grieve me worse, in saying that Desire  
Doth plunge my wel-form'd soule even in the mire  
Of sinfull thoughts, which do in ruine end?  
If that be sinne which doth the maners frame,  
Well staid with truth in word and faith of deed,  
Readie of wit, and fearing nought but shame;  
If that be sinne which in fixt hearts doth breed  
A loathing of all loose unchastitie,  
Then Love is sinne, and let me sinfull be.

WHAT, have I thus betrayed my libertie?  
 Can those blacke beames such burning markes engrave  
 In my free side? Or am I borne a slave,  
 Whose necke becomes such yoke of tyranny?  
 Or want I sense to feele my miserie?  
 Or sprite, disdaine of such disdaine to have?  
 Who for long faith, though dayly helpe I crave,  
 May get no alms but scorne of beggarie.  
 Vertue, awake! Beautie but beautie is;  
 I may, I must, I can, I will, I do  
 Leave following that which it is gaine to misse.  
 Let her go. Soft, but here she comes. Go to,  
 Unkind. I love you not: O me, that eye  
 Doth make my heart give to my tongue the lie!

The parhymes in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* #14 are: fierce-first-fire-fearing; form'd-frame; not-naught; sinne-spend; pain-plunge-upon; Than-then; While-well; but-breast-biting. Parhymes in Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* #47: slave-leave-love; engrave-give; unkind-can; borne-burning; what-want; sprite-soft; but-beautie.

I suspect that the most parhymed poem in the language is Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and appropriately so, with its thematic focus on the haunting, harrowing energies of the poetic imagination. In "Kubla Khan," every line is connected by parhyme to some other line, with some sequences of parhymes extending to five, six, or even seven different vowels between the same consonants, creating an enormously elaborate and inwrought sound texture.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
 A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
 Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
 Through caverns measureless to man  
 Down to a sunless sea.  
 So twice five miles of fertile ground  
 With walls and towers were girdled round:  
 And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
 Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
 And there were forests, ancient as the hills,  
 Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
 Down the green hill athwart the cedarn cover!  
 A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
 As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted

By woman wailing for her demon-lover!  
 And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
 As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
 A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:  
 Amid whose swift, half-intermitted burst  
 Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
 Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:  
 And 'mid these dancing rocks, at once and ever  
 It flung up momentarily the sacred river.  
 Five miles meandering with a mazy motion  
 Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
 Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
 And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:  
 And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
 Ancestral voices prophesying war! . . . (Perkins 430-431)

The pararhymes in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" are: music-mazy; miles-milk; once-win-waning; shadow-should; hair-heard-her; walls-was; holy-hill-hail; sank-sacred; device-voices; moon-man-many-meandering-Mount-Romantic-mighty; sunny-sinuuous-Abyssinian-sunless; waves-weave; wailing-walls; maid-mid-meandering-Amid; dome-damsel-demon; athwart-that-there; were-beware-war-where; ceaseless-incense-Ancestral; fountain-float-fast-fertile; enfolding-fed; motion-measureless; ran-round; then-than-within; ground-girdled; greenery-grain-green; burst-Abora; bright-burst; caves-caverns-cover; close-chasm-caves; enfolding-flail; rebounding-build; spot-swift; did-dread; haunted-honey; dancing-down; forests-far-for; sing-song.

Pararhyme is used extensively by Cummings' modernist contemporaries—T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and others, so much so that it should be recognized, if it is not already, as the dominant sonic texture in twentieth century English and American poetry. Good examples are Frost's elaborate quadruple pararhyme *like-locks-looked-lucky* in his sonnet "Once By the Pacific":

The shattered water made a misty din.  
 Great waves looked over others coming in,  
 And thought of doing something to the shore  
 That water never did to land before.  
 The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,  
 Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.  
 You could not tell, and yet it looked as if  
 The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,  
 The cliff in being backed by continent;  
 It looked as if a night of dark intent  
 Was coming, and not only a night, an age.

Someone had better be prepared for rage.  
There would be more than ocean-water broken  
Before God's last *Put out the Light* was spoken. (Frost 250)

Notice also the parhymes *not-night*; *could-clouds* and *backed-broken*. Frost's most parhymed poem is "After Apple-Picking," and appropriately so, with its variable lineation, unpredictable rhymes, meandering discourse, and thematic focus on old age and memory, sleeping and dreaming. In "After Apple-Picking" (Frost 68-69), Frost blurs/blends together elaborate strings of parhymes into larger, denser textures that pervade the poem. Here are the first 27 lines:

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree  
Toward heaven still,  
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill  
Beside it, and there may be two or three  
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough,  
But I am done with apple-picking now.  
Essence of winter sleep is on the night  
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.  
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight  
I got from looking through a pane of glass  
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough  
And held against the world of hoary grass.  
It melted, and I let it fall and break.  
But I was well  
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,  
And I could tell  
What form my dreaming was about to take.  
Magnified apples appear and disappear,  
Stem end and blossom end,  
And every fleck of russet showing clear.  
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,  
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.  
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend:  
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin  
The rumbling sound  
Of load on load of apples coming in . . . .

The parhymes in Frost's "After Apple-Picking" are: *stem-skimmed-sound-cider-beside-some-sight-struck-spiked-sticking-scent-essence-strangeness-blossom-cellar-instep-sleep-describe*; *fell-fall-fill-fuel*; *apple-melted*; *well-will*; *bruised-boughs*; *held-hand-had*; *hearing-harvest-hoary*; *winter-one-went-what*; *down-done*; *matter-melted*; *bin-bend*; *lift-let*; *upon-pane*.

A good example of T. S. Eliot's use of parhyme is his "Preludes" (Eliot 12-13), which begins with those *smell of steaks* at six

o'clock and proceeds to *stale smells, faint feet, sordid sparrows, and soiled ceilings/soles/souls*. Here is the first section of four:

I

The winter evening settles down  
With smell of steaks in passageways.  
Six o'clock.  
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.  
And now a gusty shower wraps  
The grimy scraps  
Of withered leaves about your feet  
And newspapers from vacant lots;  
The showers beat  
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,  
And at the corner of the street  
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.  
And then the lighting of the lamps. . . .

Further pararhymes in Eliot's "Preludes" are: *about-burnt-beats; steams-stamps-some; stale-smells; faint-feet; watched-waited; ceiling-soul-soles-soiled; sordid-sparrows-certain-certainties; sitting-street-such; and block-back-blanket-broken-blackened*.

William Carlos Williams uses pararhyme most extensively in *Paterson*, especially Book III, Part III (Williams 129-145). As Paul Mariani observes, Williams seems to have been thinking in pararhymes when he developed the major themes of his epic:

And at the core of *Paterson III*, Williams' counter vision, not of Aphrodite, but rather that of a nameless black woman, Kore the maiden, mauled, disfigured, raped—*ecce femina!*—this radiant gist illuminating the apparently inert mass of the world of *Paterson* . . . Kore: one of the many grim jokes and riddles propounded in *Paterson*. But the gist of this joke—this riddle is central to getting all the riddles. Kore: Curie: Core: Care: Cor—ner: Caw Caw. These and other linguistic sparks strike from the central figure of Kore, the radiant gist, the magnetic core organizing the detritic "randomness" of *Paterson*. (Mariani 581-582)

Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" is also replete with pararhyme. Here are the first 21 lines:

I caught a tremendous fish  
And held him beside the boat  
Half out of water, with my hook  
Fast in a corner of his mouth.



He didn't fight.  
 He hadn't fought at all.  
 He hung a grunting weight,  
 battered and venerable  
 and homely. Here and there  
 his brown skin hung in strips  
 like ancient wallpaper,  
 and its pattern of darker brown  
 was like wallpaper:  
 shapes like full-blown roses  
 stained and lost through age.  
 He was speckled with barnacles,  
 fine rosettes of lime,  
 and infested  
 With tiny white sea-lice,  
 and underneath two or three  
 rags of green weed hung down. . . . (Bishop 48-59)

The pararhymes in Bishop's "The Fish" are: *him-homely; seen-stained-strain-skin-sun; caught-cut; was-wisdom; pink-packed; held-haired; like-looked; blood-badly-bladder-beard; bones-barnacles-brown-blown; weight-wet-white-water; snap-strips; fast-fight-fought-frightening-infested; mine-tremendous; return-tarnished-tinfoil-tiny; little-lost-light-let; grown-green-grunting; stared-side; broke- black; bailer-bilge; filled-frayed; coarse-crisp-crimped; cracked-scratched.*

### III

In his twenty-one "Sonnets—Realities" in *Chimneys*, Cummings uses almost two hundred pararhymes, often in long sequences that link together as many as four and five words. [See Appendix II for a list of pararhymes in "Sonnets—Realities."] For example, in the last seven lines of "nearer:breath of my breath:take not thy tingling" (CP 123), we find the sequence *curl-carcass-querying-squirming-carve*:

in the glad flesh of my fear:more neatly ream  
 this pith of darkness:carve an evilfringing  
 flower of madness on gritted lips  
 and on sprawled eyes squirming with light insane  
 chisel the killing flame that dizzily grips.

Querying greys between mouthed houses curl  
 thirstily. Dead stars stink. dawn. Inane,  
 the poetic carcass of a girl

Because of their density, these pararhymes give the entire sequence of "Sonnets—Realities" in *Chimneys* a hauntingly hard, hollow sound that ties

together into large networks surprising, but thematically appropriate, meanings. For example, in “god pity me whom(god distinctly has)” (CP 125), we find: *saxophonic* and *sexual*, *wise* and *wispish*, *pity* and *parting*, and *cracksman* and *quick*.

## XI

god pity me whom(god distinctly has)  
the weightless svelte drifting sexual feather  
of your shall i say body?follows  
truly through a dribbling moan of jazz

whose arched occasional steep youth swallows  
curvingly the keenness of my hips,  
or,your first twitch of crisp boy flesh dips  
my height in a firm fragile stinging weather,

(breathless with sharp necessary lips)kid

female cracksman of the nifty,ruffian-rogue,  
laughing body with wise breasts half-grown  
lispig flesh quick to thread the fattish drone  
of I Want a Doll,

wispish-agile feet with slid  
steps parting the tousle of saxophonic brogue.

And, of course, we find *Cambridge* and *comfortable* in “the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls” (CP 115).

In “kitty’. sixteen, 5’1”,white,prostitute” the pararhymes are *brute*, *breasted*, and *bottomless*; *kitty* and *cute*; *smiles*, *souls*, and *skilled*; *corking* and *quick*; *softness* and *sweet*; *amused* and *amazing*; *broad* and *body*; *skilled* and *unequal*; *most* and *must*; *unrepute* and *importantly*; *softness* and *sweet*; *smile* and *skilled*; and *flower* and *fearsomely* (CP 126):

## XII

“kitty”. sixteen, 5’1”,white,prostitute.

ducking always the touch of must and shall,  
whose slippery body is Death’s littlest pal,

skilled in quick softness. Unspontaneous. cute

the signal perfume of whose unrepute

focusses in the sweet slow animal  
bottomless eyes importantly banal,

Kitty. a whore. Sixteen

you corking brute  
amused from time to time by clever drolls  
fearsomely who do keep their sunday flower.  
The babybreasted broad “kitty” twice eight

—beer nothing, the lady’ll have a whiskey-sour—

whose least amazing smile is the most great  
common divisor of unequal souls.

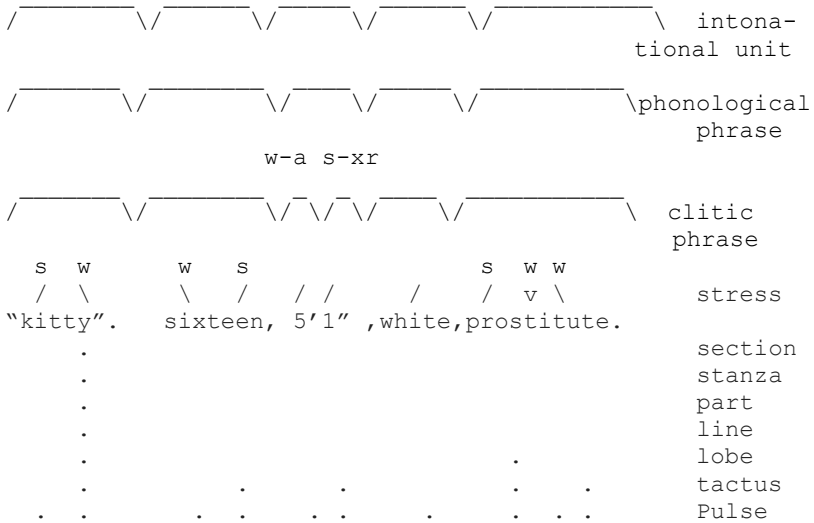
To clarify how an extensive use of parahrhyme works in the full context of a poem’s other forms, let’s take a closer look at Cummings’ use of parahrhyme in “kitty.” (See Appendix III for a discussion of one previous explication of the poem.)

Literally, “kitty” is about a young prostitute. But as a poet, what interests Cummings, we might suppose, is how this subject might be useful for self-expression, and in this case, it turns out to be remarkably apt. As with the other “realities” sonnets, for all of its play with punctuation, capitalization, visual spacing, slang, slurred speech, and other matters, “kitty” is a rather traditional sonnet and, in being so, pays quite a bit of attention to forms that usually express emotion (what I like to call “centroidal” forms, because of their preference for centering)—rhyme, concentric patterning, adjectives, copular clauses, and things like sweetness, flowers, and the soul.

As an “external” form, the sonnet, with its combination of pentameter lines (each of which must have a coda), a continuously patterned rhyme scheme, stanzas, and a higher-level metrical architecture that has two juxtaposed final codas (the third quatrain and the couplet, or the sestet), is usually used for emotional expression; and in “kitty,” Cummings leaves this emotional potential of the traditional sonnet intact. The pentameter that Cummings uses in “kitty” is remarkably traditional. Most of the metrical lines in “kitty” have exactly ten syllables, and so the meter and language move along easily together with an alternating beat, punctuated by relatively normal tensions and resolutions between meter and phrasing. For instance, the first line has an initial syncopation (*kitty*) and then two demotions (5’1”, said *five-one*; and *white pros-*) and a promotion (*-titute*).

## Lower Levels of Meter and Phrasing

Line 1



The other lines in the poem are pretty normally pentameter in this way, too. The rhyme scheme is also orderly, with stanzas intact, two quatrains and a sestet; and even so, this rhyme scheme is concentric in multiple ways, which is normally more emotional (abba / baab / cdedec) than an alternating rhyme scheme (abab/ cdcd / efefgg) would be.

And much of the syntax of the poem is traditionally emotional. There are 17 adjectives in the poem (*white, slippery, littlest, quick, Unspontaneous, cute, signal, sweet, slow, bottomless, banal, corking, clever, amazing, great, common, unequal*). The poem is largely in the present tense (*is, do keep, focusses, is*), the normal lyric tense. The syntactic superstructure of the poem is largely a tissue of relative clauses, which are often copular (*whose slippery body..., whose unrepute..., who do keep..., whose least amazing smile is...*).

Most sonnets, with their culminating codas, often have quite a bit of linear drive, too; and Cummings keeps some of this traditional linearity of the sonnet, as well—a vocative in second person (*you corking brute*), a future tense (*the lady'll have a whiskey-sour*), and some references to reality (*death's*) and more practical affairs (*skilled*). The final two lines in the poem (*whose least amazing smile is the most great / common divisor of unequal souls*) are especially artful and puzzling (more on this later), and therefore might indeed be considered both the phrasal peak and linear/

prolongation arrival for the poem as a whole.

In spite of this substantial array of lyric and narrative (centering and linear) forms, though, formally, “kitty” is overwhelmingly cyclical and relative. It is about body and mind, the peripheries of our sensibilities, not emotion and action, our personal centers. By and large, wherever possible, Cummings undermines the lyric/emotional and narrative/actional forms in the poem and amplifies the physical and cognitive ones. Much of the syntax of “kitty” is indeed lyric; but to open the poem, at least, with his “police line-up” speech, Cummings omits verbs entirely (which relativizes time) and turns the syntax into an appositional list (“kitty”. *sixteen, 5’1”, white, prostitute.*) fragmenting the poem’s vocal phrasing into short, bullet-like units, often monosyllabic, with falling tones. And even though there are indeed a lot of adjectives in the poem, in meaning, and therefore symbolically, these adjectives are almost all cyclical and relative, about body and mind, not emotion and meaning. On one hand, “kitty” is a corking brute, a babybreasted broad. She is slippery and soft, unspontaneous and slow, white, and all about touch, all about what must be done, and always “animal.” On the other hand, she is quick, and is all about amazing smiles, whiskey-sours, and bottomless eyes. She is a divisor of unequal souls. Just as lust and prostitution are themselves relative, symbolically, other relative forms are especially dense and obtrusive in the poem—adverbs (*importantly, frequently*), lexical conversion (*must, shall*), comparatives and superlatives (*most, least, littlest*), negatives (*unspontaneous, unrepute, bottomless, nothing, unequal*), and low diction (*corking, beer nothing*). A couple of times, Cummings even breaks out, dramatically and parenthetically, into other voices (*you corking brute, beer nothing, the lady’ll have a whiskey-sour*).

The densely patterned pararhymes in the poem (*kitty-cute; broad-body; littlest-least; perfume-from; amused-amazing; corking-quick; most-must; brute-breasted-bottomless, softness-sweet, smile-skilled; flower and fear-somely*) are an important part of this flood of relative forms. Twenty-four words of the poem are connected by pararhyme. These words cover 40 syllables, or in a sonnet such as this, 25% of the physical run of the poem. These words are marked in bold in the following transcription:

“**kitty**”. sixteen, 5’1”,white,prostitute.  
ducking always the touch of **must** and shall,  
whose slippery **body** is Death’s **littlest** pal,

**skilled** in **quick softness**. Unspontaneous. **cute**

the signal **perfume** of whose unrepute

focusses in the **sweet** slow animal  
**bottomless** eyes importantly banal,

**Kitty.** a whore. Sixteen

you **corking** brute  
**amused from** time to time by clever drolls  
**fearsomely** who do keep their sunday **flower.**  
The **babybreasted broad** “**kitty**” twice eight

—beer nothing, the lady’ll have a whiskey-sour—

whose **least amazing smile** is the **most** great  
Common divisor of unequal souls.

In this case, Cummings smears the whole poem with pararhyme. Lines 4 and 13 have four of these words:

**skilled** in **quick softness.** Unspontaneous. **cute**

whose **least amazing smile** is the **most** great

Line 11 has three of these words:

The **babybreasted broad** “**kitty**” twice eight

And lines 3, 8, 9, and 10 have two of these words:

whose slippery **body** is Death’s **littlest** pal,

**Kitty.** a whore. Sixteen

you **corking** brute

**amused from** time to time by clever drolls

**fearsomely** who do keep their sunday **flower.**

Just physically/sonically, this dense pararhyme gives the whole poem a dissonant timbre.

Given that pararhyme, formally, is about peripheries, this pararhyme is especially effective when Cummings brackets a line with pararhymes, or at least, words that participate in pararhyme in the poem, as in these two lines:

**skilled** in quick softness. Unspontaneous. **cute**

**fearsomely** who do keep their sunday **flower.**

and (almost):

**Kitty.** a whore. Sixteen  
you **corking** brute  
whose **least** amazing smile is the **most** great

Only one of these lines puts a pararhyme pair at line peripheries—(*fearsomely* who do keep their sunday *flower*)—and this placement of pararhymes, I think, is the most effective of all.

Cummings' pararhymes in "kitty" also do important thematic work, linking up symbols in various ways—in the same temporality, in different temporalities, etc. As might be expected, given the formal composition of the poem as a whole, many of these pararhyme linkages are cyclical (1) and/or relative, (4), connecting symbols of mind (4) and body (1) rather than emotion (2) and action. (3).

### Same Temporality

1 1  
kitty-cute;

1 1  
broad-body;

4 4  
littlest-least;

4 4  
perfume-from;

4 4  
amused-amazing.

### Different but Still Peripheral Temporalities (cyclical- [1], relative [4])

1 4  
corking-quick

4 1  
most-must

1 1 4  
brute-breasted-bottomless

### Different Temporalities, Relativized Reality (linear- [3], relative [4])

4            3  
perfume-importantly; (Snapshot)

3            4  
skilled-unequal

4            3  
unrepute-importantly

**Other Mixes of Temporalities with Relative Time (centroidal [2], linear [3])**

2            4  
flower-fearsomely

4      2      3  
smile-souls-skilled

**Other Mixes of Temporalities without Relative Time**

1            2  
softness-sweet

If it is considered as a poem—self-expression using linguistic (rhythmic, rhetorical, and symbolic) form—rather than as just a literal story, “kitty” should be related historically to other poems, both of that period and of any other time, that invoke a full sensibility as an ideal but then gut the central temporalities (will [3] and emotion [2]), emptying out psychological centers in favor of overloaded, extreme peripheries (body [1] and mind [4]). How might we interpret this poem if this were done? Here is a suggested interpretation:

Early on, biographically, both Cummings himself and those he hung out with (e.g., Scofield Thayer) had exactly the same psychological problems. Like many of his contemporaries (Stevens, Williams, Eliot, etc.), Cummings was extremely sensuous and imaginative, but felt both alienated socially (and therefore ineffective) and threatened/disorganized/detached/rejected, etc., emotionally (and therefore lovelorn/soulless). Therefore, psychologically, it might be reasonable to suggest that, in this poem, symbolically, the prostitute, “Kitty,” is Cummings himself (when he was in his 20s). Taken poetically, rather than prosaically, “Kitty,” the young prostitute in this poem, is not a fictional reference but a symbol of Cummings’ inner life at the time. At the time, Cummings felt he was “prostituting” his ac-



tions and emotional life in unnatural, undesirable ways to his physical and imaginative life. Psychologically, when he wrote this poem, Cummings himself was a parahrime.

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**Note:** In the appendices that follow, I present an overview of my theory of temporal poetics in two charts called “The Temporal Paradigm” and “The Poetic Paradigm.” For an overview of the rhythemics that I use to ground my temporal poetics, see Cureton *Rhythmic Phrasing* and “Metrical Reading.” For overviews of the basic principles of temporal poetics, see “Inner Form,” “Language of Poetry,” and “Telling Time.” For how rhythm motivates linguistic form, see “Temporal Theory of Language.” For a number of complete formal analyses, see “Temporality and Poetic Form” for Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” “Stylistics and Poetics” for Wallace Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “Process as Truth” for the opening of Walt Whitman’s “Song of the Broad-Axe,” “Jakobson Revisited” for W. B. Yeats’ “The Sorrow of Love,” “Solitary Disciple,” for William Carlos Williams’ “To a Solitary Disciple,” “Rhythmic Process” for D. H. Lawrence’s “To Women, As Far As I’m Concerned,” “Cummings and Temporality” for E. E. Cummings’ “somewhere I have never travelled, gladly beyond,” “Analysis of Emily Dickinson” for Emily Dickinson’s “I taste a liquor never brewed,” and “Map” for Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Map.”

## Appendix I

### The Temporal Paradigm

Temporal Features	Cyclical	Centroidal	Linear	Relative
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	individuality
subject-event relation	subjective	objective-in-subjective	subjective-in-objective	objective
semiotic relation	icon	emblem	index	symbol
cognitive process	reaction passive	affection recip- rocal	exploration active	creation im- provisatory
clock time orientation	past	present	future	relative
relational scope	proximate	local	regional	global
event position	initial	medial	final	peripheral
curve of energy	fall	rise-fall	fall-rise	rise
structural volatility	fixed	constrained	volatile	free

## The Poetic Paradigm

The forms that are organized into quadratic paradigms by these rhythmic qualities are summarized succinctly in what I call the *poetic paradigm*.

<i>Psychological and Neurological</i>				
<b>Temporality</b>	<b>Cyclical</b>	<b>Centroidal</b>	<b>Linear</b>	<b>Relative</b>
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	2 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*

<b>Temporality</b>	<b>Cyclical</b>	<b>Centroidal</b>	<b>Linear</b>	<b>Relative</b>
Western Culture	Ancient (-1100)	Medieval/Renaissance (1100-1750)	19th Century (1750-1900)	Modern (1900-)
philosophy	formism	organicism	mechanism	contextual-ism
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*

<b>Temporality</b>	<b>Cyclical</b>	<b>Centroidal</b>	<b>Linear</b>	<b>Relative</b>
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*

<b>Temporality</b>	<b>Cyclical</b>	<b>Centroidal</b>	<b>Linear</b>	<b>Relative</b>
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...*

<b>Temporality</b>	<b>Cyclical</b>	<b>Centroidal</b>	<b>Linear</b>	<b>Relative</b>
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*

<b>Temporality</b>	<b>Cyclical</b>	<b>Centroidal</b>	<b>Linear</b>	<b>Relational</b>
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	ocean/lake
	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



<i>Semantic and Thematic cont...</i>				
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

## Appendix II

### Pararhymes in Cummings' "Sonnets—Realities"

- I. "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls": Cambridge-comfortable; still-souls; believe-live-lavender; finds-furnished-for; not-knitting; minds-many-moon-permanent; candy-scandal; care-corner-less.
- II. "when i am in Boston, I do not speak": electric-click; click-cake; when-one; not-noting; cries-clothes; speak-paklavah; ivory-very; but-Boston; XENODOXEION-drink; flies-lugs; electric-drink.
- III. "goodbye Betty, don't remember me": Betty-breasts-but; Paris-perfume; sweet-softly; dear-dark; dear-darling; down-don't; dusk-dark; heaven-have; remember-beer; brings-boys; wear-world; themselves-smaller; themselves-stars; pencil-smaller; meeting-mystic.
- IV. "ladies and gentlemen this little girl": one's-winter; clenched-Coney; little-posolutely; whirl-will; crisp-breasts; clenched-quite; protests-tightened.
- V. "by god i want above fourteenth": Baboon-barbarous; Greenwich-grin; frail-fooling; Wall-while; most-mystic; want-what's-one; insane-Hassan; firm-fourteenth-for; sit-anisettes; screech-rich; biceps-sipping-insipidities; firm-perfumed; singular-sniggering; stroll-frail.
- VI. "when you rang at Dick Mid's Place": cheeks-chunklike; wrists-

erectly; tablets-tumbling; always-was; madam-Mid's; smeestaire-mischief; chunklike-chins; wincing-when-wun; beeg-big; hair-her; began-grin.

- VII. "a fragrant sag of fruit distinctly grouped.": Monia's-moon-minutes-immensely; distinctly-street-twitch-straightens; swims-Something-wich; looking-like; gladly-Grand-gurdy; speak-Second-Strunsky's; Strunsky's-swims; peppers-pompous; not-neatest; have-heavily.
- VIII. "irreproachable ladies firmly lewd": ladies-lewd; untimid-time; irreproachable-perpetual; comedy-crime; whose-his; most-immense; dangerous-din; dusk-distinctly; slabs-smiles; oval-svelte; Cecile-smiles; love-believes.
- IX. "nearer:breath of my breath: take not thy tingling": tigers-tingling; glad-blood; sweetness-swiftness-white; neatly-not; sprawled-steal; letting-light; leopards-lips; from-flame; stars-squirming; dream-dumb; flame-limbs; smooth-mouthed; mouthed-madness; flower-fear; steal-slowly; stink-take; killing-curl; curl-carcass-Querying-squirming-carve; squirring-upward.
- X. "when thou hast taken thy last applause, and when": silent-light-last-little-Lust-laughed-let-lintel; silly-soul-silent-smileless; ponder-painted-part; her-heart-hast; golden-god; mine-men.
- XI. "god pity me whom(god distinctly has)": saxophonic-sexual; steps-steep; pity-parting; cracksman-quick; weightless-want; feet-first-fattish; whose-has; swallows-svelte; wise-wispish; female-firm.
- XII. "'kitty.' sixteen, 5' 1", white, prostitute": kitty-cute; corking-quick; unrepute-importantly; flower-fearsomely; softness-sweet; smile-soulskilled; brute-breasted-bottomless; littlest-least; perfume-importantly; broad-body; skilled-unequal; most-must; perfume-from; amused-amazing; softness-sweet, smile-skilled.
- XIII. "it started when Bill's chip let on to": coming-came; bulls-Bill; beat-bumped-about; bloke-back; cleaned-cold-kid; locked-looking; let-laughed; waiting-went.
- XIV. "she sits dropping on a caret of clenched arms": caret-scarlet-squirm; clenched-couches; dropping-deep; streets-sits; Hassan's-obscene; squirm-weary; between-tiny; Hassan's-hips;
- XV. "unnoticed woman from whose kind large flesh": cruel-cold; stockings-smoking; Saint-street; good-gold; cries-frieze; not-night; extended-slowturning; soles-smiles; littleness-flat.
- XVI. "twentyseven bums give a prostitute the once": pants-pinch; horizontal-her; slight-struts-scatter-excitation; just-jounce-genuine; good-propaganda; bums-Business; breasts-distress; squirmy-careless-carefully; firmly-for; pants-prostitute.

- XVII. “of this wilting wall the colour drab”: wilting-wall; smile-still; souring-star-sore; blinds-born; sunbeams-scorn-inslants-disintegrates; sweating-inslants; slopcaked-slippery-sleepily; one-window; blinds-born; faintly-foetal; leans-blinds; unclosed-blinds; almost-mess.
- XVIII. “whereas by dark really released,the modern”: joke-magic; hair-her; strands-study; gripping-grapple; released-lips; anatomy-not; perfume-flame; terrific-traffic; passionate-pinch; fashionable-fierceness; indominable-modern; yes-uses; fierceness-for; halfsmile-ourselves; frail-really.
- XIX. “my girl’s tall with hard long eyes”: silence-smiles; filled-files; head-hard-hands; stands-spent; when-twine; gaily-girl’s; garden-good; her-hard.
- XX. “Dick Mid’s large bluish teeth without eyebrows”: week-worked; Mid’s-Mid’s-made; hundred-hands-had; toothless-teeth; lips-slept; cigar-girl; dark-Dick-Dick-Dick-Dick; slept-little; slept-spent-percent; but-bit; his-hands; worked-waiting; bulls-eyebrows; rolled-framed.
- XXI. “life boosts herself rapidly at me”: female-mammal; female-from; life-lifts; impertinent-puerperal; embrace-breasts; fatuous-futures; impertinent-epitome-pretty; puppy-puerperal-perpendicular; fists-face; skidding-exploded; smiles-swallowed; astute-distinctly; gums-grim.

### Appendix III

As it turns out, there is hardly any mention of “kitty” in the critical literature on Cummings’ poetry. There is no reference to the poem in Rotella’s bibliography. There is no mention of the poem in any of Norman Friedman’s three books on Cummings. There is no mention of the poem in Cohen or Terblanche or Fairley or Wegner or Marks. Kidder just mentions that the poem is about a teen-age prostitute. In *Dreams in the Mirror*, Kennedy mentions only that the first line sounds like “a police description,” as it indeed does. In all of the books I have on Cummings, only Kennedy in his second book (*Revisited*) has more to say about the poem, and even so, it’s just a few sentences of analysis on theme and tone:

[T]his one begins like a description from a police blotter . . . But in its fresh use of language, the poem goes far beyond the mere ugliness found in the “Portraits” to create both wit and sentiment. For expressing the ideas of rules and duties Cummings uses verbs as nouns: “ducking always the touch of must and shall.” Kitty’s role-playing in order to be cute is conveyed by the words “skilled” and “unspontaneous.” A surprise emerges when we encounter “banal” after “bottomless eyes.” The

metaphorical compactness of “sunday flower” for the virginity of young fellows who teasingly talk with Kitty introduces a tone of scorn for them, especially when it is followed by their own role-playing: the sudden intrusion of their tough talk, “—beer nothing the lady’ll have a whiskey sour.” In fact the shifts of tone in the poem from judgment of Kitty to judgment of the “clever drolls” who joke with her but fear her sexuality are rounded out in a final softening look at Kitty’s “least amazing smile” and its power as expressed in mathematical terms. The motifs of “sixteen” and “twice eight” are pulled together in the fact that the number eight is the largest “common divisor” of sixteen. (62-63)

Kennedy’s prosaic analysis by paraphrase comments about literal and/or rhetorical elements that may just as well be occurring in prose. He does not mention meter and rhythm at all, or intonation/prosody, or sound, or anything much about syntax or the poem’s pervasive symbolism (of body vs. mind vs. action vs. emotion), much less how all of these things relate to one another and to the overall effect of the poem. Prosaic descriptions of poetry such as this float entirely free of poetics. They have nothing to do with poetry. They operate without any conception whatsoever of what poems are and do.

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