

# One Art: Intuition and Typography in E. E. Cummings' Original Analysis of "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-e-g-r" (1935)

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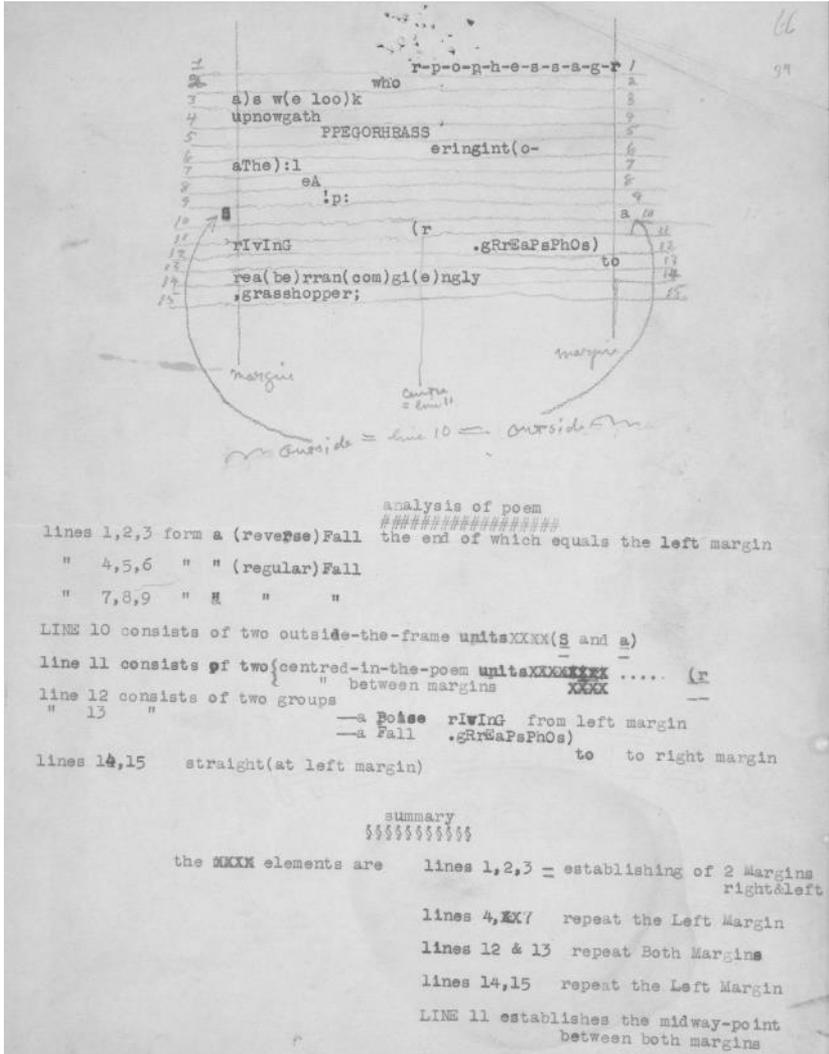


Figure 1: "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" typescript (Courtesy of the Liveright Publishing Corporation and the UVA archives)<sup>1</sup>

E. E. Cummings' radical typographical experiment with poetic form—splitting and transposing letters, truncating lines, energizing punctuation and spacing—has completely altered the way we perceive the visual field of modern poetry since Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (1918). One of Cummings' most critically acclaimed avant-gardist experiments is the poem "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r," first published in 1932 in the inaugural issue of William Carlos Williams' short-lived revival of the little magazine *Contact* and collected in Cummings' sixth book of poems, *No Thanks* (1935).<sup>2</sup> This very animated poem continues to appeal to critics in the U.S. and abroad, who explore ways in which Cummings plots in letters a dynamic motion, a life, or the courting dance of a grasshopper. Yet Cummings' earliest "analysis of [the] poem," in a manuscript now preserved at the University of Virginia Library, is little known to scholars. Recent discussions of the "grasshopper" poem and two critical studies, Michael Webster's "The New Nature Poetry and the Old" [*Spring* 9 (2000)] and Vakrilen Kilyovski's "The Nude, the Grasshopper and the Poet-Painter" (see previous article), note Cummings' typescript proof corrections sent to Brazilian translator Augusto de Campos, who brought out a translation of Cummings' poems in Portuguese in 1960. Since Cummings' schema in the early instruction to his long-time printer, S. A. Jacobs, appears somewhat different from the diagram sent to de Campos (for example, in Cummings' "analysis of poem" line 5, "PPEGORHRASS" extends to the center of the poem), I would like to examine Cummings' original intuition and typescript design, which differs also from the typeset version Jacobs produced in 1935 for Cummings' most experimental collection of poems, *No Thanks* (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>

Because of the complicated distortions of the lexical image of the grasshopper leaping through fifteen lines, innovative views of the form such as perceiving the poem as a parody sonnet (Webster) or a Cubo-Futurist Sonnet (Kilyovski) seem to add thematic dimensions to this animated poem, suggesting the grasshopper going through a courtship ritual in a dance of love. Cummings' analysis divides the first nine lines into a tripartite structure [3-3-3]—a reverse fall to the left followed by two "regular" falls to the right between the set margins:

lines 1,2,3 form a (reverse)Fall the end of which equals the left margin  
 " 4,5,6 " " (regular)Fall  
 " 7,8,9 " " " Fall

Next are two single lines, one (line 10) in which the two letters that make up the line—"S" and "a"—are outside the left and right margins respectively, and the other (line 11) in which "(r" is exactly in the center of the line, forming a kind of a pivot [1-1]. Two two-line groups follow [2-2], making the somewhat symmetrical line pattern of 3-3-3-1-1-2-2. This pattern may be perceived as an example of typographic intuition, giving life and being not only to the grasshopper, but also to the printed page and the full range of language itself.

Examining this zig-zag schema closely, the tri-partite arrangement in lines 1-9 appears to be a purposeful juxtaposition between the counterpoint of the right-to-left movement of lines 1-3, and a reversal of that counterpoint in lines 4-6 before the final "regular" fall that ends in "lp:" (line 9). This first synthesis is not fully closed, however, as the colon after "lp" points to the unfolding of a forthcoming action. A playful parallel to the 1-2-3 progression of the first nine lines seems reflected in the letters of "leA! p," moving nonetheless in the cascading steps of 1-2-3 ("l" as if step one in line 7, the "eA" as step two in line 8, then "lp:" as step three in line 9).

Looking again at the opening line from the right margin, the scrambled letter sequence "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" gives us an image of a grasshopper lying on its back. The visual arrangement of physically reversed letters—the inverted "r-g" (as in **r-g-a-s-s** instead of **g-r-a-s-s**) and the **e-r** of "hopper" overturned into distant **r... e**, with synaesthetic **p-o-p(ing)** in the midst of maneuvering—suggests a flipped and twisted grasshopper squirming to flip back over, as Cummings shows, "gath . . . erint(o-" (lines 4, 6) itself. It is an image reminiscent of Kafka's Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* (1916) waking up to a nightmare, trying to reverse a terrible predicament to free himself from the body of a bug, yet with no hope of becoming Cummings' grasshopper. In the next six lines, Cummings notes his typographic design in the analysis as lines forming "regular Fall[s]," guiding our eyes back to the left margin to see the "PPEGORHRASS," now zoomed into view, begin to right ELFSIT for the leaping motion in two more tripartite progressions. The emphatic "!" in line 9 foretells the grasshopper's dynamic ascent into the uppercase "S" that leaps out of bounds in the left margin, descending into a lowercase "a" also out of bounds in the right margin. Cummings writes: "LINE 10 consists of two outside-the-frame units (S and a)," giving an image of an arched span, stretching over the horizon like an imaginary rainbow. This image comes into focus in the centered "(r" in line 11—the metamorphosis of an unformed or deformed

grasshopper gradually morphed into its own being, as if constituting another synthesis—an inverted  $\Delta$  across the space, conveying a Trinitarian substantiation. We can see how Cummings notes in this typescript sent to Jacobs before the publication of *No Thanks*, “line 11 consists of two centred-in-the-poem / centred between margins / units .... (r)” and adds in his summary at the bottom of the typescript schema: “LINE 11 establishes the mid-way-point between both margins.” With a pivotal turn in line 11, the dance of love or the dance of life of the grasshopper is choreographed toward coming into being and rebirth in the final two two-line groups.

Here is the whole poem (CP 396), spaced as in the 1934-35 “analysis”:

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                                r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r
                                who
a) s w(e loo)k
upnowgath
                                PPEGORHRASS
                                eringint(o-
aThe) :l
                                eA
                                !p:
S                                a
                                (r
rIvInG                                .gRrEaPsPhOs)
                                to
rea (be) rran (com) gi (e) ngly
, grasshopper;

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Of lines 12-13, Cummings notes:

line 12 consists of two groups

" 13 "

—a Poise rIvInG from left margin

—a Fall .gRrEaPsPhOs)

to to right margin

The “analysis” says that line 12 moves from the left margin to the “Fall” down to line 13, the dislocated preposition “to” set flush to the right margin. By dividing the lines into two left/right groups, Cummings calls attention to his intuitive visual thinking and typographic design, giving both spatial and temporal significance to the left margin extended out from the center for the grasshopper’s transformation. The enjambed “to” in line 13

quickly takes our eye to the “rearranging” of the grasshopper in the last of the closing two lines. As Cummings notes: “lines 14,15 straight(at left margin).” Visually or psychologically, we are moved to see a grasshopper “forming” and “arriving” after an emphatic and powerful leap out of the realm of nonbeing and the unnatural world—Cummings notes in pencil: “outside = line 10 = outside”—and returning to the center to “(be)” “(com)” “(e)” itself—“grasshopper;”—in the end, accompanied by comma before (indicating a leaf of grass or a brief pause) and a semicolon after, implying continuation or something to follow—the grasshopper poised for another leap.

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## Notes

1. E. E. Cummings, “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r analysis of poem” typescript (Papers of E. E. Cummings, Circa 1917-62, in the Clifton Waller Barrett Library, MSS6246a, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.). In the summer of 2006 when I worked on Cummings’ sonnet schema in *No Thanks*, Cummings’ analysis of the poem “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” slipped out of the manuscript folder. That summer’s research turned into an article, “Reflecting *EIMI*: The Iconic Meta-Sonnet, Manhood, and Cultural Crisis in E. E. Cummings’ *No Thanks*.” As my project on Cummings’ modernist sonnets evolved, I had all but forgotten about this important manuscript when, after the 2012 ALA Cummings sessions in San Francisco, an e-mail discussion on the shaping of the poem brought this typescript copy back to my attention.
2. William Carlos Williams revived this little magazine in 1932 under the name *Contact: An American Quarterly Review*. The magazine had first appeared in December / January 1920-1921 and lasted through June 1923. Jacqueline Vaught Brogan discusses the revival of Williams’ *Contact* in chapter four of her *Part of the Climate: American Cubist Poetry* (238-240). She also notes the appearance of the grasshopper poem as one of “Four Poems” in the first revived issue of *Contact*: “Cummings’ poems include the somewhat scatological ‘let’s start a magazine’ and his now well-known ‘r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r,’ as well

- as ‘mouse)Won’ and ‘ondumonde’ ” (239).
3. Cummings’ book of poems, *No Thanks*, one of his most experimental and carefully organized collections, was also the most misunderstood—rejected by at least fourteen publishers and negatively reviewed by most critics in 1935. Paid for by his mother, Rebecca Haswell Cummings, and printed by his long-time personal typesetter S. A. Jacobs, *No Thanks* was self-published (despite quite a few poems having been already recognized in the little magazines) and so commemorated its rejection by fourteen publishers with its title and with its “toast” to those fourteen on the dedication page. The book also remembers its patron on its final page: “And Thanks to R. H. C.” For a detailed history of the publication and the surviving manuscripts of *No Thanks* at the Special Collections of the University of Virginia Library, see George James Firmage’s Afterword to *No Thanks* (New York: Liveright, 1998). I am indebted to Michael Webster for discussing this paper with me.

### Works Cited

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