

Modernism, Cummings' Meta-Sonnets, and *Chimneys*¹

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Poetic Modernism and the sonnet, a traditional genre of a more than seven-centuries pedigree, do not seem to have much in common; they are nevertheless symbiotic, especially when “make it new” experimental modernism depends on a traditional form such as the sonnet as its marker. However, the modernist movement is much more complicated than the innovation of form, multi-dimensional ways of seeing, and fragmentation of the paradigm in poetry, art, or architecture. Even though major modernist or avant-garde poets rejected traditional form in general and the sonnet in particular, the re-envisioning of the sonnet from within played a significant role in high modernism. While widely known as the “magic-maker” of the twentieth-century avant-garde free verse lyrics, this innovative poetic genius challenging the traditional genre from within is none other than E. E. Cummings. This paper addresses this unique aspect of generic modernism that Cummings engaged in, especially in his original corpus of the 1922 manuscript of his *Chimneys* sonnet (non)sequence—unique deployment of fragmented, yet identifiable, fourteenliners—generally overlooked by critics.

Norman Friedman observes two reactions to Cummings' poetry: antimodernists who criticize Cummings as avant-gardist, obscurist, a leading poet of what Max Eastman called “the cult of unintelligibility,” and modernists who generally recognize Cummings' experimentalism, but consider his subject matter (love, spring, death) as adolescent, sentimental, conventional, and romantic—lacking in tragic vision [(Re)Valuing 3-18]. One can see how neither reaction gives much thought to Cummings' re-vision of the genre in a modernist climate. Even when the sonnets are noted, they are often treated in isolation. A popular edition of Cummings' poetry, *100 Selected Poems*, anthologizes only two separate poems from the *Chimneys* sequence. The most recent edition of Cummings' poetry, *Another E. E. Cummings* (1998), claims to give the reader “an eye-opening selection of Cummings' most avant-garde poetry and prose,” but includes only six or so sonnets under the rubric of “Deviant Traditional Verse.” Critics' neglect of Cummings' *Chimneys* sonnets, coupled with a general tendency of reading his early poems through the filter of his later ones, has led to the treatment of Cummings' early poems as a step in his growth toward a transcendent vision, which Guy Rotella has discussed in depth.² Such a reading, however, risks a reduction of his early poetry to something close to undeveloped apprentice work.

Others among today's critics also do not know quite what to make of the *Chimneys* sonnets. When Richard Kennedy and George James Firmage brought out the complete 1922 *Tulips & Chimneys* manuscript version in 1976, Kennedy remarked in the introduction that Cummings' “heterogeneity” in his first book of poetry masks his “vision”:

Since *Tulips & Chimneys* is his first book of verse, the very heterogeneity which gives it special interest obscures that clear sense of an outlook on life which is distinctive in Cummings' career as an American poet. His later volumes have that center—a simple, coherent view which is implied only in a scattering of the poems in this volume. ("Introduction," xviii)

In his most recent study, Kennedy further finds fault with Cummings' judgment in making his three groupings: "On the whole the three groups of sonnets show that Cummings' judgment was faulty when he made his choices of what to include in his first book" (*Revisited* 64). He goes on to say that

Either he did not like to discard poems that he had worked hard to complete, or he could not discriminate his good work from what was poor. These pages offer plenty of evidence that he would sometimes allow himself to publish an item of self-conscious pretentiousness just because he managed to squeeze it into sonnet form. (64)

Nevertheless, placing Cummings' experimental sonnets in their cultural context of the high modernist twenties discloses undeniable significance—we see Cummings engaged the modernist dialogue between genre and culture in the aftermath of "make it new" movement. One underlying factor is Cummings' experience with censorship.³ Cummings' re-vision of the sonnet came at a very specific historical moment, a year or so after T. W. Crosland's indictment in 1917 of some published "ultra-modern" or "modernist" sonnets for their deviance from the rules or the laws of the sonnet (144).

All of the poems in *Tulips and Chimneys* were collected in 1919; the former is a collection of free-verse vignettes, and the latter, written in an extremely Cummingsesque form, is a set of naturalistic portrayals of love relationships and life pieces entitled "sonnets." For fear that publishers were unwilling to contend with censorship (implemented by John S. Sumner, executive secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice), Cummings' final 1922 manuscript (with nine sonnets removed from "Sonnets—Realities," seven sonnets removed from "Sonnets—Actualities," and some seventeen poems removed from *Tulips*) still met with rejection.⁴ Thomas Seltzer, who accepted the 1922 manuscript of *Tulips & Chimneys*, would print only a small selection that he considered "less experimental and less sexually daring."⁵ The first book of his verse was finally brought to print in 1923, a year after his *Enormous Room*, but only 66 of the 152 poems in the manuscript were accepted.⁶ When Cummings tried to publish the rest of the poems in the manuscript again in 1924, the Dial Press's editor, Lincoln MacVeagh, omitted sonnets such as "between the breasts" and "my naked lady framed" to avoid the risk of censorship. About the rejection of his original manuscript, Cummings wrote his mother, "When my beard is white with dotage, etc., the entire *Tulips & Chimneys* may possibly have made an appearance per 71 different selective passages conducted by 407 publishers" (Kennedy,

“Introduction” xiv).⁷ The story of the rejection of *Tulips & Chimneys* reveals not only the American literary conservatism that Cummings was eager to defy, but also an intertwined relationship between genre and culture.⁸

If critics have not observed Cummings’ fragmented sonnets, with their multiple perspectives of realities engaged in a dialogue with his own genteel “high” culture, it seems apropos to reconsider Cummings’ dialogism and precocity in the postmodern climate. Although Louise Bogan does not pursue the subject, she does describe Cummings’ earliest poetry, *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), as “delightfully irreverent in form and fresh in feeling,” to which she further adds: “he has reworked traditional forms as often as he has invented new ones, turning not only the sonnet to his own purposes, but also the ballad, the nursery rhyme, the epigrammatic quatrain, and the incantatory rune” (194). Above all, Kennedy’s discovery of the “very heterogeneity which gives it [*Chimneys*] its special interest” (“Introduction” xviii) strongly suggests a necessary reconsideration of Cummings’ poetic achievement in his earliest poetry, even though Kennedy himself sees “heterogeneity” as failure in Cummings’ poetic vision.

To me, “heterogeneity” voices the presence of otherness, and *Chimneys* indeed speaks itself as “other” to the established sonnet tradition. I thus believe that both the familiar and unfamiliar sonnets in *Chimneys* should be considered on their own terms. Granted, not all of the sonnets are Cummings’ best work, and some could be amateurish work or leftovers from college days, as Kennedy points out (*Revisited* 63). However, Cummings’ arrangement of these sonnets and his insistence on printing them in the exact order, along with a declaration of his sonnet poetics in the final section of *Chimneys*, points to a meta-generic critique rather than underdeveloped “apprentice” work or “faulty judgment” in his writing and choosing of sonnets.⁹

Perhaps critical oversights of Cummings’ deliberate ordering of the sonnets and manipulation of the genre did arise from Cummings’ failure to publish his complete 1922 *Tulips & Chimneys* manuscript until later. It then comes as no surprise that a recognition of Cummings’ generic modernism as an *other* modernism had been passed over in the early twenties and has even led some modernist critics to believe that Cummings was at heart a traditionalist.¹⁰ As a result, readers saw only fragmentary glimpses of his poetic experiments. However, the very significance of Cummings’ placing the three sets of sonnets under the heading *Chimneys* cannot be overlooked. With its 63 sonnets, from “Sonnets—Realities” (21 sonnets), to “Sonnets—Unrealities” (18 sonnets), and returning to “Sonnets—Actualities” (24 sonnets) with the final line of the sonnets ending in “hell,” the sequence defies the conventional expectation of a transcendent unity in a sonnet sequence. Although tri-partite in structure, the *Chimneys* section calls attention not to a classical, dialectical, upward movement, but to the multiplicity of irrepressible, co-existing realities, unrealities, and actualities. An interesting and also helpful comment from Friedman on the relationship between reality and chimneys might be worth pondering here: “Systems, codes, and theories are always being threatened by what they have excluded; reality, like a wolf, when denied entrance at the door, tries to climb down the *chimney*” (*Growth* 4; italics

mine). Apparently, *Chimneys*, if taken as a dialogue with the culture and genre taboos, appears to present itself as an outcast or outlawed reality, seeking another entrance—by the side or back door—to speak its otherness, or to present itself as the other to the discourse of the prescribed sonnet “(un)reality.”

While a full analysis of Cummings’ sonnet (non)sequence remains desirable, such an analysis is beyond the spatial limitations of this study. Given these limitations, I nonetheless offer what I believe to be a representation of the sequence’s poetic and political subversions of the unreality of the genteel form and unlove in the Petrarchan sonnet tradition. Limited by the scope of this presentation, I can only highlight one or two sonnets from each section to convey what I see as the Cummings’ performance of a self-reflexive meta-generic critique, voicing another modernism.

Genteel Form, “the Cambridge Ladies,” and the Unmasking of “Sonnets—Realities”

Ralph Waldo Emerson expresses his love for the sonnet and for Petrarch in his famous essay “Circles”:

All the argument and all the wisdom is not in the encyclopaedia, or the treatise on metaphysics, or the Body of Divinity, but in the sonnet or the play. In my daily work I incline to repeat my old steps, and do not believe in remedial force, in the power of change and reform. But some Petrarch or Ariosto, filled with the new wine of his imagination, writes me an ode or a brisk romance, full of daring thought and action. (173-74)

This Emersonian sentiment was exactly the sentiment that New England genteel culture shared, except for the latter’s further obsession with the image of the Petrarchan sonnet at the turn of the twentieth century. Raymond Alden’s *English Verse Specimens Illustrating its Principles and History* (1903), a textbook adopted in Cummings’ Harvard writing class, reiterates the prestige held for the Petrarchan sonnet: “It is suited, of course, only for the expression of dignified and careful thinking; and the difficulty of giving it unity and confining the content to the precise limit of fourteen lines has made perfect success in the form a rare attainment” (169). Alden’s prescriptions for the form reflect George Santayana’s “pedantic” view of the beautiful. It seems that the more affected the form, the greater the beauty, as Santayana notes, “what we were asked to call beautiful out of pure affectation and pedantry, now becomes beautiful indeed” (251).

What such an aesthetics attributes to the sonnet form is, then, a privileging of a poetic form and with it, a privileging of abstract over concrete reality. Under these dictates, love becomes a matter of form, absent its meaning. While rebellious high modernists redirect the abstract idea of love to coarse realities of human sexuality, one aspect of Cummings’ modernism uses the genre itself to expose from within this aestheticized reality and abstract, formal love. He does this by mimicking the form,

un-forming, de-forming, and trans-forming it through a meta-generic critique that calls attention to its meaning beyond what the amorous form represents. In his first section, "Sonnets—Realities," most of the so-called sonnets give only the impression of a sonnet stanza. Contrary to the expectations that Alden promotes for the genre, all of the twenty-one sonnets are Cummingsesque anti-sublime, making no effort to beautify or sanitize the realities around them. Within the idealized sonnet plane, a fragmented prism of reality and no longer a mirror reflecting back its transcendent beauty, Cummings' still recognizable fourteenliners compel the reader to confront other realities that the refined form and aestheticized love seek to exclude. We can see how Cummings purposefully begins his first section of the whole Chimneys sequence with a de-formed sonnet of "prefurnished" Cambridge ladies, suggesting the target of his critique.

At first sight, "the Cambridge ladies" seems out of place in Cummings' landscape of naked, low-life pieces in "Sonnets—Realities." However, if we read this sonnet as a deliberate conceit for the whole Chimneys (non)sequence, the pre-positioning of this sonnet becomes an obvious strategy for Cummings in his critique of the genteel form and the abstracted genre tradition. I might appear to be overreaching by claiming this opening lyric to be a microcosm of Cummings' critique of New England genteel (un)reality and its "formal" pretentiousness that displaces real love from the amorous genre. However, a close examination of the poem strongly suggests that such a reading is in line with Cummings' provocative mocking of the stultified and idealized form. The form has been rendered as "(un)reality" by the Cambridge ladies and by the genteel tradition. Indeed, the entire sonnet hinges on the notion of form, yet a form unliving and unloving, detached from the actuality of love and meaning.

the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls
are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds
(also,with the church's protestant blessings
daughters,unscented shapeless spirited)
they believe in Christ and Longfellow,both dead,
are invariably interested in so many things—
at the present writing one still finds
delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?
perhaps. While permanent faces coyly bandy
scandal of Mrs. N and Professor D

(CP 115)

Cummings exposes the "comfortable minds" of the Cambridge ladies as nothing more than abstraction, for the idealized form upheld by the genteel tradition has become lifeless. Alluding to Christ and Longfellow, Cummings points to the problematic of fixed meaning in religion and the inflexibility of the "furnished souls." Christ's passion codified into church rituals and Longfellow's Petrarchan sonnets rendered into an icon of genteel prestige and tradition prove to be nothing but lifeless

“formal” prescriptions. Once meaning or form is presupposed and enforced, one can only inherit the dead from the dead. As a result, meaning and form become disjointed. The “Cambridge ladies” know what motion they have to go through and what form they have to assume, but they no longer come to grips with the reasons why. In lines 7-10, the form of charity is betrayed as a stylized act without substance: “at the present writing one still finds / delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?” And the form of propriety over a sexual scandal is exposed as “formal” pretentiousness: “. . . While *permanent* faces coyly bandy / scandal of Mrs. N and Professor D” (Italics mine). When “form” displaces “meaning” as “reality,” it ends in indifference to others, as the Cambridge ladies do not care for anything above, beyond, or beneath their familiar province, as the “moon [that] rattles like a fragment of angry candy” witnesses:

. . . the Cambridge ladies do not care,above
Cambridge if sometimes in its box of
sky lavender and cornerless,the
moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy

The critique of the unreality of a “self-contained” form is further manifested in Cummings’ structural and typographical play, thwarting established generic expectations. Stripped of structural elements of the established form beyond a fourteen-line stanza, the de-formed sonnet immediately challenges the perception of the “reality” or the “unreality” of form. The punctuation, specifically the comma, often tightly squeezed in between the words, interrupts the habitual pause, further directing readers’ attention to form, to the pauses.¹¹ The five commas Cummings uses in “the Cambridge ladies,” for example, compel his reader to confront the shrunken spaces without “comfortable minds.” Thus, “unscented shapeless spirited” daughters (l. 4) might be forced to rethink the ethereal attributes of the blissful form. They are also compelled to see their belief in Christ and Longfellow to be a faith in the unliving form (l. 5). Finally, in contrast to the “changing” and “rattling” moon above, Cambridge, “in its box of / sky lavender and cornerless,the” is revealed as an unliving, self-contained genteel form. In this way, Cummings’ work anticipates post-modern thinking. Terry Eagleton’s interpretation of gaps and omissions as a subversion of “totalizing” ideology may well be applied here:

It is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt. It is these silences which the critic must make ‘speak.’ The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things; in trying to tell the truth in his own way, for example, the author finds himself forced to reveal the limits of the ideology within which he writes. He is forced to reveal its gaps and silences, what it is unable to articulate. Because a text contains these gaps and silences, it is always incomplete. Far from constituting a rounded, coherent whole, it displays a

conflict and contradiction of meanings; and the significance of the work lies in the difference rather than unity between these meanings. (34-5)

The absent spacings prior to the lines that follow them then speak Cummings' subversion of the "unreality" of form, where the unliving and unfeeling form is deliberately (un)punctuated, uncapitalized, broken, or jammed to free meaning to its own realities.

In Cummings' retrospective semi-autobiography *i: six nonlectures*, he told his Harvard audience how he was turned away from idealism and the respectability of Cambridge's genteel cultural consciousness in the process of self-discovery.

Being myself a professor's (& later a clergyman's) son, I had every so-called reason to accept these conventional distinctions without cavil; yet for some unreason I didn't. The more implacably a virtuous Cambridge drew me toward what might have been her bosom, the more sure I felt that so-called respectability comprised nearly everything which I couldn't respect, and the more eagerly I explored sinful Somerville [where lowly folks resided, according to Cummings]. (31)

What Cummings condemned in a "virtuous Cambridge" corresponds to what Vernon Louis Parrington in *Main Currents in American Thought* terms as "a refined ethicism" (436). It spoke through the idealized form, a desire for transcendent and intellectual beauty, moral refinement, and transcendent love as conventionally defined. Parrington describes this aloofness of the genteel life and letters:

The essence of the genteel tradition was a refined ethicism, that professed to discover the highest virtue in shutting one's eyes to disagreeable fact, and the highest law in the law of convention. ... Coarseness had given way to refinement. It was the romanticism of Brahmin culture, with all Falstaffian vulgarity deleted, and every smutch of the natural man bleached out in the pure sunshine of manners. (436)

This "ethicism" found its articulation in the elevated Petrarchan sonnet, a genre perceived as embodying the virtues of perfection, balance, harmony, purity, unity, and oneness, typified by Longfellow and his sonnets. The opening sonnet satirizing the Cambridge ladies with "furnished" souls thus sets the stage for Cummings' meta-generic critique throughout *Chimneys*.

Cummings goes on to bring the realities of various cultures and subcultures of Boston, including the demimonde (which he was exposed to while a student at Harvard), to what is supposed to be the dignified stage of the sonnet. Crossing the genteel line, Cummings' irregular and undecorous sonnets lead the reader through ethnic restaurants, urban lives in the Boston night clubs, the gambling table, the prostitutes and the patrons, the bums, the drunks, and the "infernal" vision of the

city, the underworld.

The scene of the second sonnet opens in a Greek coffeehouse with a pool table in the background and includes even the trivial and repugnant reality of flies lighting on a tablecloth. The high culture of “hellas” no longer resides in the Cambridge reading circles, but in the taste of Greek coffee and “paklava” (baklava).

when i am in Boston,i do not speak.
and i sit in the click of ivory balls....

noting flies,which jerk upon the weak
color of table-cloths,the electric When
In Doubt Buy Of(but a roof hugs
whom)

as the august evening mauls
Kneeland,and a waiter cleverly lugs
indigestible honeycake to men
....one perfectly smooth coffee
tasting of hellas,i drink,or sometimes two
remarking cries of paklavah meeah.
(Very occasionally three.)

and i gaze on the cindercoloured little ΜΕΓΑ
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΝ ΞΕΝΟΔΟΧΕΙΟΝ ΥΠΙΝΟΥ (CP 116)

In this uneven, semi-Shakespearean sonnet (rhymed abab cdcd in the first two stanzas), Cummings uses realistic, onomatopoeic sounds—“click,” “jerk,” “hug,” “maul” and “lug”—and the Boston dialect of Greek immigrants, “paklavah meeah,” heard in the coffeehouse, to provide a contrast to the gray Greek letters inscribed on the wall: “Grand Greek Sleeping Hotel.” He thus calls attention to the reality of the sonnet’s (un)genteel other; the sonnet seems to say that, if there is the Greek of the academy, as Longfellow and the genteel culture embraced, there is also the Greek of the coffeehouse, which has an equal claim to “reality.”

In the sixth sonnet of the section, Cummings further shocks the comfortable minds of the genteel eyes and ears by exposing the most grotesque and crude realities of prostitution and riff-raff:

when you rang at Dick Mid’s Place
the madam was a bulb stuck in the door.
a fang of wincing gas showed how
hair,in two fists of shrill colour,
clutched the dull volume of her tumbling face
scribbled with a big grin. her sow-
eyes clicking mischief from thick lids.
the chunklike nose on which always the four

tablets of perspiration erectly sitting.
 —If they knew you at Dick Mid's
 the three trickling chins began to traipse
 into the cheeks "eet smeestaire steevensun
 kum een,dare ease Bet,an Leelee,an dee beeg wun"
 her handless wrists did gooey severe shapes. (CP 120)

This blatant vulgarism of the Cummingsesque sonnet, the grotesque image of the bestial madam, and the "demotic" (and accented) speech of the street ("eet smeestaire steevensun / kum een,dare ease Bet,an Leelee,an dee beeg wun": It's Mr. Stevenson / Come in, there is Bet,and Lily,and the big one), if not placed in the context of his critique of a repressive genteel (un)reality, could be easily read as Cummings' mocking of the underclass. However, Cummings' objection to being criticized based on what he presents in the poem rather than on why he presents it as such should be taken into account.¹² Cummings, rather than attempting to mock street people, attempts to provoke a hearing, to call attention to the irrepressible existence of *other* grim realities. Through twenty-one portraits of the other almost unspeakable realities in the fragmented sonnet vignettes, Cummings concludes his first section without closure, rendering all realities inescapably immediate and present. It is indeed this blending of high culture and low life, the genteel and the grotesque, in his "Sonnets—Realities" that from the onset gives Cummings' *Chimneys* sonnets a distinct cultural nuance that cannot be dismissed as apprentice work or adolescent play.

**"and what were roses":
 Unma(s)king Unlove in "Sonnets—Unrealities"**

With the provocation of the genteel consciousness in mind, the significance of the mid-section, "Sonnets—Unrealities," becomes clear. The opening sonnet, "and what were roses. Perfume?for i do" (CP 136) is deliberately obscure, and seems to set the tone for his critique of genteel reality as "unrealities." Images of roses in their metonymic slippage from its symbolic reference to its materiality and the "demure" ladies and queens, who move with "muted steps," recall the image of the Cambridge ladies, yet ironically unreal and ethereal, in this Cummingsesque Petrarchan sonnet.

and what were roses. Perfume?for i do
 forget . . . or mere Music mounting unsurely

twilight
 but here were something more maturely
 childish,more beautiful almost than you.

Yet if not flower,tell me softly who

be these haunters of dreams always demurely
halfsmiling from cool faces,moving purely
with muted step,yet somewhat proudly too —

are they not ladies,ladies of my dream
justly touching roses their fingers whitely
live by?

or better,
queens,queens laughing lightly
crowned with far colours,

thinking very much
of nothing and whom dawn loves most to touch

wishing by willows,bending upon streams?

But why does Cummings need to go through 18 sonnets to drive his point home? Further, why would he use quite identifiable Petrarchan (VI) and Shakespearean forms (VII) or the mix of both (IV), (and one blank verse sonnet expressing desire) in the mid-section of the *Chimneys* sonnets, while in the first section the sonnets are formless? Among these both familiar and unfamiliar sonnets, why would there be three perfect Petrarchan sonnets with a bi-partite structure in accordance with the legitimate form of his period? How does this deliberation reflect Charles Deshler's comments on the meaning of the true sonnet in *Afternoon with the Poets* (1879)?

The meaning of the true sonnet, like that of all genuine poetry, needs not to be groped for darkly, or to be reached after by reason and argument; but its message, like that of the flower, the bird, or the sunset, is obvious and direct, and when it is so, its recognition will be as prompt and spontaneous as that of beauty everywhere. (83-4)

Interestingly, Cummings, more or less, does just what Deshler suggests in these three sonnets: the "Froissart" sonnet (IV) eulogizes heroes and Froissart's chronicling of war; the "garden" sonnet (IX) reflects nature's cycles; the "lover's complaint" sonnet (XI) registers a genteel lover's retreat. The meaning of all these three sonnets seems quite direct and clear. With form deliberately made to fit content, Cummings' three perfect sonnets easily convey how the meanings of war, death, and love can be idealized and comfortably subsumed into the genteel consciousness.

In contrast, when the form is not that easy to recognize, the rest of the fourteenliners which demand greater effort in reconstructing seem to compel the genteel consciousness to confront "form" before "meaning." Such maneuvering in

the mid-section thus reveals how form is nothing but a construct, constituting unrealities. Once the genteel form is stripped away, the result is clear. The idealization of war in the perfect Froissart sonnet gives way to the gruesome reality of war in a Shakespearean form in the next sonnet (V). The Prufrock-like lover's retreat from love's competition ends in voyeuristic desire and love longing in a blank verse sonnet (XII). Similarly, the sentimentality of the other-worldly "garden" sonnet cannot displace the cruel reality of the whirlwind and death's integration (XVIII). Cummings' "Sonnets—Unrealities" thus once again manifest a strong cultural critique through the manipulation of the sonnet form, provoking the comfortable minds and furnished souls of the New England genteel consciousness unflinchingly.

Exposing form rendered into unrealities in the mid-section, Cummings makes no effort to resolve the tension, as if his purpose is not to remove form or to improve it, but to contradict it and to destabilize its one-dimensional (un)reality, which leads to blind faith in established conventions.

**“—And then we are I and She...”:
The Unmasking of Love in “Sonnets—Actualities”**

In the final section, Cummings foregrounds irreducible living sensations in contradistinction to the idealized genteel form. No longer an “unliving” form of love as exposed in “Sonnets-Unrealities,” the genre is revived to speak the “actuality” of love. His final section returns to “Sonnets—Actualities,” consisting of 24 Cummingsesque sonnets that speak of the body and physical sensations of love. In the actuality of form, no single sonnet mimics any inherent rhyming pattern, Petrarchan or Shakespearean, as Cummings deliberately does with most of his sonnets in “Sonnets—Unrealities,” though some rhyme schemes without a fixed pattern are used. Here, the sonnet no longer poses as a genteel mirror. Going behind the genteel mask—its strict rules and high style, established for the elevated ear—Cummings recovers the displaced living actualities, wherein the responsive flesh-and-blood erotic body aspires to its living and immediate presence. The actuality of the sonnet shockingly turns to truly “amorous” sonnets, performing the actuality of love, or to put it bluntly, the act of making love. Contrary to the genteel expectations of an ethereal, disdainful lady, Cummings' “Cambridge lady” is now transformed into an unmistakably sensuous human being, moved with music-like sound, curving bright color, and amazingly unforgettable luring smells.

when my love comes to see me it's
just a little like music,a
little more like curving color(say
orange)
against silence,or darkness....

the coming of my love emits
a wonderful smell in my mind,

you should see when i turn to find
her how my least heart-beat becomes less.
And then all her beauty is a vise

whose stilling lips murder suddenly me,

but of my corpse the tool her smile makes something
suddenly luminous and precise

—and then we are I and She....

what is that the hurdy-gurdy's playing (CP 154)

These mixed, synesthetic sensations of sound (music) and vision (curving color), accompanying the coming of his love, quickly evoke in the lover's mind not a "thought" of the ideal beauty—as the genteel sonnet or its literary forbear, the amatory sonnet, would predict—nor the urbane scents of the genteel tradition, but a "wonderful smell" that hangs about her. Contrary to Henry Constable's anonymous love object in "My lady's presence makes the roses red," the beloved's presence in Cummings is effectively sensed through the less "refined" olfactory organs. As if predicting Diane Ackerman's comment on the mnemonic function of smell—"Nothing is more memorable than a smell" (5)—Cummings' emphasis on his love's unforgettable smell, rather than her heavenly image, strikes a deliberate pose against repressed genteel consciousness. In this very sonnet, two elliptical lines (after "darkness...." and after "I and She....") seemingly moving from desire to love making, recall the ellipsis of the unspeakable desire in the Cambridge ladies' obsessions with scandal. Returning form to its actuality and physicality, Cummings impels the genteel eye to confront the irrepressible actuality of love sensations.

In the conclusions of the last two semi-rhymed sonnets, Cummings invites the genteel consciousness to cross the "dead" tradition—a large road dividing the dead from the living—to act on passion and love:

and we will pass the simple ugliness
of exact tombs, where a large road crosses
and all the people are minutely dead.

Then you will slowly kiss me (CP 176)

.....

till,at the corner of Nothing and Something,we heard
a handorgan in twilight playing like hell (CP 177)

The *Chimneys* sonnets thus end not only in a fulfillment but also in an offering to his New England upbringing, his repressive genteel culture, to desire, to love, and to embrace life in its multiplicity. I will therefore close my paper with Cummings' summation of his sonnet poetics, which declares a pluralistic view of co-existing realities. A poetics unassumingly buried in the eighteenth sonnet of his truly provocative "Sonnets—Actualities."

my sonnet is A light goes on in
the toiletwindow,that's straightacross from
my window,night air bothered with a rustling din

sort of sublimated tom-tom
which quite outdoes the mandolin-

man's tiny racket. The horses sleep upstairs.
And you can see their ears. Ears win-

k,funny stable. In the morning they go out in pairs:
amazingly,one pair is white
(but you know that)they look at each other. Nudge.

(if they love each other,who cares?)
They pull the morning out of the night.

I am living with a mouse who shares

my meals with him,which is fair as i judge. (CP 171)

In this sonnet, Cummings states that his sonnet is a capitalized "A" light that sheds light on the genre from a "toilet" window (an "actual" mirror) rather than from a drawing room window (an "idealized" or "refined" genteel mirror). As Cummings sometimes uses lower-case letters where upper-case letters belong, this dramatization of his theory of the sonnet as a capitalized "light" cannot be taken lightly. The "toiletwindow" unquestionably reflects our best and worst moments in day-to-day life; it is a window returning things to actuality, a window which does not hide imperfections. It is a mirror—or rather the Cummingsesque sonnet—that accurately brings back the distinction between the real, the unreal, and the actual. The sonnet itself is also another conceit of actuality in which the speaker "I," the nominal "I," distinguished in a grammatically correct upper case, is brought down to a humble and human level, sharing a life with an insignificant mouse; the commonality "of mice

and men” in the divine scheme of things seems well borne-out in this sonnet.

Clearly, Cummings’ sonnet poetics, against the objection of the genteel consciousness, recognizes all forms—whether unformed, re-formed, or de-formed, including the high and the low, the genteel and the lowly, even the lowly mouse. Indeed, the *Chimneys* sonnets are not merely the experimental attempt of a modernist poet, but a defiance of the unliving and unloving form grounded in the abstracted New England genteel culture. This determination to penetrate the meaning of form, to redirect attention to the potential of the amorous form, has continually been Cummings’ priority to articulate the meaning of love before form. It is indeed a modernist, or rather “pre-postmodern,” meta-generic performance. In *95 Poems* (1958), Cummings again drives home his life-long message through the power of the meta-genre. In this meta-sonnet, he speaks his distaste for “unlove”:

unlove’s the heavenless hell and homeless home

of knowledgeable shadows(quick to seize
each nothing which all soulless wraiths proclaim
substance;all heartless spectres,happiness)

lovers alone wear sunlight. The whole truth

not hid by matter;not by mind revealed
(more than all dying life,all living death)
and never which has been or will be told

sings only—and all lovers are the song.

Here(only here)is freedom:always here
no then of winter equals now of spring;
but april’s day transcends november’s year

(eternity being so sans until
twice i have lived forever in a smile)

(CP 765)

It is not only that the subject matter evokes attention, but also that his message on “what is not love” is spoken through the recognizable sonnet form—the form of love—obtaining more attention. As always, Cummings compels us to look at the genre and culture from multiple perspectives of (post)modernist aesthetics, dispelling any illusion about the fixity of form, as well as its connotative “absolute” meaning, absent feeling and love. By cracking the pristine genteel sonnet tradition in “Sonnets—Realities,” “Sonnets—Unrealities,” and “Sonnets—Actualities,” Cummings’ meta-sonnets enact another modernism, unveiling a multi-dimensional reality of

form, which is neither reducible nor sublimatable to any abstract or neo-Platonic, transcendable ideal.

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Notes

¹ I am using Cummings' 1922 manuscript version of his *Chimneys* sonnets reprinted in *E. E. Cummings Complete Poems 1904-1962*, Ed. George J. Firmage, (New York: Liveright, 1994).

² By "transcendentalist," I do not mean a transcendentalist in the Platonic sense, but a transcendentalist of the "abstract" unreality, as Demos sees Cummings not as an idealist, but a realist (183). John Logan in *Poetry*, arguing for the defense, begins by noting Cummings' compassion and his concern with self-transcendence, quoting from *i: six nonlectures*: "we should go hugely astray in assuming that art was the only self-transcendence. Art is a mystery: all mysteries have their source in a mystery-of-mysteries who is love." Logan comments: "we may note the connection between the notion of transcending ('climbing over') oneself and the notion of ecstasy ('standing outside'); the one follows the other: and without both there is neither love nor art." As far as "anti-intellectualism" is concerned, it "is basically an affirmation of the mystery of things," a resistance against those "who insist on limiting the real and true to what they think they know or can respond to . . . Cummings is directly opposed to letting us rest in what we believe we know; and this is the key to the rhetorical function of his famous language." (Friedman 94-95 or *Critical Essays on E. E. Cummings* 86).

Even though Rotella argues for a transcendent vision in Cummings' works, he recognizes that the implications of transcendence in Cummings' early work are slight, if present at all, before *Viva* (1931) [287]. He finds that Cummings' transcendence began in the 1930s, yet he often dismissed quickly the many poems that do not show a move toward the spiritual, but toward descent, by saying that "the attention given such poems ought not to assert too much" (300). Friedman notes two views—Platonic or the material—existing in Cummings' writings, concluding that Cummings' "self-division" contributes to these dualistic views (Friedman, "Cummings Posthumous" 320 in Rotella 300).

³ Charles Norman documented that beginning in January, 1920, the "Archetype Edition" of *Tulips and Chimneys* was turned down by at least five publishers, including Cummings' present publisher.

⁴ Kennedy notes that "When Cummings revised and rearranged *Tulips & Chimneys* in 1922, he omitted some of the poems in this group probably because he thought they would scare off publishers who were unwilling to do battle with such self-appointed guardians of public morals as John S. Summer, executive secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice" ("Introduction" xiv).

- ⁵ Some of Cummings' friends, like John Dos Passos, read the manuscript and tried to persuade the publisher Thomas Seltzer to bring out a volume of selections from the manuscript. See Charles Norman, *The Magic-Maker*, pp. 127-128.
- ⁶ According to Rushworth M. Kidder's *E. E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1979), only seventeen out of sixty-three sonnets of *Chimneys* were printed in 1923. That is, six out of twenty-one in "Sonnets-Realities"; six out of eighteen in "Sonnets-Unrealities"; five out of twenty-four in "Sonnets-Actualities." I deduce the number of each section of the sonnets from Cummings' final version of his 1922 original manuscript. Friedman in *The Growth of a Writer* (1964) seems to record a different figure omitted in the second and third section, however. Friedman states that eleven, instead of twelve, were omitted in the second section and eighteen, instead of twenty-four, were omitted (41-42).
- ⁷ According to Kennedy, Cummings then published 45 of the rejected poems, along with 34 new poems, published privately in 1925 and titled &[AND]. This book of personal poetry is dedicated to his first wife Elaine Orr. The other 41 sonnets from *Chimneys* were those chosen by Lincoln MacVeagh and printed as *XLI Poems* (1925). See Richard Kennedy, "Tulips, Chimneys, &," *E. E. Cummings Revisited*, p. 53.
- ⁸ It was not until 1937 that Cummings was able to print his original manuscript of *Tulips & Chimneys* on his own money (*The Magic-Maker* 128).
- ⁹ Kennedy recognizes that the "grimy subject matter in many of his poems . . . springs from a double origin: his desire to shock The Great American Public as well as his interest in playing off matter against form as one feature of the revolution in literary expression" (*Revisited* 63); Kennedy lightly touches upon the possibility of Cummings' critique of form in his structural play of content against form. He nevertheless offers no reading or analysis of such a possibility. Without seeing Cummings' *Chimneys* as a play of sonnet form against the sonnet tradition, Kennedy hastily concludes that "There is a lot of apprentice work in these poems as well, some of which are leftovers from Cummings' college years" (*ibid.* 63).
- ¹⁰ See Alfred Kazin's review of *i: six nonlectures* in *New Yorker*, (Jan, 2, 1954), 57-59. He finds Cummings "has always made a point of defying the Philistines, but at Harvard he stood up against our terrible century armed only with his memories and the *Golden Treasury*" (59). Friedman challenges such an unbalanced view of Cummings: "The poets whose poems he recited at the end of each nonlecture—Wordsworth, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Swinburne, Donne, Dante, Keats, Shelley, and so on—are indeed from some sort of *Golden Treasury*. But when was that ever a bar to any watch we keep? These are not exactly Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, and James Russell Lowell! Cummings need not be pegged as an Anarchist to be appreciated, neither does this mean he is just another Ella Wheeler Wilcox in modernist disguise. Let us beware of false disjunctions" (*Growth* 43). Indeed, Cummings did not name or recite any genteel poets. According to

Norman, the influence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the whole Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was apparent in Cummings' early undergraduate years (*The Magic-Maker* 32-33), but by 1915, Cummings' own style and language begins to emerge. In Cummings' appreciation of "formative influences of his life," Norman notes that Cummings acknowledges his indebtedness to the poets mentioned above, but he did not include Rossetti (*ibid.* 228).

¹¹ See Charles Olson's important analysis of Cummings' typography as verbal pauses in "Projective Verse," p. 154.

¹² See Kennedy, *Dreams in the Mirror*, 431-434.

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