

## E. E. Cummings and Sound

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A study of the importance of sound in E. E. Cummings' poetry presents a challenge because the visual often takes precedence over the audible in his work. Complicating things further is the fact that Cummings considered himself a painter first, then a poet. He referred to his work as "poem-pictures," and, in one of his letters he wrote, "not all my poems are to be read aloud—some . . . are to be seen & not heard" (*Letters* 267). The way his poems appeared on the page was of great importance to him, as indicated in a letter to the editor of his first *Collected Poems*:

But what I care infinitely is that each poempicture should remain intact. Why? Possibly because, with a few exceptions, my poems are essentially pictures. And (in my naif way) I believe that you're one of the few people in America who can work out such a combination of typesize and papersize as will allow every picture to breathe its particular life ("no runover" lines) in its own private world (qtd. in Heusser 266 and Norman 288-89).

His correspondence with his publisher and typesetter Samuel A. Jacobs is replete with minutely detailed typographical instructions, underscoring the priority he gave to the visual dimension of his poetry. All the same, a closer look can reveal how, in the majority of his work, sound was also central to his art and his aesthetic, even in his heavily iconic poems. For example, Michael Webster looks at a manuscript copy of "a- // float on some" which shows Cummings' scansion of an early draft of the poem, with the question mark and the single parenthesis icon marked as long or accented "syllables." Webster surmises that such annotation reveals how Cummings believed silent "syllables" could "'sing' in a visual-verbal" way ("singing is silence" 206). A quote from Cummings' notes at the Houghton Library will help to explain this close attention to unpronounceable symbols: "the eye is a voice and a language: it speaks and it says."<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the visual paradigm dominates, but Cummings was insistent that all the senses must work together and are essential to the full human experience. That the visual is usually associated with perception and the intellect, ("Vision is tactile. The verdict of vision is cerebral"<sup>2</sup>) and that the auditory, through the penetration of sound waves, allows for greater immersion in the world were concepts with which he would have been very familiar. Further, Angela Frattarola posits that many modernist writers "use sound and auditory expe-

rience to subvert traditional . . . notions of self and narrative, which tend to privilege sight” and to support her argument, theorizes that “vision indicates an analytical self, distanced from the world, [while] audition allows for a self immersed in the world” (132).

I will argue that the close attentive reading demanded by Cummings’ visually challenging texts enhances the faculty of hearing until the text speaks itself. When the words and symbols on the page are not immediately recognizable, what we hear in our “inner ear” is the noise of chaos as we struggle to puzzle out their meaning. That chaotic sound or noise confuses and blurs the boundary between the reader and the poem, allowing the reader to become more fully immersed in the poem as a rich, sensuous experience, so that, as Milton Cohen concludes, “one’s *experience* of the work becomes its real meaning” (*PoetandPainter* 239).

This paper looks at sound in three visual poems from three different angles, employing the usual linguistic and poetic values like semantics and connotation as well as sound qualities like rhyme and rhythm. In the first example, we see how the iconic deconstruction of words and their unusual placement on the page create a dialectic between the eye and the ear through which individual words take on importance as things themselves and are not simply symbols to be remembered and recognized by the intellect. The second example explores how the sounds resulting from the reader’s attempts to disentangle and distinguish words on the page suggest the visual and contribute to the shape of the poem. The last example, a sonnet, focuses on its musicality and how that music derives not just from traditional poetic elements but also from Cummings’ iconicity. Through all these examples we see how the tension that Cummings creates between the visual and the audible suggests the ineffable moment of self-discovery.

It’s hardly surprising that this man who considered himself first a painter and then a poet would privilege the visual over the audible, but things don’t work out quite that neatly. Milton Cohen, Richard Kennedy, Robert Wegner, and others have remarked, for instance, on the importance of synesthesia to Cummings’ art and theory of perception. In one of his notes he writes:

if this wind  
which communicates itself as a series of pressures (touch)  
smelled (like seaweed)  
(a) I would seem to see the wind  
(b) the wind would therefore seem (bec[ause] I saw it)  
more real (qtd. in Cohen *PP*, 196)<sup>3</sup>

In yet another note, Cummings remarks on the importance of all the senses working together and makes a distinction between perception and recognition,

we do not see in terms of the recognizable . . .  
we do however see first, remember second (whether  
consciously or not) & the seeing  
TIMES [=s recognition]  
remembering  
(qtd. in Cohen, *PP* 88)<sup>4</sup>

Cohen summarizes Cummings' ideas on perception and recognition as follows: "Perception originates in raw sensations: a color strikes the retina; a sound hits the eardrum. As one *feels* these stimuli separately, that is, as one becomes sensuously aware of them, one perceives them. Recognition follows these perceptions, and depends on *thinking* to make 'sense' of them by joining and filtering them through memory" (88). He surmises that for Cummings, recognition makes perception a second-hand experience. Because recognition relies on memory, it loses the "nowness," the immediacy of perception that was so important to him. Isabelle Alfandary picks up on this idea to make a case for the role of silence in Cummings' aesthetics as a way to delay recognition (41). Many others have remarked on the importance of silence to Cummings both aesthetically and spiritually.

Most readers would agree that much of Cummings' poetry is visual and cannot easily be read aloud. Parenthetical insertions, syntactic shifts, and verbal-visual dislocation sometimes make even his poems written in traditional forms such as the sonnet difficult to read aloud. But those who study silence in his work, find a "voice which is sometimes that of the poet, sometimes a narrator," and they agree with Alfandary that "reading gives access to the voice, the poetic voice, even though the reading is silent" (Alfandary 38). Larry Chott, however, describes how he and his students recite "oil tel duh woil doi sez" (CP 312) in order to see and hear "what sound looks like," how Cummings renders the American dialect visually (45). Robert Wegner asserts that "after screamgroa" (CP 656) is an example of how Cummings used noise as a metaphor and sound as symbol and not simply to reinforce meaning (57). Barry Marks, in a beautiful analysis of "l(a)" (CP 673) considers how the poem's sound values that result from fragmenting and rearranging words contribute to the image of the twisting leaf and concludes that the assonance of the "ea" in "leaf" with the long e sound in "loneliness," as well as the poem's length and the whispering quality of the 's' sounds, combine to suggest effectively the settling of

the fallen leaf” (25).

I propose that Cummings’ visually challenging poems demand the reader’s attention, increase the need to “listen” in order to “hear” his/her own inner voice and/or the voice of the poet or persona, thus requiring both hearing and seeing. As noted earlier, Cummings wrote: “the eye is a voice and a language: it speaks and it says.”<sup>5</sup> A good example of the interplay between the eye and the ear is poem #63 from his collection *No Thanks* (1935) (CP 448).

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birds(
    here,inven
ting air
U
) sing

tw
iligH(
t's
    v
    va
    vas(
vast

ness.Be) look
now
    (come
soul;
&:and

who
    s)e
    voi

c
es
(
are
    ar
    a
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The first two words of the poem—“birds” and “here”—are recognizable; however, the unusual placement of these words and others on the page throws us off balance, pulls us in. Additionally, the splitting of the words in parentheses forces us to try to sound out the letters and make sense of them since the eye does not immediately recognize them as words. “Using,”

spread over the fourth and fifth lines, at first suggests “you sing,” seeming to address the reader directly; then we hear “using.” Our eyes move down the page from “)sing” to the scrambled “tw / iligH(“ initially tricking us into carrying over the short “i” from sing so that we hear “twillig” with two short “i’s” until the “t’s” on the next line reveals “twilight’s.” The sequence “va / vas( / vast” becomes the call of the birds as they fly overhead, sounding louder as they approach. The voice that commands “Be” and “look / now” and “come / soul” may be the voice of the poet/observer or that of the birds themselves. In the next line the double “and” in parentheses—(&:and)—is emphatic, made even more so by the colon, suggesting, perhaps, the voices belong to both the birds *and* the soul beckoning. Again, we have to sound out “who / s)e / voi / c / es / (“ in order to come to some sense of the words’ meaning; thus sound comes before memory and recognition. The final “are / ar / a” reverberates in our ears and takes on the ghostly echo of the sound of the birds departing into the distance and into the darkness, which is also death.

As nighttime closes off our vision of the physical world, sound opens up a vision of the spiritual world.<sup>6</sup> We hear the call of the birds in the twilight, we look, we see and hear what is near, and “now.” Through their voices, which “are,” they call forth the reader’s soul to “come” (that is, follow) and “Become,” that is, achieve transcendence or wholeness, with the double “&:and” sustaining our sense of expectant wonder, suggesting a kind of breathless “and . . . and” that escapes the lips of a child (or even an adult) in a moment of wide-eyed wonderment.

Cummings has created ambiguity and dual meanings in this poem not only by playing on the denotations of words but also by placing words and letters visually in such a way as to require us both to see them as objects and hear their sounds. By scattering “vastness” over several lines, he represents the concept of birds/soul in flight visually as well as in the call of the birds. Additionally, the letters moving across the page become ideograms of the birds moving through time and space; thus, we perceive the words and letters themselves as things of substance and sound, and not just as signifiers. Subsequently, the denotation of the word emerges and we realize that we have experienced vastness in a way we have never experienced it before.<sup>7</sup>

In the next example, the breaking up and rearranging of words and using punctuation in unusual ways results in a kind of visual plasticity and significant sound values. This example is from *50 Poems* (1940) (CP 487).

!blac  
k  
agains  
t  
  
(whi)  
  
te sky  
?t  
rees whic  
h fr  
  
om droppe  
  
d  
,  
le  
af  
  
a::go  
  
e  
s wh  
Irll  
n  
  
.g

The exclamation mark at the beginning of the first line comes as a visual surprise that is echoed audibly in the abrupt, hard sound of the “k” standing alone on the next line. The blank space after the “k” allows us the pause we need to pronounce the next word, also spread over two lines, “agains / t” ending with another hard, consonantal sound; it is also difficult to pronounce “black against” with its glottal stop. The effect of placing the hard sounds of “k” and “t” each on separate lines audibly accentuates the visual contrast of the black trees against the white sky. The isolation of individual letters throughout the poem—the “t,” “?t,” “d,” “e,” “n,” “.g,” and the free-standing comma—gives the poem its vertical shape *and* slows down our reading. As we sound out these letters and attempt to puzzle out the words they connect to, we are made aware of the “thingness” of the individual

letters as well as the words. Again, sound comes before recognition, and enables us to *feel* the language that leads to perception and not just to memory.

In contrast to the cacophonous “k” and “t” sounds at the beginning, the euphonious “wh” sound connects “white,” “which,” and “whirl” in a way that aurally enhances the visual whirling movement of the leaf. Similarly, “trees” and “leaf” are bound together by the long “e” sound. Thus, we may be fooled into reading the solitary “e” beginning stanza 7 as another long “e” until we realize that it belongs with the preceding “go” which becomes “goes” whose “s” comes as another surprise and seems at first to be part of “whirling” making it “swirling.” Thus, the entire phrase “from which a dropped leaf goes whirling” is scrambled, mirroring the motion of the leaf itself blowing in the wind. Again, significant sound values result from the splitting and rearranging of words, the full impact of which comes from communication between the eye and the ear. The voice holds the long “e,” but the inner ear and the eye search from line to line to find the end of the word.

The line “a::go” suggests the action took place in the chronological past (with the colon and semicolon signaling long ago) until our eyes and ears disentangle the words, and we understand that the action is in the present. By encoding the past within the present this way, Cummings leads us to a sense of timelessness, which along with the black and white imagery and the falling leaf might be seen to connect with recurrent themes in his work, that of death and self-discovery through escaping time. Further, the period coming before the final “g” rather than after, suggests a beginning rather than an end. “Goes whirling” is another phrase that is difficult to say, even in our mind’s ear. But the soft sounds of the “s” and “wh” might be the sounds of the leaf coming to rest as indicated by the final “.g”; thus, the poem ends much as it began, with sounds that are difficult to utter, providing a synthesizing finale for both the sound and the shape of the poem.

While this piece may be seen as a kind of “dress rehearsal” for Cummings’ more famous falling-leaf poem and does not have the same kind of tight, formal structure or the same philosophical implications, it does, like the other poem, have an orderly structure made up of four-line stanzas alternating with one-line stanzas; a narrow vertical shape; and repeated sounds (white, which, whirling; trees and leaf) that echo from stanza to stanza and aid the reader’s process of puzzling out the scrambled words and sounds.

But how does sound function when Cummings writes in a more conventional form, as in the sonnet “luminous tendril of celestial wish” (CP 669)? Though the poem follows the generic sonnet form in some respects,

like all of Cummings' works that challenge conventions, codes, and systems, it deviates in significant ways. Here again eye and ear work together to create the musicality and meaning in a way that is pure Cummings:

luminous tendril of celestial wish

(whying diminutive bright deathlessness  
to these my not themselves believing eyes  
adventuring,enormous nowhere from)

querying affirmation;virginal

immediacy of precision:more  
and perfectly more most ethereal  
silence through twilight's mystery made flesh—

dreamslender exquisite white firstful flame

—new moon!as(by the miracle of your  
sweet innocence refuted)clumsy some  
dull cowardice called a world vanishes,

teach disappearing also me the keen  
illimitable secret of begin

Examples of how this poem departs from the traditional sonnet form include the visual isolation of lines 1, 5, and 9; the scrambling of syntax throughout; unusual punctuation; jamming together words like “adventuring,enormous,” “affirmation;virginal,” and “moon!as(by”); and the nearly total absence of pure rhyme, substituting pararhymes and half-rhymes. The first line is highly abstract and breaks with the sonnet tradition of immediately naming the object being addressed (often the moon). (Contrast Sir Philip Sydney's “With how sad steps, O Moon, thou climb'st the skies!”) Here, it is not entirely clear to whom the speaker is directing his words until line 10. Interestingly, although the first line is difficult to read aloud, it is made rhythmical by the short vowel sounds creating a nearly regular dactylic line. This musical sound continues into the second line, which echoes the nearly regular dactylic rhythm, enhanced by the repeated long “i” and repeated “d” sounds. This echo audibly connects these two lines, which are otherwise set apart visually by the space between and by the parentheses. “Whying” that begins the second line resonates with and

connects to “querying” at the beginning of line 5, thus emphasizing the speaker’s wonderment. In the fourth stanza one hears in the increasingly intensive superlative “more / and perfectly more most ethereal / silence” an emphatic, one may say ecstatic, expression of the speaker’s appreciation for silence—which he finds not just more but still more and, in fact, perfectly most ethereal. The utterance is reminiscent of Keats’ exuberant praise of the scene on the Grecian urn, “More happy love! More happy, happy love!”

Cummings’ hyperbolic praise reaches the level of divine incarnation in the lovely melodic line, “Twilight’s mystery made flesh.” The dash at the end of the line (the end of the octave) builds our expectation, heightened by the blank space that leads into the next beautifully lyrical line “dreamslender exquisite white firstful flame” with its musical repetition of “s” and “f” sounds that also connect with the whisper-like music of the previous line through the consonance of the letters “f” and “l” in “flame” and “flesh.” The descriptive line 9 bracketed by white space and dashes, builds to a crescendo of anticipation, realized at line 10 where the object being spoken to is finally named, with the exclamation point signifying the speaker’s excitement—and ours—as he addresses the new moon as “dreamslender,” meaning both slender like a dream and a lender of dreams. The last two lines, the beautiful couplet, become the coda, a request for the moon to teach him how to “disappear” from the un-world and “begin” to be a self that transcends the “nowhere” of the everyday world. Michael Webster has noted how the lack of a period or full stop visually reinforces the paradox of ending the poem with the word “begin.” Thus the poem ends with the silence of the speaker’s transformation of the self into nothing, and the blank space at the end speaks (or sings) volumes (201).

In this sonnet as with the other examples, Cummings’ dialectic of eye and ear and his unique combinations of unusual rhythm and iconic effects produce a kind of special magic that moves us out of our conscious, analytical selves and into the unconscious, dreamlike world of imagination where we experience the poems and the words themselves “in much the way the child with the stick horse feels, believes the stick IS the verb to ride” (qtd. in Cohen 67).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, readers of his seemingly chaotic poems who interrogate them with unbiased ear can hear their reply and feel their noise or music penetrating far below the conscious level of thought and feeling, touching the most ancient memories and stirring the most modern sensations.

## Notes

1. Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (70) sheet 11

- folder 2.
2. Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS AM 1892.7 (69) sheet 7 folder 1.
  3. Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS AM 1823.7 (59) sheet 109.
  4. Houghton Library, Harvard University bMS Am 1823.7 (25) sheet 66.
  5. Houghton Library, Harvard University bMS Am 1892.7 (70) sheet 11 folder 2.
  6. Here, I paraphrase Barry Marks writing about “nonsun blob a”: “the nighttime death which shuts off vision of the physical world opens up at the same time a vision of the mysterious world of spirit” (30).
  7. Pierre Boulez has set this poem to music in an unforgettable and moving piece.
  8. Houghton Library, Harvard University bMS AM 1823.7 (70).

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