Two Converging Motifs: E. E. Cummings' *l!ook*

Aaron Moe

"Poetics" is the study of what poetry is and what poetry accomplishes. Concerning the first aspect, E. E. Cummings' poetry is an organic whole in which several motifs dynamically interrelate, including the many osmotic paradoxes—or "homogenous dualities" (Cummings, *six* 53)—of yes and no, here and nowhere, the infinite and nothingness—as well as many other recurring images or ideas: the moon, The Verb, numbers, birds, rain, snow, leaves, spring, winter, stars, eroticism, and flowers.[1] This enumeration is not exhaustive; it simply establishes how a handful of motifs interact to create a complex tapestry of interrelationships. This essay focuses upon the motifs of looking and the exclamation mark, acknowledging that they contribute toward a portion of what constitutes Cummings' poetics. However, it is easy to linger in the first aspect of *poetics*—marveling at the apparent ease with which these motifs evolve—but the second aspect of *poetics*—what poetry accomplishes—is equally important, especially when the subject of the poetry is nature. Ecocriticism revitalizes discourse surrounding nature poetry, moving beyond the merely enthusiastic toward the challenging questions concerning human existence within the ecosystems of the earth. The title of John Felstiner's recent book blatantly questions the practical limits of what nature poetry accomplishes: *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* Perhaps a more prudent question is, "How does poetry contribute to a philosophy that humbly recognizes the preeminent importance of the earth's ecosystems?"[2] Cummings' *l!ook* contributes towards such a philosophy, and in order to illuminate how, I rely upon a poem by W. S. Merwin and upon the scholarship of Tom Lynch and Etienne Terblanche. A thorough exploration of Cummings' *l!ook* from an ecocritical perspective reveals that it helps balance a national identity with an ecological identity.

Before discussing Cummings' *l!ook* we must acknowledge that the very notion of looking contradicts some ideas within ecocritical discourse. In *Xerophilia*, Lynch argues that many nature writers focus too much on the sense of sight. Out of all the senses, the sense of sight has the greatest potential for distancing the human from nature:

> Unfortunately, nature writing rarely approaches its task with such a commitment to multisensory experience and all too often succumbs to and reinforces the dominance of the visual at the expense of any

> other sort of somatic engagement. What we too often get in nature writing is a series of scenic views and ecologically explanatory sketches. Certainly this sort of writing can be well done and informative, but an excessive reliance on the visual dimension limits and distorts our experience of the natural world. (182-183)

Though Lynch focuses on a desert bioregion, the negative implications of the sense of sight can affect any phenomenological experience. We see a leaf fall or a grasshopper leap long before we hear, smell, or touch them. It may follow, then, that the emphasis on the *l!ook* in Cummings' poetry contributes to "the dominance of the visual," which counter-intuitively renders us detached from nature. If we rely too heavily upon a visual interaction with nature, thereby neglecting the other senses, then our psychosomatic bond with nature becomes one-dimensional and therefore feeble.

However, the idea that Cummings' *l!ook* at nature helps cultivate an ecological identity in readers is nonetheless valid for the following two reasons. First, though my thesis focuses on the sense of sight, Cummings' work encompasses all of the senses. In *EIMI*, a work that establishes Cummings' ecological vision, Cummings explicitly utilizes multiple senses to engage nature within the cities of Russia:

> An authentic chaos of unhuman smells,a joyous anarchy of noises which are not words,a merciful complexity of illogical shapes and irrational colours,an alive mad intricately free feel of tree and rock,of movingness and earth,*welcome my lonely nostrils ears eyes flesh spirit*. (31, italics added)

This is but one of many examples where Cummings exhibits a multisensory engagement with nature, which balances my emphasis upon the sense of sight. Secondly, contrary to the visual representations of nature which detach the human, Cummings' *l!ook* collapses the distance. There is immediacy, nearness, and intimacy in how Cummings uses the visual details of language to explore the visual details of nature. Rather than seeing nature from afar, the poems act as a telephoto lens, ushering the reader into the intricacy of what a distant eye would miss.

Cummings' first major publication, *Tulips and Chimneys*, establishes the motif of "looking," for the first fifty pages have at least twenty-five references to "eyes"—and the references to eyes continue throughout the thousand pages of *The Complete Poems*. Similarly throughout his work,

Cummings creates a recurring visual metaphor within the word "look":

sit(l
oo
k)dre

am (CP 610)

The two o's within the word "look" compose a complete line and become a visual metaphor for the eyes. In another poem, Cummings explores the "look" of a child:

the(oo)is

lOOk
(aliv
e)e
yes

are(chIld)and

wh(g
o
ne)
o

w(A)a(M)s (CP 740)

The visual metaphor suggests that the eyes in the first line become "wide-eyed," bursting out of the lowercased "l" and "k"—"OO" (line 2). In yet another poem, the speaker and his beloved walk the streets of a city toward their hotel, but the poem centers around their sighting of a bat (CP 354). Twice the admonishing word "look" occurs (line 7, 22), and in each instance the word composes an entire line. And we cannot overlook that in the highly discussed "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" (CP 396), the word surfaces yet again: "a)s w(e loo)k" (line 3).

The motif of looking begs the questions, "What are we supposed to look at?" and "How?" Cummings' work suggests we look at the complex-

ity of nature, and we are to do so as patiently and as intricately as we read his poems. Part of this answer derives from an observation of Cummings' use of the exclamation mark. When Cummings breaks up language, venturing into typographical explorations, he often accompanies the venture with an exclamation mark. The recurring "!" is not formulaic; rather, it is a non-definitive pattern that signals to the reader the possibility of imminent visual iconicity (Moe 15). Often—but not always—the exclamation mark accompanies an explicit reference to looking or to the eyes, and if it is not explicit, the act of looking implicitly guides the poem along. Furthermore, the exclamation mark often emerges when Cummings explores a life-form, animate or inanimate, that epitomizes an individual wholly alive within The Verb.[3] Several visual poems demonstrate Cummings' use of the exclamation mark. To begin, the first sign in one of Cummings' many leaf poems is an exclamation mark, "!blac" (CP 487), and a vertiginous display of textual upheaval follows, almost as if the wind that blows around the leaf gusts through the poem (Frankenberg 158). Though the words "look" or "eyes" are absent from the poem, implicitly looking at the details of the language corresponds to Cummings' looking at the descending leaf. Likewise, within the textual upheaval of "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" and shortly after the verb "look" (line 3), an exclamation mark emphasizes the explosive leap of the insect: ":l / eA / !p:" (line 7-9). In another poem about a moonrise, an exclamation mark begins and ends the read, for upon "finishing," the reader must follow the uppercase letters *R-O-U-N-D* back up to the first line:

!

o(rounD)moon,how
do
you(rouNd
er
than roUnd)float;
who
lly&(rOunder than)
go
:ldenly(Round
est)

? (CP 722)

Like the leaf and the grasshopper, the moon is a "creature" (see CP 383) wholly alive, and it rises into the exclamation mark. Though slightly tangential to the motif of the look, it is helpful to observe that while the reader sees the letters of *R-O-U-N-D* rise (which is a visual metaphor for watching a moonrise), an auditory dynamic augments the rising motion. The poem teems with the assonance of multiple "o" sounds: 1) the long o: "o," "float," "who / lly," "go," and "go / :ldenly" (line 2, 6, 7-8, 9, 9-10); 2) the long u: "moon," "do," "you," and "who" (line 2, 3, 4, 7); and 3) the diphthong "ou": "round," "how," "rounder," "round," "rounder," "roundest," and the "R-O-U-N-D" (line 2, 4-5, 6, 8, 10-11). Since the moonrise is silent, the assonance is not onomatopoetic; rather, the sounds require the mouth to become round with rotundity, especially with the diphthong, *rOUnd*, where the narrow lips expand to encompass the fullness of the sound. The mouth becomes acrobatic through performing various motions, directed by the assonance, until one realizes that the "shape" of the diphthong is iconic for the round shape of the rising moon. We see the moon rise with the ascending letters, and we may imagine the roundness of a full moon, but we feel the exclamatory roundness in our mouth.

life hurl my
yes,crumbles hand(ful released conarefetti)ev eryflitter,inga. where
mil(lions of aflickf)litter ing brightmillion of S hurl;edindodg:ing
whom areEyes shy-dodge is bright cruMbshandful,quick-hurl ed-
inwho
Is flittercrumbs,fluttercrimbs are floatfallin,g;allwhere:
a:crimbflitteringish is arefloatsis ingfallall!mil,shy milbrightlions
my(hurl flicker handful
in)dodging are shybrigHteyes is crum bs(all)if,ey Es

In “life hurl my” (CP 263), an exclamation mark surfaces amid the patterns confetti makes when thrown into the air. Though some may object to my inclusion of it here in an essay about nature, the poem nonetheless highlights the complexity of motion that occurs due to the utmost critical component of the atmosphere: air. The viscosity of air, slight as it is, catches the edges of paper, swirling them through infinite probabilities.

The exclamation mark occurs amidst a textual upheaval that corresponds with the upheaval of confetti: “floatsis ingfallall!mil,shy milbrightlions” (line 6). Because of the complexity of the text—confirmed by the presence of the exclamation mark—new ideas emerge. For instance, the punctuation and spacing amidst the final two words, “life” and “yes,” transforms them into four words: life, if, eyes, and yes: “l)if,ey Es” (line 8). The reference to eyes reminds us that we are dazzled by the air’s effect on confetti only after looking at it.

As the exclamation mark appears in different contexts, it becomes Protean, ever shifting its implications. Two poems highlight this protean dynamic. The first celebrates rain (CP 653):

(fea
therr
ain

:dreamin
g field o
ver forest &;

wh
o could
be

so
!f!
te

r?n
oo
ne) (CP 653)

Multiple senses explore the theme of this poem: the softness of rain. We feel the softness of the rain due to the metaphor comparing the softness to a feather (line 1-3); we hear the softness of the rain as the hushed context of parentheses enclose the entire poem; we look at the question mark, "r? n" (line 13), and recognize the absence and therefore silence of the vowels *a* and *i*—which further enhances the concept of the silent r(ai)n (Grumman 88); and as we continue to look, we see rain falling in the visual representation of the two exclamation marks: "!f!" (line 11). The upright portion of the exclamation marks corresponds to the path, and the two dots represent falling rain drops. This observation leads us to an oxymoronic epiphany. The rain exhibits an exclamatory softness. Therefore, in the context of this one poem, the exclamation mark 1) signals the reader to the imminent textual possibilities, 2) visually represents the descent of two rain drops, 3) encapsulates yet another paradox within Cummings' work, that rain can be so soft, the absence of the sound seems exclamatory, and 4) highlights other alive individuals: rain drops who exist in The Verb in their feather soft descent to the earth.

In the following poem, the exclamation mark suggests protean implications due to the surrounding context. "(im)c-a-t(mo)" explores the illimitable gyrations a falling cat makes while scrambling to land on its four feet (Pollock 45), and we discover these gyrations through looking at the poem:

(im)c-a-t(mo)
b,i;l:e

FallleA
ps!fl
OattumblI

sh?dr
IftwhirlF
(Ul)(lY)
&&&

away wanders:exact
ly;as if

not
hing had,ever happ
ene

D (CP 655)

Of the many dimensions of this complex poem, I will focus on two.[4] On the macroscale, the poem embodies the theme of the gyrating cat, for flipping the poem around reveals the silhouette of a cat landing on its two front feet: On the microscale (and most pertinent to the motif of the exclamation mark), flipping around the two pairs of letters and the exclamation mark spells the essence of the poem (line 4):

ps!fl
fl!ps
flips

(im)c-a-t(mo)
b,i;l:e

FallleA
ps!fl
OattumblI

sh?dr
IftwhirlF
(Ul)(lY)
&&&

away wanders:exact
ly;as if
not
hing had,ever happ
ene

D

We see the motion of the cat reenacted in the motion of the poem, and the exclamation mark suggests at least four implications: 1) it signals readers to the textual possibilities; 2) it is a visual metaphor for a flipping cat as it flips to become a lowercase *i*; 3) as it becomes a lowercase *i*, it helps spell the theme of the poem, flip; and 4) it therefore revisits the motif throughout Cummings' work, his lowercase *i*, the alive individuals who exists wholly in The Verb. In this poem, the individual just happens to be a cat.

Perhaps the correlation between looking at the complexity of nature and of language—and the exclamatory sensation we experience when startled by such intricate detail—led Cummings to explicitly merge the two motifs in a poem published relatively early in his career (1931). The following poem contains four exclamation marks:

n(o)w

the
how
dis(appeared cleverly)world

iS Slapped:with;liGhtninG
!

at
which(shal)lpounceupcrackw(ill)jumps

of
THuNdeRB
loSSo!M iN
-visiblya mongban(gedfrag-
ment ssky?wha tm)eani ngl(essNessUn
rolli)ngl yS troll s(who leO v erd)oma insCol

Lide.!high
n , o ; w :
theraIncomIng

o all the roofs roar
drownInsound(
&
(we(are like)dead
)Whoshout(Ghost)atOne(voiceless)O
ther or im)
pos
sib(ly as
leep)
But l!ook—
s

U

n:starT birDs(lEAp)Openi ng
t hing ; s(
—sing
)all are aLl(cry alL See)o(ver All)Th(e grEEn

?eartH)N,ew (CP 348)

The first and third exclamation mark emphasize the "Slap[... of] liGht-ninG / !" and the strikes that "Col // Lide.!high" (line 5-6, 14-15) during the storm. The second emphasizes a rumbling thunder: "THuNdeRB / loSSo! m" (line 10-11). We may observe, though, that Cummings compares the auditory folds within folds of thunder to the visual folds within folds of a *blossoming* flower, helping readers participate in a synaesthetic moment of "seeing" the augmentation of the audible thunder. In all three of these cases, the exclamation mark corresponds to some of the most explosive phenomena of nature: thunder and lightning. Therefore, when Cummings places the fourth exclamation mark within the word *look*, it carries with it the magnitude already established by the other three occurrences: "l! ook" (line 27). At this point, the speaker *l!ooks* at the sun, birds, and green earth, all of which are "N,ew" (line 34), and by implication, the act of looking is just as ponderous and explosive as the thunder and lightning of the previous storm. This may not be the case for all people, for it requires our look to emulate Cummings' *l!ook*, one that patiently discovers the complexity within both nature and language.

Tracing the converging motifs of the *l!ook* illuminates a crucial dynamic in Cummings' work, but we must embed this *l!ook* within current ecological discourse in order to appreciate its full magnitude. In *Xerophilia*, Lynch argues that humans must cultivate an identity beyond a national identity—an identity founded upon a human's identification with the plants, animals, and physical features of the bioregion where one resides. Ideally, Lynch envisions a future in which a bioregional identity balances one's national identity, but Lynch is realistic about such a colossal shift:

> It would be obtuse to expect that in this age of entrenched nationalisms that bioregional identity can wholly supplant national identity.

> But I hope it is not entirely naive to suggest that writers with the sort of bioregional consciousness I've portrayed here may be laying the foundation for some future postnationalist bioregional reconfiguration of identity. And in the meantime, if bioregional thought cannot entirely replace nationalism, it may at least help to mitigate some of its worst aspects. (138)

Maps readily manifest the tension between a bioregional—or ecological—identity and a national identity.[5] More often than not, when asked where one is from, people answer in accordance to a political map. Few people answer in accordance to a physical map. Should one say, "I am from Longmont, Colorado" or "I am from the ecotone where the west edge of the Great Plains meets the mountains of the continental divide?" The reading of nature poetry is one way to augment a shift towards a more explicit ecologically based identity, especially when the poet is conscious of the need for such a shift. W. S. Merwin, a contemporary ecological and existential poet, is one such person. In "The Cold before the Moonrise," Merwin expresses the desire for an ecological identity to balance a national identity:

> It is too simple to turn to the sound
> Of frost stirring among its
> Stars like an animal asleep
> In the winter night
> And say I was born far from home
> If there is a place where this is the language may
> It be my country (128-129)

The speaker "turn[s]" to focus his attention on the "sound / Of frost stirring" (line 1-2). This action of "turning" is precisely what Cummings' nature poems inspire. We turn from an egocentric emphasis on human affairs *towards* the earth. Merwin chooses a sound that humans could never hear without amplification, the sound of water molecules crystallizing into frost. To emphasize this faint sound, an onomatopoetic hiss of s's pervades the beginning of the poem: "It *i*s too *s*imple to turn to the *s*ound / Of frost *s*tirring among its / *S*tars like an animal asleep . . ." (line 1-3, italics added). Indeed, it is too simple to witness such intricacy and respond by saying, "I was born far from home" (line 5). It is not enough to acknowledge that being born in a human society is to be born far from the earth. One must take

the next step: "If there is a place where [the sound of frost] is the language may / It be my country" (line 6-7). Here, Merwin explores precisely what Lynch outlines, for he uses two metaphors of nationality, "language" and "country," to express his desire to shift his national identity toward an ecological identity.

The tension between an ecological identity and a national identity, which contemporary scholars and poets amplify, surfaces in the work of Cummings as well, specifically in one poem exploring the nocturnal creatures of the earth:

hush)
noones
are coming
out in the gloam
ing together are
standing together un
der a particular tree
are all breathing bright darkness to
gether are slowly all together

very magically smiling and if

we are not perfectly careful be
lieve me you and i'll go strolling
right through these each illimit
able to speak very
softly altogeth
er miracu
lous citi
zens of
(hush (CP 600)

Like Merwin's poem, Cummings' poem ends with a metaphor of national identity, but these crepuscular creatures are "citi / zens" of what Cummings calls "(hush" (line 17-19)—a brilliant line break that highlights how the hush of Zen exists amongst creatures even in a "citi"-scape.[6] Merwin's

"sound of frost stirring" and Cummings' "hush" signify a similar place in the earth, a place marked by silence, mystery, and miracle. Merwin's poem desires to make such a place one's "country," while Cummings' poem suggests he has already arrived and is therefore encouraging others (the implicit group and the reader) to enter through the imperative of the poem's initial word: "hush)" (line 1). The group of people (and the reader) enter into another country, the country of "hush" (line 19), where they *l!ook* at the emergent creatures. Though this is but one instance where Cummings explicitly speaks of nonhuman life as citizens of "hush," we infer that this domain encapsulates many of the inanimate and animate life-forms Cummings explores throughout his life's work. For instance, Cummings asks of the feather rain, *who is softer?*—and answers, *no one* (CP 653). If we think of this move as personification or anthropomorphism, we miss the point. Rather, the rain is an entity that has value, and its presence is worth celebrating. Moreover, if "hush" is the country, the rain that exhibits an exclamatory softness is clearly one of its outstanding citizens.

Etienne Terblanche provides the necessary context for further exploring the tension between a national and ecological identity in Cummings' poetics. In "The Yin Dynamic in Cummings' Poetry," he argues that the yang perspective has grown too dominant within industrialized cultures—a perspective that sees nature as a resource and a commodity. Against this backdrop, he reveals how Cummings' poetry invites the yin perspective to balance the yang perspective concerning nature: "To allow a tiny wild flower to continue growing in accordance with its inner drive as a living creature...is as profound and important as it may be to chop down a tree for fuel and clearance—or economic growth" (40). A strong parallel exists between yin and yang—as defined by Terblanche—and an ecological and national identity. A national perspective sees the value in harvesting trees as a resource to create jobs, homes, and prosperity. An ecological perspective sees the value in protecting trees and wild flowers as they contribute to the biodiversity of an ecosystem. Moreover, a person who has cultivated an ecological identity sees the intrinsic value in nonhuman life regardless if that life-form can be appropriated towards human benefit. "Respect" permeates the ecological perspective, and if we foreground the Latin roots (as Terblanche does), we see how interrelated Cummings' *l!ook* is with "respect": *re* and *specere* meaning *to look again*. Terblanche argues that Cummings' nature poems "actively steer the reader into a sense of wholeness with and within the natural world" (41), and the adverb "actively"

arises from the fact that the reader becomes a participant in order to *l!ook* at the poems and at nature again and again thereby cultivating an ecological identity.[7]

If Cummings' poetry contributes to a philosophy that humbly recognizes the preeminent importance of the earth's ecosystems, it is through his *l!ook* that enables him to speak of other creatures as "citizens" of another domain. Cummings humbly enters the country of "hush," thereby highlighting the movement to balance a national identity with an ecological identity. Like Merwin after him, he turns to the earth, and he discovers the miraculous complexity of many alive individuals including a falling leaf, a leaping grasshopper, the rising moon, swirling confetti, someone who is rain, a falling cat, thunder blossoms, lightning, and nocturnal creatures—and the poems invite readers as well to turn through the motif of his *l!ook*. This mode of looking does not create distance between the observer and the object; rather, the distance collapses ushering the reader into the microcosmic wonders of both language and the earth. Such a process may lead readers to echo Merwin's declaration to make the hallowed places of the earth one's country.

—Washington State University
aaron.m.moe@gmail.com

Notes

1. For more on the osmotic properties of Cummings' poetics, see Terblanche's "The Osmotic Mandala: On the Nature of Boundaries in E. E. Cummings' Poetry."

2. I would like to add a modifier to the thesis, thereby exploring how Cummings' poetry contributes to an *applied* philosophy . . . but such a move is beyond the scope of this current essay. Such an extension requires an analysis of how the reading and teaching of Cummings' perspective on creatures can affect myriad actions which constitute one's lifestyle. If the miraculous individuals who exist on this planet are understood to be citizens—which, as I will later demonstrate, is Cummings' perspective—then his poetry can affect our decisions concerning what we eat, how we vote, and how we reconcile capitalism with ecological principles.

3. I have intentionally omitted the words "romantic" and "transcendent" from this essay in favor of the phrase "individual wholly alive within The

Verb." The distinction is crucial, for as Iain Landles argues in "The Case for Cummings: A Reaction to the Critical Misreading of E. E. Cummings," some critics have developed a predilection towards applying a handful of Cummings' themes to all of his poems, thereby closing off other interpretive possibilities. In the first chapter, Landles reveals that in the criticism of *The Enormous Room* a commitment to developing the motif of a romantic individual who seeks self transcendence amidst the oppressiveness of a system eclipses the work's exploration of language and power (81-89). Likewise, if we continue to interpret Cummings' nature poems solely from the perspective of transcendentalism, we eclipse other critical readings. It is erroneous to suggest that a transcendental read and an ecological read mutually exclude one another; they can coexist. In this essay, though, the emphasis is upon the latter, specifically how nature poetry can cultivate an ecological identity that balances a national identity.

4. For further discussion on the exclamation mark and iconic, visual upheaval, see "Chaos & the 'New' Nature Poem."

5. I shift the term from bioregional to ecological identity because Lynch uses the term specifically for the desert bioregion while Cummings' nature poems resonate with multiple bioregions. "Ecological" is therefore the apt term.

6. I am indebted to Michael Webster for this observation, shared during discussion following the panel presentations at the ALA 2010 conference.

7. In order to explore the balancing of a national identity with an ecological identity, I have relied on the work of Terblanche and Lynch. Arne Naess' work in establishing the concept of Deep Ecology is likewise instructive. The title of one of his essays, "Identification as a *Source* of Deep Ecological Attitudes" (italics added), encapsulates just how crucial this Cummings *l!ook* is. It is through looking and looking again that we begin to identify with nature, which consequently establishes the soil from which ecological attitudes take root and grow.

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