The New Art[1]
[E. E. Cummings]

The New Art has many branches—painting, sculpture, architecture, the stage, literature, and music. In each of these there is a clearly discernible evolution from models; in none is there any trace of that abnormality, or incoherence, which the casual critic is fond of making the subject of tirades against the new order.

It is my purpose to sketch briefly the parallel developments of the New Art in painting, sculpture, music, and literature.

I.

Anyone who takes Art seriously, who understands the development of technique in the last half century, accepts Cézanne and Matisse as he accepts Manet and Monet. But this brings us to the turning point where contemporary criticism becomes, for the most part, rampant abuse, and where prejudice utters its storm of condemnation. I refer to that peculiar phase of modern art called indiscriminately, "Cubism," and "Futurism."

The name Cubism, properly applied, relates to the work of a small group of ultramodern painters and sculptors who use design to express their personal reaction to the subject, i.e.— what this subject "means" to them—and who further take this design from geometry. By using an edge in place of a curve a unique tactual value is obtained. Futurism is a glorification of personality. Every socalled "Futurist" has his own hobby; and there are almost as many kinds of painting as artists. For instance, one painter takes as his subject sounds, another, colours. A third goes back to old [end page 5] techniques; a fourth sees life through a magnifying glass; a fifth imposes an environment upon his subject proper, obtaining very startling effects; a sixth concerns himself purely with motion—in connection with which it is interesting to note the Japanese painters' wholly unrealistic rendering of the force of a river.

The painter Matisse has been called the greatest exponent of Cubist sculpture. At the 1913 exhibition[2] the puzzled crowd in front of Brancusi's "Mlle. Pogany" was only rivalled by that which swarmed about the painting called "Nude Descending a Staircase." "Mlle. Pogany" consists of a more or less egg- shaped head with an unmistakable nose, and a sinuous suggestion of arms curving upward to the face. There is no differentiation in modelling affording even a hint of hands; in other words, the flow of line and volume is continuous. But what strikes the spectator at first glance, and focuses the attention throughout, is the enormous inscribed ovals, which everyone recognizes as the artist's conception of the subject's eyes. In this triumph of line for line's sake over realism we note the development of the basic principles of impressionism.

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[1] Cummings' graduation "part," delivered on June 24, 1915. See Kennedy, *Dreams* 83-85.
[2] Called the Armory Show because it was first held at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York from February 17th to March 15th, 1913, the "International Exhibition of Modern Art" introduced Americans for the first time to avant-garde and modernist art, including seven cubist paintings by Picasso. Cummings attended the show in Boston, which included only European works. See Kim Orcutt, "The Armory Show Lands with a Thud in Boston." See also "The Armory Show at 100" (New-York Historical Society) and "The Armory Show of 1913" (UVA)

II.

Just as in the case of painting, it is a French school which brought new life to music; but at the same time, Germany has the honour of producing one of the greatest originators and masters of realism, Richard Strauss.

The modern French school of music finds its inspiration in the personal influence of César Franck. Debussy, Ravel and Satie all owe much to this great Belgian, who (like Maeterlinck and Verhaeren), was essentially a man of their own artistic nationality.

It is safe to say that there will always be somebody who still refuses to accept modernism in music; quoting in his defense the sovereign innovator, Beethoven! On a par with the sensation produced by the painting and sculpture of the Futurist variety was the excitement which the music of Strauss and Debussy first produced upon audiences. At present, Debussy [end page 6] threatens to become at any moment vulgarly common; while Strauss is fatuous in his clarity beside Schonberg; who, with Stravinsky, is the only god left by the public for the worship of the aesthetes.

Erik Satie is, in many respects, the most interesting of all modern composers. Nearly a quarter of a century ago he was writing what is now considered modern music. The most striking aspect of Satie's art is the truly extraordinary sense of humour which prompts one of his subjects, the "sea cucumber," to console himself philosophically for his lack of tobacco.

The "Five Orchestral Pieces" of Arnold Schönberg continue to be the leading sensation of the present day musical world. Their composer occupies a position in many respects similar to that of the author of the "Nude Descending a Staircase." I do not in the least mean to ridicule Schönberg—no lawlessness could ever have produced such compositions as his, which resemble bristling forests contorted by irresistible winds. His work is always the expression of something mysteriously terrible—which is probably why Boston laughed.

I have purposely left until the last the greatest theorist of modern music—Scriabin. Logically, he belongs beside Stravinsky, as leader of the Russian school. But it is by means of Scriabin that we may most readily pass from music to literature, through the medium of what has been called "sense-transference," as exemplified by the colour music of the "Prometheus."

This "Poem of Fire" is the consummation of Scriabin's genius. To quote the *Transcript*: "At the first performance, by the Russian Symphony Society, on March 20, for the first time in history a composer used a chromatic color score in combination with orchestration. . . . At the beginning of the orchestration, a gauze rectangle in about the position of a picture suspended on the back wall became animated by flowing and blending colours. These colours were played by a 'colourorgan' or 'chromola,' having a keyboard with fifteen keys, and following a written score." [end page 7]

III.

The suggestion of an analogy between colour and music leads us naturally to the last branch of the New Art—to wit, literature. Only the most extreme cases will be discussed, such as have important bearing upon the very latest conceptions of artistic expression.

I will quote three contemporary authors to illustrate different phases and different degrees of the literary parallel to sound painting—in a rather faint hope that the first two may prepare the way for an appreciation of the third. First Amy Lowell's "Grotesque" affords a clear illustration of development from the ordinary to the abnormal.[3]

"Why do the lilies goggle their tongues at me
When I pluck them;
And writhe and twist,
And strangle themselves against my fingers,
So that I can hardly weave the garland
For your hair?
Why do they shriek your name
And spit at me
When I would cluster them?
Must I kill them
To make them lie still,
And send you a wreathe of lolling corpses
To turn putrid and soft
On your forehead
While you dance?"

In this interesting poem we seem to discern something beyond the conventional. The lilies are made to express hatred by the employment of grotesque images. But there is nothing original in the pathetic fallacy. No one quarrels with Tennyson's lines.

"There has fallen a splendid tear
From the passion-flower at the gate"—

Let us proceed further—only noting in the last three lines that brutality which is typical of the New Art—and consider the following poem by the same author: [end page 8]

"THE LETTER"

"Little cramped words scrawling all over the paper
Like draggled fly's legs,
What can you tell of the flaring moon
Through the oak leaves?
Or of an uncurtained window, and the bare floor
Spattered with moonlight?
Your silly quirks and twists have nothing in them
Of blossoming hawthorns.
And this paper is chill, crisp, smooth, virgin of loveliness
Beneath my hand.
I am tired, Beloved, of chafing my heart against
The want of you;

[3] EEC quotes from an anthology edited by Lowell called *Some Imagist Poets* (1915).

Of squeezing it into little ink drops,
And posting it.
And I scald alone, here under the fire
Of the great moon."

This poem is superb of its kind. I know of no image in all realistic writing which can approach the absolute vividness of the first two lines. The metaphor of the chafed heart is worthy of any poet; but its fanciful development would have been impossible in any literature except this ultramodern.

I shall now quote from a sonnet by my second author, Donald Evans:

"Her voice was fleet-limbed and immaculate,
And like peach blossoms blown across the wind
Her white words made the hour seem cool and kind,
Hung with soft dawns that danced a shadow fête.
A silken silence crept up from the South.
The flutes were hushed that mimed the orange moon,
And down the willow stream my sighs were strewn,
While I knelt to the corners of her mouth."

In the figure "Her voice was fleet-limbed," and the phrase "white words," we have a sought-for literary parallel to the work of the "sound painters." It is interesting to compare Dante's expressions of a precisely similar nature, occurring in the first and fifth cantos, respectively, of the Inferno—"dove il Sol tace," [where the Sun is mute] and "in loco d'ogni luce muto" [a place where every light is silent]. [Here, a sentence is omitted from the printed text: "But even Dante would not have dared 'the corners of her mouth' " (Norman 45).]

From Donald Evans to Gertrude Stein is a natural step— [end page 9] up or down, and one which I had hoped the first two might enable us to take in security. Gertrude Stein subordinates the meaning of words to the beauty of the words themselves. Her art is the logic of literary sound painting carried to its extreme. While we must admit that it is logic, must we admit that it is art?

Having prepared the way, so far as it is possible, for a just appreciation, I now do my best to quote from the book "Tender Buttons," as follows:

(1) A sound.
Elephants beaten with candy and little pops and chews all bolts and reckless reckless rats, this is this.
(2) Salad Dressing and an Artichoke.
Please pale hot, please cover rose, please acre in the red stranger, please butter all the beef-steak with regular feel faces.
(3) Suppose an Eyes

* * *

Go red go red, laugh white.

> Suppose a collapse is rubbed purr, is rubbed purr get.[4]
> Little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles of mutton. Little sales of leather and such beautiful, beautiful, beautiful beautiful.

The book from which these selections are drawn is unquestionably a proof of great imagination on the part of the authoress, as anyone who tries to imitate her work will discover for himself. Here we see traces of realism, similar to those which made the "Nude Descending a Staircase" so baffling. As far as these "Tender Buttons" are concerned, the sum and substance of criticism is impossible. The unparalleled familiarity of the medium precludes its use for the purpose of aesthetic effect. And here, in their logical conclusion, impressionistic tendencies are reduced to absurdity.

The question now arises, how much of all this is really Art?

The answer is: we do not know. The great men of the future will most certainly profit by the experimentation of the present period. An insight into the unbroken chain of artistic development during the last half century disproves the theory that [end page 10] modernism is without foundation; rather we are concerned with a natural unfolding of sound tendencies. That the conclusion is, in a particular case, absurdity, does not in any way impair the value of the experiment, so long as we are dealing with sincere effort. The New Art, maligned though it may be by fakirs and fanatics, will appear in its essential spirit to the unprejudiced critic as a courageous and genuine exploration of untrodden ways. [end page 11]

A "commencement part," given by the author at Sanders Theatre on the occasion of his graduation from Harvard, and published in the *Harvard Advocate*, June 1915.

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[4] Stein's text reads "in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get"—perhaps EEC unconsciously (?) substituted "is" (one of his favorite words) for "in."