

Art Without Words: Cummings' *CIOPW*

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Everybody familiar with the literature on Cummings knows that this title is an acronym for “Charcoal, Ink, Oil, Pencil, Watercolor.”¹ Nor would anybody familiar with his idiosyncratic way with words need any justification or further explanation, although guidance on its pronunciation would be welcome. Does one simply spell out the letters (as, say, with USA) or try to pronounce it (See-o-pwe?)² There is, however, a further way of understanding (and pronouncing) it that adds to its meaning.

Cummings remembered enough of his Greek from Cambridge Latin School (1911) and Harvard—where he received a Master’s degree in English and Classical Studies in 1916, and where he was presented “with a glimpse of Homer, a more than glimpse of Aeschylus Sophocles Euripides and Aristophanes” (*six* 47)³— to use and playfully misuse isolated Greek words and phrases throughout his life, most notably the two verbs of his titles *EIMI* (Εἶμι), “(I) Am,”⁴ and *XAIPE* (Χαῖρε), “Rejoice, Be Well,” the latter found again in Greek letters in “out of a supermetamathematical subprein-cestures” (CP 425) as χαίρετε, the plural, which he translates in the next line as “rejoice.”⁵ Thus, in “the waddling” (CP 98) (as first published in & [AND] and later in *is* 5), when unable to print “fucking” outright as it was in his typescript, he transliterated it to “φουκινγ” [*fuking*]—(see Gerber 198).⁶

To all of these uses of the Greek, *CIOPW* should now be added as yet another Greek verb used as a title, for to a classicist’s eye it is clearly a way of transcribing σιωπῶ, “I am silent,” to be pronounced *see-ō-pō*, with the stress on the last syllable. Its first letter is a lunate sigma (c). The two omegas are transcribed first as an *o* and then as an omega (ω)—a liberty found in many ancient Greek inscriptions in which a long *o* sound is written as both *o* and *ω*. Cummings wrote *W* for its similarity to *ω*. The penultimate letter represents the sound of pi (π), unlike the “P” of *XAIPE*, where it represents a rho. In fact, if one were to transliterate σιωπῶ into computer-readable beta code, which uses only ASCII symbols, it would convert to *CIWPW=*.

Lying behind this punning title is the matter of the relationship between Cummings’ poetry and his (visual) art, two facets of himself he constantly

sought to unify. As he says in a mock self-interview, “—Tell me, doesn’t your painting interfere with your writing? —Quite the contrary, they love each other dearly” (“Foreword II” 316). When they are not his “twin obsessions” (“Videlicit” 333), they merge in the carefully crafted shapes that many of his poems present as “poempictures.”⁷ More pertinently, in his preface to *CIOPW*, Cummings begins by saying: “Like many the under-signed was found to write spontaneously or pictures before finding oneself compelled to draw or words,” and then describing some of his sitters as “polysyllabic.” He also describes himself as “an author of pictures, draughtsman of words” and his friends as “hearing such paintings, seeing such poems.”⁸ At the end of the preface, he praises the printer S. A. Jacobs with “persianly poemprinter predicated picturebook.”⁹ No source for these conceits other than his own experience is needed: he both drew (often himself) and wrote (often about himself) from an early age—but this unprecedented concentration of phrases equating writing and illustrating leads one to conclude that there is one source that he surely had in mind when it came to coming up with the title for his book of drawings and paintings, namely the fifth-century-BC poet Simonides, many of whose poems were carefully, sometimes handsomely, inscribed in stone, often in tandem with a painted or sculpted image, and who famously said that “painting is silent (σιωπῶσαν [*siōpōsan*]) poetry, poetry is speaking painting.”¹⁰ The comparison of writing and painting was common enough in classical Greece, but only Simonides uses the verb σιωπῶ, which all but guarantees that his is the hidden intertext in Cummings’ title.¹¹

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Notes

1. This is not exactly right, however: The anagram of the title is spelled in the table of contents, where the “O” section is labeled “Oil colours.” In the book itself, each section is headed by its appropriate letter alone; hence, Cummings can say “among whose Os occur likenesses of” Joe Gould (*Selected Letters* 115). For appreciations of Cummings as an artist, see Kidder, “Author of Pictures,” “Cummings and Cubism,” and “Twin Obsessions”; Cohen *PoetandPainter* and “E. E. Cummings: Modernist Painter and Poet”; and Tucker & Reutlinger.
2. After submission, the editor informed me that Cummings scholars do the former.

3. Note three pages later his rapid-fire quotations in the original of Catullus, Horace, and Sappho. For Cummings' education in Latin and Greek, see Kennedy, *Dreams in the Mirror* (39-40, 54-57).
4. Since Cummings spells out USSR as "You es es are" (*EIMI* 47), and *es* is Latin for "you are," his title "I am" begins to look like an artful counterpoint to what he found in Russia, especially since he pronounced *EIMI* as "a ME" ("Sketch for a preface" i). See also his description of himself on the long line to see Lenin's tomb as "a dumb me-sandwich" (*EIMI* 242).
5. Cummings' drama with the Greek title *Anthropos* (man/human), a noun, seems boring by comparison with *XAIPE*. Cf. Cummings' introduction to *is* 5: "Ineluctable preoccupation with The Verb gives a poet one priceless advantage: whereas nonmakers must content themselves with the merely undeniable fact that two times two is four, he rejoices in an irresistible truth" (CP 221). For a "misuse" of Greek letters, see the end of "floatfloatloflf" (CP 431)—"omicpiasilonlonO— / megae-ta,"—where the letters omicron, omega, eta, and epsilon are syllabically shuffled into each other.
6. Since this poem was not chosen for the first edition of *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), its first appearance is in & [AND]. "Fucking" is printed as intended in *The Original 1922 Manuscript* (1976). For the details, see Philip L. Gerber's "E. E. Cummings's Season of the Censor" (198). Gerber also points out Cummings' use of "love's a φουκ [fuk]" in "Jehovah buried, Satan dead" (CP 438).
7. In a 1937 letter to Charles Pearce, who wanted to publish his collected poetry, Cummings wrote: "But what I care infinitely is that each poem picture should remain intact. Why? Possibly because with few exceptions, my poems are essentially pictures" (qtd. in Norman 312). Note in particular the dedication to *No Thanks* listing the names of publishers so arranged that it takes the form of a drinking cup, much in the manner of Hellenistic Greek picture poems, which are found in Book 15 of the *Greek Anthology*, a work Cummings studied while at Harvard.
8. Shall we add his expression "fart in ink" from a 1921 letter to Edward Nagle (*Letters* 80)?
9. There is no pagination for this preface, which appears at the beginning of *CIOPW*. On Jacobs, see Webster and the two pieces by Rumble.
10. ὁ Σιμωνίδης τὴν μὲν ζῶγραφίαν ποιήσιν σιωπῶσαν προσαγορεύει, τὴν

δὲ ποιήσιν ζωγραφίαν λαλοῦσαν (Plutarch *de Gloria Atheniensium* 346f). The simple connection with Simonides (and the Simonides-derived *ut pictura poesis* of Horace's *Ars Poetica* 361) was noticed by Rogers and Rogers (41-42), but not Cummings' specific allusion to him in his title, which, if they did not know Greek, would not be evident.

11. Classical writing/painting comparisons are further discussed in Carson, chapter 2, "Visible invisibles" and Steiner (173-178, 281-294). For Cummings' allusions to other classical authors, see Rosenblitt, "Pretentious Scansion" and "twilight smelling." For Cummings' notion of "silent singing," see Alfandary, "Voice and Silence" and Webster, "'singing is silence'."

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