

The Osmotic Mandala: on the Nature of Boundaries in E.E. Cummings' Poetry

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Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects differences, and imagination the similitude of things. Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.

Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be "the expression of the imagination."

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*

one's not half two. It's two are halves of one:

—E.E. Cummings, *l x l*

1. Introduction: Cummings, boundaries, and osmosis

E. E. Cummings' poetry signals particular perspectives on the nature of boundaries, including the ones between self and nature, as well as those boundaries implied by grammatical, typographical and traditional poetic constraints. This poet materially traverses the barriers between artistic disciplines such as poetry and painting in terms of his typographical experimentation, for instance. This essay examines some aspects of the treatment of boundaries within Cummings' poetry more closely.

Among other considerations, Cummings offers an intriguing view of boundaries in the *i: six nonlectures* delivered at Harvard University. In nonlecture number two, Cummings discusses home, privacy, the "general good" and "the immeasurable house of being" (24). The poet sets out by stressing individuality and privacy: being one's (true) self is to "desire aloneness" (23). Cummings quite passionately disclaims the concept that one's home, or one's self, or "each seeming solidity" (such as walls) boils down to "a collection of large holes." He criticizes the loss of privacy and individuality, the fact that a "good and great government" spends billions to ensure that anyone can be a multitude of everyones (23).

Is Cummings proposing a sealed-off, completely autonomous individual? In other words, is he all for completely opaque walls, and all against ones which open up, like the senses, to a world outside? Given Cummings' copious awareness of interrelatedness with and within nature, one would doubt this conclusion—and this doubt would be justified. The poet's point is at once more subtle and simple: he wants to make it clear that he is not in favour of some sort of sentimental and brotherly mass convergence or monotony, and he achieves this by demonstrating the folly of many of our "universalist" systems, including modern homes with huge windows and diminished privacy. (One is led to wonder what the poet would have made of the world wide web.) At the same time, he concludes his remarks on the nature of a true

home, true privacy, and true individuality, by replacing “home” with “house,” and by pointing to the difference between universal “doing” which is measurable, and which is thus a form of routine repetition and even slavery on the one hand, and the poet’s actual abode on the other: “If you wish to follow, even at a distance, the poet’s calling (and here, as always, I speak from my own totally biased and entirely personal point of view) you’ve got to come out of the measurable doing universe into the immeasurable house of being” (24).

But what is this “immeasurable house of being” (in contrast to mere unpoetic homeliness, universalism, job-repetition, and unindividuality)? Cummings offers an answer within this nonlecture when he inscribes his childhood experiences of nature as an all-inclusive Who, where the poet’s “enormous smallness entered Her [nature’s] illimitable being” (32). Among the many things one wishes to mention in relation to this striking passage from the nonlectures, I will be forced to focus on one aspect only for the time being: Cummings is implying that the conceptual boundary between humankind and nature is not impenetrable. This boundary is at least permeable, and at most, disappears altogether into a sense of complete being, complete now, complete here—an utter, all-inclusive all, or a sense of fathomless “nowhere” (CP 281, 713).

If, as the ecocritic William Rueckert suggests, poems act as the green leaves of semiosis (or meaning), storing semiotic energy for present and future usage (110), then it follows—within this metaphorical limitation, of course—that poetic language may, among its many other possible differences, categories and (hence) boundaries, also reveal osmotic partitions. And since Cummings is at least implying the permeable nature of the partition between self and nature, it opens up the potential of the metaphorical application of the term osmosis to the poet’s work.

The definition of osmosis within the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (9th Ed.), offers a point of departure. The main entry under “osmosis” reads: “the passage of a solvent through a semi-permeable partition into a more concentrated solution.” Given Cummings’ emphasis on a third dimension or voice beyond static, two-dimensional oppositionality (*Miscellany* 126-127), which could embrace spatial notions such as here and there, inside and outside, it seems that the application of the term osmosis could render useful results in terms of his poetry. Cummings’ emphasis on movement and growth would confirm this likelihood. In order to illustrate and analyse this likelihood, I will focus on two poems in some detail: first, one of Cummings’ numerous sonnets, “i thank You God for most this amazing/ day” (CP 663), and secondly, one of Cummings’ expressive typographical poems “i / never” (CP 827). Both these poems are quite ecological in their themes, but the purpose here would be to delve deeper in an attempt to *follow* the poetry into an approximation of the nature of boundaries which is embodied within them, commensurate with Cummings’ idea of an immeasurable house of natural being which one may enter by means of poetry.

2. Cummings' saturation of the sonnet form

One needs to register in general that Cummings' poetry reflects an advanced awareness of the potential significance of boundaries: his poetry frequently gravitates towards the boundaries between self and other, lover, nature, or God, as if the poet is intuitively aware that it is here, in these areas and around these boundaries, that significance and beauty become possible. The sonnet to be studied against this background, reads as follows:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings;and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how could tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened) (CP 663)

At first glance, the poem appears to be Shakespearean in form: consider, for instance, the slightly variant Shakespearean rhyme scheme (abab cdcd aeae ff) and the quality of a final rhyming couplet (with its implied "twist" in meaning). The standard Shakespearean rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg (Van Gorp 375). Moreover, in the case of this sonnet, the rhyming sounds pertaining to b ("trees" and "yes"), as well as e ("no" and "You"), rhyme only to some degree. These deviations do not alter the Shakespearean structure of this sonnet substantially, but may hint at the fact that the sonnet is not entirely Shakespearean.

In its turn, the Petrarchan (or "Italian") sonnet form is characterized by the following structural aspects: the rhyme scheme is abba abba cdc dcd (or, cde cde). This sonnet form is usually divided into an octave consisting of two quatrains (abba abba) and a sestet comprising two tercets (cdc dcd — or — cde cde) (Van Gorp 375). Importantly, the crisis or "twist" in the case of this sonnet form normally occurs between the octave and the sestet — this "twist" is referred to as the volta (Van Gorp 375). Given the lack of formal Petrarchan qualities and the overt Shakespearean ones within Cummings' sonnet, can one also write of Petrarchan qualities in this sonnet?

The (perhaps) surprising answer is yes.

Parentheses indicate the Petrarchan sonnet form within this sonnet. They divide this sonnet into two sets of utterance, one consisting of eight lines (the non-parenthesized stanzas one and three), and the other of six lines (the parenthesized stanzas two and four). And in this sense, of a hidden “octave” and—in view of the parenthesis—an even more intensely hidden “sestet,” this overtly Shakespearean sonnet shares qualities with the Petrarchan form.

The “sestet” is quite formally and concretely inserted into the “octave” within this sonnet. (This insight was mentioned at a pregraduate lecture which I attended in 1984 at the University of the Freestate, South Africa, by Prof. A.G. Ulliyatt.) Or, stated another way: this sonnet presents a more condensed Petrarchan form, with the “octave” and the “sestet” interspersed within one another. The traditional Petrarchan spatial/conceptual boundary between the octave and the sestet is therefore treated as interfusible, as something which allows for the flow of one structure into the other.

At the same time, the inherited conceptual boundary between the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms is transversed, with the result of the inclusive saturation of the sonnet form in respect of both forms. This generates greater potentialities of portraying movement (in terms of the rhyming couplet, the volta, and Cummings’ interspersal of traditional forms within this one sonnet). Cummings therefore bases radical, creative renewal within the soil of existing poetic traditions, thus composing the new whilst confirming the old. These formal and careful rearrangements on the poet’s side could be viewed as the structural and dynamic delivery of his promise to write poetry characterized by “that precision which creates movement” (CP 221).

But how does this sonnet move the reader, and in terms of which themes and emotive qualities, corollary with the mentioned structural synergies? This sonnet can be viewed as an ode to the extraordinariness of an ordinary, natural day. It also celebrates the uplifting synergy of sensing one’s unison with nature; synergistic unison which is presented as rebirth, and rebirth in a specific sense: that one is again able to see and hear the incredible credibility of “everything which is natural”—such as blue sky, green trees, and the rising sun. At the same time, the sonnet signifies the maturation of a sense of belonging within nature, and is a poem of praise to the “unimaginable You.” Humility and transcendence are strikingly portrayed by means of the upward line which is implied from the nongrammatical lower case “i” to the non-*ingrammatical* upper case “You,” for example.

In other words, dynamism can be viewed as both a potentially moving theme (of growth and synergy within nature), and a formal element of this poem (as we have seen). The themes of renewal and growth are synchronized with formal/structural poetic renewal and growth, such as the unification of the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet forms. Some additional examples of this synchronizational phenomenon will subsequently be discussed.

The sonnet tradition frequently involves an illustrative octave, which is either personalized, applied, or taken further within the sestet. Cummings sets out, already within the unparenthesized “octave” of this sonnet, with a *personalized* illustration of

the nature of nature. One thinks here of the “blue true dream of sky,” “leaping greenly spirits of trees,” and the “tasting touching hearing seeing” human “merely being”—phrases which betoken the fairly intense personal form of the “octave.” Within the parenthesized “sestet,” Cummings takes the already-personalized illustration offered within the “octave” a step further, into the mysterious, namely one’s awareness that the personal and nature intimate the (hidden) sense behind or within the senses of sight and sound.

Thus one’s innermost eyes and ears are opened into the mystery of nature and God according to this sonnet. This is taken to its most conclusive (but still dynamic) implication within the Shakespearean open-ended, conclusive “twist” which possibly invites or persuades one, in a cyclical fashion, to reread the sonnet with one’s most attentive ears and eyes. Such a rereading may reveal further abstruse simultaneities within the sonnet, such as the homophonously implied “Son” of rebirth. (The seemingly everyday occurrence of the rising sun is depicted as a birthday, for example. And the Editor of this journal suggests a possible reference to the spring equinox.)

It is for this reason that the parenthesis in this sonnet-“flower” may be viewed as “protective leaves:” so personal, profound and even delicate is the mystery of dynamism and mysterious growth implied in terms of the “sestet” (with its volta and rhyming couplet, and its opening-up of innermost awareness) that the parenthesis may indicate that one must tread with care; however vigorous and non-sentimental growth may be, it is also impressible, like *meristem* (that is, growth cells / tissues). Parenthesis in general plays many roles within Cummings’ poetry, varying from the perceived role of “protection” envisaged here, to acting as graphic indicators of swallows (Webster, “singing” 209). One infers that parenthesis must be read carefully in the case of Cummings.

To summarize: 1) the interspersal of the “octave” and the “sestet” within this sonnet allows for more intensive levels of Petrarchan personalization, to the point of the open-ended, dynamic mystery and extraordinariness of one’s participation in the re-occurrence or rebirth of an “ordinary” day within creation. Thus the Petrarchan form is shifted into greater levels of intensity or saturation in terms of its own structures. The volta is treated hyperbolically in order to allow the interjection of “octave” into “sestet”, for instance. 2) The Shakespearean and Petrarchan forms are combined into a new form within this sonnet, also in order to formally accentuate the sense of synergy and mergence which accompany the mystery of nature. Other considerations could be added to this, such as the flexibility of sound in end positions within this sonnet, and the prolific usage of the “ing” syllable both in its nominal and verbal forms. (In general, Cummings clearly prefers either vowels or voiced consonants in end positions, and not the perhaps more static and harsh unvoiced consonants.) Oxymoronic and paradoxical mechanisms are also employed to enhance the sense of dynamism, as well as the sense of mystery beyond semiosis. Consider the “unimaginable You” among other examples: one can not juxtapose the existence *and* non-imaginability of someone without pointing to the limits of semiosis and beyond.

It is against this background that Robert Graves's dismissal of this sonnet (with its intricacies of synergistic structure and its osmotic view of boundaries) as "intrinsically corny" (174), appears too abrupt. For this is no sentimental or immanently trite sonnet, but a complex *and* strikingly simple, non-sentimental enactment of a sense of unity with and within nature. At the very least one may admire the artistic skill which Cummings employs in combining existing forms into something new and refreshing.

But enough has been said to reveal that—to the extent that traditional poetic forms and divisions may be viewed as conceptual boundaries (as well as quite concrete ones on the printed page, in some instances)—these boundaries are presented as permeable within this sonnet. Moreover, semiotic elements such as traditional poetic structures are transfused across these traditional and/or conceptual boundaries in order to evoke a greater sense of unity, principally the unity between humanity and nature. In this sense, the sonnet discussed here enacts saturation and dissolvance of the semiotic kind. One is therefore dealing in this sonnet with osmotic boundaries or "membranes"—not monumentalist, sealed-off, static ones. Of course, in some instances the process of semiotic dissolvance reaches the point where the boundaries themselves are dissolved, or transcended, into a sense of unity with and placement within nature. The ecocritic William Howarth describes this "as an experience [which] is about mystical fusion, the loss of boundaries, and also about social maturation, gaining a sense of place" (519)—which is suggestive of Cummings' line "All lose, whole find" (CP 556).

This sonnet, among other works in Cummings' oeuvre, could therefore be viewed, along the lines of Ezra Pound's descriptions of poetry, as a "registering instrument" (58) (such as a voltmeter or, conceivably, a more organic receptor of which every sentient creature within nature would be an example) which registers and re-signals in beautiful and/or striking form, deep waves of existence, or waves of the "authentic inner life" in Friedman's phrase [(*Re*)*Valuing* 174]. Thus artists act as the "antennae of the race" (Pound 58), sensing—early on—vital developments in respect of those relationships which make ecological survival possible (Bowers 122). Relationships such as humble awe and a joyous sense of unity with nature appear to have been lost to a damaging degree in light of the ecological crisis. In short, viewed from this angle, Cummings can be seen as an ecologically sound poet, of which the osmotic sense of boundaries would be one example.

In the process of discussing this sonnet, as is usual in Cummings, one mentions the poet's typographical, even purely graphical devices, such as the line of transcendence between "I" and "You." In the next section of this essay, this aspect and its relations to the nature of boundaries, will be discussed in terms of a poem that Webster calls a magic icon, "i / never" (CP 827).

3. Cummings' typographical osmosis

This poem reads as follows:

i
never
guessed any
thing(even a
universe)might be
so not quite believab
ly smallest as perfect this
(almost invisible where of a there of a)here of a
rubythroat's home with its still
ness which really's herself
(and to think that she's
warming three worlds)
who's ama
zingly
Eye

(CP 827)

The theme of this poem is the impact that the discovery of the (diminutive) universe of a rubythroat hummingbird's nest has on the discoverer, redolent of William Blake's lines in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?" (124).

In his essay entitled "Magic Iconism: Defamiliarization, Sympathetic Magic, and Visual Poetry," Michael Webster offers an excellent analysis of the iconic and naturalist aspects of this poem. One of Webster's salient points is that Cummings entices the reader into the "magic of similarity" (107): the creative insight needed in order to come to terms with this poem, is to see that its shape presents a hummingbird's head and pointed beak. A clue to this insight is the first and last words of the poem, "i" and "Eye", which form a visual pun on the hummingbird's eyes (107).

Among other aspects, Webster mentions that the "three worlds" which are being warmed within this nest/universe, offer a puzzle, since Cummings was quite knowledgeable about birds, and would in all likelihood have known that the rubythroat almost invariably lays two eggs. Webster suggests that the implied third world could be the mother that needs warming, too, or could be the miracle of finding three eggs (107). Also, the third world being warmed might refer to the nest as such, which is warmed by the presence of the bird. It is also likely that Cummings refers here to a third universe beyond dualistic opposites like man against or separate from nature, along the lines of his burlesque third voice or dimension as expounded in the essay "You Are Not Mad, Am I?" (*Miscellany* 126-131). As such, the third universe being warmed could be the universe of the poet's perception and / or observant participation within nature's processes, in which the striking otherness of nature turns into an

inclusive universe (or vast nest or egg, if you will) of the non-sentimental, deeply joyous coincidence which goes along with one's discoveries within nature. Discovering the hummingbird's home would then be coincident with discovering the most veritable sense of one's *selfness* (that is, of one's place within nature in its fullest possible degree).

In further conjunction with Webster's reading of the poem, I wish to focus on the nature of boundaries implied within this magic icon. Should one agree that the "top" of this poem is its northern extreme, the eastern extreme presents the point of the poem's most intense specificity or objectivity as opposed to fusion, just as a hummingbird's beak is pointed. It is here that the determiner "a" is found, and it is here that the observed "object," the rubythroat's nest, enters the field of vision, thus implying a level of delineation and demarcated awareness from the "almost invisible where" (on the fringes of perception) to "there" (as a found object). This specificity is concurrent on a visual plane with the pointedness of the poem.

However, this very moment of specificity marks a turning point: the point where the objective world enters the subjective world of innermost perception from an almost imperceptible "where" to "there" and—*through* the final parenthesis—into "here," indicating a swapping, crossing or transgression, and ultimately fusion of the worlds of the other ("somewhere"/ "there") and the worlds of the self ("here"). The final parenthesis within this pointed line would therefore be the embodiment of an osmotic boundary allowing the transfusion of otherness and exteriority into essential selfness and interiority.

This transfusion is taken to the extent where the rubythroat's nest *is* amazingly "Eye" according to the poet. At least three aspects of merge between nature and (observant) subject are thus suggested. First, the eye acts as the dynamic mediator which makes the merge of self into nature (and vice versa) possible. Secondly, the objective merges with the subjective: the "Eye" may refer to sentient perception of objects such as the hummingbird's nest, as well as to innermost awareness (consider the capitalization of the word), and is homophonously equated with the subject, "i." The implication would be that if the subject becomes small or humble enough, he sees the all-inclusive miracle of nature; this idea of smallness-and-vastness could be related to Cummings' haiku sensibilities (Welch 103), as well as Taoist ones in accordance with Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* (cf. sections 32, 48, 63, and 64).

Thirdly, the capitalization of the "Eye" may indicate that it belongs to the recurrent theme within Cummings' poetry of the all-inclusive "You" or "Who," who is more often than not the Person of Nature as it is evident from the sonnet analysed above among numerous instances within Cummings' body of poetry (see Webster, "New Nature" 119-120). The natural house of being (rather than mere doing) would then include on an intrinsically interrelated basis many worlds, such as hummingbirds, their nests, and the deeply perceptive human subject, and this interrelatedness becomes visible via the "Eye."

The final parenthesis within this pointed line therefore presents a graphical boundary through which the nest breaks into the "here" of ecological / whole awareness.

These notions again serve to underline (which may be too strong a word within this context!) Cummings' osmotic view of boundaries: potentially opposing categories or tendencies such as the nature's otherness (the rubythroat's nest) and the human self, or that which is outside and that which is inside, are divided by partitions which invite meaningful transfusion into greater stillness, completeness or wholeness, provided that the eyes of one's eyes are open(ed).

Actual (and not only textual) osmosis evidently plays an important role in terms of homeostasis, along with those processes involved in maintaining dynamic stability within a living creature. It is interesting to note that in more detailed overviews of osmosis within the natural sciences, such as the book entitled *Integrated Principles of Zoology*, permeable membranes are related to integrity: "The incredibly thin, yet sturdy, plasma membrane that encloses every cell is vitally important in maintaining cellular integrity" (50).

To this the humanities student may wish to add that it is no wonder, then, that a sense of mental health is related to the process of mergence or belonging, since the words "integration" and "integrity" are closely related, after all. It is of further interest to note that the concept of osmosis marks a development within the natural sciences: "Once believed to be a rather static entity that defined cell boundaries and kept cell contents from spilling out, the plasma membrane (also called the plasmalemma) is a dynamic structure having remarkable activity and selectivity. It is a permeable barrier that separates the interior from the external environment, [and] regulates the vital flow of molecular traffic into and out of the cell" (50). One is led to ponder the extent to which a closed-off sense of conceptual boundaries is still being overemphasized within the humanities. In the case of "i / never" and the final parenthesis under discussion here, we have an artistic and striking example of an osmotic barrier of the semiotic kind.

This dissolvance across differences or boundaries is enacted typographically within this poem: again, the eastern extreme of this poem, its turning point in terms of self and other, perception and perceiver, out there and in here, et cetera, is concurrent with its visual turning point. The poem begins with blankness in its northern extreme, graphically swells out to the eastern point of its ultimate specificity (concomitant with a decrease in blank space and an increase in poetic words), only to recede back to the nowhere or blankness in its southern extreme (concomitant, in its turn, with the decrease of printed words and the increase of blankness). Thus the poem typographically signifies a pointed mergence into the now-here-nowhere of being.

That blank space is expressive in Cummings is mentioned, among others, by Rai Peterson in her essay entitled "Readable Silence: Blank Space in E. E. Cummings' Poetry." What does blank space express in Cummings? One possibility is that it expresses the void (Peterson 46) or Cummings' sense of "nowhere." This would tie in with his notion that the house of being is *immeasurable*, as I have noted. Being, in contrast to mere doing, can therefore not be confined to a measurable moment, area, or act. But although being is immeasurable, where and how is it to be "found"? It is "found" within the recognition of the utter here-ness of here and now-ness of now.

Full awareness of now and here therefore leads to an awareness of being “nowhere,” or being part of the all-inclusive Person of Nature who remains immeasurable, and who continues to continue—so to speak—within the ever-changing, but stable here and now. In typical fashion, Cummings exploits the perhaps inadvertent and fortunate convergence of the words “now” and “here” into the unit of the word “nowhere” in order to express this sense of being fully now-here-nowhere, as Friedman notes [(*Re*)*Valuing* 112]. To cite just one example, in the poem “Now i lay(with everywhere around) / me” Cummings equates full awareness of the rain and eternity with this sense of being “nowhere” (CP 816).

To return to the magic icon in view of these deliberations: it signifies the merger of worlds or places within nature, and underscores this significance by means of its very particular typographical emphasis on blank space. Setting out from the “nowhere” (blank space) in the northern extreme, the poem reaches a crisis point of specificity (pointedness in the eastern extreme of the poem), only to return to “nowhere” (blank space) in its southern extreme.

The northern and southern boundaries also coincide with the homophonic and capitalized swopping of perceiver (“i”) and perception (“Eye”), and the implication is that the subject becomes one huge osmotic mandala, a centre of subjective-objective perception, the “Eye.” This deduction is further substantiated in terms of a letter that Cummings wrote to his mother, dated September 3, 1925, in which he asserts the following: “I am a small eye poet” (*Letters* 109). Indeed, the implication of this poem is that the subject itself *is* an osmotic boundary. This is reminiscent of the notion of the American transcendentalist poet and essayist with whom Cummings was familiar, Ralph Waldo Emerson, that in one’s proper perception of nature, “all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all” (6); although one must add that Cummings’ pre-eminent position is more humble and Taoist than Emerson’s ultimate position of the conquering of nature.

The innermost eye of awareness and perception alluded to through Cummings’ poetry is therefore, in a sense, an osmotic boundary, allowing for transfusion and greater wholeness of meaning to the point of meaningful “now-here-nowhere.” Cummings could be carefully and persuasively signalling that being part of nature’s flow means growing into a perception of dynamic processes such as “semiotic osmosis.” This thought is anticipated within one of Cummings’ earlier small, ecological prototypes:

love is a place
& through this place of
love move
(with brightness of peace)
all places

yes is a world
& in this world of
yes live
(skilfully curled)
all worlds (CP 443)

Since Cummings exalts love as the “every only god” (CP 526), his notion that it is a place through which all places move, is important. This poem anticipates that one can find stability within the very osmotic and dynamic character of nature’s complete flow: the places move through the place of love with “brightness of peace,” thus enabling one to wake, like a little church, to “a perfect patience of mountains” (CP 749). As Pushpa N. Parekh knows, Cummings is an exponent of the poet who has discovered his place within the cyclical rhythms of nature (64). Among other considerations against this background, one may also conclude that this poet’s awareness of place includes a sense of the osmotic nature of boundaries in terms of the “immeasurable house” of health, growing, and becoming. The magic icon hummingbird poem appears to be a more expansive treatment of the place of love — of man’s capability to grow humble enough, even in the miracle of observing a hummingbird’s nest, for him to know and find joy in his (mere) participation within the continuing vastness of nature.

4. Conclusion: Cummings, osmosis, and the rise of ecocriticism

Cummings’ poetry, among its many dimensions, is acutely natural, as many of his critics know. It is therefore strange to think that the poet has not enjoyed more direct ecocritical treatment—even though ecocriticism is still an emergent discipline—such as in the case of his fellow-modernist poets Wallace Stevens (Harrison 663) and Robert Frost (Elder 649). Such treatment of his poetry can not be far off, and this essay aims in that direction.

The first law of ecology, as of ecocriticism, is that everything is related to everything else (Glotfelty xix). As Michael Begon states in his introduction to a standard work within ecological studies proper: “Ecology is not a science with a simple linear structure: everything affects everything else” (vii). A similar perspective seems to be called for—from a literary angle, of course—in relation to Cummings’ poetry. Cummings’ “algebra”, for instance, is not linear but unifying: as the poet states, “one is not half two” (CP 556), that is, one should not (only) count linearly in a 1, 2, 3, 4 fashion. One should see that two can fuse into one: “It’s two are halves of one” (CP 556). Thinking of nature, then, one should take non-linearity and unity into account.

One of the further implications of the mentioned first law of ecology is that boundaries cannot forever remain static and sealed-off. Boundaries certainly do protect and demarcate, and in this sense support self-assertion, but frequently not to the degree of absolute or extreme autonomy. They are also osmotic and flexible, allowing for movement, homeostasis and growth. In this respect, ecocriticism may sanction a

renewed critique of the natural aspects—as well as the aspects of spatial orientation and a sense of place—as far as modernist poetry is concerned. Cummings' sense of osmotic boundaries could, for instance, be contrasted to the more monumentalist and sealed-off view of boundaries implied in the case of T.S. Eliot. Eliot views the individual as a sealed-off, opaque phenomenon or object—reminiscent of an atom or a snooker ball—in his notes to *The Waste Land*, where he quotes F.H. Bradley's definition of the individual, as follows:

[M]y experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to others that surround it... In brief, regarded as an existence which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul (73-4).

Not so, it appears, in the case of the circle of the poetic subject and the circle of the rubythroat's nest as they are treated within the magic icon discussed above. In this icon—however private or alone the experience may be—meaningful mergence is depicted as the quintessence of natural experience, across less impenetrable conceptual / sentient barriers. We thus end up with the paradox that aloneness is coincident with oneness (or all-oneness), indicated by Cummings' exploitation of the fact that the word "alone" carries within it the word "one" in all its implications, including unity and love (CP 813).

In contrapuntal contrast to mainstream modernist poetry, then, Cummings' sense of the individual, although as individualistic as the other modernist ones, is more osmotic in some respects, as I have attempted to reveal to some extent within this essay. Notions such as these could lead to the improved placement of the poet within the modernist canon and beyond—a concern raised both in the cases of Friedman ("Postscript" 174-175) and Rotella (18-19)—and deserve further attention. At the very least, as this essay endeavours to demonstrate, Cummings' poetry could find a sensible place within ecocriticism, in addition to the many other territories of criticism which his unique and striking poetry has entered.¹

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Note

¹This article is a substantially modified rendition of one aspect of an essay entitled "Meaningful Transgression of Boundaries in E.E. Cummings' Poetry: An Ecocritical Perspective" recently published in the *Journal of Contemporary Thought* (10, Winter 1999). In its turn, the latter essay represents a revised and extended version of a paper read at the "Theory at the End of the Millenium" conference in Udaipur, India in December 1999. I hereby gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the National Research Foundation, and the Potchefstroom University of Christian Higher Education, which enabled me to attend the conference. The views expressed in this article are mine, and should not be attributed to

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