

E. E. Cummings and "The New Art"

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On June 24, 1915, a scrawny teenager stood in front of his Harvard graduating class and stirred up the crowd by speaking on what he called "The New Art." The speech was highly ambitious and comprehensive, hitting in 1915 the figures and techniques that would later come to epitomize the modernist movement. Yet the speaker, despite his awareness and desire to place himself within the movement, would forever remain a controversial outsider. For although E. E. Cummings strove to be both a modernist painter and poet, his paintings were almost *too* modernist to be noticed, his poems *too* modern to be accepted. However, despite Cummings' problematic place within modernism, his artistic ambitions, developing theories, and fervent justification of "The New Art" demonstrate just how much he identified with and strove to be a part of the artistic revolution. In this speech one can see the origins of Cummings' own artistic philosophies, practices, and ultimately, his individualism.

Cummings begins his speech by positioning the New Art as a widespread and inclusive phenomenon, stretching across painting, sculpture, architecture, the stage, literature, and music (5). Cummings emphasizes the naturalness of the New Art as simply the next step in artistic progress. He calls it "a clearly discernible evolution from models", giving this art weight and validity when compared to Classical Art (5). As a disciple of modernism, Cummings had read and internalized the artistic philosophies presented in Willard Huntington Wright's groundbreaking modernist study, *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning*. This text presented art history through the evolution of individual aesthetic threads. Important to Cummings was how Wright's book understood both the color and form aesthetics of Synchronism through the progression from Leonardo to Cézanne (Cohen, *Aesthetics* 121). Understanding modernist art as the natural transformation of trends dating back to the ancients was an important concept for Cummings to present to his classically-bred Harvard audience.

Cummings' speech attacks "the casual critic" who defames the New Art by calling it abnormal and incoherent ("The New Art" 5). Though Cummings did not realize it in 1915, he would spend the rest of his life in a battle with the critics and censors because of the exact style that resulted from the influence of this New Art. In 1917, he faced his first major battle when *Eight Harvard Poets*, a collection of works featuring Cummings and

his Harvard literary circle, went to press. The manuscript's reader was Clement Wood, who criticized Cummings' poetry for its "bad" grammar and "dreadful" linguistic inversions (Norman 52). Given his early experiences with editors, Cummings identified with the challenges the artist faced, and in this speech he does his best to defend and reinforce the efforts of the modernist movement. Charles Norman, Cummings' first biographer, praises "The New Art" for its "extraordinary perception" which "could hardly be entirely appreciated" at the time (41-42). Cummings' graduation speech shows maturity and foresight; it exposes and explains the techniques in visual art, music, and literature that have come to define modernism, and were lost on the critics of his day.

In his speech, Cummings identifies himself as a modernist painter, a representative who will argue on behalf of the Cezannes and Matisses whom he so admires. At this time, Cummings thought of himself as primarily a painter, and was very passionate and defensive about his paintings. In his early artistic career, Cummings was more focused on painting than writing, eager to make his modernist mark in that particular branch of the New Art. From 1916-1927, he was a regular contributor to many art exhibitions in an ambitious attempt to establish himself as a painter (Cohen, "Sleight" 40). In the early teens, art exhibitions were quite in vogue, the most famous being New York City's Armory Show in 1913. This show was the most influential of the era, called the "invasion of modern art on America" as it marked the American debut of Cubist, Futurist, and Post-Impressionist art ("As Avant-Garde"). Most critics and members of the public were perplexed by this radical New style, a style that critics tried to suppress by isolating and reproving it—calling it elitist and/or artistic blasphemy. Cummings attended this exhibition and felt greatly moved by it, including in his speech both his personal reactions and a carefully constructed defense of the Armory Show's art.

In order to make the New Art more "coherent" for the average person, Cummings demystifies modernism's visual art movements, Cubism and Futurism. Cummings breaks down these art forms much in the way that the artistic forms would break down their subjects. He defines Cubism as geometric design used to express a personal reaction to a subject "using an edge in place of a curve" to create "tactile value" ("The New Art" 5). This definition will also later apply to much of Cummings' visual poetry, which is full of broken and enjambed lines. A poem in praise of one of Cummings' favorite Cubists, Picasso, appears in the 1922 version of his first

book of poetry, *Tulips & Chimneys*. In the poem Cummings admires the audacity and muscular intelligence of Picasso's cubism: "bulge: grunting lungs pumped full of sharp thick mind" (CP 95). Cummings' poetry has often been compared to the fragmented yet visually-directive cubism of Picasso, and indeed his appreciation of Cubism is evident by its presence in his poetic.

Cummings explains Futurism as "a glorification of personality," an art that reflects a particular subject of interest to the artist, such as movement or sound ("The New Art" 5). In this definition lies Cummings' own Futuristic future, as he later creates a series of abstract paintings under the categories "Noise" and "Sound." Cummings' definitions of Cubism and Futurism reveal his personal artistic philosophies: critic Milton Cohen has noted how he "shared the Modernist's [*sic*] ambivalence toward the object. He was fascinated by its 'thinginess'—its planes and lines, solids and hollows, so temptingly transmutable into an abstract design" (Cohen, *Aesthetic* 36). Cummings had a painter's eye, shaded in modernist mentality, and sparked by the poet's imagination.

His imagination is ignited by Constantin Brancusi's "Mademoiselle (Mlle) Pogany," and he describes how the body is simultaneously distorted and delineated by the movement of lines. He applauds Brancusi for his ability to draw the spectators' attention to "the enormous inscribed ovals, which everyone recognizes as the artist's conception of the subject's eyes" (6). Despite the apparent abstraction of the body in "Mademoiselle Pogany," Brancusi is still able to attract the spectators with something recognizable, consequently opening up the rest of the painting for visual perception. Cummings calls this "the triumph of the line for line's sake over realism," which is "the development of the basic principles of impressionism" (6). Thus Cummings is able to place modernist art into a context that those sitting in his Harvard audience would recognize: Impressionism. In describing modernist art in terms of a recent but more accepted art movement, Cummings was speaking a language his audience would have understood and appreciated. Implicit throughout Cummings' speech is this desire to define modernism through a language and a context that everyone could comprehend.

Cummings segues from visual art to literature via music, since he believed in the interconnectedness of the branches of modern art. Cummings cites the "colour music" of Scriabin's *Prometheus*, which on March 20, 1915 made history as "the first time . . . a composer used a chromatic color

score in combination with orchestration" (7). Scriabin's montage of musical art in *Prometheus* modernized orchestral music in a dramatic new way. Cummings and his creative companion S. Foster Damon also tried joining arts in a more modest way when they attempted to put Cummings' poetry to Damon's music in their later years at Harvard (Norman 37). Here, Cummings emphasizes the interrelatedness of all the modern arts, moving from conventional visual art to the linguistic visual by crossing the bridge of modern music.

For Cummings, "the suggestion of an analogy between colour and music" leads to "the last branch of the New Art—to wit, literature" (8). Representing this branch of art were Amy Lowell, Donald Evans, and Gertrude Stein. With Amy Lowell's "Grotesque," Cummings appreciated the "development from the ordinary to the abnormal" via the vividness and implications of its imagery of lilies that "goggle their tongues" and form a "wreath of lolling corpses" (8-9). Cummings also quoted Lowell's poem "The Letter" for the "absolute vividness" in the lines "Little cramped words scrawling all over the paper / Like dragged fly's legs" (9). Cummings' fascination at the tight and precise imagery Lowell used parallels the developments in imagism of the time, first theorized by Ezra Pound, whom Cummings also admired. Cummings was attuned to the growing developments in poetic technique, discerning for himself the poets he believed successfully practiced such original theory.

While Cummings praised Lowell for her "ultramodern" imagery and free verse, his Harvard audience sat in astonishment. Though Lowell was admired on the literary scene, she was somewhat of an outcast within New England society and the well-known Lowell family. Amy's brother Abbott Lawrence Lowell was president of Harvard in 1915, present in the audience and embarrassed at what the young Cummings was quoting (Norman 43-44). The audience, too, sat horrified. As Cummings recited Lowell's poem "Grotesque," one elderly lady was actually heard whispering "Is that our president's sister's poetry he is quoting? Well, *I* think it's an *insult* to our president!" (Norman 43). Perhaps because Cummings was trying to forestall such reactions, he turned next to discuss a poem of more traditional form, a sonnet by Donald Evans.

Cummings was introduced to Evans (and, by extension, Stein) by an important member of Harvard's literary circle, S. Foster Damon. Damon had an eye for the avant-garde, exposing Cummings to important members of the era's most revolutionary artistic circles. Donald Evans was an avant-

garde poet in the teens and twenties, but contributed most to modernism as a publisher. As a publisher and editor of Claire Marie Press, Evans understood the plight of the modernist artist, and therefore made it his mission to push the limits of acceptable art. Evans believed that only the most civilized Americans could understand modernist art, and he catered the content of his publications to those “seven hundred” advanced Americans (“Literature #207”). In fact, it was Evans who first published Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* in 1914. Cummings was aware that elitism such as Evans’ was a problem, and he did not appreciate the negative reputation that such elitism gave modern art (7). So in this speech, Cummings plays mediator between artistic elitist innovators like Evans and the ignorant public and defamatory editors, occupying a unique artistic space as a poet, painter, student, editor, avant-gardist and Harvard graduate.

Cummings’ position and perspective, therefore, allows him to both praise and critique the new art and artists. Cummings’ final artist, Gertrude Stein, receives a mixed review, as he critiques Stein’s signature linguistic abstraction. He writes that Stein’s poetry, or “literary sound painting,” is about sound and appearance, the complete abstraction of language. While Cummings respected this idea, he did not adopt Stein’s techniques in his own poetry, believing that language was too “familiar” to be used solely for “esthetic effect” (quoted in Cohen, *Aesthetics* 100). Instead, Cummings incorporated linguistic abstraction into his own poetry by breaking lines of sentence, syntax, grammar, and punctuation. Yet regardless of personal opinion, Cummings’ approbation of Stein is evident, and by including Stein in his speech, Cummings, too, is stepping into the role of artistic promoter, pushing the works of avant-garde artists.

Throughout his poetic career, Cummings never abandoned the desire to make a New Art. By his own definition, Cummings was a pure modernist, which is difficult to comprehend today after Cummings’ modernism has come to be both questioned and debated (Friedman, “Cummings’ Uneasy” 85). If “modernism” is defined as Pound and Eliot, the mythic method, and objectivism, then Cummings may not be seen as one of the modernists. However, in the teens and early twenties, Cummings was known as an experimental writer and artist (Friedman, “Cummings’ Uneasy” 85). Laura Riding and Robert Graves’ 1927 text *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* affirmed Cummings’ place among this crowd. The authors included him as the sole representative of modernism in the essay “William Shakespeare and E. E. Cummings: A Study in Original Punctuation and Spelling,”

which explained the typography of one of Cummings' poems, "because // you go away I give roses who" (CP 295), by comparing it to Shakespeare's Sonnet 129. Riding and Graves concluded that the fixedness of Cummings' typography, though it may be puzzling, presents a challenge to readers, who must work to understand the poem. Cummings' poetry, therefore, accomplishes the modernist objective of demanding a mature thinking audience.

Despite this modernist status in the twenties, today Cummings' position within modernism has come to seem "anomalous." As Norman Friedman notes, he is seen by some as "an avant-gardist, an impossibly obscure poet" and by others as "a romantic, a perpetual adolescent, and a sentimentalist" ("Modernist Tradition" 3). Given this binary opposition, it becomes difficult to place Cummings with either tradition, and yet his poetic innovations are very much in line with vision outlined in "The New Art." Ironically, a rigid concept of the modern art and artists that Cummings was so excited to introduce in 1915 has ultimately conspired to demote from the canon one of the era's most individualistic artists.

Thus when Cummings stood in front of the commencement audience at the Sanders Theatre and concluded that "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 the untrodden ways" (11), it was clear that he was speaking as much from his own convictions as from his research and readings. For Cummings would become a genuine New Artist, creating a style of his own, "an instrument of great range and flexibility" that, as Charles Norman says, did "not exist before him, and falls flat when imitated." Cummings' style cannot be imitated, Norman continues, because his style "springs from what he is" (102). Cummings' grand portrayal of the New Art, therefore, reflects the ambitions of an artist who would ultimately remain an individualist—even in an era that was *defined* by radical experimentation and ingenuity.

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