

E.E. Cummings' 'Jottings' and José Garcia Villa's 'Xocerisms' – Invoking Lyricism in Creating the Poetic Aphorism

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This paper will provide commentary and analysis, for the first time, on E. E. Cummings' Jottings, his unique (illimitable) style of aphorisms, while comparing and contrasting them to his longtime friend José Garcia Villa's innovative aphorisms that he calls Xocerisms. My main purpose in doing so is to make these Jottings more widely known and accessible to Cummings' loyal, enthusiastic readers and scholars because I believe they are worthy of further study and research. Furthermore, I will examine how the aphorisms and poems of these two poets connect, how much or little their major themes (satirical, amatory, and mystical) appear in these aphorisms, and how both poets' lyricism creates a unique aphoristic style that I call the "poetic aphorism."

Cummings wrote approximately two hundred Jottings in his lifetime, publishing thirty three of them in *Wake* 10 (1951). The rest are collected in the Houghton Library at Harvard, as are more than five hundred unpublished Xocerisms by José Garcia Villa, Filipino born poet, short story writer, and artist. For this genre, Cummings preferred the simple word—Jottings—whereas, Villa, who previously wrote and published aphorisms, coined the term *Xocerism* during his final years, to make a distinction when referring to the refinement of his later aphorisms, written from about 1990 to 1997. The term combines the word *aphorism* with Villa's name *José* as it was written in Russian (*Xoce*) by his poet friend Yevgeny Yevtushenko (*Doveglion* 241).

Quite frankly, as an avid Cummings' reader for more than fifty years, I had not known until recently that my nonhero—poet, author, and artist—had also written and published aphorisms during his lifetime. In fact, once I discovered (quite by chance) that Cummings had published thirty three Jottings in *Wake*, co-edited by José Garcia Villa, I conducted an extensive search and found Norman Friedman's brief comment in *The Growth of a Writer* about the republication of sixteen Jottings in *i: six nonlectures*. Friedman writes that Cummings "concludes this [fourth] nonlecture with a few epigrams from 'Jottings,' . . . of which my favorite is: 'knowledge is a

polite word for dead but not buried imagination’ ” (183). One might readily compare this Jotting on knowledge to the first line in Cummings’ well-known poem “since feeling is first” (CP 91). Both illustrate one of his recurring themes: that to *merely exist* is equal to *being dead*. The compact lyrical meaning in this aphorism is implied rather than didactic, creating an extended metaphor of unfeeling (pedantry) versus feeling (creativity), juxtaposing knowledge (death) with not buried imagination (living human). This Jotting thus illustrates the poetic aphorism’s essential characteristics: an inherent use of metaphor, the rearrangement of word order, and attention to lyrical sound value, characteristics which are uniquely evident in Cummings’ Jottings and Villa’s Xocerisms. Furthermore, these poetic aphorisms are in direct contrast to what D. H. Lawrence calls “nagging” prose thoughts or *pensées*—like those written by Pascal or La Bruyere. Lawrence writes: “There is a didactic element about prose thoughts which makes them repellent, slightly bullying” (v). The above Jotting is far from irritating or nagging; instead, it is provocative, while at the same time, transfixing and engaging, thereby awakening the imagination of the reader.

Before ending nonlecture four with this Jotting, Cummings reads two others which strike a very similar note on what it is to be natural in a world of false *effects*: “an intelligent person fights for lost causes, realizing that others are merely effects” and “think twice before you think” (six 70; *Miscellany* 331). In Cummings’ words, “lost causes” are only lost in the minds of “most people” like politicians, who fail to fight for lost causes, as he contentiously voiced in his most vitriolic poem, THANKSGIVING (1956), which Friedman characterized as an “attack on America’s official indifference to the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolution” (*Growth* 113). In response to the old adage to “think before you act,” Cummings would counter, “act before you think,” or you may not act at all.

Somewhere in the sixties, I read *i: six nonlectures* but did not recognize the significance of Cummings’ poetic aphorisms at that time. I prefer the term *aphorism* over Friedman’s term *epigram* because I agree with *New Yorker* critic George Steiner, who wrote: “Almost by definition, and even where it sticks strictly to colloquial prose, the aphorism nears the condition of poetry. Its formal economy aims to startle in a flash of authority; it aims to be singularly memorable, as does a poem” (152).

In 2008 I edited *Dovegion: Collected Poems*, which gathers the best of José Garcia Villa’s poetry (long out of print), and which publishes for the first time Villa’s Xocerisms (244-260), as well as describing for the first

time a new versification system that Villa called Duo-Technique (228-243). Once, when Villa's aphorisms were compared to Pascal's, he quickly retorted: "Don't compare Pascal's *Pensées* to mine—which I now call Xocerisms—pithy, inventive, philosophical insights told with a dash of Tabasco" (*Doveglion* 241). Villa believed in the importance of the aphorism and thought these Xocerisms would add to his legacy. In defining his poetic aphoristic style, Villa boasted, "My Xocerisms probe the ethic, philosophic force behind all essential living. And I do this in just one, two or three sentences at most" (*Doveglion* 242). Two Xocerisms that parallel Cummings' theme that imagination and feeling are first, transcending mere knowing, are numbers 18 and 96:

To read between the lines is Logic.

To read between the lines when there are no lines is Imagination (246)

[and]

Reason is merely connecting the dots but intelligence

is the creation of those dots (253)

The brevity of style and the probing philosophic themes that Villa describes can be found in most of his Xocerisms and in Cummings' Jottings. In fact, employing Friedman's technique of grouping Cummings' writings thematically, I discovered that 27 of the 33 poetic aphorisms in *Wake* can be classified as "transcendental." Similarly, Friedman's thematic analysis shows that by 1950—the year *Xaipe* was published and just one year before *Wake 10* appeared—there was a decline in Cummings' satirical poems in favor of his more transcendental / mystical and love poems (*Growth* 152-162). I suspect that as the maturing poet's mystical vision evolved in creating his later poems, he continued probing the inner-self and extolling individualism, the dominant theme found in his Jottings. However, for the most part the theme of love is not pursued in his Jottings.

There is a similar concentration on transcendental, mystical themes in the 150 Xocerisms published in *Doveglion*. In fact, Villa published many divine and mystical poems in his first U. S. book, *Have Come, Am Here* (1942), poems which humanize God. As English writer Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote: "It is like seeing orchids growing wild to read him... Since I met him he seems to have met God; but a God so much in his own image that I am sure no harm can come of the encounter" (*Doveglion* xxiv).

For his nonlectures, Cummings chose to read only 16 of the 33 Jottings published in *Wake 10*, while also rearranging their order. Choosing to read these Jottings at the end of this important fourth nonlecture, which

Cummings called “an exploration of his stance as a writer” (*six* 63), is proof that the poet thought highly of these relatively new poetic aphorisms. He introduces the reading of these aphorisms by saying that they are “from an essay entitled Jottings, published in *Wake* magazine [1951]” (70). Cummings’ choice of the words “from an essay” is somewhat confusing, if not misleading, given that his Jottings in *Wake* are separate aphorisms numbered 1 through 33 and in no apparent order. On the other hand, it is possible that Cummings planned to write an essay; these loosely structured Jottings could eventually be reassembled to create an essay. Perhaps this is one meaning of the sentence in the second paragraph of nonlecture four that reads: “Suffice it to say that the present non-poetical period will consist of nothing but sentences, essays, and *parts of essays*, all of which express a standing human being” (63, my emphasis). Or perhaps “Jottings” deconstructs and fragments the traditional idea of an essay just as compositions like “l)a” (CP 673) deconstruct and fragment the traditional idea of a poem.

Villa edited the widely read 1946 *Cummings Number* of the *Harvard Wake*, and now in 1951 Villa published Cummings’ Jottings in the renamed *Wake*—shortly after publishing his own aphorisms for the first time in his 1949 collection of poems called *Volume Two*. This appearance of Cummings’ Jottings in Villa’s *Wake* just two years after *Volume Two* suggests that perhaps it was Villa who influenced Cummings’ writing of aphorisms. However, Villa proclaimed that it was Cummings’ lyrical and experimental poetry that influenced him to abandon writing the short story for good in favor of poetry, stating: “If I learned to write poetry at all, it was by studying principally the work of E. E. Cummings” (qtd. in Cowen, “Lyricism” 82). One of Villa’s most poetic aphorisms, about the importance of craft in writing a poem, is one I feel Cummings would have greatly approved: Villa’s Xocerism # 49 reads:

A poem
is
language
built
to the
struc-
ture of a
flower. (Doveglion 249)

I present here the versified version in two, four-lined stanzas that Villa wrote in the margin of his notebook, but as a Xocerism it seems to maintain

its sound value written as straight-line prose: “A poem is language built to the structure of a flower” (*Doveglion* 248). However, in discussing William Carlos Williams’ famous free verse poem “The Red Wheelbarrow,” Dana Gioia writes that it is “. . .the visual placement of those sounds on the page” that creates an aesthetic harmony of aural/visual imagery. Gioia maintains that Williams’ language loses its sound value once it is written as two discreet lines of prose (35):

so much depends upon a red wheel barrow
glazed with rain water beside the white chickens

My point here is that Villa demonstrates how the pitch of language, borrowed from lyricism, is used to advantage by employing the poetic aphorism. Hence, the poetic dimension remains—sound value = poetic = lyrical.

This argument is amplified once more by Villa’s charming Xocerism, number 64, “A poem is not a thought, but a grace” (250). In other words, even the quality of language of a prose statement can be heightened to a lyrical pitch by the choice of words, syntax and punctuation, or by carefully selecting and reassembling words for their sound value as much as for their thought or expression. Cummings employs punctuation, notably the parentheses, to sculpt movement and meaning in his poetry. Jotting # 13, published in *Wake* but not in *six nonlectures*, makes canny use of the parentheses:

of course Bacon wrote Shakespeare;but so did everybody
else,including(luckily) Shakespeare
(*Miscellany* 330)

While researching Cummings’ Jottings at Houghton Library, I discovered that he had typed out an earlier version without the word “luckily” enclosed in parentheses. Without this insertion, the line reads faster, resulting in a flat, ordinary prose statement, which, in turn, lacks Cummings’ witty, lyrical conclusion.

Cummings’ Jotting # 12 in *Wake* consists of just two words—“hatred bounces”—and produces a modernist poetic effect much like what James Merrill described as “English in its billiard-table sense—words that have been set spinning against their own gravity” (qtd. in McClatchy 49). Together, both words transcend immediacy of understanding, demanding that the reader re-examine their meaning, asking for example: “Why does

hatred bounce?” “Where does it bounce to?” “What are its effects?” These are transcendental considerations caused by the juxtaposition of two seemingly simple words, which transparently form a metaphor, a figurative device found in most Cummings’ and Villa’s poems, and now, once again, in their poetic aphorisms. In an article on satire and prejudice in Cummings’ poetry Michael Webster cites a 1955 letter to Ezra Pound in which the poet quotes this Jotting in order to warn “Pound about the difficulties of controlling an emotion like hatred” (32). Webster speculates that Cummings may have composed this Jotting after his own experience with the accusations of anti-Semitism occasioned by his controversial poem “a kike is the most dangerous” (CP 644). Webster writes that the “hatred latent in the charged word [in the first line of the poem] bounces right back despite the poet’s intent to satirize what he saw as the process of prejudice-formation itself” (32). Webster further notes how Cummings’ letter to Pound refers to the biblical story of David and Goliath as an example of an attack that did not bounce back because, as Cummings says, “Joy is the name of a brook” from which David chose the “five smooth stones” to hurl at Goliath (*Letters* 243). These stones, having their source in Joy, did not bounce like hatred; rather, they “sank into [Goliath’s] forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground’ ” (1 Samuel 17:49; qtd. in Webster 33).

Similarly, Villa’s brief Xocerism # 108 has the effect of “setting words spinning” and inviting the reader to make new connections:

H-O-M-O S-A-P...Stop Right There! (255)

In this case a two-word phrase is cut short, turning “Homo Sapiens” into “Homo Sap,” a pun reminiscent of Cummings’ more satirical (wise-guy) poems written about “mostpeople.” In addition, Villa’s aphorism asks us to wonder just what sort of (un)wise saps these human beings might be.

It is typical of Cummings to use various combinations of comparative and superlative adjectives in his poetry like “mostpeople” versus “somepeople” which, according to Norman Friedman, is used “for an effect of constant choosing, preferring, discriminating, of overtopping the best and the worst, and of the transcendence of extremes” (*Art* 70). Cummings’ use of comparative and superlative adjectives shows up in the Jottings that are numbered 1 and 2 in nonlecture four but 28 and 31 in the *Wake* compilation. These two Jottings praise the real individual—the artist or the poet—who stands above all others, and who is not merely an equal.

equality is what does not exist among equals [and]
most people are perfectly afraid of silence
(*six 70; Miscellany 331*)

In Cummings, the superlative individual requires silence to imagine, to be reflective and creative, whereas most people dread freedom (silence) to ponder meaning or to be self-reflective. Villa's similar view that difficult silence and reflection are the requisites for internalizing and creating is best expressed in Xocerisms numbers 99 and 98:

Hard decisions are not in quiet made, but in turmoiling stillness. (254)
[and]

Monks do not bait themselves with fatuous mundane dreams, but live in abstract, painful peace. (254)

Both Cummings and Villa rail against the use of clichés, most evident in Villa's witty, chiding Xocerism number 150:

CLICHES: The common hussies of language—the *bimbos*. (259)

Two Jottings in nonlecture four parody well-known prosaic adages by employing word play, effectively changing the original's moralistic tone, demonstrating how the poetic aphorism can create a satirical edge, as well as the element of surprise:

people who live in steel houses should pull down the lightning
[and]
the pigpen is mightier than the sword
(*six 70; Miscellany 331*)

Like Cummings, Villa believed that form follows function in art and poetry, and it is the craft of poetry that employs structural innovations such as distorting syntax and employing punctuation to create effects that make art from words that detain and engage the reader to find new and unsuspected meanings. As he writes in numbers 35 and 42:

Form is to Substance what a wet T-Shirt is to a fine body. (247) [and]

Art is a miraculous flirtation with *Nothing!*
Aiming for nothing, and landing on the Sun. (248)

Villa despised poetry written by a species of poets he called *peots* who wrote mundane prose “chopped into lines” as he scoffed. In *Have Come, Am Here* (1942), Villa wrote, “First, a poem must be magical, / then musical” (12), and both he and Cummings condemned poorly crafted poetry. Villa does so wittily in Xocerism number 75:

They who, with all good will, use language as an instrument of torture.
(251)

One of Cummings’s Jottings, a favorite of mine, at first reading reveals only the obvious—that the penguin’s wings are to swim with—implying that the wings of this strange bird are not used for flying. But this penguin is a poet, requiring the reader to *think twice* before thinking:

a poet is a penguin—his wings are to swim with
(*six* 70; *Miscellany* 330)

Note also the lyrical use of alliteration such as the *p* in *poet* and *penguin*, the *w* in *wings* and *with*, and the assonance of short “i” in *is*, *his*, *swim*, *with*—all in just eleven words.

Cummings, like Villa, believed that the poet is an “odd bird” who performs the unexpected, even the bizarre. As Villa once wrote, “I am a freak. I am part male, part female and part child—the freakish me is the essence of me—the artist aloof and at play” (qtd. in Cowen, “Cummings / Villa” 104). While Villa’s remark stresses the freakish nature of the poet, Cummings stresses more “the artist aloof and at play” in his poet-as-penguin image. In writing about Cummings as a lyric poet, Friedman notes: “It seems to me that Cummings’ interest in people—and especially those who are strangers in society or who are creative in some special way—has not been sufficiently remarked” (*Growth* 130). One of these so-called “strangers in society” is the clown, comparable to the penguin-poet image, a freak who should be revered like the tramp or the street poet—Joe Gould—who is immortalized in Cummings’ poem “little joe gould has lost his teeth and doesn’t know where” (CP 410). An imagistic Jotting, published in *Wake* but not included in the nonlectures, describes a clown:

the expression of a clown is mostly in his knees (*Miscellany* 330)

Why his knees? Because Cummings—the poet-impressionistic-artist—can

visualize that the baggy-knee-pants of a clown mirror his frown and, like his poems, Cummings' Jottings create magical images that paint portraits.

Another of Cummings' impressionistic Jottings, published in *Wake* only, is worth considering, at this juncture, especially because we, too, have come to the end of this particular nonlecture:

ends are beginnings with their hats on (*Miscellany* 330)

It is my hope that this short consideration of these Jottings and Xocerisms will show that everything great poets write is of importance, especially when they continue to grow and experiment, transcending even their best poetry by "...handl[ing] words with supreme virtuosity—the kind of virtuosity that makes the words themselves come alive" (Schonberg 341). I'll end this paper with a challenge from one of Cummings' unpublished Jottings at the Houghton Library:

nothing which can be measured has the slightest significance

I invite the reader (and possibly the writer) to measure *something*—that is, as if you knew less *before* the *after* of the *now* of this paper.

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