

**Cummings, Villa, Cowen: An Appreciation of
Mathematics of Love (Anaphora Literary
Press, 2011)**

Robert Dorsett

1.

Cummings has had readers, but few poets, if any, that have had the ability and discipline to take advantage of his legacy. And by legacy I mean the innovations that Cummings commanded to define his lyrics so sharply, and that could be subsequently built upon and transformed by following poets to ignite their own poems with concinnity of form and power of expression. That honor has gone to Williams, and late Williams at that. The myriad poets graduating continually from MFA programs and crowding, perhaps too quickly, into print, have picked up almost universally (to take one aspect of form, the enjambment) the easiest and laziest way to break the line and to space the stanza, that is by the weak or strong caesura.

No aspect of poetic form exists independently. Innovations in the use of enjambment had to await innovations in classical metrics: initiated by Chaucer, abandoned awhile, picked up again by various poets, worked through by Surrey, Wyatt and Sidney, and gifted to the age of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's Sonnet 144, sophisticated in its subtle interplay of metrical and speech rhythm, is still heavily dependent, though not entirely, on the end line caesura.

Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit is a woman colored ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride.
And whether that my angel be turned fiend
Suspect I may, yet no directly tell;
But being both from me, both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another's hell:

Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.

Lines 5, 9, and 13 break at a weak caesura. Although it is true that all end words receive a special emphasis, enjambment adds a dynamic: a pause followed by a quickening, like the hesitation of the dancer at the apex of his leap the moment before descent.

It is my assertion that the full employment of enjambment depends upon standard punctuation. The standardization of punctuation accompanied, along with the standardization of English grammar, the advent of printing. If I am to judge by the examples of prose I can pick off my study bookshelf—that of Tottel, Puttenham, and (though decades later) Browne—standard punctuation, along with extended syntax and subordinate, hypotactic clauses, existed, much as we know it now, at the time of Shakespeare. Milton, however, applied these advances in prose into poetry composition. The following lines, 285 to 292, are taken from the creation myth that comprises the entire book 7 of *Paradise Lost*. The angel Raphael speaks to Adam while we overhear.

Immediately the mountains huge appear
Emergent, and their broad bare backs upheave
Into the clouds, their tops ascend the sky:
So high as heaved the tumid hills, so low
Down sunk a hollow bottom broad and deep,
Capacious bed of waters: thither they
Hasted with glad precipitance, uprolled
As drops on dust conglobing from the dry;

And in eight lines—five of which have strong enjambments (that is, not on a caesura at all)—we feel the heft of the creation in the lines themselves. The extended syntax plays over the rhythm of the iambic pentameter and the enjambments. And it is because of this, not because of some caprice, that Milton rejected rhyme. Rhyme would weigh too heavily on the line end and mute this counterpoint much as if Beethoven placed a drumbeat at the end of each measure.

Line breaks, in the strong poet's work, are points of action, while in a weak poet's work they are points of exhaustion. And in English prosody,

the line and its enjambment have become a refined and highly developed instruments, products of a long history and evolution, like the violin.

I have very briefly traced one aspect of technique to show that Cummings is himself a legatee of past masters. Cummings' technique is highly complicated, a careful modulation of every aspect of language, and requires close, attentive reading. The shorter lines read slower, yet quicker, like a dancer stepping, rather than striding, across a stage. The stanza spacing provides a base rhythm against other, more tenor rhythms—syntactical, metrical, and rhetorical—while enjambment across a stanza produces a more intense suspension. The indention of lines gives a slight impetus, while out-dention, a slight hesitation. Cummings mastered this, as well as classical meter and syllabic verse. In addition, he used punctuation in a radical new way: as free devices of rhythm, as well as signs not only to clarify meaning, but also to mark off and to contain ambiguities. These two stanzas in syllabic verse begin “except in your”:

except in your
honour,
my loveliest,
nothing
may move may rest
—you bring

(out of dark the
earth)a
procession of
wonders
huger than prove
our fears

(CP 575)

Nothing can be changed—not the line lengths; the line breaks, whether on preposition or article; the stanza length, and not the diction or semantics, and not the intensified rhythms imparted by the punctuation—without diminishment. The form is not imposed but a realization of intrinsic forces that are only perfected when there can be no further alteration without detriment.

When Cummings doesn't use syllabic or classical meter, the accents are still exact.

it's
spring
and
the

goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

(CP 27)

And also in this famous poem:

plato told

him:he couldn't
believe it(jesus

told him;he
wouldn't believe
it)lao

(CP 553)

And so on as the poem accelerates from a one-line to a five-line stanza and slows again to a one-line stanza, all the while maintaining perfect rhetorical control.

These lines from "spoke joe to jack" capture the action, not of the creation of the world, but of a bar fight:

jack spoke to joe
's left crashed
pal dropped

o god alice

yells but who shot
up grabbing had
by my throat me

give it him good
a bottle she
quick who stop damned
fall all we go spill

(CP 496)

Free verse, in this deepest sense, means the removal of meter—not a free pass for the poet to do whatever he / she wants. It means the strong poet must master the critical dynamics that remain. Villa picked this up from Cummings and, along with a theory that abstracted poetic meaning from prose meaning, derived from Valery, is what Villa passed on to Cowen and to others.

2.

Every Thursday night, Villa's class met in his one-room Greenwich Village flat—stacked with appropriated street trash, a chipped clay statue of St. Francis (as I recall), various partially-faded abstract paintings, and an incense holder from which ropes of pungent gray smoke frayed into shadows. Classes started about 7:30 and finished only when the last student staggered out, usually 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. Besides the revision of new poems, there were weekly assignments, usually a small piece of prose Villa clipped from newspapers or magazine advertisements, for the students to transform, without changing the words but at the same time catching the correct accents, into a poem. I found one in my notes:

If sex were a ham sandwich then guilt would be the mustard to
flavor the whole. Only a little of piquant is needed. Let each one
work out his balance.

This is Villa's version:

If sex were

a ham sandwich—
then guilt
would be

the mustard
to flavor the
whole, only
a little
of piquant
is needed: Let
each one
work out
his balance!

This looks easy to do but it is not. Longer lines and the text would read too fast, while shorter lines would make the text too choppy; the phrase “a little of piquant is needed” is slowed and stretched out for emphasis without losing the rhythm. It takes discipline and hard work to accomplish this, and it takes attentiveness on the reader’s part to absorb it. Compare now a more sophisticated example: a poem John Edwin Cowen made from a simple phrase by Gertrude Stein (#61):

PICASSO’S

picture) just
a rag cut
by a string . . .
tragic’ly—
a rag cut
by a string,
but, indeed—
a picture(
though just a
picture of

a rag cut
by a string . . .

(sad picture,
beautiful—
picture(the

Only one.

And art is worked from simple elements, like the bric-a-brac most people overlook.

3.

It is not easy, under the weight of two powerful precursors, to be both faithful to what they teach and to make it your own. It takes not only loyalty and discipline but long hard work and a strong, mature sense of one's own self: this is what Cowen has accomplished. And he has created poems grounded in his experience that are, therefore, more communicable. I can think of the moving, original elegy for Dylan Thomas, #84—and also #67 and #68, which are tender compliments to wife and daughters, but I'll quote the beginning of #65, an anti-war sonnet delivered with a verbal panache that lifts it from vulgar tendentiousness:

Here having harkened to the lark,
the bark of wolves and lops on
hooves: the tock tock tock non

ticking tom tom time. Here harks
the books of Mark and John, Luke,
Mathew and Mayhem's war of

Wars. . . .

And Cowen ties us to our earth—our deeper, imaginative earth—not with a rope of ideology but with a chain of figuration.

In the lyrical poem, #27, partially quoted here, Cowen fully applies as his own the punctuation, enjambments, and spacing that make up Cummings' technique:

no thanks, better not

i'd (than live
rather die 'til that
most addictive
love) define it-

self (in/out of bed

Here, in #47, about poetic striving, Cowen uses commas, but exactly, much as Dickinson used the dash.

The child,not every child,a bigger foxier
better,never sunnier,but whoever a

flower a-skipping along into bigness of
best,always shining:shouldn't a star

climb to a bigger,newer universe?

The opening lines of #5 exemplify Cowen's lyricism.

If when light is heavy
and burrows deep
in the hillside

or burns deep in rock

—lift up this light
when it's silent and
profound, when it

holds no more sound

choose your silence and
hallowed ground
like the deer

And in the first lines of #38, lines that need be read slowly, there is an echo of Cummings.

What is to why as to
how for a time?

In #77, a leaf falls within the poem:

One impatient ,

(white leaf
drops forward
toward the future

looping wildly
, off target

inwardly \ unites stars

other leaves

I don't wish to give too much away. I'll end by quoting the entire sonnet #23, "INTERIORS":

From this interior, we grew
not as imagined birth yields,
but as love, from a hand that knew
the unknown feel of inner fields—

or, how this body erupted
like a fuse in the month of May—
out of the used spun and tepid
night: like now, like was, and will be—

the source of nourishment, within
like the chrysanthemum's sunburst
or, the anatomy of sin . . .

but darker than death's utmost thirst—

From each layer, drink to unthirst
Your parched, your irreverent kiss.

This is as intensely beautiful and refined as a poem by Cummings; Cowen, by adapting Cummings' technique yet making it entirely his own, has become Cummings' true legatee.

Talent is not rare in the many poetry books being published—what is rare is what Cowen has: the discipline to pay attention to details so that the work—the entire summation of the work—is focused and clear. And in these poems of Cowen's, each subsequent line arrives unexpected, almost as a surprise, but fits the prior lines. The poem, in its entirety, grows organically from inner, always evolving forces, and not subsequent to any predetermined, preexistent form, so that its composition is a process, a sequence of events that determines the poem's absolute direction. Cowen's rhythms are rendered in a double sense: first as a visual rhythm carved against the empty spaces on the page, and secondly as a spoken rhythm, a rhythm heard in the mind's ear, carved against our personal silences. Neither is there a disconnect between meaning and form; the meaning is itself a dynamic and proceeds by word play so that Cowen's poems mean in the way all good poems mean, universally, not generally, and are not to be paraphrased, but interpreted, like life.

Mathematics of Love is an accomplishment that anyone who has interest in poetry, and especially in Cummings, must own. I look forward to reading Cowen's future work.

—Berkeley, California