

The Persian Typesetter: S. A. Jacobs, E. E. Cummings, and the Golden Eagle Press

Walker Rumble

In 1933, the New York publishing firm Covici-Friede sent a typescript—an E. E. Cummings travel narrative—to its printer. Cummings, whose innovative poetry was well on its way toward renown, had written about Russia, and his manuscript would become a book called *EIMI*. Covici-Friede's printers, who had barely begun their work, were already butchering it. In fact, they had mutinied. The typesetters claimed they were offended by Cummings' critical assessment of Russia under communism, and they threw down their tools, indignant, in working-class solidarity.

Cummings biographers routinely repeat this yarn.¹

It's possible, however—maybe it's likely—that rank-and-file printers shrank not from Cummings' politics, but from his grammatically weird copy. Here's an early passage from *EIMI*—in the typescript form that compositors, typesetters, might have received.

Fresh Air, burgeoning with amorphous being: sunlight, tucked with swarming closeups of old-fashioned streetcars ("don't they remind you of Harvard Square" the Sibyl mused, whimsically). "I was just thinking how somehow Athens-of-America everything seems" agreed (dimly) Aeneas; who never (no, not even in Bosting) beheld so frank a flaunting of optical atrocities. Eheu fugaces . . . posthumously the mostly becaped men wear anything; the nonmen (especially those who are of maternal construction) show an indubitable preference for kiddiefrocks (reaching less than 1/2 way to the knee) and socklets; as a result, only comrade God can make a tree--but even comrade Kem-min-kz knows that the sum total would be not quite 1/2 worse if women were present. (21)

I typed this myself. It took twenty minutes. Half of it is spellcheck-redlined. The passage comes at the beginning of *EIMI*, an early portion of

the manuscript that Covici's printers—they looking balefully at what lay ahead—assessed and abandoned.

Few composing rooms would have welcomed a daily dose of Cummings. It might be art, but on the shop floor Cummings' prose violated simple literacy. Worse, it disturbed the workmanship of typesetters prideful of quickly composed, clean proofs. And there was Cummings himself. Cummings looked at their mangled proofsheets and, as usual, smoke came out of his ears.

Introducing Jacobs

The printers wouldn't (or couldn't) handle Cummings. And so Covici-Friede turned to someone who could. Throughout the 1920s, Samuel Aiwaz Jacobs operated Polytype Press, in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. Jacobs was Assyrian by birth. He learned his printing trade at Qalla, an American Presbyterian missionary boarding school for boys in Urmia, a city in what is now northwest Iran. His early work was on behalf of the immigrant Assyrian community, specifically a newspaper called the *Persian-American Courier*. He specialized in multilingual Linotype composition. This linguistic facility led him (via the publisher Thomas Seltzer) to Cummings (or Cummings to him; they were all neighbors in the Village).

The Enormous Room was Cummings' tale of wartime captivity, and it was an auspicious debut. But Seltzer knew that getting it into print had vexed everyone. According to Cummings, Boni & Liveright's editors or printers altered his text and, worse, dropped portions of it altogether. They misplaced commas, confused "ands" and "hads," substituted "moir" for "noir"—the list went on. Cummings accused Boni & Liveright of manufacturing the "greatest burlesque achievement of the ages" (qtd. in Sawyer-Lauçanno 202). Unless fixed, death was too good for those of that company. Thomas Seltzer was eager to work with Cummings, however difficult that might be, and began a collaboration that would lead to Cummings' first book of poetry. To make a long story short, Seltzer took on the manuscript that would become Cummings' *Tulips and Chimneys* and hired Jacobs to handle it.

Beginning in 1923, Jacobs set *all* of Cummings' poetry in type. He was Cummings' "personal typesetter." Jacobs composed Cummings' poetry; he also printed a fair amount of it, first at Polytype and subsequently at Golden Eagle Press. In 1931, by which time Cummings was famous and featured in *Time* magazine, Jacobs was Cummings' acknowledged collaborator. *Time*

even referred to Jacobs as Cummings' "pressagent" (35). So, Cummings had a *relationship* with his printer, with Samuel Jacobs. Jacobs was essential to Cummings' poetry.

Tulips and Chimneys

The book publisher Thomas Seltzer, Inc. issued Cummings' first book of poems, *Tulips and Chimneys*, in 1923. It's widely famous. Much of that fame derives from its departure from verse as verse had been known. Cummings' poems were different, and the differences that made them famous made them hard to read. They were also hard to print, a literary issue that routinely gets lost.

Poetry can be tricky, but, traditionally, printers thought poetry was "fat" copy, short lines that were easy to set in type, a task quickly finished. To be sure, setting poetry might require some vigilance. Poets, after all, traded in heightened language, and verse might require particular attention. Still, normal meter and rhyme provided reliable guides. But Cummings, from the first, pushed poetry well beyond the standard. Consider what greeted a shop floor compositor with the first poem of *Tulips and Chimneys*, "Epithalamion":

Thou aged unreluctant earth who dost
with quivering continual thighs invite
the thrilling rain the slender paramour
to toy with thy extraordinary lust

(CP 3)

The phrase "aged unreluctant earth" was not a routine idiom; "unreluctant" was an unexpected formation, possibly misspelled; plus the phrase didn't seem to flow from the (acceptably poetic) opening word "Thou." Having paused in dealing with these issues, a typical compositor next arrived at the second line—with those "quivering continual thighs." And began looking around to see who was messing with him.

Or, at least, this is what Thomas Seltzer imagined might happen. Something like it had produced the typographical errors that plagued Cummings' first book, the Boni and Liveright edition of *The Enormous Room*.

Ignoring Jacobs

Jacobs' innovative typography and book designs, first at Polytype and then Golden Eagle, placed him within an elite group of modernist, limited edition presses. Dial Press made regular use of his services. Other, main-

stream, publishers did, as well. Over the years, the American Institute of Graphic Arts selected a dozen of Jacobs' book designs among its annual "Fifty Best Books of the Year." Still, awards notwithstanding, beginning with *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), Jacobs was best known for his work on behalf of Cummings.

Printing historians completely ignore Jacobs and Golden Eagle. It's odd. Jacobs' typography facilitated Cummings' fame, but Jacobs' reputation went beyond reflected glory; he was more than Cummings' caddy. Jacobs' contribution to innovative printing and graphic design helped establish a fresh new American typography. The designs and composition of Cummings' *is 5* (1926) and *No Thanks* (1935) are exemplary. So are books as dissimilar as Glenway Wescott's *Natives of Rock* (1925), Carl Heinrich's *Orphans of Eternity* (1929), and Joseph Kling's *A Full Life* (1934). Historians of graphic design—Philip B. Meggs, for instance, and more recently Roger Remington—cite Jacobs' contributions, putting him in the company of William Addison Dwiggins and Merle Armitage.² They recognize his importance. Printing historians don't.

Modernism, Literary and Typographic

In *Visual Shock*, his study of art controversies in America, the historian Michael Kammen has defined modernism to suit his purposes—and mine. Citing architect William Hubbard, Kammen says that modernism isn't about human affairs, life as we know and want it. Modernism isn't about things in the world; it *is* the thing in the world. It's about creating scenes and shapes unlike anything we have known (88-89). I like that definition because it fits the relationship between literature and its manufacture, printing. I think the definition is appropriate for both *EIMI* and *No Thanks*, as well as the typographic innovations that we call modernist graphic design: sans serif type, the asymmetric page, white space.

S. A. Jacobs' book designs for Cummings were characterized by a tight correspondence of word and image. Cummings' text and Jacobs' typography simultaneously conveyed an experience and became it (Bettley 144). This is as true of his prose texts as it is of his poetry. Jacobs' design for Cummings' travel book, *EIMI*, was a good example. In fact, most of the 1930s collaborative work of Cummings and Jacobs embodied this linkage. A page of Cummings' poetry often arrested the eye; its visual impact was its essential component.

Golden Eagle's *No Thanks*

The best representation of this was Cummings' extraordinary *No Thanks*. Fourteen publishers rejected the Cummings manuscript that would become *No Thanks*. The widely unwanted project therefore fell to the ever-ready Jacobs, who not only set the book and printed it, but published it as well. In 1935, *No Thanks* became the second issue (after Joseph Kling's *A Full Life*) from Jacobs' newly christened Golden Eagle Press. Jacobs handled it in the manner customary with underfunded projects: working around paying printshop customers, slotting composition and presswork as he could. He would print the book "in the course of 6 months or so" (Ahearn 45).³

In late January 1935, Cummings described the arrangement to Ezra Pound. Jacobs was "the Persian who sets up all my poems in his spare time," said Cummings (Ahearn 45). The manuscript, repeatedly rejected as voluptuous or byzantine, was in good hands at Golden Eagle. To Jacobs, Cummings said, the poems likely "suggest Hafiz," the renowned fourteenth century Persian lyric poet. Jacobs was Persian; surely Hafiz and Jacobs were blood kin. Cummings figured the equation made Jacobs' work "easy" (Ahearn 45).

Raining, Grasshoppers, and Hovering

In 1918, Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* included "Il Pleut" ("It's Raining"), a classic example of visual poetry. Like Cummings' famous grasshopper poem, "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" (CP 396), it's a visual poem. Apollinaire had a mediated dialog with M. Levé, his Paris printer. According to Pierre Albert-Birot, Apollinaire's editor (in the French journal *SIC*, where the poem originally appeared), the poet carefully read proof, but he left typeface and placement alone. When Levé received the original hand-written copy of "Il Pleut," he "wanted to set it up himself" and enthusiastically did (Bartram 9). As a result, we can compare Apollinaire's hand-written manuscript with its first proofing pull by Levé.⁴

And what leaps out at us is that M. Levé was allowed an *approximation* of Apollinaire's original. He could be, and was, inexact. Cummings of course was the antithesis of inexact; he never handed copy over to Jacobs and urged him to "do your best." Apollinaire, often a careful proofreader, allowed M. Levé considerable latitude in this instance, and the printer merely approximated the hand-written manuscript. Cummings, in contrast, hovered.

Cummings and the Lino: the Letter to Aunt Jane

“Hovering” gets us to Cummings’ letter of March 11, 1935, to his Aunt Jane. It’s the best description of the Cummings-Jacobs collaboration we have. It’s a snapshot of Cummings on Jacobs’ shop floor.

But first, a word or two about *No Thanks*. Jacobs designed the book (with Cummings), printed it, and published it. Jacobs thought *No Thanks* was path-breaking book design typography. Jacobs and Cummings had eliminated a title page entirely, as well as the rest of the usual front matter—the entire standard book-opening apparatus. “The only title is on the cover,” explained Jacobs, “followed on the first spread by a notice that is a continuation of the title.” This being all a reader needed to know, said Jacobs, “one might seriously question the need for a title page” (qtd. in Lee, illus. 137).

Throughout early 1935, Golden Eagle typesetters wrestled with the outlandish composition of *No Thanks*. “You should watch me,” Cummings wrote his Aunt Jane, “arguing for two and a half hours(or some such)over the distance between the last letter of a certain word and the comma apparently following that letter but actually preceding the entire next word.” Cummings went on: “You should hear my printer’s [Jacobs’] blasts against his ‘operator’(as is called the Slave of the Linotype)when said unfortunate playfully smashes the machine while ‘he’s thinking of giving Rockyfeller a bomb or something’(like all ‘operators,’ or all that I’ve met, this bird is a communist)” (*Letters* 141). For Cummings, a printing shop floor was enemy territory.

I spent several years composing books, essays, and poems for folks in and around Amherst and Northampton, Mass. Tracy Kidder once asked me to be his personal typesetter. No great burden, but I’ll say this—letting Cummings onto your shop floor was asking for a unique set of troubles. He didn’t know much about the Linotype, and I think he cared less. His was a relationship problem long before it was technical. To him, shop floor employees were reluctant and stupid if they weren’t card-carrying saboteurs.

Linotype-ese

It is a fact, though, that Cummings faced a technical problem. It was, as he said, “to retranslate 71 poems out of typewriter language into linotype-ese” (*Letters* 140). He composed his poems on a typewriter. And, then, a Linotype operator did it again. Language wasn’t the major retranslation problem (although of course Cummings’ words were frequently bizarre and

a problem). The issue that Cummings was talking about was that of poetic spacing—letter-spacing and word-spacing: that “distance between the last letter of a certain word and the comma apparently following that letter but actually preceding the entire next word” (*Letters* 141).

Strangely-placed commas are one thing, a simple matter of intent. (Do you *really* want that comma right there, in the middle?) But spacing problems were tougher. Spacing on Cummings’ typewriter was a simple matter. All typed letters occupy identical space; the letter “i” gets the same displacement as the letter “m” and the same applies to the spaces between words. If you want more word space, you hit the space bar twice. A Linotype was far more precise and complicated. The letters “i” and “m” displace differently, the one thin, the other fat. Words and spaces will necessarily fall differently within a line of type.

But Cummings’ problems merely began with letter-spacing. Word-spacing was an even greater problem. A Linotype sets an entire, fused line of metal type—a slug—not single letters. Moreover, the line fills automatically, and the operator can’t be sure of placements until the entire line drops. This confused Cummings and really bothered him. When he hit a typewriter key, Cummings said, the carriage and line moved along a “given amount.” Now, he complained to Aunt Jane, “the linotype (being a gadget) inflicts a preestablished whole” on all his words, letters, punctuation marks, and (most importantly) the spaces between all of these, so that “these various elements, awake to find themselves rearranged automatically’ for the benefit of the community’ ” (*Letters* 141). Ah! The very definition of machine-age tyranny.

AAs and PEs

Word spacing was the Jacobs-Cummings collaboration’s biggest headache. *No Thanks* was full of idiosyncrasies. But *EIMI*, a prose text two years previous to *No Thanks*, had been even more difficult. That book contains a lot of word-spacing gaps, especially the large blanks that end one line and begin the next. A compositor—Jacobs, or his man—playing by the rules, would have done whatever he could to avoid these gaps. But, *there they are* throughout *EIMI*, and because of that we must assume either (a) Jacobs did bad work or (b) Cummings insisted on the gaps.

All of which is to say that Cummings’ 432-page text demanded constant minute attention to intended eccentricities. A workman must carefully violate the rules of his trade. It’s like taking a shower with your clothes on, or

eating lunch with them off. It's *not the way it's done*.

In the trade, typographical errors are either “printer’s errors” or “author’s alterations”: *PEs* or *AAs*. Customers pay for *AAs*. Here’s where the shouting starts. And here’s where Jacobs really became valuable to Cummings. Past aesthetic empathy or technical skill, Jacobs’ gift to Cummings was his willingness to absorb huge alteration costs.

Collaboration

The book trade constitutes a system, and its components can be diagrammed. Michael Winship did this, with elegant simplicity, in his work on the Boston publishers Ticknor and Fields (14). Others did, too—Robert Darnton, Pierre Bourdieu. Jacobs equated the work of authorship with all the other raw materials of his trade: the paper, type, and ink of printing. Each was a form of supply. Jacobs was a printer. The trade journal *Inland Printer* spoke for such printers. Jacobs, it remarked, “puts as much thought into designing a book as an author does in writing it. Therefore, a Jacobs book is more in the nature of a creative collaboration than a mere design job” (Thomajan 46). Among themselves, generations of those printers took quiet pride in their “art preservative of all the arts.” Jacobs wasn’t quiet about it at all. He considered himself a creative partner in everything that Cummings did.

—*Worcester, MA*

Notes

1. See Kennedy 328 and Sawyer-Lauçanno 366.
2. See Meggs 301 and Remington 41.
3. The actual presswork was done at Walpole Printing Office, in New Rochelle, New York.
4. See facing page illustrations of “Il Pleut,” manuscript and proof pull, originally from Stefan Themerson’s article in *Typographica* 14, reproduced in Bartram 12-13. See also Debon 112-113.

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