Afterword to "The Poetry of Silence"

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I

Cummings wrote "The Poetry of Silence" in the spring of 1915, the second semester of his senior year, for Dean Le Baron Russell Briggs' Advanced Composition class, English 5 (see Kennedy, *Dreams* 69-71). This essay is noteworthy as the first sign of the poet's continuing interest in Chinese and Japanese poetry. The essay also shows that Cummings was participating in the then-current practice among advanced British and American poets to study Chinese and Japanese poetry in order to find models for creating a "New Poetry" that could directly and simply address the actualities of the modern world. These poets were handicapped in their search for models by their lack of knowledge of Chinese and Japanese language and culture, and by the lack of direct and clear translations, free from Victorian poetic diction. For example, in a 1908 review of a translation of the *Kokinshu Anthology*, British poet F. S. Flint lamented the way in which the 31-syllable Japanese tanka poems had been "done into English verse" in the "heavy English rhymed quatrain" ("Recent" 213, 212). Flint showed how one might better convey the "spontaneity" and suggestiveness of the originals by translating two haiku from a French translation and thus incidentally demonstrated how Japanese poetry might be instrumental in creating a new kind of modern verse, later labelled "imagism" by poet Ezra Pound. (The first of Flint's translations: "Alone in a room / Deserted— / A peony.") Flint concluded his brief review, saying: "To the poet who can catch and render, like these Japanese, the brief fragments of his soul's music, the future lies open. . . . The day of the lengthy poem is over—at least, for this troubled age" (Flint, "Recent" 213; Carr, *Verse* 69-71).

Harriet Monroe perceived a similar understated directness when she visited Beijing in 1911, a year before she founded *Poetry Magazine* in October 1912. She felt that the "quiet authority" and "arresting power" of Chinese art made the "realism" of Western art seem "over-emphatic and unrefined" (qtd. in Carr, *Verse* 483). Before undertaking the long journey to China across Siberia, Monroe visited London and picked up at the Poetry Bookshop the 1909 editions of Ezra Pound's *Personae* and *Exultations*. These poems, she wrote, "recapture primitive simplicities" (qtd. in Carr, *Verse* 483). Before Pound attempted to translate Chinese poems in *Cathay* (1915), his poetry and his concept of imagism were influenced by correspondence and meeting with Japanese Anglo-American poet Yone Noguchi, who wrote poems in both English and Japanese. (See the articles by

Yoshinobu Hakutani and Anita Patterson listed below in "Works Cited.") And while the Harvard undergraduate Cummings had no opportunity to meet and talk with Noguchi, Cummings' essay "The Poetry of Silence" shows that he had read Noguchi's *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* (1914) quite attentively.

The bulk of Cummings' essay discusses Japanese *tanka* and haiku because, as Cummings says, the only Chinese poems available in English at the time existed in the form of "pseudo 'translations' by our own rhymesters" and thus were not worth discussing (132). This comment shows that Cummings had not yet seen *Cathay*, Ezra Pound's adaptations of Chinese poems, which appeared in London in April 1915, around the same time that "The Poetry of Silence" was written. However, by the spring of 1916 at the end of his MA year, Cummings had acquired *Cathay*, for in his paper "The Poetry of a New Era," he hailed the achievement of this brief volume in presenting an English version of "a hitherto untranslatable poetry," praising Pound for catching "in a net of his own weaving unbelievable birds" (PNE 19). However, neither the 1915 nor the 1916 essay mentions the imagist manifestos published in the March 1913 issue of *Poetry*, which means that Cummings was inventing his own modernist practice somewhat independently of Pound's imagist theory and practice.[1]

Cummings consulted three books in writing "The Poetry of Silence." The first, Charles Budd's *Chinese Poems* (1912), provided an outline of Chinese poetic practice, while Clay MacCauley's *Hyakunin-Isshu: Single Songs of a Hundred Poets* (1899) discussed and translated a classic anthology of Japanese *tanka*. The third text, Yone Noguchi's *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* (1914), supplied a history of Japanese literature along with an extensive introduction to and translations of "hokku poetry." (No doubt Cummings found all three of these books in the Harvard University library; indeed, the only copy of MacCauley's book to be digitized comes from Harvard.) Unaware of one another, Pound and Cummings conducted parallel investigations of Yone Noguchi's writings on haiku. (Pound may also have read Noguchi's article "What Is a Hokku Poem?")[2] As for Cummings, much of the final two pages of the typescript of "The Poetry of Silence" consists of quotes from *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry*.

That Cummings knew and read these books is one surprise of reading this essay. More startling perhaps is his comparison of Chiyo-ni's haiku,

> "The well bucket taken away
> By the morning glory—
> Alas,water to beg!" (Noguchi, *Spirit* 50)

with Constantin Brancusi's modernist sculpture *Mademoiselle Pogany*, two works that would seem to have very little in common.[3] For Cummings, one commonality was that neither would be readily understood by the contemporary reader or viewer, who, he says, "will be as unable to appreciate the intention of [Chiyo-ni] as to grasp the technique of Brancusi" ("Silence" 134). And both works, he asserts, are "primitive."

Taking his cue from Noguchi, who writes that the "real poet in the Japanese understanding is primitive, as primitive are the moon and flowers" (37; "Silence" 3), Cummings defines the primitive as "that technique which deals with the subject only in the simplest terms,artistically speaking,—rejecting all but the essential characteristics" ("Silence" 134). For Cummings, Chiyo-ni's haiku and Brancusi's *Mademoiselle Pogany* eliminate "all that is unessential" and thus demand particularly attentive readers and viewers. In addition, by keeping to essentials, the poem's seventeen syllables capture a moment that implies a larger narrative, and this concision and concentration is similar, Cummings asserts (quoting Walter Pach), to the way in which Brancusi's sculpture integrates "line, volume, and surface . . . for their aesthetic and expressive effect,independent of realism" (Pach 851; "Silence" 134).

Thus minimalist art creates an aesthetic intensity that avoids the detailed elaborations of realism. Cummings quotes Noguchi, who likens the best Japanese poetry to "a searchlight or flash of thought or passion cast on a moment of Life and Nature, which, by virtue of its intensity, leads us to the conception of the whole" (Noguchi 19). Cummings sums up the differences between realist and primitivist approaches:

> In Realism,the whole is indirectly inferred through details concretely presented. In Primitivism,detail is inferred from the directly presented aspect of the whole. (135)

Here, Cummings' distinction between "concretely presented" details and a "directly presented aspect" very closely resembles Pound's distinction between describing a scene and presenting an image ("Don'ts" 203). The first narrates a series of realistic details while the second presents an "aspect" of an entire world, as in Chiyo-ni's poem, which concentrates on the moment when she decided to spare the morning glory twining around the well-bucket and realized she would have to ask her neighbors for water. This "aspect" implies a "whole" that includes the speaker's feeling for the flower as well as an entire culture's at least occasional willingness to place natural growth over immediate human needs. Without having read any of Pound's imagist manifestos, Cummings is assembling his own theory of

imagist practice.

The quote above from Noguchi about the best poems presenting an intense "flash of thought or passion cast on a moment of Life and Nature" sounds much like Pound's definition of an image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" ("Don'ts" 200).[4] And Cummings' "directly presented aspect" sounds much like Pound's first rule of Imagism: "Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective" ("Imagisme" 199). The concept of the poem or image as a direct yet minimalist presentation of an intense moment or aspect of lived experience or the natural world is common to both Pound's imagist writings and the ideas of "primitive" technique in Cummings' undergraduate essay. The two differ in that Pound does not see imagist technique as "primitive," and Pound's focus on technique, along with his distrust of abstractions, preclude any mention of a meditative state of mind and being like "silence."

To explain the title of his essay, Cummings first introduces a series of quotes from Noguchi, including the one above on poets as primitive. He ends this series with two quotes, the first a rather banal statement that "Poetry should be meaningful" (Noguchi 25), and the second a rather Zen-like question that occurs three pages later in Noguchi's text: "what is the real poetry of action for which silence is the language?" (28). Cummings answers this question by quoting a poem from Hokushi that commemorates a moment of serenity in the face of disaster: "It [the house] has burned down; / How serene the flowers in their falling" (Noguchi 27). Hokushi's poem points to a silent moment in which the speaker achieves equanimity by meditating on the calmness of flowers as their petals fall. A silent meaning occurs in the mind, and/or in one's reaction to an experience, and/or in the experience itself. Indeed, as Isabelle Alfandary points out, in Cummings' poetry, "Silence is experience" (37).[5]

The poetry of action is a response to experience, a silent one that nevertheless results in speech, or in a poem. Ideally, even "truly," Cummings says, poems "speak for themselves" (136). But hearing them speak requires receptivity and, often, a modicum of biographical and cultural information. So Cummings provides context for the two "beautiful" and "sublime" haiku (the first by Bashō and the second by Chiyo-ni) that he quotes at the end of his essay, introducing each poem by quoting or paraphrasing a passage from Noguchi. Before quoting Bashō's haiku,

> "Being tired,—
> Ah, the time I fall into the inn,—
> The wisteria flowers." [42],

Cummings quotes Noguchi's comment that "wisteria flowers most striking-

ly appeal[ed] to [Bashō's] poetic mind now simplified,therefore intensified, through the physical lassitude resulting from the whole day's walk" (Noguchi 42; "Silence" 136).[6] However, despite offering the reader this bit of context, Cummings imagines that some may not share his enthusiasm for Bashō's wisteria poem. And, after quoting Chiyo-ni's lament for her dead son which wonders "how far away" the "hunter of dragonflies" may have gone (Noguchi 41), Cummings muses that "perhaps Noguchi was right in saying: 'an appreciative reader of poetry in Japan is not made, but born, just like a poet' " (Noguchi 19; "Silence" 136). Cummings does not quote the rest of Noguchi's sentence, which advances a reader-response theory for interpreting minimalist poetry: "as the Japanese poetry is never explanatory, one has everything before him on which to let his imagination freely play; as a result he will come to have an almost personal attachment to it as much as the author himself" (19-20).

Something of a contradiction occurs here, for surely a reader whose "imagination freely play[s]" *constructs* meaning rather than *accepts* it by virtue of inborn, innate capabilities. Dropping the second part of the sentence foreshadows Cummings' later preference for a "world of born" over a "world of made" (CP 554). As he matured, Cummings began to stigmatize a collective that he called "mostpeople," a spiritually unborn group who are rocked and locked in the "prenatal passivity" of consumer society and remain untouched by the "meaningless precision" of art and the "complete fate" of life (CP 461, 402).[7] In their prenatal state, "mostpeople" view being born as "Catastrophe unmitigated," while Cummings and the readers of the introduction to his *Collected Poems* "can never be born enough" (CP 461). We cannot know how much Noguchi's passage on readers being born contributed to Cummings' pervasive rebirth imagery, but certainly "The Poetry of Silence" envisions an active reader, open to thinking and feeling poetry in new ways. In another passage that Cummings does not quote, Noguchi compares the work of haiku poets to "a silent bell of a Buddhist temple," whose voice depends upon the "person who strikes it" and which remains "helpless, silent, when with no reader to cooperate" (45). Noguchi's next clause outlines how the reader, like a writer, makes the poem come alive: "when I say that the readers of Japanese poetry, particularly this *Hokku* poem, should be born like a poet, I count . . . their personal interest almost as much as that of the writers themselves" (45). Of course, a "personal interest" implies a great deal of study, reflection, sympathy, and understanding, much of it cultural and thus not innate, not "born." To be "born like a poet" also means to participate in creative reading.

Creative *seeing* of modern art was perhaps even more problematic than finding a "personal interest" in haiku. Feeling "tears of wrath" in his "soul" when he hears someone complain of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending*

a Staircase, "But I don't see the lady!" (137), Cummings declares: "Not for such are the glories of the primitive." Faced with this incomprehension, he despairs of finding sympathetic readers and pronounces "a good night to my poor essay!" However, perhaps recollecting that the audience for his paper was not the public at large but his instructor Briggs and the other students in English 5, Cummings expresses the fervent wish that "if there be one reader to whom the wonders of the shrine have been opened by my enthusiasms . . . I shall be very happy" (137). Thus Cummings' call to revive poetry and art by reducing them to their "primitive" essential characteristics ends with a vision of a small coterie happy to worship at the "shrine" of art.

This call for aesthetic understanding illustrates one of the central paradoxes of modernist poetry: renovating poetic language in order to write a more immediate and direct verse often resulted in bafflement and cries of willful obscurity.[8] And, as his "shrine" rhetoric indicates, even though the young Cummings was able to understand and feel what Makoto Ueda calls the "esthetic primitivism" (133) of the haiku genre, he was unable (at least at first) to fully integrate that aesthetics into his own poetic practice. For example, about one year after writing "The Poetry of Silence," Cummings published in *The Harvard Monthly* three "Hokku" that all exhibit the 5-7-5 syllable count of classic haiku, but at the same time avoid concrete imagery and foreground the figure of the poet. As Michael Dylan Welch writes, "they all lack strong images, are too subjective, and do not offer implication, juxtaposition, childlike wonder, or [the] sharply focused now-moments" that characterize the haiku tradition (108-109). What is perhaps the best of these "hokku,"

> For him the night calls,
> Out of the dawn and sunset
> Who has made poems. (CP 875)

echoes the poem by Buson that Cummings placed at the end of his essay:

> "The night of the Spring,--
> Oh,between the eve
> And the dawn!" (Noguchi 48; "Silence" 137)

Noguchi comments that Buson has "introduce[ed] the night of the Spring" (49) between the more traditional subjects of the spring evening and dawn preferred by earlier Chinese and Japanese poets. However, Buson's poem not only renovates a tradition, it also presents a feeling for the spring night. As we have seen, right before quoting the Buson poem Cummings characterizes supposedly direct and "primitive" Japanese poems as "wonders of the shrine," and imagines wandering with the one reader who

understands "in that new way and old which is yet almost untrodden,—upon that night of which the old poet sings" (137). For Cummings, Buson's spring night is a metaphor for taking the less travelled aesthetic path that understands and creates advanced art. (In Cummings' own "hokku," the night calls to the artist "Who has made poems.") While Buson's spring night is actual, Cummings' night is metaphorical, making a comment on his particular ego-situation rather than creating an experience made with words.

II

Cummings' effort to renovate poetic practice by adapting artistic techniques from outside the dominant culture or from another culture was standard modernist procedure. As Helen Carr points out, in some ways modernist cultural renovation begins with the Pre-Raphaelites, who "offered a critique of modernity by constructing their own version of history, one which offered alternative values to the present" ("Empire" 73). And the early (1908-1912) Ezra Pound moved from a rather Pre-Raphaelite obsession with the troubadours to an interest in what Carr calls the "cultural primitivism" (74) of the Celtic Revival, and then moved a bit later to an imagism that followed the "example of the simple/exotic offered by the haiku" ("Empire" 80).[9] Cummings' search to adapt the forms and minimalist presentation of Japanese poetry to his own shifting poetic practice takes part in this burgeoning modernist eclecticism.

One particular success in combining traditional Western and Japanese forms occurs in "All in green went my love riding" (CP 15), which appeared in the *Harvard Monthly* (with the title of "Ballad") one month before the "Hokku" in the March 1916 issue (Firmage, *Bibliography* 46). Though nominally written in alternating stanzas of three and two lines each, "All in green" may also be seen as a poem of seven stanzas of five-lines each. Indeed, Cummings follows the description of the Japanese *tanka* stanza found in Clay MacCauley's introduction to his translation of *Hyaku-nin-Isshu*: "these five verses may be divided into two complete parts, namely, the 'first,' or 'upper,' part (*kami no ku*), made up of the first three lines, and the 'second,' or 'lower,' part (*shimo no ku*), consisting of the fourth and fifth lines" (xiii). As MacCauley points out, the first three lines, called "the *hokku*, or 'first verses'," are simply a haiku, "a complete poem contained in only seventeen syllabics that make up the first three lines, or 'part,' of the *tanka*" (xiv). Although divided into two parts of three and two lines, the "All in green" stanza does not follow the 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic pattern of the *tanka* because Cummings is also writing a Western ballad and thus maintains the standard 4-3-4-3 rhythmic beat of the ballad stanza (with one added three-beat line).

However, adopting standard ballad meter does not prevent Cummings from also inventing his own syllabic patterns, especially in the first three lines of the "All in green" stanzas. Moreover, Cummings' syllable patterns are integrated with thematic phrasal repetitions in the poem. For example, the second and third lines of each stanza alternate between describing the rider and the deer. The rider lines are six syllables each and all repeat "into the silver dawn," while the deer lines are four syllables each and all feature two monosyllabic alliterative adjectives:

- **rider** [six syllables]: "on a great horse of gold / into the silver dawn" (lines 2-3 and 32-33); "riding the echo down / into the silver dawn" (lines 12-13); and "riding the mountain down / into the silver dawn" (lines 22-23)
- **deer** [four syllables]: "the swift sweet deer / the red rare deer" (lines 7-8); "the lean lithe deer / the fleet flown deer" (lines 17-18); and "the sleek slim deer / the tall tense deer" (lines 27-28).

Since the first line of each stanza is eight syllables, the "haiku" syllable-count for rider tercets is 8-6-6, while the count for deer tercets is 8-4-4. (The deer "haiku" are thus 16 syllables, one short of canonical haiku.)

Despite the differences in syllable-count between rider and deer tercets, the rhythm of each sort of tercet remains much the same. If we scan two samples using the notation of Derek Attridge's "beat prosody," we get:

All in green went my love riding
B o B -o- B ô B o
on a great horse of gold
B o B -o- B [o B]
into the silver dawn.
B -o- B o B [o B]

Fleeter be they than dappled dreams
B -o- B o B o B
the swift sweet deer
o B ô B ô B [o B]
the red rare deer.
o B ô B ô B [o B]

Once we are supplied a key to Attridge's notation,

B beat
o offbeat
-o- double offbeat
ô implied offbeat
O offbeat by demotion
[o B] virtual offbeat and virtual beat

we can clearly see the 4-3-3 beat pattern of the "haiku" portions of Cummings' stanzas.[10] In standard ballad quatrains of 4-3-4-3 beats, Attridge detects the presence of an "unrealized" virtual beat, "experienced, but not sounded out" (106) at the end of every second and fourth line. "The most elementary metrical form in English verse," Attridge says, is "the rhythmic group made up of four lines of four beats each (the basic metre of the ballad, the nursery rhyme, the popular song, and a large amount of more sophisticated verse)" (54). Later, Attridge adds that the "four-beat falling and triple metres are furthest from spoken English (and nearest to song)" (124). Lines four and five of the "All in green" stanza do not follow any discernible syllabic pattern (varying from 6 to 9 syllables); however, for the most part, they fall into the elementary four-beat pattern. The big exception is the problematic refrain line, "four lean hounds crouched low and smiling," which might be read as nearly iambic:

/ / / /
four lean hounds crouched low and smiling

but equally could be read as beginning with five stressed monosyllabic words. Perhaps with this line and the monosyllabic deer lines, Cummings is imagining a kind of Chinese single-syllable word prosody, but the pacing in the hound lines and the deer lines is quite different. The uncertainty about stress accent, along with the difficulty of wrangling several "ou" and "ow" diphthongs in a row, lengthens the 8-syllable hound lines, while the alliterative 4-syllable deer lines fly off the tongue. At the very least, Cummings means for the hounds, for all their leanness, to be less nimble than the deer.[11]

The model of *haiku* and *tanka* also helped Cummings to simplify the diction of the poem. This focus on "essential characteristics" was intensified in "All in green" by the work of crafting the intricately patterned repetitions and variations of color imagery and the formulaic yet varied phrases that characterize the poem.[12] (For example, at the end of every fifth line, he alternates "ran before" with "sang before"—until the final line alters the rhythm and startles the reader with "fell dead before.") Drafts of the poem at the Harry Ransom Center show that Cummings deleted pseudo-medieval locutions like "wee birdling" (3.2), "sweet flowering," "wood way green" (3.4), and "featly flows many a fair waterbeing . . . over the laughing stone" (3.6).[13] Contrast with the diction of the *tanka* from Clay MacCauley's introduction to his translation of *Hyakunin-Isshu* that Cummings quotes in "The Poetry of Silence":

At the break of day,

Just as though the morning moon
Lightened the dim scene,
Yoshino's fair hamlet lay
In a haze of falling snow. [MacCauley xxv; "Silence" (135)]

Aside from the Victorian poeticism "fair hamlet," MacCauley's translation directly presents an "aspect" of Yoshino: a heavy snowfall at dawn. In his essay, Cummings calls the poem "a verbal Japanese screen,executed in simple and suggestive tints" (135). The stanzas of "All in green" also present a series of stylized verbal tableaus that resist linear narrative. Indeed, at least three critics have compared "All in green" to a "tapestry" (Springer 10; Lane 62; Kidder, *Introduction* 23), a frieze-like effect achieved largely through the poem's phrasal repetitions and variations. While European medieval context implied by the metaphor of "tapestry" certainly predominates in the poem, we may also say that the stylized repetitions and variations of its stanzas could equally be described with the metaphor of a Japanese screen.

Cummings never repeated the precise five-line stanza form he created for "All in green." For similar ballad-like verse, he stuck to the quatrain, which could be adapted to serve narrative or argumentative satires, as well as "allegorical" quasi-narrative poems that feature a good deal of nominalized vocabulary. Examples of the former include "a man who had fallen among thieves" (CP 256) and "of all the blessings which to man" (CP 544); examples of the latter include "anyone lived in a pretty how town" (CP 515) and "my father moved through dooms of love" (CP 520). However, Cummings continued to invent stanzaic and spatial forms that are particular to one poem alone. In some later poems, line and stanza patterns become somewhat standardized (often a 1-3-1-3-1 line format), while the lines themselves are truncated, sometimes consisting of only one word, or one or two or three letters or characters, holding back or losing altogether the forward pulse of rhythm.

About the same time that Cummings produced his "Hokku," he wrote "There is a moon," a free verse poem in three-line stanzas that Richard S. Kennedy calls "haiku-like" (*Dreams* 87). Probably one of Cummings' first attempts at writing free verse (the poem is number 1 on the 1916 list of his free verse that he titled "D.S.N."), "There is a moon" merges some of the decadent archaizing diction then in vogue among the Harvard Aesthetes with a more "primitive" direct presentation.[14]

Haiku was not the only place he searched for models of direct plain-speaking: seeing a production of *Hamlet* in April 1916 convinced Cummings that "conversational language is the very greatest of all mediums." However, as he wrote in a separate note, creating poetry in this everyday

“**There is a moon**” (1915)	“**there is a**” (1917)
There is a moon Sole in the blue night Amorous of waters tremulous; Blinded with silence The undulous heaven yearns Where in tense starlessness Anoint with ardors, The yellow lover stands in the dumb dark, Svelt and urgent. (Again, love, I slowly gather of thy languorous mouth The thrilling flower.) [(Qtd. in Kennedy, *Dreams* 88); D.S.N. list 1; Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS 1823.7 (23) sheet 101.]	there is a moon sole in the blue night amorous of waters tremulous, blinded with silence the undulous heaven yearns where in tense starlessness anoint with ardor the yellow lover stands in the dumb dark svelte and urgent (again love i slowly gather of thy languorous mouth the thrilling flower) (CP 43)

language was difficult for those poets who were not “geniuses like Shakespeare” (qtd. in Kennedy, *Dreams* 114, 115). Consequently, lesser poets like the Harvard aesthetes “have felt it necessary, in order to give stability to their efforts, to avoid the language (which means the life) of everyday and cultivate a hothouse style suitable to the elevation of well-preserved thoughts which they dared express” (qtd. in Kennedy, *Dreams* 115). But if one wanted to break free of the “hothouse” style and find an everyday language as powerful as Shakespeare’s, one would need to escape the hothouse atmosphere of Cambridge, both aesthetic and moralistic. The rest of Cummings’ note on *Hamlet* imagines both a geographical and an inward escape: “to write Hamlet one must fathom life completely in his heart, & thus pitilessly spurn the world for months—a winter, say, in a N.Y. garret, seeing no one” (qtd. in Kennedy, *Dreams* 114). Of course, “pitilessly spurn [ing] the world” hardly sounds like a recipe for finding everyday life and language; but the mention of New York hints at a dream of independence accompanied by at least a modicum of sociability. In the end, after receiv-

ing his M.A. and making an unsuccessful trip to New York in the summer of 1916 to find writing or editing work, Cummings settled down at his parents' house to renovate the diction, style, and subject matter of his poems, especially those written in free verse.

Reading Pound's *Ripostes* helped, especially the poem "The Return," which, he wrote later, "made me(for better or worse)the writer I am today." Cummings wrote that while he was impressed by the "invisible" rhythms of the poem, the "inaudible poem—this visual poem,the poem for not ears but Eye—moved me more."[15] With "The Return" as a model, Cummings spent the fall and winter of 1916-1917 experimenting with the visual placement of words on the page. In addition to drafting visual poems composed entirely of demotic conversations overheard on the streets of Boston [see, for example, "logeorge" (CP 935) and "wanta" (CP 942)], he also recast many of the free verse poems written at Harvard into more startling visual configurations, breaking lines between syllables, eliminating punctuation and capitalization, and creating novel spacing of phrases, words, and syllables.[16] Probably one of the first to be so recast was "There is a moon," whose diction remained substantially the same, while its capitalization, punctuation, and stanza shapes were radically altered.

Each stanza of the first version of the poem may be read as a haiku (that is, if "where" at the end of stanza two is deleted). The second version, however, jettisons the three-line stanzas and replaces them with five stanzas of four lines and one of two lines. Many lines are radically shortened; nine consist of a single isolated word. This isolation of single words, along with the elimination of all capital letters and all punctuation (except for the comma after "tremulous"), stretches out the poem down the page and focuses the reader's attention more closely on each word. The diction of the poem alternates between plain-spoken descriptors (*moon*, *blue night*, *waters*, *blinded*, *mouth*, *flower*) and "hothouse" poetic modifiers (*sole*, *tremulous*, *languorous*, *undulous*, *anoint with ardor*, *svelte*, *languorous*, and perhaps *thrilling*). The verbs, too, are balanced between everyday spoken language (*is* and *stands*) and a more heightened poetic diction (*yearns* and *gather*). The speaker's love-interest occasions the archaic address *thy*, which occurs within a "hothouse" phrase that no one would ever utter in everyday discourse: *gather / of thy languorous mouth*. The most original phrases in the poem take ordinary words from spoken language and combine them into novel synesthetic pairs: *yellow lover*, *in the dumb dark*, *blinded with silence*, and *in tense starlessness* (note also the pun on *intense*). While synesthesia was something of an obsession in late-nineteenth century arts (see Cohen, *PoetandPainter* 197-203), it was also a feature of modernist avant-garde practice, most notably in the concept of simultaneity. Cummings' mixing of the senses equates the lover with the yellow moon, and relates

the dark blank space of the sky with a "blinded" silence. For me at least, these synesthetic pairs point to an individual, subjective emotion, while the "hothouse" diction points to the self-consciously literary *fin-de-siècle* tradition. Cummings seems deliberately to include both diction-sets in the poem to show the complexity of the speaker's mood.

This double mood of languor and intensity is visually foregrounded in the second version through the one-word lines "tremulous," "svelte / and / urgent," and "thrilling / flower." Isolating these rather abstract or vague words on the page may be an attempt to connect them to the dark blank space of "tense starlessness." In addition, the moon at the beginning of the poem and the flower at the end allude to Noguchi's "real poet," one who is "primitive, as primitive are the moon and flowers" (Noguchi 37; "Silence" 135). However, while a "primitive" directness is apparent in the words "moon sole / in the blue / night," the concluding image "thrilling / flower" combines a vague "hothouse" adjective with a rather clichéd metaphor. The "thrilling / flower" of the kiss that concludes the poem seems intended as "the action for which silence is the language" (Noguchi 28), but the cliché blurs the image rather than intensifies it.

For the critic R. P. Blackmur, behind "the snag of novelty," the language of Cummings' early poems exhibited two kinds of "sameness": vague images and abstract general words like "flower" (110-112). According to Blackmur, Cummings' focus on "the relentless pursuit of the actual in terms of the immediate" (123) results in a disregard for the historical meanings of words and a tendency for the poet to lose himself in private sensations. Blackmur's main thesis states that because words like "flower" have become abstract "ideas" unrelated to "a specific experience," Cummings' poetry remains a sort of solipsistic dream, "a mere private musing," that can "never negotiate the miracle of meaning between the poet and the poem, the poem and reader" (112-114). But in the case of "there is a / moon," tired metaphor or not, the phrase "gather / . . . the // thrilling / flower" conveys a clear meaning: the speaker kisses his loved one. Moreover, the word "flower" refers to a haiku tradition of "direct treatment" that Blackmur appears unable to abide or understand.

As Cummings' experiments with line, syllable, and word placement advanced beyond "there is a / moon," he achieved more successful minimalist expressions of silence, now, and oneness with nature. Michael Dylan Welch noted that quite a few of these minimalist visual poems approach haiku, none more so than the famous leaf poem "l(a" (CP 673), which, Welch says, "is recognized as haiku more often than any other Cummings poem" (114). As has been noted many times, the spatial arrangement of only four words and two parentheses intensifies the poem's meanings: the

repeated letter "l" acts as the numeral "1," while the letter-fall down the page mimics the single leaf's fall. Moreover, Cummings' line breaks create three different words from the word "loneliness": "oneliness," "one," and "iness"— a word at the lonely ground of the poem that embodies the lower-case individuality of the poet.[17] In haiku fashion, the silence in the poem is suggested rather than named. Welch's haiku version of the poem states the implication:

out of the silence
loneliness
a leaf falls (115)

Of course, Welch's version misses the verbal-visual interplay and nonce words created by the original poem. Indeed, some of Cummings' later minimalist visual poems are difficult, if not impossible to read aloud. As he wrote in a letter from 1960: "not all of my poems are to be read aloud— some . . . are to be seen & not heard" (*Selected* 267).[18]

The poem "a- // float" (CP 571) represents the different silences of a thought and of the crescent moon by depicting them as a question mark and a parenthesis:

a-

float on some
?
i call twilight you

'll see

an in
-ch
of an if

&

who
is
the

)

more
dream than become
more

am than imagine

Not wishing to term the evanescence of twilight a "thing," Cummings sub-

stitutes a question mark: "some / ?". Likewise, the new moon floating on twilight resists naming, and is represented by an iconic left-facing parenthesis.[19] Welch does not mention this poem at all in his article, perhaps because a question mark and a parenthesis cannot be sounded as words can. However, as I have shown, Cummings marked the silent symbols as stressed or long in his manuscript scansion of the poem ("singing is silence" 202-207). The abstract statement that ends the poem continues this refusal to name while presenting the unspeakable feeling ("more / dream than become") and the undeniable actuality ("more // am than imagine") of the moon.

Welch recognizes the poem "silence" (CP 712) as "extremely close to haiku," but disallows it because "the word 'is' intrudes by explaining or resolving the relationship between the bird and its quietness" (106).

silence

.is

a
looking

bird:the

turn
ing;edge,of
life

(inquiry before snow (CP 712)

For Welch, the word "is" interferes with the juxtaposition of the two words "silence" and "bird," making one simply the equal of the other. But while this interpretation is true on the verbal level, it neglects the visual level of the silent period, the dot before the "is" that separates the two words and complicates a too-easy identification between the two. The "is" occupies its own space that is neither silence nor bird. Silence is and a bird is—the same and yet not exactly identical. The period is only the first in a sequence of silent signs [. : ; ,], a sequence common enough in Cummings' poems. While these punctuation marks are mostly a-grammatical, they also perform certain functions. The period separates two images; the colon divides the poem in two; the semicolon adds a visual "turn / ing"; and the comma marks an edge, a bird turning its head. Many years after writing "The Poetry of Silence," Cummings was constructing poems with "primitive," direct, and sometimes wordless signs that present a minimalist "aspect of the whole."

Notes

[Thanks to Gillian Huang-Tiller and Alison Rosenblitt for assistance in negotiating archival resources.]

1. Most likely, Cummings received *Cathay* in July or August of 1915 in a shipment of books from Scofield Thayer, along with a copy of Pound's *Ripostes* (1913) and a copy of *Blast* II, published in July 1915. See the undated (but circa July-August 1915) letter to Thayer, Beinecke Library, Yale University [YCAL MS 34, Box 30, folder 794]: "You quoted the best of 'Ripostes' I think. 'Blast' is a very important addition to my limited library." In his 1916 essay "The Poetry of a New Era," Cummings quotes Richard Aldington and Amy Lowell's Preface from *Some Imagist Poets* (1915), but not Pound's 1913 imagist manifesto "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." Nor had Cummings read Laurence Binyon's *The Flight of the Dragon: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan* (1911), but he could have seen the few snippets of the book that Pound quoted in *Blast* II (86). Cummings was not the only poet to be impressed by the poems in *Cathay*. John Gould Fletcher wrote that they "represented to me an enormous revolution in English poetic technique" ("Orient" 152). And, though he claims that the Chinese influence on him was more decisive than the Japanese, Fletcher also reports reading Noguchi's *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* ("Orient" 159).
2. See Hakutani, "Yone Noguchi, Ezra Pound, and Imagism" (90-91) and Patterson (55).
3. Cummings saw Constantin Brancusi's sculpture *Mademoiselle Pogany*, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and Francis Picabia's *Dances at the Spring* (*La Danse à la Source*) when he attended the Boston version of the Armory show in May 1913, the second semester of his sophomore year at Harvard.
4. Possibly Noguchi's "flash of thought or passion" was influenced by Pound's definition of the image as an "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," for Noguchi first presented in London chapter one of *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* as a paper titled "Japanese Poetry—after the publication of Pound's "A Few Don'ts" in March 1913. See the *Transactions and Proceedings of the Japan Society, London*, vol. 12 (1914), page 90.
5. See Alfandary's "Voice and Silence in E. E. Cummings' Poetry." See also my " 'singing is silence': Being and Nothing in the Visual Poetry of E. E. Cummings," which sees Cummings' visual effects as a kind of

silent singing.

6. Briggs underlines the words "now simplified,therefore" and comments: "Interesting."
7. See the poem "most(people" (CP 412) and Cummings' Introduction to the *Collected Poems* (1938), in which he says that mostpeople don't live, but merely exist in "the latest and closest plural approximation to singular prenatal passivity which science,in its finite but unbounded wisdom,has succeeded in selling their wives" (CP 461).
8. For an extensive discussion of modernist difficulty, see Diepeveen.
9. Pound probably first heard of haiku and Japanese poetry from F. S. Flint, who in 1908 published the first two decent translations of haiku in English. (See Carr, "Empire," pp. 69-72 and Flint's "Recent Verse.")
10. One can hear these beats in Peter Schickele's setting of "All in green" as sung by Joan Baez on her 1968 album *Baptism*.
11. It is as if Cummings were rewriting in a different key the slowness of the "silver hounds" in Ezra Pound's "The Return," displacing their silver lightness to rider and horse and the dawn.
12. On the formulaic character of "All in green," see Philip J. West, "Medieval Style and the Concerns of Modern Criticism."
13. Harry Ransom Center, E. E. Cummings Collection, 6.1.
14. The initials "D.S.N." probably stand for "Do Something New." The manuscript of the D. S. N. list is now at the Harry Ransom Center, E. E. Cummings Collection, 8.11.
15. Houghton Library, Harvard University, E. E. Cummings Papers ["Notes for nonlectures," MS Am 1892.7 (90) folder 25 ("Ezra"), sheet 258.] For the influence of "The Return" on Cummings, see Kennedy, *Dreams in the Mirror*, pp. 106-107.
16. For texts of four other conventional free verse poems that Cummings reworked into more daring spatial configurations, see Kennedy, *Dreams* (97-100). Of particular interest are "In just-Spring" (Kennedy, *Revisited* 27; *Dreams* 97), recast as "in Just- / spring" (CP 27) and "Stinging gold" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 98) recast as "stinging" (CP 63). On the D. S. N. list, these two poems are numbered 10 and 49 respectively.
17. For commentary on "l(a" see Friedman, pp. 171-172, Welch, pp. 114-117, and Terblanche, "Cummings' 'l(a': Solitude, Solidarity, Wholeness."
18. The three poems he mentions as unreadable-aloud are "applaws)" (CP 548), "im(c-a-t)mo" (CP 655), and "the(oo)is" (CP 740).

19. Norman Friedman was probably the first to discuss how these silent symbols take the place of words. See *Art of His Poetry*, pp. 104-105.

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