



Boxers, Cue Balls, and Comedians: E. E. Cummings' Polytexts

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Poetry and painting were the “the twin obsessions” of the American modernist E. E. Cummings. His engagement with more than one artistic practice makes his work suitable for a case study of polytextuality, which is the purpose of the present article. First, a brief theoretical introduction to polytextuality is offered. Then, four of Cummings' poems are read against the background of their visual counterparts. Since the poem-picture pairs are treated as polytexts, the discussion focuses on the “intersemiotic transposition” involved in the process of transferring thematic and material data from one sign system to another.

Keywords: polytextuality, polytextant, politextee, E.E.Cummings, autographic ekphrasis, intersemiotic transposition.

Introduction

In his discussion of visual arts and modernism Glen Macleod points out that “the close relation between poetry and painting that prevailed among the New York avant-garde is epitomized in the person of E. E. Cummings who, refusing to choose between the two art forms, always considered himself a ‘poetandpainter’” (207). The importance of this dual aesthetics in Cummings is conspicuous not only for art critics, but also for their literary peers. Rushworth Kidder, to name one out of many, states that “poetry and visual art grew, in Cummings' mind from one root; and while their outermost branches are distinct enough, there are many places closer to the trunk where it is hard to know which impulse accounts for a piece of work” (3).

Macleod and Kidder capture in a nutshell the essence of Cummings' self-awareness as a consummate artist, as a “poetandpainter,” whose aesthetic expression is unrestrained by the limits of different artistic media. In an imaginary interview for an exhibition opening Cummings commented on the relatedness of his poetry and painting stating that “they love each other dearly, [although] they are very different” (Miscellany 344). Habitually Cummings worked on his paintings during the day and wrote poetry at night. There is a touch of symbolic alignment with nature's rhythmical cycles in his artistic practices that is reminiscent of far-eastern pantheistic philosophies. It is as if, just like the antagonistic but complementary forces of Yin and Yang, his poetry and painting strive to chase each other, allude to one another, and occasionally unite and amalgamate in his avant-garde interart pieces of visual poetry. There are many instances of writing “closer to the trunk”¹ in which Cummings would treat a particular subject or express a feeling or a mood polytextually: he would write a poem or produce a painting, with the same aesthetic

¹ “Intersemiotic transposition” is Claus Clüver's term for the semiotic process involved in the “recreation” of a verbal text into a visual one. Clüver aptly points out that if we accept the idea that a poem written in English can be translated into another language, then we should also be able to grasp the idea that a poem can be “recreated” as a painting, or vice versa (62).

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impulse accounting for both. The purpose of the present study is to illuminate precisely this polytextual interplay between his poems and paintings. By reading three of Cummings' poems against their correspondent visual texts, I hope to demonstrate the "intersemiotic transposition" involved in Cummings' creative process. Harold Bloom maintains that "[criticism] is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem" (96). This study will tread the road that goes from poem to painting, from word to image, and vice versa. If nothing else, this is a road "less travelled by," as Robert Frost would have it.

Polytextuality

Oxford Reference defines polytextuality as "the simultaneous use of different texts in the various parts of a vocal composition." The term was originally used in musicology to denote two or more texts superimposed simultaneously in a single composition. With the term "polytextuality" Leo Hoek introduces a new category in the taxonomy of media interrelations: "transmedial relationships." For him politextuality involves the explicit or implicit relation between at least two different works in two different media. By "explicit relation" he means the transposition of aspects and characteristics of the medium of the source text to the medium of the target one. In Hoek's own words, "[a] verbo-visual relationship can manifest itself between two different works of art; in that case we speak of a trans-medial relationship" (24). For him, such a relationship can be observed not only in ekphrasis, but also in critique d'art. Hence, a ballet review, for example, would also fall in an intermedial relationship with the performance itself. However, as we can see from Claus Clüver's definition of ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system" (26), art criticism is already included in the ekphrastic realm. Nevertheless, as Eric Vos points out, Hoek's listing of critique d'art as an example of trans-medial relationship implies that the works in question "need not (both) be works of art themselves" (326). As a distinguishing criterion for "trans-medial relationships" Hoek introduces "polytextuality," again meaning that different works come into play.

From another perspective, we may view the concept of polytextuality as what is missing in Gerard Genette's taxonomy of transtextuality. His taxonomy deals with literary texts exclusively, but it can also be employed to analyse interart relations. Towards the end of Genette's famous book *Palimpsests*, he claims that his taxonomy can be applied to practices of art in the second degree or "hyperaesthetics." It is true that he insists that each type of art should have its own rules. However, still, relations between texts belonging to different sign systems do exist, which enables us to trace similarities rather than stress differences, much in line with the sister arts tradition.

Now, for merely taxonomic purposes, I find it practical to introduce two terms by which to distinguish any two polytextually dependent texts, that is, any two parts of a polytext. The criterion chosen is primacy of production. According to this criterion, I will distinguish between a polytextant and a polytextee, the former being the source text and the latter being the target one. They can be defined in the following way: a polytextant would be any initial text, regardless of its sign system, that serves as a source for another text in a different sign system whereas a polytextee is any text derived from an earlier text, composed in a different sign system. This definition highlights the fact that the type of the text is not important for its identification as a source text. The polytextant may be a picture, or a poem, or a musical piece, or a statue. Primacy is the criterion applied. There may be, of course, instances when the primacy of a text with respect to its polytextees will be very difficult to determine. Or there may be examples of the constituent texts of a polytext having been produced simultaneously. Such examples, however, tend to be very rare. There may also be instances of what might be termed a chained polytext: a polytextee, which serves as a polytextant for another text. Think of a tune composed for the lyrics of an ekphrastic poem. In this case the poem would be a polytextee and a polytextant at the same time. All this, however, might be a fruitful field for future research. For the time being, suffice it to say, that when discussing polytextuality in Cummings' work I will mostly resort to the above distinction between texts.

By way of illustration let us start with an easily "visible" polytext: the "boxer" poem (CP 430)² and its polytextual counterpart, the pencil drawing.

² All poems under discussion in this article are reprinted from the centennial edition of Cummings' *Complete Poems* (CP), 1904 – 1962, edited by George J. Firmage, Liveright, 1994, by the very kind permission of the publisher, Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. All rights reserved. The number

Polytextual Champions of the World

The poem depicts a boxer and apart from the iconic rendition of the dynamics of a boxing match, Cummings provides us with a direct autographic polytextee for one of his drawings:

ondumonde"
 (first than caref
 ully; pots
 edN-o wt he
 m
 ,whysprig
 eli
 nkil
 -Y-
 stroil(pre)ling(cise)dy(ly)na(
 mite)
 :ycarnawocna;
 &lscenskil-
 ling-whipAlert-floatScor
 ruptingly)
 ca-y-est
 droppeç
 qu'est-ce que tu veux
 Dwritth
 il est trop foet le nègre
 empothingish8s
 c'est fini
 p&aw,T,O:
 allons
 9
 &
 (musically-who?
 pivoting)
 SmileS
 "ahlbrooon

CP 430, scaled down to 50 %



Boxer, pencil drawing, early 1920s³

As we may see, the outline of the poem follows the silhouetted figure of the boxer from the drawing. The verbal content of the poem depicts the fight between a black bantamweight boxer, former world Ondumonde champion, called Panama Al Brown (pronounced [ahlbroon]), and his opponent (Webster, "Floating" 53). It is a patchwork of overlapping and interpenetrating pieces of conversation (in French and English), details of the boxer's movements, and a referee's counting to ten to acknowledge the loss of Brown's opponent. All this is set against background noises from the audience.⁴ The match was a real event. It was held in Paris in the late 1920s, or early 1930s, a period in which Cummings frequented the French capital (Webster, "Floating" 54). What is important for me is that the drawing is from the late 1920s, while CP 430 was first published in the volume *No Thanks* in 1935. This makes it a polytextant for the visual poem, even though we cannot be certain which of the texts was created first. Considering Cummings' habit of addressing a theme or subject in both artistic activities, he was most probably working on the drafts of the poem and the sketches at the same time.

We must still find the appropriate critical vocabulary for the analysis of the relation between the two texts. What processes occur in the transformation of a polytextant into a polytextee? How does the former become the latter, if at all?

One way of solving the problem may be by resorting to semiotics and tracing the ways in which the signification in the source text is transferred to the sign system of the polytextee. In other words, we can try to find meaningful structural units in the resultant text that have direct functional correspondences in the polytextant. These would be easier to trace, for example, in book illustrations, where the elements

after the abbreviation indicates the page on which the poem appears in this edition.

³ The E. E. Cummings papers in the Houghton Library, Harvard University. The images of this drawing and E.E. Cummings' paintings featuring below are used with the kind permission of the Trustees for the E. E. Cummings Trust.

⁴ For a brilliant analysis of the poem as a collage, see Webster, "Floating."

of the visual text correspond to descriptive details in the verbal one. Hence, we have elements (syntactic or semantic) that are transferred from one text to the other with the respective degree of transformation required by the target system of signification. This does not mean that a book illustration cannot have a meaning on its own, separate from the polytextant. It is just that readers acquainted with the original text can get an enhanced perception and better understanding of the illustration while also relishing the discovery of intertextual references. We can safely assert that the functional equivalent of an illustration, from the opposite perspective – verbal representation of a visual work – is the ekphrastic poem.

“the surely/Cued”ekphrasis and *Noise Number 13*

To show how intersemiotic transposition operates in practice I will discuss Cummings’ poem “the surely” (number III in *ViVa*, 1931) in comparison with its polytextant. I consider it a proper example of an autographic ekphrasis:

the surely

Cued
motif smites truly to Beautifully
retire through its english

the Forwardflung backwardSpinning hoop returns fasterishly
whipped the top leaps bounding upon other tops to caroming
off persist displacing Its own and their Lives who
grow slowly and first into different deaths

Concentric geometries of transparency slightly
joggled sink through algebras of proud

inwardlyness to collide spirally with iron arithmethics
and mesh with
Which when both

march outward into the freezing fire of Thickness) points

uPDownwardishly
find everywhere noise coloured
curvecorners gush silently perpetuating solids (More
fluid Than gas
(CP 313)

At first reading, the poem is on the verge of being totally unintelligible. One cannot make one’s mind whether it is referential or descriptive. One is left with the impression of an attempt to render some kind of Brownian motion of particles (“perpetuating solids”) in “fluid” or “gas.” Readers must be familiar with billiards to be able to decipher (on a third or fourth reading!) that “the Forwardflung backwardSpinning hoop” that “returns fasterishly” and “leaps bounding upon other tops” is the “caroming” cue-ball on a snooker table.

Richard S. Kennedy is the first critic to link the poem to one of Cummings’ best-known abstract paintings. In his discussion of *ViVa* he says that some of the poems “are clearly related to schools of modern painting,” and gives the example of CP 313, in which “Cummings describes ... one of his own Futuristic canvases *Noise Number 13*” (*Dreams* 319).



Noise Number 13, 1925, Oil on canvas, (151.25 x 108.59 cm),
Whitney Museum of American Art.

Kennedy quotes lines 9, 10, and 11 of the poem to illustrate his point, without going into further detail. Yet the relationship is obvious not only to him. *Noise Number 13* is the jacket painting on the centennial edition of the *Complete Poems*, edited by George J. Firmage. There is a description of the painting on the front flap of the volume, which ends with the instruction to “see page 313, within, for its companion poem.”

Milton A. Cohen provides another useful clue to the understanding of the relationship between the two texts. Discussing the perceptual ambiguity in Cummings’ series of abstract paintings, his *Sounds and Noises*, he notes that some traces of his earlier representational paintings linger in them (104). Cohen further draws attention to an explanation Cummings himself provided in a letter to his mother of 3 March 1922: “these paintings began with ‘bodies scenes faces still lifes’ as the ‘helps or raw material’ of an abstract design. These ‘helps’ were to ‘go under’ (i. e., disappear) in the final abstraction; but some lurk stubbornly among the planes, waiting to materialize” (105). Next Cohen gives some examples: he sees a “seated nude facing left” in *Sound Number 5*; a saxophone in *Noise Number 12*; an elephant in *Noise Number 1*; the “crown and profile of a rooster” in *Sound Number 2* (105). To all this I can only add that there is a visible guitar pointed to the left in *Sound Number 1* and, arguably, the “seated nude” in *Sound Number 5* is a guitar-player. As for the picture in question, *Noise Number 13*, Cohen sees “eyes in the centre of the spirals which, themselves, may be ears to hear the synesthetic ‘Noise’” (105). He notes that his reading is different from Kennedy’s, “who ties it to the cue-ball imagery in... ‘the surely’,” or from Rushworth Kidder’s, who likens “the central spiral” to the “circular section of an onrushing locomotive in Cummings’[drawing] train” (105). Finally, Cohen correctly concludes that the mere fact “that all the readings are plausible – and all different – confirms the essential ambiguity of the figure” (105).

Even though all the readings are plausible, I tend to agree with Kennedy. For me the central figure is an abstracted cue-ball. The jagged, spiralling, coloured sectors around it echo the sound waves issued

by its spinning around “fasterishly.” The diagonal shaft protruding from lower left halfway to the right middle of the picture is a cue-stick, while the greenish serpentine in the brown cylinder above it imitates the reverberations of the stick after the shot. I can even see another ball, just below the tip of the stick, emerging from the corner pocket of the snooker table (the red cone in the lower right), while the doubled bluish-green (“noisecoloured”) cones (“curvecorners”) around it form the corner itself. I am not alone in my attempt to explicate the picture by polytextual references to the poem.

More recently, Claudia Desblaches discussed both works as a “diptych.” For her, the disorder created by the “shortened and lengthened lines” in the poem “displays the meaning of the abstract painting with its conflicting and combined lines and curves” (162). She goes on to claim that the “repetition of curves and lines [in the painting] are transcribed in the poem by sound repetitions, alliterations of “o” or “p”” (line 6) and sees a “visible correspondence” in the neologism “noisecolored” and the sound-colour synesthesia of the picture (164).⁵ For me, though never stating it explicitly, by tracing out the functional equivalents of elements from the verbal text to their pictorial origin, Desblaches describes the process of intersemiotic transposition.

We can also trace other elements, which Cummings transposes from pictorial to verbal signification. Since the painting is an abstract one stylistically, the poem also abounds in highly abstract imagery. The hidden, barely discernible referentiality of the painting (the ball, the cue-stick, the corner pocket) is mirrored by its verbal equivalent: the words scattered within the text, which faintly allude to billiards, e. g. “Cued,” “spinning,” “bounding,” and “caroming.” Cummings is more explicit and of greater help, when he opens the poem with “the surely / Cued / motif” (the central spiral dominating the picture plane) that “smites truly to Beautifully” into the centre of the picture to “retire” into outer rings of colour to the upper-right. The second stanza is arguably an attempt to describe the idea behind the painting in a more common, or standard poetic language (“through its english”).

In the third stanza, the spiral shapes become “Concentric geometries of transparency” that are “slightly/ joggled” by the jagged cones that cut into them diagonally, so they “sink through algebras of proud/ inwardlyness to collide spirally with iron arithmetics.” In the picture, the “conflicting lines effect not only opposing forces but also contrasting and ambiguous dimensions – all to keep the painting’s components (and the viewer’s eyes) in restless motion” (Cohen 168). These “opposing forces” and “contrasting and ambiguous dimensions” are transposed into the poem as the oxymoronic “freezing fire,” “everywhere,” and “curvecorners”. The miscapitalized compound adjectival “uPDownwardishly” iconically suggests the “restless motion” required of the viewer’s eyes to relish the synaesthetic pleasure of the “noisecoloured” Noise Number 13.

In conclusion, I would say that the poem elucidates the abstract painting and is meant as an ekphrasis to provide the key for its understanding. It is a *poème à clef*, in a sense.

Jimmy Savo: The Comedian as Polytext

It was typical of Cummings to try both his pen and pencil, so to speak, at one and the same subject. The two impressionistic portraits of Jimmy Savo, one in oil and the other in type, would be a suitable case in point:

so little he is
so.
Little
ness be
(ing)
comes ex
-pert-
Ly expand:grO
w
i
?n
g

⁵ My emphasis.

Is poet iS
 (childlost
 so;ul
)foundclown a
 -live a
 ,bird
 !O
 & j &
 ji
 &
 jim,jimm
 ;jimmy
 s:
 A
 V
 o(
 .
 :
 ;
 ,
 (CP 471)



Jimmy Savo, Oil on Canvas board, 10" x 8" (undated).

The aesthetic considerations behind both the painting and the visual poem were to capture on the canvas/list the ease and gaiety of the comedian performing. The small, unassertive, funny “little” man with the baggy trousers grows in stature through his stage act to capture the “so;ul” of the audience/viewer/reader. In his analysis of the poem Michael Webster notes: “Savo is both “so” and “little” like a child; in his playful comic act, his little so-ness becomes both expert and pert, or his littleness becomes “ex” ... expanding his being, enabling him to “grO // w” his lowercase “i” or child-self like a bird’s wing” (“Divine” 44).

Jimmy “Is a poet iS”, a true artist who is able to make his audience feel like children again, to find in the clown their long-lost childhood. He is as alive and free as a bird and empathically makes his audience feel the same. With his innocent, yet mischievous, infant smile (compare the iconic ‘& j &’ to the photo below) he invites the reader/viewer to look at the world through the wide open in amazement (“!O”) eyes of a child again.



Jimmy Savo performing
(http://www.vaudeville.org/profiles_Q_Z/index_files/Page1673.htm)

The poem and the painting form a complex visual verbal polytext. It is not only that they both capture the comedian during a gig. It is one and the same gig that they both render. Proof of that I find in Charles Norman’s discussion of the poem where he claims that it is “about Jimmy Savo, whose fluttering hands strewed the stage with bits of paper in gestures extremely birdlike—hence its ending” (157). In the picture we see Savo caught in mid-air balancing on one leg, holding in his outstretched hand the sheet of paper to be torn into shreds. He is perched in the middle like a “bird” just spreading its “w/i/?n/g”. Moreover, both texts exhibit an overall impression of light and lightness in spirit, colour and movement. John Ordeman writes on the painting that it

is also a lively impression; it is painted with broad, rapid strokes with a range of vibrant colors. Cummings conveys the comic nature of Savo’s dance by the wiggly, indistinct lines of his floppy trousers and oversized jacket. The paint is thin in places; in others, there is a thick impasto; every where there is quick motion, gaiety, freedom, surprise, and exuberance. (54)

If in the painting motion is achieved through the brisk brush strokes and alteration of thin layers of paint and “thick impasto,” in the poem it is achieved through different line lengths and positioning some of the stanzas (like stanza 3, the “wing” stanza, or the last two stanzas) visually perpendicularly to the rest. This effect is achieved because the stanzas are comprised of lines having only one letter and a punctuation mark or are entirely comprised of a single punctuation mark (last stanza). Such a translucent architectonic of the poem also foregrounds the whiteness of the page that directly corresponds to the lighter-shade, triangular halo surrounding Jimmy Savo’s blurred figure in the painting.

The stanza in which the name of the performer visually grows out of itself “ji/&/jim,jimm/;jimmy” demonstrates another technique typical of Cummings, aptly defined by Norman Friedman as the “technique of telescopic build-up” (120). This gesture has the effect of bringing forth the plastic quality of the words. It accentuates the materiality of the written language. Telescoping occurs when a word appears on the page as a compressed compound of its letters, successively doubled and extended. For example, the last line of the poem “as if as” reads: “mmamakmakemakesWwOwoRworLworld” (CP 423). The combination of telescoping the words “makes” and “world”, along with the progressive capitalization of letters in the latter, visibly enacts the rising sun and how the dawning of the new day gradually reveals the landscape before the eyes of the viewer (Webster, “Sinister” 93). With the comedian’s name, this gesture iconically renders not a movement on the stage, but the “grO // w” – ing of Jimmy’s figure on it. It is also the mirror image of his “be (ing) /comes” an artist from the first and second stanza. Thus, it closes the structure of the poem symmetrically. This same “becoming” and “growing” in the painting are visually achieved through the positioning of Jimmy’s figure in the centre of the plane, his outstretched right arm and left leg forming a diagonal, curved line, loaded with tension, thus instilling direction and movement.⁶

The last two stanzas of the poem form visually a descending zigzag and a dotted diagonal one, again instilling motion, but this time there is a touch of ending to it, a sense of fading away. But it is an open ending. In the “s;/A/V/o(“ stanza, apart from the implications that the comedian performance was “A” class and he is “V”ictorious, we have only two punctuation marks: a colon and an open bracket, both bearing the semantic load of introducing the next thought, hence the sense of incompleteness, of something going on and on. This effect is highlighted in the last stanza which begins with a full stop and ends with a comma. Thus, the last stanza is an iconic rendition of the birdlike, light footprints with which the “so little” “so:ul” of a “childlost”/“foundclown” tip-toes into eternity.

The Fait: Polytextual Self-Transcendence

The language-of-gesture poetics employed by Cummings forces the reader/viewer to read or, more precisely, to experience his poems as works of other non-literary pieces of art. What does this tell us about Cummings’ notion of the poem as an art form? The predominant modernist notion of the poem is of an “image [presenting] an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Ezra Pound, qtd. in Mitchell 25) or as “verbal icon,” which does not rely on visual or pictorial “likeness,” but constitutes a “[crystalline] synchronic structure in some metaphorical space” (Mitchell 25). Such a notion shifts the emphasis away from the subject of the poem and focuses on its form or structure. Following the same line from the early stages in his career E. E. Cummings focused on the visual and sound patterns in his poems. He sensed that his experiments were moving him far away from the conventions of poetry to the extent that he would refer to a poem as a fait and to an artist as a fauteur (Kennedy 116). Fait is the past participle of the French verb faire, which translates as “to do” or “to make.” So, fait, as a noun translates as an “act,” or “deed,” or a “fact,” or an “occurrence.” It has the connotation of something done and finished as a product and at the same time of something happening by itself. The fact that Cummings refers to his poems as faits is indicative of two things. First, it demonstrates Cummings’ understanding of the

⁶ Cummings was familiar with Wassily Kandinsky’s treatise “Point and Line to Plane,” (first published in 1926 under the title of “*Punkt und Linie zu Fläche*”), in which the latter examined the line and the point as the basic elements of painting with respect to the effect they produce on the viewer. There, Kandinsky claimed that the line is a rendition of a force that has been exerted towards a specific direction. He distinguished between three basic types of lines: a straight line as a result of force applied in a single direction, an angular line – indicating alternating forces acting in different directions, and a curved line, marking the simultaneous impact of two different forces.

poet not merely as an intellectual worker, but also as an artist, a craftsman, as somebody who creates with his hands as well as with his imagination. This means that the poet should create with the same attitude towards his work like that of the painter or the sculptor. Hence, in the notion of the fait the poem is brought closer to the visual and plastic arts and away from its kinship with music. The second major consideration that his notion of the fait points to is that there is a need for a radical change in the notion of the reader as a recipient of the product of art. If poems need passive (though occasionally empathic) readers, faits require involved participants actively engaged in the process of aesthetic experience. This is best understood if we refer to Cummings himself and his note on the subject: "The day of the spoken lyric is past. The poem which has at last taken its place does not sing itself; it builds itself, three dimensionally, gradually, subtly, in the consciousness of the experiencer" (qtd. in Kennedy 128).

This new attitude of this new type of reader proves to be aesthetically rewarding for it transforms "reading" into a spiritual experience. I will try to demonstrate this in my analysis of Cummings' l(a (CP 673), popularly known as the "leaf poem." This fait can be read as a haiku, a drawing, a figure, a letter or a digit, and can be "experienced" as a prayer, or a mantra.

In 1958, at the age of 64, E.E.Cummings publishes his last volume of verse 95 poems. He chooses to begin his last poetry collection like this:

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(CP 673)

Since, obviously, this is a "visual poem," critics hasten to search for semblances. They try to relate the shape of the poem to particular objects. In his *E. E. Cummings*, Barry Marks says that at first glance the unprepared reader sees something that resembles the Washington Monument or a telegraphic pole (21). For Eve Triem, it is something like a "needle" (18). The list can go on forever. If there is an attempt on behalf of Cummings at any figurative imitation, the form was more likely meant to represent the digit [1]. This would be true provided we read it as a visual metaphor for the abstract notion of "loneliness." Nevertheless, for me, it is important to understand that the "shape" is by no means imitative as in a painting, for example.

Technically speaking, we do not have a complete sentence. What we have are just four words: "loneliness" and the phrase "a leaf falls." And if we are to put them in a standard typography they would look like this: "l(a leaf falls) oneliness." Cummings might as well have simply stated that loneliness is like a falling leaf. So, we have loneliness as state of being and its symbolic image, the falling leaf, the feeling of solitude, and a metaphor expressing it. This is on the surface. This is what immediately comes to mind; a poetic way of saying that a man or a woman lives in loneliness all their life. Life itself can be represented via the metaphor of a falling leaf in an autumn forest. We are born in the prime of the foliage, among our kind, we swirl in the spiral of life, blown by the wind and finally we lie motionless on the ground, ending the journey or closing the cycle of life, closing the parenthesis - "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

We might have as well stopped here and said that is all. This is what Cummings means. It is true that he uses modernist typographic devices, but the feeling of solitude has been widely exploited in poetry. Besides, the “falling leaf” metaphor is not quite ingenious either. However, in my opinion, the ingenuity of this fait lies beyond such an initial reading. The precision with which Cummings structured the poem-picture indicates that the formal appearance was the governing principle for the poetic impression. We will have to go back to the poem and look at its structure once again.

Though lacking the elegant form and typical appearance of a poem, it is still neatly structured. There is symmetry in the line pattern – we have an alteration of one-lined and three-lined “stanzas” in the following order: 1-3-1-3-1 (Marks 22). This symmetry of the stanza pattern is the first thing that reminds us of a haiku. Van den Heuvel’s definition of a haiku is “an unrhymed Japanese poem recording the essence of a moment keenly perceived, in which nature is linked to human nature” (9). In the classical haiku tradition, we have only three lines, following the 5-7-5-syllable pattern respectively, and an absence of rhyme. Of course, this is a basic, but not obligatory, model. So, even at first glance, the lack of rhyme, the odd number of both lines and stanzas, the brevity and the circular construction of E. E. Cummings’ [l(a)] all remind us of a haiku. However, it is a haiku by its mere appearance. Its form, meant to represent the digit [1], corresponds directly to the visual effect, characteristic of the Japanese haiku. Only here, instead of calligraphy, typography is the technique.

In his definition of haiku Alexey Andreyev says: “Real Japanese haiku are written in Japanese characters. Each character-word is also a little picture; seeing “how-it-looks” is a part of “how-it-reads” (Akita International). Cummings’ poem was intended to be “seen” or “perceived,” not “read.” Most haiku contain the so-called kigo – a “season word” which indicates the “time of happening” of the “haiku event” (Andreyev). Sometimes it can be a direct naming like “winter night” or just a hint, “icicle,” implying winter. The “leaf” that falls plays such a role here, unmistakably indicating autumn. Furthermore, being a painter himself, Cummings is extremely skilful in mastering the image. Every haiku is like a little picture, a momentary “snapshot” of certain natural events. It depicts a situation from the environment, animals, sceneries, which correspond to the inner state of mind of the poet. At the same time, it evokes feelings or even moods in the mind of the reader. In this sense, the “picture” of the falling leaf (in the parentheses) is a classical haiku, forcing the reader to a contemplative mood, but at the same time torturing his/her mind with the deep sadness of the vast, all-embracing (outside the parentheses) “loneliness.”

This brings us to the philosophy of haiku poetry. It is derived from various forms of Eastern Pantheistic Monism, the basis of which is that all things in nature are interconnected and exist in harmony and unity. In this great “Unity” or “Oneness” the human being is closely connected to nature and is dependent on it (see Hughes).

To finish discussing the haiku aspect of the poem, I will quote Lewis Turco, who compares Cummings’ [l(a)] to one of Basho’s works:

On the ideational level Cummings’ poem does almost exactly the same thing as an ancient haiku by Basho:

Please come to visit,
for I am lonely. One leaf
falls from the kiri.

... Cummings’ treatment of the subject was quite original and creative. Perhaps the most interesting thing here is that Cummings’ little poem is even smaller and more economical than the product of one of the greatest of the haiku masters. (73)

Another formal aspect of the fait is the “visual rhythm,” suggested by the successive repetition of lines having one vowel and one consonant in a reversed order in the first two stanzas. Furthermore, the “le/af/fa/ll” implies the “fluttering pattern of a falling leaf” and involves both sound and visual values (Triem 18-19).

If we omit the parenthesis, the result will be the following:

l
one
l
iness

In the old typewriter font, as well as in certain other fonts in typography, the letter [l] prints as the digit [1]. The result is that we do not read “loneliness,” but we read “one-one-one-iness” instead, and that is the quality or condition of being “I.” Barry Marks noted that this is a peculiar linguistic phenomenon, a real discovery. According to him, “Cummings’ treatment of ‘loneliness’ adds to the word not a semantic quality but what critics of visual arts call a “plastic quality” (23). In all his works Cummings constantly uses lowercase “i” for the personal pronoun “I.” The “i-ness” in the last stanza is the “self,” the “being,” the essence of human life, while the other three lines are a way of analysing it, an attempt to discover its meaning. The breaking down of the word “loneliness” into its constituents is reminiscent of the Banyan tree parable from the Upanishads, in which the father, a guru, asks his son to bring him a fruit from the banyan tree. Here it is:

“Bring me a fruit of that nyagrodha (banyan) tree.”

”Here it is’ venerable Sir.” “Break it.”

”It is broken, venerable Sir.”

”What do you see there?”

”These seeds, exceedingly small,

”Break one of these, my son.”

”It is broken, venerable Sir.”

”What do you see there?”

”Nothing at all, venerable Sir.”

2

The father said: “That subtle essence, my dear, which you do not perceive there – from that very essence this great nyagrodha arises. Believe me, my dear.

3

“Now, that which is the subtle essence – in it all that exists has its self. That is the True. That is the Self. That thou art.” (Holy Upanishads, Chapter XII)

Breaking down “loneliness” into its seeds – the “one” lines – leads us to the “i-ness”, the “self” (Atman), which cannot be “seen,” for it is “one” with the Ultimate Reality. It is the “nothingness” from the banyan seed, from which the Cosmos (Brahman) itself is made.

We have reached the end, the last line of the “poem”, the “i-ness.” The self is alone in its “i-ness” (visually expressed by the horizontal extension of the longest last line – “iness”), but it is also one with the “oneness” of creation. For, although lying prone at the bottom (ninth line), the “i-ness” rises and stands erect (eighth line), then as “one” it steps on the first step of awareness (seventh line), and slowly, step-by-step (lines five through two visually representing a ladder), it transcends upwards to the ultimate beginning: “l(a)” (first line). I call it the “ultimate beginning” not only because it is the first line or for its common reference as the title of the poem. Let us look at it once again:

l(a)

What we have here is the numeral “1” and the letter “a” separated by the parenthetical bracket “(”. Due to the lack of “spacing” on both sides of the punctuation mark, it does not “divide” the letter and the number, but, on the contrary, it links them. Thus, the first line represents visually a unity between the first among the numbers and the first among the letters. This is a unique formal expression of the “oneness” of the two “beginnings,” or of the duality of existence itself. To put it simply, this is the concept of Yin and Yang, the two opposing principles, present in Taoism. There is a conceptual Yin-Yang opposition in the l(a). The letter and the digit stand in a binary opposition. They are the two sides of the same coin. They represent the two sides of humanity and the world in general. The letter is the spiritual side, the transcending soul, humanness striving for perfection, while the digit is the material side, the earthly being, humankind. Therefore, what we have here is an embodiment of both the digit and the letter simultaneously, expressed as haiku, disguised as a poem, and acting as a prayer. This is a prayer not to the omnipotent God Creator, but to the Cosmos as eternal “Oneness” of nature and humanity, mind and soul, material and spiritual. The temple of this God is the person himself/herself, as the American tran-

scendentalist Henry David Thoreau puts it: “Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by hammering marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones” (221).

To this, Cummings gives his humble response: “i am a little church(no great cathedral)” (CP 749). Even if we agree with his claim, with his unrivalled literary style, profound artistic vision, and versatile talent, Cummings, the faiseur, stands in a “temple” of his own, second to none.

To finish the discussion of the poem, I will touch upon its polytextual aspect. Cohen correctly asserts that “the exquisite ‘l(a’... is a spiritual and aesthetic soul mate to the Self-portrait” from 1958, the year of the publication of Cummings’ last volume of poetry (115). Cohen is referring to Cummings’ *Self-portrait in blue tie*, 1958.



Self-portrait in blue tie, 1958, oil on cardboard, The Kidder Collection.

In 1958, Cummings was nearing the end of his career. Both the poem and the painting seem to grasp the serenity and wisdom of old age. The brownish tonality of the painting echoes the nostalgic autumnal imagery of the poem. Figure and background are unified in the portrait, nature and Self become one in the poem. Both works invite a contemplative mood. Cummings wants us to brood over life as a spiritual experience, to look into our inner selves and find there our own “loneliness,” “one-ness,” and “wholeness,” and then transcend it into our “i-ness.”

Conclusion

By way of conclusion I’d like to point out the specific manifestation of polytextual relations between the visual-verbal pairs of E.E.Cummings’ works discussed above. The aesthetic considerations behind the poem “ondumonde”) and the pencil drawing of the boxer are purely formal. Both works are so designed as to “pivot” around a central vertical axis, in order to render the dynamics of a boxing match.

In the second pair, “the surely” is conceived as an ekphrasis to the abstract *Noise Number 13*, thus the painting serves as a polytextant for the poem. With the twin portraits of Jimmy Savo, polytextuality is one of theme and subject matter, in the sense that both texts depict one particular gig by the comedian and attempt to represent the spontaneity and gaiety of the performance. With the last pair, the relation is more abstract, on a more spiritual and philosophical level. The poem and the painting form a complex polytextual self-portrait of E. E. Cummings, the “poetandpainter.”

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