

Ambiguity and Idiosyncratic Syntax in the Poems of E. E. Cummings

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The driving force of Cummings' poetry is the desire to turn language into a flexible material that is no longer subject to conventional rules of combination and principles of distribution. Apart from breaking the limitations imposed by the referential function of language and constructing a semantic universe that works independently of the extra-linguistic one, Cummings' poetic language also builds on an idiosyncrasy of syntax that is based on various forms and degrees of syntactic discontinuity, distortion and dislocation, in which the usual punctuation and word order rules are no longer respected, while the traditional world-building patterns are transgressed. However, they are not substituted by some new and thoroughly coherent system of principles that could justify the changes in the morphology that shape the syntax of the poems, since they only reflect the poet's 'ludicrous' approach to language and the need to break free from any form of limitation enforced by convention. Cummings also plays with the iconic potential of linguistic signs, as if asserting that the juxtaposition of graphemes according to some clear principles that engender meaning is not unidirectional, but equivocal and open to multiple 'readings'.

Keywords: poetic language, transgression, ambiguity, syntactic distortion, discontinuity, dislocation, conversion, iconic poetry, syntactic dispersal, contraction, semantic duplication, syntactic parallelism



The preponderance of the poetic function, which in Jakobson's theory corresponds to a form of predominance over, not annihilation of, the other five functions, individualizes poetic language up to the extent of 'suspending' the relation between the message of a text and the referent-world.¹ Thus the relation between the text (as a succession of signs) and its content

¹ According to Roman Jakobson, the six functions of language are: referential, poetic, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual. Roman Jakobson, *Grundlagen der Sprache*, quoted by Ion Coteanu (ed.) (Bucharest: Crestomatie de lingvistica generala, Romania de miine Foundation, 1998) Crestomatie de lingvistica generala, Romania de miine Foundation, Bucharest, 1998, p. 50-57. See also, for example, Gérard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Columbia University Press, 1982), Groupe M (J. Dubois *et al.*), *Rhétorique de la poésie. Lecture linéaire, lecture tabulaire* (Bruxelles; Editions complexe, 1977) and Dumitru Irimia, *Introducere in stilistica (Introduction to Stylistics)* (Iași; Polirom, 1999).

becomes absolute and the semantic universe thereby created functions independently of extra-linguistic reality. Ambiguity may be considered one of the effects of the preponderance of the poetic function over the referential one as well as an intrinsic quality of poetic language, since the nature of the referent is no longer objective and determinate and the reference itself may be multivalent.

As Jacob Korg thought, poetry may be regarded as ‘a way of stretching the resources of language beyond their ordinary power, in order to communicate what language seems unable to communicate’.² This ‘inability’ should be understood as corresponding to the vertical axis implied by this relation with the referent, since language as such is believed to have an unlimited potential for representing reality, yet impediments come from the norms and the rules of association assigned to it. The ‘stretching’ of the resources is thus equal to the predominance of the poetic function, which enables the construction of an autonomous semantic world. This does not mean that language becomes ‘non-referential’, but that it turns into a universe which is complementary to the extra-linguistic one, although they often develop a relation of opposition as well.

The transgression of the ordinary limitations imposed on language may be accomplished at not only the semantic but also the syntactic level. The tension in language (which cannot be separated from the tension in thought) results in a coherent and complex structure that usually reflects the organization and the rules of combination of the pre-existent semiotic system in which it is incorporated. However, the ‘modern’ understanding of poetry required the ‘violation’ of a larger series of rules that had been traditionally respected, in order to make use of, to the greatest extent, the latent and formerly unexplored potential of language.

Besides, the necessity of an even more revolutionary and permissive ‘modernism’ is embodied in postmodernist tendencies, which do not radically contradict the preceding trend of subscribing to the dialectics inherent in literary history, but rather seem to include and to complete it, enlarging the ‘freedom’ that has been gained hitherto. The transgression of norms and borders in post-modern tradition manifests itself not only as deconstructing and iconoclastic tendencies but also as a high tolerance for ambiguity and plurality of meaning. There is no longer a fixed set of expectations regarding direction, explicit significance and closure, except perhaps for the very code of flexibility and equivocality, which, in Jauss’ terms, define the post-

² Jacob Korg, *The Force of Few Words*, (New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston Inc., 1966) quoted by Ștefan Avadanei, *Introduction to Poetics* (Iasi: Institutul European, 1999) p. 27.

modern horizon of expectations.³ Thus, the original meaning of Eco's principle of 'opera aperta' may be extended in a reference not only to the variety of possible readings of a text but also to the absolute freedom of the act of creation, in which the author can play with signs, codes and representations at will.⁴ Consequently, the quality of ambiguity intrinsic to poetic language is doubled along the addresser-addressee axis by the open nature of the text and the multiple possible readings.

The typically post-modern desire to turn language into as flexible a material as possible and cultivate ambiguity as if it were an unwritten poetic rule is reflected in the poems of E. E. Cummings.⁵ An idiosyncrasy of syntax, the result of various forms and degrees of syntactic distortion and dislocation including some unusual use of word order and punctuation, is revealed in his work. At the same time, a series of changes in the morphology that shapes the syntax of the poems is relevant, since it reflects the poet's particular understanding of language and poetry.

Syntax is not mere juxtaposition; it also implies a relation between the items that are brought into proximity and a series of functions that correspond to each 'element' in a unitary construction. Cummings' innovations lie in the way in which the traditional, conventional linearity is broken and the result is a structure that does not lack coherence, despite the impression of disruption and discontinuity when compared to the usual 'patterns' of combination. The incongruity between certain units is eluded, new relations are built and the functions traditionally fulfilled by specific classes of words are now assigned to items belonging to a different part of speech.

As if going through a process of conversion, pronouns, adverbs and verbs are granted a function that usually corresponds to nouns, according to a new distribution principle. Not only are some semantic properties 'put into parentheses' in favour of other features that allow association with certain items as well as transfer of meaning (which, in a modern understanding, would be the very principles of metaphoric language), but also some grammatical categories that define a specific class are assigned to words of a different nature. Thus, it is possible to say:

³ Hans Robert Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) p. 125

⁴ Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta: forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milano: Bompiani, 2004) p. 33

⁵ Some publishers have preferred the atypical writing of his name in lower case — e. e. cummings — so as to mirror his unwillingness to conform to the rules and standards imposed in written language and typography.

2 little whos [...] 2 little ams, [...] incredible is
a you or a me
wills and weres
magical maybes of certainly
never the iswas
a pretty how town
[...]
he sang his didn't he danced his did
[...]
little by little and was by was
[...]
wish by spirit and if by yes.
[...]

This point is well illustrated by whole poems such as *two little whos*, *quick i the death of thing*, *)when what hugs stopping earth than silent is* or *the way to hump a cow is not*; a stanza from the last mentioned text is an appropriate example:⁶

to multiply because and why
dividing thens by nows
and adding and(i understand)
is hows to hump a cows

The discourse is often individualized by another type of change to the syntactic relations: either unusual coordination or the use of coordination instead of subordination. In the poem *maggie and milly and molly and may*, the conventionally required juxtaposition is replaced by copulative coordination,⁷-while in another poem, the atypical combination of the two relations is also likely to affect the logic of the sentences (which is already 'flawed' by the ambiguous relation of 'consequence'):

⁶ E. E. Cummings, *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*, ed. by George J. Firmage, (New York: Liveright, 1991) pp. 83, 634, 502, 500. Contrary to normal practice, the titles of individual poems will be in italics. In many cases, the poems have no formal title other than the first line of the text. Given Cummings' idiosyncratic use of punctuation marks and non-use of capital letters, the use of italics without any inverted commas will make it clear when I am referring to the whole poem and when to a single line from a poem.

⁷ Ibid., p. 682.

she being Brand
-new;and you
know consequently a
little stiff i was
careful of her and(having ⁸

Moreover, some poems reflect a form of discontinuity as far as the sequence of tenses is concerned. In an apparently narrative structure (since the depiction of a succession of ‘events’ is far from being what Cummings primarily aimed at), the linearity of a ‘narrated material’ in the past tense is broken by the use of a verb in the present:

[...] i touched the accelerator and give
her the juice,[...] ⁹

The impression of disruption is amplified due to an instance of syntactic inversion that seems to have no emphatic function and to the insertion of a verbal form which reflects dialectal speech, but is not accepted by the norm:

(it
was the first ride and believe i we was
happy ¹⁰

Of course, the poet’s pleasure in flouting convention requires his making best use of all the resources a language may have; a one-to-one signification is not regarded as the primary aim in Cummings poetics. The more ambiguous the syntax, the more levels of meaning are open; the more strongly multidimensional the signification, the richer is the creative potential of language.

Sometimes the text begins as if there were some larger discourse from which it had been extracted. The incipit consists of a conjunction corresponding to adversative coordination that introduces a sentence, although there is no preceding item to which it can be related, a point well illustrated by a poem entitled *but mr can you maybe listen there’s*.¹¹ Similarly, the impression that a text is only the continuation of another that is unseen and may not even be yet be written derives from the use of brackets — in fact, only one of the pair of punctuation marks is present, as if the beginning of the poem were part of a parenthesis that is closed at a certain point. At the same time, the ending marks the opening of another parenthesis that will not be

⁸ Ibid., p. 246.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 316.

closed within the space of the poem. Thus, the brackets are deprived of their traditional function. They neither enclose any longer an explanatory construction nor do they mark some incidental or intercalated discourse conceived, nevertheless, as a necessary ‘comment’ Instead, they either adopt the function of other punctuation marks (such as comma or semicolon), or are used only for the sake of some ‘ludicrous syntax’.

Particular instances of disrupting the syntax of the poetic discourse by means of parentheses are the poems in which these punctuation marks indicate the juxtaposition of two distinct dimensions of the text. Each of the two is independent of the other if taken as such — it has both coherence and wholeness. Nevertheless, their contiguity engenders a complex reading that is directed to multiple levels of significance. Probably the most relevant example would be the well-known poem ‘depicting’ the falling leaf:

l(a
le
af
fa
ll
s)
one
l
iness¹²

When read as a whole, the text consists of two units: a word and a sentence. What is syntactically atypical is the ‘inverted’ intercalation: it is not the word that is put into brackets and inserted in the sentence, but vice versa. The word ‘loneliness’ encapsulates the sentence ‘a leaf falls’. The semantic association between them is obvious and not necessarily complex, but the stress falls on the syntax of the semantic worlds. The text is a representation of the very act of representing, since the abstract (the concept, the state of loneliness) is epitomized in the concrete (the movement of a single leaf from life into death). Thus, the syntax of the poem reflects both an act of repetition and a form of *mise en abyme*.

The semantic nucleus undergoes a process of syntactic dispersal that is intensified by a fragmentary reading of the text. The horizontal units may mirror the same quality of ‘singleness’, which is also an effect of the intersection of different systems of signs: the letter ‘l’ is almost identical to the numeral ‘1’. Indeed, the two signs may be considered homographs by virtue of the fact that they belong to distinct systems. At the same time, by ‘taking over’ the

¹² Ibid., p. 673.

function of a numeral, the indefinite article ‘a’ becomes syntactically synonymous with the word ‘one’, hence the reiteration of the same concept in various forms.

Moreover, the graphic form engenders a signification that parallels the meaning of the text understood as a succession of linguistic signs. The iconic dimension represents the very movement of a falling leaf. The vertical ‘reading’ reveals a descendent movement in zigzag, while the horizontal image of the last line (seen as a succession of graphemes) ‘depicts’ the slow ending of the fall. Besides, the parentheses, regarded as graphic signs, may create an impression of isolation. Thus, the two systems of signs, linguistic and iconic, are brought together as in a relation of synonymy, since they are semantically convergent. Nevertheless, the poem is different from the so-called calligram, such as is to be found in, for example, Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes*, subtitled *Poems of war and peace 1913-1916* and published in 1918.¹³

The graphic shape of Cummings’ poems is usually complementary to the text as a whole made up of linguistic signs that generate meaning. Other examples of such ‘semantic duplication’ may be various texts such as the poems *warped this perhapsy* or *moan*.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there are cases (though rare) in which this ‘principle’ of complementariness is broken. A poem entitled *Little Tree* that almost derisively refers to the ‘loneliness’ and ‘littleness’ of a Christmas tree apparently represented from a child’s point of view has a graphic form that does not suggest smallness at all, since the lines are long and the spaces between them are large.¹⁵ Although alluding to a different size, the iconic dimension of the text still evokes the shape of ‘the object of contemplation’. Apart from playing with the potential expectations generated by his very (traditional) poetic ‘games’, Cummings aims at creating some ambiguity of intention by letting the shape contradict the content and the para-text gain independence from the text.

The graphic aspect is also emphasized by the use of capital letters either at the beginning of a word inside a sentence, or within a word:

once White&Gold — mOON Over tOwns mOOn — poor But TerFLY— ygUDuh ¹⁶

¹³ A calligram is a poem in which the typeface, calligraphy or handwriting is an essential element, so that the themes presented aurally and textually are also presented visually; for example, in ‘2^e Cannonier Conducteur’ the stanza beginning ‘salut m’onde [...]’ is presented in the shape of the Eiffel Tower (Guillaume Apollinaire, *Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War* (1913-1916) bilingual edition, trans. by Anne Hyde Greet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) pp. 126-7.

¹⁴ E. E. Cummings, *Complete Poems*, pp. 495, 493.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 690, 383, 322, 347.

Furthermore, the proliferation of punctuation marks in various texts should indicate the intention to intermingle signs belonging to different systems and the desire to fragment the discourse by means of syntactic disruption. The punctuation marks are deprived of their conventional function: an exclamation mark is the first grapheme of a text and is followed, at a couple of words distance, by a question mark. Two signs are juxtaposed in the middle of a phrase:

stand-
;Still)

Even a single word is split:

n,o;w:

The idiosyncrasy of Cummings' works is also reflected in the recurrent syntactic dislocation. In this case, ambiguity is no longer generated by the multitude of possible readings, but by a form of clash in the usual 'order' of poetic language, as in a process in which syntactic games disrupt the wholeness and the coherence of the semantic world. The usual order of words in a sentence is broken, which requires a form of fragmented or 'reverse' reading in order to reach the logic or potential logic of a whole text. The following poem illustrated this point:

!blac
k
agains
t
(whi)
te sky
?t
rees whic
h fr
om droppe
d
,
le
af
a::go
e
s wh
IrII

n
.g¹⁷

It is obvious that, in this case, the syntactic distortion is not partial but over the full extent of the entire poem. Language is thus granted absolute flexibility and the highest position in the hierarchy is assigned, not to the semantic dimension, but to the syntactic aspect, completed by the graphic form.

However, if, in the poems of E. E. Cummings, phrases or clauses are dislocated and words fragmented by 'the intrusion' of punctuation marks, the reverse process can also be found. There is a form of syntactic contraction whereby the traditionally required spaces between words are omitted; this leads to the formation of new verbal structures such as 'greasedlightning' or 'flooded-the-carburator' (the hyphen plays only the formal role required by the 'poetic game', since such a compound word would be grammatically impossible to create).

Some instances reflect the 'pattern' of derivation, which is most likely to be derided, since the morphemes that make up a word only result in semantic redundancy, but, of course, the device is a prolific 'means of enriching the lexicon' (by way of illustration, the word 'ultraomnipotence', for example). A hybrid mixture of derivation and conversion may be found in constructions like 'perhapsy', 'singless', 'hereless', in which the rules of combining morphemes in order to generate a meaningful unit are evidently broken. Other verbal structures coined out of the desire to use the full potential of language as well as to ridicule the traditional rules of word formation are 'plusorminus', 'hyperexclusevely,' 'ultravoluptuous,' 'superpalazzo', 'deadfromtheneckup', 'squarefootofminusone', 'internalexpanding' or 'externalcontracting'.

Sometimes the norm is broken by the use of abbreviations such as 'mr', 'mrs' or even 'r s v p'. The last one appears in a poem that claims to give a quotation from a letter starting "dearest we", which contains the following:

"i cordially invite me to become
noone except yourselves r s v p"¹⁸

Apart from the deconstruction of the two entities involved in any communicational act, namely the addresser and the addressee, generally corresponding respectively to the first and second person forms of the personal pronoun, the text mirrors the combination of two different

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 487.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 504.

linguistic codes. The likelihood is that the reader will interpret this as standing for *répondez, s'il vous plait*; the poem contains several other words in French, in which connection the phrase 'la moon' must be mentioned, since it reflects on a micro-level the juxtaposition of two distinct codes in a single linguistic sign made-up of two morphemes belonging to different languages.

There are, however, some cases in which traditional syntactic patterns, rather than being disrupted, are overemphasized. Such instances may be found in poems that are based on syntactic parallelism, that is, on a set of relations that should be considered both horizontally and vertically (the principles of distribution also include the prosodic aspect).

Sometimes the syntax reflects a form of gradation, in a movement from complex to simple, as in the following poem, which also suggests the form of a dialogue and in which, despite the absence of punctuation marks, the logic of the text implies that certain structures should be read as questions:

he isn't looking at anything
he isn't looking for something
he isn't looking
he is seeing
what
not something outside himself
not anything inside himself
but himself
himself how
not as some anyone
not as any someone
only as a noone(who is everyone) ¹⁹

In other cases, the syntax of the text is highly simplified and the dialogue, although not marked by punctuation, is this time rendered by means of the presence of the verb and the pronouns corresponding to the incidental level of the discourse. At the same time and on the vertical axis, the syntax both results in a series of prosodic elements (rhyme, rhythm, meter etc.) and imparts some euphonic qualities to the lines:

may i feel said he
(i'll squeal said she
just once said he)
it's fun said she

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 904.

(may i touch said he
 how much said she
 a lot said he)
 why not said she
 (let's go said he
 not too far said she
 what's too far said he
 where you are said she)
 [...] ²⁰

Ambiguity is thus a major effect of the idiosyncrasy of syntax in the works of E. E. Cummings and is shaped not only by the innovatory way in which he makes use of a considerable part of resources that lie in language but also by a particular manner of using traditional devices and structures. Quite often, the text is constructed according to some principle of harmony and equilibrium only for the sake of a disruption or a dislocation that is to occur at some point. Thus, linearity seems to be a pretext and a fertile ground for the subsequent syntactic distortion that is emphasized by means of a relation of contrast, since it functions as a deviation from the context.

For instance, 'the intrusion' of a typically paratextual element, namely the signature, inside the text is far from being a modern device. Nevertheless, Cummings inserts his name at the end of some poems in an atypical manner, as he uses only lower case. The fact that this device is not found in all his poems is another proof of his reluctance to adhere to any form of linearity. In the same time, in most of the texts the first line is used as a title, which reflects the intersection between the two dimensions, textual and paratextual, yet in an inverted form.

Cummings' poems may sometimes require a reading that should be simultaneously directed towards several levels of significance. Profitably turned to use as a quality of poetic language, ambiguity has intrinsic creative potential, but this is intensified by the existence of multiple possible readings of a text. At the same time, ambiguity is generated by the coexistence and the interaction of multiple systems of signs that start from the same material. In a seemingly paradoxical manner, both ambiguity and poetic meaning are emphasized through the interdependence of multiple dimensions of significance. Apart from the interaction of iconic and linguistic systems, there is another aspect that should be considered, namely the sonorous correspondent of the linguistic sign. The succession of graphemes and the whole shape thus formed do represent a major aspect of his poetic language, yet in some texts the euphonic level

²⁰ Ibid., p. 399.

must also be taken into consideration (despite the poet's preference for a form of euphony that, somehow paradoxically, does not function according to the so-called 'classical' principles of association).

The impression of disharmony, disorder or discontinuity and ambiguity reflects Cummings' poetics of reducing the incongruities between structural units and of making use of language as if it were some utterly flexible material. Besides, he also insists on the comic potential of his poetic language, which often derives from a sort of mockery at the very devices that he uses. When it comes to artistic creation, Cummings is less interested in the product than in the process, which may also be seen as 'an obsession with Making', which he believed to lie in the very nature of a poet.

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