

Modernism and Postmodernism Foregrounded: A Stylistic Analysis of E. E. Cummings Poems

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Abstract

E. E. Cummings' poetry has fascinated readers and critics since the first edition of his poems, primarily because of its unique and unusual style. Although he belongs to the modernist school of poets, with a literary consciousness and sensibility peculiar to the school, some critics still consider his poetry repetitive in themes and technique, and fail to see modernism and postmodernism as prominent features of his picture poems. This article stylistically analyses two of Cummings' poems, 'l(a)' and 'fl' in order to unravel the modern and postmodern themes and techniques instantiated in the poems through foregrounded deviations. The paper employs five types of foregrounded deviations: typographical, grammatical, lexical, semantic, and morphological as a theoretical framework—deviations proposed by Geoffrey Leech in A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry. The study finds the poems deviant to various degrees, in all five respects, and concludes that modernism and postmodernism are prominent features of the poems both in terms of themes and techniques; hence, style and meaning are embedded and complementary to each other in his poetry.

Keywords: Cummings, foregrounded, deviations, picture poems, modernism, postmodernism

Introduction

Cummings' poetry has been a rich source of debate for both his supporters as well as detractors both during his lifetime, and afterwards. Whether he is a genuinely modern poet, or a juggler playing with words without being seriously sensitive towards the issues, challenges, and demands of the 'modern' world and its different aesthetics, has been a question that critics have disputed over the years. According to Ansel (2012), Cummings is a modern poet irrespective of the detractors' judgment, some of whom think that Cummings is not a modern poet in the proper sense of the word.

Cummings is an artist who can likely be qualified as an iconoclast. He is an informed modernist whose poetry rests on the scaffolding of three major modernist principles: newness, immediacy, and difficulty (Ansel 2012). Critics have mostly focused on the experimental nature of his language and see Cummings as a "conspicuous member of the avant-garde" (Friedman 1996: 72), a modern movement with the motto "make it

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new” (ibid). Yet, the fragmented language of Cummings’ poetry was taken for granted by many of his early critics. His fragmented syntax not only makes Cummings’s poetry new but difficult and immediate as well. He mixes word order and re-writes words in a strange and ludicrous order to resist conventionality of poetics and to exhibit the nonconformity of his individual ideals (Kidder, 1979).

Critics have studied in detail the poet-painter combination of Cummings and how one craft informs the other in his work. The poet Cummings, Cohen (1987) says, cannot be understood without the aid of painting—an art that was equally dear to Cummings, especially in his early career. Cohen (1987) maintains that his poems express motion and are in motion on the page with a calculated spontaneity, with his use of “white space as the visual, and often thematic, complement of black ink” (p. 14). His strategically shaped and visual poetry, along with its concrete iconicity, has been interpreted by Cureton (1986: 245-277) as the expression of a self-reflexive text under the influence of Derridean deconstruction and post-modernism. Naserkhaki (2009) echoes other critics in stressing the importance of reading Cummings’ visual as well as aural complexities to place him as a significant modernist poet along the likes of Eliot and Pound. Flajšar and Vernyik (2009: 17-25) argue that the rules of temporality and spatiality have been willfully confused by Cummings in his visual poetics, though temporality is normally associated with text, and spatiality with painting. Cummings has disregarded such rules to make a creative use of the verbal mixed with the spatial. ‘Presence’ and ‘absence’ are represented through “visual form and blank space” (Webster 1999: 199-214) on the page. Moe (2011) observes that “Cummings shattered language, but he did so with precision” (p. 110); his linguistic disorder on the page looks extreme, which actually has pictorial and mathematical accuracy. Cao and Chen (2014) study the typographical deviations in Cummings’ poetry through their multimodal approach. They find Cummings’ visual semiotics equally meaningful if not more meaningful than the usual verbal semiotics we are accustomed to in poetry.

Stylisticians such as Azhar (2010: 32-40), who have explored the uncertainties of the English language in general, and Cummings’ language and deviations in particular, argue that despite its lexical and semantic deviations language can still perform the communicative function. Azhar displays how Cummings crafts a fresh language to convey his subtle and different poetic sense. Alfandary (2007: 111-121) investigates Cummings’ ‘ungrammar’ as a conscious strategy to deconstruct language and unleash the fluidity of meaning. Commenting on the metalingual effect of Cumming’s distorted linguistics, Alfandary notes that his “grammar reflects language, at the same time as it reflects upon language” (Ibid.). To her Cummings is a poet who is “both creative and critical” (Ibid.)—he is a creative artist and an acute critic of language and society through his poetry.

Despite the long history of Cummingsian scholarship, few scholars have delved deeply into the fabric of Cummings’ poetics to coherently study the highly deviant and foregrounded language of his poetry and to establish him as a ‘pre-postmodernist’

(Flajšar & Vernyik 2009). Huang-Tiller (2006) explores the metapoetic experiments of Cummings with the strict poetic definitions of the form—which had led certain famous artists of his time like William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot to abandon writing sonnets. He maintains that Cummings was a poet with “pre-postmodern consciousness” (2006: 156). However, few researchers have analysed modernism and postmodernism in Cummings’ poetry through a stylistic analysis, particularly, through the lenses of the foregrounding theory. Hence, this research is aimed at stylistically analyzing Cummings’ poems ‘l (a’ and ‘fl’, arguing that this ‘formally’ deviant poetics is modern and postmodern in meaning as well. It will be further argued how Cummings perceived conventional concepts of a self-determined, self-present, autonomous, and homogeneous ego as classic instances of ‘logocentrism’—a truth independent of how language, semiotics, and discourse(s) shape reality and knowledge (Derrida 1976: 18-19).

Foregrounding

Although the term ‘foregrounding’ is associated with Mukařovský (1970), a Czech language theorist, the idea it conveys is the continuation of Coleridge’s (1984) insightful critique on style and expression in poetry: true poet creates “the child’s sense of wonder and novelty” (p. 81) in things which years of familiarisation render ordinary. In the early twentieth century, the Russian formalist, Shklovsky (1921), opines that stylistic devices “create a special perception of the object—it creates a ‘vision’ of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it” (p. 18).

The foregrounding theory rests on the notion of a stable ‘norm’ in language, an idea that is questionable itself keeping in mind the great functional and structural varieties of a language. Deviation from the general norms of language outside a particular text is known as ‘external deviation’. Moreover, writers may not only foreground their choice of language against the standard norms of language, they may also foreground certain features within the same text by deviating from and breaking their own newly established linguistic norms—called ‘internal deviation’ (Jeffries & McIntyre 2010: 32). Foregrounding is the general principle behind all deviations in literature, but literature is not the only place where the theory of foregrounding is employed; artists, painters, composers, and even humourists use the idea for innovative and creative purposes. Leech (1969) argues that foregrounding is the element of surprise and interest which breaks the automatism of everyday usage. In poetry such artistic deviations “stand out” from the background “like a figure in the foreground of a visual field” (p. 57).

Analysis of the Poems

The analysis of the poems is aimed at answering two questions:

- (1) What are the different kinds of foregrounded deviations in Cummings’ poems?
- (2) How is modernism and postmodernism instantiated in Cummings’ poems through these deviations?

Although there are multiple kinds of foregrounded deviations in Cummings' poetry, the present study analyses two of his poems i.e. 'l(a)' and 'fl'. These poems are some of the most enigmatic instances of modern poetry whose complexity has puzzled critics over the years (Flajšar&Vernyik 2007). This study has explored and examined these deviations: graphological/typographical, grammatical, semantic, lexical, and morphological deviations.

Graphological / Typographical Deviations

'l(a)', unlike traditional poetry, does not move horizontally which is a serious break from stanzaic rules. The vertical stretch of the words as a spray of alphabets not only breaks the normal stanzaic rules, they also create an altogether different shape, a "brief description of autumn," where "the single leaf falling is a metaphor for both physical and spiritual isolation" (Kidder 1979: 200-201). It is "the most delicately beautiful literary construct that Cummings ever created" (Kennedy 1994: 463), imitating and representing nature, where form, content, and the reader are integrally involved (Martland 1985). Hood (1984) considers the poem inscrutable since he believes that poetry is primarily aural than visual; he reads the typographic complexities of the poem but cannot find his way through the labyrinth of the modernist aesthetics of Cummingsian verse. Contrary to what Hood says, Dumas (1974: 72-73) describes the poem as perfectly readable and legitimate, stressing the visual nature of the ideas reinforced in the poem through numerical and graphemic representations. Cummings uses "white space as the visual, and often thematic, complement of black ink" (Cohen, 1987: 14). The huge white space is contrasted with the narrow letters on the page. The visual shape of the falling lines or what can be seen as small units of mere alphabets embodies the notion of 'falling' (Flajšar&Vernyik 2009). It is a fall more like that of a falling autumn leaf whirling and winding in the air before it reaches the ground. This visual movement can be seen in the alternation of the alphabets "l (a)" and "le", 'af', and "fa" and the two parenthetical signs. The falling alphabets or pairs of alphabets not only read as "a leaf falls", they show how a leaf falls, lying flat at the end as suggested by the word "iness" which is longer in stretch than the rest of the lines/stanzas—it is hard to tell whether these are lines or stanzas or just individual letters. This may further suggest the 'fall' and deterioration of humankind towards 'iness' or because of our 'iness' or narcissism, which, in a way, is the bottom line of the depravity of the modern man and woman.

The abnormal or unusual spaces between the letters/lines/stanzas and words are again a violation of the rules of written language. The big gaps and spaces seem to convey the idea of estrangement in the modern world. The strange graphological distances define our abnormal relationships leading to "iness", "oneness", and "loneliness" (Asher 2012: 96), and these in turn create more distances and gaps among people.

The poem is notable for its lack of punctuation marks and unusual use of mechanics. There are no commas, no semi-colons, no full-stops and no proper spacing. It does not have a proper beginning and has no end at all. All the words are in lowercase.

Moreover, the alphabet “l” is confusing too since it can be read as a numerical ‘one’ (Klarer 2013: 42-43). Parentheses have been misused. Like most of Cummings’ poems, this one too is untitled.

Breaking punctuation rules is asking for a break with conventionalities—questioning, transforming, and defamiliarising the ‘word’ in order to transform the ‘world’. Having no title and being deviant according to all norms of prosody, the poem is anarchic in structure and probably in message. Directionless individuals are better off for Cummings than a well-guided orthodox society if such directionlessness can lead to individual freedom. “‘One’ness”, “iness” (Asher 2012), and individuality have not only been shown through words and the isolated letters, the alphabet ‘l’ can also be read as numerical ‘one’, thus, reinforcing the notion of individuality and singularity. For a traditionalist, the whole of the poem embodies anarchy, leading to the question ‘where do we come from and where are we going?’

The lowercase letters being a trademark of Cummings’ poetry is evident in the current poem also. These letters have been used for a special effect and contribute powerfully to the sense of the poem. The smallness of the letters suggests the smallness and pettiness of the people, or mankind in general. The general themes of degeneration, triviality, and deterioration are conveyed by using small alphabets.

The poem ‘l (a)’ is metalingual in a sense that the careful carelessness of word order and graphological distortions suggest a postmodern break with linguistic rules and the freedom of the signifier by avoiding ordinary graphology. The postmodern jubilation in ‘senselessness’ has been exhibited by hurling language into the air.

The poem ‘fl’ embodies broken graphology like ‘l (a)’. Heusser (1995: 16-30) argues that Cummings’ ‘picture-poems’ are puzzles for the critic and so is this one. He believes that these poems should not be dismissed as mere typographical tricks as some critics suggest. Like the previous one, this poem is typographically one of the most deviant of Cummings’ poems. Mocking the customary prosody, the short poem makes twenty five lines or may be the same number of stanzas. With larger blank spaces and broken words, two misplaced parentheses dividing the poem in two disjointed phrases, and a downward vertical movement, the poem has serious orthographic distortions. Fragmentation of the language represents the fragmented ‘self’ of the modern times and the dismemberment of a meaningful world and language into a postmodern decentred one.

A poem that can be read as “flattened dreamlessnesses wait spit) (these foolish shapes ccocoucoughcoughing with men more on than in them” (Tabakowska, Ljungberg & Fischer 2007:169) has “flattened” men, and their flattened shadows are mirrored throughout. The men in the poem are mere dreamy shadows, without any creative abilities and imaginative faculties. The otherwise broken letters, “tt”, “ene”, “dd”, “essn”, “esse”, “t) (t”, and “shsh”, have strong reflexive qualities or ‘shadows’ of

the 'personae'. Each of the men is shown to be identical, reduced to a mere "it" (line 10) with no human qualities. They are living dead. The "he" (line 14) and "apes" (line 25) criticise language as a gibberish culminating into a nonsensical cacophony of sounds, "ccocoucoughcoughcoughing" (lines 21-22), asking instead for silence, as suggested by "shsh" in line 19. The metalingual commentary of the poem, as was seen in the previous one, is very subtle and sarcastic. The blankness of the page reveals the themes of 'silence', 'void' and 'nothingness' as the real language of the 'self' in Cummings' poetry—themes which were famous with some of his contemporaries, for instance Beckett (Kane, 1984: 105). The white blanks provide a background for the nonlinear movement of the widely separated letters and foreground them while getting foregrounded in turn.

Grammatical Deviations

'1 (a)' may be observed as grammatically extremely deviant. There is a lack of an identifiable sequence or order into which the words can be grouped. Syntactically, the poem flouts all laws of traditional linguistics. Meaning has been undermined by breaking the words into haphazard units, in themselves making very little sense. The basic syntactic order of words in English is S(ubject) V(erb) O(bject) (Yule 2014: 98), and Cummings is violating this rule.

The broken grammar/'ungrammar' (Alfandary 2007: 111) of the poem suggests broken relationships. At the same time, the syntactic disconnectedness requires an effort to read the disjointed letters and to make sense out of the poem. The fractured leaf falls in loneliness in the poem and intervenes in between what can be read the initial "I" of the word "loneliness". So, the idea of disconnectedness has been aptly embodied.

Language itself has been shredded beyond common comprehension, as shown in the above grammatical and linguistic deviations. Language had already been shown as a fluid and arbitrary tool by structuralists and linguistic theorists like Ferdinand De Saussure (1916) early in the twentieth century, thus, paving the way for the latter structuralist and semiotic critics to question the validity and reliability of linguistic sense and meaning, or at least fixation of meanings (Chapman & Routledge 2009). Cummings goes further than the structuralists and sounds almost a radical post-structuralist critic questioning and defying all linguistic rules. The suspicion and incapacity of language as a communicative tool and the unreliability of linguistic 'sense' seem to be speaking at the heart of the poem. Moreover, the deviations on such a large scale, as shown above, may suggest the failure of rational and meaningful discourse in the wake of the atrocities of the world-wars in the so-called civilised West (Hiebert 2008: 213). No wonder sensitive authors like Cummings turned their preference to gibberish and broken language, as exhibited in the poem under discussion. Language has been practically shattered and bombed apart here.

Another important grammatical deviation is the use of certain parallel letters in the poem that have grammatical importance, but do not belong to the English system of grammar, although there is no conventional parallelism in the poem. On surface, no

grammatical, syntactic, verbal, and phonological parallelism can be found in the poem. Still, there is a great deal of unorthodoxly achieved parallelism when closely studied. Parallelism in the poem is dynamic, instantiated in linguistic deferral, and suggests as much of similarity as difference. The poem opens up with the French definite articles “l (a”, the definite feminine singular (where the parenthetical sign breaks the word into two alphabets “l” and “a”) and “le”, the masculine singular (Schmidt et al 2012:21). Cummings seems to have fully exploited this characteristic of duality of the definite articles in the French language, thus, not only killing meanings as far as English is concerned but creating new ones too. The binary opposition and parallelism can be observed in “l (a” and “le”, the following alternating “af” and “fa”, and the twin “ll”. A sense of symmetry, alternation, and difference is conveyed by what looks like a numerical “1” and the alphabetical “one” (Asher 2012). It is significant to see how the similarities and discrepancies finally lead to “iness”, “one”-ness and ‘nowhere’—since the poem does not end. It is essential to mention here that the poem is undeniably rich in its structure, although when mapped by traditional standards, it has got no structure at all; therefore, the meanings reached at here may be contradictory.

The poem’s commencement with the ruptured feminine “l (a” and the succeeding masculine “le” is fascinating to notice because their difference and similarity have also been shown in the rest of the alternating words, and in the general meaning of the poem as a shape withering, deteriorating, and falling towards a morbid “iness”. The male and female divide has been strongly suggested by choosing the French definite articles and by rupturing the feminine article through the intervention of the parenthetical sign “l (a”.

Furthermore, a break with conventionality and traditionalism is a powerful theme running through the short poem. Cummings could not see human beings confined and enslaved in the name of civilisation. He always hated mass thought, orthodoxy, and commercialism as a threat to individual freedom and talent. This is what is suggested by the defiance against the traditional rules of grammar.

Similarly, in ‘fl’ the foregrounded ‘ungrammar’ of Cummings’ poetry is deeply rooted. There are only two punctuational signs—two inverted parentheses, i.e. “)(”. He liberates language and meaning from conventional shackles by playing with both the form and mechanics of the language. There is no regard for the grammatical rules of capitalisation likewise and no respect for syntax. The “dreamlessnesses” seems to have no subject at all in the first part of the poem. “[f]latteneddreamlessnesses” is a personified subject of the first part and “These foolish shapes” is subject of the second part: both the constructions reveal the unimaginative and foolish behaviour of the “men” (lines 22-23) in the very grammar of their subjecthood. The small “i” stands alone symbolising, as usual, singularity, humility, and individuality in Cummings (Bloom, 2003:12). The deviant punctuation, syntax, and capitalisation have reduced language to a mere spitting and coughing in the poem.

Semantic Deviations

'1(a)' is semantically very complex: it makes a lot of meaning and no meaning at the same time. The vertical sentence is open-ended and the words are grammatically shredded. Semantics has little role to play in the interpretations of the poem; it is rather the absence of semantics which foregrounds the poem itself. The study of reading the words, symbols, signs, sentences, and their relationships does not apply here in the ordinary sense: it is conspicuous by absence. The language is too deeply structured/unstructured for a semanticist to make sense of it; thus, it reinforces the themes of senselessness and the suspicion of language as a tool for total understanding, as a natural consequence of the studies in postmodern linguistics, where the signifier is barred from the signified (Chapman & Routledge 2009).

Semantic deviations in 'fl' are extraordinary in nature. The obvious 'nonsense' of the poem and its metaphors is precisely what constitutes great poetry. "[c]cocoucoughcoughing", "apes" and "spit" are metaphors exposing the abject or ugly sides of human life, associated with the men in the poem. The poem is deviant not only on word level but on sentence level as well. "flattened dreamlessnesses wait spit)" could mean nothing as an ordinary sentence but in poetry it does come handy. Here "flatteneddreamlessnesses" is an abstract subject that may stand for men who are useless and unimaginative. A new phrase has been coined to poetically represent their shadows-like figures, that only "wait" and "spit". The second half, "(these foolish shapes ccocoucoughcoughing with men more on than in them" again calls the subject of the previous part "foolish shapes" or "apes" whose speech is as abhorrent as coughing; they are better off silent as suggested by the "shsh" sounds. Though we may try to make more meanings out of the broken verses, their unmeaning is the most striking quality in the poem.

Lexical Deviations

It is believed that poets have the poetic license of making and breaking morphological, lexical, and syntactic rules. Cummings is famous for his neologism and lexical nuances, using various techniques such as strange affixation and functional conversion of word classes (Adams 1997). However, the poems under discussion are lexically deviant to different degrees.

In '1(a)' there is no striking example of conventional lexical deviations. While some parts of the poem fall inside parenthetical signs, others fall outside. The word "loneliness" which falls within the parenthetical signs and the phrase "a leaf fall outside the parentheses—where the phrase gives us three classes of words, the indefinite article followed by a noun and the third person singular form of a verb—in themselves do not exhibit lexical deviation. But the way the poem is written is a striking neologism in itself where words are vertically created instead of writing them horizontally. As a whole, we may see the poem consisting of four words blown apart into mere letters, seemingly a strong opposition to traditional classification of words themselves, which generates a strong criticism of linguistic rules.

There are two great examples of lexical innovations/neologisms or deviations in 'fl'. "[d]reamlessnesses" and "ccocoucoughcoughcoughing" are neologisms created by Cummings to convey his repugnance of the grammatical subjects in the poem. The former is an abstract noun used in plural form that cannot 'wait' or 'spit'; the latter is again an abstract noun with a 'functional transference', that is, it is used as a present participle. Again, "foolish shapes" cannot cough, which is another lexical eccentricity. By lexically unhinging the poem and coining ambiguous words ready to be changed from "apes" into "shapes", Cummings bars us from any finality of lexemes, sense, and meaning. The formlessness, fluidity, and disjunction of the verses defy sense, but by default lead to absolute freedom—the celebration of meaninglessness, the loss of meaning—and pluralism of meaning.

Morphological Deviations

In 'l(a)' morphology has been questioned since none of the constructions apart from "one" and "iness" makes sense morphologically. The reader is faced with great difficulty while reading the poem because all but one line consists of clusters of letters without making any meaningful morphemes. The broken morphology of the graphemes, "ll", "le", "af", "fa" and the rest of the letters in a way imitate a child's learning stages of the morphemes of a language on the one hand (David 2000: 272), and show a rebellion against language itself, in the same breath, by unmaking morphological units instead of making them. Putting morphology to test is like putting the very logic of meaning and meaning-making to test since morphemes are the building-blocks of words and the smallest meaning-making units.

This morphological distortion of the rules of language in a way suggests social breakdown. There are no laws and rules to be followed as anarchy has been embodied through the morphological lawlessness in the poem. No doubt, one would look for such recurrent themes in Cummings and other post-war poets who had lived through the battering days of the war-stricken West.

Turning to 'fl', in the first part, "a" and "it" seem to be the only two meaningful morphological units of language. The second part has more morphemes but those are enjambed into each other and evade a clear grasp and smooth reading. The neologism "ccocoucoughcoughcoughing" may be deviant morphologically like the rest of the poem, because all the twenty-five lines consist of very few morphemes, and the strange words suggest the creative and generative power of language. It further proposes language to be a dynamic system where meanings are created every moment not just simply fixed by certain usages. Thus, the deviant and dynamic morphology of Cummings is metalingual in function.

Conclusion

Studying the modern and the postmodern elements in two of Cummings' poems through the lenses of the foregrounding theory and deviations, this paper has found the poems

stylistically as well as thematically deviant. Stylistically the poems are deviant in all five respects: typographical, grammatical, semantic, lexical, and morphological. The poems run vertically on the page instead of the wonted horizontal movement in prosodic and orthographic traditions. None of the poems has got a title. The language of the poems is fragmented and shredded. The visual poetics at work embody defamiliarisation and strangeness—the thesis statements of the foregrounding theory. The ‘ungrammar’, that is, deviant grammar or absence of grammar, abounds the poems; syntax is deranged and flouted. The deferral of meaning has been observed as a technique in the fractured poems bespeaking the deconstructive process at work.

Thematically, too, the poems have been found richly immersed in modernism and postmodernism. Modernist thoughts like avant-gardism, immediacy, difficulty, bricolage, metalinguistics, fragmentation, disillusionment, and existential dilemmas have been substantiated through the aforementioned deviations. Similarly, the postmodernist thoughts and techniques of writing such as formlessness, disjunction, fluidity of meanings, groundlessness, arbitrariness, play on language, the ‘death of the author’, meaninglessness, and the ruptured relation of the signifier and signified are strongly suggested by the analysis of the poems.

The dismantling of language, society, self, relations, and norms suggest not only the individualism and freedom that Cummings cherished but the disturbing and gloomy aspects of modernist ‘loneliness’, ‘iness’, coldness, and dysfunctionality too. The analysis of these poems reveals an absolute disregard for rules and norms of language and a complete sense of freedom which are prominent features of postmodernist poetry.

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