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Still Life with a Machine: E.E. Cummings's Typewriter Poems

Typography is such a formidable problem that some poets . . . stay with the typewriter and try to make its peculiar qualities organic to the meaning in their poem.

Mary Ellen Solt

When I was into typewriter concrete, it was as much that I was into the typewriter as a tool of the writer — as an extension of the writer.

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1. A Curiosity Breeding Little Joker

When in 1874 Mark Twain bought his Remington Model I, he did not suspect that the machine invented in 1843 by Charles Thurber would struggle for popular recognition. Accordingly, when he consigned to his publisher the printout of Tom Sawyer, he was probably unaware that the first typescript in the history of literature was to set a standard for the professional writers to come, as the mocking note that accompanied the text suggests:

GENTLEMEN: PLEASE DO NOT USE MY NAME IN ANY WAY,
PLEASE DO NOT EVEN DIVULGE THE FACT THAT I OWN A
MACHINE, I HAVE ENTIRELY STOPPED USING THE
TYPEWRITER, FOR THE REASON THAT I NEVER COULD

WRITE A LETTER WITH IT TO ANYBODY WITHOUT RECEIVING A REQUEST BY RETURN MAIL THAT I WOULD NOT ONLY DESCRIBE THE MACHINE BUT STATE WHAT PROGRESS I HAD MADE IN THE USE OF IT, ETC., ETC. I DON'T LIKE TO WRITE LETTERS, AND SO I DON'T WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW THAT I OWN THIS CURIOSITY BREEDING LITTLE JOKER.

YOURS TRULY,
SAML L. CLEMENS. (Kittler 192-3)

Thirty-three years later, when the more efficient Model II had long introduced the flexible lowercase option and the Underwood company its innovative device for visual control of the output, none other than Henry James started his second career as the *dictator* of his work to Theodora Bosanquet. In the words of Friedrich Kittler, the most immediate consequence of this memorable event was that, from then on, the author "shifted his famous, circumlocutionary style of novel writing toward *Remingtonese*" (216). That James, who didn't like the machine on a matter of principle, was soon emulated by his machine-enthusiast friend Edith Wharton — who, in turn, took delight in dictating to a male typist — is not surprising. That he fell victim of "a reflex loop," so that "only the clanking of the typewriter induced sentences in the writer" (Kittler 216), however, is telling of the paradigmatic shift brought about in modern times by the new technological scenario.

In a few years, the belated habit of using typists as mechanized secretaries was gradually dropped in favor of a more efficient one-to-one relationship with the machine and, but for some notable exceptions,¹ the typewriter became as indispensable to the writer as the pen or the pencil had been in the past. Although the latter were never completely superseded by the former, the image of the professional writer grew gradually closer to that of the reporter, who

exerted an iron-grip control over word-processing, thanks to the fact that "the advent of the typewriter" brought about "an indication of how many words will fit on the page" (Smith 12). Out of this functional approach, which appealed mostly to novelists and essayists, one figure at the beginning of the century stands out as the pioneer who employed the machine in the uncharted territory of poetry almost single-handedly. Although he may not have been "the first significant poet to compose on a typewriter" (Gioia, "Manuscripts" 17), by using the machine as his privileged means of composition Edward Estlin Cummings inaugurated a practice that would not see any significant development until the advent of postwar visual and "sound" poetry.

2. The Poet as Typist

Cummings began to experiment with his Royal typewriter very soon, as his pieces in the 1917 *Eight Harvard Poets* anthology confirm. Apparently, he was fascinated by the opportunities that the mechanics of wordprocessing offered to his reflections on prosody and spacing prompted by the discovery of Pound's "The Return" in his college years. The young poet, who in a 1957 letter to Charles Norman still acknowledged the debt to his elder fellow,² was probably struck by the typographical rendition of Pound's peculiar and, at that time, unusual prosody. According to Richard Kennedy, to him this "freedom of spacing represented a release from formal bonds, and he saw, as he sat at the family typewriter trying out visual arrangements, that there were immense possibilities for expressiveness in the combinations and the separations of the words on the page" (107).

Cummings had meanwhile started all sorts of verbal experiments with codes borrowed mainly — although not exclusively

— from painting and music. He conceived a system of correspondences between colors, sounds and the alphabet which, partly reminiscent of both French symbolist poetry and Apollinaire's Orphism, soon converged into a highly original conflation of Scriabin's theory of correspondences, the poetics of the Synchronists and, of course, Pound's Imagist and Vorticist credo (Cohen 195-209). As a result of his growing interest in the interrelations of the arts, Cummings started to "subvert all the conventions of punctuation, capitalization, and syntax" (Kennedy 110) and, between June 1916 and January 1917, "[w]hile he waited for answers to letters about jobs," he "was free to play with his typewriter and to investigate further all the relationships among the new arts to which he had so recently been exposed" (Kennedy 115).

Among the formal experiments that didn't find their way to publication, there is at least one instance of reversed writing order — i.e., a text whose words are written from right to left — a number of poems featuring arrangements in vertical or diagonal rows according to aural correspondences among clusters of vowel and consonant sounds, and different versions of the same fragments characterized by the endless relocation of the lines over the page. These early samples, which laid down the foundation of Cummings's future experiments with the pulviscular aspects of visual composition, have in common the exhilarating effect produced by the mechanical spacing of the typewriter on the poet's compositional habits. Far from being the constrictive prison that its automatic functioning may suggest, the machine helped the author solve his problems with both verbal disposition and syntactical consistency, two concerns that accompanied him throughout his career. Not that the writer ever relinquished manuscript composition; on the contrary, there is plenty of evidence not only that he conceived diagrams and early drafts in his handwriting, but also that he often adorned the

typewritten text of his poems with drawings and calligraphic notes. In neat opposition to Apollinaire,³ however, Cummings consciously erased all the traces of what Stanley Kunitz would call the kinetic dimension of writing,⁴ and in the end, nothing but the bare typescripts found their way to publication. With the presence of the medium so neatly inscribed in the very texture of his work, any discussion of Cummings's typography should start from a survey of the techniques that he derived from the typewriter. Given for granted that no taxonomy can effectively do justice to a set of strategies meant to "prevent the sort of reading which vapourizes words into concepts, and give his poem the status of objects whose specific features must be attended to" (Korg 196), it is useful to group all the "visual features of typography that have no exact equivalents in speech" (Gioia, "Manuscripts" 17) in the three broad categories of spacing, punctuation and lettering — the latter including "lower- and upper-case letters, visual symbols (like &, \$, and %), arabic and roman numbers ... and abbreviation" (ibid. 17).

3. Spacing

The first thing to consider in the work of a poet and painter is that the page tends to be used as a canvas and, therefore, as a unit of composition. Consequently, with the exception of some juvenilia, Cummings's poetry almost never stretches beyond the folio. Either in the traditional form of the sonnet or in the organic format of the poem-picture, his poems are short and, more often than not, have plain, simple texts. At least at first impact, the reader is startled more by the idiosyncrasy of his typography than by the use of "deviant morphology," as Richard Cureton calls the poet's "uninhibited, consistent, and effective deviation from accepted norms of syntax" (213). Therefore, spacing performs a central role in the service of the

example — where, to be sure, punctuation also plays a central role — is the following portrait (CP 201):

(one!)

the wisti-twisti barber
 —pole is climbing

people high,up-in

tenements talk.in sawdust Voices

a:whispering drunkard passes

The spiralling progress of the barber-pole, which establishes a neat parallel with the drunkard's walk, orients the reader's perception of the poem toward the up and down of the page *and* suggests movement in the three-dimensional space of the scene. Although the text reads with ease, line-break and the peculiar use of spacing contribute to its moderate and yet irreducible degree of uncertainty which derives from the contrast between the singular connotation of the first-line title and the "synaesthetic reduplication" (Anderson 255) of the "wisti-twisti barber/-pole," i.e.: is the "one" a real barber-pole or a drunken barber, say, of Polish⁵ descent? Or does the first-line title suggest that the event occurs when a chime strikes "one!" (a.m./p.m.)? And so forth. No matter what the poet had in mind, here as elsewhere the effects produced by the cunning use of spacing - from verticalization to double spacing, the shifting of the line or its zig-zagging course — are all by-products of the typewriter's carriage.

4. Punctuation

Another side-effect of composing with the aid of the typewriter is the reassessment of punctuation from prosodic marker to stand-alone semantic unit. Cummings's *ars punctandi* is in the first place a rediscovery of the pictorial value of signs that could have been hardly possible, had he chosen to stick to the pen(cil). In the first place, the author "is fond of using a graduated series of marks . . . to control the lightness and rapidity, the heaviness or slowness, of the reading, or even, in a figurative way, to give a visual sense of progression and development as an equivalent of the meaning" (Friedman 114). Then, as if to anticipate the secondary orality of chat-lines and cell-phones, Cummings's plunge into the iconicity of diacritical signs results in a polysemic construct that is all the more astonishing because of the economy of its means. With simple combinations of parenthesis, dash, comma, colon, semicolon, period, question and exclamation mark, he is able to provide the reader with an imagery that verges on a pre-verbal stage of human experience, as in the two final stanzas of the poem dedicated to dancer Jimmy Savo (CP 471):

ji
 &
 jim,jimm
 ;jimmy

s:
 A
 V
 o(
 .
 :
 ;
 ,

Cummings's awareness of the iconic potential of punctuation — in addition to its obvious syntactic value — grows slowly but steadily from poetic principle to self-referential quotation before being fully explored creatively. Therefore, if in 1922 he writes about "in the strenuous briefness" (CP 108) that "it is a supreme pleasure to have done something FIRST - and 'roses & hello' also the comma after 'and'('and,ashes') are Firsts" (SL 71), in the almost contemporary "window go orange in the slowly." he closes the text with the lines (CP 103):

(ta-te-ta
in a parenthesis!said the moon
)

Cummings's unmitigated "graphemic autology" (Anderson 25), an anticipation of the much-quoted finale of "since feeling is first" ("for life's not a paragraph // And death i think is no parenthesis," CP 291 — where, consistently, the parenthesis does *not* appear) suggests that, despite the visual translation of the half-moon into punctuation, here the new medium is incorporated in the message through the aged and hardly imagistic metaphor of the writing act. Needless to say, the metonymic potential of the parenthesis is better exploited in later texts. The following positive recast in haiku-like form of Blake's "The Sick Rose" — not surprisingly, a belated homage to a much-admired poet-and-painter — is an effective example of the power exerted by a single punctuation mark on the whole organization of the poem. In addition to its strong iconic value (so that the inside/out relationship between the bee and the rose is first reproduced in the parenthetical phrase, then doubled in the *carmen figuratum* which emerges when the poem is rotated 90° left), the parentheses bridge between two

separate and yet intertwined simultaneous texts (CP 691):

un(bee)mo

vi

n(in)g

are(th

e)you(o

nly)

asl(rose)eep

5. Lettering

Cummings's idiosyncratic notation of the first person singular pronoun is at the same time the most famous and the less remarkable case of his creative exploitation of typefaces and their relationship to graphic conventions. No less interesting, for instance, is the use of the ampersand, whose rejection by the publisher Thomas Selzer from his first book of poetry prompted the writer to title "&" his next privately printed volume. & gathers together the erotica that had been expunged from *Tulips and Chimneys* because of the editorial fear of censorship; had Cummings's original proposal been accepted, then the latent iconicity of the ampersand would have worked as all anticipation of the typographical novelties contained in the book through the visual translation of the knotted sexual symbols of chimney and *two-lips*. Back to the infamous "lowercase i," however, it is fair to maintain that its discovery depends at least in part on the play on the uppercase/lowercase device of the typewriter. Besides various degrees of iconism (as in the beautiful

homage to Apollinaire "theraIncomIn," CP 348), Cummings's exploitation of this elementary effect presents the reader with multiple readings (the opening of "in Just — / spring," CP 27), unprecedented synaesthesia (the raising pitch of the "sawdust Voices" in the already discussed "one! "), or straightforward parallels (the chain Buffalo Bill/Jesus/Mister Death, to quote from another poem that has already been dealt with). Lettering is also put in the service of movement (the wings of a "poor But TerFLY," CP 322) or stasis (the crystal-like structure of "n I OthI / n / I g can / I s / urPas / s // the m // y / SterR / y // of // s / tilLnes / s," CP 814), and the dance of the alphabet can identify among other things natural phenomena — like light, from the pale twinkling of a star ("bRight," CP 455, where also the alternate reading "be right" is possible) to sudden lightning ("THuNdeRB / loSSo!M iN," CP 348, with a transparent simultaneity of imagery) —, or stress cultural ones ("by the way Pay the," CP 266). Since the list could stretch out almost indefinitely, it is probably more appropriate to end the discussion on the overall influence of the keyboard on Cummings's typographic pieces by reading the following representative poempicture (CP 655):

(im)c-a-t(rno)

b,i;l:e

FalleA

ps!fl

OattumbII

sh?dr

IftwhilrF

(U!)(1Y)

&&&

away wanders:exact
ly;as if
not
hing had,ever happ
ene

D

Nowhere is the uniqueness of Cummings's achievement at the typewriter clearer than in the comparison of his work to that of his contemporaries. A case in point is William Carlos Williams, who "kept a typewriter in his office to write between patients when a paper and pen would have been more convenient" (Gioia, "Manuscripts" 17). Williams was extremely careful with both punctuation and spacing, authored a fine piece on the same subject, and yet said of "(im)c-a-t(mo)": "I would reject it as a poem. It may be, to him [i.e., Cummings], a poem. But I would reject it. I can't understand it. He's a serious man. So I struggle very hard with it — and I get no meaning at all" (396). Williams' statement sounds odd for a number of reasons, especially if we think of his own cat poem; in addition to the strong figurative suggestion emanating from the visual arrangement of the stanzas (do they represent the eat's paws?), according to Hugh Kenner the text draws a parallel between a eat's leap and the the acrobatic act of writing a poem about the very same event (398-9):

Poem

As the cat
climbed over
the top of

the jamcloset
 first the right
 forefoot

carefully
 then the hind
 stepped down
 into the pit of
 the empty
 flowerpot

Of course, neither the text nor the context of Cummings's poem is mysterious. The writer himself describes the hero of his fascinating portrait as "a relaxed 'c-a-t'; a creature motionlessly alive" (SL 231); "an *immobile* cat" who "suddenly puts on an acrobatic act" (SL 268), "after which, he wanders away looking exactly as if nothing had ever happened... whereas, for me, the whole universe has turned upside-down in a few moments" (SL 231). The authorial comment, however, is silent on the story told by lettering, spacing and punctuation, which is what Williams probably considered the anti-poetic elements of the text, but at the same time it is also what makes the poem unique. To begin with, the layout suggests a different reading of the opening lines, i. e., "i'm cat, mobile," where the temporary motionless squatting feline, iconically evoked by the microfigurative rendition of the word *c-a-t*, is so to speak *already* moving. In other words, the poem picture exploits the inner tension between the animal's intimate nature and his transient situation in such a way that the reader is reminded of the dialectic between the compositional process and the final product, i.e., the poem. Therefore, after "a series of crazily acrobatic antics" (SL 231) that are visible in the sudden apparition of uppercase letters and triple

ampersand — here an obvious iconic double of the animal — the dynamism of the action freezes for a moment in the poempicture that emerges from its 90° rotation to the right, with uppercase D suggesting the cat's head, before the vertical posture of the animal lets it move again as he "FalleA / ps" and "away wanders."

6. Typescript to Typesetting and Beyond

Despite its relentless exploitation, Cummings's relationship with the typewriter is problematic to say the least. On the one hand, the enormous range of opportunities offered by the machine helped him address the problems of composition in a perspective that can be easily called revolutionary. From this point of view, his position is even more radical than the one expressed by Charles Olson in *Projective Verse* as late as 1950, i.e.,

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the conventions of rhyme and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (Solt 48)

Whereas Olson's concern with the performative dimension of poetry leads him to look for a system of notation that, in the Williams-and-Pound tradition, focused on breathing and the spoken word, Cummings prized the visual even more than the aural. In addition to the fact that he obviously paid attention to *melos*, and "use[d]

typography as a guide for the reading of his poems" (Heusser 241), in his own words, "not all of my poems are to be read aloud — some ... are to be seen & not heard" (SL 267).

On the other hand, a comparison between his achievement and that of the international movement of "*poésie concrète*, that pure form of *typewriting poetry*" (Kittler 229) shows how his typography "is still remarkably conventional" (Heusser 243). Contrary to the mechanical signature of the so-called typewriter poem, for instance, Cummings's devices are never aimed at introducing provocative elements of instability in the resulting text. As Martin Heusser correctly observes, in his corpus "The letter as a minimal unit, for instance, is never touched. There are no partial letters, no crossed out letters, no rotated letters, not even misaligned letters" (243). And the same can be said about the use of typeface - "that of his typewriter" (Heusser 243) — of type effects, and of the general organization of his texts.

Why is that so? In the first place, the work of "a most painstaking craftsman" who, according to Max Nanni, could go "through roughly 230 manuscript and typescript versions" (211) of a poem like "un(bee)mo" is conceptually remote from most iconoclastic procedures of contemporary visual poetry. He neither improvises, nor "arranges letters on a page at random, punching the keys of his typewriter with his head turned away" (Heusser 243). In fact, despite the inclusion of "brIght" in Mary Ellen Solt's 1968 anthology *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, Cummings's poem-pictures are only distant relatives of, say, Pierre Garnier's *poèmes mécaniques* — where the typewriter is employed for its immediacy of effect, so that the resulting text can be considered a variation on the Surrealist notion of automatic writing — or Dom Sylvester Houedard's *typestracts* realized in different ink colors on an Olivetti Lettera 32 (Pignotti and Stefanelli 158-9).

Secondly, the American poet considered the typescript not the point of arrival of his work but rather the necessary intermediate stage between the process of composition and printing. Contrary to the underground mimeographic small presses that throughout the Sixties and the Seventies contributed to low-cost circulation of visual poetry, the readership of Cummings's poems depended on books, magazines and reviews. Consequently, in the published versions of his poems all the traces of typescript composition are erased, whereas in the typewriter concrete genre they are proudly exhibited as such. Since he was not interested in reproducing the exact layout of his typescripts, he seems to have been content to maintain a topological correspondence between his small press versions and the final book format.⁶ Last, but not least, whereas many contemporary visual poets have direct control of the output because of their first-hand experience either as graphic designers (like Max Bill and Eugen Grominger) or typesetters (like Hansjorg Mayer and bp Nichol), Cummings had none. Hence his endless quarrels with typographers and publishers⁷ ever since his first published poem featured one dropped word, and his lifelong mistrust of typesetters — with the notable exception of S. A. Jacobs, "the printer who had come to be his special typesetter" (Kennedy 308).

Finally, one more variable should be taken into account in the evaluation of Cummings's overall approach to the new technology of writing implemented with the typewriter. Together with the adoption of the machine as a privileged medium for composition, ill fact, the writer relies systematically upon a set of graphic conventions dating back to the heroic age of typography. It is particularly interesting, for instance, that he constantly avoided spacing before and after punctuation in keeping with the regular practice of William Caxton's beautiful early editions. Faced with contradictory visual information, the reader of his poetry

experiences semiotically what she already understands semantically, i.e. that even the most extreme instances of Cummings's modernist style "cannot mask his arch-Romanticism" (Gioia, "Cummings" 163). As if to mirror the ebb and flow of the man, in his work the typewriter becomes the totemic mark of a poetics of the divided self where spiritual anarchism meets retrograde conservatism. Paradoxically, then, through the machine Cummings came to the rescue of a tradition against which the likes of Pounds and Williams — purportedly his allies in the Modernist rejection of past conventions — fought strenuously throughout their lives. Nevertheless, without the "intermediate thing between a tool and a machine, almost quotidian and hence unnoticed" (Kittler 183) of Heidegger's celebrated definition, he would have hardly achieved any "breaking-up of the traditional linear presentation" (Heusser 273) of the poem. And this, beyond all contradictions, is Cummings's greatest contribution to the poetry of the Twentieth century.

NOTES

1. According to Elizabeth Nowell, Thomas Wolfe, who worked so to speak by word count, was "the most completely un-mechanical of men and never knew how to operate a typewriter" (Kittler 217).
2. "I shall never forget the thrill I experienced on first reading 'The Return'" (SL 254).
3. Throughout his life Cummings denied that his poetry had much to do with the visual experiment of the French poet. After all, as Jakob Korg correctly points out in his discussion of modernist typography, "[u]nlike Apollinaire's printing experiments, which use a wide variety of printing devices, Cummings's are a creation of the typewriter" (194).

4. "I'm a physical being and resent this sedentary business of sitting at one's desk and moving only one's wrist. I pace, I space my poems, I get very kinetic when I'm working... When I insist on poetry as a kind of action, I am thinking very much in these terms — every achieved metaphor in a poem is a gesture of sorts, the equivalent of slashing of a stroke on canvas" (quoted in Gioia, "Manuscripts" 2).

5. In the famous sonnet "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls," for instance, there occurs the line "delighted fingers knitting for the is it the Poles?" (CP 115).

6. The idea of choosing a monospaced font for his books in order to cope with the problem, for instance, never dawned upon him.

7. Here is a typical letter to a publisher: "Dear Mr—, if I could make you realize how an artist feels when his work is mutilated by the very person he trusted to cherish it, you would be a wiser and a sadder man. If I were a killer, you'd be in Hell now. Being only myself, am trying as hard as I can to forgive you. But don't commit the blunder of reviving your crime" (SL 187).

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