

POETS' LOYALTY TO POETIC CONVENTION

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Abstrak

Karya ilmiah ini merupakan hasil dari studi pustaka tentang inovasi dalam penulisan puisi. Dalam tulisan ini penulis membandingkan para penyair yang menjunjung tinggi bentuk-bentuk sajak yang setia pada kaidah-kaidah konvensional dengan penyair-penyair yang 'melanggar' kaidah-kaidah konvensional dalam penulisan sajak. Disini penulis menggambarkan usaha-usaha yang dilakukan oleh para penyair pada zaman awal penciptaan sajak di Inggris dimana para penyair sangat menjunjung tinggi unsur rime dalam sajak-sajak mereka. Dengan berjalannya waktu, ada beberapa penyair yang tidak lagi menghiraukan bunyi atau rime yang enak didengar baik rime yang ada di awal, di tengah, maupun di akhir bait. Mereka justru berinovasi, yaitu dengan menulis sajak-sajak yang 'memanjakan' mata dan tidak lagi mempedulikan telinga. Salah satu penyair inovatif yang karya-karyanya dijadikan sebagai sumber utama pembahasan dalam makalah ini adalah sajak-sajak Edward Estlin Cummings. Penyair ini dijadikan sebagai fokus dari tulisan ini karena dia adalah penyair yang paling banyak 'melanggar' tata cara dalam menulis sajak-sajaknya. Apakah kita harus menyanjungnya sebagai penyair yang paling inovatif sangat tergantung pada konsep kita tentang sebuah sajak; apakah sebuah sajak itu adalah sebuah tulisan yang harus dibaca dengan bersuara dan didengarkan dengan enak atau sebuah tulisan yang hanya bermakna bila dipandang dan dinikmati tanpa suara seperti halnya sebuah gambar atau lukisan?

Key words: poems, convention, innovation, poetic devices, ear, eye, rhyme, shape

INTRODUCTION

This library research is concerned with innovation in poetry, particularly the works of Edward Estlin Cummings (1894 – 1962), an American virtuoso who is a significant figure in the development of modern American poetry. His collections of poems, to mention but a few, include 'Tulips and Chimneys' (1923), "And" (1925), "41 Poems" (1925) and "95 Poems" (1958). The most typical feature of his poems is the physical appearance on the printed page. Unlike most poets who stick to the strict principal principles of poetic rhymes and metres, Cummings strays from the constraints of traditional convention. He even disregards syntactic, lexical, and typographical rules in his artful poetic experiment. However, it is this 'rebellion' that has earned him a world reputation in literature.

POETRY FOR THE EAR

Ever since the dawn of human civilization, to a greater or less extent, human beings have been interested in literature. The first well-known literature in England presumably dated back to the sixth century AD. Among the three most common forms of literature that we know today, namely poetry, drama, and novel, we can undoubtedly point to poetry as the first literary form that literary men formed. It is widely believed that Geoffrey Chaucer was the pioneer in poetry-writing in England. Chaucer wrote in Anglo-Saxon, the language from which Old English, Middle English, and Modern English originated. Here is an excerpt of a revised version taken from Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales':

When that our host had heard this sermoring,
He gan to speak as lordly as a King:
He saidē 'What amounteth all this wit?
What shall we speak all day of holy writ?

The devil made a Reeve for to preach,
And a cobbler a shipman or a leech!
Say forth thy tale, and tarry not the time,
Lo, Depford, and it is halfway prime.
Lo Greenewich, there many a shrew is in;
It were all time thy tale to begin.'

It is worthwhile to know at least a little about the earliest form of literature and what it was like as well as how it was conducted in order to be able to discuss its development and innovation properly.

It is generally assumed that poetry was not written down but it was handed down orally from one generation to the next. Thus, Chaucer's works that we have today were not written on paper let alone published during his life. It is certain that his works were posthumously published since we know that paper was invented in China long after the death of Chaucer and William Caxton invented the printing machine in England in 1477. What is the point in discussing whether the earliest poetry was literally in black and white or only recited? It should be emphasized that apart from the other poetic devices, rhyme played a key role in those days. Poetry was definitely intended to be heard. Only by listening to a recital of it, were people able to enjoy its beauty. Moreover, since it was not written down, it should have been more melodic to compensate for 'the visually missing elements'.

I do not think it necessary to enumerate poets' names since it is a well-known fact that from Chaucer's time to the Elizabethan Age, except for William Shakespeare, who used blank verse in his poetic plays, all the English poets conformed to the 'poetic laws of sound devices'. Hence, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and miscellaneous kinds of end rhymes must surely be found in their verse. The need for composing beautiful and appropriate rhyme is not 'much ado about nothing' since a poem was really intended to create beautiful, either harmonious or disharmonious, sounds that are pleasant for the ear to hear. There would really be no point in creating an alliteration of successive *s* sounds, *l* sounds or *f*, *b*, and *s* sounds to imitate the sounds of the whispering wind, the lake water by the shore, and the fast-moving of a sailing ship respectively if a poem were meant only for the eye to spy! Consider Yeats' verse 'I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore'. The *l* sounds in the words *lake*, *lapping*, and *low*, 'make a pleasant, liquid sound' (Lewis: 30) that in fact correspond with the meaning.

Poets also manipulate delicate metre or poetic rhythm in order to dedicate it to the ear. Some poets use iambic, trochaic, anapaestic or dactylic metres, others delight in employing spondaic, pyrrhic, or amphibrach rhythm. Both rhyme and rhythm, the former being much more prominently used, continued to be glorious even after the emergence of blank verse.

Shakespeare's use of blank verse, pentametre without rhymes, was the first to 'violate' the rhyme schemes in the English poetic drama. In the Introduction to Shakespeare's *Othello*, it is stated: '... and the earliest English drama, which is almost entirely in verse (as indeed is most literature till well after Shakespeare's time)' (Lott: xxv) However, the truth is not that Shakespeare feels stuck in the rut. He deliberately uses five-foot iambic unrhymed verse to good purpose. When employing blank verse, the Bard must have been aware of the fact that 'Metrical form also helps to make lines memorable, and to give added emotional power to the words by playing off the natural pause of the speaking voice according to the sense of the words against the pause demanded by the metrical pattern.' (Lott: xxv) Thus, the absence of the rhyme is recompensed by the quite regular Iambic pentametre which has a function of its own.

Innovation in poetry later also took place in the forms of poems with the creation of, for instance, elegy, epic, limerick, lyric, ottava rima, rondeau, ode, ballad, sonnet and even vers libre. As far as sonnet is concerned, we must also refer to Shakespeare who innovated a new form of sonnet commonly referred to as the Shakespearean sonnet, or the Elizabethan sonnet or English sonnet. Instead of imitating Petrarch, an Italian sonneteer who used an octave rhyming *abba abba* and a sestet of 3 free rhymes, Shakespeare composed a sonnet consisting of 3 quatrains *abab cdcd efef* or *abba*

cddc, effe, and ended it with a couplet *gg*. Moreover, Shakespeare did not need to create a visual picture appealing to the physical eye. In lieu of ‘painted scenery, he put into the mouths of his characters splendid descriptions, poetry which paints the scenes in the mind’s eye.’ (Lott: vii)

POETRY FOR THE EYE

Innovation in poetry has also happened to the visual shape or physical appearance. It is not precisely known who was the first poet that commenced this movement. However, we do have a poem entitled ‘The Mouse’s Tale’ that is ‘loyal to its shape’ (a mouse’s tail). It was written by Lewis Carroll or Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832 – 1998), an English author who was very well-known for ‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland’ (1865) and ‘Alice through the Looking-glass’ (1871). The word ‘Tale’ in ‘The Mouse’s Tale’ is pronounced in the same way as ‘Tail’. A mouse may have a winding tail with a gradual decrease in the width towards its end. Note the pun on ‘tail’ and ‘tale’ and look at the physical shape of the poem below. One may no longer wonder whether it is a long sad tale (story) or literally a long tail after seeing the shape of the poem.

‘Fury said to a
mouse, That he
met in the
house,
“Let us
both go to
law: *I* will
prosecute
you. – Come,
I’ll take no
denial; We
must have a
trial: For
really this
morning I’ve
nothing
to do.”
Said the
mouse to the
cur, “Such
a trial,
dear Sir,
With
no jury
or judge,
would be
wasting
our
breath.”
“I’ll be
judge, I’ll
be jury ”
Said
cunning
old Fury:
“I’ll
try the
whole
cause,
and
condemn
you
to
death.”

(Waters: 28)

The following poem entitled 'Balloon', that is written by Colleen Thibaudeau, is arranged in such a way that it does resemble a balloon with a piece of string underneath that we can see and appreciate when we look at the printed words. However, is it a poem in the real sense of the word or is it just a rhyme that is not of great literary value?

as
big as
ball as round
as sun...I tug
and pull you when
you run and when
wind blows I
say polite
ly
H
O
L
D
M
E
T
I
G
H
T
L
Y

(Waters: 107)

Innovation that to a great extent 'violates poetic sound laws' can be seen in the following examples. For the sake of the shape, which is unquestionably intended to indulge the eye, and unfortunately at the expense of the rhyme, the poet succeeds in visually illustrating the image of a mirror which corresponds with the meaning:

Mirror Image: Port-au-Prince
Au petite
Salon de Coiffeur
Monique's / hands fork
like lightning, like a baton
rise / to lead her client's hair
in repassage: she irons out the kinks.
Madame's brown cheek / is dusted over with a
paler shade / of costly powder. Nails and lips are red.

Her matching lips and nails incarnadined. / in the
next booth Madam consults her face / imprisoned
in the glass. Her lovely tan / is almost
gone. Oh, watch Yvonne's astute
conductor fingers set the
permanent, / In little
Drawing-room of

Hairdresser!

(Nemerov: 84)

However, since 'No poetry which, when mastered, is not better heard than read, is good poetry' (Sansom: 162), it is up to the reader to judge whether it is a good piece of poem or not.

Poets are always eager to create something unique. William Burford has created a poem whose meaning is compatible to the shape of a Christmas tree. In order to be extremely loyal to the shape of the branch of the Christmas tree, the poet gets rid of the letter *e* in the preterite 'huddld'. This spelling error is deliberately made with the aim to link and match the title and the subject matter to its physical shape:

A Christmas Tree
Star,
If you are
A love Compassionate,
You will walk with us this year.
We face a glacial distance, who are here
Huddld
At your feet.

Likewise, another poet, George Herbert has arranged the words of his poem 'Altar' with a similar effect, namely to link and to match the contents of the poem with the physical shape of the poem.

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears:
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touched the same.
A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy name.
That if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine.

The poet is successful not only in providing the poem with a visual picture that corresponds to the sense but also in creating it with rhyming couplets.

REAL INNOVATION IN 'POETRY FOR THE EYE'

With regard to poetry that has much to do with the visual appearance or physical shape, we must surely concentrate on the poetic works of E.E. Cummings (1894 – 1962), a modern American poet who has made a great contribution in creating 'poetry for the eye' (a phrase I have specially coined to

contrast the ordinary verse that indulges the ear with E.E. Cummings's experimental verse that gives the words a visual shape .) Most critics, teachers and students of literature, whether they frequently or rarely read American poems, are familiar with the form of E.E. Cummings's poems on the printed page. Take the poem below as an example:

one

t
hi
s

snowflake

(a
li
ght
in
g)

is upon a gra

v
es
t

one

Never before has a poet created a poem in such a weird form. How should we read it? An impatient teacher may promptly 'reprimand' a primary school student who writes like this in a dictation test. However, this is by no means a mistake or an error that a dull student has made in a language class. The words 'snow' and 'flake' are combined whereas some others are vertically printed. It does not imply that this very well-educated poet is ignorant of the minimum requirement for rules of punctuation. He does do it deliberately to make the visual appearance correspond with the sense. Adam Kirsch states 'Cummings was not the first poet to use a typewriter, but as this poem shows, he was the first to take advantage of its power to control the exact spacing and shape of every line, and thus to make a poem's visual appearance as important as its musical rhythms.' Cummings was the first poet who exhibited his expertise in tinkering with language. His original invention of manipulating a visual shape must have been influenced by his experience as an artist. In 'An Outline of American Literature', it is stated 'The Cubists broke their paintings up into many different angles or "facets". Similarly, Cummings loved to break the traditional poem into unusual bits and pieces.' (High: 155) His original innovation can also be found in typing the first singular subject pronoun 'I' with a small letter. Anyone who reads English or writes in the English language must surely be aware of the fact that this subject pronoun should always be written with a capital letter instead of a lower case 'i'. In this case, however, Cummings's deliberate mistake has made him universally famous. His tricky trick is found not only in it; upper case letters may suddenly appear in the middle of a word like 'O' and 'L' in 'SIOWLy'. A capital letter may also abruptly turn up at the end of a word, for instance, 'stopS', while small letters are often used at the beginning of lines. This has become his 'trademark' that makes it easy for the reader to recognize that it is his poem. A computer which has an auto-correct function will automatically correct the 'typing error' while we are typing his poem or at least we will see a red underline as a reminder that there is something wrong with the spelling. Cummings's deliberate typing errors or mistakes, apart from the fact that it is done for the sake of arts, may be traced back to his childhood experience, a repressed desire to rebel against his stern father

who imposed strict discipline. Concerning the poet's biography, Kirsch points out: '... And it is no exaggeration to say that having a father like Edward Cummings - physically strong and spiritually intrepid, a dominant presence in his home and his city - helped to make E.E. Cummings one of the eternally rebellious "sons" of modern American poetry.'

Cummings's verse does look bizarre on the printed page. It is said that he might want the reader to peruse every single word or even every single letter in the word. Apart from the fact that it is his artful experiment, his intentionally odd typography is presumably his typical way of defying conventional rules of language and life.

In 'In Just', Cummings employs queer diction. To reveal the great speed of the children running towards the balloon man, he puts three words together without a space: 'eddieandbill'. He also combines three words into a single word in 'bettyandisbel' to indicate how enthusiastic both the children are. Another notorious thing worth mentioning here is Cummings' s unconventional way of using lower case letters for proper names. He even writes his own name with small letters thoroughly: 'e.e.cummings'. Aside from an artful experiment, this disrespectful action might also have been done to go against social convention.

IN JUST

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's
spring
and
the
goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
far
and

wee

That Cummings does not wish to comply with rules of grammar and diction can also be seen from the following extract:

i like my body when it is with your
body. it is so quite new a thing
muscle better and nerves more.
i like your body. i like what it does,
i like its hows ...

That he does not want to conform to grammar can be seen in line 2! The purpose may be to emphasize the adjective 'new' since having sex with his spouse is really a new experience for him. He also alters the grammatical function of the word 'how'. This word can be either an adverb or a conjunction, but it cannot be in the plural form. By adding an 's' to the word, he apparently distorts the English syntax turning the part of speech into a noun. By using the plural form, he obviously wishes to highlight that there are many things that his spouse's body can do to satisfy him. Finally, what innovation do we have in 'WHAT IF A MUCH OF A WHICH OF A WIND' which is also written by E.E. Cummings, the grand master of syntactic, lexical, and typographical distortions? Elaborate it by yourself!

CONCLUSION

Concerning Cummings's innovative, experimental verse and his life as a poet, an artist, and a lecturer, the son of a pastor, much more profound analysis can be made. Furthermore, from the discussion above, it is obvious that he has made a great contribution to modern American poetry, particularly his poetry for the eye. Referring to E.E. Cummings's poem entitled 'she being Brand', which is about the first drive in a new car, the editor of York Handbook loudly lauds him, declaring that this poem 'exemplifies this intense fusion of form, rhythm and meaning. Yet its success depends on all manner of syntactic, lexical and grammatical distortions.' (Probyn: 35) However, I am in favour of traditional poetry which is for the ear to hear. The reason is quite simple; poetry is like music. We cannot enjoy a song without listening to it. By looking at the note on a piece of paper, we can never enjoy the beautiful melody until we hear the song. I am of the opinion that poetry, music, and drama need to be recited, sung, and performed. On the other hand, drawings, sketches, pictures, and paintings are for the eye to eye. Visual shape that corresponds to the sense of a poetic work can be put in the latter category. We can appreciate them only when we see them. In this respect, I am not alone. Outstanding poets who are also eminent literary critics such as Alexander Hadow and Marjorie Boulton speak for me as well. Here is Hadow's comment in line with poetry for the ear: 'Our debt to the printing press is great – so great that it is vain to try to measure it – but it has not all been gain, and one of the losses to the people in general is that they no more hear the voice of poetry.' (Sansom: 162) Boulton asserts that 'Poetry, as much as drama, is meant to be performed, to be heard, rather than read with the eye....' (Sansom: 162) In addition, the subsequent citation taken from 'Let Them Write Poetry' gives a clue that poetry is not for the eye to spy but for the ear to hear through the imagination: 'The language of poetry is the language of imagination, of beauty, and of feeling.' (Walter: 101) Our tacit conclusion is that poetry is for the ear, not for the eye.

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