

Cummings and campion: are literary works definitely over?

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I.E.S. Parla II

Este artículo explora como la literatura está siempre en movimiento, y como autores de diferentes épocas y culturas pueden colaborar creando y completando obras literarias. El escritor norteamericano E. E. Cummings fue capaz de actualizar un poema renacentista casi olvidado del inglés Thomas Campion a pesar del largo periodo de tiempo que separa a ambos autores. Cummings compartió su afición por la literatura con la pintura y la música, Campion adaptó sus poemas a la música y también se dedicó a la medicina. La combinación de estas destrezas y el gusto por descubrir lo que otras tendencias podían ofrecerles, hicieron a Cummings y Campion ser radicalmente opuestos a otros artistas de su generación, creando un lenguaje especial el cual sólo aquellos que van más allá de la realidad pueden entender.

This article explores how literature is always on the move, and how authors from different times and cultures can collaborate in creating and completing literary works. The American writer E. E. Cummings was able to update a forgotten Renaissance poem through the English Thomas Campion in spite of the lapse of time between both authors. Cummings shared his love for writing with a career devoted to painting. Campion adapted his poems to music and was also a medicine doctor. The combination of these skills and the taste for discovering what other tendencies could offer them, encouraged Cummings and Campion to be radically opposed to other artists of their generation, creating a special language which only those who go beyond reality can understand.

Palabras clave: literatura contemporánea, obras antiguas, experimento nuclear, catástrofe, concepción metafísica, inmortalidad, pensamiento trascendental, regeneración, individualidad.

Key words: contemporary literature, ancient works, nuclear experiment, catastrophe, metaphysical conception, immortality, transcendental thought, regeneration, individuality.

“CUMMINGS AND CAMPION: ARE LITERARY WORKS DEFINITELY OVER?”

We live in a time in which a three-year-old computer is almost obsolete and teenagers do not remember the New Romantics or techno music, but fortunately, the taste for reading books published centuries ago still pervades. Without doubt, one of the most gratifying experiences for those who enjoy literature is to appreciate how contemporary authors revise and complete ancient works elaborated through generations of writing. When in the sixteenth century William Shakesperare created *The Comedy of Errors*, he was adapting Plautus's *Menaechmi*. Although her poems were longer and more terrible, Sylvia Plath has clearly inherited Emily Dickinson's sense of aloneness, pain and death. Thanks to their genius audiences throughout history were able to enjoy literary works composed some centuries ago.

The American poet E. E. Cummings (1894-1962) has frequently been accused of obscurity, not only due to his typographical tricks, distorted grammar and bizarre vocabulary, but because of the difficulty in understanding his works. Many critics have attacked against his jazz effects, bawdy dialects, tough guys, slim hot queens, barkers, fairies and, as Richard Blackmur points out in his article “Notes on E. E. Cummings' Language”, “baby talk” diction (1984: 124). However, these unique features are unavoidably the symbols of his style. They are more than a simple ornament; they are substance. It is true that Cummings' code and background require much more effort than any other poets', but, in spite of the fact that his characteristic immediateness and rapid transmission of events is not as powerful as in other contemporary writers as T.S. Eliot or Erza Pound, neither could we understand Cummings' poetry without knowing the multicultural references contained in it. Sometimes Cummings'

works are rooted in old literary and scientific traditions and some others in present day tendencies. In all his prose and verse production and even his personal correspondence, he always presented a particular view of the world's past, present and future affairs. As Richard Kennedy remarks in Cummings' latest biography *Dreams in the Mirror*, he is as American as Concord Bridge and the Statue of Liberty (1980: 7), but his deep interest in what was happening in the rest of the world impulsed him to travel and investigate for himself what other countries and cultures could offer.

As Cummings grew older, meditation became a remarkable occupation in his life. His last four books –*IXI, Xaiñe, 95 Poems* and *73 Poems*– were substantially more philosophical than the first—*Tulips and Chimneys, &, is 5, ViVa, No Thanks, New Poems* and *50 Poems*. Transcendence was then the writer's business and many of his poems of this period concerned the transitory nature of life in this world. There is a piece in *IXI* that deserves special attention. “what if a much of a which of a wind” is one of the few poems in Cummings' production with such an original and suggestive rhyme that it deserves to be read aloud. The composition is more than merely a phonetic pun. It is, as Pilar Abad rightly notes, an example of the aesthetics of Formalism (2001: 57). But it is also, in my view, today's answer to “What if a day, or a month, or a year”, a two-stanza poem which Thomas Campion wrote in 1606.¹ Robert Wegner says that “the similarity exists only in the first lines. ... The two lines are identical in prosody and in the use of the first three words. Beyond this the two poems are not alike” (1965: 8).

Campion (1567-1620) lived during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and the early years of King James. Cummings studied at Harvard in Cambridge (Massachusetts) and Campion at Cambridge (England). The American was a poet and a painter, and the Englishman combined music and poetry with the practice of medicine.² Some of Cummings' poems were set to music. Richard Kostelanetz compiles them in *AnOther E. E. Cummings*. We can also consider as a source of inspiration for Cummings another genre of Campion's poems such as “Rose-Cheeked Laura”: music, spring, and a beautiful woman and her hair are topics that appear in “yours is the music for no instrument” (“SONNETS-ACTUALITIES,” *Tulips and Chimneys, CP 160*).

Just as Cummings did, Campion also spent some time in France where he gained a degree in Medicine from the University of Caen. If

we compare Campion to his contemporary Sir Philip Sidney, he did not have the highest lyrical talents, but possessed a good ear in adapting words to tunes, the knack of sweet phrasing, and a mastery of complicated stanzas. His *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* were published in 1602 defending classical metres against, as Margaret Drabble quotes, “the vulgar and unarteficiall custome of riming” (2000: 167). However, it could be suggested that his excellent musical skills enabled him to compose a serious poem with an almost too delightful Elizabethan rhyme which brought the Golden Age to Cummings’ mind four centuries later.

Campion presents a somewhat fantastic and forced idea and leaves a wound and a question open. Cummings’ tone is even more dramatic but his characteristic optimism heals the wound opened by Campion. The idea of a catastrophe invades both poems. What the reader perceives at first sight is an apocalyptical explosion—natural or provoked. In an era where disasters menacing mankind are so common, we might think that the explosion in Cummings’ poem was a premonition that he transformed into a metaphor at a time when the atmosphere was full of rumours of the government’s nuclear experiments and the United States were involved in WWII. Certainly this poem was first published in *Poetry* two years before the first A-bomb was secretly exploded on July 16th 1945 at Alamogordo Desert (New Mexico).

Campion’s cataclysm is more fantastic, merely something he invented with apparently no real reference. It is true that there was an earthquake in London which the talkative Capulet’s nurse cites in her speech, but it is quite improbable that the Elizabethan poet recalled it as he was only thirteen when it happened in 1580.

The poem displays a clear progression based on movement and mutability. It moves from the big to the small and from the diminutive to the colossal. Campion alludes to a much more metaphysical conception than Cummings. As Frederick Candelaria observes, in the first stanza of Campion’s ballad the movement is from the microcosm to the macrocosm, from the particular to the universal, from immensity to a particle:

Cannot a chance of a night or an hour?
 Cross thy desires with as many sad tormentings?

All our joys are but toys,
Idle thoughts deceiving;
None have power of an hour
In their lieves' bereaving.

In the second, Candelaria adds, the movement is more violent and everything becomes more and more confined. The poet surrounds the reader through that cosmos, comparing first the size of the earth to the universe, and then, the size of man to that of the earth (1959: 135):

Earth's but a point to the world, and a man
Is but a point to the worlds compared centure;
Shall then the point of a point be so vain
As to triumph in a seely points adventure?

In the next lines all definitely moves from the universal to the limited by means of fast sweeping flights:

All is hazard that we have,
There is nothing biding;
Days of pleasure are like streams
Through faire meadows gliding.

At the end of the stanza, in spite of that "felicity" that Edward Albert attributes to Champion's poems (1984: 86), he shows his pessimistic side, commenting on the ephemeral nature of mundane glories:

Time is never turning:
Secret fates guide our states,
Both in mirth and mourning.

In Cummings' poem, if presenting a world upside down, the structure is much more familiar to a reader although his style is less orthodox. The poem is also based on the violence of destruction but adds the component that Champion's lacks, that of the increasing force of the man's spiritual strength. In the last verse of the first stanza Cummings supplies that force with a statement dignifying human magnificence and presenting the immortal man inhabiting a transcendental universe as proof against catastrophe:

what if a much of a which of a wind
 gives the truth to summer's lie;
 bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun
 and yanks immortal stars awry?
 blow king to beggar and queen to seem
 (blow friend to fiend:blow space to time)
 —when skies are hanged and oceans drowned,
 the single secret will still be man

Why is the solution *a priori* in “man” and not “men”? For Cummings, always so attentive to the Romantics, the Existentialists and Rainer Maria Rilke, the poet's insuperable loneliness is irrevocable as he depends on it for his artistic achievements. As Martin Heusser points out in *I Am My Writing. The Poetry of E. E. Cummings*, it is impossible for an individual who wants to create something, to step beyond the narrow confines of his own self, much less to unite himself with another individual (1997: 58). The Cummingsesque individual is not as insignificant and mortal as Campion's. His nature in this world is not transitory; he will survive through transcendental thought.

Cummings' stanzas display his typical seasonal patterns. The first stanza starts in summer and finishes in autumn. What is supposed to be true in summer—a very negative period of the year for Cummings—becomes a lie when the autumnal wind starts to blow. The wind displaces eternal stars and reduces a king to a beggar—as King Lear after the storm—a queen to a false appearance of one, and blows away letter “r” making a “friend” become a “fiend” to finally restrict space to time.

The second stanza moves from winter to the beginning of spring:

what if a keen of a lean wind flays
 screaming hills with sleet and snow;
 strangles valleys by ropes of thing
 and stifles forests in white ago?
 blow hope to terror;blow seeing to blind
 (blow pity to envy and soul to mind)
 —whose hearts are mountains,roots are trees,
 it's they shall cry hello to the spring

There is a winter storm bringing physical devastation intensified by glaciation. However, the consequences of physical destruction are not the most dramatic. What terrifies the author is that soul becomes mind—the most denigrated concept in Cummings’ poetry. Again only the ones who survive are those “whose hearts are mountains, roots are trees” and fuse with nature to greet the new season—the symbol of rebirth and regeneration in Cummings.

In stanza three we reach spring but doomsday menaces throughout. Here comes the cosmic explosion that destroys the universe but, although paradoxical, the poet is quite satisfied that it may happen. The number of individuals increases as the poem progresses. In line four it is not just a single person, but “me and you”, a pair of lovers who will transcend despite whatever might happen to the universe, since for Cummings the highest value is love.³ In “all ignorance toboggans into know” also in *IXI*, Cummings reiterates the transcendence of life as in stanza three he says “—tomorrow is our permanent address”.

In the last line these two people have multiplied into “we”, representing, as Laurence Perrine notes, “all persons possessing true individuality and integrity, and capable of unselfish love” (1980: 12). A spiritual world will appear obliterating not only all physical life, but also the past:

what if a dawn of a doom of a dream
bites this universe in two,
peels forever out of his grave,
and sprinkles nowhere with me and you?
blow soon to never and never to twice
(blow life to isn’t:blow death to was)
—all nothing’s only our hughest home;
the most who die,the more we live

Does this mean that Cummings suggests we should enjoy life only considering what may happen after death? Certainly not. As Stephen E. Whicher demonstrates in his explication of Cummings’ poem, “the poem affirms the present” (1953: 14). Regardless of the transcendental tone, Cummings was a man who, like Horace, seized the day. With his sudden questions constituting stanzas and dialogical tone, the poet *does* urge the readers to make the most

of the present time and give little thought to the future. The Renaissance stoic poem is answered by an updated *carpe diem* lyric.

With his effort, Cummings tries to satisfy an audience troubled by an inscrutable problem centuries ago and, warn scientists, politicians and those who reject feeling of what might occur if they give priority to mind. But is the poem definitely over? Must we wait for another poet who tells us what “me and you” will be able to do in an immortal world?

NOTES

- ¹ Robert Wegner says that “the similarity exists only in the first lines. ... The two lines are identical in prosody and in the use of the first three words. Beyond this the two poems are not alike” (1965: 8).
- ² Some of Cummings’ poems were set to music. Richard Kostelanetz compiles them in *AnOther E. E. Cummings*. We can also consider as a source of inspiration for Cummings another genre of Campion’s poems such as “Rose-Cheeked Laura”: music, spring, and a beautiful woman and her hair are topics that appear in “yours is the music for no instrument” (“SONNETS-ACTUALITIES,” *Tulips and Chimneys*, CP 160).
- ³ In “all ignorance toboggans into know” also in 1X1, Cummings reiterates the transcendence of life as in stanza three he says “—tomorrow is our permanent address”.

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