

E. E. Cummings, *Poesía experimental*.
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In a 1965 essay titled "Some notes on Organic Form," Denise Levertov argues that no poetry deserving that name can be exempt from form, even if, as twentieth-century literature has shown, this form must be created anew every time. Levertov bases her thesis on Gerard Manley Hopkins's definitions of *inscape* ("the intrinsic form, the patterns of essential characteristics both in single objects and . . . in objects in a state of relation to each other) and *instress* ("the experiencing of the perception of inscape, the *apperception* of inscape") (420).

As with the rest of poets coming of age after World War II, Levertov's statements take us back to the paths open by the great Modernist poetic generation of the Anglo-American scene in terms of experimentation with verse forms: Eliot, Pound, Williams, H.D., or Cummings, among others. In the introduction to the bilingual volume *E. E. Cummings, Poesía experimental*, translator and editor Eva M. Gómez Jiménez explains that Cummings's poetic form, early adopted by the author as a conscious departure from his deep knowledge of classical and English poetry, is that of free verse. The originality with which the poet breaks down this verse form up to the typographic limits of intelligibility and assisted by the technical possibilities awarded by the typewriter, leads him to name his written art "poem-pictures."

Despite the unique compositional perspective that he employs, Cummings of course shares poetry themes and techniques with most of his Modernist poet-fellows, such as the rendering of urban chaos, the use of street language and dialogue, the references to popular culture, and the breakdown of syntax. If anything, his particularly visual use of such elements strongly anticipates postmodern poetic modes, especially after 1960s' conceptualist movement in American poetry (Perloff 2012).

In effect, it is the inescapable visual quality of Cummings's poems what has awarded him long-lasting fame, even outside academic circles and regardless of his non-existent concessions to a more accessible style. As if putting Rudolph Arnheim's theory on visual thinking as the predominant mode of perception to test (1965), Cummings's experimental poems may be described as the result of an intersection between ekphrasis and iconicity. They reproduce the shape or silhouette of the object evoked *in absentia* not simply through the layout of verses on the page. The notion of the poem-picture actually begins at syllable and letter, not word level, thus exposing the malleability of the language signs and their boundless capacity for re-signification beyond their assumed arbitrary or symbolic nature. A case in point is, of course, the well-known NY skyline poem, for whose full visual apprehension we must turn the page clockwise:¹

e
cco the uglies
t

s
ub
sub

urba
n skyline on earth between whose d
owdy

hou
se
s

l
ooms an egggyellow smear of wintry sunset
t

73 Poems, 1963

1 To keep the visual sought-out effect as close as possible as the original typed poems, we have kept the letter type (courier) and font size chosen by the editors of *Poesía experimental* for all the examples included in this review.

Gómez Jiménez explains Cummings's moves and formal decisions for this and for the rest of the poems included in the collection on the basis of a fresh assumption: it has usually been the least experimental Cummings that has been disseminated and translated, precisely for the sake of his popularity. This comprehensive edition proves that, with the accompaniment of the appropriate critical and philological comment, a considerable part of Cummings's corpus and, in many ways, the most compelling one, can also reach a wide range of readers.

The edition follows a chronological order that, interestingly, could also be understood as a thematic one. From children's poems with a certain Blakean flavor to impressionistic/haiku-like landscapes, from portraits of characters mostly depicted through their speech to intimate scenes, from politics to popular culture, no subject matter seems foreign to the poet. In this extensive catalogue of human perceptions, the diminishing presence of the "I", prompted by the poems' own construction, strengthens the impression of immediacy in the reader. Thus, each poem works simultaneously at two levels, the visual and the verbal, without losing its force as a unit, a one-piece object. In the following example, the brackets—a common resource in Cummings's technique—guide the two-way process of reading at just one glance. The intended effect may be described as subtle, visually agile, and profoundly lyrical:

l(a

le

af

fa

ll

s)

one

l

iness

95 Poems, 1958

To the difficulty of illuminating the path into the poems with the help of the appropriate critical apparatus we must add, of course, the crucial point of translation. Gómez Jiménez logically goes through all the previous translations of Cummings's poetry available in Spanish. She concludes that, despite

considerable achievements by translators and poet-translators such as Alfonso Canales and Octavio Paz, there seems to be a repeated pattern among translators to avoid the most radical Cummings, as it has already been remarked. Gómez Jiménez argues, based on Paz, that neither was Cummings in the least arbitrary in his experimental facet, nor is it impossible to translate the outcomes deriving from such level of experimentation without a method.

Furthermore, in her versions, Gómez Jiménez employs specific choices of translation coherent with the Spanish syllabic system at the service of the rendering of Cummings's complex linguistic play. This way, her approach follows Walter Benjamin's still valid 1923 recommendation that the translation of experimental poetry must remain as estranged from everyday speech in the translated language as in the original one, against the constant temptation to "improve" it (151-165). In Benjamin's own words, "the fundamental error of the translator is that he holds fast to the state in which his own language happens to be rather than allowing it to be put powerfully in movement by the foreign language" (163). Clearly, this allusion to poetic movement resonates at present in accordance with Hopkin's definition of *instress*: if we perceive poetry as a fluid, dynamic process, its translation must then be conceived exactly under similar assumption.

More importantly, insofar as each experimental poem prompts the invention of its own form—paraphrasing Levertov—, each translation calls for dissimilar decisions along the way.² The following poem provides just one set of translating choices among many plausible ones:

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r

who

a)s w(e loo)k

upnowgath

PPEGORHRASS

eringint(o-

aThe):l

eA

!p:

S

a

(r

rIvInG

.gRrEaPsPhOs)

2 Once considered an exercise of recreation, nowadays the predominant view on translation studies states that "the translational process is a creative process and, consequently, translation is also creation" (Bezerra 2012, 47). For poetry, this means that a poetic form must be translated into an equivalent poetic form in the translated language.

to
rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
,grasshopper;

No Thanks, 1935

s-n-o-t-m-e-t-a-l-s-a
que
mien)tras mi(r am)os
haciaarribaahoracerr
NTESOSMALTA
ándosee(n-
unLos):s
aL
!to:
S l
(l
eGaNdO .sSaElNtTmOa)
a
reorg(ha)aniza(cers)dam(e)ente
,saltamontes;

No gracias, 1935

In a footnote, Gómez Jiménez asserts that this famous poem—to some extent an exception in comparison with the lesser-known contribution to the anthology—presents a grasshopper on the move. The disorder of letters at the beginning, partially amended in the middle and solved in the last line, is premeditated. It responds to phonetic reasons: any reader must be able to pronounce it, despite the lack of meaning. The translator transfers such requirement to her own language, in which this coherence within disorder is carefully reproduced.³

Together with the biographical and socio-literary context provided in the introduction, the editor includes a detailed bibliography of Cummings's poetry books and of critical studies around his oeuvre. In this regard, the volume fills a relevant gap both for scholars and readers of Anglo-American poetry in general and interested in the work and evolution of E. E. Cummings in particular.

3 Spanish poet Tomás Sánchez Santiago's definition of a poet, "el que desordena" (the one who messes up) seems suitable for Cummings here (2006), although Sánchez Santiago mainly refers to word-level disorder. Cummings's (dis)ordered chaos at letter level is read still today as remarkably innovative.

In a 2010 article, Esteban Pujals Gesalí discussed the current trends underlying the Spanish editors' decisions about which contemporary American poets to publish. On that occasion, Pujals pointed at a certain lack of thorough criteria to the detriment of many authors of considerable value (11-23). This is certainly not the case of the catalog developed by *Cátedra Letras Universales*. Regardless of changing modes, the publishers dare to deal with contemporary classics, as this edition demonstrates. From now on, E. E. Cummings will undoubtedly be appreciated by Spanish readers in a much broader way, thanks to the excellent work of her editor and translator.

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