

## Reflections on Two Poems by e. e. cummings (1894-1962)

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### Introduction

The poetry of e. e. cummings continues to exert a spell over legions of readers. From my generation to the present generation, high school and college students who are otherwise resistant to poetry nonetheless embrace the work of cummings warmly. Certain of his poems speak to them with a feeling and a freedom that they cannot resist. The poems speak to these students as they had spoken to their teachers before them. Unfortunately, the very engaging and apparently freely unconventional way in which they say what they say has blinded too many readers to the way in which they say what they say, blinded them to the technical care and deliberateness (even the disguised conventionality) with which the poems are constructed.

Two examples of very different structures will serve to illustrate this.<sup>1</sup>

#### Example I

[untitled, *XAIPE* (1950), #63]

honour corruption villainy holiness  
riding in fragrance of sunlight(side by side  
all in a singing wonder of blossoming yes  
riding)to him who died that death should be dead

humblest and proudest eagerly wandering 5  
(equally all alive in miraculous day)  
merrily moving through sweet forgiveness of spring  
(over the under the gift of the earth of the sky

knight and ploughman pardoner wife and nun 10  
merchant frere clerk somnour miller and reve  
and geoffrey and all)come up from the never of when  
come into the now of forever come riding alive

down while crylessly drifting through vast most 14  
nothing's own nothing children go of dust

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<sup>1</sup> The text of this poem and the next are taken from Edward Estlin Cummings, *Complete Poems 1913-1962* (Harvest/Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980).

The first striking characteristic of this poem is its subject, namely *The Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer.<sup>2</sup> Its second striking characteristic is its form, namely a sonnet.

Neither of these characteristics would be surprising to those who attended the series of Charles Eliot Norton lectures that cummings delivered in the 1952-1953 academic year at Harvard.<sup>3</sup> Therein cummings displays a stunning knowledge about, reverence for, cherishing of, and indebtedness to the entire western poetic tradition from the ancient Greeks to the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> In particular, cummings selected a group of poems to read, poems that—taken as a whole—constitute what he called “a strictly amateur anthology, or collection of poetry which...I dearly love” (i 6). Among these poems are the first eighteen lines of the General Prologue to Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (i 37) and a pair of sonnets (one by Dante, one by Shakespeare) that he describes as “the greatest sonnets which exist” (i 54-56).

In the sonnet above, cummings has written a poem that simultaneously celebrates Chaucer and Shakespeare. He has done this by expressing his tribute to Chaucer in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet. This is an effective way to allow two of his literary exemplars to speak to each other and to us.

However, while the subject (Chaucer) is overt, the form is covert. That it is a sonnet is evident, but its being a Shakespearean sonnet is harder to see. A clue to its Shakespearean formal origin is its familiar division into three quatrains and a concluding couplet. The connection to Shakespeare is not completed until one sees that its rhyme scheme and rhythmic thrust are also Shakespearean.

The rhyme scheme—with due allowance for a broad understanding of rhyme—is:

a (“-ess” sound)

b (“-d” sound)

a (“-ess” sound)

b (“-d” sound)

c (“-ring”)

d (“-y” sound)

c (“-ring”)

d (“-y” sound)

e (“-n” sound)

f (“-v” sound)

e (“-n” sound)

f (“-v” sound)

g (“-st” sound)

g (“-st” sound)

This is perfectly Shakespearean.

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<sup>2</sup> The “geoffrey” of line 11.

<sup>3</sup> Published as *i six nonlectures* (Harvard U., 1953). What cummings himself calls “nonlectures,” the ancient Romans would have called “*sermônês*” (“talks”).

<sup>4</sup> cummings demonstrates comfort with reading Sappho in Greek, Catullus and Horace in Latin, Dante in Italian, Walther von der Vogelweide in German, Charles d’Orleans in French, and Chaucer in Middle English (i 50-51, 55, 96, 40, 37).

The rhythmic thrust of the poem is more complicated. Each line is discernibly pentameter, giving the poem a total of seventy feet. Of the seventy feet, thirty-one are iambic and twenty are anapestic. If one can understand an anapest as a, so to speak, slow motion or stately iamb, then approximately three-quarters of the sonnet (73%) is what one could call “iambish.” The remaining feet are trochaic (17 feet/24%) and spondaic (2 feet/3%). The first foot of every line but the eleventh and twelfth is a trochee. The rhythmic schema would be this:<sup>5</sup>

|    |    |     |     |     |
|----|----|-----|-----|-----|
| Tt | iI | iI  | aaA | iI  |
| Tt | iI | aaA | iI  | iI  |
| Tt | iI | iI  | aaA | aaA |
| Tt | iI | iI  | iI  | aaA |

|    |    |     |     |     |
|----|----|-----|-----|-----|
| Tt | iI | iI  | aaA | iI  |
| Tt | iI | iI  | aaA | aaA |
| Tt | iI | aaA | iI  | aaA |
| Tt | iI | aaA | aaA | aaA |

|    |     |     |     |     |
|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Tt | Tt  | Tt  | iI  | iI  |
| Tt | SS  | Tt  | Tt  | iI  |
| iI | aaA | iI  | aaA | aaA |
| iI | aaA | aaA | aaA | aaA |

|    |    |    |    |    |
|----|----|----|----|----|
| Tt | Tt | iI | iI | SS |
| Tt | iI | iI | iI | iI |

The sonnet, then is formally Shakespearean through and through.

In this instance, to be rhythmically Shakespearean is also to be rhythmically Chaucerian, since the typical line of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, from which cummings read at Harvard, is iambic pentameter too.

The preference for the iambic flow of verse is rooted in its naturalness, its nearness to the casual flow of ordinary human conversation. The trochee, on the other hand, is the reverse mirror image of the iamb and is meant to convey a hint of the unnatural or paranatural, as can be seen most clearly in such poems as Poe’s “The Raven,” whose trochaic thrust rhythmically support its eeriness.

The greatness of Shakespeare and Chaucer rests, to some extent, on their ability to ground the most sublime and far-reaching examinations of the human condition in the naturalness of ordinary human conversational speech.

In the cummings sonnet, the focus is Chaucer. In a mere fourteen lines, the speaker endeavors to express the breadth and essence of the Chaucerian world that is encapsulated in *The Canterbury Tales*.

In the first two quatrains, which together form an implicit octave, each line has as its first foot a trochee and as its last (fifth) foot either an iamb or an anapest. This gives each line the overall rhythmic feel of a descent followed by an ascent. It is in these two

<sup>5</sup> A capital letter designates a stressed syllable and a lower case letter an unstressed syllable. Therefore, “iI” is an iamb, “aaA” is an anapest, “Tt” is a trochee, and “SS” is a spondee.

quatrains that the speaker provides a panoramic overview of the pilgrimage that Chaucer presents. During this pilgrimage, the wayfarers will descend into the rigors of travel (which is etymologically equivalent to travail) in order to achieve as the fruit of their journey a spiritual elevation.

The four words of the first line are a catalogue of the moral spectrum that the wayfarers incarnate. The chiasmic structure of the line presents human baseness (“corruption villainy”) enfolded (and perhaps redeemed) by human nobility (“honour...holiness”).<sup>6</sup> The pilgrims are riding “in fragrance of sunlight,” a double-edged metaphor that points simultaneously to the freshening of the burgeoning springtime through which the wayfarers wend their way and to the perspiration odor of the travelers as they ride in the heat of the day. This duality of connotation fuses, as Chaucer does so well, the high and the low, the pretty and the ugly, into a beautified whole. The parenthesis that is in apposition to “riding” (2) sprawls from the second line to the fourth. It is placed without a space next to the word “sunlight” as a way of instantiating the close side-by-sidedness of the riders. Its syntax is Latinate: its usual English order would be this:

(all riding side by side in a singing [yes] wonder [yes] of  
blossoming [yes], riding) to him....

In other words, as the travelers ride, their minds are filled with presumably psalmic chanting that expresses the awe that is inspired in them by the newly blooming flora of the springtime.

In the last line of the first quatrain, the speaker describes the goal of the pilgrimage as a shrine “to him who died that death should be dead.” This suggests a shrine of Jesus rather than the shrine of Thomas Becket to which the pilgrims actually travel. This conflation of a Christian martyr with Jesus may suggest that from the point of view of the pilgrims, every martyr’s death is a needed reenactment and reminder of Jesus’s primal death. At the same time, the phrasing evokes the language of John Donne’s “Holy Sonnet X.”<sup>7</sup>

The second quatrain is a recasting of the description in the first quatrain, this time with a more secular emphasis. Here honor and holiness are replaced by humility, and corruption and villainy are replaced by pride. This reflects the moral calculus of *The Canterbury Tales*, in which there seems to be an inverse proportion between societal rank and spiritual purity.

Yet high-born persons and low-situated persons are all, in the hands of Chaucer, “equally...alive,” and their vivacity is placed in what seems to be a miraculous day, a day whose miraculousness suggests both the miracle of rebirth that is seen in a springtime day and an age in which miracles are still vividly credible.

The group is filled with joy (“merrily moving”) as it sojourns through the cleansing sweetness of the season in which life reawakens, and the “sweet forgiveness” here evokes Chaucer’s sweet April showers (“Aprill with his shoures soote,” *CT*, “GP 1) and sweet breeziness (“Zephyrus eek with his sweete breath,” *CT*, “GP 5).

The last line of the second quatrain initiates a parenthesis that extends through the first two and a half lines of the third quatrain, thereby giving these quatrains a side-by-

<sup>6</sup> The enfolding is strengthened by the choice of noble words that both begin with “ho-,” thereby binding them more strongly together than the central baseness pair.

<sup>7</sup> Donne is another of the poets whom cummings includes in his informal Harvard anthology (*i* 58; cf. 54).

sidedness analogous to that of the pilgrims. The centrality of the word “gift” in the eighth line suggests that the world is a gift to humanity for its enjoyment and cherishing. In addition, this centrality is accomplished by shifting forward both prepositions of which “gift” is the object. The normal structure of this line would be:

over the gift of the earth, under the gift of the sky.

The repositioning of the preposition also allows the following reading:

under the gift of the earth, over the gift of the sky.

Putting these two readings together yields the suggestion that Chaucer’s vision encompasses a cosmic totality stretching from subterranean depths through the earthly realm bounded by ground and sky to superuranian heights. In short, Chaucer—the speaker implies—puts before us a vision of the whole of being.

The conclusion of the parenthesis in the third quatrain presents a catalogue of the pilgrims that singles out just under half of those mentioned by Chaucer, encompassing the others with the monosyllable “all” (11) that echoes the first and second quatrains (“all,” 3, 6). The speaker emphasizes the catalogic format of these two lines by giving each of them exactly seven words. The central items in the two lines (word 4) are the pardoner and the summoner, the sexually corrupt ecclesiastics, allied in their homosexuality and in their related professions as purveyors of the ‘piety for sale’ mentality that pervaded the Catholic Church of the time. At the other end of the Chaucerian moral gauge are the two items to the left (word 3) of the central items, namely the ploughman and the clerk, two exemplars of simple piety, and the only two persons in the two-line catalogue who represent religious purity.

If one takes the eleven persons in the two-line catalogue as a whole, the central figure (the sixth) is the merchant. His centrality in the list suggests the centrality to the Chaucerian world of mercantilism, a social phenomenon that led not only to the rise of the middle class but also to the pervasiveness of the temptation to material self-aggrandizement that infected the clergy even more than it did the laity.

The end of the parenthesis (11) brings one to the narrator of the pilgrimage. The speaker refers to him by name. However, he does not refer to his surname, but only to his given name. Since the two names are metrically identical, the choice of the one over the other is attributable to the speaker’s desire to indicate an affection for, and intimacy with the works of, the speaker’s medieval narrative precursor.

Having established the physical geography of the pilgrimage through a group of interlocking prepositional phrases (8), having followed that with the catalogic subject of a clause (9-11a), the speaker now (11b-12) completes the clause with three parallel phrases, each introduced by the word “come.” These phrases establish what one might call the aesthetic geography of the pilgrimage. The three phrases are:

- (1) come up from the never of when,
- (2) come into the now of forever, [and]
- (3) come riding alive.

These three phrases constitute a succinct image of the genesis of the work of art known as *The Canterbury Tales* as a paradigm for the genesis of any great work of art: the artist

takes persons who are not temporally existent (1), puts them into a form that makes them eternally present (2), thereby making them come actively alive (3).

Ending the third quatrain with the words “riding alive” unifies the three quatrains by echoing the double “riding” (2, 4) of the first quatrain and the “alive” (6) of the second quatrain.

The final couplet provides a compact summary and generalization of all that has preceded. The sense of the couplet begins to emerge if one gives it a more syntactically normal order:

down go the children of dust while drifting crylessly  
through the most vast nothing's own nothing.

Since “the LORD God formed man of the dust” (Genesis 2:7, KJV), one can say that all humans are children of dust. Therefore, to call the pilgrims “children of dust” is to suggest that they figure forth and incarnate humanity in its entirety. Humanity is “crylessly drifting,” a phrase that echoes the second quatrain’s “eagerly wandering” (5) and “merrily moving” (7), which suggests that the pilgrimage of humankind through the world is less directed and less celebratory than that of the pilgrims toward the shrine in Canterbury. In addition, while the journey of the fictive Chaucerian pilgrims is at least an implicit ascent, the journey of humanity is a descent *simpliciter*. Furthermore, it is a descent into an infinite nihilistic universe (“nothing’s own nothing”).

However, it is *our* nihilistic universe, our “own nothing,” and what redeems us (and it) is precisely this ‘ownness.’ It is that ‘ownness’ that Chaucer brings so vividly to life and that cummings (as Chaucer’s heir) tries in his own way to revivify.

Example II  
[untitled, is 5 (1926), X]

nobody loses all the time

i had an uncle named  
Sol who was a born failure and  
nearly everybody said he should have gone  
into vaudeville perhaps because my Uncle Sol could  
sing McCann He Was A Diver on Xmas Eve like Hell itself which  
may or may not account for the fact that my Uncle 5

Sol indulged in that possibly most inexcusable  
of all to use a highfalootin phrase  
luxuries that is or to  
wit farming and be 10  
it needlessly  
added

my Uncle Sol's farm  
failed because the chickens  
ate the vegetables so 15  
my Uncle Sol had a  
chicken farm till the  
skunks ate the chickens when

my Uncle Sol 20  
had a skunk farm but  
the skunks caught cold and  
died and so  
my Uncle Sol imitated the  
skunks in a subtle manner 25

or by drowning himself in the watertank  
but somebody who'd given my Uncle Sol a Victor  
Victrola and records while he lived presented to  
him upon the auspicious occasion of his decease a  
scrumptious not to mention splendidous funeral with 30  
tall boys in black gloves and flowers and everything and

i remember we all cried like the Missouri  
when my Uncle Sol's coffin lurched because  
somebody pressed a button  
(and down went 35  
my Uncle  
Sol

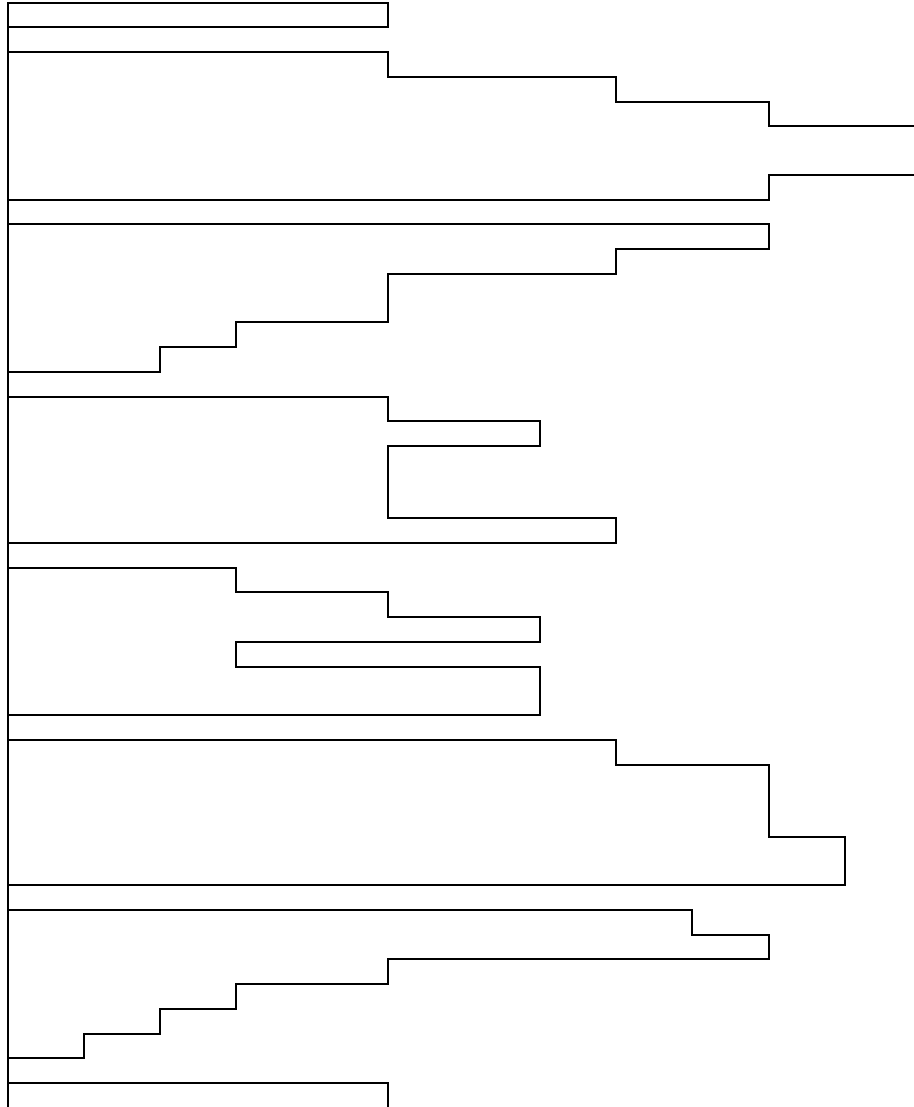
and started a worm farm) 38

The contrast in form between the previous example and this second example seems massive. The former was visually a tight rectangular-shaped sonnet, while the latter seems as free and sprawling as verse can be.

However, to accept that this poem is as unstructured as it appears at first glance to be would be rash. The poem consists of eight stanzas, with two one-line stanzas (first

and last) bracketing six six-line stanzas. In addition, the number of words in both stanza one and stanza eight is five. Therefore, the first and last stanzas have a double identity, number of lines (one) and number of words (five).

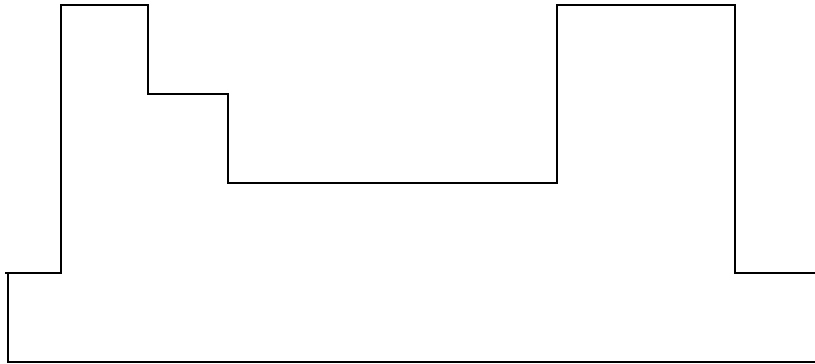
Furthermore, the shape of the poem is roughly this:



One must ask whether this shape is a deliberate attempt to create the modern equivalent of the pattern poem in the tradition of George Herbert's "The Altar" or "Easter Wings."<sup>8</sup> If one considers the narrated recollection by the speaker about "an uncle named / Sol" (2-3) in terms of its shape with the left margin as its base,<sup>9</sup> one sees that the shape mirrors Uncle Sol's life:

<sup>8</sup> The tradition can be traced as far back as the ancient Greek bucolic poetry of Simias of Rhodes (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BCE).

<sup>9</sup> The diagram below is abstracted and simplified for clarity.



Both peaks correspond to the rare moments of triumph in uncle Sol’s life, the first his impressive holiday singing and the second his triumphant funeral (a broader peak than the first because of its more broadly communal character, as opposed to the narrowly familial character of the first). The broad valley in the middle reflects the pervasive failure that marked the bulk of his adult life.

Behind this patterning, there is a supportive numerical framework that is indicated by the number of words in each stanza:

|       |
|-------|
| 1) 5  |
| 2) 51 |
| 3) 26 |
| 4) 26 |
| 5) 26 |
| 6) 50 |
| 7) 25 |
| 8) 5  |

The first and last stanzas suggest that multiples of five will be the governing numerical hieroglyph of the poem, and this suggestion is realized—or almost realized. Using it as a guide, one may divide the poem into four parts: (1) stanza 1, (2) stanzas 2 through 5, (3) stanzas 6 and 7, and (4) stanza 8. In parts two and three, the sequence involves one stanza of approximately ten times five (fifty) words and one or more stanzas of approximately five times five (twenty-five) words. The second (and longest) part is the one that requires the use of “approximately,” because each stanza in it has an excess of one word. That is, each stanza in this part is slightly “off.” The reason for that seems to be that this longest part details the extent of uncle Sol’s failure, namely the extent to which his life was “off.” In addition, the ‘bump’ up from twenty-five words to twenty-six words in stanzas 2 through 5 gives each of them a total of words that is double thirteen (twenty-six), which suggests the multiplication of bad luck (‘thirteeness’) that characterized Sol’s life.

Only in death does his life right itself, thereby allowing the sixth stanza to contract to the desirable fifty (ten times five) and the seventh stanza to contract to the desirable twenty-five (five times five). This underscores the rightness that Sol’s funeral brings to

his life by showing that on some level, Sol touched those around him enough to inspire them to honor him in death as he never had been honored in life.

### Conclusion

Let this suffice to encourage readers of cummings's poetry to give it a formal scrutiny that they otherwise would have neglected, because the apparent casualness of the verse seemed to belie such an approach.

After all, nonlectures are still lectures.