

# Cummings' Metaphoric Strategies

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The objective of this essay is to identify the various metaphoric structures inherent in Cummings' poetry. We will examine a few poems to identify different metaphors which might fit into the poetic theories pinned down by the critics. To name only two of them, let us remember Paul Ricoeur, who gives a vivid account of the history of metaphors from Aristotle to the present day (*La Métaphore Vive*). We will also refer to Guy Rosolato (*La Relation d'Inconnu*), who reveals that the elements of our world (for example, art, painting, music, the mother-child relationship, and poetry) are orchestrated around an oscillation between metaphor and metonymy. His explanation will prove particularly useful to the understanding of Cummings' poetry.

## 1. Rosolato and Cummings: the oscillation between metaphor and metonymy

Let us read first "when god lets my body be" written in 1916<sup>1</sup> and first published in book form in 1922 (*Tulips & Chimneys*, "Songs," IX, CP 19):

when god lets my body be

From each brave eye shall sprout a tree  
fruit that dangles therefrom

the purpled world will dance upon  
Between my lips which did sing

a rose shall beget the spring  
that maidens whom passion wastes

will lay between their little breasts  
My strong fingers beneath the snow

Into strenuous birds shall go  
my love walking in the grass

their wings will touch with her face  
and all the while shall my heart be

With the bulge and nuzzle of the sea

The readers attend here to the metaphoric and metonymic rebirth of the narrator, his fingers being transformed into flying birds:

My strong fingers beneath the snow

Into strenuous birds shall go

The narrator's body parts (each brave eye, his lips, his heart), or further, his feelings ("my love walking in the grass") spring up from the earth and transform into birds. Their flight recalls the conventional metaphor of sentimental exaltation and the liberation of the soul. It is as if Cummings gave movement to death in this oscillation between metaphor and metonymy. The initial metaphor (that of fingers being compared to birds) fits into a vital metonymy ("My strong fingers beneath the snow") after the enjambment occurring when the inclusive preposition "into" comes into place.

Like the new-born baby whose umbilical cord is suddenly severed from his mother to allow him to start in life, the metaphor takes its initial impulse on metonymic development. As Guy Rosolato acknowledges, it is precisely the close link to the real ("My strong fingers beneath the snow") which gives birth to metaphor as a sudden change of meaning ("Into strenuous birds shall go"). If we look closely at Cummings' poem, we will see that the first metonymic line, which reproduces what is familiar (the narrator describes his body parts and looks forward to his rebirth in the snow), gives the opportunity for a dauntless plunge into the unknown: the metamorphosis of the narrator's fingers into vigorous birds. The tension towards the unknown is particularly at stake in this change from "strong" to "strenuous." The adjective "strenuous" (which is of Latin origin and is more abstract than the adjective "strong") reminds us of the fingers' strength, thus ensuring a metaphoric impulse from a metonymic continuity.

We could then conclude that Cummings' poetry is partly based on this oscillation between metonymy ("From each brave eye shall sprout a tree") and metaphor ("fruit that dangles therefrom // the purpled world will dance upon"), an oscillation recognized by Guy Rosolato as the ruling principle of literature, music, and the mother-child relationship. It is true that Cummings' poems often start from the real before plunging into lyricism, or that lyrical outpourings are always related back to the real. To borrow a sentence from Cummings' poetry, one could say that when "air is air and thing is thing;no bliss // of heavenly earth beguiles our spirits" (CP 675), but Cummings acknowledges also and demonstrates in his poetry that the literal power of words liberates "a deeper magic":

Mountains are mountains now;skies now are skies—  
and such a sharpening freedom lifts our blood  
as if whole supreme this complete doubtless

universe we'd(and we alone had)made.

The universe Cummings describes here is a subtle combination of metaphors and metonymies empowering each other. The poet has shown that happiness and plenitude are achieved via a metaphoric understanding of the world, a sort of metaphoric reading of the metonymic chain. Without this modification, things are things. The metaphoric-metonymic oscillation is a source of aesthetic pleasure, a necessary gap to favor psychological equilibrium, the definition of poetry, the reason for musical understanding. Like the new-born baby who understands the newness of other voices while listening to the reassuring voice of his mother, like the amateur who appreciates the spontaneity of musical variations grafted onto a pre-existing repetitive melody, the reader becomes receptive to the sudden leaps of meaning which disturb the initial metonymic order.

Two readings can often coexist in Cummings' poetry. For example in 'I have seen her a stealthily frail' (CP 147), in the lines "her body / will come toward me with its hurting sexual smell / of lilies," two semantic nodes seem to revolve around the adjective "hurting":

Across the important gardens her body  
will come toward me with its hurting sexual smell  
of lilies....

First, one could interpret the word in its inadequacy to qualify a smell and conclude that the metaphoric adjective qualifies the sentimental suffering of the subject "me" facing the object of his desires "her body." The inappropriate adjective allows the subject to briefly express his feeling by a description of the object at the origin of his feelings. But why not propose a second reading and understand "hurting" as a metonymic adjective? "Hurting" might refer to the penetrating smell of sex. Thus the word which appears as a metaphor can be revealed as a metonymy in favor of a controlled movement towards the real. Far from disclosing the irrelevance of some words, the adjective allows the description of the particular sexual odour.

## 2. Substitution? (Aristotle, Jean Cohen)

Often the transition from the metaphoric order to the metonymic order can also be reversed. For example, in the expression "the velvet tiger of my soul" ["When parsing warmth of dusk construe" (CP 990)], the adjective 'velvet' creates the link between two nouns. The word qualifies the smoothness of the tiger's fur (touch) and the toned down violence of the animal, a sort of oxymoron between velvety smoothness and cruel violence which designates the poet's soul: "the velvet tiger of my soul . . . Leases sensation absolute":

The velvet tiger of my soul  
Washing in fundamental mind  
Elided chaos hating  
Leases sensation absolute

The genitive metaphor indeed represents the fruitful union between two terms, “tiger” and “soul,” owing to the semantic intersection created by the adjective “velvet,” an intersection which is made concrete in the following predicate which defines sensation as “absolute.” The notion of the absolute arising from the compatibility between “velvet” and “tiger” allows the liberation from the usual limits of the denotative. The metonymic order of relativity seems to be invalidated by the metaphoric notion of the absolute. In this example, as in the line with the adjective “hurting,” it is less a matter of substitution (the usual theory of metaphor: the metaphoric word replaces the expected non-metaphoric word) than a close link or intersection between two terms.

In this two-terms formula, “the velvet tiger of my soul,” the softness of velvet and the wildness of the tiger define the poet’s soul: lyrical outpourings generate unknown sensations. The logic revealed here gives the illusion of syntactic order: the lyricism and violence of the oxymoron spring syntactically as something relevant. If we consider this as a Cartesian metaphoric construction, is it still relevant to talk about the substitution theory or would it be more appropriate to think about another theory which relates two elements: a supposed “tenor” (“soul”) and a “vehicle” (“tiger”) which interact and fuse into the predicate (“Leases sensation absolute”)?

### 3. Interaction (I. A. Richards, Max Black, Beardsley)

The genitive metaphor, which is thus no longer apprehended solely on the lexical level, has to be replaced within the whole sentence or within a larger poetic context. The poet as a liberating Emersonian god (“the poet . . . speaks somewhat wildly . . . ‘with the flower of the mind’” [319]) generates mature liberating thoughts ready to flood men’s hearts. The velvet ferocity of the tiger could be read as the vehicle for aspiration or “the melodious ascension of the poet,” as Emerson puts it in his essay “The Poet”:

[W]hen the soul of the poet has come to ripeness of thought, she detaches and sends away from its poems and songs, . . . a fearless, vivacious offspring clad with wings . . . which carry them fast and far and infix them irrevocably into the hearts of men. These wings are the beauty of the poet’s soul. . . . [T]he melodies of the poet ascend, and leap and pierce into the deeps of infinite time. (Emerson 317)

If I have taken some time to show that metaphors should be understood not only on the simple level of words but also on the syntactic level or within a larger intertext, it is because this gap from the metaphoric word and a larger metaphoric context will favour the emergence of the interaction theory and discard that of substitution. It is I. A. Richards who invents the notions of tenor and vehicle which allow a redefinition of metaphor as any expression linking two active ideas together.

The idea of interaction between two words could be identified in a haiku particularly cherished by Cummings. The haiku's interpenetration of things might be understood as an echo of I.A. Richards' interpenetration of the parts of discourse. In the notes at the Houghton Library at Harvard University, Cummings copied out a similar idea from R. H Blyth's book on *Haikai*. "The more the mind endeavours to distinguish two things, the closer they insensibly become; the more they assert their unity, the more they separate"<sup>2</sup> These two things which interpenetrate correspond to what Beardsley, I. A. Richards and Max Black identify as tenor and vehicle or frame and focus. Let us first remember how one line in "Do you remember when the fluttering dusk" (CP 863) functions:

Then from the world's harsh voice and glittering eyes,  
The awful rant and roar of men and things,  
Forth fared we into Silence. The strong wings  
Of Nature shut us from the common crowd;  
On high, the stars like sleeping butterflies  
Hung from the great grey drowsy flowers of cloud.

The comparison between the stars and the sleeping butterflies allows us to identify a tenor and a vehicle which are later reactivated to create a genitive metaphor: "the great grey drowsy flowers of cloud." The comparison has paved the way for the emergence of a metaphor deeply anchored in the real: the sleeping butterflies belong to the same isotopy as the drowsy flowers ready to be gathered. The vegetal attributes are thus projected into the sky without undermining the credibility of the description

The genitive metaphor "flowers of cloud" represents at the same time a fusion and a separation between the tenor "stars" and the vehicle "butterflies." It is owing to the initial comparison (the stars are compared to sleeping butterflies) that the metaphor can be understood: the drowsy flowers of cloud represent the stars. In other words, the comparison A1 is like B1 (the stars like sleeping butterflies) generates the metaphor B2 of A2 (the great grey drowsy flowers of cloud). There has thus been a transition from comparison to metaphor owing to the interactive qualities of the words "stars," "cloud," "butterflies," and "flowers."

By briefly studying another poem entitled "she being Brand" (CP 246), I would like to show how Cummings in a way applies this interaction theory I have just

explained, combining it with another theory—that of iconicity. Cummings comically creates confusion between the interchangeable vehicle and tenor: the woman and the car. The metaphoric interaction between the two, as well as the more tangible interaction between the narrator and the woman, is exhibited in the extravagance of typography. In other words, interaction is iconic here.

#### 4. The iconic moment of metaphor (Paul Henle, Marcus B. Hester)

Owing to this successful mixing of interactive metaphors and icons, Cummings seems to reinvent what has been pinned down by Paul Henle and Marcus B. Hester as the iconic metaphor: the metaphoric word is understood as it interacts with other radioactive words. According to Henle, metaphors are the subtle transformation of literal meaning into a figurative meaning. It is as if a figural interpretation preserved within itself the original literal meaning. According to Hester, poetic language presents a certain fusion between sensations and meanings, what is verbal and nonverbal, sensation and logic fuse into the power of language to create images.

One could take several examples from Cummings' poetry, the most famous one probably being "(im)c-a-t(mo)" (CP 655), in which the poet skillfully creates a morphological instability which represents the potential leaps of the cat. The severed letters (e.g., "b,i;l:e" or "leA / ps!") show the surprising rebounds of the cat:

(im)c-a-t(mo)  
b,i;l:e

FalleA  
ps!fl  
OattumbII

The poem's charm lies in the confusion between the mobility and immobility characteristic of the abrupt suppleness of the cat. In Cummings' poem "she being Brand," the woman is given the usual attributes of the car by a chauvinistic, saucy, and conniving narrator ("you know"). This poem takes the notion of vehicle literally. A vehicle is indeed started by a competent driver-lover:

she being Brand  
  
-new;and you  
know consequently a  
little stiff i was  
careful of her and(having  
  
thoroughly oiled the universal  
joint tested my gas felt of

her radiator made sure her springs were O.

K.)

(CP 246)

Two readings coexist here, a literal one (that of a car being started) and a figurative one (that of the virginity of a woman being taken). The interaction between two interpretations echoes the interaction between tenor and vehicle, woman and car.

Another well-known poem by Cummings fuses the figurative and literal interpretations. In “weazened Irrefutable unastonished” (CP 253), the large twenty moving fingers are mentioned as such and seem to be moving as our reading eye encounters the alternation between lower case and upper case letters:

weazened Irrefutable unastonished  
two,countenances seated in arranging;sunlight  
with-ered unspea-king:tWeNtY,f i n g e r s,large  
four gnarled lips totter

The alternation between letters represents sign language, the way deaf persons communicate, replacing their lack of speech by means of their “four gnarled lips tottering.” Shall we say that the words “:tWeNtY,f i n g e r s,large” represent the fusion between the tenor (sign language) and the vehicle (the typographic form of the letters or moving fingers)? In this case, the icon is represented, empirical reality appears textually in linguistic and typographic manipulations: the segment “:tWeNtY,f i n g e r s,large” mimes the movements of both hands as if the author wanted to focus directly on his mimetic intention.<sup>3</sup>

And we reach here the central point in Cummings’ metaphors, which are always closely attached to the real. In his original definition of metaphors from the Houghton notes, Cummings assimilates metaphors to various material elements taken from the real: microbes, sounds, flavours, and silences. Cummings’ definition of metaphor seems to be quite close to that of metonymy since metaphor is a vivid and real entity. Metaphors are systematically projected onto the world:

I have just realized something, the silences and the solidities which we call things are not things but metaphors. Metaphors are the hoppings of one thing to another which we mistakenly call ideas: they copulate in laughter, in your smallest gesture are born myriads which die in the next and incredibly are reborn; they are eaten and drunken, we swallow them and we breathe them, under different names: we do not stroke edges and feel music, but only metaphors. They are the brightness. There are a billion on an instant, on a coatsleeve. They are what we call sounds and flavours, the difference between this face and another<sup>4</sup>.

Although Cummings' definition makes a scandalous juxtaposition of different elements, his definition seems to condense the different theories we have tried to explore above.

The real being the starting point of the poetic revelation, one quickly understands that metaphors also imply an adequate metonymic reading of the world. The disappearance and immediate rebirth of metaphors ("in your smallest gesture are born myriads which die in the next and are incredibly reborn") recalls Rosolato's metaphoro-metonymic oscillation. Further on, metaphors are considered as constellations ("myriads," "they are the brightness," "There are a billion on an instant"), and one remembers the radioactivity of words and the interaction theory as well as the interpenetration of things.

All these references which generate an enigmatic and polymorphous definition of metaphor demonstrate that the debate is open, that many theories seem to be valid according to this amazing definition. We have seen that in 'when god lets my body be,' metaphors take their impulse from the poetic reading of the metonymic axis. In "I have seen her a stealthily frail," metaphors hesitate between substitution ("Metaphors are the hoppings of one thing to another"—they are "the difference between this face and another") and interaction ("There are a billion on an instant"). This tension seems to favor a controlled back movement towards the real (we "mistakenly" call metaphors "ideas"; "they are eaten and drunken"). The metaphoric word cannot be understood in relation to the replaced entity but to other "radioactive" surrounding words.

Since "things are not things but metaphors," it seems impossible to read the world through analogical lenses; on the contrary, Cummings invites readers to read anomalies hidden under analogies and metaphors in the real world. Owing to poetry, readers can apprehend the real differently, the implicit equivalence between words and things being questioned here. Cummings reminds readers that the objects of the world were named according to an inspired apprehension of the real world. Each named object originally comes from a metaphoric reading of the world which has been lost and which Cummings tries to reactivate. Each named thing is a former vivid metaphor that readers should bring back to life. Cummings refutes a literal reading of the world; we can be attentive to the poetic ecstasy the world offers.

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## Notes

- 1 According to Kennedy, Cummings wrote this poem as a part of Dean Briggs' versification class at Harvard (92).
- 2 Notes at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS, Am 1823.7 (23) Notes to this book may also be found at bMS Am 1823.7 (64), folder 4 and bMS Am 1823.7 (64), folder 5.
- 3 [Editor's note] The reader might notice that there are twenty typed characters before and after the colon.
- 4 Notes at the Houghton Library, Harvard University bMS Am 1823.7 (25) folder 8, sheets 162 and 223. Cohen notes that this passage is quoted almost verbatim in a scene in *Him*, pp. 28-29 (Cohen 153).

## Works Cited

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