# The Nude, the Grasshopper, and the Poet-Painter: A Reading of E. E. Cummings' "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r"

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Cubism pioneered by Picasso and Braque immediately spread in other fields of avant-garde artistic activities. Modernist poets ventured in discovering techniques to apply cubist ideas in the written text. Cummings' unique position among his modernist peers was defined by the duality of his artistic genius. He always thought of himself as a "poetandpainter." Practitioner in both artistic fields, he was able to freely import techniques from painting to writing, thus pushing the limits of language experiments beyond wildest imaginable horizons.

The following reading demonstrates how Cummings applies the ideas of cubist painters in poetry. Explaining the strong influence that Marcel Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier* exercised on Cummings' grasshopper poem results in the conclusion that the former served as a hypotext for the latter.[1] The result of this transposition can be justly termed a cubo-futurist sonnet. The following poem appeared as number 13 in the Cummings' volume *No Thanks* (1935).

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                    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)
                                        to
 rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
 ,grasshopper;
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(CP 396)

The obvious difficulty in grasping the poem is that it is constructed so as to be seen, not spoken. At first sight there are only three intelligible words on the page—"who" in the second line, "to" in line thirteen, and "grasshopper" in the last line. This is the initial indication that we are faced with a poem about an insect, or a poem about who or what that insect is. After a third or fourth reading, we discover what is actually laid down on the page, namely: three different ambiguously scrambled and punctuated variations of the word "grasshopper" (lines 1, 5, 12), plus this spatially dispersed text: "who as we look up now gathering into a The leA!p:S arrIv-IngG to rearrangingly become ,grasshopper;". As Sam Hynes, one of the earliest interpreters of the poem, suggests:

> The whole poem is an attempt to deal with words visually, and to create art as a single experience, having spatial, not temporal extension: to force poetry toward a closer kinship with painting and the plastic arts, and away from its kinship with music. (item 9)

Thus for Hynes the poem is "a picture of an action rather than a description of it." Further on he suggests that the word clusters that represent separate phases of this action—like take-off, leap, flight, and landing—are meant to be received simultaneously rather than being perceived as occurring one after the other. He observes, for example, that "[i]n the penultimate line . . . the [re]arranging and the becoming are simultaneous processes." I would further note that what we witness is a transformation of the insect from anonymity and nonexistence into attention and recognition and hence into a sudden "aliveness." This is brilliantly suggested by the indefinite article "a," which is compressed together with the capitalized definite article "The" (beginning of line 7). The "aThe" is a miniature image signifying the process of "becoming."

In his analysis of the poem Norman Friedman comes to this conclusion:

> The appearance of the poem on the page does not resemble, by any stretch of the imagination, a grasshopper leaping. The important fact to grasp is that the spatial arrangement is not imitative in itself, as is the case in representational painting or drawing in which the lines and colours actually resemble some object; it is rather that the spacing is governed by the disruption and blending of syllables and the pause and emphasis of meaning which produce a figurative equivalent for the sub-

ject of the poem, as the reader reads in time. (123-124)

What Cummings has done is approach the empty page as if he were approaching the canvas on his easel.

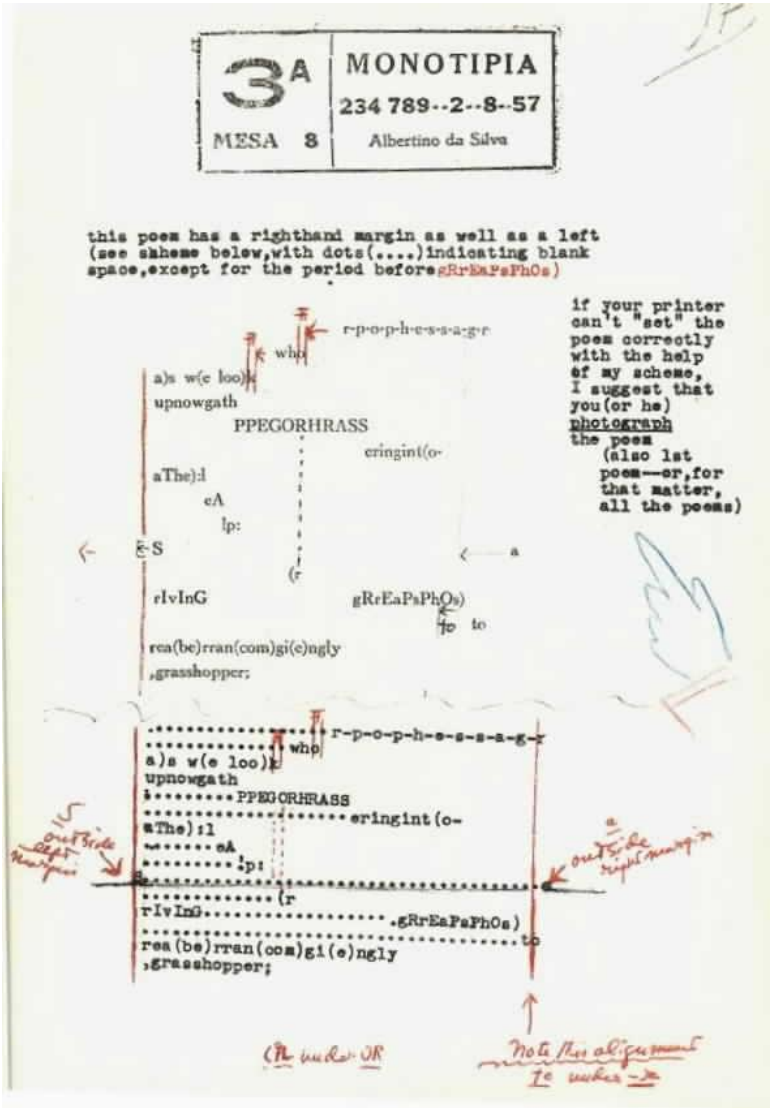


***Figure 1:*** Corrected proof sheets of "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" sent by Cummings to his Brazilian translator, Augusto de Campos.

As we may see from the corrected proof sheets (Fig. 1) that Cummings sent to his translator Augusto de Campos, the spacing and arrangement of the syllables, letters, and words (normal, fragmented, or compounded) is by no means arbitrary. On the contrary, what we have is precision in the placing of the linguistic elements on the page, as if he were working with a brush. As Cummings has written at the top of the page, "this poem has a righthand margin as well as a left." This is an indication that the poem is "framed." Of course his instruction that the capital "S" and lowercase "a" on the tenth line be placed outside the frame serves both to reinforce and distort the form of the poem, creating the visual suggestion of the frame being "forced" from within. Another indication that the poem is "framed" or "formatted"—that is, that it has an intentional shape— is created by the number of lines—fifteen—which suggests a sonnet with its title being the last line, as Max Nänny aptly points out (121).

But if the poem has a complex formal structure—or even a sonnet-like form—then how can one claim a similarity between the poem and cubistic expression? The basic characteristic of a cubist artwork is that in it the objects are broken up, dismantled, analyzed and then reassembled in an abstract form. The artist depicts the subject not from one viewpoint but from a various number of viewpoints simultaneously. Thus, through abstraction the object is virtually deconstructed.

The multiple viewpoints in Cummings' poem are suggested by the phrase "a)s w(e loo)k" (line 3). Not only is the personal pronoun in the plural, but it is further split by a parenthesis. Thus what is evoked in the reader's (or more precisely the viewer's) mind is an image of a leaping-from-the-grass grasshopper, seen simultaneously from different angles. As for the dismantling of the subject, first we have the poetic form distorted to a degree of total unintelligibility. Rhyme, meter, and feet are out of the question. They are simply not applicable terms. As for rhythm, if there is any, it is visual rather than audible.

On the linguistic level, morphosyntax is radically violated. The participle "rearranging" is forced to serve a different syntactic function by the addition of suffix "–ly" (line 14). Moreover, the word is interspliced via parentheses with the word "become," splitting the infinitive "to become" and slicing the word "become" into three parts, one being the word, "be," which can be perceived as functioning separately. Thus the poem becomes an illustration of Cummings' philosophy of life as direct experience of the self—a view of life as the motion of the self through space and time—or as he himself explains it:

> There are certain things in which one is unable to believe for the simple reason that he never ceases to feel them. Things of this sort—things which are always inside of us and in fact are us and which consequently will not be pushed off or away where we can begin thinking about them—are no longer things;they,and the us which they are,equals A Verb;an IS. (*Enormous Room* 168)

We might regard this philosophy as a form of ontology of becoming, in which change is not accidental to the subject but is regarded as the corner-stone of reality and hence as the true essence of being. In linguistic terms, this motion-oriented philosophy "equals A Verb;an IS". To put it simply, becoming is the essence of being, or being exists through successive changes or stages of becoming. This is clearly visible in the three permutations the word "grasshopper" undergoes in the poem (lines 15, 12, 5, 1)

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


                          PPEGORHRASS


                                                .gRrEaPsPhOs)

        ,grasshopper;
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Michael Webster calls the three images of the insect (lines 1, 5, 12) "exotic beasts" (111), which I find fascinating. While he describes only those images in a logical descending order, I think that the idea of a leaping motion implies a reversed reading order. Hence I will start from line 15 and go upwards. First at the bottom line we have an easily recognizable ",grasshopper;". The second "beast" (line 12 ) begins with a period and then alternates lower and upper case letters of the word "grasshopper" in such a way as to suggest "a mostly reversed, mostly upper-case 'hOPPER'

stick[ing] out of the lower-case 'grashs' " (Webster 112). This second image, duly distorted and reshaped is, albeit barely, still recognizable as the linguistic sign of a grasshopper. The third even more scrambled and blurred image presents the original insect in the very moment of take-off. The all uppercase "PPEGORHRASS" (line 5) suggests the maximum muscle tension of the "beast" at the precise millisecond of its leaping off the ground. And we arrive at line one, where the "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r " (line1), the utmost abstraction of the original image, presents an invisible, dispersed and hyphenated grasshopper stretched in the air in the full arc of its flight. So reading up the page, we see four successive images of a grasshopper, each with an ever-increasing depth of abstraction.

In linguistic terms, through rearrangement, E. E. Cummings creates four different linguistic signs for the notion of "grasshopper," with an increasing degree of "estrangement" (Webster 112). So, the changing structure of the signifier changes also the signified. And this deconstruction of the signifier / signified opposition results in new, different, and more abstract signs for the same referent, which, though absolutely challenging our readerly expectations, may actually represent the true nature or essence of a real, lively grasshopper. Or, as Webster puts it: "Cummings presents the otherness of the insect by deforming that most distinctive human invention, language" (112).

But the four signs do more than that. They create motion. In this way they overcome the greatest weakness of cubist paintings that are by necessity static. That makes the poem strikingly similar to a painting by Marcel Duchamp. This similarity of the overall impression of the two works is briefly mentioned by Richard Kostelanetz in the introduction to his *Another E. E. Cummings*. In 1912 Duchamp was the first to introduce a cubist-inspired technique for depicting motion. In that he was influenced by the new-born cinema and the photographic studies of the body in motion of Eadweard Muybridge (Fig. 2), who captured the moving subject, be it an animal or a human being, by tripping the shutters of a succession of cameras set along the subject's path of movement.

***Figure 2:*** *Woman Descending Stairs and Turning Around*. Photographic sequence by Eadweard Muybridge, 1887.

Duchamp's painting *Nu descendant un escalier* (Fig. 3), or *Nude Descending a Staircase*, depicts a female figure in motion. It is created in the cubist mode of deconstruction of form in the sense that it does not resemble an anatomical nude, but only presents abstract lines and planes instead. These lines suggest the successive static positions of the body and thus create a sense of motion. But the motion and the female nude occur only in the mind of the viewer.

***Figure 3:*** Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912)

Just like Duchamp, Cummings intended the three deranged images of the grasshopper to create a sense of motion in the mind of the reader. There is a difference, however. While Duchamp's superimposed images imply sequential movement in a spatial dimension, Cummings' metamorphosed images of the grasshopper, with their increasing degree of abstraction, suggest also a qualitative change in temporal dimension.

Another aspect of the poem with a similar function that corresponds in some ways to Duchamp's painting is the last line "title" [*,grasshopper;*].

Taken together with "The" in line seven, the last line becomes the title of a "disguised" fourteen-line sonnet: "The ‚grasshopper;" (Nänny 121). Being one of the few recognizable meaningful words upon first reading, it serves as a starting point for the gradual cognitive process of the reader's apprehension of the poem as such, that is, as "text." Simultaneously, however, this recognizable grasshopper contrasts with the rest of the poem's "body," perceived at first as illegible lines and marks denoting image rather than text, and thus broadening readers' expectations: they confront not a poem but a poem-picture. In this way Cummings challenges the way we read literature in general and poetry in particular. He shifts the stress from how we should *read* a poem to how we should *experience* a poem.

Marcel Duchamp does something similar in his work. He paints the title in capital letters, "NU DESCENDANT UN ESCALIER," on the bottom-left corner of the canvas, turning the painting into a multimedia product. This did not conform with cubist practice at that time. When he first submitted the painting for the cubist section of the *Salon des Indépendants* in Paris in 1912, the jury found the caption cartoonish and decided that Duchamp was intentionally poking fun at cubist art. So they told him to paint over the title, thus forcing him to withdraw the painting from the exhibition.[2] The painting caused even more controversy at the Armory show in New York the following year, scandalizing the American public, which was accustomed to naturalistic art. But such was the fate of the majority of avant-garde work. Duchamp was not trying to poke fun at modernist art; he was pushing it beyond the limits of a single artistic medium. Through a combination of techniques from painting, cinematography and the emerging mass-culture comics, he challenged the conventional ways in which a single work of art should be understood by the audience.

Thus Cummings' poem-picture and Duchamp's painting both demonstrate the modernist tendency to dismantle received artistic canons. I maintain that in Cummings' inter-media product, we witness a transposition of the cubo-futurist pictorial expressivity into verbal textuality. Duchamp's multi-media work serves as a hypotext for the "grasshopper" poem. Thus both fall into a polytextual relationship.

The similarity of the two Cubist-inspired works is evident and it can be exemplified further if we go the other way round and make a Cubist painting out of the poem. You will see below (Fig. 4) a computer-generated painting of Cummings' sonnet, done in collaboration with my colleague the artist Svetoslav Kosev.

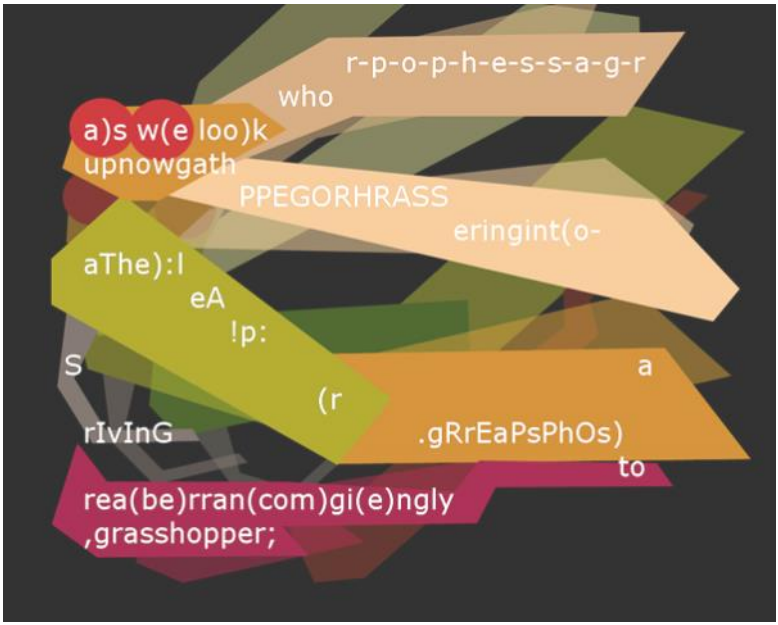


***Figure 4:*** *Cummings' Grasshopper,*
Svetoslav Kosev, Vakrilen Kilyovski (2009)

In conclusion, I would like to point out that Cummings may be said to invite us to close our minds and widely open our senses. He so orchestrated his virtuoso leaping grasshopper as to make us experience the vivid spontaneity of a simple natural phenomenon as a celebration of life.

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**Notes**

1. A "hypotext" is a previous text that lies underneath or behind the "hypertext." The hypotext "is grafted" on the hypertext "in a manner that is not that of commentary" (Genette, *Palimpsests* 5).
2. Duchamp said much later in an interview that his painting "wasn't in line with what they [the cubists] had predicted. Cubism had lasted two or three years, and they already had an absolutely clear, dogmatic line on it, foreseeing everything that might happen. I found that naively foolish" (qtd. in Cabanne 17).

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