Thirteen Ways of Reading EEC's *R-O-U-N-D MoOn:* And the Making of a Poem

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The Making of a Poem

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!

o(rounD)moon,how
do
you(rouNd
er
than roUnd)float;
who
lly &(rOunder than)
go
:ldenly(Round
est)

?
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Cummings was obsessed with *poiesis,* with making. He called it, "the Making obsession" (CP 221), and it involved an utter attentiveness to the materiality of the printed page. Max Nänny's earlier work on iconicity in Cummings' poetry and poetics helped attune later readers to the detail of such attentiveness, and Etienne Terblanche's perspective of the "micro-ideogram" at work throughout Cummings' *oeuvre* provides even greater focus toward the micro-architectures of Cummings' craft (See Nänny, "Iconic Features" and "Iconic Dimensions"; see Terblanche 73).

Cummings' "Making obsession" of micro-ideograms can be traced in the records of his numerous drafts. One sheet from the archives at the Houghton Library may contain several typed and handwritten stages of the poem's becoming—as well as doodles, sketches, and syllable countings—all of which became the marks of an imagination in the midst of creative breakthrough. Cummings' drafts not only provide a tremendous weight of evidence as to the sheer attentiveness Cummings gave every fragment and

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punctuation mark (i.e. he did not haphazardly "destroy" language, but rather, through deconstructing language, he created innumerable semiotic possibilities), but they also give scholars insight as to his overall creative process. In what follows, I speculate upon what may have been going on in Cummings' mind as he made this moon poem, but it is a speculation informed by the marks left on the sheets as a result of this poem's process of becoming.

I have always loved "! // o(rounD)moon,how"—or what I call Cummings' poem of the *R-O-U-N-D MoOn* (CP 722). I have taught the poem many times and have circulated some ideas on it at conferences and elsewhere (see Moe 14–15). When I read it for students, I do so with the illimitable gestures of the performing body. This poem epitomizes what Whitman calls the "best poems," for in it and through it, the "body reappears" (*LG* 1891–92, 176).

When I saw that the archives held four sheets of the poem's drafts, I requested them immediately. As I waited for the copied sheets to arrive, I grew anxious. Would there be glimpses into Cummings' work as a maker? If so, would they bewilder?

The four sheets contain roughly 29 drafts of the poem, the approximation arising from considering just how much writing constitutes a draft.[1] Provocatively, from the first draft to the last, Cummings adds only one word and two punctuation marks, yet he omits nothing. Throughout the making of this poem, then, the obsession has to do with the gestures of the letters and the blank spaces of the poetic page. Cummings wrote seven of the drafts in pencil, and they are interspersed throughout the typed drafts. This observation suggests that his breakthroughs emerged not solely from the typewriter (as is often suggested) but rather through switching back and forth between writing technologies; the pencil and typewriter worked together throughout the making of this poem.

I am interested in what happened between the drafts—especially because it is messy. Cummings did not work linearly. For instance, on the first sheet containing twelve drafts, Cummings lowercased every letter. In the first draft of the second sheet, he includes the capitalization of *R-O-U-N -D* (Draft 13). However, we can see penciled-in capital letters written over the very first draft of the first sheet (fig. 1).

This suggests that Cummings typed out the first sheet of drafts, pulled it from the typewriter, and let his imagination go to work with a pencil. He etched in the capitals, fed a fresh sheet into the typewriter, and typed the
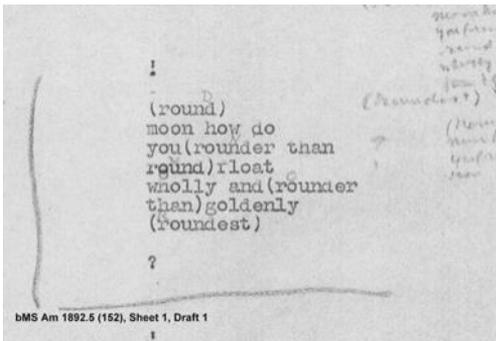
Figure 1: Draft 1

poem complete with the innovative breakthrough of a moonrise gestured by the ascending *R-O-U-N-D*. Perhaps playing with the capitals was indirectly inspired by an earlier creation of his, "mOOn Over tOwns mOOn"—a poem that also uses the word "flOat" in innovative ways (CP 383). As Terblanche explores, Cummings capitalizes the "O" so the word "visually depicts a line formed by the lowercase letters and a form bulging from and out of the line. . . . Poignantly, the lowercase letters in this word spell 'flat.'" As such, the letter "O" "break[s] loose from the horizon or from the line of buildings in a city" (82–83). Such insights contribute more traction for a community of readers to delve into the micro-iconic worlds of Cummings.

As mentioned, the words of the poem do not change from the first draft to the final save for one: the initial *o* of the poem. Cummings adds the *o* with a pencil in the second sheet's 14th Draft. But the 13th Draft (at the upper left below) is typed (fig. 2).
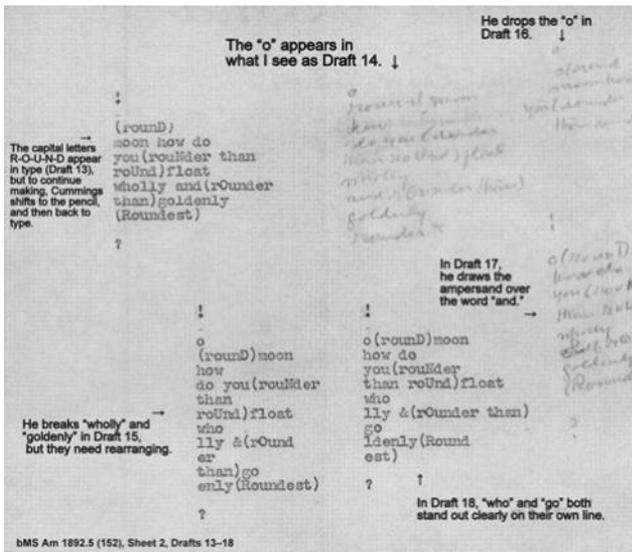

Figure 2: Drafts 13-18

This suggests that when Cummings began the second sheet, he typed the 13th draft with the capitalized *R-O-U-N-D* and got stuck. He removed the sheet and picked up a pencil. At this moment, I figure he was most concerned with iconicity (where form mimes meaning)—that is, with getting the *R-O-U-N-D* moon materially represented in yet another way. And then he adds the lowercased *o* all by itself in a line at the top of the poem— again, with his pencil. One breakthrough in material iconicity (a moonrise of capital letters) leads to another (the *moon* of the first letter). With Cummings, however, the micro-ideograms often suggest multiple readings. While "looking for letter icons" in this poem, Nänny observes how the poem includes fourteen o's, "and we have to remember that it takes fourteen days for the new moon to round into the full moon" ("Iconic Features" 229). He sees the fourteen o's reinforcing how the alternating line lengths from long to short suggest the cycle of waxing and waning, waxing and waning ("Iconic Features" 228). The "o" is, after all, the only word Cummings adds to the poem, and he does so on the fourteenth draft—a happy coincidence. Even though we cannot know precisely what prompted Cummings to add the "o," we know he was deliberate. I like to imagine him delighted by the surprise that the "o" could serve both as a visual metaphor and bring the total number of o's to fourteen. To quote Frost, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader" (11).

After the pencil draft, Cummings shifts back to his typewriter; and when he types the next draft, he breaks "wholly" into "who / lly" and "goldenly" into "go / ldenly" (Second Sheet, Drafts 17, 18). The moon becomes a "who" that can "go." Shifting back to his pencil, he drops the "o" down a line in the 16th draft and draws an ampersand over the word *and* in the 17th draft. Draft 18 crystalizes the breakthroughs of the last several drafts, including placing "who" and "go" on their own lines.

And I must discuss the layer of counting within the poem. Readers of Cummings soon realize how counting patterns create deep structures in Cummings' seemingly random makings (fig. 3).

Alongside Draft 21, the sheet provides explicit evidence of counting the syllables per line. The pattern of the published poem unfolds as 4-1-2-1-3-1 -5-1-3-1 syllables per line, which is not as symmetrical as many of his other makings. However, this pattern suggests a continual return to ONE. The fact that the final draft places one syllable on every other line is not a "happy coincidence" but rather the result of working and re-working the form of this poem.
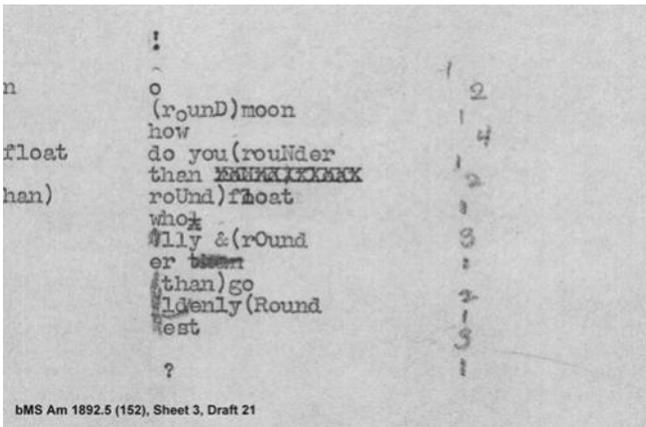
bMS Am 1892.5 (152), Sheet 3, Draft 21

Figure 3: Draft 21

Cummings does not add the comma, the semicolon, or the colon until the final draft in the archive. It is as if he wrote the poem one last time; having worked on the materiality for 28 other drafts—in order to discern where the final punctuation ought to go. Provocatively, Cummings wrote the final draft in pencil. Pencils, like paintbrushes, make pictures. When he adds the punctuation, he simultaneously finalizes the pattern of one syllable every other line (fig. 4).
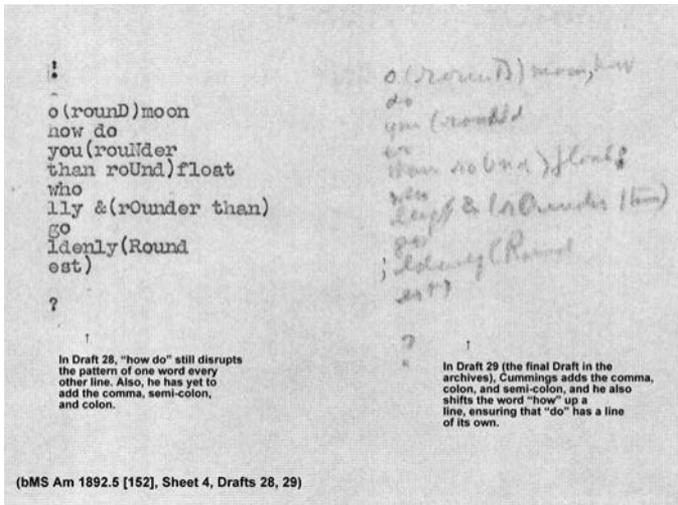

(bMS Am 1892.5 [152], Sheet 4, Drafts 28, 29)

Figure 4: Drafts 28 and 29

There is a slight (but crucial) change between the 29th draft and the published poem: Cummings switches the placement of the colon and semi-colon. Why? Throughout Cummings' *oeuvre*, he constantly plays with variations on a series of commas, semi-colons, colons, and such (, ; : . : ; ,). The comma often points toward a more "open" state, whereas the period

often points toward a "closed" state.[2]

Also, for some reason, Cummings neglects to include the "!" in the 29th draft even though it appears in every typed draft preceding it. I imagine that Cummings turned to a fresh sheet—one that is not in the archives—and typed the poem one last time.

All this shows Cummings approaching the poem in a series of layered breakthroughs: the initial words; the capital letters; the iconic *o*; the breaking of words; the pattern of syllables per line; and the added comma, semi-colon, and colon as the final touches. Aside from the *o* that eventually begins the poem, the totality of the "content" appears in the first draft; and therefore "the Making obsession" hinges upon grappling with the materiality of the marks on the page, searching for the most fitting gestures that give us many more than thirteen ways of reading this poem.

to all makers

```
!

o(rounD)moon,how
do
you(rouNd
er
than roUnd)float;
who
lly &(rOunder than)
go
:ldenly(Round
est)

?
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I

Cummings was a painter. To paint bark, you don't use one color. You layer many colors. Reds, browns, greens, yellows, purples. From a distance, bark may seem like one color, but anyone who has spent time marveling at bark knows the array of colors present in the folds and furrows of what we call "brown."

Cummings made "! // o(rounD)moon,how" with several layers. The layer of basic denotative content. The layers of iconicity including the *o* and the moonrise of capital letters. The layer of counting syllables per line. The layer of descending into a question and rising into exclamation. And the last splotches of paint: the comma, semi-colon, and colon.

<div align="center">II</div>

Walking through the drafts, the moon begins to rise . . . a

<div align="center">do</div>

<div align="center">er</div>

<div align="center">who</div>

<div align="center">go</div>

<div align="center">est</div>

<div align="center">III</div>

o round moon how do you float wholly and goldenly ?
(rounD) (rouNder than roUnd) (rOunder than) (Roundest) R-O-U-N-D !

<div align="center">IV</div>

Emerson argued that the shape of a poem—its order, its breaks, its sounds, its material—must be driven by "a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it [that is, poetic form] has an architecture of its own" (290).

Emerson ought to extend the possibilities.

like the spirit of a plant

or an animal

or a moon

V

The main event of this poem is not on the page. It is in the body of the one who reads the poem. The moonrise happens *through* the body. *Through* the arms gesturing a crescendo of rOUNdness with each iteration of *r-O-U-N-d*. The voice amplifying the crescendo. The lips stretching in their own pantomime of r-O-U-N-dness . . . stretching around the expansive diphthong. The jaw unhinged with a mouth full of moon. A moon that fl-O-A-ts in all of its g-O-ldenly wh-O-liness. A moon that makes the question h-O-W usher the body into an exclamatory O-de.[3]

Not just *how do you float wholly and goldenly?!*

but also *how did that moon just float through my m-O-U-th?!*
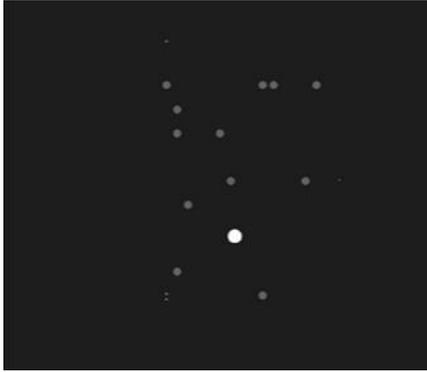
VI

who

is

holy

who

goes

goldenly

VII

The poem never really ends. We descend into a question only to rise back up through the poem—*R-O-U-N-D*—arriving at the exclamation mark. The beginning. The first line of the poem. And we read again. Only then does the stored energy unleash itself in crescendo of awe. Feedback loops. A chaos of turbulent sound.

IX

We have to linger in the final splotches of paint: the comma, the semi-colon, the colon. For Cummings, punctuation is all about ontology. States-of-being. Ways-of-being. As we read the poem—or as we watch a moon-rise of a fuller-than-full moon (one of those super moons or "perigee" moons that causes us to stagger and reel no matter how many times we witness them)—we experience different states of being. A *,ness*. A *;ness*. A *:ness*. A *?ness.* Then a *:ness* again. A *;ness*, a *,ness*. A *!ness*.

Often with Cummings, the progression of punctuation coincides with a progression between open and closed states of being where commas are "open" and colons are more "closed." Here, we descend beyond the colon into an inquisitive state of being (what is this poem about?) only to discover a renewed ontology that progresses back up through the *: ; ,* towards openness. One must descend into the question mark before morphing back through other states of being. Then, we enter the ontology of exclamatory ode. To reach *!ness*, one must undergo a spiritual journey. A purging. A phoenix-like descent followed by ascent.

The punctuation reflects and shapes the ontological journey of moon-watchers.

(parentheses are hands cradling the moon)

X

But no. The last splotches of paint occur in the poem that follows it in

95 Poems (CP 723). There, it is dawn, and the *R-O-U-N-D MoOn* has become a *blue blur* vanishing. This moon is now a "was of is"—suggesting how the verbful super moon, once fully inhabiting the state of IS (*est*, the word just before and just after the question mark, means "is" in Latin), has moved into a *was—*a memory. And yet, the speaker of the poem is still in an ode-filled state, marveling now at the way the moon vanishes in the middle of the last line, in the middle of "thea lmo st mor ning" where counting the letters from the right and left (4-3-2-3-4) leads us to an implied zero-of-nothingness between the *s* and the *t*. . . .

Not too many poems end in the middle of a line, in the present-absence of a vanished moon:

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f

 eeble a blu
r of cr
umbli
ng m

oo

  n(
poor shadoweaten
was
of is and un of

so

  )h
  ang
  s
  from

thea lmo st mor ning
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<p style="text-align:center">XI</p>

As a maker, Cummings saw the "completeness of gesture" as a "prime number . . . like 11 or 13."[4] The poem of the *R-O-U-N-D MoOn* gestures on the page. When read, it directs the gestures of the performing body. The

poem, then, uses language to precede language, ushering us back to the primal, irreducible origins of *poiesis*—to the gestures that once migrated from the hands to the mouth, ready for breath to turn them into speech.[5]

<div align="center">

XII

</div>

A reader and the poem
Are one.
A reader and the poem and the moon
Are one.

<div align="center">

XIII

</div>

<div align="right">

—Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame

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Acknowledgements:

Notes

1. The sheets preserve 25 full drafts, but I reach the number 29 through including four drafts of smaller sections of the poem. The four frag-

ments are not "complete" per se, but they are surely part of the unfolding of the poem's becoming.

2. For more on the progression of punctuation in Cummings' works, see Webster and Terblanche's "Eco-iconicity in the Poetry and Poemgroups of E. E. Cummings" 162; and Moe's "Cummings' Urban Ecology: An Exploration of *EIMI, No Thanks, &* the Cultivation of the Ecological Self."

3. The fifth reading has to do with place. In the interview "Imagining Ecopoetics," Brenda Hillman suggests a three-fold understanding of place, one of which focuses on the "site of the material syllable, the composition" (764). For Hillman, the place of the poem is found in the syllables when they are spoken *and* on the composition of the printed page—that is, in the materiality of the text *and* the materiality of the body reading the text. The other two facets of place include the "symbolic realms, the worlds of spirit, myth, and dream" as well as the "local bioregion" (764). I see Cummings' poem of the *R-O-U-N-D MoOn* dwelling in all three places. We identify with the local bioregion when we see the rOUnd moon in the trees of our neighborhood; the mOOn becomes a mythological and spiritual force in Cummings' *oeuvre*, and the materiality of the poem's syllables and composition cultivate a sense of dwelling in and through an embodied language.

4. Cummings collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, call number bMS Am 1823.7 (25), folder 4, sheet 74.

5. To make these claims, I draw on Sir Richard Paget's gesture-speech theory. Sir Richard Paget argues that, prior to speech, the mouth unconsciously imitated the semiotic gestures of the body, and he exposes hundreds of Indo-European and Polynesian roots in which the mouth still retains vestiges of the gestures of the body. Those roots exist in today's language. For instance, when we say "hither," the tongue still reaches out and back in like a hand waving someone to draw near (*Human Speech* 138). When we say "creep," the tongue *creeps* towards the front of the mouth in a pantomime of how the hand gestures the action of *creeping* (*This English* 69). The mouth still enacts the unconscious "pantomime" of the gestures of the body (*Human Speech* 132). As Cummings shows us, when we say "round," the mouth gestures in all of its round rotundity. I cannot say if Paget's argument is *the* theory for the origin of language, but it surely articulates a contributing factor.

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