A close[r] reading of E.E. Cummings's[1] "anti-rationality"

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Abstract

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This article investigates the lingering suspicion prevalent among critics that E.E. Cummings's poetry is essentially "anti-rational" and refutes this view in terms of a logical and ecological analysis of the sonnet "i thank You God for most this amazing/day". A.J. Greimas's logical or semiotic square is used to show, firstly, that Cummings's poetry is quite logical, even logical in the terms employed by those accusing him of anti-rationality; and, secondly, that this logic is part of a more expansive ecological reasonability within his poetry. It is argued that the negative response to Cummings is largely the result of a frame of anti-rationality being superimposed on his work, which, in turn, is based on a narrow dualistic outlook which presents itself as universal and "objective". Seminal responses to Cummings's work (such as those of R.P. Blackmur, Helen Vendler and Edmund Wilson) are examined in this article. The central question posed is what the frame of anti-rationality actually marks or masks – should Cummings's poetry be shown to be quite rational, after all. In provisional conclusion it is argued that the frame marks or masks a contra-ecological blind spot in terms of which the true values of Cummings's poetry have been consistently overlooked.

1 The advice of E.E. Cummings's most revered critic, Norman Friedman, will be followed in printing Cummings's initials and surname in upper case (see Rotella, 1984:6). Friedman (1998a & 1998b) invalidates the myth that Cummings had his name changed legally to the lower case form, and offers several convincing arguments for using the upper case.

1. Contextualization and introduction

Much of of the critical response to E.E. Cummings is based on the assumption that his poetry is "anti-rational". This article is an attempt to refute this prevalent view on the grounds that Cummings's poetry is, after all, quite rational, and not only for the evident riddly and cerebral qualities that engage the receiver of his code throughout his bulky oeuvre. The notion that Cummings's poetry is rational is based on the following possibilities: firstly, that logic is fully functional in his work; and secondly, that the mentioned logic forms part of a greater rationality within Cummings's work, namely an inclusive and indeed ecological rationality – which will be referred to as an ecological reasonability for the sake of clarity.

The possibility of restoring Cummings's rationality to his poetry evidently involves several interesting questions such as: Why is Cummings accused of anti-rationality? ("Accused" is the appropriate verb, since the response to Cummings, whether positive or negative, is invariably passionate and even warm, and in some cases Cummings is properly castigated for his anti-rational attitude, as we will show.) Secondly, should it become apparent that Cummings is quite rational after all, what do these accusations and the frame (or tag) of anti-rationality actually mark or mask?

A brief overview of the critical response to Cummings, and especially its more negative aspects in terms of the frame of anti-rationality, provides some insight into some of the reasons for the imposition of this frame on Cummings's work. Some of the reasons are superfluous, and most seem circumstantial. It is one of those critical habits which may go by unnoticed that any poet with a degree of Romantic or Expressionist overtones (such as Cummings) would be dispositioned towards a certain form of anti-rationality, and may therefore be accused of this – should the need for accusation arise. Any poet with Romantic leanings may suffer from the frame of anti-rationality being imposed upon his or her work. Particularly striking in this regard is the history of critical suspicion towards the so-called "pathetic fallacy" and the Apostrophe in Romantic poets proper (Feder, 2000:2, 11). The poetic freedom and indeed the truth of addressing nature, or of sympathizing and identifying fully with nature, reveals a history of being held with critical or rationalist disregard, and it is highly likely that these tendencies might have played a circumstantial role in framing Cummings as anti-rational.

Should one wish to follow this route in the case of Cummings, however, we would argue that one would have to overlook the substantial influence of other sources in Cummings's poetry and indeed the sheer

inclusivity suggested by the diversity of roots or sources which make up Cummings's particular poetical "tree". These include the modernist root, for instance, in which Cummings admittedly enjoys an intriguing ambivalent status, the classical one (Cummings majored in classical languages and this influence is discernable in his work), the Freudian one (Cohen, 1983:599), as well as the influence of Transcendentalism, and the comical/ Christian influence. The latter influence is at least paralleled by the vital influence of Lao Tzu in Cummings, as he himself acknowledges in his poetry (Cummings, 1981:553).

We would therefore argue that the possible equation of Cummings with either Romanticism or Expressionism and hence with an infantile anti-rational stance is an oversimplification, because on the one hand, Cummings's position within modernist poetical discourse is far more complex, and, on the other, because Cummings reveals an overarchingly ecological stance that would have to be ignored in order to uphold this equation. Even though the majority of Cummings's critics avoid the possibility or temptation of this oversimplification, it might have played a circumstantial role in terms of what critics may have assumed with regard to Cummings. More important, however, is the recognition that modernist discourse includes New Critical and Structuralist dispositions towards a divisioning of the world of meaning and experience into two starkly divided legs (or categories, or logical opposites) arranged hierarchically, statically and seemingly "neutrally" or "objectively."

Nothing has been more devastating in the critical response to Cummings's work than this habitually dualistic and narrow outlook which – according to those that maintain it – embodies rationality on a universal scale (Neutjens, 1999). This outlook was (and often still is) so influential that it has become entrenched as the "standard" response to Cummings's work to the extent that it is tacitly assumed to be "natural" or "objective" or "positive". Of course, this outlook has also had devastating ecological consequences, since it has allowed society to view nature as something external, exploitable and "female", something "out there" which could only be made sense of in terms of the most efficient scientific exploitation, and exploitation which actually boils down to mere destruction in most instances.

In any event, seminal articles written early on in Cummings's career have had a sustained ripple effect to this day in the attempt to categorize Cummings according to this dualistic outlook, an attempt – we would argue – that is bound to fail since it would have to overlook imperative aspects of Cummings's poetry, such as his ecological overtones, especially in terms of unity beyond duality. Consider, for example, R.P. Blackmur's important early article, entitled "Notes on E.E. Cummings'

Language", published in 1931, which was structured according to the dualistic splits of *major versus minor* and especially *mature* (intellectual/ tragic/objective) *versus infantile* (emotional/enthusiastic/spontaneous), like so many other modernist criticisms (see Blackmur, 1984a). Blackmur's article carried tremendous weight and to this day critics insist on Cummings's "self-divided" or "childlike" poetry (Parekh, 1994:63,70), despite a more nuanced appreciation for Cummings's possible wholeness resulting from his writing about nature. Lewis Turco's insistence upon Cummings's "split-mindedness" or the "schizoid" (Turco, 1994:74). nature of his work is another example of a critic whose approach is based on this dualistic outlook which ignores the fact that Cummings patently stretches and warps grammatical rules to ensure the possibility of unity beyond duality. In other words, Cummings has taken an essentially dualistic language and rationalistic milieu, and has creatively reassembled it in order not only to signify unity, but to enact it poetically in a dynamic fashion. The commendable fact that Blackmur himself, just more than a decade after his first dualistic, and devastating article, published an article that virtually apologizes for misreading Cummings and for overlooking the obvious "synergy" (1984b:70) in his work in the first article, did not help to restore the critical balance.

Recently, of course, the dualistic outlook briefly introduced above and explained in more detail as the arguments here will unfold, and imposed on Cummings within the modernist framework to which Cummings so obviously belongs for several reasons, and from which he differs significantly in many other respects, has been criticized in a very sophisticated fashion within post-structuralist discourse such as deconstruction, which refers to the dualistic outlook as "logocentrism". Perhaps less noticeable within the field of theoretical activity but even more relevant in terms of Cummings and ecology, has been the emergence of ecocriticism and the related fields of deep ecology and/ or cultural ecological texts. In these works in general, the overemphasis on dualism is viewed as a complicating factor which obscures the possibility of unity, inclusivity, connectivity and groundedness. A compilation of these texts would include work by Lao Tzu, Fritjof Capra, Gary Snyder, Arne Naess, Cheryl Glotfelty, Ursula Le Guin and C.A. Bowers, among others.

Certainly, as Rai Peterson (1995:45) asserts, Cummings anticipates post-structuralism, for instance in his employment of expressive blank spaces. However, when viewed from an ecological perspective, Cummings's anticipation stretches much further. Indeed, the ecological comparison of the poet to the antennae of society, sensing developments early on, especially in terms of a supersensitivity towards those

essential relations that make society and persons and the continuation of the universe what they are (Bowers, 1993:122), relates well to Cummings.

These possibilities are conspicuously overlooked by those either accusing Cummings of anti-rationality, or admiring him for it. In order to place these accusations and the frame of anti-rationality in perspective, however, it is necessary to provide a concise summary of some of the most influential and most telling critical articles written along these lines. These include the criticism of Blackmur (mentioned above), as well as that of Helen Vendler and Edmund Wilson. To re/read their articles from the angle adopted here should not be interpreted as an attempt to put them on trial, however. These critics are eloquent, and their work reveals a high degree of passion in the response to Cummings, which could be interpreted as a form of dissonant resonance with the poet. It has already been mentioned that Blackmur had the courage to publish a later article in which he renounced his earlier judgement of Cummings to a substantial degree, and in which he praised Cummings for his synergy, which is close to the synesthetic and ecological essence of Cummings's poetry.

2. Framing Cummings: the dualistic misjudgement of his work

The more articulate of these critics, Helen Vendler, indicates that Cummings will only be appreciated by the young (1984:100), that "ambivalence is not possible with him" (1984:101) and also writes of Cumming's "murderous devaluation of the intellect" (1984:103). These remarks are typical of the virtual acerbity characterizing some of the responses to Cummings's so-called anti-rationality. They also typify a set of dualistic splits according to which poetry is measured, such as (once again) *intellectual versus emotional*, as well as the fact that should a poet seem more *emotional* and less *intellectual* – which is problematic in the case of Cummings because he strives for a renewed dynamic balance between these poetical forces – the poet will readily be accused of "sentimentality".

R.P. Blackmur – in the earlier, dualistically inclined article – refers to Cummings as a poet of "romantic egoism" (1984a:109). As usual, this is accompanied by the familiar frame of Cummings's "sentimental denial of intelligence" (1984a:107) and even a description of Cummings's work as "tough-guy poems" (1984a:108). In the conclusion to the article, Blackmur goes so far as to refer to Cummings's poetry as "a kind of baby-talk" (1984a:124)! Many more examples in a similar vein could be cited, mostly of critics following in Blackmur's footsteps, such as Preston (1984), Burke (1984), and Jarrell (1984), among others. The ambiguity

often associated with these negative judgements of Cummings's poetry will be illustrated further by a brief exposition of Edmund Wilson's article entitled "E.E. Cummings and Wallace Stevens".

Wilson (1984:44) is highly appreciative of Cummings's best works which, according to him, "seem to dissolve on the mind like the flakes of a lyric dew". (Wilson, however, clearly does not seem to appreciate the resonance of his remark in terms of the ecological and dissolving nature of Cummings's work.) At the same time, he castigates Cummings for being "an eternal adolescent" (1984:44) and "as half-baked as boyhood" (1984:44) – insults accompanied by the familiar verdict that Cummings shows "little application to the intellect" (1984:44). The pattern of "inclusively excluding" Cummings's poetry from "true" (modernist) poetry on the basis that Cummings ends up on the "wrong" side of dualities such as *intellectual versus emotional* and *mature versus infantile* is therefore continued.

Wilson (1984:45) continues his argument with a page of fatherly advice on how to write poetry, and comments on the fact that Cummings does not seem to rework his poetry (which is patently incorrect – Cummings even reworked his letters (Friedman, 1996:118)), and also advises that Cummings should stop the use of the lower case "I"! These remarks must surely be one of the more extreme examples of a critic forgetting entirely that writing about poetry is an essentially supplementary activity (which is meant in a deconstructive and positive sense here). It is quite obvious that Cummings's poetical lyricisms in general supersedes Wilson's glib, prosaic lyricisms.

Like a good father, Wilson concludes the article with the glowing reassurance that "Cummings deserves well of the public" (1984:46). In other words, Wilson is playing what Eric Berne (1983:31) refers to as a game or a crossed transaction: under the guise of an objective adult-to-adult transaction (or conversation) and in this case a "scholarly" or "rational" review, Wilson is acting the castigating father attempting to evoke and/ or rebuke the cowering child. These are the lengths to which those who advocate the application of the frame of anti-rationality to Cummings's poetry will go. The critic may be completely blind to the narrow, dualistic angle on which his or her universalist outlook is based, and may criticise Cummings for not playing the same game. In the process the crucial ecological value of Cummings's poetry, and indeed its ecological reasonability, is overlooked or undermined. We will return to some of these criticisms towards the conclusion of the article, and especially to further remarks made by Helen Vendler. Suffice it to state for the time being that the trends discernable in the critics mentioned

above, are discernable throughout the negative and/or ambiguous strand in the response to Cummings.

Indeed, even in the positive responses to Cummings, and especially in the case of Norman Friedman, wholeness is hinted at or strongly suggested, but never thoroughly examined. A thorough examination of Cummings's whole tendencies falls outside the scope of this article as well, even though it forms an essential "sub-plot" to the issue at stake. What follows is a brief exposition of this ecological reasonability offered in terms of the "textures" of Cummings's poetry.

For several reasons, such as the fact that it depicts a celebration and transcendence in terms of the "ordinary" natural "environment" (which, of course, is also an "invironment," viewed ecologically, since water speaks when one speaks), as well as the fact that the sonnet tradition plays a substantial role in Cummings's poetry, the following titleless sonnet has been chosen for analysis (Cummings, 1982:76):

> i thank You God for most this amazing
> day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
> and a blue true dream of sky and for everything
> which is natural which is infinite which is yes
>
> (i who have died am alive again today,
> and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
> day of life and of love and wings: and the gay
> great happening illimitably earth)
>
> how should tasting touching hearing seeing
> breathing any – lifted from the no
> of all nothing – human merely being
> doubt unimaginable You?
>
> (now the ears of my ears awake and
> now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

3. The "textures" and ecological reasonability of Cummings's sonnet

A logical analysis of any text goes along with the supposition that one should pierce the "everyday surface" of a given text in order to reach the structural and logical "depth" or "essence" (or "immanence" or "*langue*") of its meaning (Greimas, 1987:177) (structuralism shows a tendency to proliferate synonomous terminology). These are complex issues which will briefly be touched upon in the course of the analysis. However, before any "deep" or "structural" analysis is attempted in order to demonstrate the logical side of Cummings's rationality, we wish to focus

in this section on precisely those aspects of the "everyday surface" or "poetical surface" – or, simply, the "textures" – of this sonnet, as well as its ecological reasonability.

Some of the striking "textury" or sensuous features of this poem include a rhyming pattern almost conforming to the Shakespearian tradition, an arrangement of lines revealing the same Shakespearian-yet-not-quite-Shakespearian form (and indeed, hiding the Petrarchan qualities of this sonnet), the obvious stretching, blurring and reassembling of grammatical categories in order to achieve new wholes, new "integrities" and new co-incidences of meaning. Consider, for instance, the adjectival-exclamational surprise of the virtually tangible "place" of "yes" to which this sonnet gives embodiment. In addition, one thinks of the flexible, sensuous sound-pattern which emphasizes vowels and voiced consonants (rather than unvoiced, more "harsh"/ delineating ones) throughout Cummings's seamless, pliable and indeed dynamic oeuvre.

All of these factors point to the ecological reasonability underpinning Cummings's poetical endeavours. For instance, Cummings's "blurring" and interspersion of the traditional sonnet forms and their traditional shapes, points to his tendency to transgress boundaries in order to achieve a renewed intermingling of categories, and his realization, therefore, that boundaries are potential areas of osmosis. It also points to the concomitant emphasis of the relationality and integrative powers of meaning, as if meaning is an "emergent property" arising from the arrangement of relations, rather than the constituent parts of meaning. Many more notions and examples could be cited, but these broad outlines will suffice for the time being as indications of Cummings's awareness of the "textures" of the sign and of its ecological potential.

The aim of this article is not so much to show Cummings's ecological tendencies in their encompassing detail[2]. These can be outlined here, at best. Rather, the ecological reasonability briefly sketched here, will be returned to as one of the factors which should be stressed in an attempt to show the complexity of the imposition of the frame of anti-rationality on Cummings's poetry. What follows below is an attempt to refute the imposition of this frame by using its own terms, that is, to show that Cummings's inclusivity also includes (and, in an ecological sense,

2 The authors of this article are currently involved in a detailed analysis of Cummings's ecological tendencies, and it would be impossible to do justice to this theme within a limited article such as this, where this theme forms a "sub-plot" of or acts as background to the issue of contending the frame of "anti-rationality" as such.

inclusively transcends) the very logic that those accusing Cummings of anti-rationality, base their arguments upon.

4. Squaring the sonnet

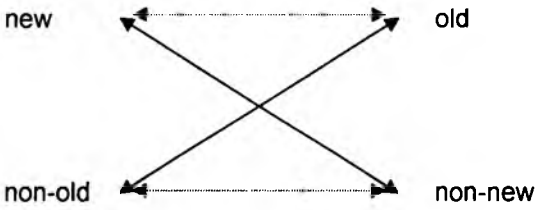
We are now left with the issue of demonstrating the logical aspect of Cummings's rationality. Since A.J. Greimas's logical (or: semiotic) square epitomizes the dualistic modernist logic we have been referring to (Jameson, 1981:56-49; Neutjens, 1999), and since it offers an economical model for this type of analysis, it will be utilized for this purpose.

The first step in applying the square to any text, and in this case to the sonnet, would be to decide on a central set of opposites (or, a central binarism) from which the square can explode. It is possible to envisage several related binarisms in terms of Cummings's sonnet. Based, however, on its novelty of form as well as the theme of rebirth or a radically new sense of what it means to be alive and human in the most "ordinary" fashion within this sonnet, the binary set of opposites *new versus old* seems a "logical" place to start. According to the logic made manifest within the semiotic square (Greimas & Rastier, 1968:86), the term *new* presupposes (is unthinkable without) the contrary term *old* (or its polysemically implied synonyms, *familiar* and/ or *traditional*), as well as the contradictory term *non-new*. The fourth term needed in order to complete the square would then be the contradictory term to old, namely *non-old*.

Although it will not be possible to indulge ourselves at length in the technical aspects of the square, it should not go by unnoticed that the dualistic hierarchy we have been referring to throughout this article and which has had the most substantial impact on Cummings in terms of the framing of his work as anti-rational, is prevalent in this logical way of conceiving of things and indeed therefore in the square analysis. One leg of each logical duality in the square is constantly privileged whereas the other is constantly undermined, and the process therefore becomes violent and static, despite the appearances of a *Gestalt*, "objectivity", and infinite continuation or "movement". It becomes static, because it blocks out essential forces in terms of mental homeostasis, forces such as intuition, emotion, connectivity, integration, etcetera (Capra, 1982:27). In other words, the hierarchical arrangement of these dualisms implies an ecological blind spot, since it is presented as the universal truth, whereas it actually disguises a narrow outlook.

No such hierarchy is at work in Cummings, of course, and the logic embodied in the square should therefore have a more limited application in Cummings's sonnet in this sense. Still, the logic is at work, and this

can be demonstrated in terms of the square. Moreover, the logic is included within a more expansive ecological reasonability, as we have stated. A graphic representation of the logical relations according to which the four terms we have identified should be arranged, is as follows:



The square offers important clues in terms of the logic which is functional within this sonnet. For instance, the arrangement of logical relations reveals that the *new* (or the individual) presupposes (or rests upon, in this instance, or grows from, to be even more appropriate) the *old* (or the familiar/ context/ tradition). Just as tall people would be unthinkable without short ones, in other words, so would anything new be inconceivable without that which foregoes it. Cummings seems to be fully aware of and comfortable with this possibility – quite a rational possibility – that the new emanates from the traditional. Indeed, Docherty (1995: 120) refers to Cummings as the most modern of traditionalists, and the most traditional of modernists. This is reflected within this sonnet: it is based on and contains aspects of both traditional forms, as we have stated, namely the Petrarchan and the Shakespearian forms, and yet in combining these aspects, Cummings ends up with a wholly unique form.

The rhyme scheme, as we have stated, is Shakespearian to a degree, but the differences mark the important fact that this is not a Shakespearian sonnet in any strict sense. In addition, Cummings manages to include the following aspects from both forms: a rhyming couplet with the implied Shakespearian "twist," as well as a hidden Petrarchan octave (with a highly personalized description or illustration of nature) in the first and third (unparenthesized) stanzas, and a hidden sestet in the second and third (parenthesized) stanzas. In the sestet, in a move reminiscent of but deviant from the Petrarchan tradition, Cummings takes the personalized illustration in the hidden octave even further into more intense planes of personalization. This also means that Cummings takes the logic of the pressupposition of the *new* and the *traditional* to new levels of inclusivity (the two sonnet forms come to rest within one another's domains at last) and renewal (a new form seems to grow

spontaneously from the soil of the more familiar forms). These are the levels of the synesthetic genius which, we would argue, is Cumming's ultimate contribution to modernist poetry, and which make him an ecological poet *par excellence*.

The fact that the square allows a chiasmic "movement" to occur within its framework in terms of the overturning embodied in the diagonal lines (despite its "static" pretences, that is), can be applied to the sonnet with useful results. Within the sonnet, the final rhyming couplet is the point of the sonnet's greatest potential movement in Shakespearian terms, and the fact that Cummings rearranges both forms in order to ensure this couplet, leads to the idea that a "twist" may be contained in these last lines. It is a "hidden twist," because these lines express a sense of completion on one level: it is the ultimate point which can be reached in terms of the intensification of personalization which we have mentioned with respect to the Petrarchan qualities of this sonnet. Still, this point is so personal, that it dips into the mysterious, and therefore does leave the receiver of the sonnet with a lingering question, the question – or the ongoing concern, for Cummings equates questions with growth (1981: 462) – which may be formulated as follows: but what are these inner ears and eyes? Or, even more appropriately, since the poem is addressed to the unimaginable You as much as it is addressed to the receiver: Who are they?

Before we move on to attempt an "answer" to these questions, we must stress that in a sense the question itself is more important, and therefore embodies the conclusion of the sonnet. This is so because Cummings writes extensively and cryptically on a topic dear to him throughout his career and enacted throughout his oeuvre in the foreword to his *Collected Poems* of 1938, namely the topic of the overwhelming importance that movement and growth holds for him. He "concludes" this Foreword with a typical Cummingsian dynamism, or dynamic balance, in the following line (with no full stop, a tell-tale manoeuvre in this context): "Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question" (1981:462).

However, the logical movement referred to in the paragraphs above may help to find an answer to the question: Who are they?, posed above, further illustrating firstly, that logic is at work in Cummings, and secondly, that this logic takes on a more creative shape within the more inclusive context of Cummings's poetry in general and his ecological reasonability (as well as in the sonnet, obviously). The dynamism of the final rhyming couplet and the balance achieved in terms of dynamism within or via the couplet, includes the possibility of a rereading along Shakespearian lines, as we have stated. The couplet, in which eyes and ears are

stressed, offers the clue that this rereading may occur along the lines (or the osmotic boundaries, rather, viewed from the angle of Cummings's entire poetical project) of a rereading in terms of sound (ears) and the visual appearance of the sign (eyes). This is the first point to keep in mind.

The second point is that the rereading, in terms of the analysis offered, here occurs in an attempt to answer the following question: What or Who is it that drives the movement from *new* to *non-new* and from *old* to *non-old*? A third point should be added: one of the Taoist aspects of Cummings's attempt to write poetry that may lead one into a renewed sense of wholeness, and indeed a law within Cummings's work, is that of coincidence (or: co-incidence, in the sense of co-existence). The grammatical and/ or typographical (or other) coincidences that English offers, are fully exploited in his poetry, in the belief that the coincidences in language may be synchronous with the coincidences in reality, and that this overlapping represents a state of unity beyond dualities (such as the duality of *object versus subject*, for instance).

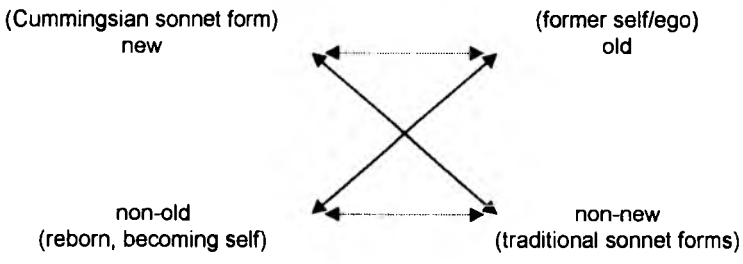
With these points in mind, one may explore the sonnet further, and come to the following conclusions: firstly, that an answer to the Who that drives the process according to which the innermost ears and eyes open, and according to which the *old* turns into its negation and the *non-old* (and in this instance – outside the parameters of pure logic – rebirth), may be found not only in the direct references to the unimaginable You within this sonnet, but also in the personified references to the sun. It is, after all, the sun's birthday according to the sonnet. On one level, this personification forms part of the celebration of the discovery of the extraordinariness of an ordinary day. The everyday occurrence of the sun rising is taken to great personal depths, and is tied in with the theme of rebirth. But another, further possibility is subtly expressed through this personification: that the process of renewal is driven by the Son. The fact that Cummings emphatically personalizes the sun, and that he offers the clue of rereading the sonnet in terms of visual appearance and sound, combined with the fact that homophonic coincidences play as much of a role as others within his work, supports this conclusion.

In order to conclude the analysis in terms of the square and the sonnet on a stylistic note, then, one may go so far as to assert that the sun/ Son finds itself on the chiasma where the two diagonal lines in the square cross, and that this is the logical "pivot" of the sonnet, which drives the movement from contrary to contradictory. Another way of formulating this conclusion, would be to stress that Cummings – to some extent, and unlike fellow modernist poets or thinkers – reveals a logic of acceptance and change: Cummings accepts from the outset that clichés are un-

avoidable, and should be revitalized: the *new* is based on (presupposed by) the *old*, and the new implies and may turn into the *non-new*. The inclusion of straightforward phrases such as "i who have died am alive again today" would from a certain stringently modernist outlook, be viewed as a "cliché" in the sense that it might "give the poem away". Cummings's intention, however, is precisely to give the poem away and connect with the reader, but to include his "clichés" – if one should refer to them as such – within a musical and sensuous, and dissolving context in order to revitalize their meaning, not unlike, say, Gustav Mahler or Amadeus Mozart's inspiring musical revitalization of perfectly familiar spiritual words. (We are not trying to imply that Cummings is a Mozart, but merely that Cummings shares the ability to revitalize seemingly redundant phrases with classical music composers such as Mahler or Mozart.)

Cummings's logic implies, according to this analysis, that the familiar will give rise to the new, and that this is not an exclusive event, but a highly inclusive one. Again, the best example of this is the fact that the two traditional sonnet forms are evoked in the same movement in which they are renewed. One could go further and add similar nuances of his logic in terms of the square and the sonnet. A graphic summary of the logic at work in the examined sonnet is offered after this section.

This graphic summary will substantiate the argument that Cummings does indeed comply with modernist logic, even though he takes this logic further. As we have stated, this leads to the issue of what it is that the frame of "anti-rationality", imposed by those who adhere to the very logic used above in order to analyse the sonnet, marks or masks.



Before we address the issue of what the "anti-rationality" marks or masks, we wish to focus briefly on the more typical critical response/s to Cummings's sonnet, since new light will be shed on these in terms of our arguments.

5. Rereading existing responses to the sonnet

The existing responses to this sonnet are summarized as follows by Rushworth M. Kidder (1979:193-194):

> One of Cummings' best known sonnets, 'i thank You God for most this amazing', is good enough that one wishes it were better. Revealing itself cleanly on a single reading, it has been dismissed, in Robert Graves's words, as 'intrinsically corny'. A religious poem, it has neither the vibrant intellectuality of Hopkins, the cool ambiguity of Eliot, nor the resonance of Thomas. It depends, especially in the third stanza, on assertion rather than demonstration, and is finally a bit too facile. Nevertheless, it has some very good moments. The first line, for example, makes excellent use of the transposed adverb. We expect 'most' to modify either 'thank you' ('i thank you most, God') or 'amazing' ('for this most amazing day'). Splitting the difference, Cummings places the word in a position where it does double duty.

Or does Cummings unify the difference, merge it into a renewed single category, rather than "splitting" it? This is a vital question, since the entire judgement of the sonnet is based on the overlooking of the other complexity in Cummings's work, namely the ecological one. As we have shown, Cummings's poem is straightforward, but far from facile in terms of the logical and ecological ways in which it deals with rationality. It also seems that Graves has forgotten that corn can be healthy, can indeed be wholesome. But to dismiss Cummings's work simply because it is not coolly ambiguous (why would that be the only prerequisite for good poetry?) or vibrantly intellectual – which is, again, an arguable point, since Cummings's syntactical transgressions and reassembly of categories certainly imply at least some mental gymnastics, in addition to the sound logic contained in this sonnet – seems virtually ludicrous. It seems so, because one would have to overlook Cummings's entire project in order to reach these conclusions, since Cummings obviously strives for unity beyond duality: for instance, even in his Freudian moments, he stresses the fact that Freud reminds us that opposites used to be etymologically unified (Cohen, 1983:599). Cummings takes great care to cross-stitch opposites throughout his oeuvre, and in this sonnet his application of paradoxes and oxymorons serve the same purpose. His radical Taoist exploitation of coincidences and his warping of grammatical categories all imply his search – on behalf of the reader – for unity in a dualistic society. In fact, the examples of Cummings's enactment of wholeness (unity beyond duality) are too numerous to mention. And this is Cummings's particular "complexity," a complexity of spontaneous order rather than objectified and hierarchical distance, and of a transgression of dualities into unity which includes the straightforward trans-

gression of the boundaries between self and other, self and God, self and nature, male and female, and sender and receiver. From this angle, one fails to see the "intrinsic corn" of this beautiful sonnet in the negative sense of something a little rudimentary or permeated with kitsch.

Numerous examples can be cited of Eliot's "cool ambiguity" being upheld by assertions, because it is impossible to write poetry that would not connect with the reader in some fashion. For instance, is it justifiable to write and publish a dissertation on one's own poem, such as Eliot's lecture on "The Waste Land" in his self-selected selected poetry (1982: 68-74)? Are we to ignore this quite assertive explanation of a poet's poetry by the poet himself? Would the poem communicate to its full extent without this supplement? These are the unfortunate extremes that an author such as Graves drives one to with his dismissive remark that the sonnet analysed here is immanently trite. Graves simply overlooks the subtle and remarkable role that integrity plays within this sonnet.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that Eliot does include numerous flat assertions in his work, such as "Life is very long" in "The Hollow Men" (1982:80). As in the case of Cummings, this assertion acquires its poetical impact from the context in which it finds itself, not from some intrinsic non-assertiveness. The fact that Eliot's assertion happens to be ironical and tragical and Cummings's to be paradoxical and comical then makes no difference to the quality of their work. (Context and groundedness and connectivity are not poetical sins, but were merely viewed as such by certain critics.) In fact, on a melodramatic scale, Cummings's "corny" assertions may even be less corny than those of Eliot, should one wish to push the point beyond its reasonable limits (as Graves did).

6. Provisional conclusions

There is reason, then, to claim that Cummings's poetry is rational, even to the extent of being logical and deeply systematical. Besides and beyond the logic which in Cummings will always form part of a greater reasonability, however, one should include the following notions in order to further demonstrate the uniqueness of Cummings's reasonability, balance and maturity:

- Cummings is ecologically sound and mature, as depicted in the sonnet analysed above. His poetry is largely aimed at creating a renewed sense of wholeness, of the context of things, of their connectivity and their dynamically balanced "hanging together". In this particular sonnet these processes are apparant, among other considerations, in the establishment of a connectivity with the environ-

ment, the elements and the great Other, (the) You. On more subtle levels it is apparent from Cummings's insistence on a "soft" rhyme scheme and an open-ended conclusion, both of which serve to keep the poem "dynamically open", so to speak. It is also apparent from Cummings's acute awareness and meaningful transgression of boundaries, the code of his un/grammar involving the receiver in a connective fashion, and the flexibility of his sound patterns, which have been mentioned. Indeed, Cummings's yin qualities and overall ecological sensibilities deserve greater attention than they have deserved up to now.

- The point that seems to be overlooked quite easily by those critics who tend to maintain a greater and more rationalistic distance, is that Cummings aims directly and virtually obsessively at revitalising a sense of health, joy and wholeness, and of the concrete unity between subject (such as a "human merely being" (line 11)), object (such as the (subjective) "blue true dream of sky" (line 3)) and medium (such as the senses actively portrayed in the climactic lines 9 and 10, or language and the interaction with the reader) – a unity set out in this way by the deep ecologist[3] Arne Naess (1995:27). The sonnet discussed above is nothing less than a sensitive, persuasive and intense machine or organistic construct designed solely for the purpose of renewing a sense of the sheer, green joy of being here, continuing to be here, and radically sensing that things are and that one is part of the process – a joy described by the deep ecologist, Warwick Fox (1995:138) and referred to as "green grace" by Jay McDaniel (1997:115). In Cummings we see the green grace being related to the comic vision of an undoubtable, unimaginably awesome You and goodness, the "red grace" of the You's involvement with everyday reality, flesh and blood, sun and sky. Cummings will not be satisfied with less than involving the reader in these insights and for these ecological reasons a certain rationalistic distance is not only unimportant to Cummings, but could pose the nemesis to his very aims. It is obvious from his oeuvre that Cummings is both wary of such rationalism and that he celebrates the more inclusive, warm, connected option of the potential oneness of everything. In addition, one is confronted with the possibility that Cummings emphasizes the sheer relationality of signs to the extent that the meaning emanating

3 Deep ecology contrasts itself with "shallow" or historical environmentalism on the basis that every creature in the cosmos has intrinsic value, and should therefore be respected not merely for its utility value, but its immanent value. See Drengson and Inoue (1995) in this regard.

from his work is not so much the result of constituent autonomies, but results as "emergent properties" – but that would be consideration for a separate argument.

- To illustrate Cummings's rationality further, one must add that Cummings is cerebral. He tends to engage the reader in a persuasive riddle and in his unique ungrammar or "secret code". It is possible for the reader to follow Cummings and gain insight into wholeness, in the sense that his poetry seems to "dissolve", leaving one with a restored emotional sense or mental homeostasis (which can be hard to express rationally, of course).

- Cummings is responsible to poetical tradition. As we have seen in terms of the logic operating in the sonnet, Cummings revitalises poetical tradition, in this case by creatively merging the qualities and forms of the Petrarchan and Shakespearian sonnets. The paradox in Cummings is that he sometimes seems to be so individualistic and unique precisely because he is so conscious of poetical and grammatical tradition. The point in Cummings is, however, to revitalise tradition and grammar which presupposes, as the square clearly shows, a strong linkage with tradition and grammar. Cummings seems to see his art as an extension of a great past, and his obvious awe for the other – which includes most specifically in his case the lover, the reader, nature, the weather and God – therefore must include a reverence for past artists and art forms, even though his allusions can be hidden to the extent of spontaneity. In short: it is perhaps easy to overlook the importance of tradition in Cummings and to overlook in the process the seriousness of his views on the practice of art.

- Cummings is concerned about a rationalism in which imbalance and the logocentric hierarchy pertaining to dualism are maintained. Throughout his poetical project (and hence on a truly comprehensive scale) and in the sonnet above, one can not miss his continued transformation of duality into unity by means of oxymoron with its intense relativisation and eventual unification of opposites, for instance: "all nothing" (line 11), the "illimitable earth" (line 8), or the "unimaginable You" (line 12). Or by means of metaphor: the "blue true dream of sky" with the implied unity/ connectivity between the spiritual and the "ordinary", or the merging of objective perception and subjective experience. In this respect Cummings consciously or unconsciously anticipates one of the crucial issues prevalent in post-structuralism and in ecology today, namely the problem in Western metaphysics of being removed from the environment which is seen as female and of

lesser, exploitable importance in terms of unbalanced and static dualistic thinking (Derrida, 1976; Bowers, 1993; Capra, 1982; Naess, 1995; etcetera).

It should be clear from these considerations that the frame of anti-rationality so often imposed on Cummings in order to "inclusively exclude" him from the modernist canon, must mark something more complex than straightforward irrationality, as we mentioned at the outset of this article. And since wholeness is crucial in the case of Cummings, the possibility should be investigated that a tendency among some modernist critics to overlook rationalistically these whole/ecological tendencies could to some extent be responsible for their struggle to position Cummings properly and even for the insulting use of the frame "anti-rational".

7. Coming the full square

Perhaps in spite of her intentions, Vendler comes close to what the frame of "anti-rationality" imposed on Cummings could mean when she writes that Cummings's "optimism excludes too much; pain is scanted, and the perpetual analogy of man's life to the seasonal cycle [in the sequencing of poems in his collected poetry] awakes in the reader angry logical resistance instead of the faith-filled acquiescence [C]ummings must have hoped for" (Vendler, 1984:102). Viewed from the perspective of Cummings's obvious logical rationality and inclusive ecological reasonability, as has been argued above, Vendler's assertions seem to backfire. We would argue that her admission that her logical resistance has been "angered" is tell-tale in this respect. According to her view, pain and the tragical are associated with intellectuality and maturity beyond all reasonable proportion. Her angry logical resistance and, in fact, her logic itself, determines that the pain of being human is more important than a human being's connectivity to nature (a theme that can be traced throughout Vendler's article), that complexity and intellectualism are more important and closer to the truth than simplicity and warmth or emotion, etcetera. Of course, this stance can at most pretend to be objective/ decontextualised and purely logical because it actually shows a clear preference for certain qualities above others, such as intellect above emotion, distinction above integration, etcetera. What one is dealing with, in other words, is the typical logocentric and modernist habit of thinking in terms of hierarchical dualities under the guise of "neutrality". Could this be the reason why Cummings's unifying rationality has not been – and is still not – appreciated? Could this be, as Vendler (1984: 102) writes, why Cummings seems to turn these critics (including herself) into "ungenerous Scrooges", "hissing 'bah, humbug' to the spirit

of mercy, blossoming, life, love, and April which has dared to disturb" their "cynical universe" (1984:102)? Is the real problem, in other words, Cummings's *anti*-rationality or the ironic and even cynical demand that rationality and properly rationalistic poetry *has to reveal* a sense of detachment, along dualistic lines of thinking?

Friedman (1984:72) is aware of the dangers of this kind of misjudgement within modernist critical discourse when he states the following:

> His [Cummings's] is not a poetry about us and our Situation. And isn't there something more difficult after all in such a poetry, a poetry which comes telling us we can be different? Isn't it easier, more faddish even, to write of Exile and Alienation and the Symbol? More condescending to show us images of our own ambivalent and anxious selves? More flattering to assure us that affirmations are difficult, and that they are to be achieved, if at all, only – later? Isn't there something finally sentimental, irredeemably melodramatic even, in insisting upon darkness which must precede and accompany our vision of the light? Doesn't this attitude justify us to ourselves, telling us what we are instead of what we might become? Isn't the divided self in manifest danger of becoming in turn a stock response, the modern cliché?

Indeed, the divided self has become a materialistic cliché to the extent of a collective, non-sustainable blind spot, blind to its own overlooking of the possibility of (at least striving for) wholeness, integrity and sustainability. Should this be the case, it must be acknowledged that Cummings's reasonability ultimately lies (or keeps on moving) in the extent to which he assailed this blind spot, and in his poetical enactment of the inclusive transcendence of some of the worst contra-ecological confines characterizing modernist discourse in its colonizing/ dualistic (as opposed to contextualizing) modes.

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Key concepts:

anti-rationality
Cummings, E.E.
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Greimas: logical square
poetry, critical response to

Kernbegrippe:

anti-rasionaliteit
Cummings, E.E.
ekologiese redelikheid
Greimas: logiese vierkant
poësie, kritiese beoordeling van