

# Graphological Deviation in the Poetry of E.E. Cummings

Dr Vasudha Maitre

Assistant Professor, Dronacharya Govt. College, Gurgaon, Haryana  
E-mail: vasudha\_maitre@rediffmail.com

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Deviation literally means to oscillate about or move away from a designated norm. In other words one may say that turning away from the routine or normal path or going astray is deviation. Deviations are found in prose, the language of advertisement and even in the language of every day communication. It is particularly associated with poetic language. Since Classical times the focus of critics has been mostly on the language of poetry. We have already expected striking metaphors, far-fetched similes, paradoxes, personifications, unusual collocations, irregular word- order or phrases or sentences etc. in the language of poetry. The poetic language is generally highly charged with striking attractions. Deviance is mainly used by writers to attract the attention of the readers or to foreground an idea.

Poetic deviations are the result of keenness of poets to present their matter in novel way. Deviation helps them in removing the film of familiarity from the people's eyes. By their creative art of recreating the language they make the familiar strange and attract the attention of the reader. Their craftsmanship of carving out deviant form rouses the people's mind from slumber. Experiences when expressed in common order become boring, unimpressive and insipid and further lead to the indifference of the reader or listener. In such a situation a good poet tries to find out a new technique to express himself. This newness brings forth beauty in art. The beauty in art in its turn gives delight and happiness to its beholder. In a poem not only the rhythm, implied meaning and fresh thought impress the sensitive reader but also the queer diction and structures with which they have been presented add to joyfulness of the reader.

Deviant expression in poetry are deployed by the poet not only to attract the attention of the reader but also to produce unusual effects or express thoughts and feelings, which would here otherwise remained unexpressed. Transgressing the grammatical rules was done deliberately not just because it was a fashion with most of the members of the *avant-garde* movement who wanted to hit and break all shackles of conventional poetry but also to lead their readers from the

perceptual ground to a fresh conceptual ground. Skilled poets use it as a powerful vehicle for expressing a particular shade of an idea or feeling. They also create new ideas with new words and structures of a language.

Edward Estlin Cummings is a poet who has earned name and fame in the type of poetry which is permeated with deviation. Cummings has special talent for converting simple words and sentences into unique poetic structures. From the beginning his unusual technique and stylistic devices attracted attention and in succeeding years critics concerned themselves mainly with his typographical eccentricities: his peculiar line arrangement, his freedom with commas and other marks of punctuation and his displacement of words. In view of many critics his contribution to English poetry is most significant.

"Edward Estlin Cummings is the best popular poet of the Post War United States".<sup>1</sup>

"He is the most brilliant monologist, I have ever known".<sup>2</sup>

"Cummings came out to be a true virtuoso. He is brilliant analytical wit".<sup>3</sup>

Inexpressible doesn't exist for Cummings. He seldom uses words that have lost vitality. His poems are laboriously wrought with new patterns. Often, he doesn't begin his lines with capital letters. In fact, he uses them only at unexpected places for emphasis. He writes not only the first person pronoun 'I' with a small letter but also his own name 'e.e.cummings'.

In his poems, we find, deviation at various levels i.e. Graphological Deviation, Lexical Deviation, Syntactic Deviation, Phonological Deviation and Semantic Deviation. In this paper, I would like to take on Graphological Deviation.

Graphology refers to the writing system of a language, therefore, strangeness reflected in the written form is graphological deviation. As compared to the prose texts, graphology in poetry enjoys a greater variety and liberty in design making. With the advent of new poetry and new

poetics, we witness a greater freedom of experimentation in the texture of the poem. The poet performs the job of a designer so we can christen him a 'word-smith'. In order to understand Cummings' graphological poetry one has to keep in his mind that Cummings, the painter poet, has created poem pictures, quite different from the traditional ones. So a relationship between his poetry and its written form is to be perceived carefully. Cummings called himself "an author of pictures and a draughtsman of words".<sup>4</sup> In the poetry of Cummings we often have to read the meaning of a poem by its visual symbols. At times one has to labour much in order to make out the intended meaning by decoding the unconventional forms of such poems. The graphological devices of Cummings may be grouped under the following headings--

1. Capitalization
2. The use of lower case 'i'
3. Deviation in line arrangement
4. Word spacing
5. Dismemberment of words
6. Telescoping of words
7. Punctuation
8. Use of ampersands
9. Use of numerals and equalization signs
10. Pictographs

### 1. CAPITALIZATION

Capitalization is the major visual device adopted by Cummings in order to impress upon the reader the conceptual effect of some physical object or an action referred to in the context. He transgresses the rules pertaining to capitalization. He does not capitalize the initial letter of the line of his poetic compositions. Whenever he wants to emphasize a word he capitalizes its first letter. At other places he writes the proper noun in lower case. Even after full- stop he does not begin the sentence with a capital letter. Such deviations from the conventional usage of capitalization attracts the reader and leads him to deduce the meaning which the poet wants to convey. For instance:

old age sticks  
up Keep  
Off  
signs) &  
youth yanks them  
down (old  
age  
cries No  
Tres & (pas)

youth laughs  
(sign  
old age  
scolds Forbid  
den stop  
Must  
n't Don't

&)youth goes  
right on  
gr  
owing old [C.P. 729]

Cummings in this poem uses capital letters. These are "Keep Off", "No", "Tres", "Forbidden", "Stop", "Mustn't" and "Don't". All these words are used in negative sense which foreground the idea that old age cannot be stopped, it is bound to come.

### 2. THE USE OF LOWER CASE 'I'

The most obvious innovation of Cummings is the use of lower case 'i' for the first person pronoun. This speaks of his humbleness, of taking oneself to be an ordinary creature of the universe. Cummings made a mention of this practice in English and American speech as irrational and egoistic while this practice is not in German, French and Italian languages. He made his idea clear in the letter to an unidentified correspondent: "...concerning the small 'I'[sic]:did it never strike you as significant that, of all God's children, only English and American apotheosize their egos by capitalization of a pronoun whose equivalent is in French 'je', in German 'ich' and in Italian 'io' ".<sup>5</sup> Some of the lines of a poem has been mentioned below in which Cummings has made use of lower case 'i'.

i am a little church (no great cathedral)  
far from the splendour and squalor of hurrying cities  
-i do not worry if briefer days grow briefest,  
i am not sorry when sun and rain make april  
[C.P.749]

### 3. DEVIATION IN LINE ARRANGEMENT

Cummings experiments with many new metrical and stanzaic arrangements and avoids regular rhythmic units. Friedman observes that Cummings introduced "free verse stanza"<sup>6</sup> into modern poetry wherein he uses no rhyme or metre, the visual effects of a regular stanza is created by grouping regularly matching lines.

a like a  
grey  
rock wanderin

g  
through  
pasture  
wom  
  
an creature whom  
than  
earth hers

elf  
could  
silent more no  
be

[C.P.654]

The line length of free verse poems is determined by the poet's thinking breathing or speaking cycle and Cummings introduced poems of extremely short lines, sometimes even single letters constitute independent lines.

#### 4. WORD SPACING

In many of his poems Cummings spaces out words on the page in an irregular manner.

ta  
ppin  
g  
toe  
  
hip  
popot  
amus Back  
gen

teel-ly  
lugu  
brious  
eyes  
LOOP THE LOOP  
as fathandsbangrag

[C.P.107]

The poem starts with a word 'ta'. To a layman 'ta' does not carry any sense but when a singer present his composition to the audience and greets his fans with word 'ta' in the beginning, it means that he expresses his gratitude and welcome them with the exclamatory word 'ta' – meaning 'thank you'. He thanks his fan for having come to listen to him suggesting them that they will do so with rapt attention. The words "tapping", "hippopotamus", "genteely" and

"lugubrious" have been split skilfully by the poet suggesting some deep meanings. "Hip" suggests the incessant movement of the hip in music. "popot" sounds like 'poppet' which is used especially as a term for affection for a child, that is, music sounds like an affectionate note. 'g' (the last letter of the word tapping) stands for the fifth note in the scale (6) of C major (music). The word "genteely" has been split into three parts – "gen" stands for information. It suggests that the music is not only genteel but also informative in nature. "Lugubrious eyes" suggests the pensive mood of the singer who ponders deeply while singing. "Loop the loop" is an idiom meaning to 'fly' or make an aircraft fly in a complete vertical circle. When the poet says that "eyes LOOP THE LOOP", the poet presents the delightful sight of the singer whose eyes are seen often taking a swift curving. The last line of the poem wherein four words have been clubbed together presents a beautiful picture of the musician in sight and sound. "Fat hands" of the piano player are banging and ragging the instrument. Telescoping of words is a popular device of Cummings by virtue of which he takes his reader from the perceptual ground to conceptual apex.

#### 5. DISMEMBERMENT OF WORDS

In order to slow down or speed –up reading, Cummings very often omits or creates a space in his pictographic poems. On his part he seems to be indulging in such a deviation in order to reinforce meaning in the context.

Another poem 'l(a' is the most delicate, beautiful, literary marvel, construction that Cummings ever created. Michael Morse has called it, "in spirit a perfect haiku"<sup>7</sup>. It consists of the phrase "a leaf falls" and the word "loneliness".

l(a

le

af

fa

ll

s)

one

l

iness

[S.P.39]

Arrangement of the words is in vertical order which suggests the vertical fall of the leaf from a branch of a tree. The word "loneliness" has been split in such a beautiful way that "one" forms a separate word which in itself indicates the pangs of loneliness. "Loneliness" suggests the despondency and

sadness of an afflicted being. This also speaks of the skill of the poet in splitting the words or in choosing meaningful glossary.

**6. TELESCOPING OF WORDS**

Cummings sometimes joins two or more words together which strike as deviant to the reader since their formation is ungrammatical, unsound or unreasonable. This technique is known as telescoping. By telescoping Cummings does not reduce only the space and time according to the express demand of the context but he reinforces also a fresh imaginative thought. This device is, therefore, an innovative artistic instrument to take the reader from the perceptual ground to the conceptual height. Cummings makes ample use of the telescoped phrases and clauses. For example:

“theraIncoming  
O all the roof roar  
drownInsound”  
[S.P.43]

Cummings has joined twice the three words together i.e. “the rain coming” and “drown in sound”. By combining the words “the rain coming”, the poet shows the intensity of the rain. Moreover, because of the heavy rainfall other sounds are not audible. That is why he says “drown in sound”. So according to the poet every other sound is drowned in the sound of the heavy rain. Cummings has also capitalized ‘I’ in the words “rain”, “coming” and “in”, as if the rain drops are falling down.

**7. PUNCTUATION**

Linguists point out that punctuation is an attempt in written language to reproduce supra- segmental aspects of spoken language. The primary role of punctuation is to supply in a written language some structural indications. The proper placement of commas, colons, periods and other punctuation marks make a difference between a clear, well- constructed statement and a muddled confusing series of meaningless symbols. Cummings as a surrealist breaks these conventions of normal punctuation by putting forth various uses of punctuation marks. These uses are certainly startling and radical.

The poem ‘Bright’ which is given below has been heavily punctuated.

bRight s??? big  
(soft)  
  
soft near calm  
(Bright)  
calm st?? holy  
  
(soft briGht deep)  
yeS near sta? Calm star big yEs

alone  
(wHo

Yes  
near deep whO big alone soft near  
deep calm deep  
????Ht ?????t)  
Who(holy alone)holy(alone holy)alone  
[S.P.170]

In this poem, there is progression from “s???” to the full spelling of “star”, it appears as if the star gradually comes into being. “Bright” orthographically disappears into “?????T”. This shows that when the night approaches the bright daylight fades away. The poet presents a pleasing pattern of linguistic experiment. Kennedy suggests that this poem is about the star of the Bethlehem and probably alludes to the Christmas hymn: “Silence night, holy night and all is calm and all is bright”.<sup>8</sup>

**8. USE OF AMPERSANDS**

Cummings has a passion for using ampersands in his poems. We know that the title of one of his collection of poems published in 1926 is ‘&’. It is well known that the sign ampersand is used in place of the conjunction ‘and’ but in the hands of Cummings it creates a special effect in the poem. It is not only visual but carries along with it musical notation as it resembles ‘treble clef’. That is, its use is suggestive of the highest and unbroken voice in carol singing. This symbol in music is used to show that the notes following it are high in pitch. Some of the critics of Cummings are of the opinion that many of his poems are musical in character.

(im)c-a-t(mo)  
b,i;l:e  
FalleA  
ps!fl  
Oattumb l l  
  
sh?dr  
IftwhirlF  
(U) (IY)  
&&&  
  
away wanders:exact  
ly;as if  
not  
hing had,ever happ  
ene  
  
D [C.P.655]

The poem ‘(im)c-a-t(mo)’ is very interesting. The poet shows that the cat is sitting still i.e. it is immobile. In the middle of

the poem, Cummings uses the three ampersands together in place of words. The triple use of “&&&” evinces that it is a cat which is at the present moment sitting still but is preparing for a leap.

### 9. USE OF NUMERALS AND EQUALIZATION SIGNS

Numerical or equalization signs in place of words leave an effect of irony when they are inserted in the poems. They catch the eye of the reader and are instrument in striking at the dignity if the words.

In the following poem the use of numeral indicates the height of the prostitute.

“kitty”.Sixteen, 5’1”,white prostitute  
 ducking always the touch . . .  
 [S.P.91]

Another poem where Cummings uses equalization sign suggests the mathematical accuracy of the statement.

. . .  
 (lullaby)  
 & z  
 = an infrafairly of floating  
 . . . [C.P.317]

Hence, we may conclude that most of the typographical ventures of Cummings are simply intended to make the poem look more peculiar than it really is. Use of ampersands, numerals and signs of equalization is thus to create another deviant element in punctuation.

### 10. PICTOGRAPHS

Pictorial poems are most striking amongst the compositions of Cummings. He became popular because of this deviant device. It is the key feature of his poetic art which gave him recognition as a great experimentalist of his time. Richard S. Kennedy terms his poems pertaining to typographical deviation as “the poetry of the Eye”.<sup>9</sup>In the opinion of Kennedy this effective innovation lurked into his poems through the paintings of the impressionists and the pioneers of cubism. Cummings had an exposure to such new concepts when he went to France in 1917. Most of the poems of Cummings are written in such a manner that the lines are arranged not with reference to rhyme and metre but to shape the reflecting thought of the poet.

Many of the poems of Cummings present astonishing forms. Some are designed to be read vertically on the page instead of horizontally. Barry A. Marks says about the poem ‘l(a) that it is “more like a picture of Washington Monument or a telephone pole than a poem...”<sup>10</sup>

The following poem is in the pattern of a wine glass in which names of some publishers are written:

TO  
 Farrar & Rinehart  
 Simon & Schuster  
 Coward - McCann  
 Limited Edition  
 Harcourt, Brace  
 Random House  
 Equinox Press  
 Smith & Hass  
 Viking Press  
 Knopf  
 Dutton  
 Harper’s  
 Scribner’s  
 Covici, Friede [C.P382]

Undoubtedly, they are most original and charming contribution to English verse. Cumming’s iconoclastic mind revelled in his *avant-garde* visual arrangements. He has a painter’s eye and therefore, he sensed the satisfying punning contours of such arrangements as we see in the poems discussed here. Cummings’ poems may be short on ideas but they are generally long on frivolous games with letters.

### References

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