

Life's Not A Paragraph

by

Bonnie Sillay

Throughout his poetry, E. E. Cummings seduces readers deep into a thicket of scrambled words, missing punctuation, and unconventional structure. Within Cummings's poetic bramble, ambiguity leads the reader through what seems at first a confusing and winding maze. However, this confusion actually transforms into a path that leads the reader to the center of the thicket where Cummings's message lies: one should never allow one's experience to be limited by reason and rationality. In order to communicate his belief that emotional experience should triumph over reason, Cummings employs odd juxtapositions, outlandish metaphors, and inversions of traditional grammatical structures that reveal the "illogic" of reason. By breaking down the formal boundaries of his poetic structures, Cummings urges his readers to question boundaries of any kind. Indeed, in the same manner Cummings's literary style appears to be uncontrolled; many of his poems, such as "since feeling is first" and "as freedom is a breakfastfood," in turn suggest that emotion provides the compositional fabric for our experience of life, and therefore, emotion itself should never be defined or controlled.

In "since feeling is first," Cummings urges his reader to reject any attempts to control emotion by using English grammar as one example of the restrictive conventions present in society. By stating that "since feeling is first / who pays any attention / to the syntax of things," Cummings suggests that emotion should not be forced to fit into some preconceived framework or mold (1-3). He carries this message throughout the poem by juxtaposing images of the abstract and the concrete—images of emotion and images of English grammar. The abstract nature of emotion and the undeniably concrete nature of English grammar reveal the absurdity of restricting emotion. Cummings's word choice enhances the depictions of his intentionally strange juxtapositions, with the poet often using grammatical terms that suggest some sort of regulation or confinement. For example, the line, "and death I think is no parenthesis," implies confinement (16). By suggesting that parentheses trap the words they surround, Cummings warns the reader to not let death trap one's life or emotions. The poet does not want our emotions to be confined by reason. Referring to emotion, Cummings uses words such as "kisses" and "blood" (8, 7). These words are somewhat subjective and are almost impossible to define accurately or to confine—kisses mean different things to different people, blood flows through the body freely and continually. Cummings's word choice ultimately paints language as restrictive and emotion as a flowing and powerful force.

Aside from poetic diction, Cummings also rejects conventions in the structure of the poem. Instead of the traditional poetic structure that seeks resolution in the final stanzas of a poem, Cummings opens his poem by stating his primary message: "since feeling is first / who pays any attention to the syntax of things" (1-2). Here, Cummings urges the reader to realize that order and structure come secondary to emotion. How can emotion be bottled in sentences and interrupted by commas, colons, and spaces? To Cummings, emotion is a never-ending run-on sentence that should not be diagrammed or dissected: emotion should never be intellectualized.

Cummings also emphasizes his belief that emotion should not be intellectualized in the third stanza of "since feeling is first," noting, "my blood approves, / and kisses are a better fate / than wisdom" (7-9). Here, Cummings wants the reader to go with his or her gut feeling, to revel

in what he or she feels during a fleeting moment, such as a kiss. He continues his refusal to intellectualize emotion by stating, “the best gesture of my brain is less than / your eyelids’ flutter” (11-12). Cummings wants the reader to focus on a pure emotive response, in this case, the blush of a cheek or the flutter of an eyelash, to concentrate on the emotional, not the logical—words, instead of punctuation and spaces. Cummings’s use of two grammatical terms in the last line, “for life’s not a paragraph / and death I think is no parenthesis,” once again alludes to attempts to format lives and feelings into nice, responsible segments that smoothly run together (15-16). Attempts to control, rather than feel, are rejected throughout Cummings’s entire poem. In “since feeling is first,” he suggests that life and emotions do not have to fit into a certain space. For Cummings, life does not have to be an introduction, followed by well thought-out paragraphs tied together with smooth transitions followed by a logical conclusion. Emotion should be limitless, free from any restrictions or rules.

Cummings continues the idea of emotion as limitless in “as freedom is a breakfastfood” as he compares love to an endless sky. Although he weaves his belief in the power of emotion throughout both poems in slightly different ways, the underlying theme is very similar: emotion is always best when it is uncontrolled and indefinable. Cummings employs inversions to portray this message. One might suggest that Cummings uses the inversion of grammar in “since feeling is first” and the inversion of reason in “as freedom is a breakfastfood” to depict the message that emotion should not be intellectualized. While “since feeling is first” portrays emotion as being unable to be controlled, ordered, or analyzed, “as freedom is a breakfastfood” suggests the difficulty of defining emotion. The poem is also full of outlandish metaphors that are deliberately far-fetched such as, “freedom is a breakfastfood” or “time is a tree” (1, 26). These metaphors are somewhat arbitrary, and Cummings does not attempt to make profound statements on time or freedom, but rejects the definite “is” in these images. Cummings suggests that there is no right or wrong definition of anything. Freedom and time are subjective, and attempts at definition are ridiculous. Cummings also employs inversions of nature, such as “robins never welcome spring” and “water most encourage flame,” to underscore emotion’s ability to defy reason (16, 7). Cummings uses these inversions to suggest the arbitrariness of words or, as he puts it in “since feeling is first,” the syntax of things” (3).

By the close of “freedom is a breakfastfood,” Cummings compares love to the sky: “but love is the sky” (27). The final structure of the poem helps Cummings portray love as limitless; although, most of the poem has a very rambling mind-set, Cummings shifts tones at the end of the poem with the use of “but.” By prefacing the final metaphor, “love is the sky,” with “but,” Cummings not only separates it from the rest of the poem, but also subtly validates the statement, implying that the final metaphor is the only accurate comparison in the whole poem. In order to reach this final conclusion, however, Cummings has taken his readers on a long and often ambiguous journey.

Nevertheless, this confusion has been deliberate: Cummings wants his readers to follow him through the winding thicket because he believes the path of the straight and narrow limits the possibilities of experience. Through the unconventionality of his poetic structures, Cummings urges his readers to question order and tradition. He wants his readers to realize that reason and rationality are always secondary to emotion, that emotional experience is a free-flowing force that should not be constrained. Cummings’s poetry suggests that in order to get at the true essence of something, one must look past the commonsensical definition, and not be limited by “the syntax of things.”

Works Cited

- Cummings, E. E. "as freedom is a breakfastfood." *E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems 1904-1962*. Ed. George J. Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1991. 511.
- Cummings, E. E. "Since feeling is first." *E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems 1914-1962*. Ed. George J. Firmage, New York: Liveright, 1991. 291.