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**‘Paris;this April sunset completely utters’. The Landscape of Paris
through E. E. Cummings’ Eyes**

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1. Introduction

Within English Studies, it seems to me that all scholars remark E. E. Cummings’ peculiar use of language, but in fact, most of his poems have been studied from a traditional critical perspective, dealing with his life, his critical reception or the topics of his poetry. Richard Kennedy, for instance, published a book on E. E. Cummings’ poetry focusing on his individualistic view of life (1994). Norman Friedman, in his *(Re)valuing Cummings: Further Essays on the Poet* (1996), concentrated on the author position within the modernist tradition, his reception and his biography. A bit later, Martin Heusser (1997) and Harold Bloom (2003) considered traditional critical topics in Cummings’ texts, taking in consideration aspects such as sentimentalism or banality.

On the contrary, only a few studies have been taken from a linguistic perspective. This is the case of Irene Fairley (1975), who studied syntactic deviance in Cummings’ poetry. Curiously, many stylisticians such as Leech (1969: 47-48), Short (1996: 29), Simpson (1997: 57-59) or Burke (2007) have included this author in their books and articles. In support of a new approach, Iain Landles has proposed that an “opening-up” of Cummingsian criticism can only be achieved through the use of criticism that itself “opens-up” new perspectives’ (2008: 18).

Keeping in mind all this state-of-the-art background, I propose in this paper an analysis of the poem by Cummings ‘Paris;this April sunset completely utters’ (1925).

My aim is to describe Cummings' particular vision of the French city and to assess how the author made the most of language to create and reinforce the meaning of his text. This way, the analysis is placed within the framework of plain Stylistics and organized into linguistic categories according to Short guidelines (1996: 34, 105, 124, 166). I offer here a general approach because I have focused my reading of the poem on textual linguistic procedures, but obviously, this analysis could be expanded more in depth taking many other aspects in consideration as Stylistics has developed new branches with the passing of time.

The poem, which was written in 1923 and published in 1925, appeared in a collection of poems titled *&[AND]*, which comprised several texts that had been forbidden before by the censorship. For this reason, the book was at first printed privately by E. E. Cummings. The reference to this text, nonetheless, includes also its page number within *Complete Poems: 1910-1964* (1994), the most complete up-to-date anthology on the author.

2. The poem

Paris;this April sunset completely utters

utters serenely silently a cathedral

before whose upward lean magnificent face

the streets turn young with rain,

spiral acres of bloated rose

coiled within cobalt miles of sky

yield to and heed

the mauve

of twilight(who slenderly descends,
daintily carrying in her eyes the dangerous first stars)
people move love hurry in a gently

arriving gloom and
see!(the new moon
fills abruptly with sudden silver
these torn pockets of lame and begging colour)while
there and here the lithe indolent prostitute
Night,argues

with certain houses

1925 (*CP* 183)

3. Analysis

3.1. Discourse Situation

The discourse situation of this poem may be understood in terms of the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, named as ‘tenor’ by Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad (1982: 9). This aspect is observed in this poem from the very beginning: Cummings conducts the reader from the title line, which is inexistent. This absence creates a scheme: the reader is placed blindfolded in front of the text, without knowing what s/he is going to find. And suddenly, s/he faces the poem. S/he faces Paris. This discursive deviational effect is remarked in line 1, where the author declares that ‘this’ is an April sunset: the demonstrative implies physical proximity between the described image and the reader. Cummings could have written ‘an April sunset’, ‘the April

sunset', 'that April sunset', 'my April sunset' and so on, but he is placing us just in front of this city and this sunset, in this particular moment. This way, the reader may find him/herself much more implied in the situation, and the relationship among addresser, message and addressee becomes intense.

Apart from the title line and the demonstrative, the other discursive marker in the poem is found in line 13:

(13) see!(the new moon

Following Kress and Van Leeuwen's theory, this poem would fit into the category of a 'demand picture' (2006: 122) since the writer asks the reader to pay attention to the arrival of the night and the new moon. But this is not only a matter of attention: Cummings includes the reader in his particular vision of the city, inciting us to sit beside him, look at Paris from the distance and appreciate this special landscape as he does. The visual experience is then shared between these interactive participants.

3.2. Typography

Just at the beginning of the poem, the reader may check that Cummings defines his poem in terms of linguistic elements:

(1) Paris;this April sunset completely utters

In this line, the semicolon has two functions: to isolate Paris and to connect it to the concept of sunset. On the one hand, reading Paris as a separate element gives an impression of what the poem is going to be about: a drawing of the French city. This expectancy is fulfilled throughout the text by means of different participants –a cathedral, the streets, some people, the Night and certain houses– that gradually draw our particular vision of Paris. This construction of an isolated locative proper noun is similar to those employed in other genres such as drama or cinema, where the location in place and time appears anywhere at the screen. It also resembles a postcard. As ‘Paris’ is the first thing we face when reading the poem, the isolation is greater and the semicolon becomes something more than a punctuation mark.

On the other hand, the concept of time is also included in this first line by means of the reference to a concrete moment of the day, and a concrete month of the year: an April sunset. The connection between ‘Paris’ and ‘sunset’ is reflected in the semicolon and the absence of a blank space: the semicolon because it is normally used to link two related independent statements; the blank space because visually speaking, ‘Paris’ and ‘April’ become closer this way.

There are some other blank spaces in the poem that Cummings has omitted:

- (9) of twilight(who slenderly descends,
- (13) see!(the new moon
- (15) these torn pockets of lame and beggin colour)while
- (17) Night,argues

In all these examples, there is a blank space omitted that should appear before the right parenthesis or after the left one. The same occurs to the last line, where ‘argues’ is right beside the comma. By omitting these spaces, the reading of the text becomes quicker, and the sense of immediacy is highlighted.

Having a look at the poem, there are other similar cases that make the reader increase the speed of his/her reading:

(3) before whose upward lean magnificent face

(11) people move love hurry in a gently

Technically speaking, these two examples are quite similar, although they are grammatically different: the former is a noun phrase whose noun is premodified by three adjective phrases, while the latter is a complex sentence with three predicators. In both cases, there is a series of qualities and processes that the author should have had to separate by commas and a conjunction according to the rules of English. Without these, Cummings achieves two effects: in the first case, the cathedral face seems more magnificent and taller; in the second case, the movement of the people is greater. This movement expressed by the poem is contrasted to its descriptive nature: while there is a description of a scene in Paris, there are also some elements that move and change throughout this scene: the sun, the light and the people are in movement, and this is reflected by means of verbal elements, but also through the absence of blank spaces and commas.

Curiously, the procedure to raise speed becomes inverted in line 9, where Cummings increases the blank space at the beginning of the line:

(9) of twilight(who slenderly descends,

Here, the reader changes his/her eyes' visual movement getting, as before, a sense of movement and cycling. The curious thing here is that the author reverses the same procedure to get an identical effect by a breaking of spatial arrangement: the reader moves forward in the passing of time instead of going back to the expected beginning of the line.

The final remark within typographic deviation is connected to the use of a capital letter in line 17:

(17) Night,argues

Someone could argue that 'night' is written in capital letters because it appears at the beginning of the line –as it is usual in English poetry–, but no line in the entire poem starts this way. Consequently, Cummings highlights this noun and the readers pay more attention to this concept. Capital letters are always applied to proper nouns, but 'night' is a common one. The effect this produces is a personification of the noun, especially thanks to the verb that follows it, which is a verbal process that needs a human subject. As it will be seen later in detail, the author applies several human properties to this concept, so the capital letter is just another resource to get his aim.

3.3. Semantic Procedures

Semantic properties are a wide label that can refer to many aspects. They can be considered in many different ways, but for the purpose of this analysis, I have taken in consideration processes of oddity and semantic deviation, which are defined by Short as ‘meaning relations which are logically inconsistent or paradoxical in some way’ (1996: 43). In this poem, there is a global sense of personification since all the participants in this image are treated as human entities:

Entity	Property or process
cathedral	utters (v.)
streets	young (adj.)
acres	yield to (v.) / heed (v.)
twilight	who (pronoun)
	her eyes (determiner + noun)
Night	lithe (adj.) indolent (adj.) prostitute (adj.)
	argues (v.)

(These properties and processes are normally carried out by human entities, but here they are applied to a cathedral, the twilight, the new moon and the night, which are precisely the main characters of this poem. Personification, then, becomes crucial in the creation of this image of Paris that is formed by non-human entities treated as humans.)

To develop more in deep this side of my analysis, I have taken in consideration Halliday’s system of transitivity, which construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types. According to this system, there are six types of processes (material, behavioural, mental, verbal, relational and existential), each of them providing its own schema for construing a particular domain of experience as a figure of a particular kind (2004: 170).

Following this classification, it is possible to study more in detail the process of personification carried out by Cummings. Let's have a look at the entities mentioned before in the context of their respective clauses:

1. this April sunset completely utters serenely silently a cathedral
2. the streets turn young with rain
3. spiral acres of bloated roses [...] yield to and heed the mauve of twilight
4. the twilight who slenderly descends, daintily carrying in her eyes the dangerous first stars
5. the new moon fills abruptly [...] these torn pockets of lame and begging colour

Transitively speaking, the first and fifth clauses are verbal, since they include verbs that mean a symbolic exchange of meaning. Halliday states that “‘verbal’ ones [processes] do not require a conscious participant” (2004: 254), so ‘this April sunset’ and ‘the lithe indolent prostitute Night’ are two examples of unconscious participants that carry out processes typically associated to humans, as ‘utter’ and ‘argue’ are related to the language system.

The second clause, ‘the streets turn young with rain’, is relational in the sense that it characterises an element, that is, ‘the streets’. Within this type of process, Halliday also distinguishes between intensive, possessive and circumstantial (2004: 216), falling this one into the intensive group. These intensive clauses also receive the name of ‘attributive’, and structurally, they are formed by a carrier (here, ‘the streets’), and the attribute (here, ‘young’). The peculiarity within this clause is that ‘young’ tends

to be applied to people, animals and certain elements such as wine, or mountains, but in an odd manner Cummings is referring to the streets of Paris.

The third sentence in my list is constituted by two verbs, 'yield to' and 'heed'. The second one illustrates a mental process whose actors are the acres of the cathedral; something which is totally deviational in the sense that mental processes can be only carried out by humans (Halliday, 1994: 201), which receive the name of 'sensors'.

Finally, the fourth clause exemplifies the process of personification by means of the personal pronoun 'who' that is applied to the twilight, as well as the determiner 'her'.

This way, participants in this poem are all treated as human entities, despite the fact that they are non animate elements. I have explained this in terms of participants and processes, but concepts such as metaphor or lexical properties could also have been employed to this end.

3.4. Parallelism and Cohesion

After having mentioned the importance of the processes of personification in this poem, there is also a global sense of cohesion achieved through parallel structures. Lexical groupings are an important aspect in this poem, for they give the impression of the poem as a whole and self-contained unit:

- a) *Rose, cobalt, mauve, gloom*: rose, cobalt and mauve are three colours representing the appearance of the sky. Although it is not a colour, gloom is semantically related to the others. The important thing in this group is its progression from a pale colour to a dark one, which corresponds to the progression of the twilight. This way, Cummings exploits the meaning of words

at the level of discourse to give a higher sense of unity, and a description of a landscape which goes beyond semantics and the explicit meaning of words.

- b) *Paris, cathedral, face, streets, houses*: these are the words related to the city and civilization. As Cummings promised at the beginning, Paris takes shape line by line, in contrast to nature elements, which are represented in the following words.
- c) *Sunset, rain, spiral, sky, twilight, stars, moon, Night*: although Cummings describes a scene in Paris, the French city receives the marvels of nature. In this sense, the poem has a duality that contrasts civilization to nature and the moving of a big city to the quietness and peace of nature.

Furthermore, cohesion is also perceived in repetitions: ‘utters’, for instance, is repeated twice in lines 1 and 2. In line 2, we face ‘serenely’ and ‘silently’, which are two adverbs which share their derivative suffixes although they mean differently. There are two special cases in which, though there is no direct repetition, it can be considered as a sort of parallelism:

- (3) upward lean magnificent face
- (11) people move love hurry in a gently

These two examples are controversial in the sense that the selected words are not similar in meaning. They are related because they modify the same elements respectively and they do not include any punctuation mark or external element so that they appear all together. This way, progression keeps going on and cohesion is achieved through typographical and grammatical parallelism.

Another example of parallelism is provoked by two verbs: ‘utters’ (1) and ‘argues’ (16). Meaning here is related in the sense that they belong to the category of verbal processes (as mentioned before in the semantic section), but at the same time, it is opposed: the former refers to the cathedral and its meaning is positive; the latter refers to the night and its connotation is negative. Though they are quite separated in the poem, this double side is important to its content, as it has been mentioned before in other processes.

Finally, grammatical parallelism plays an important role here: all the sentences are structured into subject, the predicator in present simple, and the complements. In some cases, there is a direct object, while in others, there is an adjunct or even a subject complement. Nonetheless, they all give an impression of unity and cohesion, especially the use of present simple for the whole composition:

- (1) this April sunset completely utters serenely silently a cathedral
- (4) the streets turn young with rain (Subject Complement)
- (5) spiral acres [...] yield to and heed the mauve
- (11) people move love hurry in a gently arriving gloom
- (13) the new moon fills abruptly [...] these torn pockets
- (16) the lithe indolent prostitute Night argues with certain houses

This way, the meaning conferred to the text is double: on the one hand, it can be observed as a description of a specific moment on a specific day of April; but at the same time, it can be observed as a recurrent image that takes place every evening in Paris. It can also be particular or generic, so the meaning of the whole context becomes expanded thanks to this grammatical process.

3.5. Grammatical Procedures

As meaning is related to grammar, the grammatical structure of the poem reveals some aspects that would be misunderstood if syntax was not taken into account. The first sentence in the poem, for example, implies a case of ambiguity:

- (1) Paris;this April sunset completely utters
utters serenely silently a cathedral

before whose upward lean magnificent face

the streets turn young with rain,

At first sight, the line division of the beginning is misleading, for it could be considered that the sunset is uttering something:

[...] this April sunset completely utters → SAPtorOd

Besides this first impression, meaning is achieved in the second line:

[...] this April sunset completely utters

Utters serenely silently a cathedral → OdAPtorS

Meaning in this case is achieved through a process of inversion where the direct object is exchanged for the subject. Although enjambment has more to do with phonetic structure, it is also important here in the creation of meaning. In these lines, keeping the neutral word order of English is impossible, since ‘a cathedral’ is postmodified by a restrictive relative clause that provokes an example of end-weight. So, this process of inversion has a perceptive consequence for the readers: the April sunset becomes remarked and the first perceived element in the poem together with Paris.

Line 14 consists on a similar case of inversion provoked by end-weight:

(14) [...] (the new moon

Fills abruptly with sudden silver

These torn pockets of lame and begging colour) [...]

This sentence's inversion consists in that the direct object 'these torn pockets of lame and begging colour' should be placed right after the verb instead of at the end of the sentence:

* the new moon fills these torn pockets of lame and begging colour with sudden silver abruptly

One last remark should be made on line 16, where there is another case of enjambment:

(16) there and here the lithe indolent prostitute
Night, argues

As in line 1, after reading the first line one thinks the poem is talking about a prostitute, but when reaching the next line, you realize it is talking about the night. This ambiguity is created thanks to the line division, but also to a morphological process of rank-shift: 'prostitute' can only function as a noun or as a verb, but in this case, it becomes an adjective premodifying 'Night'.

3.6. Phonetic Structure

Phonetics and metrics contribute to the creation of the image of Paris less strong than the aspects mentioned before. Phonetic structure, for instance, is related to some cases

of alliteration and rhyme, which contribute to the perception of the poem as a whole and self-contained unit.

In the case of alliteration, there are two clear examples:

- (6) coiled within cobalt miles of sky
- (1) this April sunset completely utters
utters serenely silently a cathedral

In the former, it is repeated the sound [k], which reminds us of the sound of metal. In the second example, it is the sound [s] that is permanent, which reminds the reader of the sound of silence.

Regarding rhyme aspects, there are some cases such as ‘face’ (3) and ‘rain’ (4), ‘rose’ (5) and ‘mauve’ (8), or internal rhymes such as ‘gloom’ (12) and ‘moon’ (13) or ‘sky’ (6) and ‘twilight’ (9).

3.7. Metrical Structure

There is no identifiable metrical structure for the poem, so this text is characterized by the use of free verse. It does not follow any metrical pattern, and although it contains rhyme, it does not follow a continuum in this sense. The only remarkable aspect is the relation between grammatical organization and line boundaries, because in most cases, they do not correspond to each other and occupy three, four, and even six lines:

- (1) Paris;this April sunset completely utters
utters serenely silently a cathedral

before whose upward lean magnificent face
the streets turn young with rain,

(16) there and here the lithe indolent prostitute
Night, argues

with certain houses

The effect of this relationship is the creation of movement, because the process of reading overlaps with the process of getting darker. There is a sense of speed, transition and movement that is represented through many ways, including the metrical structure of the poem. Nonetheless, metrics is not fully helpful for the understanding of the poem as a visual representation of the French city.

4. Interpretation

The poem written by E. E. Cummings consists on an image of Paris whose elements resembles those of a postcard. Its nature is mainly descriptive, as he presents several static participants that form the landscape of the city. On the one hand, we have elements that are proper of civilization: a cathedral, the streets, and certain houses. Although Cummings does not give the name of the cathedral, we can infer he is talking about Notre-Dame, since this is the only cathedral in the whole city. On the other hand, we have elements that are typical of nature. The silence of this building, which seems to be the central character in this postcard, is linked together with the light of the sunset which is taking place and that crosses the stained glass windows of the cathedral. It is probably seven or eight o'clock in the evening when it starts to rain. There is a fusion of material with immaterial things, of the religious building with the sky. And this idea of blending is the one which keeps throughout the poem. The colour of the sky begins to change from blue cobalt to mauve as the twilight arrives. But this is only momentary: the first stars make their appearance in this scene, signalling the first steps in the arriving of the night. Within all this transition in the sky, and going back to the city landscape, it can be appreciated certain people who are moving quickly. Suddenly, the

sky gets dark and the new moon appears in our eyes, prompted by Cummings to pay attention to it. Finally, the dark of the night is contrasted to the illuminated houses.

Beyond an explanation of how I interpret this poem according to its linguistic procedures, I believe its main feature is the one related to the contrast between the static elements (the cathedral, the streets and the houses) and the ones in movement. These static elements create the mental image we produce when reading the poem. But this is not only an image or a postcard of Paris; this is also a scene, a transition that takes place in front of us. There is the transition of the sky, whose colour changes as the twilight appears and disappears, and there is also the transition of the people, who walk around the city, or kiss each other. All these people seem to ignore the marbles of nature and the city landscape; but here it is Cummings who demands us to pay attention to all these elements that set up this particular vision of the French city.

5. Conclusion

After studying the poem by Cummings in detail, I have checked that the author uses language in a creative manner to produce and reinforce meaning. He uses certain linguistic procedures to offer a peculiar description of a Parisian April sunset, especially those related to typography and lexis. On the contrary, other factors that are typically associated to poetry are left aside in this text. Punctuation marks, blank spaces, capitalization, line arrangement, personification or lexical groupings are some important procedures carried out by the author to increase the readers' perception of the poem.

The relationship between writer and reader and the topic of the poem is clear and precise from the very beginning, despite the absence of a title line. But although this situation is unquestionable, the author creates a complex net of processes that reaffirm the description of this city. Cummings employs blank spaces and punctuation marks in an odd manner to increase the reading of the poem. Besides semantic factors such as vocabulary or lexical groupings, speed and transition are created through them, so the reader gets the impression that something is going on the text: the passing of time from the evening to night.

To conclude, traditional aspects in poetry such as metrics and rhyme are not really important for the description of this text. It can be perfectly understood in terms of linguistic criticism, and although its message could be completed with some other information such as biographical or historical data, the text by Cummings is purely self-contained.

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