


# Reading blank space from an ecopoetic perspective in selected poems by E.E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams



## Author:

Etienne Terblanche<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliation:

<sup>1</sup>Research Unit Languages and Literature in the South African Context, School of Languages, Faculty of Humanities, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Etienne Terblanche,  
etienne.terblanche@nwu.ac.za

## Dates:

Received: 12 Oct. 2021

Accepted: 16 Feb. 2022

Published: 31 May 2022

## How to cite this article:

Terblanche, E., 2022, 'Reading blank space from an ecopoetic perspective in selected poems by E.E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams', *Literator* 43(1), a1847. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v43i1.1847>

## Copyright:

© 2022. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Sorrow is perhaps the usual response to the disappearance of things into 'nowhere'. The use of blank space in the poetry of E. E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams indicates an alternative response: to accept and even celebrate this. With a view to exploring this alternative response to disappearance, appearance, and nowhere, the article reads blank space in the little man poem and air poem (Cummings), as well as the obsolete rose poem and red wheelbarrow poem (Williams) – I use these labels because the poems are untitled. The article closely examines the tensions that these poems create between their printed black fragments and the blank space within which these are located. It finds that the former mimes being, existence, and 'something', whilst the latter mimes unbeing, nowhere, and nothing. The poems present the latter condition as *vibrant*, embodying the place from where being emerges, ablaze with itself. The blank space embodies this vibrancy in the poems examined; the poets use various devices to heighten the perception of this. For instance, Cummings' little man poem signifies the reconnection of a modern subject, a little man, and the huge and dynamic earth by rejuvenating an acute sense of now-here in terms of nowhere, as mimed by breaking a phrase across the poem's final two stanzas, inviting blank space into the poem on an accentuated level. A similar textual event occurs in the tracing of a rose petal's paradoxical line between something and nothing within Williams' obsolete rose poem, where the determiner 'the' is followed abruptly by the fecund nothingness of blank space. At its conclusion, the piece synthesises these and other findings to argue that the use of blank space in these poems boils down to a node of modern ecopoetic maturation: the poems orient themselves to and within the dynamic earth anew, marking radical acceptance of being on the earth in terms of unbeing.

**Keywords:** modern poetry; E. E. Cummings; William Carlos Williams; blank space; unbeing; being; ecopoetic maturation.

only to  
have done nothing  
can make  
perfect

William Carlos Williams  
*Spring and All*, 1923

## Introduction

The modern poets E. E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams conspicuously play with the available blank space on the pages of their poems. They break apart printed black signs to 'paint' heightened awareness of blank space into these. Or, they end a line or sentence ungrammatically or at least non-traditionally to achieve the same result. It is usual, rightly so, to examine these manoeuvres in relation to modern poetry's much-discussed emphasis on visual-verbal writing.

The present piece centres on a neglected aspect of their dexterous employment of blank space. Both poets indicate in their poems and prose that nature's objects must be incorporated in modern poems in ways that are alive, imaginative, and new: they distinctly relate this to their concerns about the inability of the inherited language and poetic devices of their era to achieve freshness and authenticity (Heusser 2013:163, 165). These are the reasons why they stretch language and encourage visual reading, notably again by their use of blank space. One infers that they employ blank space in their poems also with a view to ecopoetic effect, or ecological effect, that is, with a view to what I term the *eco-logos*.

## Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

*Logos* originally means not simply a word or even a sign, but 'relation': that which binds this to that within a larger context (Harrison 1992:200). The *eco-logos* I would define as the way in which signs orient themselves to and within the changing earth process. It appears, then, that Cummings' and Williams' use of blank space may well enjoy an ecological value. I return to this at the conclusion of the piece.

It is of course in the poems that one finds their play with blank space to be most striking. I start by reading Cummings' little man poem (neither he nor Williams regularly entitle their poems, hence my exploitation of another way of labelling these poems). Cummings' use of blank space is a degree more conspicuous than Williams'. For this reason, he offers a good starting point for the discussion. The little man poem incorporates its blank space in a scintillating fashion by spanning a phrase across a stretch of blank space, as will be demonstrated. These are one or two reasons for focusing on this poem at the outset. Williams' obsolete rose poem very nearly uses a blank strategy similar to that of the little man poem and will be subsequently discussed. Furthermore, poems are read with a view to their blank space and the *eco-logos* and, at the conclusion of the present piece, I turn to Williams' much-discussed, much-anthologised, and frequently misunderstood wheelbarrow poem to examine its engagement with blank space, which takes the discussion to a limit of its potential nuances.

## A little modern man and the magic connectedness of the now-here-nowhere

The little man poem describes a little man in a modern hurry, probably in a city such as New York (which Cummings knew well), where traffic lights control movements, instructing citizens to halt or stop:

little man  
(in a hurry  
full of an  
important worry)  
halt stop forget relax  
  
wait  
  
(little child  
who have tried  
who have failed  
who have cried)  
lie bravely down  
  
sleep  
  
big rain  
big snow  
big sun  
big moon  
(enter  
us)

(Cummings 1994:393)

The poem is a little masterpiece of poignancy, endearing the reader to the plight of the little man and child. A golden

thread binds the materials: it is not the conditions of hurrying and worrying that lead to vital connection with existence, but slower, apparently more passive verbalisms such as forgetting, relaxing, waiting, and sleeping. There is even the suggestion here that failing is more successful in bringing one into alive contact with the nature of one's being than the supposed importance attributed to various modern worries about a successful lifetime, the latter from which the little man suffers and from which he needs to escape in accordance with the poem's main thrust.

The final two stanzas attractively 'paint' the context in which these more 'passive' attributes should come into their own by reconnecting the little man with his aliveness: it is the context of the earth's huge changes in weather and its marvellously plain, huge objects. The little man should see again that the earth is magnanimous in its bigness, and that he is a radical part of that. He has become bogged down and entrapped by his worries. In a sense, his littleness, like that of a child – or that perhaps of the child within him – will become the avenue that returns him to that visceral hugeness. In contemporary parlance, one could say that the little man must be relieved from his urban 'nature-deficit disorder' (Louv 2008:10) while, according to this poem, this will be the avenue into this littleness.

Examining the employment of parenthesis in this poem, a form of which Cummings is a master in terms of visual nuancing, one sees a pattern of progression. In the first stanza, the parenthesis pertinently encloses, even visually, the description of the little man's important worry. This contrasts with the final two stanzas where the parenthesis breaks open. The worry-materials in the first stanza, so to speak, fill the parenthesis to the brim, miming the debilitating extent to which the worry occupies the little man's daily routines.

Between this parenthesis and the open one at the conclusion, one finds another set that encloses the child's experience. In this case, the signs referring to the little child are enclosed *within* the parenthesis, in contrast to the case of the little man, where the signs 'little man' are situated outside the parenthesis. This dancing of inclusion and exclusion mimes the idea that the child is still contained, protected perhaps, while the little man has broken the skin of that protective boundary: he is displaced by his worry.

He needs to find his place: the big, dynamic earth. How will he be able to do this? I suggest that the poem says he should turn so little that he should become nothing, so as to connect with vibrant emptiness. This will paradoxically connect him with the enormity of (his) being. The poem, in other words, progresses from little man to even littler child to dynamic and meaningful zero, the latter which overflows with earthly emergence. Consider that the pattern of lines per stanza, frequently meaningful in Cummings, reads 5-1-5-1-5-1. The reiteration of and final return to one suggests oneness, in this case the open and active oneness between the speaker and the dynamically generous earth.

The two concluding stanzas signify, to my mind in an unsurpassed manner, the connection with emptiness. As it is for the little man, the earth must '(enter//us)', and this radically breaks open the parenthesis, miming the way in which emptiness flows into recognition, just as the blank space on the page is now attractively steered to enter the poem. The boundary between printed materials and blank space is open and dynamic: it is a membrane, not a barrier. It actively and skilfully allows the integrity of relations between being (big earth) and nothing (emptiness) to be restored for the little man, and for us. The commingling of unbeing and being, that is, the way of nature in the sense that within it, creatures, forces, phenomena or the 'ten thousand things' come from non-being into being and disappear into non-being again, restores the little man to his true self by emplacing him anew: subject (little man) and 'object' (the earth) integrate, establishing their renewed integrity.

If the conditions of the earth are unbeing and being, and if things accordingly emerge as if by magic from nowhere, then this poem offers one of its most aesthetic and elucidating embodiments by virtue of its peculiar emphasis on the emptiness of the page. The little man and 'us' enter what Friedman (1996:112) succinctly refers to as Cummings' sense of the now-here-nowhere. Now-here comes into its own with a view to nowhere. It is only by finally achieving nothing, beyond the barriers created by worrying, that the little man reaches his self, his nature, his dynamic earth. Reaching nothing – emptiness – has paradoxically turned into an achievement for the little man and the poem.

This poem as a whole is an *eco-logos* that skilfully orients the reader towards radical open-endedness where active participation in the earth's dynamic balancing of being and unbeing can be experienced anew. It persuades the reader that processes such as rain and bodies such as the moon appear as if from nowhere, rendering that nowhere into all the vibrancy of its overflowing potentials. The implication is that the same nowhere has paid one the compliment of one's own emerging along with all else that has emerged on and indeed in this earth. In a childlike manner, and in terms of suffering in all too human ways from the pressure of worrying, the poem illustrates that one rediscovers precisely the magic of earthly existence to establish again the lost authenticity of one's modern being.

## Williams: The critically obsolete rose

Williams ascribes a similarly positive role for emptiness, nothing, in his poetry. Although he does not employ blank space on the page as radically as does Cummings to illustrate this, he perhaps states the positivity of emptiness with greater pertinence, as found especially in the 1923 volume *Spring and All*. Note that, in this volume, like Cummings, Williams does not allocate titles to poems; this habit of not titling the poems reinforces the invitation to read the poems in terms of blank space and in terms of one another across a volume. The poems are not arranged

as though they were separate little monuments or neat and different rooms down a corridor. Consider first Williams' perception of nothingness, as expressed in the following lines within *Spring and All*:

for everything  
and nothing  
are synonymous  
when  
energy in vacuo  
has the power  
of confusion  
which only to  
have done nothing  
can make perfect

(Williams 1923:26)

A working decoding of this poem could read as follows. The energy located in emptiness (vacuo) contains and sustains the natural chaos of earthly life, whilst it is non-activity that will perfect that chaos, whether the agent be nature's agency of unbeing-being (emptiness-chaos) or the poet—and, paradoxically and preferably, both. The moral is that the poet should *do nothing about this*. Let nature be, and let the poem participate in this natural being, which is ablaze with life emanating from nowhere. This will render a most natural poem, one that moreover achieves 'location' beyond (its) language. That would be the perfect natural poem, because it would participate in nature's aliveness and perfection, which consists in the active continuation that balances unbeing and being.

Just as the little man reconnects with the earth by finding nothingness embodied in the now-here-nowhere, so can that which Williams presents as the perfect poem be created by *doing* nothing, that is, actively refraining from doing something about, interfering with, going against the flourishing and imaginative grain of the earth. This is the way in which this poem foresees a new language able to overcome the corruptions and difficulties of extant semiosis, the latter condition which troubled poets such as Cummings and Williams, as indicated. However, consider that such non-doing is imaginative: it is to participate fully in the earth's own imaginativeness, its bringing forth of the most astonishing forms, shapes, energies, and colours as if from nothing.

In another poem of the same volume by Williams, which poem I will identify (not entitle) for the sake of convenience as the obsolete rose poem, the poet's dexterity around creating a nuanced sense of exactly this kind of (beyond)-linguistic doing, this linguistic implementation of vibrant nothingness within which concrete objects find their rejuvenated outlines and substance, is taken to considerable poetic heights, unsurpassed perhaps in poetry:

The rose is obsolete  
but each petal ends in  
an edge, the double facet  
cementing the grooved

columns of air – The edge  
cuts without cutting  
meets – nothing –  
[...]

It is at the edge of the  
petal that love waits

Crisp, worked to defeat  
laboredness – fragile  
plucked, moist, half-raised  
cold, precise, touching

What

The place between the petal's  
edge and the

From the petal's edge a line starts  
that being of steel  
infinitely fine, infinitely  
rigid penetrates  
the Milky Way  
without contact – lifting  
from it – neither hanging  
nor pushing –

The fragility of the flower unbruised  
penetrates spaces

(Williams 1923:30)

The poem is an ekphrastic response to Juan Gris' 1914 cubist painting entitled *Flowers*. Studying the painting is useful when it comes to interpreting the poem, but it does not visually add much to the way in which the poem engages blank space on the page, except to say that the ekphrastic aspect surely invites a closer visual-verbal examination of the poem, which will, in turn, heighten one's scrutiny of its blank space. Perhaps the most useful interpretative clue that comparison of the painting and the poem provides is the fact that they both revitalise, in a modern manner, the obsolete artistic image of the rose. The hidden sexiness of the poem is also made clear when comparing it with the painting, as the latter distinctly includes images that show that two lovers had been drinking tea.

The reader interested in critically examining the blank space in this poem is struck first, perhaps, by the word 'nothing' in the first stanza. The same volume of poems, as indicated, states that only to have done nothing can make perfect. Is the obsolete rose poem doing something similar with nothingness? Does it want to reach its relative perfection by 'doing nothing'?

Consider that, in Taoist traditions, to which Williams and Cummings turn in their different ways, such non-doing is understood differently from the way in which it is perhaps usually understood in other traditions. It is not understood as passivity or a nihilistic stance or attitude but, instead, is viewed as actively *doing* nothing, or actively doing *nothing*, known in Taoist philosophies as *wu-wei*, which suggests that by this paradoxical (non-)action, everything falls into place, because one is *working along with nature's dynamics* instead of working against its natural, active flow. In this resides an

important recognition around how it can be that only to have done nothing can make things perfect, and subtle nuances of this position find their way compellingly into the obsolete rose poem. Consider carefully again the first stanza with its surprising use of 'nothing':

The rose is obsolete  
but each petal ends in  
an edge, the double facet  
cementing the grooved  
columns of air – The edge  
cuts without cutting  
meets – nothing –

With this, we enter a paradoxical world, the world of solid objects and the apparent emptiness of air and the emptiness of all that is not that particular object and its outlines. As the stanza progresses, the reader enters the world of something and nothing, solidity and emptiness, being, and unbeing. In this way, the poem heightens the baffling aspects of assumed things: like all petals, this one has a *double facet* – the stanza as a whole suggests that this not only comprises its two opposing surfaces but also its relationship with the vibrant nothing that sculpts it; otherwise, we would have had only an infinite petal, and no boundary at which it gave over to its non-self, its important nothingness (conversely, without the nothingness, there is no petal; one would in fact not notice any object without its non-self). The petal provides surprisingly a concrete shape to the emptiness around it, the latter which becomes visible, tangible, by virtue of its shape. Air columns are grooved: a counter-intuitive recognition only until one perceives that the *meeting* of petal and air surely informs the appearance and perception of both.

As the stanza progresses, it becomes clear that the play of petal and air prepares a more radical recognition, namely the play of presence and emptiness. However, here the emptiness is not simply absence. It becomes present, just as the air becomes present in view of the leaf's shaping of it. The petal meets nothing: there is a verbal, active relationship between them. This is why the edge of the petal cuts without cutting: on the one hand, it is as solid as the sharp edge of an object that is able to cut, presumably cutting into visual perception, whilst, on the other, and because it meets nothing, it does not cut at all. Its cutting, therefore, merges it precisely with the nothingness that surrounds it. This means again that nothingness does not amount to the mere absence of the petal, but to an actual presence from which the petal emerges most completely as itself. The petal is cuttily ablaze with its emptiness.

The poem in this way does nothing: it illustrates how nothing informs something, and unbeing being, to which I return. Importantly, this edge, this meeting point of unbeing and being, the shape and substance of the petal as informed by the emptiness (nothing) around it – no, informed by the meeting with it – is the place where 'love waits', which can be understood erotically and metaphysically. Erotically, it is the place where sex becomes enticingly possible. Metaphysically, it is the place where the opposite conditions of 'somethingness' and nothingness shape each other in their connection, as



indicated. The motif of vibrant emptiness comes to a climax in the subsequent stanzas:

Crisp, worked to defeat  
laboredness – fragile  
plucked, moist, half-raised  
cold, precise, touching

What

The place between the petal's  
edge and the

The fragile leaf touches 'What'. It is a mystery: that which it touches cannot be named or can be named only paradoxically by the use of an open term such as 'what', which does not specify a particular this or that. The uppercase spelling of this term is intriguing. On the one hand, it may well refer to erection: what should have been smaller, lower cased, has sprung into something larger, the uprightness of the upper case. The petal touches this what: the first contact of a sexual encounter begins.

The subsequent stanza makes clear another crucial meaning of 'What'. Reading the single-lined stanza containing 'What' as a progression into the subsequent stanza, the decoding would entail something like this: 'What' is the 'place between the petal's/edge and the [ ]'. I use the square brackets to indicate, somewhat to the unavoidable detriment of the blank space in the poem which does not contain such brackets, that there is no word there, but only blank space as such. As such, because of course there should be a word: linguistic expectation is that the determiner 'the' should usually be followed by some noun, object, or other word or a series of words, the this or that, but not simply 'the' and then nothing. The lack of such a word or words heightens one's awareness of the blank space on the page, involving a poetic strategy reminiscent of Cummings' use of blank space in the little man poem, in the particular sense that blank space enters interpretation on a heightened level.

At this telling moment, the obsolete rose poem radically shows, instead of explaining, its engagement with blank space, which space now comes to mime the vibrant emptiness from which the poem emerges. The visual-verbal proposition is that just as an object, such as a rose petal, emerges most vividly in terms of its meeting point with the nothingness around it, so does the poetic object, in this case the printed line, fragment, or sign, find its freshest and most colourful, meaningful emergence in terms of blank space. The arrangement between black print and blank space no longer amounts to a convention that makes poetry possible, but these elements instead find themselves in an energetic, crisp, and nuanced dance or state of tension. This is what makes the obsolete rose petal alive again in this poem, which therefore amounts to a modernist credo of sorts, where the visual element is heightened to the point where the opposite conditions of unbeing (blank space) and being (black print) meet and inform each other with animateness.

This animateness that an object derives from its surrounding emptiness finds surprising expression in Cummings' air poem, to be discussed immediately. Just as the latter progresses by means of parenthesis to actively integrate the blank space with a view to miming significant emptiness, so does Williams' obsolete rose poem progress stanza for stanza from emphasis on the word 'nothing' to the word 'What' to a missing word that marks the vibrancy of the earth's emptiness in tandem with the poem's blank space. This amounts to the poetic celebration of unbeing and being, that is, radical human acceptance of existence on this planet, where mere 'habitat' or sorrow about 'habitat' turns into the warmth of dwelling on and within the condition of being alive, namely earthly unbeing-being.

## Or(e) in emptiness: Cummings' air poem

If airy but vibrant emptiness plays an important role in the obsolete rose poem, as demonstrated, Cummings takes these dynamics further in the following poem:

air,  
  
be  
comes  
or  
  
(a)  
  
new  
(live)  
now  
  
;&  
  
th  
(is no littler  
Th  
  
an a:  
  
fear no bigger  
th  
an a  
  
hope) is  
  
st  
anding  
st  
  
a.r

(Cummings 1994:532)

On decoding the fragments, one soon finds that the poem is weaving itself into a moment where a star is brightening ('anding') as the sun sets in twilight; this time of day, where it transitions into night and change itself becomes acutely visible, is one of the tropes in Cummings' oeuvre, and the air poem under examination here is one of the fragile exquisite triumphs of its expression. The poetic voice or subject or observer in this air poem brightly engages the

atmospheric moment of twilight. That poetic voice is indicated, as throughout Cummings' oeuvre, by means of an ungrammatically lower cased 'i', and careful reading of the air poem requires from one to see that the subject-'i' at first hides in the sign 'air', as I will explain. The reason for lower casing the 'I' becomes clear in terms of Cummings' overall project: it visualises for the reader the subject's smallness in relation to the largeness of nature. Such smallness then allows the subject to enter nature, as expressed in the little man poem analysed above.

In the air poem, the subject becomes so small, and his entrance into the earthly phenomenon of twilight as centred on the brightening star becomes so intense, that he virtually disappears. However, the disappearance is not sorrowful. It involves instead utter mergence with the brightening star, a meditative moment of dynamic, open-ended union. Carefully compare the poem's first and last signs, 'air' and 'a.r' - the poem's gently bulging shape invites this comparison and, as a consequence, these two signs distinctly find themselves in the same position on the page. In the sign 'air', one finds the subject 'i' in its centre. In the sign 'a.r', however, this 'i' melts with the horizon, as mimed by the fact on the page that its little shaft has dropped away below the line's visible horizon, leaving only its dot on that horizon. This suits well Cummings' overall visual playing with his 'i' (Terblanche 2010:181). The remaining dot in the sign 'a.r' is meant to indicate not only the merging of the subject 'i' and the darkening horizon but the merging with the brightening star, of which the shape is mimed by the very same dot. In a meditative moment, speaker-subject and star-object come to their bright union; the speaker loses himself in the brightening star in the most positive way by performing non-doing.

I read it this way in view of the fragmentary semantics around that dot in the sign 'a.r'. The star embodies the holy event of subject and object merging, as indicated by the fragment 'st', which indicates the sacred, the saintly, given that 'st' is an everyday marker of sainthood. Furthermore, by spreading the plain, even automated word 'standing' across the page in fragments, the poem creates a new verb, 'anding', which clearly means that the star is becoming more of itself, that is, brighter, in tandem with the increase of twilight into darkness. The darker the air, the brighter the star with which 'i' increase in mergence to the point of one dot, one star, one horizon of being on the earth. Note that the twilight at one stage has a golden hue, as indicated by the fragment 'or', homophonous with 'ore' - as indicated to me by the Cummings scholar Michael Webster.

This is a most pleasing and enchanting merging of meaning and form. The refined level at which Cummings here steers pictorial elements is unsurpassed in English poetry. As is often the case in his project, punctuation and the separation of or emphasis on letters do considerable work. Moreover, the poem creates movement. It is able to trace change, dancing in tandem with the latter. It is the *process* of the earth,

its agency, its huge capacity to continue changing, of which the poetic subject becomes part. This is why the moment is sacred, involving oneness with the continuous unfolding of the earth.

This dynamic unity carries the subject to a place, let us say a world of 'threeness', through and beyond opposite feelings or 'twoness', in this case those of fear and hope, as the middle stanzas of the poem clearly suggest. Consider that, in Williams' obsolete rose poem, the sense of emptiness mimed by blank space involves a similar movement through and beyond opposites, in that case the hanging or pushing of the leaf, and the cutting or not cutting of the petal's edge, where the living unity between these opposite conditions is paradoxically embodied. This reintegration of opposites by virtue of playing with blank space and black print is meant to rejuvenate, discover anew, the active integrity not only of human participation in natural being and its 'objects' but also of the meeting between signs and the earth, so as to refresh, even heal, once more, poetic language—or at least to meaningfully carry it into a healthier zone of signification.

Most intriguingly, Cummings' air poem reverses black and white to mime the star, of which the dot is black against white. The fragments on the page therefore paint animated pictures presenting the experience and meaning of lucidly living on the earth. It is a vibrant reinforcement of the freedom where humans may enjoy earthly perceptions in the first place, as a gift from nowhere, so to speak.

Ezra Pound, a major influence on Cummings and Williams as is commonly accepted, wrote about poetry approaching its visual-verbal aspect anew in 1914. He famously exited the subway in Paris, and the faces of passengers around him unfolded in his imagination like petals 'on a wet, black bough' (Pound 1914). Before he came to his much-discussed Image, he ruminated on the supremely visual nature of his experience in the subway:

Three years ago in Paris, I got out of a 'metro' train at La Concorde and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion.

And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation ... not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just a 'pattern', or hardly a pattern, if by 'pattern' you mean something with a 'repeat' in it. However, it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a language in colour. (Pound 1914)

As demonstrated in the reading here, blank space allows a 'language of colour' to surface in the projects of Cummings and Williams. One of its most profound expressions, where 'little splotches of colour' come to new life against the blankness of the page, is found in Williams' wheelbarrow poem.

## Preliminary conclusion: Revisiting the redness of the red wheel barrow, the whiteness of its chickens and the whiteness of the page

so much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
beside the white  
chickens

(Williams 1923:74)

As it were, this poem slides open along two structural axes. If one excludes the first stanza for the moment on the basis of its difference from the remaining three, one sees that the second line in each of the stanzas presents an object or objects: barrow, water, and chickens. In contrast, the first line in each of these stanzas presents colour or impressions: red, glazed (with water) and white. One of the interpretations of this is that the meeting place of humanity and nature, namely the 'ordinary' domestic space that the poem depicts, equals the meeting place of colours and impressions in a poem.

Given this visual aspect, what exactly is the role of blank space in this case? Surely, unlike the little man poem and the obsolete rose poem, blank space is not dramatically invited into the text's fibres. Focusing on the use of blank space can, therefore, be justified only in terms of two considerations. The first is that, as demonstrated, Williams' volume on the whole, and modern poetry on the whole, emphasise the whiteness on the page. The second is that, as the poem is composed in fragments in a way that was radical – and to my mind still is – for readers of poetry in the early twentieth century, blank space and its singing silence of that unbeing from which the 'ten thousand things' (such as wheelbarrows) emerge are heightened by the sheer economy of the printed materials. I envision a sliding scale where the blank space and its significance increase as the line decreases; this is in fact an important inheritance of modern poetry in contemporary work, which frequently uses brief lines that consciously or unconsciously catch much of their poetic life by the excess of silence they invoke, as mimed by blank space.

Finally, then, the sign 'white' finds itself at the end of a short line where the enjambment with the next line is more noticeable than was the norm in the early twentieth century, with the effect that it is emphasised. Consider that, as such, it literally evokes a certain tension with the whiteness where the line ends. One has here an invocation of that tension similar to the more visible instances in the little man and obsolete rose poems, where a phrase is conspicuously stretched across the 'opening' signalled by white space and a fragment ending on 'the' to make the

reader aware of it anew; in the case of 'white' in the wheelbarrow poem under examination, the instance of this strategy is just more subtle than those more radical examples, hinted at by the use and placement of the word 'white'. To my mind, its impact is caused by its subtlety of use. Then, one finds that the blank space in the poem is a kind of canvas carrying and enlivening the blotches of colour that the poem names – red, the glazed 'colour' of water (as though the wheelbarrow is a ceramic pot), and white. Here, one reaches an extremity of the two poets' implementation of blank space on the page.

One often wonders why Jacques Derrida gave the graphic novelty of modern poetry such a considerable osculation while not mentioning blank space. One wonders, too, about why he never returned to his claim, no less, that the Chinese influence on modern poetry embodies the first break with the most entrenched mode of sign-making in the West: logocentrism as informed by phonocentrism. Derrida (1997:46) carefully argues that 'all the Western modes of analysis' employ the idea that the presence of the origin of being is embodied in speech, which is closer to breath and spirit, and of which writing is merely a secondary 'representation'. Against this background, he praises modernist visual-verbal experimentation:

This is the meaning of the work of Fenollosa whose influence on Ezra Pound and his poetics is well-known: this irreducibly graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition. The fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on Pound's writing may thus be given all its historical significance. (Derrida 1997:92)

Modern poets such as Pound manage nothing less than becoming free from logocentrism, presumably because they break free from phonocentrism, replacing the idea that speech is closer to the origin of presence with the actuality of an ideogrammatic way of doing, a semiosis where the sign becomes visual, against the phonocentric grain, so as to establish a new actuality where the relations between things are made fluidly concrete. In the cases of Williams and Cummings, not least as influenced by Pound (and Fenollosa and the ideogram), we have seen the graphical use of blank space to signal renewed sharpness and awareness of being in terms of unbeing. Perhaps these latter prospects do not fall within the philosophical ambit and purpose of Derrida's project. Ultimately, one is surprised that he does not relate the foregrounding of visual poetics (and blank space) with the actuality of the earth, especially given the overall emphasis on nature in his oeuvre.

Whatever the case, then, the effect of both poets' visual-verbal employment of blank space in these poems is ecopoetic. That is, it is of an eco-logos that orients itself with surprising directness to and indeed into a primary condition of life on earth: the appearance of things as if from nowhere, and their return into nowhere, which holds true as much for petals, stars, and wheelbarrows as for human beings. Above all, in the worlds according to Cummings and Williams, it holds true for playful blank space on the printed page.

A mature view of this given character of being would certainly maintain room for the sorrow that comes with disappearance. One would not be completely human if one did not miss a beloved who has returned, so to say, to that 'place' or nowhere from which they had emerged into one's life, blazing with their uniqueness of form and spirit, the core spark of the simple fact that they were here, being on this earth with all that exists and has existed here – the plain fact of the innocence of one's being.

However, what if that nowhere is not only a place of sorrow or even loss? Surely, it is also the very 'place', as far as one knows in terms of one's embodied existence, where new things come from, hence a radiant condition of being on this earth. Cummings and Williams find a poetic avenue into accepting and acclaiming this critical aspect of existence. As such, their profound playing with blank space on the page marks, at the level of poetry, a node in ecological maturation.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

### Author's contributions

E.T. is the sole author of this article.

### Ethical considerations

This study followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

This research work received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

## References

- Cummings, E.E., 1994, *Complete poems 1904–1962*, ed. G.J. Firmage, Liveright, New York, NY.
- Derrida, J., 1997, *Of grammatology: Corrected edition*, transl. G. Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.
- Friedman, N., 1996, *(Re)valuing Cummings: Further essays on the poet 1962–1993*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL.
- Gris, J., 1914, *Flowers* [painting], viewed 02 August 2020, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/497126>.
- Harrison, R.P., 1992, *Forests: The shadow of civilization*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL.
- Heusser, M., 2013, 'The semantics of structure: Iconicity in the poetry of E. E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams', in L. Elleström, O. Fischer & C. Ljungberg (eds.), *Iconic investigations*, pp. 159–172, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Louv, R., 2008, *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC.
- Pound, E., 1914, 'Vorticism', in *Fortnightly review* 96, pp. 491–471, 01 September 1914, viewed 17 September 2021 from <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/vorticism>.
- Terblanche, E., 2010, 'Iconicity and naming in E. E. Cummings's poetry', in J. Conradie et al. (eds.), *Signergy*, pp. 179–191, John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Williams, W.C., 1923, *Spring and all*, Wentworth, Contact.