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## **“decomposing in the mouth of New York”: Spatial New York City in E. E. Cummings’ *Tulips & Chimneys***

Zénó Vernyik

*University of Szeged, Hungary*

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This paper deals with the appearance of the urban sphere in E. E. Cummings’ first volume of poetry, *Tulips & Chimneys*. It shows that even though critics and scholars dealing with Cummings’ art tend to ignore the role of the city, it is nevertheless an important aspect of his oeuvre. It points out that the poems can be interrogated in search for a unified city concept that is complex and subversive. Based on Walker (1998) and Eliade (1979) the paper argues that the city of this volume is built upon the dichotomy of mechanical vs. organic existence and that the city transcends her mechanical characteristics through an act of self-sacrifice.

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### **Introduction**

In this paper, I analyze the urban sphere in E. E. Cummings’ *Tulips & Chimneys* through three representative poems of this volume: “[in the rain-]”, “[writhe and]” and “[at the ferocious phenomenon of 5 o’clock i find myself gently decompos-]”. I argue that even though available writings on his art tend to ignore the role of the city and focus more or less solely on the poet’s “lyric vision” of a “transcendent world which is one, and full of love” (Friedman 1960: 9), the urban experience is nevertheless an important aspect of the oeuvre of Cummings. The failure to notice the importance of poems of the city is even more curious if one considers that these poems comprise a large part of Cummings’ work, although their percentage is slowly decreasing in the later volumes. Although Friedman (1996) already emphasized the importance of analyzing the role of the city in the poetry of E. E. Cummings in 1984, there has not been anything published on this topic ever since.

I show that the poems provide more than mere sketches of city life: they can be interrogated in search for a unified city concept. I point out that this is a city full of life,

showing a dualism of organic and mechanistic features. More than being organic, the city of *Tulips & Chimneys* is anthropomorphic, and gendered: the New York City portrayed in this volume is female. I also argue that it is dynamic, full of force and movement, and her dual nature (mechanical-organic) is leading towards attaining an organic existence. The city achieves this transformation through a sacred act of self-sacrifice. In effect, in this volume, the city becomes a modern day savior, saving both herself and those of her body – the citizens – through the said self-sacrifice and her repetitive, commemorative act of symbolic Sacred Feast or Holy Communion.

### **The Organic and Anthropomorphic City: “[in the rain-]”**

The topic of “[in the rain-]” is visibly the praise of the loved one. However, even if it is so, this poem still remains an important source if one is to establish the city-concept of the present volume. Curiously, however, commentators of the poem do not seem to realize that. Martin Heusser mentions this poem as an example of the case when the loved woman is linked to a religious experience (1997: 158). Robert E. Wegner also ignores the presence of the city in the poem when he describes the images of “[in the rain-]” as “those [that] Cummings loves – rain, sunset, flowers, a star – but they seem artfully rather than artlessly posed” (1965: 149).

It is true that it can be inferred from the lines “the holy / city which is your face” (Cummings 1994: 43) that the face of the lady is holy, however, it is to be noted that the attribution of the feature is only indirect. Her face is first a city, and then and only then is it holy.

It is important to note that the space of the lady’s face is not the only locality in the poem. There occurs also the space of the poet who is meditating in the rain, remembering to his love:

in the rain-  
darkness,      the sunset  
being sheathed i sit and  
think of you

[...]

a single star is  
uttered, and I

think  
of you (43)

What it entails is more than just the presence of two different localities: these localities also stand for different types of space, in harmony with the space concept of the religious man, as defined by Mircea Eliade. Such space is fractured rather than homogenous, defined by the basic dichotomy of sacred vs. profane spatiality (Eliade 1979: 21). The words “angel” and “single star” further emphasize the religious/sacred tone of the poem: the star usually stands for Jesus in Christian tradition (Num 24: 17), or alternatively for the Virgin Mary from medieval times on (Pál and Újvári eds 2001: 98), while there is no need to explain the religious character of the word “angel”. The poem’s possible reference to the Holy City, Jerusalem, further supports this point.

Another feature of this city is that it is full of life: there are thrushes, flowers, some water, dance, song, and pirouette. It behaves as an organic whole, even as a living organism, similar to the city-concept of Walt Whitman and William James (Campbell and Kean 1997: 165). Taking a further look at some points of the poem, it becomes apparent that this city is not simply organic, but anthropomorphic:

the holy  
city which is your face  
your little cheeks the streets  
of smiles

your eyes half-  
thrush  
half angel and your drowsy  
lips where float flowers of kiss

and  
there is the sweet shy pirouette  
your hair  
and then

your dancesong soul (Cummings 1994: 43)

Its anthropomorphism springs from the fact that the city itself is identified with a woman’s face, but also from the identification of its various parts with certain organs of the human body.

The most important part is probably the soul, as this can lead further with respect to the city-concept of the volume: its presence suggests that it is very probably unrelated to the city as imagined by the expressionists who integrated the social machinery of Hamilton and the organic city of Whitman into one complex ambiguity. They thought of the metropolis as a dystopic, “noisy and unpredictable machinery [...] that continuously threatens any vestige of individual autonomy,” and at the same time as a devouring, primeval jungle (Walker 1998: 119).

Not only does Cummings’ poem totally lack the machine-aspect, its soul and joyful human face also clearly differs from the expressionist idea of the devouring jungle. The pirouette of the hair is too orderly a figure to be so instinctive and ancient, or animalistic. Not to mention the angel and the thrush that would definitely not appear in such a context, except if the angel were fallen.

### **Mechanical to Organic: the Act of Sacrifice in “[writhe and]”**

Even if Richard S. Kennedy characterizes “[writhe and]” as a “poem describing the sunset in a city, but employing imagery in which city rectangularity bumps against the traditional presentation of the dissolving colors of sunset” (1994: 25), it features more than that. It offers a cityscape that – at least at first sight – conforms surprisingly well to the ideas of the expressionists. This town is suffering. It is tortured. The first part’s “unusual diction gives a sense of wrenching and stress” (25) not only because of the “harsh consonant sound – g, p, k, z – in clusters” (25), but also to emphasize this suffering:

writhe and  
gape of tortured

perspective  
rasp and graze of splintered

normality  
    crackle and  
    sag  
of planes                      clamors of  
collision  
collapse (Cummings 1994: 62)

There are obvious differences, however. Even though the city is mechanical, man-made and is suffering, it is *the city* that is in this condition. The city is not the perpetrator, but the victim. Strange as it may seem, this city lives, it “writhes” and “gapes” and is being “tortured” (62). This is not a mad jungle or a destructive machine. It is much more human than that. It provides a strange mixture of organic anthropomorphism and the possibly rigid existence of a machine.

The human existence of the city is even more emphatic in the second part of the poem. For one thing, it turns out that the city is a woman, just as in the case of the previous poem, it is young, and it blushes. Through rising into the sunset, she practically transcends her own limits and leaves behind her mechanical half. And she enters what is becoming the garden of her agony, or enters a garden of agony that suits her, depending on how one understands the word “becoming”. But rather the latter, considering the possible allusion to the Christian theme of the Agony in the Garden (Matthew 26:36-39). What the reference to the Bible means is not only that this poem also has a strong religious tone, but also that the poem’s perception of the city is positive and also radical to the point of being thoroughly new and subversive. Not only is the city here a modern day savior, suffering for us, but also this savior is female and mechanistic.

Kennedy, however, is right in assuming that this is a poem of a developing city, but not only through offering “a cityscape changing at twilight from the noise of the day to the quiet at night” (1994: 25). The poem visualizes the city in transformation from a mechanical existence to an organic one. The mechanical-organic dichotomy behind this transformation is the same that propels Cummings’ poetic persona’s critique of human existence, exemplified by such poems as “[anyone lived in a pretty how town]” (1994: 515) and “[the greedy the people]” (1994: 801). Thus, just as the individuals’ options in the poetry of Cummings ranges from “lives [that] are as empty and meaningless as the mechanical ‘dong and ding’ of the clock which rules [...] coming and going, [...] eating and sleeping, [...] work and ‘play’” to being “able to grow and finally blossom” (Marks 1964: 41), the possible forms of existence of the city range from clockwork mechanism to blossoming organic existence.

### **Transubstantiation as Self-saving and the Way to Organic Heaven: “[at the ferocious phenomenon of 5 o’clock I find myself gently decompos-]”**

The volume’s city conception seems closest to that of the expressionists in “[at the ferocious phenomenon of 5 o’clock i find myself gently decompos-]”, even if it is also organic and anthropomorphic. Here, it seems no longer true that the city is threatened or suffering or that the picture of the city is positive. The speaking voice is a mere morsel in a gigantic monster

mouth, the city. This lone piece of bread provides an insightful picture of “the isolated and alienated character of the modern subject” (Walker 1998: 119). The enormous mouth with its “financial teeth,” “murderous saliva of industry” and the noise of “digestible millions” (Cummings 1994: 111) form a complex figure both for the “monolithic entity [of the city] that antagonizes and annihilates the isolated energies of the subject,” as well as how “the individual is dissolved into the mob” (119-20). Even the wording is similar: “decomposing” vs. “dissolving”.

However, this conformity is only virtual: the tongue does not fit into the picture of an evil town, nor does the Woolworth building, for that matter. This tongue is not trying to destroy or annihilate anything: it supports the said building, and at the same time tastes it. The expression “devouring” loses its negative tone, as the tongue here devours music, not people or the speaking voice. What this music is, or where it comes from is unclear, unless it refers to the proportions of the Woolworth building. The Pythagoreans and later Plato extended their findings about musical ratios to a model of the sky that consisted of ten spheres. These spheres in turn (or sirens at these spheres) produced sounds conforming to the same harmony, (Plato, Republic X: 691) bringing about *musica universalis* or the music of the spheres. The idea that those ratios that are pleasurable to the ear, should be equally pleasurable to the eye brought about the application of the ratios found by the Pythagoreans in architecture.

So the speaking voice can reasonably talk of “sharp algebraic music” referring to the Woolworth building. The devouring of this music then becomes a synaesthesia of three different sensory areas: taste, vision and hearing. This harmonic conception of the said building denies the possibility to attribute thoroughly negative features to the city-concept of the poem: not only the supportive tongue, but also the building it surveys and supports becomes highly positive. The large number of words referring to movement and dynamism in this part only further supports this positive reading. The seemingly paradox situation of devouring the music of a building that is at the same time referred to as a “squirming cube of undiminished silence” (Cummings 1994: 111) fits neatly in if one refers to the first two lines of another poem by E. E. Cummings, a poem of highest praise: “yours is the music for no instrument / yours the preposterous colour unbeheld” (160).

In the latter part of the poem, the speaking voice changes perspective: the morsel stops being “buoyed on the murderous saliva of industry”. It surveys instead from the top of one tooth what lies underneath. The persona of the poem sees underneath

the complete important profane frantic inconsequential gastro-  
nomic mystery of mysteries  
,life (111)

This life is an “ecstasy” that “wags and rages”, it is full of “Laughters jostle grins nudge smiles” (111). That is, this city is again dynamic, filled with movement and force. With all their “putrid spikes of mad-/ness” the large mass of people’s “various innocent ferocities” still compare rather agreeably to “the sole prostituted ferocity of silence” (112) that presides at the level from where the lyric voice is surveying the crowd.

The expression “digestible millions” also loses its negative air, as the lips of the evening have particularly positive adjectives. The procession seems at first ambiguous, but poems of Cummings often hail and celebrate obscenity. It is true, digestible can mean shallow and simplistic, and there are quite enough poems by Cummings that support this reading.<sup>1</sup> However, there are some other options. This poem is about a city that is made of a mouth and the black depth of a stomach. People are morsels in the mouth (and later the stomach) of the city that devours them. Through eating something, the human body dismantles the food it consumes into its constituents, and builds its own material from these constituents. In this

sense, then, the act of devouring is nothing but a symbol of becoming part of the organism or the body of the city as a living being. Furthermore, digestible can also refer to the people as such kind of food that can be digested: food that is not poisonous or unhealthy; something that is good and valuable for the body of the city.

Valarie Meliotes Arms in her article on the other poem of Cummings that features a morsel as its protagonist, “[morsel miraculous and meaningless]”, points out that the morsel of bread can be precisely the host of the body of Christ. This is a “crumb” that “only becomes ‘miraculous’ and ‘fabulous’ when we feast our souls on it after transubstantiation” (Arms 1979: 293). Is it possible to think of the morsel(s) of the present poem as similarly referring to transubstantiation, or in a little more general way, to the Holy Communion? Although it is a quite strange supposition, it seems to me that it is, indeed, possible. The waffle or bread that is taken in Holy Communion is valuable and important precisely because it is no longer bread, but the living body of the savior. And these morsels are indeed living bodies, people moving around in the city. And they really are of the same substance as another living body: the city, of which they are parts, and as it follows from the concept of the city as one large living organism. That it is possible to think of the city as the savior of the people I have already shown above, in connection with the poem “[writhe and]”. What happens then, is that the city continuously partakes of the Holy Communion, carrying out a ritual sacrifice to herself, commemorating her own sacrifice for the life and wellness of her people, or more generally, for herself. The act of saving is no longer outer, external or divine: the savior is the saved, the two are one, and life carries on as an eternally returning cycle. The word “always” emphasizes the endless eternality of movement, whereas the word “procession” has its own Catholic connotations. The presence of the myth of the eternal wheel of time, at the same time, can quite easily be pointed out in other poems of Cummings’, as well.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

Although it was possible to show through the three poems analyzed above that E. E. Cummings’ *Tulips & Chimneys* has a unified, intriguingly complex and somewhat subversive city concept that would deserve much more critical notice than has been paid by critics, the present essay can be nothing but a short and incomplete introduction to the field. Through incorporating the analysis of the remaining city-poems in the volume, no doubt, a much more comprehensive and complex understanding of the city of the early work of Cummings can be gained. Even after doing a detailed analysis of all the relevant poems in the volume, there remains the question of how the city changed in later volumes, if it did.

Furthermore, beyond establishing the general character of the urban space, a mapping of it would be of much use. How is it fractured and divided beyond sacred vs. profane? What are the special loci of the urban space? What happens to the ancient, central heterotopic locality of the church that organizes space in classical cities?

These and similar questions that are yet to be answered show that there is still much to do in connection with the topic of the city in the oeuvre of Cummings. Although up to this point ignored by critics and scholars, this seems to be one of the most intriguing aspects of his poetry.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example “[one winter afternoon]” (Cummings 1994: 802) or “[F is for foetus(a)]” (635)

<sup>2</sup> See “[anyone lived in a pretty how town]” (Cummings 1994: 515).

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