

Love Beyond Measure in Cummings and Catullus

I compare several poems by the Roman poet Catullus and Modernist poet E.E. Cummings, all of which share a common theme: the idea that love defies measurement and logical analysis. Not only do these poems express a common sensibility, but their linguistic patterns suggest that Cummings was working with Catullus in mind.

Cummings majored in Greek and Latin at Harvard, and his knowledge of Classics is reflected throughout his poems, even in their titles (e.g. *eimi*, *puella mea*). In her recent book on E.E. Cummings, Alison Rosenblitt claims that he preferred Horace above all other Latin poets. Yet there is a deep affinity between Cummings and Catullus, especially in the representation of spontaneity and lived experience in colloquial terms, as Frank Copley recognized decades ago.

I begin by examining Catullus poem 5 and Cummings' "there are so many tictoc." Poem 5 expresses the speaker's urgent demand for Lesbia's kisses. He demands an impossibly high number (lines 7-9) – a thousand, another hundred, then another thousand and another hundred – and says he will scramble them to prevent anyone from counting them (10-13). His insistence stems not only from worry about others' interference, but also the elusiveness of the time for love, which occupies an ill-defined space apart the regular recurrence of day and night (4-6).

We find a similar representation of love as outside the bounds of time and numbers in Cummings' poem. The poem begins with a complaint about the prevalence of clocks:

there are so many tictoc
clocks everywhere telling people
what toctic time it is for
tictic instance five toc minutes toc
past six tic

But the speaker goes on to say time “is not regulated and does not get out of order.” In particular, it cannot touch lovers’ kisses:

(So, when kiss Spring comes
 we’ll kiss each kiss other on kiss the kiss
 lips because tic clocks toc don’t make
 a toctic difference
 to kisskiss you and to
 kiss me)

Both poets distinguish love from attempts to measure and count, and do so in a playful and ironic manner. Poem 5 relies so heavily on repetition and numbers that the speaker falls into the trap of enumerating and assessing value even as he tries to escape it. The speaker in Cummings’ poem also uses repetition, in this case of ‘tic,’ ‘toc,’ and ‘kiss,’ mixing up the syllables to try to confound the passage of time even as he re-creates the sound of a clock.

A second comparison involves Catullus poem 8, the speaker’s bitter farewell to Lesbia, and Cummings’ “since feeling is first,” about giving oneself to a lover without reservation. Both refer to grammatical rules to distinguish emotion from orderly analysis. Catullus’ poem ends with a repetition of interrogative pronouns that suggests a declensional exercise (lines 15-18):

Scelesta, uae te, quae tibi manet uita?
 Quis nunc te adibit? cui videberis bella?
 Quem nunc amabis? Cuius esse diceris?
 Quem basiabis? Cui labella mordebis?

The speaker uses a sequence of interrogatives as if to impose some order on what will happen to Lesbia without him. Yet this grammatical investigation in fact offers little clarity, since the very openness of the pronominal referents invites the possibility of a rival even as the speaker tries to close it off.

Cummings’ poem likewise turns to syntax and punctuation as a way to understand love:

since feeling is first
 who pays any attention

to the syntax of things
 will never wholly kiss you;
 wholly to be a fool
 while Spring is in the world

...
 we are for each other: then
 laugh, leaning back in my arms
 for life's not a paragraph

and death i think is no parenthesis

The speaker contrasts himself and his emotion with someone else who cares too much about correct speech. Ironically, however, even as he discounts the role of syntax and punctuation, he can't leave it behind. The last word of the poem is 'parenthesis.' And like Catullus' list of "who, which, what" words to describe a rival, Cummings also uses a sequence of "wh" words for his imagined rival as if to capture the polyptoton in Catullus (who, will, wholly, while in lines 2,4-6). These poems reveal the problem of writing about something as unpredictable as love without in some way systematizing it.

Bibliography

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