

# A linguistic approach to literary criticism

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**Abstract**

This paper aims at throwing some light on the linguistic analysis of poetic style. The first section deals with what is called "linguistic features". It tackles, for exemplification and illustration, some sample lines of Walt Whitman's poetry. The emphasis here is on the dissection of the levels of linguistic analysis. The linguistic features expounded here are: the phonological, the lexical, the grammatical, the semantic, and the stylistic.

The second section deals with what we may call "visual effects", as contrasted with, "audio effects". The emphasis here is on the exploration of the kind of linguistic features that appeal to the eye more than to the ear. A sample analysis of one of E.E. Cummings poems represents the material of this section, trying to offer an answer to the question: how far is the poet successful in achieving his aim, and what are the linguistic devices he employs for his purposes? In answering that question, we had to refer to, and analyse, the phenomenon of "linguistic deviation".

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## O. INTRODUCTORY

This paper comprises, in addition to this **Introductory** which presents the reader with the scope and limits of the subject, two main sections. The first section, entitled '**Distinctive Features: A Sample Analysis of Whitman's Poetry,**' tries to investigate, linguistically, the most dominant features of this great poet, through the analysis of some of his more familiar lines. The second section, entitled '**Visual vs. Audio Effects: A Sample analysis of E.E. Cummings' Poetry,**' attempts a linguistic interpretation of a single specimen of contemporary poetry--a specimen that is rather shocking with regard to form but almost unique in being representative of a most recent trend. The first section is mainly concerned with the notion of 'linguistic features,' the second with the notion of 'linguistic deviation.'

The whole paper, though short, abrupt, and lacking in more than one respect, aims at presenting the reader with a standard methodology for approaching literary criticism from a linguistically orientated point of view. Such an approach, it is hoped, may throw more light on the appreciation of a literary text. For, if it is the case that the function of criticism is to help us better understand such literary texts, it is our belief that nothing less than the science of modern linguistics can handle such a job, employing all its tools for this analytical research, in order to arrive at the latent linguistic properties underlying such a literary text. These properties, which serve to enhance the effect aimed at by the writer, could be semantic, syntactic, morphological, phonological, dialectal, or otherwise. It is such considerations that called for entitling this paper '**A linguistic Approach to Literary Criticism,**' although tough linguistic terms and abstractions have been avoided as much as possible, sometimes at the expense of scientific clarity and precision.

Of all forms of literature, poetry has, so far, received the greatest amount of linguistic attention. This has been the case for some very obvious reasons; its condensity, intensity, brevity, and metrical form, were found to be a very fertile field for linguistic investigation.

### 1. DISTINCTIVE FEATURES: A SAMPLE ANALYSIS OF WHITMAN'S POETRY

1.0. This section represents an attempt at a linguistic description of Whitman's poetry. The aim of such an attempt is twofold. First it displays a certain approach, a certain methodology, that could lead to further future investigations. Second, it aims at trying to find out, classify, and illustrate, the most outstanding characteristic properties of the style Whitman uses for his poetry.

Language to Whitman is a kind of spiritual experience. In an attempt to explore completely new dimensions of linguistic expression, he mixed

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the style of very elevated situations with that of most familiar ones (the style of complete spiritual exaltation with that of sheer bodily sensuality). Thus, he ended up with coining a new type of register; one that is unique and hard to imitate; one that suits his subjects best. And his poetry is most notable for its creative originality.<sup>(1)</sup>

A lot has been said--a lot can still be infinitely produced--about the man and/or his work. But the task of reviewing some, or even very little, of such works cannot be envisaged here. However, in this context, the following quotation may not be out of place:

This is the Whitman who has seemed to linguists as though he was trying to get beyond the limits of language altogether. In the view of Sapir, subscribed to by Ogden and Richards, he sometimes is moving so entirely in terms of abstractions that he appears to be 'striving for a generalized art language, a literary algebra.'....

Thus Whitman seems to show the very dichotomy between the material and the ideal, the concrete and the abstract that we observed in Emerson's remarks on language. Nevertheless, when we look at their poems, it is obvious that Whitman often bridged the gap in a way that Emerson could not.<sup>(2)</sup>

Following are the opening stanzas of "Song of Myself", one of Whitman's most celebrated poems. The lines quoted here, which we regard as representative, are not very many, only as many as can be dealt with in such a short paper as the present one:

1

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.  
I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.  
My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents  
the same,  
I, now, thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death.  
Creeds and schools in abeyance,  
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,  
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,  
Nature without check with original energy.

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## 2

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,

I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,  
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,

It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,  
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,  
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,  
Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,  
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,

The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color'd sea rocks, and of hay in the barn,  
The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind,

A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,  
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,  
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and hill-sides,  
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much?

Have you reckon'd the earth much?

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

### 1.1. The Linguistic Features:

When criticising poetry linguistically, one can either discuss the **linguistic deviations** (as we will do in 'Section 2'); or discuss, more generally, the **linguistic features**, be they deviations or not. The first term may be used when such deviations are, to a great deal, the predominant factor. The second term can be used when trying

to supply a critical study of a certain writer, as regards the stylistic features or devices that characterize his writings. The points discussed below constitute the most outstanding linguistic features prevalent in the above-cited text.

### 1.2.1. Phonological:

One of the factors that contribute to the strength and smoothness of Whitman's verses is his careful choice of every sound: every consonant and every vowel. Thus, the following features were found to enhance the effect of the rhetorical and aesthetic elements of his composition; hence, the reader's full enjoyment of it:

- A. **Syllable - structure:** Most of the words in this text are of the monosyllabic and disyllabic types; this helps create an effect of simplicity, clarity, positivity and liveliness, e.g.

**My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this  
soil, this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same,  
and their parents the same,  
I, now, thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death.**

- B. **Vowel Features:** Many of the vowels employed here are of the glided type; diphthongs and glided vowels create a much more pleasant effect than long vowels (i.e., vowels that retain the same quality through their pronunciation), e.g.,

|                          |        |
|--------------------------|--------|
| <b>celebrate</b>         | ('ei') |
| <b>assume</b>            | ('u:') |
| <b>loafe</b>             | ('ou') |
| <b>invite</b>            | ('ai') |
| <b>lean, ease, spear</b> | ('i:') |

- C. **Alliteration:** The repetition of certain sounds in successive positions within the text, conveys a harmonious musical effect to the responsive ear. Alliteration, as a phonological feature, is one of the forms of sound repetition, e.g.,

- **I celebrate... and sing...**
- **I lean and loafe....**
- **The play of shine and shade....**
- **... a reaching around of arms,**
- **The delight alone... or along...**

### 1.2.2. Lexical:

The lexical features that should, ideally, be added to entries in a

lexicon are either 'verb features' or 'noun features':

A) **Verb features:** English verbs may be said to be of five major types:

- |                            |                              |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| a) transitive verbs        | ('They are watching T.V.')   |
| b) double transitive verbs | ('We gave the porter a tip') |
| c) intransitive verbs      | ('They laughed heartily')    |
| d) linking verbs           | ('She seemed pleased')       |
| e) mid verbs               | ('That dress suits her')     |

Such structural differences can be verified through either the 'passive transformation' of the whole sentence or through the 'substitution test.' Thus, a verb of type (a) can render a passive sentence, a verb of type (b) can render two passive sentences, a verb of type (c) cannot be passivized. However, this last test, which is a negative one, also applies to verbs of type (d) and (e), The only difference here is that only verbs of type (d) can be substituted by one of the forms of the verb 'Be'; and that only verbs of type (e) can neither be passivized nor substituted by forms of the verb 'Be'.

If we try, now, to apply such distinctive values to the text under consideration, we can draw some conclusions from the following lines:

i) **I.now. thirty seven years old in perfect health begin, Hoping to cease not till death.**

The verbs **begin** and **cease**, which could only be used either transitively or intransitively, under certain conditions in each case, are here used intransitively with human subjects, violating such conditions.<sup>(3)</sup>

ii) **I harbor for good or bad,....**

The verb **harbor** is used here intransitively, in which case it should be followed by a locational prepositional phrase, not a nominal (abstract) one.

iii) **..., I permit to speak at every hazard,**

The observation mentioned above holds here as well.

The verb **permit** is used here intransitively, although, according to the norm of English, such usage only obtains with a certain type of prepositional phrases (mainly starting with the preposition 'of').<sup>(4)</sup>

B) **Noun features:** Following the common practice of modern grammarians, nouns have the following basic features:

- ± Common (i.e., common vs. proper)
- ± Concrete (i.e., concrete vs. abstract)

± Animate (i.e., animate vs. inanimate)

± Human (i.e., human vs. nonhuman).<sup>(5)</sup>

The following examples violate the application of such distinctions:

**i) I celebrate myself, and sing myself.**

The verbs **celebrate** and **sing** are followed by '+ human' nouns (or, pronouns, in this case), whereas they should, according to the norm of English be followed by '-human', '-concrete' nouns.

**ii) I loafe and invite my soul,**

The verb **invite** is usually followed by a '+ concrete' noun; and when it is, sometimes, followed by a '- concrete' noun (e.g., 'He invites trouble'), such a noun cannot be preceded by a possessive pronoun.

**iii) The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,**

**It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,**

**I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,**

**I am mad for it to be in contact with me.**

The noun **atmosphere** is '-concrete'; yet, it is treated here as a '+ concrete' noun. Normally, it would not agree with the following complements:

**is not a perfume**

'subjective complement'

**is for my mouth**

'subjective complement'

**to be in contact with me**

'objective complement'.<sup>(6)</sup>

### 1.2.3. Grammatical:

The three grammatical features discussed here are (a) ellipsis, (b) NP's (noun phrases) as independent units, and (c) morphological deviations.

#### A) Ellipsis:

The deletion of the verb 'Be' is a very common feature; it is a universal phenomenon as well. This verb 'Be', the copula, is also sometimes termed the 'dummy verb', since its function in the sentence is purely grammatical, i.e., it is semantically void.<sup>(7)</sup>

In the above-cited text, the following instances were found to occur:

**- My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,**



- Creeds and schools in abeyance,
- Nature without check with original energy.

**B) NP's as independent units:** In the above quoted lines, we said that the copula was deleted, i.e., it can be restored ('reinstated'). This means that we are dealing with complete sentences which are lacking only in one respect. However, it was found out that in some other places noun phrases stand on their own. This is the case with the whole of the third stanza in the second part of the poem (the stanza beginning with **The smoke of my own breath**). Hence, it is more correct to regard such NP's as independent units equal in status to full sentences. This leads us to conclude that Whitman uses, as complete linguistic units, not only sentences (and sentences minus copula), but also NP's.

**C) Morphological deviations:** An obvious morphological deviation occurs in the following line:

**A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,**

Morphologically, the word **reaching** is a verb not a noun, hence, it cannot be preceded by an article. It is not similar to **wedding** and **covering**, where we can add the plural 's'; nor is it the same as **interesting** and **exciting**, where we can add adjective qualifiers ('intensifiers') like **very** and **rather**. Thus, the **-ing** of **reaching** or **eating** is said to be verbal, that of **wedding** or **covering** is said to be nominal, and that of **interesting** and **exciting** is said to be adjectival.

#### 1.2.4. Semantic:

By semantic here is meant facts belonging to the universe. They are different from the lexical features (be they verbal or nominal) by virtue of the impossibility of applying any of the already mentioned feature-distinctions. For example, there is nothing lexically wrong with any of the following:

- **The smoke of my own breath,**
- ... **buzz'd whispers, love-root, ....**
- **The play of shine and shade on the trees...**
- ..., **the full-noon trill, the song of me rising from bed and**
- **meeting the sun.**
- **You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are**
- **millions of suns left,)**

That there exists only one 'sun' or more than one, depends on what one means by the word itself. Metaphorical usage (or 'the figures of speech') expresses what is linguistically called the 'marginal' or 'transferred' meaning of a linguistic form (versus the

'central' meaning).<sup>(8)</sup>

The poet often resorts to metaphorical usage in order to enhance some of the effects he aims at conveying to the reader. He also resorts to such usage in an attempt to avoid hackneyed or exhausted methods of literary expression.

Just as a kind of conclusion to this point, we quote the following lines which best expound the idea lying behind metaphorical usage :

Since metaphor uses terms in a transferred sense, this means that, subject to some not very serious limitations, a poet who wants to write about object X but finds its terminology defective or resistant to manipulation, can simply move over into the terminology of Y. By using Y-terminology to describe X, he opens to himself the linguistic resources available in connection with Y.<sup>(9)</sup>

### 1.2.5. Stylistic :

The stylistic features which contribute to the sense of harmony that dominates the whole text can be illustrated as follows:

**A) Balanced clauses:** The two clauses of a sentence have the same constituent-structure, together with the repetition of one (or more than one) of the constituent elements, e.g.,

- I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,
- Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,
- Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?

**B) Parallel constructions:** The same constituent-structure is repeated over and over. For example, the third stanza of 'Section 2' (starting with "The smoke of...."), contains as many as ten occurrences of the construction: 'the' + N + 'of', viz. the smoke of, the beating of, the passing of, the sniff of, the sound of, the eddies of, the play of, the rush of, the feeling of, the song of.

Note also the parallelism in :

- I loafe and invite....  
I lean and loafe....
- ... .. and know it and like it,  
... .. but I shall not let it.

**C) Repeated elements:** Repetition here takes more than one form :

- i) The same 'Head' with different 'modifiers':  
- The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves,  
-... of parents... from parents... .. their parents...

**ii) The same 'modifier' with different 'Heads':**

- **My tongue, ... my blood, ... this soil, this air,**
- **A few light kisses, a few embraces,**

**iii) Repetition of the same item or construction:**

In the second stanza of 'Section 2', there are five occurrences of the pronoun **it**. In the last stanza of the whole text, the construction **have you** occurs three times, **you shall** occurs five times; **nor** occurs three times, it is first accompanied by **no** and **or**, and lastly accompanied by **not**.

**D) Direct address:** Throughout the whole text, the poet is addressing the reader in a direct way. There are as many as 'forty-three' occurrences of the pronouns **I** and **you**, together with other members of their paradigms (viz. **me, my, myself, you** 'the objective', **yourself**). It is by employing such **conversational style**, that the writer is trying to create some kind of intimacy with the reader. He is not only asking him questions, e.g.,

- **Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?**

but he is giving him orders as well, e.g.,

- **Stop this day and night with me....**

## **2. VISUAL VS. AUDIO EFFECTS: A SAMPLE ANALYSIS OF E.E. CUMMING'S POETRY**

- 2.0.** It was found out that although the greater corpus of poetry employs effects that are directed towards the sense of hearing (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, etc.), some of the modern or contemporary poetry resorts to employing certain effects that can only be conveyed through the sense of sight. Of this latter type, the following example, which breaks up with some of the traditional rules, may best serve as a model for illustration:<sup>(10)</sup>

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| my sweet old etcetera               | 1  |
| aunt lucy during the recent         | 2  |
| war could and what                  | 3  |
| is more did tell you just           | 4  |
| what everybody was fighting         | 5  |
| for,                                | 6  |
| my sister                           | 7  |
| isabel created hundreds             | 8  |
| (and                                | 9  |
| hundreds) of socks not to           | 10 |
| mention shirts fleaproof earwarmers | 11 |

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|                                           |    |
|-------------------------------------------|----|
| etcetera wrists etcetera, my              | 12 |
| mother hoped that                         | 13 |
| i would die etcetara                      | 14 |
| bravely of course my father used          | 15 |
| to become hoarse talking about how it was | 16 |
| a privilege and if only he                | 17 |
| could meanwhile my                        | 18 |
| self etcetera lay quietly                 | 19 |
| in the deep mud et                        | 20 |
| cetera                                    | 21 |
| (dreaming,                                | 22 |
| et                                        | 23 |
| cetera, of                                | 24 |
| Your smile                                | 25 |
| eyes knees and of your Etcetera)          | 26 |

**E.E. Cummings, Selected Poems 1923-85**  
(page 20)

Supposing that the feelings the poet aims at conveying here are those of banality, dreariness, bitterness, isolation, loss, indifference, automation of life, among others (or just some of these); how does the writer try to achieve such an aim? How far was he, or was he not, successful? A linguist's answer to such questions would raise the following two issues: an **argument**, and a set of **linguistic devices**.

**2.1. The Argument:**

The poet here uses a **common** (or 'plain') **style** for an **elevated** subject, viz. that of war, death and love. The effect aimed at, at this point, would be the destruction of the classical form, or forms, with the objective of shocking the reader.<sup>(11)</sup>

**2.2. The Linguistic Devices:**

Linguistic analysis is properly divided into levels. Although such levels may sometimes slightly overlap, it is advantageous, for the sake of clarity, to deal with each level individually. This has always been, and still is, the common practice; in spite of the fact that the levels of linguistic analysis are not that far disconnected, and that some such levels are more related to each other than to other levels. For example, the phonological, morphological, and syntactic levels form a hierarchy; while the relationship between, say, the semantic and the phonological levels is not that direct.

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In the following sub-sections, we are going to attempt a stylistic analysis in terms of the linguistic deviations that could be detected in the above-cited poem. The levels and sub-levels dealt with here are:

1. Lexical;
2. Grammatical:
  - a) elliptical utterances,
  - b) parenthetical utterances,
  - c) syntactic deviations,
  - d) morphological deviations;
3. Semantic;
4. Orthographical;
5. Typographical.

### 2.2.1. Lexical:

This text is characterized by the inserton of (a) informal colloquial lexical items; and (b) business-like and stereotyped expressions; e.g.,

- a) socks, shirts, fleaproof, earwarmers, etc.;
- b) just what everybody, hundreds (and hundreds), not to mention, ant the word etcetera itself.

### 2.2.2. Grammatical:

The poem is characterized by the use of a 'conversational' style. A conversational style, as different rom a literary style, a scientific style, etc., would have the following linguistic properties, among others:

**A) Elliptical utterances** (i.e., broken-up sequences of sentences, clauses, or other grammatical units above the word level), e.g.,

--- talking about how it was  
a privilege and if only he  
could....

**B) Parenthetical** (i.e., utterances interrupting the continuity of a grammatical sequence or stretch of speech), e.g.,

--- could and what  
is more did...  
- isabel created hundreds  
(and  
hundreds) of...  
- i would die etcetera  
bravely...

**C) Syntactic deviation:** The word 'etcetera' would normally

(i.e., according to the norm of English) be used following a series of items (usually a minimum of two) to indicate other identical or similar alternatives or choices. Furthermore, it is normally placed sentence-finally, clause-finally, prepositional-phrase finally, or cluster-finally; but never in between the constituents of a single unit.<sup>(12)</sup> For example, while it might be acceptable in its first occurrence in the text:

**my sweet old etcetera  
aunt lucy....**

indicating the possibility of adding some other similar adjectivals (i.e., contextually similar, but not necessarily semantically similar); the other occurrences of the same word are certainly deviant, as is illustrated below:

i) in between a series of similar lexical items, e.g.,

**... shirts fleaproof earwarmers  
etcetera wristers....**

ii) between a verb and its adverb (the verb here is one single unit, not a member in a series), e.g.,

**i would die etcetera  
bravely....**

iii) between a subject (one single unit) and its verb, e.g.,

**... ... my  
self etcetera lay quietly**

iv) following the occurrence of a verb cluster (one single unit), e.g.,

**... lay quietly  
in the deep mud et  
cetera  
(dreaming,  
et  
cetera...**

v) as the head of a cluster, e.g.,

**eyes knees and of your Etcetera**

#### **D) Morphological deviation:**

i) The poet makes new derivations, formed on the analogy of older and more familiar words, e.g., **wristers** (for 'wrist-bands') on the analogy of **lighters**, **liners**; and **earwarmers** (for 'ear-covers') on the analogy of **foot-warmers**.<sup>(13)</sup>

ii) The word **myself**, the reflexive or emphatic pronoun, is here divided into its two constituent morphemes **my** and **self**--each represented as a free morpheme standing on its own. Furthermore, **myself** is used here in the subject position ('subjective' or 'nominative' case), where the pronoun **I** would normally be expected (lines 18-19).<sup>(14)</sup>

iii) The word **etcetera**, normally abbreviated **etc.** in written form, is here cited in full.<sup>(15)</sup> Moreover, it is divided twice in the text into **et** plus **cetera**. This cannot be regarded as a morphological division (it is a syllabic one), unless we take into consideration the Latin and Middle English origin and derivation of the word.<sup>(16)</sup>

#### **E) Semantic deviation :**

i) Semantic deviation is represented in this poem in the form of sudden transitions from one register to another, e.g.,<sup>(17)</sup>

**what everybody was fighting  
for,  
my sister  
isabel created hundreds  
....**

ii) It is also apparent in the juxtaposition of elements of heterogeneous nature, e.g., death, war and love, on one hand, making socks, shirts, and chatting on other trivial matters, on the other hand, e.g.,

**... die etcetera  
bravely of course my father used  
to become hoarse talking...**

iii) The poet makes shocking statements or proclamations, which run contrary to the facts and/or habits of our human nature, e.g.,

**... ..., my  
mother hoped that  
i would die etcetera  
bravely of course....**

#### **2.2.3. Orthographical**

Heavy stress is placed on the use of orthographical devices in this poem.<sup>(18)</sup> Very little punctuation is used, even where obscurity or ambiguity might result. Orthographical deviations are exploited to a great extent--for example, where capitalization, spacing, and line and stanza boundaries are concerned. The following observations illustrate such points:

i) omission of punctuation marks leading to obscurity, e.g.,

**my sweet old etcetera  
aunt lucy during....**

The obscurity here lies in the fact that the word **etcetera** comes at the end of the line; so, we would not expect a continuation of the same noun cluster on the next line.

ii) omission of punctuation marks leading to ambiguity, e.g.,

**... and if only he  
could meanwhile my  
self etcetera lay ....**

The ambiguity here lies in the fact that the word **meanwhile** may belong either to the preceding utterance or to following one.

iii) No full-stops are used at all, and commas very scarcely. Punctuation is remarkably lacking where we would most obviously expect it, e.g.,

**i would die etcetera  
bravely of course my father....**

iv) The whole poem is written in small letters (with the exception of two words). According to the norm of English poetry, we would expect capital letters at the beginning of each new line, more so at the beginning of each sentence (supposing that punctuation was properly marked), still more so at the beginning of the whole poem (as we would expect a full-stop at the very end), but mostly at the beginning of proper nouns, viz. **lucy** and **isabel**.<sup>(19)</sup> But the most outstanding orthographical deviation (the one that is most shocking to the eye, since we are speaking of visual effects) is the representation of the personal pronoun **I** in small letters (line 14).

However, the poet employs capitalization only twice, viz.

**Your smile  
eyes knees and of your Etcetera)**

Such usage, which is not in conformity with the general practice, may itself be semantically significant. Such significance can be hypothesized as follows; the poet wants to indicate that the only thing that matters in this world (i.e., in 'his' world, or rather 'world no more') is her smile and her figure, i.e., her person as soul and body.

v) The use of brackets is only characteristic of 'common English,' 'scientific English,' or even 'business letters.'

vi) Line boundaries as poetical (or metrical) units are not maintained. They do not coincide with sentence boundaries, clause boundaries, prepositional-phrase boundaries, or even cluster



boundaries. So, line boundaries separate the internal constituents of the following grammatical units: head from its modifiers (lines 1-2, 4-5, 10-11, 12-13, etc.); subject from its verb (lines 3-4, 17-18); verb from its complement (lines 16-17).

vii) Stanza boundaries as poetical units are not maintained. Thus, they separate the following constituents: head from its modifiers (lines 2-3); verb from its particle (lines 5-6); complementizer from its complement (lines 13-14); the serial members of a single noun cluster (lines 11-12); the morphological constituents of single words (lines 18-19, 20-21).

#### 2.2.4. Typographical

A typographical deviation that is mostly noted here is the one that occurs in 'line 24'. Here, two typing (or printing) spaces are left out, thus:

et  
cetera,....

From such a typographical deviation, no doubt intended by the writer, we can deduce any of the following remarks--all of them hypothetical:

- a) it is a typing error that the writer would not care to correct (e.g., expressing complete indifference or utter boredom);
- b) things started to get obscure or hazy to the writer (e.g., he is now dreaming);
- c) that nothing matters any more (e.g., it is the absolute end);
- b) or else that he is actually dying (i.e., he has already broken up ties with our world and its conventions).<sup>(20)</sup>

#### 2.3. Limits of Linguistic Deviation:

There are certain limits, however imprecise, beyond which a writer cannot go. Language is primarily a means of communication, depending for its purposes on a certain set, or sets, of symbols that are arbitrary. They are arbitrary in the sense that there is no direct relationship between a symbol and what it stands for; and they are also arbitrary in the sense that a writer producing a work of art is bound to be limited in his choices between alternatives. He does not have the same freedom of choice as, say, a musician or a painter. Whereas the latter can pick and choose not only concerning the content, but concerning the form as well, a writer is only free as far as the content is concerned. His freedom of choice, or invention, as regards the form of expression is ultimately bound to be limited.<sup>(21)</sup> If a writer exceeds such limits, he risks intelligibility. And when he does so, he may still be creating a work of art, but not necessarily a linguistic one. Such a work of art

would be taken impressionistically by the the reader, he either likes it or he does not (i.e., like some modern abstract paintings); and sometimes he does like it merely for the sake of its deviation.

Here, another poem by the same author is quoted, which may help to illustrate our point. In this poem, the writer could be risking intelligibility, but again the boundaries are far from being clear-cut. To one reader, who will obtain a certain impression or satisfaction, the poem represents a good work of art; to another, it will be either shocking, incomprehensible, or merely a bad work of art. That is, acceptability is relative, hence, deviation is also relative.<sup>(22)</sup>

### Four III

here's a little mouse) and  
 what does he think about, i  
 wonder as over this  
 floor (quietly with  
 bright eyes) drifts (nobody  
 can tell because  
 Nobody knows, or why  
 jerks Here & here,  
 gr (oo) ving the room's Silence) this like  
 a littlest  
 poem a  
 (with wee ears and see?  
 tail risks)  
 (gonE)  
 'mouse',  
 We are not the same you and  
 i, since here's a little he  
 or is  
 it It  
 ? (or was something we saw in the mirror)?  
 therefore we'll kiss; for maybe  
 what was Disappeared  
 into ourselves  
 who (look)., startled

**E.E. Cummings, The Faber Book of  
 Modern Verse, London, 1965  
 (pp. 189-90)**

## NOTES:

- (1) According to Leech (Geoffrey Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*), an artist can be creative in one of two ways; either through being inventive, i.e., coining new forms or new uses of existent forms; or through being original, i.e., bringing into vivid light the original or latent qualities of forms existing in everyday usage. In our estimate, Cummings' poetry belongs to the first category (cf. 'Section 2'), Whitman's to the second.
- (2) F.O. Matthiessen, 'Only a Language Experiment', R.H. Pearce (ed.), *Whitman*, p. 70.
- (3) Thus, we can say **He began work yesterday** or **Work began yesterday**, but not **He began yesterday**. The same applies to 'cease'.
- (4) E.g., **The situation does not permit of such interruption**.
- (5) Cf. R. Jacobs & P. Rosenbaum, *Grammar*.
- (6) Note also that it may not be followed by a nominal complement, but rather an adjectival one, e.g., we can say **The atmosphere is peaceful**, but not **\*The atmosphere is peace**.
- (7) That is, the sentence **Mary is very pretty** is semantically equal to **Mary very pretty**. If the second sentence is not acceptable in English, it is the norm in many languages, including the Semetic family. Still, the word 'is' here is recognized as a mere function word, a 'structural marker'.
- (8) Cf. Bloomfield, *Language*, p. 149.
- (9) Winifred Nowotny, *The Language Poets Use*, p. 67.
- (10) Revolution against form is as old as the invention of form itself, e.g., Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, which appeared in the middle of the eighteenth century.
- (11) Styles should be suited to the subjects they are used to express. Styles can be roughly divided into three relative types within a linguistic scale: **grand**, **medium**, and **common**. **Grand** is for elevated situations; **common** is for familiar, everyday situations; and **medium** is somewhere in between (cf. Leech, *op.cit.*, Ch.1).
- (12) These four grammatical units are taken to be the basic ones: Sentence, Clause, Prep. Phrase, Cluster. The last of these terms may be defined as a group of words whose constituents hold a certain relationship to each other, namely, that of a **modified** to a **modifier** or **modifiers**. The modified is termed the **head** of the cluster. Compare, also, in this respect, an **endocentric construction** (Bloomfield, *op.cit.*, Ch. 12).
- (13) Note that in the case of **lighters**, the derivational **-er** is added to a verb-base, as is the common practice; but in the case of **liners** (i.e., ocean-liners), the morpheme **-er** is added to a noun-base as in **wristers**.
- (14) This observation also bears on the syntactic level.
- (15) This note also bears on the orthographical level.
- (16) Latin: et caetera; **ME**: et cetera.
- (17) A very brief definition of the term 'register' is: varieties of the language according to usage, in contrast with the term 'dialect' which means: varieties of the language according to users (cf. Halliday '& others', *The Linguistic Sciences And Language Teaching*, Ch.4).
- (18) Orthographical observations, or deviations, should be kept in clear distinction from typographical ones (to be considered next). The former phenomenon refers to punctuation in general. The latter phenomenon refers to typing or printing factors like italics, bold letters, underlining, etc.
- (19) The idea of grading the irregularities means that there are degrees of linguistic deviation or audacity, in very general terms. That is, where some deviations can be tolerated or partially accepted by native speakers, others can not.
- (20) This idea can be confirmed by the lack of a final full-stop at the very end. But it can also be refuted by the presence of a closing bracket. Although the second argument seems more plausible, it has been our aim, throughout the paper, to illustrate a methodology of research, by showing as many alternatives as possible, sometimes by giving too many details or driving a point a little too far.

- (21) Obvious examples from English literature can be drawn here to illustrate this point. James Joyce's **Ulysses** is rather difficult to understand. However, his later novel **Finnegan's Wake** is quite difficult, at times rather impossible, to understand. It is a vivid example of too much linguistic deviation. The writer, there, toys not only with technical form, but with linguistic means as well.
- (22) The following poem can be linguistically analysed along the lines illustrated in 'Section 2.2'. The trouble is that it will be difficult to locate an aim, an argument (using our terminology), or an effect, that the writer wants to convey. However, it might be a self-rewarding personal exercise for the student of stylistics to try to analyse the poem along the lines illustrated above.

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