

Innovation and Multimedia in the Poetry of cummings and Mayakovsky

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**Abstract:** In her article "Innovation and Multimedia in the Poetry of Cummings and Mayakovsky" Svetlana Nikitina discusses how e.e. Cummings and Vladimir Mayakovsky foreshadowed the digital revolution of today in their multimedia experiments in poetry. Although they spoke different languages and lived in different societies, the two modernist poets display similarities in their modernist aesthetics. Both are artists as well as poets who blur the line between the two forms of art. Their synesthesia inoculates them against postmodern disintegration of meaning or form. Although Cummings is a staunch individualist, and Mayakovsky the tribune of the collective, they both rebel against traditional poetic forms and invent a new language of multisensory and multimedia processing. Both make orthography and page design sculpt the spontaneous experience they want to convey. By showing Mayakovsky and Cummings as consummate makers of words, images, experiences, and new social orders who treated their verbal material as a physical medium, Nikitina supports the claim that the poets' visual sensibility and multimedia orientation prevented them from sliding into postmodern deconstruction and created the center that could hold.

**Svetlana NIKITINA**

### **Innovation and Multimedia in the Poetry of Cummings and Mayakovsky**

Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) and e.e. Cummings (1894-1962) are multimedia modernists. Their "twin obsessions" with poetry and painting make them unique innovators even in the age of wild and ubiquitous experimentation of the early twentieth century (Kidder 242). They stand out because their bold demolition of traditional poetic forms did not lead to disintegration of meaning or self-absorbed formalism. This happened, I argue, because their "poempictures" and the merger of the visual and verbal sensibilities led to the "hardening" of their image making and inoculated it against postmodern deconstruction (Cohen 13). In their poetry, Mayakovsky and Cummings foreshadow the digital revolution of today and suggest promising avenues for literature and art in the twenty-first century.

Mayakovsky and Cummings never met. Almost exact contemporaries, they grew up on different continents, one in the jagged crevasses of Caucasus, the other in the gentle folds of the Massachusetts valleys. While their personal universes do not touch, their artistic journeys run eerily parallel. They were born into the world forever ruptured by World War I, which had a deep impact on both. Both were romantics who practiced irony of the most sincere sort and were burned by love, art, and war. They were boundary crossers who traveled to each other's country at the time when almost nobody dared. They crossed the line from painting to poetry on a daily basis and deployed the same kind of explosive under the foundation of conventional poetic rhyme and line. Both found in them the power to celebrate births not burns, life not language, experience not experiment. They were revolutionaries in the sense that goes beyond politics. Form for them was the vibe of their vision, not an end in itself, which distinguishes their modernism from that of many others. Despite these similarities, the bridge connecting them and extending all the way to our time is seldom made in scholarship. This lacuna needs to be addressed because these poets' comparison illuminates the constructive aspect of modernism, often neglected. Kirsten Blythe Painter points to a regrettable lack of "comparative studies of Modernist poetry that cross the border between western and eastern Europe" (4) as well as to the general "neglect of Russia" in this scholarship (13). Although the direct contact between the West and the Soviet Russia was hampered, the connections that do exist go deeper than surface similarities based on personal contact or direct exchange of ideas. Scholars who study these connections are able to uncover significant aesthetic overlaps between Anglo-American, French, German, and Russian avant-garde movements such as Imagism, Acmeism, Symbolism, Futurism, Vorticism, Constructivism and others (Painter 3). Ultimately, modernist experiment in art and literature was not French or German or a US-American movement; rather, it was a global phenomenon. Contrasting politics only highlights the unifying principles of Mayakovsky's and Cummings' poetics. Both poets were makers and breakers: their formal breaks and innovations were productive of new meanings, and not just of orthographic tricks. Both poets remained committed to visual integrity of perception and meaning which saved their image from deconstruction and analytical dissection. Synesthesia of the different artistic sensibilities in their work, created the firm center that could hold.

Mayakovsky and Cummings are unanimous in their view of a poet as a maker, a reshaper of the world rather than its abstract observer and formal interpreter. There is a clear parallelism in their sense of mission: they see themselves as creators of new words and experiences. Both approached their verbal material very much like artists and engineers. "If a poet is anybody," writes Cummings, "he is somebody ... who is obsessed by Making ... I should prefer to make almost anything else [other than money], including locomotives and roses. It is with roses and locomotives ... that my 'poems' are competing" (Cummings qtd. in Norman 9). A poem is thus not an abstraction, but a breathing creature that is ready to participate in the world: "the poem her belly marched through me as / one army. From her nostrils to her feet / she smelled of silence" (Cummings, *AnOther* 39). Mayakovsky, likewise, describes his craft as an industrial assembly of facts and ideas. He is proud to see himself as a plumber of the Revolution called upon to fix the pumps of reality. The poets' preoccupation with making stems from their commitment to the physical transformation of verbal material, rooted in their work as painters. Painting obsession began very early for both. Cummings, who described himself as "an author of pictures, a draughtsman of words," began to paint at about the same time as he began to write poetry (Cummings qtd. in Norman 4). Generally self-taught, he considered himself a professional

painter throughout his life. His work between 1915-1926 is distinctly modernist, inspired by Cézanne, the Synchronists (Morgan Russell and Stanton MacDonald-Wright), the Cubists (primarily Picasso and Gleizes), the Futurists (particularly their US-American counterparts Joseph Stella and John Marin), and others (see Cohen 43). In the late 1920s, however, Cummings settles into a more representational, subjectivist mode of painting and notably breaks with the aesthetics of "objectivity, calculation and detachment" (Cohen 57). His goal was to stay connected to reality to a greater extent than the abstract art movement cared to. In fact, all of his works, even the colorful cubist abstractions and suggestive impressionist portraits, display his positive commitment to experience and a direct tie to it. His paintings hold on to the inner dynamism of the experience he wants to relate, while his poetry is informed by images, colors, and shapes. He never draws a distinct line between poetry and painting, both of which stream from the same creative source, as he sees it. When a journalist asked him once, "Tell me, doesn't your painting interfere with your writing?" Cummings replied, "Quite the contrary: they love each other dearly" (Cummings qtd. in Norman 175). Mayakovsky's dual passions for painting and writing also developed in childhood with his early poems expressing "strong painterly visions" and his childhood pictures taking "their inspiration from his reading" and helping to "accompany stories" (Brown 32). In 1908, Vladimir Mayakovsky enters the Stroganov School of Industrial Arts in Moscow and from there he transfers to the Moscow Institute of Painting and Sculpture and Architecture in 1911. After being expelled from the Institute for revolutionary activities, Mayakovsky designs posters and advertisements, as well as arranges graphic designs for the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA). He continued to make posters and to draw pamphlets until the end of his short life.

Despite similarities in their long-term dual commitment to painting and poetry, the actual artistic output of Mayakovsky and Cummings shows distinct differences. Cummings's pieces are suggestive of some pulsating reality, as opposed to Mayakovsky's pamphlets and posters that hit you over the head with it. This contrast is present in poetry, too, but the differences there are subtler. At first glance, Mayakovsky's bombastic confession of love to Tatiana Yakovleva seems to have very little in common with Cummings's penetrating love lyrics. Mayakovsky demands of his passion to merge seamlessly with his political fervor: "In the kiss of your hands / or lips, / In the trembling of your body / close to me / The red / flame / of my republics / Has / to burn / as well" (my translation; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("V potselue ruk li, / gub li, / v drozhi tela / blizkikh mne / krasny / tsvet / moikh respublik / tozhe dolzhen / plamenet" [*Poemy i stikhotvorenia* 135]). For Cummings, on the other hand, love is a very quiet place: "love is a place / & through this place of / love move / (with brightness of peace) / all places" (*Collected Poems* 271).

Much as the tone of the two poems is distinct, they both present love as something real (a place, a color) and transcendent (connecting all places, tied to social transformation) at the same time. Both poets are looking for edgy images to give vivid snapshots of the experience of love. As artists and makers, Mayakovsky and Cummings are looking to find a parallel to their romantic feeling in action, image or rhythm. Mayakovsky, for example, defines love experience as the physical joy of cutting wood: "To love - / means / to run / into the courtyard / and / through the crow's night, / see the axe shine, / as you cut wood, / delighting / in your / plight" ("Liubov' - /eto znachit: / v glub' dvora / vbezhat' / i do nochi grachyey, / blestia toporom, / rubit' drova, / siloi / svoey / igraiuchi." [*Poemy i stikhotvorenia* 131]). Cummings, similarly, compares his love to building a building: "my love is building a building / around you, a frail slippery / house, and a strong fragile house / (beginning at the singular beginning / of your smile) a skilful uncouth / prison, a precise clumsy / prison (building that and this into Thus, / Around the reckless magic of your mouth" (*Collected Poems* 46). Both poets' expression of a feeling through an image or action is different from Cubist, Futurist, or Dadaist absorption with word play. Words, lines, or punctuation marks for Cummings and Mayakovsky are meaningful units of experience infused with powerful emotional charge. In Mayakovsky's long poem *Cloud in Trousers*, for instance, "it is through and in the form of the verse that the logic of the poem's movement, sudden transitions included, becomes apparent" (Aizelwood 90). This drive for unity of form and content, the visual and the verbal, is present in Cummings' work, too, because he "not only thought and heard his poems, but saw them as well" (Cummings qtd. in Cohen 16). Cummings often referred to his poems "in visual terms, on one occasion writing his editor, "what I care infinitely is that each poem picture should remain intact. Why? Possibly because, with a few exceptions, my poems are essentially pictures" (Cummings qtd. in Cohen 16). Cummings' following poem picture shows the falling

of a leaf in both verbal and visual terms, with a feeling of nostalgia reinforced by media convergence: "1 (a / le / af / fa / ll / s / one / iness" (Cummings, *AnOther* 136). Mayakovsky's poem-pictures use fewer visual means, but they specialize in conveying the meaning through a beat communicated graphically through a staircase of lines: "March! / So that time / shatters / behind" ("Marsh! / Shtob vremia / szadi / yadrami / rvalos" [*Poemy i stikhotvorenia* 94]). A union of the verbal and the visual delivers "the emotional substance of experience" in all its vitality and integrity (Lane 9). Convergence of different media is attempted in the works of Cummings and Mayakovsky not as a formal exercise, but as a way to reinforce the message and protect it from disassembly. In translating across media, both poets distill and solidify the essence of the image, making it signify. Cummings hoped for a true convergence of media and perception, "in which the artist and viewer actually become the work of art — presumably, by imaginatively entering into it so thoroughly as to obscure the boundaries separating subject and object" (Cohen 70). This participation in the work of art is clearly facilitated by its 3D rendering in a variety of media.

Merging media is a strikingly contemporary idea that is being realized actively in interactive media where the path to the integrity of meaning seems to lie through synesthesia. Both Mayakovsky and Cummings put the sound, rhythm, color to work to overcome the analytical flatness of the poetic message. Poem-crafting in their hands involved tinkering with words as if they were also musical bars or design elements with which to give shape to experience. Their synesthetic sensibility — bringing the verbal and the visual together — possibly inoculated Cummings, in particular, "against the galloping stagnation which seems to carry off so many of our younger American poets" (Slater Brown 39). A poet for Mayakovsky is a world-maker, and not just a word-maker. As an artist, he gets his hands wet in experience: "Suddenly I smeared the map of everydayness, / splashing paint from the jar; / I made the ocean's sloped cheekbones / in a saucer of aspic. / I read a summons from new lips / on the scales of a tin fish. / And could / You / Play a nocturne / On a flute of drainpipes?" (Mayakovsky in Kiaer 118) ("Ya srazu smazal kartu budnia, / plesnushki krasku iz stakana; / ya pokazal na bliude studnia / kosiye skuly okeana. / Na cheshuye zhestianoi ryby / prochyl ya zovy novykh gub. / A vy / noktirn sygrat' / mogli by / na fleite vodostochnykh trub?" [*Poemy i stikhotvorenia* 25]). To become a world-maker, this poem suggests, the poet has to become an artist working the actual physical medium without which his song is hollow. Because both artists are fashioning artworks on a daily basis, they expect the same level of traction from their verbal artifacts. To make his poetic meaning come together as one whole visceral experience, Cummings dips pen into paints and music, too. Passing "from music to literature, through the medium of what has been called "sense-transference," he modeled his poetry on color music of Scriabin and others. Similar to Mayakovsky, Cummings uses a poetic line as a "visual chord" (Slater Brown 120) or an auditory-rhythmic device in descriptive poems. Cummings notes, "The poem which has at last taken its place does not sing itself; it builds itself three-dimensionally, gradually, subtly, in the consciousness of the experiencer" (Cummings qtd. in Slater Brown 128). The support of multimedia seems to focus rather than fracture the poem's meaning.

In *How are Verses Made?* Mayakovsky describes poetic process as "the struggle to organize movement, to organize sounds around oneself, discovering their own proper nature, their peculiarities" (*How are Verses Made?* 37). His stock of poetic "supplies" is not an inert or abstract mass; on the contrary, words "wriggle and squirm dozen times over, until you can't imagine how any word will ever stay in its place" (*How are Verses Made?* 36). Mayakovsky often resorts to architectural imagery when describing his poetic creativity: "Poetry is a manufacture. A very difficult, very complex kind, but a manufacture" (*How are Verses Made?* 56). This conception of his craft as visual and visceral helps Mayakovsky "to break the barrier between the word and reality" (Shklovsky 118). Cummings's own use of "engineering" in his verse and in the design of a poetic page is no less extensive (see Slater Brown 48). Experience and action clearly take precedence over analysis and interpretation in the poetics of Cummings and Mayakovsky as makers. Insisting on the primacy of feeling or creation over reflection, Cummings writes, "since feeling is first / who pays any attention / to the syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you" (*Selected Poems* 35). His disdain for "why or because or although" is visible in all his works designed to celebrate "the virginity of experience" (Slater Brown 72). But anti-intellectualism in both poets is not about rejecting meaning; it is about overcoming its analytical flatness. Visual thinking is instrumental in this. Milton A. Cohen notes that "At the same time e.e. Cummings made his poems and painting more 'feelable to the eye,' he made them less directly familiar to



the mind" (100). This was not a subtractive, but an additive move on his part because his aim was "not to jettison meaning but to expand it visually and aurally" (Cohen 100). Cummings never forces his reader to choose "between sense and sensation: even the purest of his 'poempictures' possesses a clear emotional or physical reference point. Far from wanting to divorce the visual from the verbal, he seeks to join them to make his poems mean at all levels simultaneously" (Cohen 101). Mayakovsky also "tried to board his readers at a station deeper than intellect" (Lane 5) and to deliver a more "feelable" and actionable world than "tedious philosophy" ("nudovaya filosofia") ever could (*Poemy i stikhotvorenia* 106).

In addition to visual medium, musical and rhythmic sensitivities helped Mayakovsky and Cummings to breathe life into their verse. Tempo, forward motion, and the "dynamic rhythm running through and unifying the separate parts" serve as yet another way to deliver direct experience (Cohen 40) and "The lines of his poems are built for speed" and have a "quality common to racing cars, aeroplanes, and to those birds surviving because of their swift wings," remarks Slater Brown of Cummings (39). The same is true of Mayakovsky who often trains his poetic line on the beat of a march. Dos Passos finds that nothing in modernist poetry comes close to Cummings's *Buffalo Bill* in "accuracy in noting the halting cadences of talk and making music of it" (qtd. in Slater Brown 34-35). In their urge to "make" poems and to give them substance, Mayakovsky and Cummings differ from many modernists. Cummings's work is marked by "unified sensibility" (Friedman 3), which is "simultaneity and instantaneousness" in expression, rather than by "irony and ambiguity" (Friedman 3). He is better at "reawakening encapsulated meanings rather than at multiplying them ... he aims at joyfulness rather than at meditateness" (Friedman 4). Mayakovsky expresses the same life-affirming spirit when he writes, "I hate / all sorts of deadliness! / I adore / all sorts of life!" ("Nenavizhu / vsyacheskuyu mertvechinu! / Obozhaiu / vsyacheskuyu zhizn'!") [*Poemy i stikhotvorenia* 65]). Both poets thus challenge the notion that modernist verse has to be involved in deconstruction or "polarization" of meaning (Friedman 11). Cummings, for example, "could never be faithful to Dada because he loves the world too much to stop with denial" (Friedman 32). Although admiring of the works of Ezra Pound and Cézanne, Cummings never joined a modernist group formally in painting or poetry. Mayakovsky, who did drift among different modernist formations of his time (Futurism, Constructivism), is described by his contemporaries as primarily a man who "hungered for life" (Shklovsky 41). The ultimate act of making and becoming for Mayakovsky was in blurring the line between "aesthetic and political radicalism" and between the visual and the verbal, "spurred by apocalyptic hopes engendered by the Russian Revolution" (Ehrlich 7). Cummings's ultimate act of becoming consisted in trying to dissolve the boundary between the artist and the viewer, the subject and object, "in which the artist and viewer actually become the work of art" (Cohen 70). Much as Cummings might be loathe to admit it, dissolving the self in the work of art comes very close to the Constructivist idea of dissolving the self and its creations in a larger social goal. In his effort to marry text with the texture of experience, however, Cummings never goes as far as Mayakovsky as to have his word bend to ideology, no matter how inspired. Nevertheless, he and Mayakovsky both heed the Constructivists' call upon easel painters to turn "to the material properties of their art as the significant content of their work," and to regard "color, faktura, the planarity of the surface, the flatness of the support, the shape and extension of the ground" (as well line, sound, and orthography) as parts of the expressive palette (Gough 22). Their poetic work is the act of making, which involves "the constant restocking of the storehouses, the granaries of your mind, with all kinds of words, necessary, expressive, rare, invented, renovated, manufactured, and others" (Watten xvii). Much like Constructivists, Mayakovsky and Cummings are also "working the material and not just treating its surface" (Gough 72).

Cummings's and Mayakovsky's use of satire and irony signals their break from bourgeois mores and values. It is a clean break for both poets because bourgeois values undermine one's quest for authenticity and personal growth, which they both cherished. In "You!" Mayakovsky ridicules bourgeois excess and falsehood in the face of soldier's sacrifice in the trenches of the Great War: "Do you know, the feckless many, / Concerned with how to stuff yourselves, - / That may by now Petrov, lieutenant, / Has lost his legs to bomb shells / ... / If he, who is brought to slaughter, / Wounded and bleeding, saw / How you, lip smeared in cotlette, / Mouth Severianin's jingles galore" ("Znaete li vy, bezdarnyie mnogie, / dumaiushchie nazhrat'sia luchshe kak, - / mozhnet byt' seichas bomboi nogi / vydralo u Petrova poruchika? / ... / Esli b on, privedyennyi na uboi, / vdrug uvidel izranenny, / kak vy

izmazannoi v kotlete guboi / pokhotlivo napevaete Severianina!") [*Poemy i stikhotvorenia* 29]). Cummings's satirical response to hypocrisy in "Humanity i love you" mirrors that of Mayakovsky: "because you would rather black the boots of / success than enquire whose soul dangles from his / watch-chain which would be embarrassing for both / parties ... / and because you are / forever making poems in the lap / of death Humanity/ i hate you" (*Selected Poems* 18). No other feeling brings the two poets closer together than their aversion to empty versification in the face of human tragedy. Mouthing jingles of Igor Severianin while soldiers are being blown up in the front and "forever making poems in the lap of death" deserve profound poets' scorn. Their abhorrence of verbal emptiness points directly to their view of a poet as more than a word-maker.

Mayakovsky's and Cummings's break from the political system, however, takes decidedly different forms. As early as 14, Mayakovsky participated in socialist demonstrations and later aligned himself fully with the agenda of overthrowing the tsar and bourgeois rule in Russia. Three times, still underage, he finds himself in jail for subversive political activities. After the Bolsheviks took power, he continues to fight against internal and external enemies of the Revolution. Cummings, on the other hand, scorned any political affiliation, especially after his trip to Russia. His one political suit was the protection of the individual from the press of the communal values. According to Cummings, "one must live directly and spontaneously, freely and responsively" (Friedman 51) and he regarded "collectivism of any kind" as "anathema" (Friedman 51). Curiously, both poets had a very similar reaction towards each other's country. Just as Mayakovsky sees the U.S. through the "Bolshevik bard's programmatic scorn for American capitalism," Cummings' portrayal of Russia in *Eimi* (1933) is utterly predictable in its condemnation of the Soviet regime and its suppression of the individual and of artistic freedom (Ehrlich 256). They both seem to criticize (or stereotype?) the same things in each other's country. Mayakovsky complains that the West's capitalist system, "retards the development of art, and Russia has the priceless advantage of having cast off the impediment of the old system and thereby acquired unlimited freedom to develop new ideas and new forms" (Mayakovsky qtd. in Edward Brown 270). Cummings's accusation of the Russian system as paralyzing creative expression is almost identical to Mayakovsky's, which suggests that both poets valued individual expression to the same degree.

The thirst for creative freedom, as one might expect, hit a hard rock in Mayakovsky's life. Complete alignment of his song with the song of the Revolution did not reinforce his personal freedom and creativity, as he hoped. His ideas were of interest to the state only to the extent they oiled the ideological machine. In the late 1920s, he becomes too much for the state to handle and his wings are clipped in many subtle and searing ways: critical rejection of his plays, caustic remarks in the press, and supervised trips abroad. The split in his self between the tribune of the revolution, the satirist, and the lyric poet was growing. Inevitably, "a brash barbarian in a yellow blouse, a cynic who spatters people with grease spots, a "cabby" whose vocabulary shatters the calm propriety of decent houses, a literary huckster ("reklamist") with his name in every paper, and — a cloud in pants" was headed to a tragic end (Brown 108). In the mid-1920s, he is beginning to lose touch with the deep roots of his personhood. Many Soviet artists of the time tried active erasure of their individual self in the Revolution, elevating it even to an aesthetic level. It did not really work. Constructivists, for example, attempted to adapt their artistic output to "the ambitions of the revolutionary state by eradicating marks of individual authorship — and hence ... subjectivity — from the work of art" (Gough 10). Movements like this did not last long. The loss of intimacy produced a break in Mayakovsky that proved fatal: "By holding to an artistic program taken from historical materialism, Mayakovsky made only verses lacking intimate warmth and feeling, stirred up by external mechanical forces, by artificial heating" (Hirschman 32). While there is still debate about the exact motive for his suicide (failed love affair, direct persecution, critical rejection), it is clear that the consummate maker of socialist realism and its tunes was brought down by a break in his inner core: "Did Mayakovsky realize that his headlong rush toward the mythical future where a poet and his gargantuan powers could live, love, and create at the highest pitch of emotional intensity, he had driven himself into a situation which rendered all genuine poetry impossible? Did he realize by the time he pulled the trigger that the express train he boarded in 1917 was hurtling in the wrong direction?" (Ehrlich 263).

The breaks that proved much more positive and productive for both poets were their formal innovations. These innovations involved radical rethinking of all poetic material: words, their connections to other words, and their placement on the page as semantic devices. Such breaks signal a new rela-

tionship between the poet and his material, informed by a sensibility of a visual artist. Both poets treated a word as a unit of meaning as well as a design piece. The visual aspects of the word expressed through its graphics and placement on a page are not extraneous to meaning, but an essential part of it. Grigorij Osipovic Vinokur describes Mayakovsky as a "language innovator" ("novator yazyka") who has introduced "something completely new into the store of possibilities of linguistic expression" ("nechto sovershenno novoie v obshchy zapas vozmozhnostei yazykovogo vyrazhenia" [8]). The same is true of Cummings. How did the two poets augment expressive possibilities of their respective languages? Several linguistic innovations including word-making, loosening of syntactic ties, line and orthography breaks are common to both and probably spring from a shared aesthetic commitment. Both poets are tireless word-makers. They created words by merging several stems into compounds ("shout-lipped," "puddle-wonderful," "mud-luscious") by moving the words between grammatical categories (a noun becomes a verb, an adjective becomes a noun), and by turning an abstract concept into countable nouns. Mayakovsky's word crafting aims typically at erasing "the line between abstract words from words that signify things, living creatures" ("granitsu, otdeliayushchuyu slova, otvlechyennyye ot slov, oboznachaiushchie veshchi, zhivyye sushchestva" [Vinokur 67]). He achieves it by the use of diminutive suffixes, changing regular conjugation, and personifying inanimate or abstract nouns. Cummings uses intentional misspellings and phonetic spellings, regionalisms, and colloquialisms to achieve similar results. Both poets practice the loosening of logical and linguistic ties between words in the sentence. Mayakovsky uses "an isolated Nominative Case" to set the image conveyed by that noun "apart from the rest of the text" ("tsenoi razobshchenia s ostal'nym tekstom") (Vinokur 82) and make it more dramatic as in: "Night. / You put on the fanciest dress" ("Noch.' / Nadevayete luchsheye platye") (qtd. in Vinokur 78). Loosening of syntactic ties and the use of associative logic in such poetry grant words more stylistic, graphic and semantic independence, turning them into "individual syntactic values" ("samostoyatel'nyie sintaksicheskie tsennosti" [Vinokur 82]), which would be hard to single out if words were tightly bound in grammatical constructions. This is particularly obvious in Russian, which by its nature demands more grammatical subordination than English. Nevertheless, Cummings achieves a similar effect in dissolving bonds between the words and even letters and playing them out as single notes carrying their own color, rhythm, and pitch. Mayakovsky's rhymes are also "structured on sound, not graphic similarity" which gives them "a phonetic transcription, inasmuch as it can be done by means of an approximate orthography" (Shklovsky 121). He justifies all his formal changes by the actual transformation of the way of being in a new society: "It is hopeless," Mayakovsky notes, "to shove the bursting thunder of the Revolution into a four-stress amphibrach, devised for its gentle sound!" (*Poemy i stikhotvoreniia* Russian 15). His play with roots of the words, prefixes, suffixes, declension, assonance, alliteration, and neologisms is reminiscent of the artist's experimentation with color, texture, shape, and brush strokes on the canvas. Both Mayakovsky and Cummings "conceive of the poem as a unified text to be read *and* seen, unfolding sequentially (at least in its essential narrative thread) even as it encompasses a multitude of spatial movements" (Cohen 160).

What separates Cummings from Mayakovsky is expressed in Cummings's complaint about the Futurist poets where he criticizes Futurists for "their posturing, their collectivist identity, and their categorical repudiation of the past" (Cummings qtd. in Cohen 158). All three attributes apply to Mayakovsky, who has been part of the Futurist movement. Important as these objections are, however, bombastic behavior, ideological fervor, and Shakespeare bashing reflect just the surface characteristics of the movement and the qualities that Mayakovsky could easily put on and take off. "Yet the Futurists' philosophy," Cohen observes, "if not their precise techniques, permeates Cummings's thinking in the desire to explode poetic structure, syntax, and typography so as to liberate maximum force and motion — goals for which he could fashion his own techniques" (160). Both poets, as ultimate makers, are working hard to release the energies of language (corked by fixed grammar and frozen syntax) in order to make their images signify. Mayakovsky's and Cummings's formal innovations look like clean breaks from tradition, without any precedent. On a deeper level, however, their linguistic sensibility, informed by visual thinking, could be seen as a return to the ancient conception of a word as an ideogram — a sign, which blends the visual and the verbal and bridges the gap between the signifier and the signified. Their kind of "linguistic creativity is *traditional* but not in the sense of direct borrowing from these or those close or remote cultural traditions, but in the sense that it serves as a con-



stant reminder of the origins of this linguistic culture" ("yazykovoye tvorchestvo *traditsionno*, no ne v smysle pryamoi preemstvennoi zavisimosti ot tekhn ili inykh blizhaishikh ili otdalyonnykh kul'turnykh traditsy, a v tom smysle, shto ono sluzhit kak by postoyannym napominaniyem iskhodnykh nachal dannoi slovesnoi kul'tury" [Vinokur 99]). These origins go back to when the meaning of a sign and its shape were closely linked. cummings's treatment of language likewise reminds one of going back to a time "when drawing was language" and when "the picture symbol was closer to its referent than the latter alphabetical symbol was to its referent." Both poet-painters try to create a form of multimedia collage that combines "physical presence and aesthetic worth" and does not require "a mental translation from symbol to referent" (Cohen 66). In the very act of breaking words and lines apart, cummings and Mayakovsky restore language to its original holism based on the fusion of the verbal and the visual, which got severed with time. This explains why their poetry is best experienced visually and orally, as speech and image, not text.

While making the new words and new worlds, Mayakovsky and cummings are also decisive breakers with everything stale, inauthentic, and false. They give a new shape to their poetic page and add to it visual and auditory dimensions. They attack and break away not only from poetic forms, but also bourgeois morality, empty verbiage, hypocrisy, and unjust political order. Extreme ideological alignment leads in the case of Mayakovsky to a snap in the self, from which he could not recover. In most of their formal and ideological breaks, however, both poets demonstrate a commitment to positive growth, to becoming, and to constructive experience of love and nature. On the rubble of old poetic forms innovative poetic experiences are created, as they invent neologisms and page designs expressive of new meanings. Their multimedia orientation urges them to hold on to the totality of emotional experience, which acquires texture and solidity impervious to fracture. The two poets are different in many ways. Yet, there are important elements in their poetics that provide crucial meeting points. They are makers and breakers at the same time. They make new poetic forms, record new experiences and generate new rhythms through merger of different art forms and sensibilities. As artists, they treat words as perceptible units of meaning that have a presence, a shape and a purchase upon the world. Not big fans of analytical dissection, they both engage in synthesis of the verbal, the visual, the auditory and the graphic material in their works. What they break – stale poetic lines, frozen idioms, confining word and world orders – they generally replace with innovative poetic forms, new content and a stream of original works that span several media. Their shared scorn of empty versification in the face of human plight is a testimony to their commitment to poetry as an active participant in human affairs, and not as a formal exercise. Multimedia orientation in the works of Mayakovsky and cummings create a potent antidote against the disintegration of meaning and image.

In the early twenty-first century we are entering a new period "of literary eclecticism and hybrid fictions," based on the development of digital technology that easily blends image, text, sound, and moving image and our own multimedia obsessions offer similar opportunities as they did to Mayakovsky and cummings to fight forces of postmodernist entropy (Grassian 2). The use of "pastiche, the slicing together of cultural elements from different times and places" seldom adds up to a coherent belief system and often results in "depthlessness, a self-aware superficiality ... rejection of metanarratives," one aspect of which is "a weakened sense of national history and destiny ... fragmentation ... the breakdown of connections" (Griswold 148). Fortunately, modernism provides us not only with deconstructive, but also with constructive models of poetic experimentation that digital art and literature of today could follow. Electronic writing today is another case of "a complete renegotiation of the alphabet/icon ratio," which may suggest a return of "the complex icon/word interaction of oral rhetoric" attempted in cummings', Mayakovsky's, Dadaist, and Futurist poetry of the early-twentieth century (Lanham 34). But whereas Dada and Futurist poempictures were about refocusing the reader on the forms and shapes of the word, asking them for nothing more than "a new act of attention" (Lanham 37), Mayakovsky and cummings suggested a possibility of looking both at and also through the word for deeper subjective and social meaning (Lanham 43). Perhaps the merger of media offers us an opportunity to deal with "a sense of exhaustion in philosophy, politics and the arts" and to try "to resolve this crisis of the spirit," which we are facing (Stephens xi). Such hybrid forms of writing, some critics believe, "should provide us with the tools – intellectual and artistic tools – needed to construct new, more resilient ways of looking at our lives" and of writing about them (Stephens xi).

Mayakovsky and cummings — different as their poetic and political sensibilities were — have both demonstrated that synesthesia is a promising tool to try.

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