Experiment and Tradition: Concrete Poetry, John Ashbery and Philip Larkin

THE CLIMATE FOR EXPERIMENT

Consciousness of the arbitrary nature of language, its essential conventionality (in the sense not of conformity, but of operating in accordance with tacitly agreed codes which have no naturally inherent laws) has become a major feature of twentieth-century poetry. It is almost, one is tempted to say, the defining feature of the modern, were it not that post-modern poetry is still more marked by it than classical modernism of the Pound–Eliot–Williams upheaval. By freeing poetry from the demands of consecutive syntax and claiming as its own the modern cinematic technique of juxtaposing images for primarily emotional/dramatic effect, modernism opened the way to further experiments in the breaking down of accepted assumptions governing verbal expression. Once the standard of 'correct', transparent English, whether spoken or, still more significantly, printed, was breached, it became possible to question the conventions of presentation which educated writers and readers had come to take as inviolable rules, and which are still treated as such in the language of scientific, journalistic and critical discourse. It became possible for transgression, or non-observance, of the rules to function on a positively sophisticated, rather than vulgarly negative, level – though this, of course, also presupposes general familiarity and conformity with them, since the abnormal effects of dispensing with them, or operating them in unfamiliar ways, depends on the existence of a strong feeling for them as the linguistic norm. An experimental poetry thus came into being which turned on its own consciousness of itself as an arbitrary construct of
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signs and symbols, in tension with an established linguistic practice seeing itself as the right and proper way of doing things.

e. e. cummings (1894–1962)

One of the most self-consciously ‘experimental’ of twentieth-century poets is the American, e. e. cummings. The printing of his name without capitals is indicative of one of his innovations: the purposefully irregular use of punctuation. Much modern poetry is very lightly punctuated, allowing a fluidity and open-endedness of construction which goes naturally with the rhythmical freedoms cultivated by poets like Williams and Olson. In contrast, cummings punctuates heavily, but in a disconcertingly original way. His mouse poem, ‘here’s a little mouse)and’, has a closing bracket towards the end of its first line, but no opening bracket – as if to suggest that, the beginning is not a beginning as such, but the interruption of some on-going process which the catching sight of a mouse itself interrupts. The frightened darting of the mouse, and the perceiver’s nervous uncertainty as to whether he has seen it or not, are enacted in verbs such as ‘jerks’ and ‘frisks’, but still more tellingly in the odd punctuation which fractures the normal run of the syntax (and even words themselves) into unexpected units, uses capitals and commas only for its own peculiar emphases, and inserts question marks and parentheses for essentially dramatic effect:

jerks Here &, here,
gr(oo)ving the room’s Silence)this like
a littlest
poem a
(with wee ears and see?
tail frisks)

(gonE)

The abnormal ‘E’ of ‘(gonE)’, which cannot be heard when the poem is spoken, any more than the enclosing brackets, is dramatic, but purely visual. It is part of a linguistic construct peculiar to the printed page. On the other hand, a poem like ‘ygUDuh’ is a sound poem – a dialect poem, based on a phonetic rendering of New York Bronx, comparable with Tom Leonard’s bizarre transcriptions of