

# A Stylistic Analysis of E. E. Cummings' Poem "in Just-" from the Perspective of Foregrounding

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**Abstract**—Edward Estlin Cummings stands as a pioneering and prominent figure among modern American experimental poets of the 20th century. His poetic oeuvre challenges conventional norms through innovative techniques such as word lacunae, line breaks, and omission of punctuation, thereby forging a distinctive stylistic imprint. This study endeavors to examine Cummings' utilization of deviation and parallelism to achieve foregrounding effects within the realm of stylistics, with a specific focus on appreciating the foregrounding attained in the poem "in Just-". The paper aims to facilitate a deeper comprehension of Cummings' poetry and to offer an enriched lens for interpreting poetry.

**Keywords**—stylistics, foregrounding theory, e. e. cummings

## I. INTRODUCTION

Edward Estlin Cummings was an American modernist poet, playwright, prose writer, and painter. He is best known for his unorthodox and avant-garde writing style in poems, as he used a lot of word gaps, line breaks, omission of punctuation, capitalization and lowercase that did not conform to writing norms of his time in his works. He even wrote his name in the lowercase-e. e. cummings. As noted by writer Eve Triem [1] in her work, Cummings was a smasher of the logicalities who used idiosyncratic typographic and stylistic devices diverging from traditional practice in his poetry and brought readers with different reading experience. Consequently, he is recognized as one of the prominent figures in the literary expression revolution of the 20th century. Many of his works dealt with themes of love and nature, as well as the relationship of the individual to the masses and to the world.

Foregrounding theory has a significant position in stylistics. It involves manipulating language features such as syntax, morphology, phonology, and semantics to draw attention to specific aspects of a text. Foregrounding is often applied to enhance the aesthetic appeal of a text or to convey deeper meanings and themes. It is a key analytical tool in literary and linguistic analysis, allowing scholars to explore how language choices contribute to the overall effect and interpretation of a text.

Because of Cummings' unconventional avant-garde poetic style, which challenges readers' reading habits and demands a fresh perspective to comprehend poetry, this paper seeks to analyze Cummings' representative work "in Just-" from the perspective of foregrounding in stylistics. This analysis seeks to assist readers in deepening their understanding of Cummings' poetry and offers a richer perspective for interpreting poetry. Examining poetry from the foregrounding perspective is beneficial as it helps readers identify and determine linguistic features that exhibit

foregrounding characteristics within the text. By exploring aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, phonology, orthography, and semantics, readers can uncover the author's aesthetic intentions and pragmatic effects. This approach integrates the distinctive features of poetic language with textual interpretation, leading to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the poem.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Foregrounding" is one of the significant concepts in stylistics, originally introduced from the field of painting art. It refers to the technique employed by artists to emphasize the foreground elements in a picture, making them stand out and capture the viewer's attention. The term, initially coined as "aktualisace" in Czech by Prague School linguist Jan Mukarovsky in his work "Standard Language and Poetic Language", was later translated into English as "foregrounding" by Paul L. Garvin [2].

Mukarovsky posits that foregrounding represents the opposite of automation, characterized by the de-automation of an act. From an objective standpoint, automation schematizes an event; conversely, foregrounding entails the violation of the schema [3]. Standard language in everyday contexts can be seen as the "background", while literary language is the intentional violation or deviation of the norm of the standard. Mukarovsky also noted that the purpose of foregrounding in poetry is to highlight linguistic acts themselves, aiming to achieve an aesthetic impact. Mukarovsky's theory of foregrounding primarily emphasizes the aspect of deviation in literary works, whereas in contrast, Jakobson of the Prague School places greater emphasis on another aspect of foregrounding, namely, parallelism. Parallelism refers to the repeated use of structures or sentence patterns in language, where these structures are similar or identical in grammar, syntax, or meaning, creating a sense of symmetry or parallel relationship. This type of parallel structure can occur within sentences, paragraphs, discourse units, or entire texts.

Leech synthesized deviation and parallelism, culminating in a comprehensive theory of foregrounding. He categorizes foregrounding into two types, syntagmatic foregrounding and paradigmatic foregrounding. Syntagmatic foregrounding repeats the same selected linguistic elements at different positions within the preceding organizational structure, while paradigmatic foregrounding involves the selection of a linguistic element that deviates from the normal range of available choices [4]. Thus, the two principles of foregrounding are unified into a comprehensive theory, where deviation occurs when authors select linguistic

elements beyond the normal range of the language system, while parallelism arises when authors repeat choices made previously.

The application of the foregrounding theory is mainly focused on translation studies. For example, Wang and Liu [5] conducted a foregrounding consistency analysis of the texture in English translation of Shizuo and Lun Yu. Feng and Dang [6] consider foregrounding language translation strategies in translations to be of significant value for evaluating the quality of translated works. Consequently, they conducted a foregrounding analysis of Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Ruined City*. Compared to translation studies, there has been relatively little research analyzing the linguistic features of poetry from the perspective of foregrounding. Therefore, this study attempts to analyze the linguistic characteristics of Cummings' poetry from a foregrounding perspective, aiming to enrich the perspective of poetry research.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

According to Leech [7], there are in total of eight types of deviation, including lexical deviation, grammatical deviation, phonological deviation, graphological deviation, semantic deviation, dialectical deviation, deviation of register and deviation of historical period. Lexical deviation occurs when authors introduce novel vocabulary or assign fresh meanings to existing words to achieve specific purposes and effects. Grammatical deviation encompasses breaches of morphology and syntax rules. Phonological deviation is primarily exemplified by conspicuous sound patterns like alliteration and consonance. Graphological deviation involves deliberately diverging from conventional graphical elements in writing, manipulating aspects such as letter and word size, spacing, or arrangement for visual impact. Semantic deviation refers to a departure from the typical or expected meaning of words or phrases within a language. Dialectical deviation entails using dialectal or regional language instead of standard language. Register deviation denotes a linguistic departure from expected norms within a particular context or social setting. Deviation of historical period refers to straying from typical linguistic patterns of a specific historical era or time period.

As stated by Leech [7], the significance of parallelism in poetic language is nearly comparable to that of deviation. Furthermore, he noted a distinction between parallelism and mechanical repetition, emphasizing that any instance of parallelism involves a combination of invariants and variables. In essence, every parallel pattern must include both elements of identity and elements of contrast.

Based on Leech's foregrounding theory, this paper will analyze the Cummings' representative work "in Just-" from both deviation and parallelism at different linguistic levels. Simultaneously, this paper will integrate the content and themes of the poem to analyze the role and effects of foregrounding techniques employed within the poetry, along with their implications for thematic representation.

### IV. ANALYSIS OF FOREGROUNDING IN "IN JUST-"

Of Cummings' large body of work, "in Just-" is one of the most famous poems. The earliest version of this poem, "In

just – Spring," which in many ways is simply a poetic schema of what was to follow, was written in 1916 when Cummings was still a student at Harvard University [8]. Later, this poem was included in the collection of poetry entitled *Tulips & Chimneys*, together with another 65 poems by Cummings. "in Just-" is a lyric poem with 24 lines in total contained within one stanza of text. It depicts an image that a group of children is playing happily in the wet mud in early spring. They see a crippled balloon seller coming towards them, which makes them feel more joyful. It can be simply interpreted as a child's narrative at the arrival of spring, as the nursery rhyme structure of the poem and many compound words indicative of children's language suggest that it is narrated by a child. This poem is representative of Cummings's non-traditional and free verse style. It does not follow traditional poetic rules: there are many spacings between lines that violate wiring norms; some words are elongated across the page while some are jammed together; some words do not follow the rules of uppercase and lowercase of English words; and there is also no punctuation between lines to connect them. From the perspective of foregrounding, this poem shows clear stylistic features of deviation and parallelism.

[in Just-]  
 [01] in Just-  
 [02] spring            when the world is mud-  
 [03] luscious the little  
 [04] lame balloonman  
  
 [05] whistles            far            and wee  
  
 [06] and eddieandbill come  
 [07] running from marbles and  
 [08] piracies and it's  
 [09] spring  
  
 [10] when the world is puddle-wonderful  
  
 [11] the queer  
 [12] old balloonman whistles  
 [13] far            and            wee  
 [14] and bettyandisbel come dancing  
  
 [15] from hop-scotch and jump-rope and  
  
 [16] it's  
 [17] spring  
 [18] and  
  
 [19]            the  
  
 [20]                    goat-footed  
  
 [21] balloonMan            whistles  
 [22] far  
 [23] and  
 [24] wee

#### A. *Lexical Deviation of "in Just-"*

Lexical deviation, characterized by the use of neologism,

allows a poet to surpass the conventional boundaries of language. This term, neologism, or the invention of new “words” (i.e., items of vocabulary) is “one of the more obvious ways in which a poet may exceed the normal resources of the language” [7]. Each year, a large number of new words are coined and integrated into our lexicon. In everyday usage, these neologisms often arise to meet new needs and describe new concepts or technologies. However, in literature, the motivation behind creating new words can be different. In order to achieve a certain novelty effect, there are a lot of new words created in literary works. But most of the new words in literature are created for a specific context and not for the actual needs of the public. Due to their specific and often unique contextual usage, they are less likely to be “borrowed” by others and are usually used only once. Therefore, we call them “nonce-formations,” meaning they are created “for a single occasion only, rather than as serious attempts to augment the English word stock for some new need [7].”

When the poem “in Just-” is analyzed in terms of its lexical level, it can be noted that it contains a lot of ‘nonce-formations’. “mud-luscious”, “balloonman”, “puddle-wonderful”, “hop-scotch”, “jump-rope” and “goat-footed” all belong to ‘nonce-formations’. According to Oxford English Dictionary, the word “mud” is a noun signifying ‘wet earth that is soft and sticky’; and the word “luscious” is an adjective meaning ‘soft and deep or heavy in a way that is pleasing to feel, look at or hear’. “Mud” is a physical object that can be seen visually, while “luscious” is an abstract feeling that can be felt by human beings. Here, these two words are combined as a new word, which connects figurative objects with abstract sensations, allowing the reader to engage both the visual and sensory imaginations as they read, and to feel the joy that the poem’s depiction of spring brings to children. Similarly, “puddle” is a noun meaning ‘a small amount of water or other liquid, especially rain, that has collected in one place on the ground’, while “wonderful” is an adjective signifying ‘very good, pleasant or enjoyable’. The combination of sight and feel allows us the reader to imagine the scene where children play in puddles after the rain, creating a relaxed and bright atmosphere. In this poem, the two words “hop-scotch” and “jump-rope” refer to two games children play, and “hop”, “scotch” and “jump” are all verbs, which add a sense of dynamism to the picture painted by the poem, making it more vivid and graphic. These new words, including the words “balloonman” and “goat-footed”, are reminiscent of ‘children’s language’ which is simple and unpretentious without losing the vivid and romantic and beautiful atmosphere [9].

#### *B. Grammatical Deviation of “in Just-”*

Grammatical deviation includes “surface structure” deviation and “deep structure” deviation. According to Leech [7], surface structure deviation is ‘superficial’, it is “not only in the technical sense, but also in the sense that they have no fundamental effect on the way in which a sentence is understood”; while deep structure deviation “can be treated as cases of mistaken selection”. Surface structure deviation can be the repeated use of a certain conventional grammatical form to an unconventional degree, or it can be the violation of grammatical rules [4].

Grammatical deviations of the poem “in Just-” are all surface structure deviations. Firstly, sentences in this poem are basically complete and follow the grammatical rules. However, the first line “in Just-spring” should be “just in spring” according to grammatical rules. Cummings violates the rule and changes the regular grammatical order, making the word “just” more prominent, thus emphasizes that the scene depicted in poetry can only be seen in spring and shows the poet’s love for the beautiful spring which is full of vitality. Secondly, a repeated use of a certain conventional grammatical form is also a surface structure deviation. In this poem, the conjunction “and” is obviously used a lot more than it usually is. The conjunction “and” appears 12 times in this poem and serves as a grammatical link between sentences and words. It connects the sights, sounds, and people in the poem into a complete picture: after the rain, spring looked vibrant and the children played games and danced together while in the distance a limping balloon seller was whistling and walking towards the children and then slowly walking away. Moreover, on a grammatical level, the use of “and” is a very simple and basic way to connect. It is also reminiscent of “children’s language” because children think and speak simply. The repeated use of “and” also brings the reader into the picture of innocence and beauty that the poet paints from the children’s perspective, so that they can better feel the emotions that the poet wants to convey.

#### *C. Semantic Deviation of “in Just-”*

Semantic deviation is the most common type of deviation in poetic language. Just as W. B. Yeats thought that an irrational element was present in all great poetry. The “irrational element” here refers to semantic deviation [4]. Besides, “in poetry, transference or meaning, or metaphor in its widest sense, is the process whereby literal absurdity leads the mind to comprehension on a figurative plane” [7]. In other words, both transference and metaphor are semantic deviations in a broad sense.

In line 20 and 21 of “in Just-”, there is a metaphor. In the word “balloonMan”, the letter “M” is capitalized and the poet uses “goat-footed” to modify it, implying that the balloonMan is the god Pan. In Greek mythology, Pan is a fertility deity who was generally represented as a vigorous and lustful figure having the horns, legs and ears of a goat. He was the god of wild groves, shepherds and flocks so people often associate him with spring. Thus, the whistle mentioned several times in the poem is in fact the sound of a musical instrument representing the god Pan, a siren or pan flute. The sound of this flute represents both the identity of its owner and the message of spring [10].

#### *D. Graphological Deviation of “in Just-”*

There are two types of graphological deviations, one refers to a written form that represents strangeness of pronunciation, and the other refers to deviations in typography, punctuation, printing and so on [7]. Cummings is well known for his use of orthographic deviation as he discards capital letters and punctuation where convention calls for them and he jumbles words and uses parentheses eccentrically, etc. This characteristic of Cummings is well reflected in this poem.

The typography of this poem has outstanding features. Firstly, if we look closely at the layout of this poem, we can see that many lines of the poem are not finished before the

line is changed. The first line of the poem throws out an incomplete sentence, with “in Just-” followed by no indication of the object it refers to, then in the second line the word “mud-luscious” is split. In the third line the object modified by “mud-luscious” and “little” is also not written out but stated at the beginning of the fourth line. If we read on, we will find that almost every line has suspense at the end of the sentence, driving us reader to read on and on to get the answer. Secondly, the word “spring” appears three times in the poem, and each time it is written at the beginning of each line. “Spring” is the time depicted in the poem, and its placement at the beginning of each line emphasizes it. It also suggests that “spring” is the beginning of the seasons, the beginning of everything, so it is full of new hope. Finally, the irregular empty lines and cross-line variations of sentences and words, which is the most prominent feature of this poem’s typography. In line 6 and line 14, the poet adopts the same approach, writing the names of the children together with the word “and” in the middle without spaces, which graphically shows the intimacy of the children holding hands and dancing as well as playing. The most obvious is the change in distance between the three words “far and wee” which appear three times in this poem. The first occurrence of “far and wee” is in line 5, where “far and wee” and “whistles” are in the same line, and the interval between “far” and “and wee” is large, emphasizing the whistle is “far” from the children. The second occurrence is in line 13, where “far and wee” are listed on a separate line, but the distance between “far” and “wee” is significantly shorter, suggesting that the balloonman is closer to the children. The last appearance is in lines 22–24, where each of the three words occupies a separate line and is further apart, suggesting that the balloonman is moving on after selling the balloons and is getting farther and farther away from the children. What’s more, the three words listing on separate lines help readers to create a visual sense of seeing the balloonman moving farther and farther from the children. The use of word gaps and line breaks here creates a dynamic sense of audio-visual integration, making it more vivid through typography, showing how the whistle’s volume changes and the change of distance between the balloonman and the children.

The punctuation and the use of letter cases in this poem are also very noteworthy. Except for the hyphen after “in Just-” in the first line, the poem is not punctuated but connected by the conjunction “and”, which makes the poem very coherent. The hyphen in the first line also highlights “spring”, the time that the poet wants to emphasize. There are four unconventional uses of letter cases in this poem. The first is “Just” in the first line, whose initial capitalization emphasizes that the scene depicted in the poem can only happen in spring. Another capitalization is “balloonMan” in line 21, where the capitalized “M” implies that “balloonMan” refers to the god Pan. In addition, the names “eddie”, “bill”, “betty” and “isbel” are all lowercase, implying that the people here refer to children.

#### *E. Parallelism of “in Just-”*

Parallelism in foregrounding theory is not exactly the same as parallelism in rhetoric, but has a broader meaning, meaning that two or more structures are “parallel” to each other, that is, there is some similarity between them, not

necessarily repetition, which includes symmetry, parallelism, repetition and prose, and its level can also be reflected in various aspects of phonology, vocabulary and grammar [4].

In this poem, parallelism can be easily found. The sentence patterns in lines 2 to 9 are similar to those in lines 10 to 17. But there are differences in the use of words in both places as well as in the typography, as I have analyzed in the previous sections, showing the changes in distance, sound, and vision. Similarly, “the little lame balloonman whistles far and wee” appears three times, but “little lame” is replaced by “queer old” and “goat-footed” in the second and third time. They form a parallel, but the change in adjective modifying “balloonman”, the change in letter case, and the change in typography allow for a change in the specific content of the poem, as well as a progressive change in semantics - from balloonman to the god Pan. In addition, there are many repetitions of words in the poem: the repetition of “spring” emphasizes the theme of the poem; the repetition of “balloonman”, “whistle”, “far and wee”, etc., puts the whole poem in a sound and picture scene, which is vivid and makes the poem coherent and unified as a whole.

#### V. CONCLUSION

This paper undertakes an analysis of Cummings’ poem “in Just-” through the lens of foregrounding within the framework of stylistic theory. The examination elucidates that Cummings primarily achieves foregrounding effects through deviation, particularly graphological deviation, among the two means of deviation and parallelism. By employing deviations and parallelism, Cummings imbues a brief poem with vitality and intrigue, inviting readers to interpret the deviations and parallelism in diverse ways and construct their individual understandings. Cummings boldly challenges conventional norms, forging his unique poetic style and thereby endowing his poems with distinctiveness.

The unconventional techniques employed in Cummings’ poetry hold significant importance for deepening the understanding and realization of foregrounding in poetry. Through the application of foregrounding theory to Cummings’ poetry, we not only gain a better grasp of his unique artistic expression but also expand the field of poetry research. This analytical approach not only aids in further comprehending the artistic features and connotations inherent in poetry itself but also serves as a valuable reference for constructing a more comprehensive and profound mode of poetic analysis. By studying the non-traditional techniques employed in Cummings’ poetry, we discover a wealth of possibilities within poetic creation, offering insights and directions for future poetic composition and research. Therefore, the foregrounding analysis of the unconventional techniques in Cummings’ poetry holds not only aesthetic significance but also expands the perspectives and approaches in poetry studies.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yiyi Xie made the main work including analyzing the poem and paper writing; Zhang Yi provided many good

suggestions and helped to revise the paper; both authors had approved the final version.

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