A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination. This is all that can save poetry from sing-song, all that can save prose from itself.

—Robert Frost, Foreword to *A Way Out*

CHAPTER THREE  

voice

If the poet’s vision determines in general the kinds of poems he writes, then it is the kinds of poems he writes that determine the styles he uses.

R. P. Blackmur has complained that Cummings’ language is frequently unintelligible because he disregards the historical accumulation of meaning inherent in words in favor of merely private and personal
associations. But the words a poet puts into the mouth of his persona, and their peculiar combinations, are governed by what he wants us to think and feel about this speaker and what he wants his speaker to accomplish dramatically and rhetorically, whether he is alone and reflecting, with his lady and persuading, or instructing the reader. He does this by providing us with various clues as to the nature and occasion of the speaker's utterance, while at the same time creating a linguistic structure in which one word acts upon another in such a way as to modify and delimit mutually the meanings that it is possible to discover in the poem. The principle here is indeed intelligibility, or appropriateness, or, when liberally interpreted, what used to be called decorum. A certain kind of vocabulary in a certain set of circumstances produces what may be called a tone of voice. Our sense of this tone will be conditioned by what we normally expect to hear in such a situation in relation to what we actually do hear. Mockery, in a serious situation, will result in more than mockery; earnestness, in a comic situation, will be more than earnestness. Intelligibility, then, is an individual matter with each poem and cannot be decided in advance merely by reference to a theory of the history of language.

With Cummings, particularly, this is a complex matter, for nothing is more characteristic of his style than its range and variety. He makes fun of what he praises, and mocks what he reveres; he is seriously funny, comically serious, and classically romantic. He can use obscenities in a love poem and archaisms in a topical satire; he can mix concrete adjectives with abstract nouns and see colors in terms of sounds. Thus I shall call his general stylistic quality "mixed." Although the mixed style is characteristic of much modern poetry, what is impressive is the particular nature of Cummings' mixture and the special way he handles it.

The components of this mixture—whether appearing alone or in combination—range, reading from right to left on the linguistic spectrum, from "formal" or "archaic," to "neutral," to "mock" or "burlesque." These three modes and their various mixtures constitute an instrument of great dramatic and rhetorical precision which Cummings
has forged to characterize the subtlety and variety of his speaker's attitudes and responses. Since there appears to be almost no limit to what his speaker can say in a given situation—he may talk out of the side of his mouth, or sing, or speak grandiloquently, or combine various voices—this verbal freedom is his chief pitfall. But here, as elsewhere, Cummings' freedom transcends danger—or rather lives on danger—and comes out finally as discipline.

I shall take up, to begin with, the characteristics of these components in their relatively "pure" states, and then conclude by examining how Cummings mixes them.

At the center of Cummings' style is a vocabulary of a certain sort, and this is what I have termed his "neutral mode." Briefly, it may be defined as a modified romantic style, which is romantic because of the quality and quantity of certain "sweet," "soft," "warm," and "moist" words, such as delicious and exquisite, and modified because of the frequent intrusion of antipathetic or "plain," "hard," "cool," and "dry" words, such as exact and stern. And, because such juxtaposition allows Cummings either to intensify or modify certain traditional associations of certain traditional words, it is this flexible neutral mode that allows him to meet the demands of intelligibility by suiting the history of language, on the one hand, to the needs of the individual poem, on the other.

Taking a hint from the notes of T. E. Hulme and other similar twentieth-century critical writings, we may identify a sweet, soft, warm, and moist vocabulary as that which is traditionally associated with romantic poetry. Its physical qualities are fluidity, mellifluousness, and musicality; its semantic qualities are spirituality, lack of concreteness, and imprecision; and its referents are either subtle or violent inner states. In its extremes it becomes dull, cloudy, and verbose—everything our early twentieth-century poets and critics thought they saw in the Victorians and which they spurned.

A plain, hard, cool, and dry vocabulary, on the other hand, is traditionally associated with "classical" or metaphysical poetry. Its physical qualities are flatness, sharpness, and prosiness; its semantic qualities are
materiality, concreteness, and precision; and its referents are personal restraint and social discipline. Its virtues are clarity, wit, and compression, or everything Hulme and others wanted to re-establish in our poetic tradition.

Now let us observe the behavior of these vocabularies as they are combined by Cummings:

one's not half two. It's two are halves of one:
which halves reintegrating, shall occur
no death and any quantity, but than
all numerable mosts the actual more

minds ignorant of stern miraculous
this every truth—beware of heartless them
(given the scalpel, they dissect a kiss;
or, sold the reason, they undream a dream)

one is the song which fiends and angels sing:
all, murdering lies by mortals told make two.
Let liars wilt, repaying life they're loaned;
we (by a gift called dying born) must grow

deep in dark least ourselves remembering
love only rides his year.

All lose, whole find (XVI: 398)

Here the speaker warns his lady to avoid those who substitute quantitative for qualitative values, and instructs her in the truths of a love that involves transcendence of the merely temporal and mundane. Surely this is a romantic subject and situation, and the poem is correspondingly replete with such romantic words as "miraculous," "kiss," "dream," "angels," "deep," "dark," and "love." But notice how the vague and subjective are tempered in the direction of the precise and public by the correlative presence of such classical or metaphysical words as "reintegrating," "stern," "dissect," "repaying," "loaned," and "fiends."
The point is that such a love as this speaker advocates, although it places lovers beyond good and evil as we know such things in the unworld of materiality, is not easily achieved nor does it come to those
who merely relax into a sensual swoon. It is a love achieved only through the discipline of surrender: “All lose, whole find.”

These are the values defining the thought and character of the speaker of this poem and this is the situation and the language through which such values are defined. The special quality of this language is the peculiar clash of vocabularies which trims the uncut edges from traditionally romantic words and their chains of association. There is no egoistic self-indulgence here, no wailing after the moon, no private baby-talk babbling of obscure sensations, no willful distortions of language out of pure love of thrills and mischief. Cummings’ love may be “miraculous,” but it is also “stern.” He uses tradition, but in his own unique way; for, although such words as “miraculous” are historically associated with romantic love, and although he uses them quite intelligibly in that same connection, such words as “reintegrate” are not so associated. Thus he merges into one co-operative adventure the demands of the language and the needs of the poem.

If there is any obscurity in this poem, it is easily dissolved once the reader understands Cummings’ habit of transforming other parts of speech into nouns. Such a grammatical shift alters the forms but not the meanings of words: “but than/ all numerable mosts the actual more” is simply a distinctive way of saying that love’s quality has comparatively more value than any superlative quantity.

This clash of vocabularies is the central fact of Cummings’ style with which we must come to grips if we are to understand his use of language. We may say that this style originates in what he calls “carnalized metaphysics; or, abstractions raised to the power of the concrete” (quoted from a letter to the present writer, referring to the devices of personification). His vision of life, although transcendental, begins in an early and never-failing sensuous delight in the physical world, both urban and rural. It is the social world, the world of manmade anxieties and routines, that he transcends and not, as is sometimes believed, the physical or cultural worlds. Not death but the fear of death is what he scorns, and not the living cultural tradition but the sterile convention.

His adjectives, of which there are a large number and variety indeed,
are equally cosmic and material, vague and specific, ideal and real, referring as often to concepts as to physical qualities. "Immortal," "il-limitable," and "unimaginable" are just as characteristic as "silent," "bright," and "thick." For Cummings, the natural world pulsates at certain moments with a supernatural vibrancy, and these moments are at once the symbols of and the gateway to the transcendent world. In this manner the sensationalist becomes the mystic, and this is the language that results.

There is a similar combination of abstract and concrete in his choice of nouns. Cummings is a poet with a serious vision of life, rather than the anti-intellectual sensationalist he is still being taken for. What is especially characteristic, regarding his use of abstract nouns, is his wholesale transformation of other parts of speech into nouns. These are often paired to denote conceptual opposites or contrasts, for Cummings' world, as we know by now, is divided into a heaven—the dream world of faith and fulfillment—and a hell—the unworld of fear and automatism—which together form the basis for an intelligible and philosophical set of moral values. Thus the meanings embodied in such words as "now" vs. "never" or "here" vs. "where," although coming to us with a unique and personal flavor as the result of a grammatical shift, are nevertheless perfectly comprehensible as expressions of the philosophy of life that Cummings espouses, which is transcendental, romantic, prelapsarian, organicist, and individualistic. The same is publicly available in the writings of many others, such as Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, and Emily Dickinson. We may wish to take issue with such a view but we cannot attack it as obscure.

Regarding Cummings' more conventionally handled abstract nouns, which refer, sometimes metonymically, to man's faculties and their products, we may note that "dream," particularly, epitomizes his concept of the transcendental world. "Memory" is the common avenue down which the reflecting and observing persona walks, and "heart" and "soul," though often set in romantic opposition to "mind," are not always merely the favored pair, since he frequently ridicules his automatons for lacking mind as well:
he does not have to feel because he thinks
(the thoughts of others, be it understood)
he does not have to think because he knows
(that anything is bad which you think good)

when Souls are outlawed, Hearts are sick,
Hearts being sick, Minds nothing can

Without a heart the animal
is very very kind
so kind it wouldn't like a soul
and couldn't use a mind

Or again, such cosmic nouns as “mystery,” “doom,” and “splendor” represent attempts at expressing the inexpressable and are essential parts of the mystic’s vocabulary for describing the ineffable and transcendent sphere of spiritual fulfillment central to Cummings’ conceptual world. So, too, are words denoting emotions such as “hope,” “fear,” and “ecstasy.” These appear often in pairs, either by way of contrast or by way of encompassing fearlessly a set of extremes. Nouns referring to qualities are used either synaesthetically or to denote abstractions: we encounter in Cummings’ poetry the “colors” of a smile, the “gesture” of a brain, the “music” of a sunset, or the “silence” of a voice rather more frequently than in the verse of other poets.

Although he writes many descriptive poems, Cummings was never an imagist; nor does he make a fetish of avoiding adjectives. Neither is he wary of adverbs, of which by far the largest number denotes manner. Whether dealing with perceptual movement, mental or emotional movement, an abstract-concrete mixture of the two, or a paradoxical combination of opposites, his continuing concern with the way in which things happen or are done is reflected by such words as “gently,” “cleverly,” and “spontaneously,” which partially accounts for the strong effect of motion one gets as he reads the poetry. Adverbs denoting degree mirror a concern with quantity, which is also a strong character-
istic of Cummings' language. Such adverbs give an impression of definiteness mixed with a tentative quality, which produces a hovering, paradoxical, and delicate effect, as in "wholly and probably" or "impossibly and utterly." This seems entirely appropriate in view of his sensationalist-transcendentalist values. Adverbs of speed such as "abruptly" and "gradually" confirm the sense of motion noted above, as do those of physical quality such as "silently" and "crisply." Words denoting sound, taste, touch, and sight are fairly prominent, while words denoting smell seem uncommon. The mystic's vocabulary is augmented by adverbs of time, which usually denote timelessness, such as "continually" and "perpetually."

Regarding the matter of growth and decline, the gradual disappearance of such words as "frailly," "utterly," delicately," and "sweetly" indicates a certain amount of pruning, of cutting down on some of the more flagrantly saccharine romantic elements. Nor can we lament the disappearance of such nouns as "sweetness," "fragility," "rapture," and "ecstasy," or of such adjectives as "fragile," "fraile," "pale," "golden," "slim," and "smooth." As in other aspects of Cummings' art and thought, there has been, if not a sudden change, a gradual tightening of his style.

His chief distinction in the use of verbs is a penchant for clusters of homophonic words denoting either sound or movement—"swoop," "hurl," "wriggle," "twitch." The cumulative effect of the frequent use of such words, expressing as they do violence of motion and gesture and sound, is one of distortion and stress, especially since they are often used either synaesthetically in connection with nonhuman phenomena to produce an impression of vivid and even startling personification—as when a sunset "chatters," for example—or in connection with people and human actions to produce an impression of disgust, comedy, pity, horror, and outrage—as when a girl's sex "squeaks" like a billiard cue. Most of these verbs serve to counterbalance the softness already noted as characteristic of a large portion of his vocabulary.

Cummings' neutral vocabulary, regarded as a whole, then, is not any one thing. Although such words as "bright," "mystery," "wholly," and
“float” loom large, there are an almost equal number of such words as “brittle,” “brain,” “abruptly,” and “bang” to produce a contrapuntal effect. This juxtaposition and strain mark his neutral style, so that the speaker’s tone is rarely entirely serious or sarcastic or joking or reverential in any one poem but is rather, even when most “neutral,” shifting and changing:

whose are these(wraith a clinging with a wraith)
ghosts drowning in supreme thunder?ours
(over you reels and me a moon;beneath,
bombed the by ocean earth bigly shudders)
never was death so alive:chaos so(hark
—that screech of space)absolute(my soul
tastes If as some world of a spark
’s gulped by illimitable hell)

and never have breathed such miracle murdered we
whom cannot kill more mostful to arrive
each(futuring snowily which sprints for the
crumb of our Now)twiceuponatime wave—

put out your eyes,and touch the black skin
of an angel named imagination

This is a poem of persuasion in which the speaker is represented as instructing his lady in the symbolic values of the booming of the surf below and the glowing of the moon overhead at night, emblems of Death and Time, and of the dream world, respectively. He tells her that, by virtue of the power of the creative imagination (moon) and although apparently swallowed up and destroyed by the encroaching waves, they transcend the powers of Death and Time and become immortal because they are there in experience “now” and surrendering to it. Notice the occurrence of such characteristically soft words as “wraith,” “supreme,” “shudders,” “illimitable,” “miracle,” and “imagination,” as well as that of such typically hard words as “bombed,”
"screech," "gulped," and "sprints." This poem exemplifies a relatively "pure" instance of Cummings' neutral style, while at the same time embodying a relatively serious tone and situation. It is clear that this language is called into being by the peculiar dramatic necessities of the situation informing this poem as well as by the general qualities of Cummings' vision. The speaker, as usual, talks in the character of an artist, and is thus concerned with both the concreteness of the scene and with its meaning; his lady is both an object of devotion calling forth his comments and a person of deep perception sharing his moment of transcendence; and the doctrine he expounds to her, being based upon the paradox of victory through surrender, and combining as it does the clash of opposites (alive death, absolute chaos, screech of space, breath-miracle-murdered-kill, and so on), requires naturally the use of so flexible and various a stylistic instrument.

Also exemplified here is a characteristic phraseology which marks Cummings' style throughout, especially in his last three volumes: "more mostful to arrive each." Such comparative and superlative adjectives as "least," "most," and "more," "less," and such pronouns of quantity as "each," "all," "every," "some," "any," "only," "merely," and "much" (frequently related or compounded with such pronouns of time, number, and space, as "when," "thing," and "where"), and the various combinations thereof, account for an effect of constant choosing, preferring, discriminating, of overtopping the best and the worst, and of the transcendence of extremes. In the poem cited above, for example, the phrase in question modifies "wave," and the implication is that, although each wave batters the shore with more than utmost violence, froths impetuously, is succeeded by the next wave, and grasps for the fixed present of the lovers in an effort to undermine it by the moving flux of the future, the lovers will survive such a threat through the office of the poetic imagination.

The effect is frequently one of conceptual intensification, as in "his least unmotion roams the youngest star" (11: 435), or in "more much than all" and "one small/ most of a rose" (10: 434), or in "swim so now million many worlds in each/ least less than particle of perfect dark"
VOICE

(5: 431), where the smallest or the largest becomes even smaller or larger to emphasize Cummings' transcendentalism. Such intensification becomes, ultimately, the mutual blending of extremes wherein the lesser absorbs the greater, which is one chief kind of paradox or reconciliation of opposites that Cummings practices:

life is more true than reason will deceive
(more secret or than madness did reveal)
deeper is life than lose:higher than have
—but beauty is more each than living's all

.(here less than nothing's more than everything)
deadh,as men call him,ends what they call men
—but beauty is more now than dying's when

(LII: 421)

An exact illustration of how to say "beauty outlasts the grave" in a fresh and original manner, this poem exemplifies, as well, Cummings' habit of reversing what are to him the inverted values of most people by means of a characteristically individual way of phrasing comparatives and superlatives.

II / Varying to the right of this norm produces a purely serious, archaic, reverential, and formal style, while varying to the left creates a purely vulgar, violent, burlesque, and mock style; and, it is clear, each of these extremes has its special utility for glorifying and ridiculing, respectively. Since praise and satire are two of Cummings' most commonly used forms, accounting between them for at least 40 per cent of his work as a whole, we are likely to meet each of these extremes frequently.

Cummings has shown greater interest in the burlesque than in the archaic style. Although the latter plays a large part in his first volume, Tulips and Chimneys (1922), he used it much more sparingly in all his subsequent volumes. Perhaps this is because Tulips and Chim-
nevs is chiefly "literary" and derivative, but the fact remains that he will still use such a style when the occasion arises. And which of our modern poets has dared to be so reactionary? Most poets writing today would feel embarrassed to use the archaic style seriously, yet Cummings does it:

we thank thee
god
almighty for dying

(forgive us, o life! the sin of Death (6: 432)

Take the softer elements of Cummings' neutral mode, and combine them with outmoded forms, such as "thou," "thy," "hath," and you have his most serious formal style, of which the following is an early example:

Thy fingers make early flowers of all things.
thy hair mostly the hours love:
a smoothness which sings, saying
(though love be a day)
do not fear, we will go amaying.

(III: 11)

And here is a late example:

what of the wonder
(beingest growingest)
over all under
all hate all fear
—all perfectly dyingest
my and foreverless
thy?

why our
is love and neverless

(L: 420)

There is a distinction to be made between late and early archaic, largely on the basis of the developing recurrence of his conceptual idiom. Such words as "beingest," "growingest," "over," "under," "dyingest," "for-
everless,” and “neverless” give the latter poem a maturity and a weight of personal conviction that are almost entirely absent from the former poem because it is so much more secondhand.

The former poem was grouped as a “Song” in *Tulips and Chimneys*, and an Elizabethan melodiousness, a quality that Cummings has always excelled in producing, even more in his later work than in his youth, is an effect of his poetry that we would do well to examine as an aspect of his formal style. For archaisms, tending as they do to suit praise and glorification and a reverential and prayerful tone, and so frequently associated with art-song and hymn, carry with them an aura of melody that is intensified by their resemblance to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry which was often written for or set to music. Many of Cummings’ poems have actually been given a musical setting and performed publicly at concerts. Furthermore, the poem of praise also tends to create an effect of song, and this is a form that Cummings shares with the Elizabethans and that he handles more frequently than most modern poets, many of whom are cultivating a deliberately prosaic style. Then, too, Cummings frequently organizes the sequence of his poems on a repetitive and parallelistic basis, a trait that reflects the influence of such lyrics as Campion’s “Cherry-Ripe” and Carew’s “Ask Me No More,” both, incidentally, poems of praise. Take for example the following, which is also a poem of praise:

if everything happens that can’t be done
(and anything’s righter
than books
could plan)
the stupidest teacher will almost guess
(with a run
skip
around we go yes)
there’s nothing as something as one

one hasn’t a why or because or although
(and buds know better)
than books
don't grow)
one's anything old being everything new
(with a what
which
around we come who)
one's everyanything so

so world is a leaf so tree is a bough
(and birds sing sweeter
than books
tell how)
so here is away and so your is a my
(with a down
up
around again fly)
forever was never till now

now i love you and you love me
(and books are shuter
than books
can be)
and deep in the high that does nothing but fall
(with a shout
each
around we go all)
there's somebody calling who's we

we're anything brighter than even the sun
(we're everything greater
than books
might mean)
we're everyanything more than believe
(with a spin
leap
alive we're alive)
we're wonderful one times one

(LIV: 422–23)
Here every stanza not only matches every other as far as the disposition of stresses, line lengths, and rhymes is concerned, but also in terms of the way in which each phrase or syntactical unit of each stanza is balanced by a similar phrase or unit in a similar position in every other stanza. This device in written and spoken poetry is analogous to the way in which each separate verse of a song is sung to the same melody and tends to produce, therefore, a similar "lyrical" effect. Cummings' essays are also often characterized by an elaborately balanced prose style. Combine, then, a purity of formal tone and style with a joyful subject, such as the celebration of love, and a delicately varying yet strictly sustained system of repetition and balance, and you have a poetic song, a "lyric" in the true sense of the word. It is this type of poem that, to my mind, represents one of Cummings' major contributions to modern English and American poetry.

III / Cummings' burlesque style, at the other extreme, is more virile—a different matter entirely. If he is unashamed of being openly reverential, he is equally unhesitant about being downright sarcastic. His burlesque style is a rich mixture of elements, of which the commentators have discussed only his New Yorkese vulgarisms. Some have been embarrassed by this aspect of Cummings' style, and have decided that it is Park Avenue trying to talk like the Bowery, "slumming in morals along with he-men and lady social workers." But there is much more to it than that.

The New Yorkese element did not enter his work until is 5 (1926):

... "I'll tell duh woild; some noive all right. Aint much on looks but how dat baby ached." (II: 165)

This, it is essential to remember, is "Mame" speaking, a whore who has just returned from having her tooth pulled; and a reading of the whole poem reveals that its speaker or narrator (Mame's visitor) uses standard English:
she puts down the handmirror. “Look at” arranging before me a mellifluous idiot grin

Cummings is interested in giving a dramatic impression of one of the creatures of his demimonde by allowing her to speak in her own language. The effect is one of comic pathos, achieved in the contrast between the bravado of the diction on the one hand and the wretched circumstances of the character on the other. A similar effect is found in another poem:

```
oil tel duh woil doi sez
dooyuh unnurs tanmih eesez pullih nizmus tash,oi
dough un giv uh shid oi sez. Tom
oidoughwuntuh doot,butoiguttuh
braikyooz,datswut eesez tuhmih. . . .
```

(II: 224)

A more comically ludicrous effect is produced, however, in the following:

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in dem daze kid Christmas
meant sumpn youse knows wot
i refers ter Satter Nailyuh . . .
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(VIII: 172)

Or in this sample:

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buncha hardboil guys frum duh A.C. fulla
hooch kiddin eachudder bout duh clap an
talkin big how dey could kill
sixereight cops— . . .
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(XXIII: 239)

We see that it all depends upon who is talking and what he is saying. So far such phonetically spelled gutter-talk has been used either to arouse pity or laughter, or both. But there are more serious uses, as in the Hemingway satire (26: 294) or in “ygUDuh” (VII: 393), where ridicule and hatred are aroused by the use of New Yorkers. In rare instances the persona himself speaks that way, as in the following where he describes distastefully the efforts of modern parents to disabuse their children of the “psychotic myth” of Santa Claus, and then turns to all
real people, "all joybegotten whelps," who still believe in such myths, "like Jonah And The Whale," and says:

:oiwun uhsoi roitee runow dutmoi
jak roids wid yooze

Vury Sin Silly
:oi

(15: 288)

Much of this diction resembles the speech of Herriman's Krazy Kat; as we know, Cummings wrote an introduction to a collection of that cartoonist's work. This argot permits the formation of various comic puns, like "Sin Silly," for example. The whole statement can be transliterated as "I want to say right here and now that my jack rides with you—Very Sincerely, I." If the people and attitudes he is satirizing are proper and au courant, he emphasizes the distinction between them and others like himself who are more old-fashioned by speaking the language of the gutter modified by the locutions of a love-crazy cat of ambiguous gender who speaks like a gentle New York Jewish fruit peddler.

Since is 5 (1926) Cummings has tended to use New Yorkese less frequently, but he has continued the device of phonetic rendering of other dialects, even in his latest work:

He
no
care
so
what
yoo-ginta-doo? . . .

(20: 440)

or

hooz
gwine ter
hate
dad hurt
fool wurl no gal no
boy
(day simbully loves id) . . .

(33: 373)
And in these cases it is crucial to note that both speakers, a foreign-born ice-coal-wood man and a Negro guitarist, are presented through the medium of their own speech as specimens of decent, if humble, human beings.

Colloquialisms, of the kind used in this early Buffalo Bill poem, have always been a part of Cummings' style:

Jesus

he was a handsome man

and what I want to know is

how do you like your blueeyed boy
Mister Death

(VIII: 50)

This late World War II poem is similar:

can't you see now no not
any christ but you
must understand
why because
i am
dead

(40: 451)

The conversational voice, almost as characteristic of Cummings as the singing voice, may be used by his own persona, as in the first example cited above, or by some other speaker entirely, as in the second example.

Nor are slang expressions and vulgarities alien to such an informal tone: "absolutely posolutely dead" (III: 59); "wouldn't that/ get yer goat" (V: 88); "she got the info/ from a broad that knew Eddie in Topeka" (XVI: 113); "waiting for the bulls to pull his joint" (XX: 114); "both all hopped/ up" (IX: 229). Rough diction has always been considered as decorum for satirical poems, even by the strictest of classical critics; and it is largely for the purposes of comedy and ridicule that Cummings has either his own persona or other assorted speakers talk in this way.

Although he has not gone so far as to print, without distorting their normal spelling (cf. IV: 86-87; II: 224; XXX: 244; and 54: 314), the
familiar four-letter words referring to digestive and sexual functions, he is not above using an occasional obscenity in an appropriate place, or even building an entire poem around one, as in:

the way to hump a cow is not
to get yourself a stool
but draw a line around the spot
and call it beautifool

This poem is spoken by an old-time political hack telling an aspirant the secrets of successful electioneering, and the fruits of wisdom he has garnered from experience are cynical—

to vote for me(all decent mem
and wonens will allows
which if they don't to hell with them)
is hows to hump a cows

Such a style seems to me entirely appropriate to a situation involving such a hateful person. The poem is perhaps even more complicated by the fact that the satire hovers ambiguously between attacking the gullible electorate, on the one hand, and the cynical politician who thinks they are gullible, on the other. The target is the politician and those who are gullible, for it is clear from the last stanza quoted above, first, that it is a politician who speaks, and second, that some voters do not fall for his line.

A fifth element of Cummings' burlesque style, the obverse of the use of New Yorkese and vulgarisms, is constituted of the mock-archaic, mock-formal or Latinate language, periphrases, and hyperbolic prefixes. Cummings frequently uses high-flown language ironically and sarcastically with devastating effect: “yonder deadfromtheneckup graduate” (V: 170); “wherefore yon mob” (XVI: 176); “One wondrous fine sonofabitch” (XXV: 181); “a dozen staunch and leal/ citizens” (XXVIII: 184); “ponder,darling,these busted statues/ of yon moth-eaten forum” (XXX: 186); “the season ’tis, my lovely lambs” (I: 191); “yon clean upstanding well dressed boy” (VIII: 195); “‘Gay’ is the
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captivating cognomen of a Young Woman” (XVIII: 236); “lye/galleon/wilts” (6: 282); “o pr/gress verily thou art m/mentous superf/lossal/hyperpr/digious” (9: 284); “Life,dost Thou contain a marvel than/this death named Smith less strange?” (23: 293); “ye twang of little joe(yankee)gould irketh sundry” (27: 294); “all history oped her teeming womb” (XII: 395); “the/ great pink/superme/diocri/ty of/a hyperhypocritical D/mocra/c” (37: 449–50). These examples show the opposite side of the coin of his true archaic and formal style, and illustrate perfectly the wide range of his speaking voice.

A sixth and somewhat similar stylistic device is the parody, mock-literary allusion, or comical pun. In the second chapter I have remarked upon the ways in which Browning, Kipling, Longfellow, and other great poets are pressed into service, and may now note, in addition, Cummings’ continuing habit of burlesquing patriotic songs and slogans, advertising claims, and political clichés:

take it from me kiddo
believe me
my country, ’tis of

you, land of the Cluett
Shirt Boston Garter and Spearmint
Girl With The Wrigley Eyes(of you
land of the Arrow Ide
and Earl &
Wilson
Collars) of you i

sing:land of Abraham Lincoln and Lydia E. Pinkham,
land above all of Just Add Hot Water And Serve—
from every B. V. D.

let freedom ring

amen. . . .

(II: 167)

This is a satire of the dead language that symbolizes a dead culture in general and patriotic, commercial, and artistic clichés in particular; and
the technique consists in repeating, with slight twists, in the context of
the persona's own angry voice ("I do however protest," "I would/ sug­
gest"), the actual words and phrases that typify the linguistic abuse that
is itself under attack. This is an early, well-known example; the follow­
ing illustrates a later and somewhat different use of parody:

red-rag and pink-flag
blackshirt and brown
strut-mince and stink-brag
have all come to town

some like it shot
and some like it hung
and some like it in the twot
nine months young

Not only do we find some startling vulgarisms here, but we also notice
how the deadly effect of this satire on Communism-Fascism-Nazism
is intensified tenfold by the clearly recognizable allusions to the nursery
rhymes, "Hark, Hark, the Dogs Do Bark" in the first stanza and "Pease
Porridge Hot" in the second. Whereas in the first poem cited Cum­
mings used the very language of those he would lampoon, in this one
he alludes to an opposite sort of thing altogether—a world of joy and
innocence—from what he would satirize—a world of hate and misery—
thereby emphasizing the effect by a subtle contrast rather than by
exaggeration and the reductio ad absurdum method. Cummings is also
frequently fond of punning on the names of famous people—"Robin­
son Jefferson," "Injustice Taughed," "Wouldwoe Washington" (XIII:
232–33); "Amy Sandburg," "Algernon Carl Swinburned" (IV: 170)—
as well as official titles—"THE UNCOMMONWEALTH OF HUMANUSETTS"
(XVII: 236)—and reversed homonyms—"wrongers who write what
they are dine to live" (XXVI: 242).

IV / The three styles described so far have been theoretically pure
types—neutral, formal, and burlesque; but there is a fourth mode which
exists anywhere along the spectrum from one extreme, through neutral, to the other; and this I have called "mixed." Nowhere is Cum­
mings' versatility so clearly in evidence as in his many poems containing
a compound of voices and tones. Even his neutral mode, as we have
seen, is "neutral" only in his special manner.

Let us bracket our target by citing an early poem illustrating this
style, and then a late one:

dead is more than
certain a hundred these
sounds crowds odours it
is in a hurry
beyond that any this
taxi smile or angle we do

not sell and buy
things so necessary as
is death and unlike shirts
neckties trousers
we cannot wear it out

no sir which is why
granted who discovered
America ether the movies
may claim general importance

to me to you nothing is
what particularly
matters hence in a

little sunlight and less
moonlight ourselves against the worms

hate laugh shimmy

(IX: 172-73)

Notice the mixture of voices and the shifts in tone: the first two stanzas
are serious enough in tone and neutral enough in style, except for the
gradually developing effect of incongruity that results from his peculiar
choice of analogies—for example, "death is more in a hurry than any
taxi.” Beginning with the third stanza the speaker begins to slip into a colloquial and mock-formal style—“no sir which is why,” “granted . . . may claim general importance.” Somewhere between the fourth and fifth stanzas his tone becomes most serious—“sunlight,” “moonlight,” “worms”; and at the end, with the progression “hate laugh shimmy,” he engages in one final reversal back to a colloquial and vulgar tone. And why? Surely his subject is serious, the most serious a poet can choose. The speaker is stating a proposition: Death is certain, in a hurry, necessary, durable, and important; therefore we, as opposed to the citizens of the unworld who pin their faith upon transitory things, live out our lives against the permanent backdrop of a belief in death. He is talking to people of imagination, then, and uses a neutral, a colloquial, and then a vulgar tone by way of emphasizing the increasing seriousness of his meaning, by contrast and by way of symbolizing a humorous readiness to believe in the reality of death. For the speaker and his audience are not frightened by such a thought.

Consider the following as a late example of the mixed mode:

no time ago
or else a life
walking in the dark
i met christ

jesus)my heart
flopped over
and lay still
while he passed(as

close as i’m to you
yes closer
made of nothing
except loneliness

Again a very serious subject, and again the speaker’s tone modulates through several variations. He opens seriously, except for the slight and delicate hint of a fairy-tale beginning (compare “anyone lived in a pretty how town,” 29: 370–71)—“no time ago” suggests “a long time
ago there lived . . . . " The tone becomes even more serious in the second line because of the allusion in the first—"or else a life." The first half of the second stanza, because of the way in which Christ's name is spaced, opens colloquially—"jesus! my heart," and continues in the same manner with "flopped over." The second half of the second stanza is neutral enough; and the pattern is repeated once again in the third and last stanza—colloquial in "close as i'm to you/ yes closer"—and neutral in "made of nothing/ except loneliness." The speaker narrates an emotional experience he had, and the whole effect is of an intensely serious, yet naively personal and humble, reaction to a vision of God's presence on earth. By means of such a delicately responsive stylistic instrument, Cummings naturally avoids pomposity and inflated holiness. His treatment of Christianity is Unitarian, as the following Christmas poem amply demonstrates:

(and i imagine
never mind Joe agreeably cheerfully remarked when
surrounded by fat stupid animals
the jewess shrieked
the messiah tumbled successfully into the world
the animals continued eating. And i imagine she, and
heard them slobber and
in the darkness)

stood sharp angels with faces like Jim Europe  (XII: 174)

If the meanings of poetic language emerge from a co-operative interplay between the demands of linguistic history and the needs of the individual poem, and if Cummings' poetic language is built upon such dramatic interaction, then it may be claimed that his poetry, far from being obscure, is public and intelligible while at the same time unique and individual. Cummings' poetry, in stemming from a complex but comprehensible sensationalist-transcendentalist philosophy of life, makes use of a mixture of the sweet and the plain styles, which modifies their historical associations to suit the needs of a special poetic temperament as well as the formal demands of any given poetic context.
I do not conclude, however, that a poet can make anything he wants out of language, but rather that he can select, from out of the variety of meanings with which historical association has clothed a word, those that he deems suitable to the dramatic needs of his poem. Thus we have examined as the chief general characteristic of Cummings' style the ways in which his use of romantic words is modified and limited in certain dramatic contexts by a strong influx of unromantic words, even of vulgarisms, with the result that the traditional vocabulary, while retaining its historical character, will never be quite the same again. And that sort of linguistic transformation is a true poet's work.