

AND: overtone

Michael Webster

In her article in *Spring 19* on the erotic sonnets of Cummings' third book of poems, & [AND], Gillian Huang-Tiller discusses a note about the book's curious title that Cummings sent to his printer and typesetter, S. A. Jacobs. Cummings writes:

title of my book: & + AND
contents: Post Impressions A
 Portraits
 & (4 poems = 8 pages (5th poem = 2 pages) N
 Sonnets Realities
 " Actualities D

explanation of title: the overtone is basis of my poetry
 the & is basis of overtone
 this book is basis of my books

note: the word "AND" = a formula for overtone. Thus:

A N D
Tulips + Chimneys
N = + (&,and)

(qtd. in Huang-Tiller 112)¹

Huang-Tiller points out that the *OED* defines "overtone" in its musical sense as "an upper partial tone; a harmonic." Figuratively, the term implies "a subtle or elusive implication or association; a connotation." Then she comments on what the term means for Cummings:

Cummings' "overtone" evidently suggests all of the above: a higher frequency, intimation, and a harmonized tone, hinting at a division or discord that precedes it. As & [AND] connotes an overtone that is sexual in orientation, I believe that this volume intimates an imagining of the book's body re-joining the two literally repressed and censored bodies of *Tulips and* [&] *Chimneys*. In some ways, the graphic title "&" almost connotes what Cristina Garrigós terms "sexuality," to suggest sexual relationships between literary texts. (113)

Cummings' diagram implies that the two halves of *Tulips & Chimneys* are joined by an ampersand, which is the "overtone" of all Cummings' books.

And not only these two halves are joined. As Etienne Terblanche noted in an e-mail to me, Cummings “says ‘overtone’ AND ‘basis’: the two opposites of high and low, joy and foundation, conscious and unconscious, somehow reside there.” The ampersand that was omitted when the truncated version of *Tulips & Chimneys* was first published in 1923 also represents the omitted texts, the “overtone,” now restored in the book *AND*.

However, the poems in the ampersand middle section of & [AND] are more literally “ands”—additional poems not part of the original *Tulips & Chimneys* manuscript. And the final line-up of the section contains seven poems, rather than the five that Cummings mentions in his note to Jacobs. These poems are: “i will be”; “i’ll tell you a dream”; “Spring is like a perhaps hand”; “Who/threw the silver dollar up into the tree?”; “gee i like to think of dead”; “(one!)”; and “who knows if the moon’s” (CP 195-202).

These “&” section poems are additional in the sense that they are not sonnets or “Impressions” or “Post Impressions” or “Portraits” etc.—they are “&” poems. In spite of being in the ampersand section, *none* of these poems contains an ampersand, though six of them do feature quite a few spelled-out “ands.” (Note, for example, the “and” at the end of lines 8, 13, and 18 in “Spring is like a perhaps hand.” Also, “and” rhymes with the “perhaps hand,” which is an image of the overtone of spring.) The one poem that does not contain an “and” is poem VI, “(one!)” (CP 201). Possibly this poem has no “ands” because, as Lou Rus pointed out long ago, the three sentences of the poem are grammatically linked to one another, while the poem as a whole may be read from the end back to the beginning in looping fashion—the drunkard “passes . . . the wisti-twisti-barber / -pole.” The poem is about oneness, not addition.

Paging through the early parts of the *Complete Poems*, I have been unable to find a single ampersand in *Tulips & Chimneys* or & [AND]. However, Cummings does place a question mark and an exclamation point on lines of their own towards the end of “the skinny voice” (CP 72). The first “&” I spotted appears in the first line of “MEMORABILIA” (CP 254), poem XXVII of *is* 5. And despite the appearance of an exclamation point on a line of its own in “it’s jolly” (CP 268), the next ampersand that I have found appears in poem VI of *ViVa* --“but mr can you maybe listen there’s” (CP 316). An ampersand with a line of its own also appears in “ohld song” (CP 336). So far, I have found no ampersands in any of Cummings’ sonnets.

At the bottom of Cummings’ note are three hand-drawn ampersands,

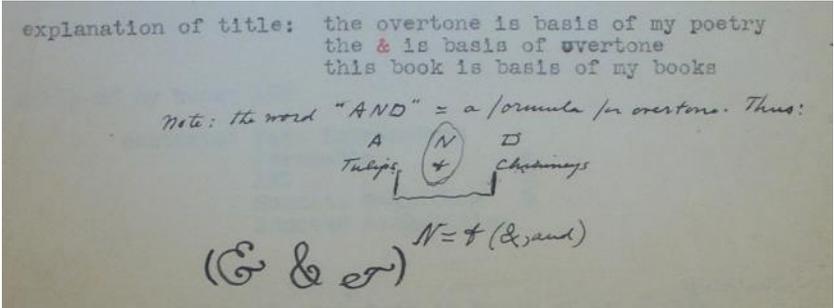


Figure 1: E. E. Cummings’ note on the title of & [AND]

which could be seen as depicting an “E” and “e”—and perhaps a cursive “c,” indicating “Edward,” “estlin,” and “Cummings.” The three ampersands at the end may also stand for “Tulips & Chimneys,” three of the overtones in Cummings’ poetry. In addition, the large lower section of the first big Greek “E” ampersand resembles a capital C—for Cummings, of course. If this interpretation is correct, then the ampersand of the title becomes a sort of logogram of his initials. The actual cover of & [AND] resembles most the first hand-drawn ampersand (fig.2).

I am not sure what to make of the tildes [~] in the first and third hand-drawn ampersands except to say that maybe Cummings echoes the S-curve of the treble clef on the musical staff. Or maybe it is an overtone of the treble clef. Or maybe the tildes are the two lips [tulips] that utter the poems. Plus, the third hand-drawn ampersand looks like the French “et.” In addition, the “N” in “AND” is another sort of ampersand: in colloquial American English, one may say “rock ’n’ roll” or “tulips ’n’ chimneys.” The overtone is an added suggestion, an “and”—as when William Carlos Williams says of poetry [discussing a truncated version of Cummings’ “(im)c-a-t

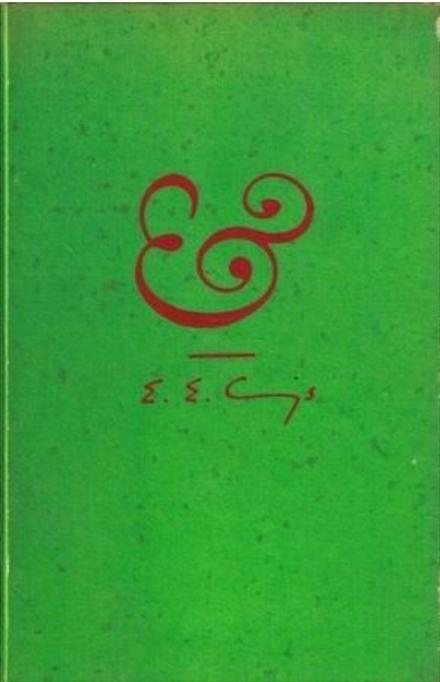


Figure 2: Cover of & [AND] (1925)

(mo)"] in the interview quoted at the end of *Paterson* V.II: "In poetry, you're listening to two things...you're listening to the sense, the common sense of what it says. But it says more. That is the difficulty" (222).

This "overtone" way of viewing the ampersand might alter the way we read poems with this sign. For example, how might we re-interpret the line "&&&" in "(im)c-a-t(mo)" (CP 655)? Sometimes the "more" or "overtone" added by the ampersand might also be encoded in "normal" words that contain an "n." For example, read down the first letters of the second-to-last stanza of "fl" (CP 488) below:

fl
a
tt
ene
d d
reaml
essn
esse
s wa
it
sp
i
t) (t
he
s
e
f
ooli
sh sh
apes
cc ocoucougcoughcoughi
ng with me
n more o
n than in the
m

The men in this poem are probably “flattened” homeless men, standing on their shadows and waiting for a soup kitchen to open. The “foolish shapes” are their shadows, iconically depicted in the many lines that double the letter shapes. The three “n” shapes that begin each line of the second-to-last stanza might be said to depict three upright “flattened” men and their shadows. These “n” shapes are followed by the single “m” of the last letter of the poem. This “m” can be seen as a double “n”—or perhaps as an “and” with a shadow or overtone.²

—Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI
websterm@gvsu.edu

Notes

1. Papers of E. E. Cummings, circa 1917-62, in the Clifton Waller Barrett Library, #6246, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va. Thanks are due to Gillian Huang-Tiller for bringing this manuscript to my attention.
2. For further discussion of this poem, see Terblanche and Webster, pp. 168-171.

Works Cited

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