



e. e. cummings

(1894-1962)

Chanson Innocent (1923)

In Just-  
 spring            when the world is mud-  
 luscious the little  
 lame balloonman

whistles            far            and wee  
 and eddieand bill come  
 running from marbles and  
 piracies and it's  
 spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer  
 old balloonman whistles  
 far            and            wee  
 and bettyand isabel come dancing  
 from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's  
 spring

and  
 the  
 goat-footed

balloonMan        whistles  
 far  
 and  
 wee

### ANALYSIS

This little poem, typical of the joyful cummings, is one in a series of “Chansons Innocentes” in *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923). The title “Chanson Innocent” may be translated as innocent song or song of innocence, bringing to mind the mystical poet William Blake’s “Songs of Innocence” and “Songs of Experience” (1794). Cummings combines innocence with experience in one poem, expressing through poetic form both the innocent perspective of a child and the holistic vision of the poet.

At a glance the typography conveys the spontaneous unconventionality and free expression of a child—pastoral values. The opening line “in Just-” begins without the conventional capital letter, evoking the “continuous present” sought by Gertrude Stein and enjoyed by children. The words “in Just” together sound like “injust,” suggesting injustice. The word “Just” by itself modifies “spring” as the next line of the poem, striking a note of irony: The poem celebrates Spring yet mutes its significance (1) by calling it “Just” in the sense of merely; and (2) by not capitalizing spring. The unconventional capitalizing of the second word in the opening line rather than the first word increases the emphasis on “Just,” introducing justice as a theme in the poem.

The hyphen unites “Just-” to “spring” at the beginning of the second line, which is the inspiration and the general subject of the poem. The word “spring” is uncapitalized yet emphasized even more by (1) placement in the second line and (2) by the long space between it and the rest of the line, which conveys a heavy pause in deep appreciation of spring, as if the poet is inhaling it like Whitman throughout the first half of “Song of Myself” (1855). Such a long pause gives the first mention of “spring” a tone of gratification, awe, even reverence. “Just-spring” implicitly affirms Nature as a transcendent order that is “Just” in a larger context than human morality.

At the same time, however, Nature is “in Just,” or unjust, as illustrated by the handicap of the old balloonman. Since the season is only one sense of the word *spring*, and since the word is not capitalized, the sense of the word is not specific. Hence “spring” may also be understood as a verb, an understated exhortation—a version of the old theme “seize the day”—applicable especially to children at play among puddles and “dancing from hop-scotch and jump-rope.” The girls especially are engaged in games that require springing. Adult readers are urged to spring into life with all our hearts like children do, but with an awareness of the “mud” at the end of the line. Adult awareness is solicited by the unconventionality and the ambiguities of the first three words of the poem, which require using your head. In cummings there is usually a tension between the spontaneous experience of a poem and the subtle implications in it that must be figured out: “since feeling is first / who pays any attention / to the syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you.” Kiss now, think later. Without the qualifying irony in “Chanson Innocent,” that is the Romantic morality of sentiments that got Hester Prynne into trouble.

Grammatically, in the next lines “mud-” modifies “luscious,” but the emphasis from the line break makes luscious modify mud. This inversion sustains the tone of irony. The line break conveys a sense of value not apparent in mud alone. The hyphen redeems some mud in life by affirming it as “luscious” from the perspective of a child, or of an adult with an inner child. We may transcend conventional stock responses and literal reality through imagination, as in games and balloons and art that uplift the spirit. Almost half a century after cummings wrote his poem, after it rained on the Woodstock Festival the hippie-

of-ceremonies on stage, Wavy Gravy of the New Mexico Hog Farm Commune, tried to cheer up the soaked and stinking multitude by proclaiming like cummings that “mud is part of heaven too, man.” In response they turned the hillside down to the stage into a long mud slide and played in the rain.

The phrase “luscious the little” introduces the thematic counterpoint to the children, an adult in the form of the balloonman. Since he is little and lame he is immediately sympathetic and apparently unthreatening. Holding a bouquet of balloons makes him a pastoral figure, apparently in a park or garden of a City. His balloons are in the Sky, connecting him with the archetypal space of transcendence. His whistles “far and wee” suggest that he can be heard from afar, transcending the local. The rhythm in the rest of the stanza is a rush of “eddieandbill” as they come running together, the typography indicating their oneness at play even when competing. The only word in the last line of the stanza, “spring,” attains an even greater emphasis here through repetition--a tone of ecstasy. The next line, isolated as a stanza, is like the afterglow of an orgasm, “when the world is puddle-wonderful.”

But then the first word of the next stanza pops out like a snake in the Garden—“the queer.” At that time, the word *queer* did not mean homosexual, it meant strange, a bit sinister and vaguely ominous. That is a subjective perception. Literally, he is *not* a child molester, though he brings that to mind because he represents mankind in general. He enhances the innocence of the children with balloons and moves on. Nevertheless, he is no longer purely a pastoral figure. He has become suspicious. We do not know him. He is old and “queer” and whistling like a Pied Piper, calling the children to him. The long gaps between words here effectively evoke the long duration of his whistles, as if they go on forever, as if what he represents is eternal and “wee” are we, forever drawn to what he brings. The typography here conveys our emotional, irrational, spontaneous mood as we look up at the balloons in the Sky that are so appealing we barely see the balloonman. The boys come running first, reversing the biblical order of Eve then Adam looking up at the apples on the Tree of Knowledge.

The boys and girls play separately, but they come together in the spring, attracted by the siren whistle of the balloonman. Natural differences between the genders are further defined by the different games they play and by their movement: boys running, girls dancing. The balloons lift their eyes and hearts. They are trying to rise into the Sky. They have a buoyancy of spirit, for as long as they might last. The rhythm of the poem rushes forward until it gasps into a climax beyond words, represented by the space between stanzas, followed by a rhythm of gratification: And “it’s / spring.”

The decrescendo from this bliss is a series of single words that descend in stairsteps into the image “goat-footed.” This is the traditional literary reference to Pan from Greek mythology, half man and half goat, a creature of the Wilderness who seduces with the music of his flute. This modern avatar of Pan and the Pied Piper seduces with toys. The goat is traditionally associated with brutish Nature and also with lust and Satan, the flute with the divine. In this poem the “balloonMan” is the human race or Man, both divine and brutish, good and evil. We are lame, small and insignificant—“wee.” Man is goat-footed by nature, which inhibits our advancement, but we also have ideals--we are part balloon. The most significant insight in the poem is the psychological link between Wilderness and the Sky.

The sparing use of capital letters gives force to the few. In this case capitalizing the syllable *Man* turns the poem into an allegory. The modern balloonMan lives by advertising, by seducing with his whistle and selling things that are pretty and fun. He is analogous to the serpent offering apples in the Garden, except that the apple represented knowledge, whereas the balloon is just entertainment. Also unlike an apple, a balloon is artificial and inflated. It provides no nourishment and will eventually explode. These balloons are not very high in the Sky, they are tied down and held back. They are like materialistic ideals. Balloons are fun but cummings would rather spring than pay to get jerked around on a string.

Boys and girls play competitive games, the boys including “piracies.” Normally it takes more than two to play jump-rope. Why did the other girl or girls not come dancing? What if one or more of the children have no money to buy a balloon? Will eddieandbillandbettyandisabel ever be so close again? Will the balloons bust up their games? We are given spaces to fill in ourselves rather than answers. Cummings maintains the childlike upbeat tone of the poem by omitting what happens when the children reach the

balloonMan. In the end of the poem, the vertical descent of the last three single-word lines ending in “wee” implies a resulting diminution of the balloonMan, perhaps to extinction.

Michael Hollister (2015)