E. E. Cummings

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"Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing to be so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them" [Rilke]. In my proud and humble opinion, those two sentences are worth all the soi-disant criticism of the arts which has ever existed or will ever exist.

—E. E. Cummings, *i: six nonlectures*

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**INTRODUCTION**

**criticism**

Every age is an age of transition, but today in poetry we are witnessing an especially poignant transition: the giants of modern poetry, those who gave it its unique character and who by now are being taught in the classroom as if their works were already classics, are nearing the end of their careers. Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Frost, Williams, Cummings—they are still, with the exception of Stevens, alive among us (in 1959) and producing important work. But they are in their sixties, seventies, and eighties. Already it seems to many of us that our middle-aged poets
—Auden, Spender, Roethke, Shapiro, Lowell, and others—were only yesterday our younger poets. And with some surprise we realize that our really younger poets—such as Wilbur, Coxe, Hall, and Wright—have established firm positions and are themselves not only teaching but also being taught in the classroom. What makes this transition especially poignant is not simply the inevitable sequence of generations; it is more significantly that there is such a difference, for better or for worse, between the older and the younger poets. This difference—and it is a big one—is basically the result of our new poets’ not having to go it alone. Today, the rising poet is not only likely to have an academic post, he is also an heir of the modern mode which has by now become his tradition. We are witnessing the passing of our great generation of innovators and experimentalists.

Cummings undoubtedly has a high place among them. He has never been without a strong reputation, and in the last decade alone he has been showered with honors. In 1950 he received the Fellowship of the Academy of American Poets; in 1952–1953 he was appointed to the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship at Harvard; in 1954 a complete collected edition of his poetry was published; in 1955 he received a special citation for that collection from the National Book Awards; in 1957 he won the Boston Fine Arts Festival Poetry Award; and in that same year he was awarded the Bollingen Prize in Poetry. The year 1958 was an annus mirabilis, witnessing the publication of no fewer than six Cummings volumes: a translation of a selection of his poems into German; another into Italian; a reprint of Eimi in paperback form; a collection of his fugitive prose pieces; a biography; and a new book of poems. And I understand that there are in preparation a full-length bibliography and a collection of essays on his work by various hands. Further, Cummings is in constant demand for poetry readings, and invariably attracts large and enthusiastic audiences.

It is clear, then, that Cummings has earned a stature that calls for a full-scale assessment of his poetry as a whole. Yet it is curious that
he has less frequently had the sort of concentrated critical attention that his noted contemporaries have had. There are books on Eliot, Pound, Auden, Stevens, Frost, Thomas, Williams, Jeffers, and others, but none—except Charles Norman's recent biography—on Cummings. It is true that many well-known writers—Pound, Dos Passos, Williams, Franklinberg, Graves, Marianne Moore, Spencer, Auden, W. T. Scott, J. P. Bishop, Gregory and Zaturenska, for example—have always thought very highly of him; and it is true that many younger critics—S. V. Baum, George Haines IV, Rudolph Von Abele, David Burns, for example—have written of his work with perception and enthusiasm. The fact remains, however, that many of our most influential critics—Blackmur, Ransom, Wilson, Honig, Jarrell, Untermeyer, Matthiessen, G. S. Fraser, Kazin, and Bogan—have not known quite what to make of him.

There are several reasons for this division in appreciation, and chief among them, I believe, is that some of our reigning critics are bound by certain limiting conceptions as to what poetry should be and that these conceptions do not happen to apply very comfortably to Cummings. To look in his work for the signs of a tragic vision, for an ambivalence of structure, for a studied use of verbal ambiguity, for the display of a metaphysical wit, for the employment of mythic fragments, for the climax of a spiritual conversion—this is to look for things which are simply not there. And to complain, accordingly, that he lacks maturity of vision, variety of forms, intelligibility of diction, true seriousness, a sense of artistic purpose, and development is to misconstrue the nature both of critical principles and of Cummings' poetry. To assume, on the one hand, that such conceptions cover the entire range of excellence in lyric poetry is to rule out—as has already happened in the case of some of the most famed poets in the history of English literature—much that is of genuine value when seen in the light of other principles; while to apply, on the other hand, such conceptions to poetry which they do not fit is to distort the true nature of that poetry. This has happened to Cummings. Paradoxically, however, many of the critics who have been unable intellectually to assent to his work have nevertheless confessed
to a certain furtive delight which it brings them. Although they like
the poetry, that is, they have difficulty in taking it seriously.

It is the purpose of this book, then, to attempt a more complete and
accurate definition of just what it is that Cummings can do, and on
that basis to suggest how his very real accomplishment may be viewed
in a more adequate light. I hope to do so in terms of a criticism that
will bridge the gap between heart and head—a gap found in so many
of his interpreters. To feel delight and yet to be persuaded of the in­
significance of its causes is not the proper state of mind in which to
approach the poetry of Cummings—or of any other poet. Indeed, it is
the right of any poet to be evaluated in terms of what he does rather
than in terms of what he should do, and it is the duty of his critic to
allow the work to flower before him in terms of its own inner neces­
sities rather than in those of his own favored prescriptions. I suppose
that there are standards external to the poet against which he is ulti­
mately to be judged, but surely the critic must be careful that these
standards are capable of including the wide variety of things that we
may cherish rather than merely what a given fashion has taught us to
care for.

If Cummings does not have a tragic vision, he does have another type
of vision, which is sufficiently serious to serve as the basis of a significant
lyric poetry—if not of tragic drama or fiction—and it should be judged
accordingly. Similarly, if it be granted that poetry has other ends than
the embodiment of symbolic tensions, then the variety of Cummings’
forms will appear; if it be realized that a poet can and usually does im­
pose a form upon the language he uses, then it will be seen that his
language is not unintelligible; if it be admitted that technical devices
can have other uses than that of reconciling opposites, then it will be
clear that his experiments do serve legitimate artistic ends; if his more
than forty years of dedication to his art be considered, then the claim
that Cummings is a haphazard workman will be confounded; and if
his poetry be read attentively from beginning to end, then it will be
obvious that it does reveal a steady development toward maturity.
II / In order to define the nature of Cummings' poetry, and consequently to suggest how it may be evaluated, I shall search out its sources in his view of life, analyze its varieties, and inquire into its methods. Thus I intend to trace the why of his work, then the what, and finally the how.

An inquiry such as this into a group of poems by a given author begins with the mind of the poet. For it takes a man with certain qualities of imagination and sensibility to write not only poems (rather than something else) but poems of certain kinds. What he does and how he does it, that is, are given shape by the force and direction of his inner necessities; what he can conceive of determines what and how he will write, or not write. By this I do not mean that we shall be concerned with the poet's biography or philosophy or psychology, but simply with such qualities of his artistic imagination and sensibility as may be inferred from the character of the person he has invented to speak his poems, the attitudes and ideas he has attributed to him, and the kinds of subjects he has chosen to elicit a response in that speaker. Accordingly, in the first chapter, I try to focus the entire study in terms of Cummings' own values.

It is the response of the speaker, whether dramatic or rhetorical, to the various sorts of situations in which Cummings has placed him, that defines the shape of the poem, and since his response is determined by his character, thought, and the various subjects which compel his attention, it follows in Chapter Two that I endeavor to outline the nature and variety of the different kinds of poems Cummings writes as a result of his having a certain sort of vision.

In Chapter Three, I attempt to analyze the various languages with which this speaker is endowed in order to express these responses, and to evaluate the use of these languages as appropriate to and consistent with his nature and temperament, and the situations in which he finds himself. Similarly, in Chapter Four, I seek to analyze the special techniques used in connection with the speaker's languages, and to evaluate their use as vivifying and intensifying devices.
In Chapter Five, as a demonstration in a particular case of all that has gone before as well as of the workings of Cummings' constructive powers, I trace the growth, through its manuscript variants, of a recent poem.

In the Conclusion I discuss separately the question of Cummings' development; and finally, in the Postscript, I review his latest volume, 95 Poems.