

E. E. CUMMINGS

(1894—1962)

E. E. Cummings, whose first volume of poems, *Tulips and Chimneys*, appeared in 1923, remained a controversial but always prominent poet. Cummings produced a large volume of quite individualistic lyrics and exercised an exciting and probably a lasting influence on readers and on other poets. He was a moralist with an almost pagan dedication to the free expression of nature, both in the forms and the language of his art, and in human patterns of behavior. His joyful exploitation of the animal instincts, his love of untrammelled youth, his unabashed employment of the sexual experience—including the comic—and his insistence on the passionate character of genuine love, were so ingeniously and earnestly managed that they appeared free from offense or salaciousness if not even a step in advance of predictable changes in social attitudes. Also liberating was the dextrous novelty of his versification. Although more partial to traditional forms and meters than most twentieth-century experimental poets, he often employed an accentual measure of great flexibility, freed from the traditional bondage of syllable-counting. Like both Pound and Sandburg before him, he experimented with the "rhythm of the phrase" characteristic of our ancestral English, which Walt Whitman rediscovered and for which William Carlos Williams at last found the name—"the variable foot." Like these predecessors also, he employed in many lyrics a line broken by the cadence of the phrases, thus heightening and distributing the emphasis and reducing the dependence on end-rhyme to the advantage of the melody of the verse as a whole. These efforts were assisted in many of his poems, particularly the earlier ones, by a fondness for typographical experimentation that betrayed a concern for design not surprising in a poet who was also a profes-

sional painter. In the later poems the experimentation tended less to the graphic and more to a playful disregard of the normal rules of syntax.

Edward Estlin Cummings was born on October 14, 1894, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His father, then a member of the English department at Harvard, later served as pastor of the famous Old South Church in Boston, from 1905 to 1926. Cummings was graduated from Harvard in 1915 and remained to take his M.A. in 1916. In World War I, he enlisted in the Norton Harjes Ambulance Corps and was sent to France for active duty. A censor's mistake produced an uncomfortable comedy of errors which led to his spending three months in a French detention camp, charged with treasonable correspondence. This experience provided the material for *The Enormous Room* (1922), one of the memorable literary records of that war. Upon his release he at once volunteered for service in the United States Army. After the war, Cummings went to Paris for training in painting, to which he devoted himself professionally, first in Paris and later in New York.

The experimental nature of Cummings's poems is evident first in their mechanics—in the reduction of capital letters, purposeful underpunctuation, and the dissociation of phrases from logical relationships. More essential is his use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. His words or phrases may be symbolic objects representing the simultaneous presence in the mind of meaningful but illogical associations. Finally, his subjects or intended effects often involved allegedly "forbidden" areas of the mind or human behavior, or the language of violent or vulgar experience.

At his best he was an exquisite lyricist. In his love poems and poems of nature he

conveyed an intense passion in forms of controlled beauty and propriety. He was a master of satire, armed with sparkling wit, or, when necessary, the heavy club of irony and invective, as in his attacks on advertisers, Babbitts, and super-patriots. And in those of his poems not consciously raucous for satirical effect, he united great melodic power with verbal precision and clarity.

Complete Poems, 1904-1962, 1989, supersedes earlier "complete" collections. *Poems 1923-1954*, 1954, is a comprehensive collection to that date; later volumes are *95 Poems*, 1958; *100 Selected Poems*, 1959; and *50 Poems*, 1960. Critical prose pieces are contained in *e.e. cummings: A Miscel-*

lany, 1958 (revised, 1965), edited by George J. Firmage. F. W. Dupee and George Stade edited *Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings*, 1969. *Etcetera: The Unpublished Poems of E. E. Cummings*, 1983, was edited by George J. Firmage and Richard S. Kennedy.

The Magic Maker: E. E. Cummings, rev. ed., 1965, is an authorized critical biography by Charles Norman. More recent is a full and excellent biography by Richard S. Kennedy, *Dreams in the Mirror*, 1979. George Firmage edited *E. E. Cummings: A Bibliography*, 1964.

Critical studies include Norman Friedman, *E. E. Cummings: The Art of His Poetry*, 1960; Friedman, *E. E. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer*, 1964; Barry A. Marks, *E. E. Cummings*, 1964; Robert Wegner, *The Poetry and Prose of E. E. Cummings*, 1964; Bethany K. Dumas, *E. E. Cummings: A Remembrance of Miracles*, 1974; Rushworth M. Kidder, *E. E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry*, 1979; and Milton A. Cohen, *Poet and Painter: The Aesthetics of E. E. Cummings's Early Work*, 1987.

Thy Fingers Make Early Flowers Of

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.

5

thy whitest feet crisply are straying.

Always

thy moist eyes are at kisses playing,

whose strangeness much

says; singing

(though love be a day)

for which girl art thou flowers bringing?

10

To be thy lips is a sweet thing
and small.

15

Death, Thee i call rich beyond wishing

if this thou catch,

else missing.

(though love be a day

and life be nothing, it shall not stop kissing).

20

1923

When God Lets My Body Be

when god lets my body be

From each brave eye shall sprout a tree
fruit that dangles therefrom

the purpled world will dance upon
 Between my lips which did sing
 a rose shall beget the spring
 that maidens whom passion wastes
 will lay between their little breasts
 My strong fingers beneath the snow
 Into strenuous birds shall go
 my love walking in the grass
 their wings will touch with her face
 and all the while shall my heart be
 With the bulge and nuzzle of the sea

1923

In Just-

in Just-
 spring when the world is mud-
 luscious the little
 lame balloonman
 whistles far and wee
 and eddieandbill 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 bettyandisbel come dancing
 from hop-scotch and jump-rope and
 it's
 spring
 and
 the
 goat-footed
 balloonMan whistles
 far
 and
 wee

5

10

15

20

isabel created hundreds
 (and
 hundreds) of socks not to
 mention shirts fleaproof earwarmers

etcetera wrists etcetera, my
 mother hoped that

i would die etcetera
 bravely of course my father used
 to become hoarse talking about how it was
 a privilege and if only he
 could meanwhile my

self etcetera lay quietly
 in the deep mud et

cetera
 (dreaming,
 et

cetera, of
 Your smile
 eyes knees and of your Etcetera)

1926

I Sing of Olaf Glad and Big

i sing of Olaf glad and big
 whose warmest heart recoiled at war:
 a conscientious object-or

his wellbelovéd colonel (trig
 westpointer most succinctly bred)
 took erring Olaf soon in hand;
 but—though an host of overjoyed
 noncoms (first knocking on the head
 him) do through icy waters roll
 that helplessness which others stroke
 with brushes recently employed
 anent this muddy toiletbowl,
 while kindred intellects evoke
 allegiance per blunt instruments—
 Olaf (being to all intents
 a corpse and wanting any rag
 upon what God unto him gave)
 responds, without getting annoyed
 "I will not kiss your f ing flag"

straightway the silver bird looked grave
 (departing hurriedly to shave)

but—though all kinds of officers
 (a yearning nation's blueeyed pride)
 their passive prey did kick and curse
 until for wear their clarion

voices and boots were much the worse,
and egged the firstclassprivates on
his rectum wickedly to tease
by means of skilfully applied
bayonets roasted hot with heat—
Olaf (upon what were once knees)
does almost ceaselessly repeat
“there is some s. I will not eat”

30

our president, being of which
assertions duly notified
threw the yellowsonofabitch
into a dungeon, where he died

35

Christ (of His mercy infinite)
i pray to see; and Olaf, too
preponderatingly because
unless statistics lie, he was
more brave than me: more blond than you

40

1931

If There Are Any Heavens

if there are any heavens my mother will (all by herself) have
one. It will not be a pansy heaven nor
a fragile heaven of lilies-of-the-valley but
it will be a heaven of blackred roses

my father will be (deep like a rose
tall like a rose)

5

standing near my

(swaying over her
silent)
with eyes which are really petals and see

10

nothing with the face of a poet really which
is a flower and not a face with
hands
which whisper
This is my beloved my

15

he will bow,

& the whole garden will bow)

1931

Somewhere I Have Never Travelled, Gladly Beyond

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond
any experience, your eyes have their silence.