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| Edward Estlin Cummings was a prolific and iconoclastic figure in American poetry of the mid-twentieth century. He experimented with unconventional verse forms, often playfully disrupting syntax, punctuation, and typography, and creating a more flexible, visually active kind of poetry, which yet retained surprising lyric power. He was also a painter and dramatist. |
| Edward Estlin Cummings was a prolific and iconoclastic figure in American poetry of the mid-twentieth century. He experimented with unconventional verse forms, often playfully disrupting syntax, punctuation, and typography, and creating a more flexible, visually active kind of poetry, which yet retained surprising lyric power. He was also a painter and dramatist.  Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Cummings was educated at Harvard University, where he studied alongside a number of future literary figures, including John Dos Passos, Archibald MacLeish and T. S. Eliot. Through the circle of friends involved in the *Harvard Monthly,* Cummings encountered avant-garde developments in art, music and literature, such as cubist painting, the compositions of Debussy and Stravinsky, and the poetry of Gertrude Stein and Amy Lowell. In response to this new sensibility, Cummings began to explore the possibilities of free verse and to develop his own distinctive poetic style, with its irregular layout, its tension between spoken and written speech, and its startling juxtaposition of images. The first draft of the poem ‘in Just—’ dates from this period. In 1917, Cummings contributed to *Eight Harvard Poets,* which was published while he was enlisted as an ambulance driver at the Western Front. Arrested on suspicion of anti-French activities, Cummings and his friend William Slater Brown spent three months in a detention centre, an experience recounted in his powerful and textually inventive memoir, *The Enormous Room* (1922).  Based in Greenwich Village after the war, Cummings published regularly in the New York literary journal *The Dial.* Founded as a vehicle for the ideas of the New England Transcendentalists in the 1840s, *The Dial* was bought in 1920 by Scofield Thayer and J. Sibley Watson, with Stewart Mitchell joining as a managing editor. All three were friends from Cummings’ days at Harvard, and promoted his work alongside other key writers of the 1920s, including T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Djuna Barnes, William Carlos Williams and Carl Sandburg. However, Cummings had more difficulty finding publishers for collected volumes of his verse because of his non-standard forms and his sometimes openly sexual content. His first solo volume, *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), had to be dramatically cut to secure publication, but was reprinted in full in 1937, and remains a classic text. This volume displays all the originality and exuberance of Cummings’ poetic persona—sensual, irreverent, tender and daring. His use of intrusive punctuation and of the white space on the page as means to control pace, alongside his readiness to run words together or to break lines mid-sentence, even mid-word, created a new kind of poetic line based on visual impact rather than sound. This assertion of the poem’s claim on the eye, as well as the ear, was Cummings’ most powerful technical innovation, and one only has to open any anthology of verse from the past fifty years to see how influential that shift would prove. Nevertheless, sound remains an important element in Cummings’ work, with his appropriation of slang and dialect, his punning, his ironic rhymes, and his adaptations of traditional lyric rhythms, especially the sonnet form, which he reworked again and again.  As his writer career took off, Cummings fell in love with Thayer’s wife Elaine Orr, with whom he had a long-term affair and a daughter, Nancy. Cummings and Elaine travelled together in France in the early 20s and after Elaine’s divorce were married in 1924. But, a few months later, perhaps tired of Cummings’ reluctance to take financial or emotional responsibility for his family, Elaine left him and moved to Ireland. Nancy grew up estranged from Cummings, and only discovered in her late twenties that he, not Thayer, was her father. After a second troubled marriage to the model Anne Barton, Cummings began a relationship with the model and photographer Marion Morehouse, which would continue until his death in 1962.  A committed individualist, Cummings consistently refused to temper his use of strong language, sexual descriptions, politically inflammatory terms, or his views on religion. In his poems, he delighted in challenging authority, in originality, spontaneity and inconsistency. Consequently, he was often at odds with mainstream publishers and the literary establishment, and never settled within any political faction or aesthetic group. In 1931, he travelled to Soviet Russia, where he became profoundly disillusioned with Socialism, responding with a travel book entitled *Eimi* (1933), from the Greek for “I am.” This attack on left-wing ideals lost him supporters within the radical presses and artistic circles where he had previously been admired as a non-conformist, but Cummings shrugged off the criticism. In 1935, the volume of poems *No Thanks* was so named in defiance of the fourteen publishing houses who had turned it down. On the fly leaf, as a spoof dedication, Cummings listed the names of those firms to whom ‘no thanks’ was due.  Despite his publishing troubles, Cummings attracted a large and loyal readership, and drew packed houses for his public poetry readings. Establishment recognition came eventually with the award of a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship in in 1951, and with an invitation the following year to give the prestigious Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard. These talks and readings were later published as *i: Six Nonlectures* (1953)*,* a title which draws attention both to Cummings’ sense of personal identity as unbound by convention, and to his desire to distance himself from an intellectual tradition which, even so, he could never quite escape. Thus Cummings’ varied oeuvre can be understood as a search for multiple ways to voice a view of human experience which echoes the Transcendental model which he had absorbed in childhood: the flawed, often ridiculous individual self attains value mostly through being true to its own nature, but is nevertheless capable of insight, connection and heightened awareness when confronted with the beauty of the natural world or with the joy of love. Such moments, for Cummings, continually reaffirm the sheer exhilaration of being and observing. As he phrases it in a poem from his final volume: “(existing’s tricky; but to live’s a gift)”  **List of Works**  Poetry  *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923)  *Puella Mea* (1923)  *XLI Poems* (1925)  *&* (1925)  *Is 5* (1926)  *Christmas Tree* (1928)  *VV (Viva: Seventy New Poems)* (1931)  *No Thanks* (1935)  *1/20* (1936)  *Collected Poems* (1938)  *Fifty Poems* (1940)  *1 x 1* (1944)  *Xaipe* (1950)  *Poems 1923-1954* (1954)  *95 Poems* (1958)  73 Poems (1963)  Plays  *Him* (1927)  *Tom: A Ballet* (1935)  *Anthropos: The Future of Art* (1944)  *Santa Claus: A Morality* (1946)  Autobiography  *The Enormous Room* (1922)  *Eimi* (1933)  Other  [No Title] (1930) (Short stories)  *CIOPW* (1931) (Visual art)  *i: Six Nonlectures* (1953)  *Cummings: A Miscellany*, edited by George Firmage (1958) (Newspaper and magazine articles)  *Adventures in Value,* with Marion Morehouse (1962) (Photography)   * *Fairy Tales*, Harcourt, 1965. * *Three Plays and a Ballet*, edited by Firmage, October House, 1967. * *Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings*, edited by F. W. Dupee and George Stade, Harcourt, 1969. * *E. E. Cummings Reads His Collected Poetry, 1943-1958* (recording), Caedmon, 1977. * *Little Tree* (juvenile), Crown, 1987 * *Fairy Tales*, Harcourt, 1965. * *Three Plays and a Ballet*, edited by Firmage, October House, 1967. * *Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings*, edited by F. W. Dupee and George Stade, Harcourt, 1969. * *E. E. Cummings Reads His Collected Poetry, 1943-1958* (recording), Caedmon, 1977. * *Little Tree* (juvenile), Crown, 1987 * *Fairy Tales*, Harcourt, 1965. * *Three Plays and a Ballet*, edited by Firmage, October House, 1967. * *Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings*, edited by F. W. Dupee and George Stade, Harcourt, 1969. * *E. E. Cummings Reads His Collected Poetry, 1943-1958* (recording), Caedmon, 1977. * *Little Tree* (juvenile), Crown, 1987.   *Fairy Tales* (1965)  Recording  *E. E. Cummings Reads his Selected Poetry* (Caedmon, 1977) |
| Further reading:  (Cummings)  (E. E. Cummings)  (Firmage)  (Friedman)  (Kennedy)  (Sawyer-Lauçanno) |