

## Review of E. E. Cummings, *Erotic Poems* (Norton, 2010)

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It was a strange feeling when I first encountered the little book *Erotic Poems* by E. E. Cummings, a book published with no Preface, Foreword, Afterword, or Contents page. Although it is known that Cummings wrote many erotic poems with explicit sexual imagery in his early period, a collection of poems devoted only to this purpose along with 13 erotic line drawings (which I have not been able to identify at the Houghton) is unusual. Immediately, I felt that an introduction explaining the origin and purpose of this collection would definitely help, but the reader is bound to be disappointed as there is none. The book is thus truly unusual, opening directly to poems with no introduction and no section dividers to indicate poemgroups or the origin of its collection, as if these poems juxtaposed with erotic drawings justify Cummings' sense of an affirmed individual. Even though more than once Cummings jotted down in his art notes a line from Delacroix, "art is to omit," this book omits too much—almost everything except the poems and the line drawings.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, I cannot tell on what principle the book is edited, in spite of widely esteemed Cummings' bibliographer George Firmage's name printed as editor inside the cover.

Those who know of Firmage from his editions of Cummings' *Complete Poems* (1991, 1994) and other prose work (*A Miscellany, Three Plays and a Ballet*, etc.) will recognize a detailed hand with laborious documentation of Cummings' textual sources. A book missing editorial commentary or documentation is not in keeping with Firmage's editorial reputation. The reader can verify this by checking Firmage's often cited book *E. E. Cummings: A Bibliography* (1960). As Firmage has been gone for several years, I surmise that he was in no way responsible for the printing of this book. Perhaps W. W. Norton owes the reader an explanation; I believe that if Cummings were alive, he would not rest easily with a seemingly unauthorized edition of his erotic poems.

Examining Cummings' manuscripts at the Houghton Library, I found that Cummings showed extreme attention to each of his publications, whether poetry, prose, drama, or art work—typography, punctuation, the ordering of his poems, etc. On poems sent to poetry magazines, he often

stamped his submission with this phrase: “please send proof to”—and he also provided an extra sheet of editorial instruction at the front of his manuscripts. For example, in his “Notice for XAIPE,” he instructs the linotypist, “please set each poem EXACTLY as in this MS kindly note the space.”<sup>2</sup> Most of Cummings’ readers might remember how displeased he was by the changes made without his knowledge in the first edition of *The Enormous Room*. He wrote in a letter from Paris, dated “14 mai 1922”: “(P.S. AS IT STANDS the book is not merely an eye-sore but an insult)” (*Letters* 88).

Cummings, known as a modernist experimental lyric poet of spring, love, sex, and feeling in addition to his satiric stance against the collective, would probably not object to having his erotic poems collected in one volume. For example, T. R. Smith’s anthology *Poetica Erotica: A Collection of Rare and Curious Amatory Verse* (1931) reprinted 16 of Cummings’ “Sonnets—Actualities” from & [AND] (1925) and “she being Brand” from *is 5* (One, 19). Embracing “aliveness” and “IS,” Cummings also “feels” sex as action and as negation of death or inaction.<sup>3</sup> However, without his own selection of poems or erotic drawings or his permission to have his erotic drawings juxtaposed to poems, the provocative and radical display of the text and drawings together only undermines the art of suggestiveness of both. One thing he would have objected to: stifling and foreclosing the spontaneity of feeling and freedom of the reader’s imagination in art or in poetry. Two of his most audacious art pieces are cases in point: one juxtaposed with the well known “O It’s Nice To Get Up In, the slipshod mucous kiss” (*Erotic Poems* 27) and the other with “she had that softness which is falsity” (*EP* 67). In contrast, Richard Kostelanetz in his *AnOther E. E. Cummings* (1998), highlighted both sonnets in his selections, but presented them without the distracting drawings so that the reader can appreciate what Kostelanetz means by calling Cummings “the finest erotic poet of his generation” (43).

In 1943, Cummings wrote to an editor who wanted to pair his poems with drawings:

so far as I’m concerned, each poem is a picture γραφή - γραφω “I write”(whence our word “graphic”)but originally “I make lines”—cf the Poet-Painter of China)and the paperspace around each poem is a where in which it heres or a surface on which it floats. Consequently, line-drawings-on-the-poempage strike me (much as I love to write by drawing)as redundant<sup>4</sup>

We could applaud the publisher's wish to put a new Cummings book on the shelf. But a serious and careful poet like E. E. Cummings, who sought a transcendent feeling of wholeness through love, sex, nature, and everything else, does not seem to be represented adequately by a book of randomly selected erotic poems with arbitrarily interspersed line drawings.

Regarding Cummings' seriousness about his work and numerous revisions of his love lyrics (witnessed in his Houghton MSS.), the book needs to inform the reader of the time period and the context for these 50 erotic poems, as well as line drawings. Matching the first line of the erotic poems with the Index entries in Firmage's edition of *Complete Poems* (1994), I find that the first 17 poems and sonnets are taken from *Tulips & Chimneys* (1922 manuscript), eight from *& [AND]* (1925), two ("she being Brand" and "(ponder,darling,these busted statues") from *is 5* (1926), one ("may i feel said he") from *No Thanks* (1935), and one ("wild(at our first)beasts uttered human words") from *73 Poems* (1963). The rest of the 21 poems are all from *Etcetera: The Unpublished Poems* (1983). Most of the selections were written around 1919-1920, a period of formal innovations and rebellion against genteel conventions. Some from *Tulips & Chimneys* could have been written even earlier as they deal with erotic encounters in Paris, where Cummings volunteered as a Norton-Harjes ambulance driver in 1917 (cf. *Dreams* 184). Some from "Sonnets-Realities" (*T & C*) deal with the *demimonde* world of Boston in his Harvard years (cf. *Dreams*, 185; *Revisited* 63-65). Others from "Sonnets-Realities" were his erotic fantasies while at Camp Devens in 1918 (*Revisited*, 33-35). (Cummings was drafted into the U. S. Army after his December 1917 release from detention at La Ferté Macé on false espionage charges.) Those from "Sonnets-Actualities" (*T & C*) were mostly completed before 1920 when Cummings fell deeply in love with Elaine Orr (*Dreams*, 194-95). Even though the last seven erotic poems appear in the section titled "Late Poems, 1930-62" of *Etcetera*, they were not really late poems, as we can tell by the brown frail sheets of some of these poems in the MS folders. For example, the poem "b" (*EP* 71) began as a radical experiment of visual poetry during his early phase (cf. *Dreams* 118-122 and *AnOther Cummings* 140). With a few exceptions, this collection mainly serves as a point of entry to a younger Cummings.

As a poet of "spring," "aliveness," "wholeness," and "IS," Cummings' eroticism of sexual coupling deepened over the years. Sexual love and the sexual union of "IYou" (*No Thanks* 57; CP 442) increasingly connotes a more nuanced feeling that includes, but is not limited to, vulgarity or youth-

ful lust and desire (*Dreams* 186). Try reading aloud his “(once like a spark)” and one of Cummings’ favorites, “one’s not half two. It’s two are halves of one:” from his ninth collection of poems *1 x 1* (*One Times One* 1944), and you will realize what this collection has missed. Printing mostly early erotic poems outside of the context of each publication and arbitrarily juxtaposing erotic drawings with the poems to represent an “erotic” Cummings, this selection will probably not give the reader a proper understanding of sex and love as Cummings’ metaphor for death, rebirth, growth, and self-transcendence. The book *Erotic Poems* would be more welcome if it provided thoughtful coverage, explanatory notes, and documentation. In its current state, it is rather a book for the collective unworld, and a book that Cummings himself would very likely have been displeased with.

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## Notes

1. E. E. Cummings collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (55)
2. E. E. Cummings collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1823.4 (98)
3. “‘Death’ and ‘Sex.’” MS. notes. Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (57), folder 4 of 4, sheet 65
4. Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (219), folder 8.

## Works Cited

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