

**E. E. Cummings: Man and Poet: Review of  
*E. E. Cummings: A Life* by Susan Cheever  
(Pantheon, 2014)**

Gillian Huang-Tiller

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I

Susan Cheever's *E. E. Cummings: A Life* is not a literary biography of Cummings the man and the poet, but is more of a cultural biography of the poet's New England home: the anti-Semitic Harvard under President A. Lawrence Lowell that Cummings rejected, the Bohemian culture of Greenwich Village, and the many women in Cummings' life—from his adoring mother, Rebecca, to his first two wives, Elaine Thayer and Anne Barton, to Marion Morehouse, Cummings' fully devoted common-law third wife, and his daughter Nancy (born to Elaine and Cummings) with whom he became reacquainted after more than twenty years of separation.<sup>1</sup> Compared to Richard Kennedy's definitive literary biography *Dreams in the Mirror* (1980) (32 chapters and 529 pages with detailed notes and source references) or to Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno's 606-page *E. E. Cummings: A Biography* (2004) (mainly an expansion of Kennedy's text with some of his own readings of Cummings' poems), Cheever's modest 14-chapter biography is a smooth read, but contributes little to Cummings scholarship. It is nonetheless distinct in the angle she chooses, portraying Cummings' life through the lens of others.

In so doing, Cheever's biography takes a rather unorthodox approach. It begins in late October 1952, with the audience's reaction to the older Cummings' well-received Charles Eliot Norton Lecture at Harvard. From this prelude, "Odysseus Returns to Cambridge," Cheever introduces us to Cummings' college rebellion against his strict father, his genteel upbringing at "104 Irving Street," and to the youthful rage that she believes grew from his sensitive nature and that becomes Cheever's key to understanding Cummings' art. Unlike previous biographers, Cheever skips the period between his early schooling and his Harvard years. In her third chapter "Harvard," Cheever devotes several pages to President Lowell's anti-Semitic admissions policy. She builds an impression that Cummings' anger led him to reject Cambridge society and to embrace what even his parents disapproved of, "from drinking to sex to Jews to foreigners" (38). The ensuing section presents an abrupt connection between the young Cummings' rebellion

against Cambridge-Harvard society and his breaking of aesthetic rules as part of the new art initiated by Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. In contrast, Kennedy takes four chapters to explain the development of Cummings' modernist aesthetic.

Cheever's biography proceeds to Cummings' post-Harvard life in Greenwich Village and reasserts that his anger as the driving force behind his poetry, something she believes one will not miss when reading "Buffalo Bill 's" (48). When not discussing anti-Semitism or anger, Cheever details Cummings' fascination with sex (73) and his time in sexual Paris (53), where in 1917 Cummings and his friend William Slater Brown were supposed to report to the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service. Cheever follows Kennedy's account of how they missed their group after getting off at the wrong station, how they explored Paris for five weeks, and how Cummings was imprisoned by the French government with Brown in September on a trumped-up charge of espionage until Cummings' release in December 1917. Cheever's chapter "The Enormous Room" says little about the book itself, a subject Kennedy devotes an entire chapter to in "The Great War Seen from the Windows of Nowhere" (Kennedy 216-25).

Cheever's next three chapters—"Greenwich Village: Elaine and Nancy," "Anne Barton and Joseph Stalin," and "Eimi and Marion Morehouse"—foreground the women in Cummings' life, as Kennedy also did in three of his chapters; but *Dreams in the Mirror* does a better job of connecting Cummings' life with his creative works. Cheever's Elaine chapter focuses on her time in sexually permissive Greenwich Village, as well as Scofield Thayer's (Elaine's first husband and co-owner and editor of *The Dial*) apparent crisis over his sexual identity (74). It is a sweeping chapter, covering Cummings and Elaine's affair, her pregnancy, and her subsequent divorce from Thayer and marriage to and divorce from Cummings—emphasizing Elaine's unhappiness in her second marriage to an aloof poet-husband. Cheever's next, quite suggestive, chapter draws connections between Anne Barton's promiscuity and a divorced Cummings, confronting self-division and a crisis of manhood. To analyze Cummings' self-division Cheever coins the term "Cummings Duplex" (a notion derived from Alphonse Daudet's "homo duplex"), citing Cummings' own notes on his "before breakfast self" and his "other I," which Cheever calls "his after-breakfast self" (85). Sawyer-Lauçanno examined the same notes in his discussion of Cummings in the early '50s (502-03). Cheever, however, differs from Sawyer-Lauçanno by placing Cummings' self-analysis of his dual

nature in the mid-20s, after his divorce and during his sexual attraction to the unfaithful Anne.<sup>2</sup> Although she imprecisely dates Cummings' original 1939 analysis of his dual self,<sup>3</sup> Cheever generally provides more precise dates in this chapter than in her previous ones. She notes the dates of Cummings' first four collections of poems and Cummings' *Dial* award in 1925, as well as his introduction to the sexual Anne through Morris Werner, the tragic death of his father in a car accident in 1926, the writing and production of his play *Him* in 1927-28, psychoanalysis with Fritz Wittels in 1928, marriage to Anne in 1929, and his disillusioning journey to Russia in 1931, which occurred as his marriage to Anne was becoming a nightmare. The chapter ends with Cummings' second divorce.

The next chapter, which introduces Cummings' modernist travel book *EIMI* (followed by an account of meeting Marion Morehouse in 1932), is surprisingly brief, given the importance of both events. Cheever simplifies and condenses Kennedy's much longer account of *EIMI* to a few crucial details. *EIMI*, Cummings' Dantesque journey to the Soviet underworld, shows Cummings' contempt for Soviet communism in the left-leaning 1930s. Cheever once again introduces sex and anger as the impetus for Cummings' creativity, tempering her account with a description of his more comfortable sexual relationship with Marion. Although Cheever rarely cites poetry, she points out how Marion inspired the beautiful sonnet: "love's function is to fabricate unknownness" (105 [CP 446]). Cheever ends the chapter with Cummings and Marion traveling to Europe and meeting Elaine and MacDermot, who urged Cummings to break his connections to his daughter Nancy. Following Kennedy, Cheever devotes a few pages to Cummings' and Marion's stay in Paris, where they dined with and met Lincoln Kirstein, who commissioned a ballet from Cummings based on an American folk theme—Marion suggested *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (108)—resulting in Cummings' ballet *Tom*, which was never produced.

The chapter on "*No Thanks*," a collection of poems whose title reflects the rejection notices he received from fourteen publishers, gives Cheever further occasion to stress Cummings' anger as the poet's creative force (114, 117). Cheever here suggests that Cummings' failure to get the attention of Hollywood producers and Marion's inability to gain an audition as an actress irritated Cummings into verbal anti-Semitic outbursts (121). Cheever then moves her narrative quickly from *No Thanks* (1935) and back to Marion, narrating her consent to A. J. Ayer's sexual advances and subsequent reassurance of her love for Cummings. The chapter ends with the

publication of Cummings' *Collected Poems* in 1938. Cheever notes that for this collection, Cummings selected more playful poems (such as "may i feel said he") and fewer angrier ones (124).

Cheever's tenth chapter brings together Ezra Pound and Cummings' morality play *Santa Claus* (1946). She portrays Cummings' anger at this phase in his career as turning inward, characterizing him as "an equal opportunity hater" (133). Cheever finds angrier poems in *I x I* (1944), written in the midst of war, and sees Cummings' poems as more "anti- and less poetic" (133), while adding that the poet was "disturbed" by Pound's anti-Semitism (133). Cheever ends this chapter with Cummings' play *Santa Claus*, which expresses a desire for a parent-child reunion and a wish to see through Santa's mask like a child (137).

The four remaining chapters are titled "Rebecca and Nancy" (on Cummings' mother and daughter), "i think i am falling in love with you" (on the difficulties of reuniting with Nancy), "Readings: A New Career" (on Cummings' poetry readings), and "Victory and Defeat." Again following Kennedy, the final five chapters tell of the death in 1947 of Cummings' beloved mother ("the genuine 101% New Englander"), the publication of *50 Poems* (1940) (containing a deeply moving poem about his father, and another thanking God for "most this amazing day"), the father-daughter reunion in 1946, Marion's increasing protectiveness of Cummings, his failing health and anger toward the war and war mongers, his campus and public readings, his later life at Joy Farm in New Hampshire, his wide recognition after the publication of *95 Poems* (which won the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1958), his premature death at age 67 at Joy Farm from a brain hemorrhage, and the posthumous publication of *73 Poems* (1963).

Before the final chapter, Cheever evokes Pound a second time to address the subject of anti-Semitism. As mentioned earlier, Cheever notes, "Cummings was disturbed by Pound's burgeoning anti-Semitism" (133), evident in a letter to James Sibley Watson: "Gargling anti-semitism from morning till morning doesn't (apparently) help a human throat to sing" (133; Sawyer- Lauçanno 426). But the chapter's main goal is to discuss the debate over the alleged anti-Semitism of Cummings' infamous "kike" poem published in *Xaipe* (1950). Cheever includes Cummings' own explanation that the poem was about prejudice formation: Protestants invented the term to diminish Jews (175). Here she apologetically explains why Cummings failed to withdraw his disturbing poem. Like other biographers before her, Cheever includes the American critic Leslie

Fiedler's defense of art: "Certainly when the attackers of Cummings (or Eliot or Ezra Pound or Céline) are revealed as men motivated not so much by a love for Jews as by a hatred for art, I know where to take my stand" (177). Like Kennedy (434) and Sawyer-Lauçanno (401, 484), Cheever places this controversial issue over one "indefensible word" in context.

However, in his review of Cheever's biography in *The London Review of Books*, August Kleinzahler finds fault with Cheever for not being harsh enough on Cummings' alleged anti-Semitism. Kleinzahler cites from Sawyer-Lauçanno a typescript note on which Cummings penciled in "I understand the hater of Jews" (427), and Cummings' 1941 letter to Pound referring to him as "our favourite Ikey-Kikey Wandering Jew, Quo Vadis, Oppressed Minority of one, Misunderstood Master," as further evidence of anti-Semitism (465). Surprisingly, Kleinzahler reads the lines in the note and letter unironically. In context, Michael Webster believes that they more likely suggest that Cummings punctures Pound's single-minded prejudice by referring to him as an "oppressed minority of one" and comparing him to the mythical "Wandering Jew."

Apart from disregarding Cheever's efforts to put anti-Semitism in context, Kleinzahler's review dismisses Cummings' poetry as a subject for serious criticism. He assumes that a reader's appreciation of Cummings' poetry is based on age and will fade with maturity: "E. E. Cummings is the sort of poet one loves at the age of 17 and finds unbearably mawkish and vacuous as an adult" (35). If so, Cheever's own experience that led to the writing of Cummings' biography contradicts Kleinzahler. In her Preface, Cheever recounts the time when her father John Cheever drove the poet back to Patchin Place from her school in Dobbs Ferry, where Cummings was giving a reading. That memory sparked an enduring interest in Cummings, prompting Cheever to come back to him in her later life. Her opening chapter also refutes Kleinzahler's belittling comment on Cummings' adolescent readership. Beginning her biography with Cummings' life as an older poet, at 58, returning to Cambridge to give the prestigious Norton Lectures in Sanders Theater, where he once stood to give his commencement speech on "The New Art" (1915), Cheever portrays a welcoming reception of Cummings' readings at Harvard, showing that Cummings' work has stood the test of time. Cummings is thus not the "Little Lame Balloonman" whom Kleinzahler lampoons. Nor does Cummings scholarship find in his poetry the "paucity of content, limited range and shallowness of his

work” that Kleinzahler identifies (35).

## II

However, to enjoy Cummings beyond adolescence and to be Cummings’ biographer can be two very different things. Cheever’s overriding concern to provide a context for Cummings’ life is constantly foregrounded. Although Cheever often honestly acknowledges previous Cummings biographers—Charles Norman, Richard Kennedy, Catherine Reef, and Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno—as well as Hildegard Watson’s and Elizabeth Cummings Qualey’s memoirs, she also characterizes herself as a different sort of biographer. In her Preface, Cheever states that her biography will go beyond the poet’s own life by placing it in the context of his time:

Nothing was wrong with Cummings—or Duchamp or Stravinsky or Joyce, for that matter. All were trying to slow down the seemingly inexorable rush of the world, to force people to notice their own lives. In the twenty-first century, that rush has now reached Force five; we are all inundated with information and given no time to wonder what it means or where it came from. Access without understanding and facts without context have become our daily diet. (xii)

Although Cheever largely delivers on her promise to contextualize, by its nature, biography is context-oriented. Why would Cheever need to emphasize writing about “the time in which that life was lived” (129)? Does she perhaps mean a *different* sort of context, one that draws attention to the sexual, anti-Semitic, and the “emotional” milieu into which she places an “angry” and “bigoted” Cummings (121)? At any rate, Cheever’s contextual biography mainly addresses a selective history of Cummings’ time and thus pays little attention to his art or poetry, as Charles Norman and Kennedy have done.

Unfortunately, Cheever fails to deliver on her promise in the section of the Preface on Cummings’ modernism, which provides, in fact, little or no context. What Cheever offers are only her assumptions. Concerning Cummings’ relationship to modernism, Cheever states: “Modernism as Cummings and his *mid-twentieth-century colleagues* embraced it had three parts. The first was the exploration of using sounds instead of meanings to connect words to the reader’s feelings...” (xii; italics mine). In this com-

ment, Cheever seems to date modernism as a post-Depression movement. Where does this assertion come from? Cheever herself notes that Cummings gave his commencement speech “The New Art” on modernist painting, music, and poetry in 1915 (39); and Cummings’ experimental verse was influenced by “Cubist imagery” as early as in 1916, as is especially noted in Kennedy (*Dreams* 99). In addition, Kennedy notes how Cummings integrated sound patterns into visual-verbal arrangements around the same time (118).

Though context-based, Cheever’s biography not only fails to contextualize Cummings’ modernism or avant-gardism (Cubism, Futurism, Imagism, Vorticism, and Dadaism, etc.), but also is sometimes factually misleading. Writing about John Dos Passos, for instance, Cheever says that he “was to become one of the leading novelists of the 1920s with his *U.S.A.* trilogy” (35). The first novel in this trilogy, *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*, appeared in 1930, followed by *1919* (1932) and *The Big Money* (1936); these novels were not known as the *U.S.A.* trilogy until 1938. Concerning Thayer’s divorce from Elaine Orr so she could marry Cummings, Cheever writes, “When Thayer arrived in Paris on his way to Vienna and Sigmund Freud, he and [four-and-a-half-year-old] Nancy were officially divorced on July 28” (78). Perhaps these are editing errors, individually of little consequence; but collectively, they mar the credibility of the biography. It is also unclear why Cheever analyzes “i am a little church(no great cathedral)” (CP 749), as a poem “in five stanzas [written in] conventional iambic pentameter” (Cheever 179). The poem actually scans with mixed meter, including the final line of the last stanza, “(welcoming humbly His light and proudly His darkness).”

Although not technically part of Cheever’s biography, the dust jacket on the hardback edition contains serious factual errors that can mislead potential readers before the book is even opened. Cummings the poet is identified in lowercase letters as “cummings.” Norman Friedman’s article “NOT ‘e. e. cummings’ ” quotes a sentence from a letter to Cummings’ mother that shows us the uppercase man and the lowercase poet in the same sentence: “I am a small eye poet” (*Letters* 108-9). According to Friedman, the uppercase “I” in this personal reference reveals a distinction between the “writer of the letter and the writer of the poetry” (“NOT” 114). Cheever herself capitalizes the name throughout the text; the publisher, however, perpetuates the common misconception of a lowercase “cummings” for Cummings the man. On the front flap, the blurb introduces the reader to the

Reverend Edward Cummings, a Unitarian minister, as Cummings' "Calvinist" father. In the following paragraph, we read: "At Harvard, he roomed with John Dos Passos; befriended Lincoln Kirstein." Cummings did not move to Harvard Yard until his senior year in 1914. Dos Passos and Cummings both lived in Thayer Hall, but no biographies before Cheever's ever mentioned that they shared a room. Further, it was impossible that he would meet Lincoln Kirstein at Harvard. According to Kennedy, Kirstein, twelve years Cummings' junior, met Cummings in New York when Kirstein moved his journal *Hound & Horn* from Harvard to New York in 1930 (Kennedy 344). These inaccuracies only serve to create confusion.

It is always a welcome addition to Cummings studies if a book offers readers something new about the poet they have loved and studied for years that they cannot get elsewhere, especially when a new biography by an author who claims "personal acquaintance" appears. The contextual details highlighting the counter-cultural creative and sexual energy, intoxication, and chain smoking of Greenwich Village in the 1920s indeed make an interesting read. But many of Cheever's details can be found in Kennedy, suggestive of Sawyer-Lauçanno's re-phrasings of *Dreams in the Mirror* in his 2004 biography. (In his review of Sawyer-Lauçanno, Wyatt Mason addresses the issue of following in Kennedy's footsteps.) A similar criticism might be applied to parts of Cheever's work. For instance, with small differences in punctuation, Cheever copies a passage from Kennedy verbatim, quoting the latter part from the original: "a lively, spree-drinking, girl-chasing group of young men who were apprentices in the new artistic movements of the twentieth century" (Kennedy 74; Cheever 9). Comparing these three biographies, Kennedy's remains the only reliable scholarly work on Cummings' life and works, as Kennedy diligently studied Cummings' letters, poems, prose, paintings, and manuscript notes archived at the Houghton Library, as well as conducting personal interviews. Scholars of Cummings interested in the growth of the poet's mind and the connections between the poet's life and works can count on Kennedy for reliable information, as his 24 pages of notes date all of his sources.

In the end, what Cheever contributes, I believe, is a portrait of Cummings as an "angry" and "sexual" man seen through the eyes of others. Quoting from a Radcliffe student (attending one of Cummings' Norton Lectures) on the first page of her biography, Cheever sets the tone for her book: "He was very virile and sexual on the stage. I think he made some of the men uncomfortable" (3). However, equating Cummings' radicalism in

language and typography with anger and rage against old-school Cambridge, dogmatic Puritanism, his controlling father, and prudish Harvard President Lowell's conservative animus against homosexuality and Jews seems to discount aesthetic innovation and cultural changes as reasons for Cummings' experimental modernism and his new art consciousness. If Cheever had turned to Cummings' own published and unpublished writings for evidence for this alleged anger, she may well have seen satire rather than anger (see Webster, "hatred bounces"). Not taking into account this possibility, Cheever appears to assume the persona of Cummings' psychiatrist Fritz Wittels diagnosing his symptoms: "The fury against all rules and authority that seemed to take hold of Cummings in his late teenage years and when he was at Harvard was tremendous fuel for a writer and painter. Oh, there were so many rules to break!" (135). Following this paragraph, Cheever writes, "Anger doesn't age well. Angry young men are sexy; angry old men are less appealing" (135). Cheever is primarily talking about angry Pound, yet somehow leads the reader to an angry and tired Cummings during and after WWII. It is true that Cummings the man was angry about the war machine and *mostpeople's* disdain for art. Before and after the end of WWII, however, Cummings the poet satirically reacted against the nihilistic thinking and feelings that characterized the WWII and post-war mindset in *I x I* (1944) and *XAIPE* ("joy" in Greek, 1950).

As early as the introduction to *is 5* (1926), Cummings makes it clear to his reader that "a poet . . . is obsessed by Making. . . Like the burlesque comedian, I am abnormally fond of that precision that creates movement" (CP 221). In *XAIPE*, Cummings the poet illuminates the multiple selves of a man, "so many selves (so many fiends and gods / each greedier than every) is a man" (CP 609). Following Kennedy (110, 197) and Sawyer-Lauçanno (502-03), Cheever expresses awareness of the complexity of Cummings' multiple selves. Cheever's biography highlights what she terms "Cummings Duplex," the two selves of Cummings' uppercase "I," as well as the persona of his lowercase "i" (85), what Paul Muldoon also rightly notes in his review of Cheever's book as Cummings' "empirical self" (70). However, in spite of her recognition of a "Cummings Duplex," Cheever often blurs the boundary between the "I" and the "i" persona, the man and poet. Representing Cummings as an "angry"; "sexual"; and (Cheever adds problematically) "anti-Semitic" man, this latest biography seems of limited value for Cummings scholars, but may appeal to general readers and poetry enthusiasts.

In her “Coda,” Cheever assesses Cummings’ reputation in the twenty-first century by claiming that “in the past twenty years, however, Cummings’s reputation has waned” (186). If Cheever means that his scholarly—as opposed to his popular—reputation has waned, she is demonstrably inaccurate, as the last decade has actually seen a rise of scholarly works on Cummings. David Chinitz’s recent *A Companion to Modernist Poetry* (Blackwell 2014) contains a substantial critical entry on Cummings. The recent reissued editions of Cummings’ works (*The Enormous Room*, *EIMI*, *Erotic Poems*, *The Theater of E. E. Cummings*, to name but a few) and the inclusion of an excerpt from Cummings’ *The Enormous Room* in the new edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (8th edition), as well as the existing scholarly journal *Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society* devoted to Cummings (and noted in Kennedy’s *Dreams in the Mirror*), all counter an assessment of Cummings’ “waning” reputation in the twenty-first century. In reality, Cummings’ reputation as one of the major American modernist poets has never abated, despite how he is sometimes labeled a minor poet. With her scant analysis of Cummings the poet and the art of his poetry (first and foremost examined by Friedman and continued by Charles Norman and Richard S. Kennedy) and her lack of awareness of recent Cummings scholarship, Cheever’s coda appears to make an unsubstantiated assessment.

Cheever does not strike me as intending to offer a reductive biography of Cummings. For general readers, Cheever’s elaboration of “Cummings Duplex” is informative, and her final account of Cummings’ attempt to instill in Pound a love of blue jays is interesting (173). It shows Cummings’ sensitive nature, trying to shift Pound’s attention from the depressing circumstances of his incarceration. Though leaving much to be desired, Cheever’s very readable cultural biography does take the reader to an appreciation of a teenager’s feeling about Cummings, conceived in adolescence and coming to fruition in later life. Her inclusion of a couple of Cummings’ beautiful bird poems (173, 183-84), along with two poems by Nancy Thayer Cummings Roosevelt Andrews (142, 144), is a welcome addition to Cummings’ biography. But for a definitive and scholarly biography on Cummings, the reader is better served by Kennedy’s *Dreams in the Mirror* as a source of illustrations; photographs; facsimiles; frequently quoted poems; verifiable facts; extensive notes; and, more importantly, a judicious assessment of Cummings’ art and poetry.

—University of Virginia-Wise

## Notes

1. Thanks to Michael Webster for valuable feedback.
2. Cheever also derives her notion of a “duplex” self from lecture VIII of William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a book that Cummings owned. For Cheever, Cummings’ divided self appears in “the problematic nature of the uppercase I”—the everyday self rather than the poet’s lowercase i-persona (85).
3. Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (217) folder 7, sheet 61.

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