

ANOTHER REVIEW of ANOTHER E. E. Cummings from Europe

María Teresa González Mínguez

I remember when my friend from Glasgow sent me Richard Kostelanetz's *Another E. E. Cummings*. I was terrified of buying on the Internet and she did it for me. I thought: "hardcover, clear writing and nice thick paper. Let's start reading." The book became a dear and original resource for my doctoral dissertation. Actually, it is never on the shelf of my home library, as I use it so often. The high concentration of relevant material is such that you do not have to collect three or four books at the same time, although those who write theses know that sometimes we hold four books in each hand. Apart from the funny idea of comfort, perhaps because of its concentration, *Another E. E. Cummings* gives you more and more ideas rapidly—as rapidly as Mr Cummings transmits his own in his works.

Cummings' avant-garde writings reveal someone who wrote in many genres, from the traditional sonnet and the taste for the Pre-Raphaelite poet-painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti that he once learnt from Professor Royce to the most sophisticated stylistic inventions in prose and poetry—and even in his idiosyncratic personal letters.

Mr. Kostelanetz's publication might be conventional, but there's a mystery in its pages that says it is not. Before enumerating the contents in a traditional but stylish way, the book starts with acknowledgments to those who gave permission to the author to reprint invaluable material in the book. All this is followed by quotations from authors of the category of Randall Jarrell, John Logan, and Ezra Pound concerning Cummings' style, topics, and significance. The words of Roger Shattuck, who in *The Banquet Years* (1958) claims that quietness allows the universe to move around us, are also reproduced here, placing Cummings in the category of Bergson and Baudelaire.

The book could not go on without a tribute to the memory of the multi-talented Harvard man who taught young Mr. Estlin the essentials of his future life. Extracted from Richard Kennedy's *Dreams in the Mirror*—the superb latest biography of the Cambridge poet—this portion of text contains a remembrance of S. Foster Damon, who survived Cummings by nine years, instructed him to play the piano, took him to my fellow countryman El Greco's¹ exhibit at the Fogg Museum, acquainted him with the French Impressionists and Les Fauves, and also introduced him to "low life," taking the boy out drinking for the first time. In the Preface, Mr. Kostelanetz's purpose is clear. Since Cummings criticism has usually concentrated on his most accessible writings, he is completely determined not to "sweep up behind established opinion but to propose alternative taste and to rescue unfamiliar work" (xiv).

After a decade of selecting Cummings' texts, Kostelanetz realizes that that his anthology "differs from many other one-writer selections in that the first person to read it, to learn about the possibilities of poetic activity, is meant to be me" (xiv).

And then we have the fine Introduction, which, as with all the thirteen different chapters, is preceded by something I really admire when it is well chosen—that is, an intelligent quotation. From Cummings', Erza Pound's, William Carlos Williams', Bob Grumman's, John Logan's, Roger Shattuck's, C. K. Stead's, Samuel Beckett's, Antonin Artaud's, Richard Kostelanetz's, Edmund Wilson's, Gertrude Stein's to Ernest Hemingway's words, these quotations give us not only the essence of every chapter but also open a door to the reader's imagination. Kostelanetz and assistant editor John Rocco also preface each chapter with words that clarify the most difficult Cummings texts in such an original way that they make a reader unfamiliar with the poet's publications wish to know more, and, at the same time, permit those more familiar with them to add their own ideas.

Kostelanetz complains about the way in which Cummings has been almost neglected in all Guides to Contemporary American Literature. If he appears at all it is because of his lyrics, but his plays, prose works, and the rest of his artistic production have been ignored, with the exception of Milton A. Cohen's extraordinary book about his paintings.² But now that the reputations of canonical poets such as Eliot and Pound appear to be secure,³ there is hope to reconsider Cummings after the centenary of his birth and analyze the differences between him and his contemporaries in the way he deserves, and also to show a new Cummings to those people who know him well, as well as revealing an even newer poet to those who are not acquainted with him at all.

All is achieved by Kostelanetz in a superb eleven-page Introduction. Cummings is exposed to the eyes of his eternal admirers and also revealed to those of his readers-to-be. Giving an unusual variety of alternative shapes of his poems and remarking his personal use of language,⁴ word fragmentation, grammar shifts, phonetic spelling, visual arrangement of the words, and odd capitalization, Kostelanetz reminds the reader that Cummings also produced traditional rhyming poems, such as the superb "THANKSGIVING (1956)" (CP 711), or pure sound poetry, such as "from the cognoscenti" (CP 334).

Kostelanetz wants to make this book unique by also emphasizing the other artistic activities of the poet: his plays, a film scenario, a ballet, his innovative masterpieces of experimental prose, his articles for *Vanity Fair*, and his correspondence (Ezra Pound and Cummings were two of a kind, writing those letters that make us spend hours deciphering the funny codes that turn them into real works of art). Although not included in this book visually, his paintings are also mentioned—the Houghton Library at Harvard houses over 10,000 sheets of drawings. This hybrid between a poet and a painter demonstrates that one can "spend a lifetime earnestly practicing more than one art, in spite of gross discrepancies in recognition" (xxiv).

Cummings was the eternal Bohemian. Unlike William Carlos Williams, who was a doctor, or Wallace Stevens, who was a full-time businessman in an insurance company, he did not have another profession. He always tried to live by his writings, readings,⁵ and paintings and only received a real salary once in his life when he became the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard for a year. He always rejected

the idea of creating merely conventional poems or of simply following the rules [remember the incident previous to the celebration of the Boston Arts Festival when he proposed “THANKSGIVING (1956)” as the festival poem]. However, his career was as serious and, somehow, as conventional as other poets.⁶ If he is extraordinary and a major American poet of the twentieth century, it is because his more avant-garde productions are not the latest, already appearing in *Tulips & Chimneys*, his first work, and continuing through every period of his literary life.

Through thirteen sections, Kostelanetz offers the poet’s vision of love, sex, entertainment, politics, Europe, . . . the whole world. “Deviant Traditional Verse” includes thirty-seven poems from most of his publications, “Erotic Poetry” twenty-eight, “Language Experiments” no less than fifty-five (please do not forget to turn the book sideways to read “life hurl my”[84]); “Visual Poetry and Sound Poetry” twenty-five, including “two brass buttons off” (148), one of the visual poems—pure movement in design—that Richard Kennedy discovered in the course of producing *Dreams in the Mirror*, and the translations of the “grasshopper poem” into French, Italian, Portuguese, German, Dutch, Polish, and Russian. “Texts Set to Music” amazes us when we see how composers such as John Cage and Morton Feldman have adapted Cummings’ poems to music and, what surprises us most, a passage from *The Enormous Room* by the American composer David Diamond incorporated into his score of his piece of the same title in 1948. “Condensed Prose” contains the Cummings’ longest poems and peculiar personal writings, such as a letter and a thank-you note to his friend Edmund Wilson (187). The letter, from Berlin, starts with an “ACHTUNG” and a phonetic sententious statement. The thank-you note includes Mrs. Wilson, and was sent to Provincetown on Cape Cod—“Thalassaville” for the Bostonian⁷—from the Cummingses after the summer visit to the couple. I do not think I have ever seen a longer word aglutination in all of Cummings’ production than

Shantyshantyshantyshantyshantyshantyshanty
hovelhutcabinhouseaboderesidencedemesnemanorcastlepalace-
farmshack (204)

The preface to “Elliptical Narratives” disputes Hugh Kenner’s provocative claim in *A Homemade World* (1975) concerning the question of Cummings’s importance. Though Kenner writes that the poet “finally altered no verbal environment except his own” (205), Kostelanetz hails Cummings as one of the originators of compressed narrative and to demonstrate it, he includes poems from *ViVa, is 5*, and *ETC*, the latter published by George Firmage in *E. E. Cummings. Complete Poems 1904-1962* (1994).

The next chapter is dedicated to “A Book Without a Title,” also published as [*No Title*] in 1930 and frequently dismissed by critics as insignificant. It has only thirty-one pages and combines drawing and writing.⁸ Each drawing represents a story, and the stories are represented by emblems. John Rocco points out that “A Book Without a

Title” plays with the same narrative disassociations and compressions as Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (216). I think that the real sense of this publication was to challenge the reader and provide him or her with a good entertainment through irony—have you ever imagined the entire Royal Family escaping in a submarine disguised as cheeses? “Film Scenario” is prefaced with a quote from Artaud about what most people feel when they go to the movies. The cinema, another genre of popular culture, also fascinated Cummings, and for that reason he wrote “A Pair of Jacks” in the twenties, a piece that illustrates the most remarkable aspects of the medium in the late silent era of Hollywood films. In “Translation” Cummings manifests his mastery of the French language with “THE RED FRONT,” originally published by Louis Aragon in 1931. In “Arts Criticism” Kostelanetz remarks that “Cummings was the first theatre critic to recognize what we now call performance art and to praise it over drama” (244) and reproduces some of his articles from *Vanity Fair* on this topic. “Self-Prefaces,” a genre that, in my opinion, must communicate a lot in a small space, are another of Cummings’ best achievements. His prefaces to his books and even to his own exhibitions are so smart and concise that we would like to have more of them. The classy dedication at the beginning of *No Thanks* has always reminded me of a champagne glass, as if the Patchinite wanted to drink an ironic toast to those publishers who once rejected his “bookofpoems.” “Memoir” is primarily dedicated to Cummings’ major works in prose: *The Enormous Room* and *Eimi* are two of the most wonderful examples of bilingual writing. Based on nothing less than John Bunyan and Dante, they represent a revolution even in Cummings’ own style.

Mr Kostelanetz finishes with a useful index of the first lines of the poems mentioned in the book.

In a word, all those familiar and unfamiliar with Cummings—readers, admirers, detractors, scholars, and would-be scholars—must put *AnOther E. E. Cummings* in a privileged place in their home libraries where they can reach it easily and carefully read every line that only AnOther poet can write.

—Madrid, Spain

Notes

- 1 Actually El Greco was born in Crete (Greece), but he spent most of his life in Toledo, a city 70 kms away from my hometown Madrid.
- 2 See Cohen’s *PoetandPainter: The Aesthetics of E. E. Cummings’s Early Work*. In “Disparate Twins: Spontaneity in Cummings’ Poetry and Painting,” an article published in *Spring* 4, Cohen praises the absolute precedence of feeling and spontaneity to thinking and calculation in Cummings’ aesthetics. However, he remarks that “the poems, therefore, offer no direct equivalent to those paintings that convey spontaneity through the act of painting”. He suggests that the reader must release a magical energy appreciating the poems visual and semantic devices, and then, by actively participating, he will experience spontaneity (91).
- 3 Brooker offers a renovated vision of Eliot, eliminating some negative aspects

- generally attached to his personality and works.
- 4 “Cumings illustrates Mayakovsky’s dictum: ‘Neologisms are obligatory in writing poetry’” (xxii).
- 5 “With the exception of Dylan Thomas, he was the best reader of the time” (Kennedy 444).
- 6 Elaine Orr Thayer, his first wife, told the critic Edmund Wilson that Cumings was “the most conventional man in the world” (quoted in Kidder 6).
- 7 Cumings associated the atmosphere of the area with a civilization surrounding an inland sea.
- 8 His drawings remind me of John Eaton’s for *Fairy Tales*, the book of children’s stories written by Cumings for his daughter Nancy when she was a young girl.

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