

**Review of Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno,  
*E. E. Cummings: A Biography.***

Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2004; London: Methuen,  
2005. 608 pages.

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Comparisons. It will always be about comparisons. The appearance of the first Cummings biography in 25 years ought to be a moment of excitement and anticipation, especially since Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno has had access to “400 boxes of previously sealed papers from the archive of Harvard University” (*Methuen* advertisement, Feb. 2005).<sup>1</sup> Thus S-L should be able to bring to light material that Charles Norman and Richard Kennedy were not privy to, and the hope would be that this ‘new’ material could possibly kick-start a renaissance in EEC scholarship. However, I do not think this book will do that. Indeed, this book will only damage that attempt.

The first most obvious difference of this biography is sex—this book is stuffed full of EEC’s writings on sex: doing it, fantasising about it, and analysing it. We also find out in detail about EEC’s various affairs (and the affairs of his three long-term partners). A lot of this information is new, and S-L links these hitherto hidden thoughts to the work itself—but not in a wholly satisfactory way. For example, at the end of Chapter 24, we find out that EEC has a collection of “271 erotic poems that verged on the pornographic.” Some of these are “replete with numerous erotic drawings” (457). S-L then lists four examples, introducing the quotes with the following words:

As for the poems themselves, they range from silly to crude, as these (rather tamer) examples show: (458)

Two points arise: first, this sentence and the four examples end the chapter and thus receive no analysis whatsoever. The unearthing of 271 poems demands at least some sort of analysis—it is not enough to merely mention them. To do so smacks of some sort of repression or suppression. S-L makes the point early on that EEC suffered sexually at first—that he literally couldn’t get it up and when he did, not for long:

IF I HAD DONE MY JOB AS HUSBAND PROPERLY&ALL THIS  
WOULDN’T HAVE OCCURRED. it was my fault.... All she wanted was  
TO GO OFF.... This was worst thing a man could know about his life-  
this failure. (251)

So what was the function of these poems? Masturbation material? Repressed fantasies? How did they link to his published work? None of these questions are an-

swered; we are left with our own suppositions.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, why has S-L effectively censored the sample—why “tamer” examples? Is he scared of offending us? Surely, if we are to see a “warts and all” biography—something that is hinted at in the blurb—then we need to see these oddities, if only to place them in the picture S-L is building.

The whole “sex” material is implicit in Cummings’ poems and plays anyway, and thus the actual rubber-stamping (that EEC had a sexual life, complete with fantasies) is undercut from the beginning. Kennedy talks (more interestingly) about how EEC’s guilt affected his work—especially masturbation. It comes as no surprise to us that a poet who produced poems such as “may i feel said he” (CP 399) had a secret stash of sexual material—what is interesting is that EEC composed his own stash of sexually explicit material.

Sawyer-Lauçanno is guilty of what Norman and Kennedy are also guilty of—the lack of information about EEC’s life with Marion. Norman’s book is, quite frankly, awful on the subject, and Kennedy’s skirts around the issue far too delicately. Similarly, S-L refers less and less to EEC’s sexual life as the book goes on—especially with the link between a lack of sex life and his work.

Sawyer-Lauçanno avoids “touchy” subjects—for example, in dealing with EEC’s relationship with Nancy, he steadfastly refuses to put into print the simple fact that EEC fought a custody battle for Nancy simply to “get at” Elaine—otherwise, how can EEC’s instantaneous dropping of Nancy have ever happened? In other words, once EEC had another woman (Anne Barton) to fill up his time, he couldn’t have cared less about his daughter. This is a very important point, since EEC is famous for his “individualism” (something S-L is at pains to point out). This abandoning of his child is the flip side of that individualism—the rejection of sharing. EEC comes to realise late in his life that transcendence can also be reached through sharing, not only art. Yet here is evidence that at times EEC couldn’t do that—that art was his only interest, and his dedication to art shows him to be a selfish, non-social being. This is interesting territory that S-L never explores.

Sawyer-Lauçanno’s analysis of the work is never really insightful and adds nothing to the canon of pre-existing critical work. Indeed, his analyses of certain works are superficial to say the least. He hardly prints a poem in full—a mistake since “new” readers may make the assumption that what is on the page is actually the complete poem. S-L’s analysis of *Him* is inferior to Kennedy’s as is his dissection of EEC’s articles written for various magazines.

What I find really horrifying, though, are the numerous mistakes and borrowings from Kennedy. This is just sloppy research and harms the “Cummings cause.”

Here are a couple of examples of sloppy or lazy mistakes:

1. The poem “oil tel duh woil doi sez” (CP 312) is not “about card players” (335) as S-L claims—rather, it’s about an American WWI veteran bemoaning his fate in a French bar (cf. Chott). Though S-L shows that he has consulted *Spring* occasionally (see his Bibliography), he shows here that he isn’t particularly up to date with current criticism.
2. A small, but telling example: when S-L quotes “anyone lived in a pretty how town” (CP 515), he transcribes line 26 as “(and noone *stopped* to kiss his face)” (436) instead of the correct (and much more suggestive and telling) “(and noone *stooped* to kiss his face)” (italics added).

The list of errata in this biography is such that it begins to affect the reading of the book. (For more examples, see the following review.) Now we could put this lapse down to the publishers, but I suspect that S-L hasn’t proof-read the book closely at all. Either way, the more one reads, the more that the book begins to seem like a first draft undergraduate dissertation handed in at the last minute. It does not come across as serious academic research.

Perhaps the most unpleasant charge against the book has been that of plagiarism. In an article in *Harper’s Magazine*, Wyatt Mason makes a strong case that S-L’s biography “is jammed with instances of wholesale borrowing—not only of research but of storytelling and language” (99-100). In particular, Mason provides detailed examples of alleged plagiarism of passages from Kennedy’s biography. Furthermore, Washington Post critic Jonathan Yardley noted that the biography relied heavily on Mr. Kennedy’s work and might have benefited from a more thorough section of research notes.

Naturally, S-L defended himself—in Mason’s article, he is quoted as saying that he “obviously missed some places that should have been documented . . . . But I didn’t do it consciously” (100). In a March, 2005 *New York Times* article on the controversy, S-L responded to the charge of plagiarism by saying that it was “inaccurate and unfair.” Furthermore, he asserted that “Mr. Mason’s selected passages indicate—at most—that I failed to cite properly Kennedy’s contributions in a few of my 1,406 notes. I have corrected these oversights for the paperback edition of the book that Sourcebooks will publish in the fall. . . . This is an oversight, not plagiarism.”<sup>23</sup>

An oversight? Some would call this blindness. The constant drip-drip of errors, misinformation, “oversights,” and down-right mistakes provide a sour experience for the reader. The claim on the dusk-jacket that the book “deserves first place on any short list of Cummings’s scholarship” is nonsense. This is so badly written that I for one will actively encourage students to read it as a poor example of academic research.

Overall, this book must have been aimed at the general reader—the one who hasn't come across EEC in any detailed way. This is a pity, since what they will take away with them is the book's inconsistencies and misinformation. What galls me personally is that here in the UK this book was serialised in *The Guardian*—just as news broke of the plagiarism charge. What effect this has had on Cummings' scholarship over here isn't worth thinking about. It is certainly not scholars who will feel a sense of frustration and disappointment—the scholar's first book will still be Kennedy's. One senses that S-L loves EEC but this rather flattering portrait is flawed not just academically, but also in intent—it simply isn't brave or good enough.

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## Notes

- 1 The number 400 seems excessive. Perhaps the blurb-writers meant “400 *folders* of material”? [Editor's note.]
- 2 For different interpretations of this passage and of the passage later in this review on Cummings' custody battle for his daughter Nancy, see the following review. [Editor's note.]
- 3 The paperback edition of Sawyer-Lauçanno's biography has yet to appear. [Editor's note.]

## Works Cited

- Chott, Larry. “The Sight of Sound: Cummings' ‘oil tel duh woil doi sez’.” *Spring 6* (1997): 45-48. See <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/oiltel6.htm>
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