

## **E. E. Cummings: A Surprising Spenserian**

William Blissett

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In 1954, a large number of poets in mid- or late career received a letter reminding them that Edmund Spenser had long been acclaimed as “the poets’ poet” and asking them if they still read and admired Spenser. For all but a few Canadian recipients, the sender’s name (my own) would be strange, as well as the place of origin exotic—Saskatoon, the university city of the province of Saskatchewan. Well over half replied. I attribute this to the inherent interest of the enquiry and to the kindly disposition of poets. I uncovered no major Spenserians to continue the grand tradition of Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, and Yeats, for whom Spenser was indeed the poets’ poet for a crucial period, if not for a lifetime, but I did find many for whom Spenser counted to a limited but definable degree. I set myself the task of reading the complete published works and the major criticism of each of my poet-correspondents. This ruinous resolve accounts for half a century’s delay in advancing my project. In diligently looking for traces of Spenser, I also imposed on myself an equally difficult self-denying ordinance—not to squeeze until the pips squeaked.

Four of the American correspondents—lifelong poets, prolific, widely recognized, and (rare then, increasingly rare since) outside the academic community, surprised me by acknowledging an awareness of Spenser amounting to engagement. These were Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and E. E. Cummings.<sup>1</sup>

Intrigued for a moment by my approach, the first impulse of these four must have been to say something not patently untrue to this far-away enthusiast—some small thing, not deeply pondered, but good enough to set down and sign. Because signed and sent, it enters literary history. Of these, the letter from Cummings is (another surprise) the most formal, the least playful. Beautifully typed and spaced on the page, it is like a small polished piece by Brancusi:

November 19 1954

Dear Mr. Blissett--

your letter of November 13 has been  
forwarded by my agents. My reply is  
a question: how could anyone, who (like  
myself) admires primarily form--or what  
Berenson calls "decoration"--in the  
fine arts, fail to more than "respect"  
Edmund Spenser?

--sincerely

E. E. Cummings

In 1913, at the age of nineteen, Estlin Cummings published in *The Harvard Advocate* a poem called "Summer Silence," to the best of our knowledge, his only exercise in the Spenserian stanza:

Eruptive lightnings flitter to and fro  
Above the heights of immemorial hills;  
Thirst-stricken air, dumb-throated, in its woe  
Limply down-sagging, its limp body spills  
Upon the earth. A panting silence fills  
The empty vault of Night with shimmering bars  
Of sullen silver, where the lake distills  
Its misered bounty.—Hark! No whisper mars  
The utter silence of the untranslated stars. (CP 858)

This puts one in mind of Keats more than Spenser, and of Rossetti more than either, as is evidenced by "immemorial" and "untranslated." Cummings recalls having been introduced to Rossetti's sonnets as a youth by a neighbour, the philosopher Josiah Royce (*six* 29-30). From Rossetti, he must have learned and adopted the emphatically placed long negative word. Let me quote a few from Rossetti's *House of Life*: *imperishable, unimagined, untuneful, unpermitted, unmemorable, incommunicable*, and the line we all remember: "Sleepless with cold commemorative eyes."<sup>2</sup> "Epithalamion," the first poem of Cummings' first collection *Tulips and*

*Chimneys*, matches these with *unspeaking, unimaginable, insufferable, incognizable, inconceivable, irrevocable*. This specific influence continues over a whole lifetime, especially with the innumerable words (many of them coined) beginning with “un,” culminating in “that incredible / unanimal mankind” (CP 620). There is no Spenserian influence to match this. Nevertheless, “*Epithalamion*” takes its title as much from Spenser as from Catullus (Cummings read both as a student). An extended poem in a complicated stanza form ABCADCBD, this promising journeyman performance by Cummings cannot survive comparison with Spenser’s achieved masterpiece in the great matters of structure, continuity, or detail of writing. One of its stronger stanzas evokes the coming of dawn:

On dappled dawn forth rides the pungent sun  
with hooded day preening upon his hand  
followed by gay untimid final flowers  
(which dressed in various tremulous armor stun  
the eyes of ragged earth who sees them pass)  
while hunted from his kingdom winter cowers,  
seeing green armies steadily expand  
hearing the spear-song of the marching grass.      (CP 4)

The comparable stanza of Spenser’s *Epithalamion* proves to be, well, incomparable, even though it allows itself to rhyme “love” and “turtle dove,” now perhaps, after 400 years, a bit hackneyed:

Early, before the worlds light giving lampe  
His golden beame upon the hils doth spred,  
Having disperst the nights unchearefull dampe,  
Doe ye awake, and, with fresh lusty hed,  
Go to the bowre of my beloved love,  
My truest turtle dove:  
Bid her awake; for Hymen is awake,  
And long since ready forth his maske to move,  
With his bright Tead that flames with many a flake  
And many a bachelor to waite on him,  
In theyr fresh garments trim.  
Bid her awake therefore and soone her dight  
For lo the wished day is come at last,  
That shal for al the paynes and sorrowes past,  
Pay to her usury of long delight:  
And whylest she doth her dight,  
Doe ye to her of love and solace sing,  
That all the woods may answer and your eccho ring.

While at Harvard, Cummings took from W. A. Neilson a half-course on “The Nature and History of Allegory,” touching on the Bible, the *Roman de la Rose*, *Piers Plowman*, *Confessio Amantis*, and *Everyman*, followed by Spenser, Bunyan, the *Dunciad* and *Gulliver*, then *Endymion*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and Tennyson’s *Idylls* (Kennedy 63-64). A half-course! Unless it kills the student outright, it is bound to make him for life. From this sort of information, we may safely surmise that Cummings was well grounded in English literature, with competence in Classics and a growing proficiency in French. Was Cummings a *doctus poeta*, a learned poet? In the context of Spenser, the answer must be no. Spenser’s mentor, Gabriel Harvey, asserted that it is “not sufficient for poets, to be superficial humanists: but they must be exquisite artists, & curious universal scholars” (161).<sup>3</sup> Such poets are few: Virgil, Spenser, Milton, Coleridge, Goethe, Eliot. Cummings could deliver six well-received and publishable “nonlectures”—about himself as a poet. He set a splendid example by actually speaking, “delivering,” poems, giving time and attention to this neglected essential. But he was incapable of writing a set of essays in criticism—or of wanting to do so.

As I opened the letter from Cummings, I hoped and rather expected to find some reference to Spenser’s allegory. Keats remarked that Shakespeare lived a life of allegory;<sup>4</sup> certainly the two main outer events in Cummings’ life—his incarceration in 1917 as a suspicious character in a French detention camp and his travels in 1931 in the Soviet Union—are both presented in a quasi-allegorical fashion. Of this the letter says nothing.

Indeed, of this *The Enormous Room* says nothing until the beginning of chapter five, and then only as an “extrinsic observation”:

In the preceding pages, I have described my Pilgrim’s Progress from the Slough of Despond, commonly known as Section Sanitaire Vingt-et-Un . . . through the mysteries of Noyon Creil and Paris to the Porte de Triage de La Ferté-Macé, Orne. With the end of my first day as a certified inhabitant of the latter institution a definite progression is brought to a close. Beginning with my second day at La Ferté a new period opens. This period extends to the moment of my departure and includes the discovery of the Delectable Mountains . . . (82)

No allegorist would so comment on his allegory; nevertheless, the reader is thus alerted to a scattering of allusions to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the movement from the opening *locus* to one near the end. The narrator sees

himself as a sort of pilgrim in a bewildering world, and he encounters other persons in various states of patience, acquiescence, rebellion, and defeat. The place of detention itself (memorably named “the Enormous Room”—huge and out of the norm of reasonable expectation) is a sort of allegorical structure, a great bad place, with vividly imagined pockets and recesses, loosely comparable to Apollyon’s realm in Bunyan or to the House of Busyrane or Grantorto’s castle in Spenser. But these allegorical stopping places are matched by no structure of allegory, no balancing of event and event, character and character. The persons do not add up to a human totality, as they do in achieved allegory. They are like characters in Dickens, which is praise, but not the praise that belongs to allegory. The limitation follows quite naturally from Cummings’ rejection of the “idea” as something refined into airless abstraction, hostile to life and to feeling. He is a Cynic, in the best classical sense, in which Diogenes, with a lantern by daylight looking for an honest man, is a Cynic, and Iago saying “virtue? A fig!” is not a Cynic. Cummings’ poems of scorn and rejection come within the purview of cynical rhetoric, the “diatribe.”

The Bunyan references are just clear enough and frequent enough to catch the eye of reviewers and to invite the reader to toy with them but cannot bear any serious weight of interpretation.<sup>5</sup> For Bunyan, the “Delectable Mountains” are a definite though mysterious allegorical place, in the vicinity and with a view of the Celestial City; for Cummings, the phrase “Delectable Mountains” is decorative, applying to persons of whose existence and nature he approves for no explainable reason save the promptings of his heart, which indeed he regards as good reason, the only reason. Had the phrase been available then, they might just as well have been called the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

In the Prefatory Letter to Raleigh, Spenser called *The Faerie Queene* “a continued allegory, or dark conceit.” Cummings is conceited enough, both in the old literary sense of verbal ingenuity and decorative finish and in the modern sense of self-congratulation, but he does not “continue,” lacking, or scorning, what his first mentor, Rossetti, called “fundamental brain-work.”

In the other extended prose writing, he travels in a more enormous, vastly worse, place, the Soviet Union in 1931. *EIMI* is denser stylistically than *The Enormous Room*, but simpler structurally, being essentially a day-to-day expanded diary, a mode of presentation hardly compatible with allegory and far indeed from Spenser. Spenser was careful to devise *The Shep-*

*heardes Calender* as proportional to the twelve months of the year; he balanced his poems of celebration with poems of complaint; he fashioned his sonnets into a coherent sequence; and the books and cantos and stanzas of *The Faerie Queene* display expert joinery. Like the shadow of Bunyan in the earlier book, the shadow of Dante falls on *ELMI* from time to time.<sup>6</sup> The place is an inferno, sure enough, and the first guide is likened to and called Virgil; another guide is very loosely likened to and called Beatrice. It is unthinkable that Beatrice should appear in the *Inferno*: the error undoes any Dantesque effect. These are glancing allusions, not worked out, because not thought out, on principle. Allegory is in its nature deliberate, “labored” if you disapprove. Though its double-take can be made nearly simultaneous and its action energetic, it can never be or seem spontaneous. Cummings eschews, on principle as “willed,” the discipline necessary for allegory. Allusion is not influence. When it comes to influence on Cummings, the influence of Spenser, or Bunyan, or Dante, as allegorists is as nothing to the influence of Krazy Kat.

Leave allegory, try “decoration.”

Cummings intends the word “decoration” in Bernard Berenson’s sense, which is approving. There is, of course, a disapproving sense, strong among Modernists of Cummings’ breed and still widely current, as in the dismissive phrase “purely decorative,” with its overtones of the showy, the cosmetic, the meretricious. Consider the gradations in the gamut from no to yes: prettified, dolled up, dressed up, dressed to the nines, looking great, impressive, glorious, resplendent—“life-enhancing,” in Berenson’s own memorable phrase. The fact that each of these has its disenchanting opposite is yet another reminder that celebration generates complaint, something Spenser and Cummings could agree on.

Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), in his time the leading expert on Italian painting of the Renaissance, published late in life a distillation of his thoughts on art under the title *Aesthetics and History* (1948). If Cummings had just read the Doubleday Anchor Books reprint of 1954, it might well have been at the top of his mind when my enquiry arrived late that year.<sup>7</sup> Here is Berenson on “decoration”:

Decoration comprises all the elements in a work of art that distinguish it from a mere reproduction of the shape of things: tactile values and movement of course, proportion, arrangement, space composition, in short everything in the field of visual representation that is made life-

enhancing by means of ideated sensations. In other terms, decoration is presentative and not representative. (94)

This is a definition in terms specifically of painting, but Cummings extends it to “the fine arts,” including Spenser’s poetry and his own. “Decoration” in the general sense of embellishment and adornment (“illustration” in du Bellay’s French) was current in Spenser’s time, though the more usual word for this in oratory and poetry was “ornamentation,” an activity of the third part of rhetoric (after the amassing and arranging of one’s material): *elocutio*, finding the words and schemes and tropes, all that are necessary and no more than are necessary to make one’s topic interesting, attractive, and convincing. The Elizabethans, among whom I would place Spenser and Cummings, aim at amplitude in this regard; the Jacobeans, among whom I would place Donne and Eliot, aim at concentration. Nothing of a logician, Cummings must be acclaimed as an accomplished rhetorician, or decorator, and, before that, an enthusiastic grammarian, delighting in the details of diction, syntax, and accident, and in literality of layout. He relies on our firm grounding in grammar for the effectiveness of his departures from it at the dictates of rhetorical decoration.

Spenser’s intention to make of *The Faerie Queene* a highly decorative work of literature shows itself at once in the minutely thought-out continued allegory and in the detailed architecture, the “gothic unity,” of the six books. A second, independent, equally decorative quality is to be found in continuous minute attention to style, especially the diction, relying on archaic and dialectal words and phrases in old spelling, all devised so as to direct the attention of the reader to the text as a unique kind of literature. Spenser’s “decorative vocabulary,” in Ezra Pound’s phrase (5), is as omnipresent and as demanding as the special typographical layout is in Cummings.<sup>8</sup> Ben Jonson, a classicist, grumbled that “Spenser in affecting the ancients writ no language,” by “the ancients” meaning in this context Chaucer and other early English writers (38). Cummings scatters patterns of sounds so that they should not be missed; his characteristic turn, or trope, is to squeeze unique positive poetic statements out of negative ones, and to reclothe one part of speech in the costume of another, often with the application of pretty firm horseplay. This he does to such an extent that a complaint might be made that, like Spenser, he “writ no language.” Some of his poems, including the famous “grasshopper,” are so occluded by this and other devices that they defy reading aloud, the fifth part of rhetoric, “pronunciation,” or delivery.<sup>9</sup>

In the long Spenserian tradition, only a few poets have made any use of his archaic diction, usually with humorous intent, as in Shenstone's *School-mistress*. Cummings jokingly allowed himself "derring-do" (*EIMI* 31).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Cummings' devices are often parodied—just for fun, or by reviewers who want to demonstrate that they can do it as well as he can. (No, they can't.)

Let us consider briefly two poems from the time of the 1954 letter that work typically well. One is a spring poem, the other a moon poem. That figures: the year for Cummings has 300 days and nights of spring, and the moon for him is the supremely decorative thing. Spenser, in contrast, holding himself to larger patterns, gives spring its due welcome but not to the neglect of any month or season.

i thank You God for most this amazing  
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing and—lifted from the no  
of all nothing—human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened) (CP 663)

In this Unitarian Easter poem, the poet lifts up his heart in simple praise. It is a sonnet, most of its rhymes full, some approximate. The lines are of equal duration though metrically free. Some details are foregrounded so as to demand attention, achieving acceptance and delight. The placing of "most" in the first line is odd, but it would be less effective anywhere else. "Greenly" and "illimitably" are adverbs pretending to modify the succeeding nouns but really reaching back to remaster the previous words "leaping" and "happening." "Natural" and "infinite" make an uneasy pair. But they are reconciled by "yes," whose power carries over to nullify the "no" of "all nothing." I take pleasure in the third quatrain, which has the



same form as the letter of November 19, 1954.

The second poem (likewise a sonnet, rhymed in irregular fashion but metrically more regular) has a distinctive layout on the page that I think is the key to its delivery.

luminous tendril of celestial wish  
  
(whying diminutive bright deathlessness  
to these my not themselves believing eyes  
adventuring, enormous nowhere from)  
  
querying affirmation; virginal  
  
immediacy of precision: more  
and perfectly more most ethereal  
silence through twilight's mystery made flesh—  
  
dreams slender exquisite white firstful flame  
  
—new moon! as (by the miracle of your  
sweet innocence refuted) clumsy some  
dull cowardice called a world vanishes,  
  
teach disappearing also me the keen  
illimitable secret of begin (CP 663)

A single line, followed after a pause by three, the pattern repeated twice, the sonnet closing with a couplet. Aside from the widely-separated “wish” and “flesh” and “from” and “flame,” its only near-rhyme is “keen” followed by that new moon of a word, the noun “begin.” The poem consists almost entirely of decorative turns, in Berenson’s sense: this we can see without further analysis.

Spenser’s *Amoretti* is a sequence of 89 sonnets. With some surprise, we note that Cummings wrote well over 200 sonnets or sonnet-patterned short poems. Even the plainest sonnet is an act of decoration. What it does not entail is architecture. It can contribute to architecture only by disposition in sequence, as in Dante and Petrarch, Sidney and Shakespeare, Rossetti and Auden. While few sonnet cycles are inexorably sequential, most move in some sense of succession. We are tempted to impose patterns on them—carnal to transcendental perhaps—but Cummings never did and never tried.<sup>11</sup> This is in character: he was completely an individualist and didn’t want his poems to join together and march in step. Though in an age of

parricide, he loved and revered his father, he could not have gone any distance with him in the study of sociology or the proclamation of a social gospel. He seemed to believe there is no such thing as “society.”

A last observation: Spenser and Cummings were both lifelong professional poets of rich and voluminous achievement. Collected, their poems form hefty books, in Spenser’s case either sumptuous collectors’ items or academic editions—tiny type, crowded pages, thin paper—such as dominated the earlier twentieth century. In Cummings’ case, we have now, and are grateful for, the eleven-hundred pages of the *Complete Poems*. But one cannot help recalling the Foreword to *is* 5: “the Eternal Question and Immortal Answer of burlesk, viz. ‘Would you hit a woman with a child?’ ‘No, I’d hit her with a brick’ ” (CP 221).

*The Complete Poems* are excellent for reference and scholarly purposes, but just as I like to read Shakespeare’s plays in individual editions and *The Faerie Queene* in two volumes if not in six, so I would welcome a generous selection of Cummings’ inventive exercises in sonnet form, or a book of spring poems, or a book of raucous and funny poems. Moon poems, too—the one quoted here, and the one that so delighted the past-mistress of the light line, Marianne Moore, beginning:

i’ve come to ask you if there isn’t a  
new moon outside your window saying if

that’s all, just if”

(CP 572)

Too many moon poems, too much moonwork? Perhaps so? One is put in mind of the opening of *Barnaby Rudge*, where a traveller comes in one night and makes a remark about the moon. The surly innkeeper replies, “You let the moon alone and I’ll leave you alone.” The traveller says, “No offense, I hope.” To this, the reply is, “No offense as yet” (83). How Cummings would laugh at this with us—and with a bit of luck, and a lot of skill, make a poem of it.

—Toronto, Canada

## Notes

1. At a meeting of the International Association of University Professors of English in Lund, Sweden, 2007, I gave a paper, “ ‘Who Knows Not Colin Clout?’ ” on Spenser and Walter de la Mare, Marianne Moore, and Robert Penn Warren. At the next conference, in Malta, I dealt with

- “Three Surprising Spenserians: E. E. Cummings, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams,” from which I have taken, with revision, the present essay.
2. This is the last line of sonnet 97 in the *House of Life*, titled “A Superscription.” Among Cummings’ books preserved at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas is a 1927 reprint of William Ponsonby’s 1595 edition of Spenser’s *Amoretti and Epithalamion*. [Editor’s note]
  3. Harvey, Gabriel. *Marginalia*. G. C. Moore-Smith, ed., in the margin of *Dionysius Periegetes*. [Editor’s note: Cummings was more learned than is often supposed. His notes at the Houghton Library show that he was at least, as Milton Cohen puts it, “a closet intellectual” (17).]
  4. Keats in a letter to the George Keatses, 18 February 1819.
  5. The possibilities of such interpretation are carefully presented by David E. Smith’s “*The Enormous Room* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress*” (1965). I hold to my reservations.
  6. I have similar reservations about another well-researched paper by Allan A. Metcalf, “Dante and E. E. Cummings.”
  7. Cummings did indeed own a copy of Berenson’s *Aesthetics and History* (Pantheon, 1953). The book is now in the Cummings collection at the Harry Ransom Center. The entry for the volume in the online catalogue notes: “Manuscript notations throughout text.” [Editor’s note]
  8. This I read as conceding that a poet may have a “decorative vocabulary” but that other poets shouldn’t mop it up.
  9. Cummings wrote to a correspondent in 1960, “not all of my poems are to be read aloud—some . . . are to be seen & not heard” (*Letters* 267).
  10. It may be noted that Cummings with fair consistency used the spelling “faerie.”
  11. Editor’s note: Cummings did arrange his books in complex thematic and mathematical patterns. For example, *No Thanks* begins with two moon poems and ends with two star poems, and groups of three visual poems are bookended by two sonnets. See Webster, “Poemgroups.”

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## Appendix:

Cummings' "Spenserian Stanza" as published in *The Harvard Advocate*, Vol. 95, March 7, 1913. [Source: Hopkinson, "The Early *Advocate*: e. e. cummings."]

### Summer Silence.

(Spenserian Stanza.)

ERUPTIVE lightnings flutter to and fro  
Above the heights of immemorial hills;  
Thirst-stricken air, dumb-throated, in its woe  
Limply down-sagging, its limp body spills  
Upon the earth. A panting silence fills  
The empty vault of Night with shimmering bars  
Of sullen silver, where the lake distils  
Its misered bounty.—Hark! No whisper mars  
The utter silence of the untranslated stars.

E. E. Cummings, '15.