

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

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I

I doubt that anyone, not even Richard S. Kennedy, has looked at every scrap of paper and read every word preserved in the 288 blue boxes of notes, letters, drawings, and drafts that Cummings and his widow Marion Morehouse left to the care of the Houghton Library at Harvard University. And of course, there are more Cummings letters, proof sheets, and manuscripts at other libraries: the Beinecke at Yale, the New York Public Library, the Clifton Waller Barrett collection at the University of Virginia, and Harry Ransom collection at the University of Texas at Austin are the most prominent of these. By leaving so much writing behind, Cummings made the task of would-be biographers very difficult. If no one person can digest all those writings, how can anyone possibly comprehend the man? Indeed, Cummings saw his own being as a mystery, not to be plumbed even by himself. As he says at the end of the poem “so many selves(so many fiends and gods)” (CP 609): “—how should a fool that calls him ‘I’ presume / to comprehend not numerable whom?”

Cummings is thus like the elephant of the Indian fable, and his readers and admirers are like the proverbial blind men, each of whom has grasped and described a part of the beast (say, the trunk, or a leg, or the tail) thinking they know the whole. For example, this particular blind man strenuously disagrees with Iain Landles’ assertion in the previous review that Cummings “fought a custody battle for Nancy simply to ‘get at’ Elaine.” To me, the record “simply” does not show that Cummings’ motives were so one-dimensional, unfeeling, and vindictive—he loved Nancy and wanted to see her. Neither does the record show that he “instantaneous[ly]” dropped Nancy. But perhaps Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno’s sloppy presentation of the material has influenced Iain’s view of the matter. And that’s the real point. To avoid misleading their readers, biographers must strive first for a fair and accurate presentation of the evidence. We cannot arrive at a decent interpretation of the evidence without a first having a coherent, dispassionate, and detailed review of the actual record.

Besides the sheer volume of the evidence—the incredible number of words that must be read to master that evidence—we have the problem of how to put those words into some sort of context. For example, Cummings recorded many of his dreams, and interpreting dreams has been a perilous enterprise since Joseph spoke with the Pharaoh. (For an attempt, see Forrest.) Cummings also (obsessively, it seems) recorded his psychological self-questionings. Some of these questionings are on display in Sawyer-Lauçanno’s biography and in Landles’ review. Indeed, the pas-

sage where Cummings accuses himself of not doing his “JOB AS HUSBAND PROPERLY” may be interpreted quite differently than Landles does. One could interpret the passage as I do (and as Sawyer-Lauçanno seems to do) as saying that Cummings berates himself *not* for failing to “get it up,” but for failing to provide pleasure for Elaine.¹ Certainly other texts can be found to support the contention that it was Elaine, not Cummings, who had difficulties achieving intimacy. Reading through the thousands of pages of “Personal notes,” one gets the feeling that Cummings wrote down every passing thought, question, worry, fantasy. It’s not true of course. Even though Cummings left us a mountain of texts, they are only a small fraction of his lived experience.

So a biographer has at least three imperatives: accuracy, selection, and presentation. Sawyer-Lauçanno fails at all three. Some parts of the life he can never know, and the parts that he can know must be dug out of the archives or created from interviews, transcribed accurately, selected carefully, and presented in some sort of narrative, psychological, literary, critical order. Though Sawyer-Lauçanno does provide us with many new selections from Cummings’ personal notes and though he does give us some new details (sometimes juicy or sordid) of Cummings’ life, he fails to master those details and find an order, a narrative line, a theme. He concentrates on presenting the life and scants the analysis of poetry and prose. Perhaps one reason he fails is that he follows too closely the narrative and scenic structure of Richard S. Kennedy’s biography, *Dreams in the Mirror*.

II

In May, 2005 *Harper’s* published Wyatt Mason’s review-essay of Sawyer-Lauçanno’s biography, titled “Make It Newish: E. E. Cummings, plagiarism, and the perils of originality.” Mason’s essay is by far the longest and most carefully considered and researched review of Sawyer-Lauçanno’s book that I have read.² The first half of the essay places Cummings within the larger context of modernism, noting that even though his poetry remains “enduringly filled with vigor, intelligence, and beauty” (95), his reputation, along with those fellow modernists James Joyce and Ezra Pound, has declined in recent years. Mason’s basic contention seems to be that modernist experimentation alienated later readers. Modernist writing was made *too* new for our lazy age to bother with it. Cummings, for all his “watchmaker” (94) complexity, was rejected for being too sentimental, too trivial. Mason then proceeds to wonder why a normally “generous reader of poetry” like Helen Vendler “dropped Cummings’s work whole into the critical basin, closed the lid, and flushed.” His answer is that the modernist experiment failed:

What such a blithe dismissal of Cummings’s work means is this: Modernism failed. The artistic shelter it designed to bridge the storm of unmediated information wasn’t structurally sound. Modernism hadn’t merely hoped to produce writing that would be read in the world; it promised to

produce writing so good that it might fundamentally, and lastingly, change the way we look at the world—or, at the very least, compel a wise critic such as Helen Vendler to engage with one of its texts instead of spurning it as if it were simply more noise. (95)

Here, I would quarrel a bit with Mason's analysis. Helen Vendler certainly has little trouble accepting a modernist like Wallace Stevens. It's more likely that Vendler saw Cummings as mere sentimental noise for the same reasons Blackmur saw the poet's language as "babytalk"—they could not see beyond the Romantic or satiric façades to the precise and intelligent artist beneath. They assumed that feeling could not be as subtle as thinking—a scholar's error, to be sure. In other words the fault, dear Brutus, lies not so much in modernism as it does in ourselves. More pertinent, it seems to me, than any failure of modernism, are our failures as readers and scholars.

For Mason, neither of Cummings' two earlier biographers, Charles Norman or Richard S. Kennedy, was interested in why modernism failed. But when he turns to critique Sawyer-Lauçanno's biography, Mason examines not modernism's failure but Sawyer-Lauçanno's. Mason reluctantly decides that Sawyer-Lauçanno has committed plagiarism, but I would say that, technically, Sawyer-Lauçanno is not guilty of this crime. For example, he never repeats Kennedy word for word, and he will often introduce new material of his own. However, he often follows Kennedy's construction of scenes, repeating the same sources in the same order. Mason offers ample examples to support his case, but to me, this sort of re-doing is not plagiarism but simple laziness. At times, Sawyer-Lauçanno will lift quotes and facts from Kennedy without attribution, or he attributes the quotes not to Kennedy, but to the primary sources, "suggesting that he found them on his own" (Mason 99). And while Mason acknowledges that "there is no question, and every indication, that [Sawyer-Lauçanno] charted countless hours reading in the archives" (98), he basically accuses Sawyer-Lauçanno of trying to pass off Kennedy's hard work as his own and hoping no one would notice.

As distressing as Sawyer-Lauçanno's dependence on Kennedy might be for some, even more distressing to me are the numerous errors that pepper the biography. I will mention here only three of the most egregious. [I've compiled a longer list, available to anyone who may be interested.] In his account of Cummings' detention at La Ferté Macé, Sawyer-Lauçanno writes that "the [detention] complex consisted of two large buildings, each three stories high, plus the converted chapel where Cummings was housed" (120). As the late Jack Gill pointed out to me, this sentence contains at least two errors: including the chapel, there are *three* large buildings in the complex, and Cummings was not housed in the chapel. Cummings receives his mattress or *paillasse* in the chapel (*Enormous Room* 42), but of course he is housed with everyone else in the Enormous Room, on the fourth floor of another building in the complex. It seems obvious that Sawyer-Lauçanno did not read *The Enormous Room* very atten-

tively. Nor did he bother to read Jack Gill's two articles detailing the complex layout of the buildings at La Ferté Macé. This error will have to stand for the many errors in the chapter on *The Enormous Room*. As Jack Gill wrote to me in an e-mail: "in most of the quotations in this chapter there are other errors, many words are omitted, punctuation and capitalization misquotes occur, the footnotes contain a wrong page reference to the ER, etc."

My second example is less eye-popping than the first, but it illustrates Sawyer-Lauçanno's sloppiness. He quotes a famous sentence of *Him* as follows: "An artist, a man, a failure, I MUST PROCEED" (298). Of course, the sentence should read: "An artist, a man, a failure, MUST PROCEED" (*Him* 13). It may seem like a small mistake, but as Bernard F. Stehle wrote to me, this is "arguably [the] most important sentence in all of HIM."

Every biographer must have an immense amount of stamina to see the project through to completion. One cannot merely *think* one knows, or guess, or remember that one heard something somewhere, one must *know* and document that knowledge. Then one must double-check to make sure. The biographer cannot *assume*. I think that Sawyer-Lauçanno assumes that he knows something when he confidently asserts that the poem "Doveglion" in *Adventures in Value* is about David Diamond (536). As readers of *Spring* are aware, the poem and photo depict another of Cummings' friends, José García Villa (cf. Cowen). Of course, even Kennedy makes errors. (In one case, Sawyer-Lauçanno copies Kennedy's errors in one difficult passage from Cummings' notes, while adding one of his own. Then he compounds the problem by citing in his notes the same erroneous call number that Kennedy cites. See Kennedy 282, 504, note 1 and Sawyer-Lauçanno 289 and note 289.)

Of course, Kennedy makes far fewer errors than Sawyer-Lauçanno does, and my theory about this is as follows. Kennedy put in a lot of hard work interviewing people who knew Cummings, reading letters and memoirs, transcribing notes, searching for medical records, etc. The hard work made him at once surer and more suspicious of his knowledge. He knew what he didn't know, so he checked. For large chunks of his biography, Sawyer-Lauçanno relies on Kennedy's work, and this makes him lazier than any biographer has a right to be. He thinks he knows.

III

Nevertheless, Sawyer-Lauçanno's biography has its real merits. As already stated, the book does add new material from the notes and other sources. For example, Sawyer-Lauçanno quotes more extensively from Brown's World War I letters than Kennedy does (but does not mention—as Kennedy does—that knowing about the French mutinies may have been the real cause of Cummings' and Brown's internment). Access to papers that were supposedly off-limits to Kennedy allows Sawyer-Lauçanno to add an account of Marion's one-night stand with A. J. Ayer, as well as

providing details of her more serious affair with Paul Rotha. And in at least one case, it seems to me that Sawyer-Lauçanno presents a more coherent version of some events and their resonance in Cummings' later life. (Compare his account of the episode when Reverend Cummings' car was impounded by the police while parked in front of a brothel [69-70] with Kennedy's accounts [89-90; 103-104].)

Sawyer-Lauçanno also transcribes a fascinating note on Ezra Pound in which Cummings meditates on the differences between Pound the generous poet and Pound the "incoherent bore" who "raved away frantically at (if not against) America" (464-465). Sawyer-Lauçanno's view of the older Cummings' psychology takes its cue from a document that Kennedy fails to mention—one in which Cummings analyzes his two selves, one cranky and suspicious of women, the other cheerful and humorous (502-506). This is a somewhat more balanced view of the later Cummings than that presented by Kennedy, who often gives the impression that the poet's "querulousness" (*Dreams* 393) and dark moods were alleviated only by summers in New Hampshire. For example, Sawyer-Lauçanno's view of Cummings' occasional anti-Semitic notes divides the poet into the head filled with the poor logic of stereotypes and the heart that responded positively and joyously to any true individual (see pp. 426-430). While this analysis may not convince all readers—Cummings' head seems stronger to me than Sawyer-Lauçanno allows—it is at least worth pondering.

Also worth considering is Sawyer-Lauçanno's view that Marion's conservatism influenced Cummings' politics (425). But here, as elsewhere, Sawyer-Lauçanno is content to suggest avenues of thought rather than explore them. As Wyatt indicates in his review, perhaps this sort of surface concern with people's lives—what they wrote, what they said, who they slept with—is symptomatic of the age we live in. With "information" so readily available on the internet, our age has made it easier to skim the surface of knowledge. Knowledge seems so cheap, so easy, just a mouse-click away. For example, the *Harvard Magazine* for March-April 2005 printed an article by Adam Kirsch titled (in the PDF version that reproduces the magazine's layout) "the rebellion of e. e. cummings: the poet's artful reaction against his father—and his alma mater." Despite the lower-case antics of the title (no doubt the cute invention of some editor), Kirsch employs upper case for Cummings' initials throughout. (In this case, real information on the Cummings Society's recommendation that the poet's initials be capitalized *is* readily available on the internet at <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/caps.htm>.) Drawing most of his information from Sawyer-Lauçanno's biography, Kirsch discusses the poet's twin rebellions against his father and Harvard, concluding that "even [Cummings'] most adventurous work seem[s] like the antics of a beloved child, certain that his transgressions will be forgiven" (99). In spite of his own Harvard education, Kirsch seems never to have heard of Richard S. Kennedy's earlier groundbreaking biography. He writes: "The full scope of the University's role in Cummings's life can be fully appreciated only now, thanks to a new biography of the poet by Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno" (49). (Kirsch's article is

No one can know everything. But if we write an informative article or review or book for publication, we must be conscientious enough to find legitimate sources, check them carefully, and make sure that we know what we don't know. Otherwise, errors will proliferate. Otherwise, we will make it even easier for the current unworld that we inhabit to fail to produce people who care about getting it right, who care enough to think at length about the connections between the life of the poet and the life of the poems, who care enough to put in the hard work it takes to read a great writer's work carefully and fully. In a cyberspace virtual world of instant, unedited, uncheckable, trivial, and possibly erroneous "information," in a world full of canned 30 second sound-bytes that go down easy and leave not a trace behind, very few people will want to expend any intense intellectual effort when they read. Or when they research and write. And Cummings demands attention, alertness, aliveness. His poems are not meant to be like the ubiquitous background chatter of a droning television, "consumed" while the half-awake "viewer" cracks open the next cool beverage and slumps onto the couch. A Cummings poem is an actual experience, one you can have only if you are alive and paying attention.

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Notes

- 1 Sawyer-Lauçanno writes somewhat ambiguously that Cummings "decided that his inability to give Elaine an orgasm was proof that he was a failure as a lover" (251).
- 2 In May, 2006, Mason won a "Reviews and Criticism" award from the American Society of Magazine Editors for this and two other reviews. See "Harper's Magazine Wins Twice."

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