

**Review of *E. E. Cummings' Modernism and the Classics: Each Imperishable Stanza* by J. Alison Rosenblitt (Oxford University Press, 2016)**

Etienne Terblanche

---

To the Cummings scholar as well as the scholar of classical literature, this handsomely published cloth-bound book with its beautiful dust jacket displaying one of Cummings' remarkably tense and balanced classicist line drawings (of which further samples are printed within the covers) offers an intriguing and highly useful platform for further study. Indeed, at its inception the book invites "today's undergraduates," who are "tomorrow's scholars," to further pursue its expedition into Cummings' classical influences (17); and its final sentence expresses the hope that if "this book prompts the researches of others, that would be my greatest satisfaction" (248).

For, as Rosenblitt explains, Cummings' classicist translations and his aesthetic notes about classical texts are somewhat disorganized and bulky, hence hard to navigate (317). She has completed the considerable job of beginning this adventure with aplomb, and the fact that the book suggestively adopts all kinds of directions and fields as it undertakes its odyssey is therefore to be praised.

The first, argument-directed part of the book I shall return to presently. The second part, in many ways its most pleasing and valuable aspect, offers a rich and well-organized collection of "Translations, Further Verse, and Prose" by our non-hero, as related to the classical influence on his work. Here, Rosenblitt notes that, given that the archival materials are vast and given "Cummings' present stature," she has limited the number of archival texts and the amount of textual apparatuses in this second part of the book.

Her research offers a first invaluable straightening out of classical Cummingsian archival affairs, including an important correction of Richard S. Kennedy's and George James Firmage's printing in their *Etcetera*, of two poems that, through painstaking precision, Rosenblitt has determined are actually two parts in a five-part parody of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (215-222, 322). How effective that parody and its classicism are the book does not say, arguing that Cummings' parody places "Eliot and *The Waste Land* into the larger modernist context," seeing the poem "as part of—not apart from—Eliot's earlier work" (219).

The section titled "Editing the Unpublished Work" in this second part of the book, along with the Appendix titled "Cummings' Education and

---

Library” will serve as solid starting points (and points of return) for scholars who wish to engage the Cummings archives housed in the Houghton Library at Harvard University and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Furthermore, the actual printing and crisp arrangement here of full materials from Cummings’ translations offer anyone interested in his work food for thought, not least in terms of the classical foundations of finding his poetic voice, his form.

The book’s argument-directed first part falls under four headings. The first, “E. E. Cummings as a Classical Poet,” focusses on his translations at Harvard and the impact of classical poetics on his early development; the second, “Childhood, Harvard, and Paganism,” turns classicist attentions to his paganism with a view to his upbringing, Harvard years, and early poems, with special reference to the much-discussed goat-footed balloonman. Part three, “The Great War and Beyond,” makes the important argument that Cummings should be viewed more frequently and intensely as a war poet, since he *participated* in the Great War. It links the poet’s classical references with his war experience, including a suggestive exploration of correspondences between his writing and that of H. D. And the final, fourth part titled “Cummings, Classics, and Modernism,” details how Cummings’ classicist awareness and training inform his struggle with modernist form.

My review would be incomplete without briefly mentioning in greater detail at least some highlights in the first part of the book. Have we critics perhaps forgotten, for instance, that Cummings’ openness about sex is underpinned by his encounter with the classics (13)? The poet was further inspired by Greek poetry towards “the licence he takes with capitalization,” including, as Rosenblitt delightfully points out, his playful poetic dancing down a path of sensuous Greek letters with the tap dancer Paul Draper in the poem “floatfloatloflf” (33; CP 431). Moreover, the Classics clearly shape Cummings’ lasting sense of metre (55), a topic worthy of more intense discussion. Similarly, his brilliant playing with “the stanza form of mixed line-length” gained impetus from his encounter with the classics (56). One learns from this book that his goat-footed Pan-paganism can be understood properly only by knowing his classical influences as surprisingly and inspiringly for this reader, his careful listening to Debussy (76)!

Incidentally, one agrees wholeheartedly that biographical approaches to a poem such as “in Just-” (CP 27) can be reductive (78). Another highlight (among numerous others) is how the book poignantly discusses the classical elephant (Cummings’ totem) in *Adventures in Value*, complete with a Marion Morehouse photograph of a stone that really does look like this animal as seen slightly diagonally from behind, along with a discussion of classicist John Finley (94-95), who also appears in *Adventures*.

For lack of space, I mention just one or two more salient instances of how Rosenblitt's approach teaches, and teaches exquisitely well: the book illuminates anew how Cummings' phrase that death "hides in a fragility / of poppies" (CP 55) connects with poppies as a war symbol (148), as well as adding a classical component to the influence of Freud and Cézanne, noted by Cohen, on Cummings' aesthetic of "seeing around" form, extending this notion to the poet's capacity to create verbal *bulges* and opening one's eyes anew to his verbal skill in that adjective's many senses (201).

Let these instances suffice as pointers to what the book's reader may look forward to. Somewhere I have to confess, though, that in some respects I may or may not be what Umberto Eco would term the Model Reader (821) for this text. I dare to think (see Cohen 63) that a major part of Cummings' past-present dialectic happens to be Zen-Taoist, orientalist, or whatever label one prefers for his unique sense that the earth is a moving, fragile energy who moves us all, as portrayed in dynamic manner through Western "ideograms." As the book indeed indicates, Mary David Babcock raises the point about China's formal influence on the poet (see, among others, pages 29, 50, 84). But aside from these mentions, plus two brief discussions of Ezra Pound's *Cathay* (29, 50-51) and the odd reference to Norman Friedman's work on Cummings' Taoist aspect, this monograph could have taken more care with Cummings' indubitable and vital classicist-Taoist influence. A more nuanced synthesis of Cummings' classicism and orientalism is probably unavoidable. It is also imperative for understanding his poetry and appreciating its modern status in full. Indeed, a problem centering on the (classicist) past-present dialectic in Cummings is that the increasing intellectual body of work on modern poetry's classical Far Eastern origins, careful and enlightening studies by authors such as Wai Lim Yip, Zhaoming Qian (who, himself Chinese-English, relishes in the Chinese influence on modern poetry), Eric Hayot, Cynthia Stamy, Robert Kern, William W. Bevis, and George Steiner (in terms of translation), do not mention Cummings, hence (again) marginalizing his oeuvre exactly there where he could be inscribed most assuredly *within* the movement.

Minor concerns: apparently even Oxford University Press now suffers from spelling interferences created by computer spell-checkers, for instance "Forward" instead of "Foreword" (27)—given Cummings' emphasis on movement within that very foreword, not a bad pun, perhaps. The book's editor also irritatingly follows the Wikipedia trend, so prevalent among my own students, to ignore the English pronouns in sentences such as "No doubt *Cummings'* marriage to Anne, which lasted from 1929 to 1932, influenced *Cummings'* [what has happened to the very useful "his"?] interest in and attitudes to questions of sexual abuse" (103; emphasis added). Finally, while my personal reading style is usually not too nonplussed about jumps

in texts, and may even enjoy some of these, the editing of this book has overlooked the odd confounding gap, for instance between the citation from Cummings' foreword to *is 5* and the subsequent discussion, which refrains from integrating the citation (27).

Friedman's rightful insistence that Cummings is something of a Romantic modernist seems to me to be a valid point, despite the monograph's insistence that seeing Cummings as both Romantic and modernist discourages us from seeing his poetry within a wider conception of modernism (Rosenblitt 5-6); this insistence goes along with the by-now stock assertions in Cummings criticism that the poet's allegiances with an experiential Freud are unbreakable (89, 92, 105), despite the fact that, as Rosenblitt indeed says, "Cummings' delight in the playfulness of childhood is one of the most recognizable features of his poetry" (90). The rather heavy-handed Freudian reading of cannonballs pounding the soil in "O sweet spontaneous / earth" as "sexual violence" (131) therefore seems to me implausible. And, although Rosenblitt does mention them once (330), I would add that the books by C. G. Jung in the Houghton archives that Cummings owned and annotated with considerable care are certainly worthy of further study. His "treatment" by a Freudian analyst appears to me to have done more damage than good, while his "delight in the playfulness of childhood" to a large degree appears to me as one of his major achievements—at least experientially—despite Freud.

Nonetheless, taking a larger view, *E. E. Cummings' Modernism and the Classics* brings fascinating, significant news to students and readers of our non-hero's work as well as students and readers of classicism and war poetry, especially those captivated by any of the various interfaces between these crucially important intellectual fields.

## Works Cited

- Cohen, Milton A. *POET and PAINTER: The Aesthetics of E. E. Cummings' Early Work*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1987.
- Cummings, E. E. *Complete Poems 1904-1962*. Ed. George James Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1994.
- Eco, Umberto. "Reading My Readers." *Modern Language Notes* 107.5 (Dec. 1992): 819-827.
- Qian, Zhaoming. *Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.