

24 CRITICS DISCUSS

e. e. cummings

(1894-1962)

“The poet always seems to be having a glorious time with himself and his world even when the reader loses his breath in the effort to share it. He is as agile and outrageous as a faun, and as full of delight over the beauties and monstrosities of this brilliant and grimy old planet. There is a grand gusto in him.”

Harriet Monroe
Poetry
(January 1924) 213-14

“Since the highbrows have taken to vaudeville, Cummings is their favorite Touchstone. At times, he overplays the clown; at others he has the instinct of the perfect comedian. When he is perfect, no poet is more dazzling; when he plays the bad boy too many times, one has an itch for spanking and shooing him to bed...Cummings’s Paganism is as much a reaction against New England Puritanism as it is a passionate embrace of the earth and its ladies. Behind his beautiful gamboling, one hears the heartbeats, subtle and exquisite, of a poet steeped in sentiment. He is the love poet of the radical era.”

Alfred Kreymborg
Our Singing Strength
(Coward-McCann 1929) 519, 516

“I have heard two personal friends of E. E. Cummings debating as to whether his prosodical and punctuational gymnastics have not been a joke at the expense of the critics of poetry. One of them thinks Cummings will some day come out and announce that he has been joking; the other insists with fervent and faithful admiration that he is really as crazy as he seems.”

Max Eastman
The Literary Mind
(Scribner 1932) 103

“What Mr. Cummings likes or admires, what he holds dear in life, he very commonly calls flowers, or dolls, or candy—terms with which he is astonishingly generous; as if he thought by making his terms general enough their vagueness could not matter, and never noticed that the words so used enervate themselves in a kind of hardened instinct.”

R. P. Blackmur
The Double Agent
(Arrow 1935) 20

“Pseudo-experimental poetry is the work of a poet who confuses tradition with convention, and who, desiring to experiment, sees no way to escape from or alter tradition save by the abandonment of convention: it means the abandonment of form and of poetry. Mr. E. E. Cummings is a good example of this type of poet. When Mr. Cummings ceases to experiment, and essays the traditional, he becomes painfully literary. Either way he shows little comprehension of poetry.”

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 86

“Leave him alone, and he will play in a corner for hours, with his fragilities, his colors, and his delight in the bright shapes of all the things he sees....The important point about E. E. Cummings is, however, that he was not left alone. He was dumped out into the uninnocent and unlyrical world....His lyricism, shy enough at best, ran completely for cover, and he turned upon the nightmare worlds of reality, partly with the assumed callousness and defensive self-mockery of the very sensitive, and partly with the white and terrible anger of the excessively shy.”

S. I. Hayakawa
Poetry
(August 1938) 285-86

“The poems show his transcendental faith in a world where the self-reliant, joyful, loving individual is beautifully alive but in which mass man, or the man who lives by mind alone, without heart and soul, is dead. The true individual Cummings praised, often reverently and with freshness of spirit and idiom, but the ‘unman’ was satirized as Cummings presented witty, bitter parodies of and attacks on the patriotic or cultural platitudes and shibboleths of the ‘unworld.’ This poetry is marked by experimental word coinages, shifting of grammar, blending of established stanzaic forms and free verse, flamboyant punning, typographic distortion, unusual punctuation, and idiosyncratic division of words, all of which became integral to the ideas and rhythms of his relatively brief lyrics. These he continued to write with subtlety of technique and sensitivity of feeling...”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford, 1941-83)

“I think of Cummings as Robinson Crusoe at the moment when he first saw the print of a naked human foot in the sand. That...implied a new language—and a readjustment of conscience.”

William Carlos Williams
“Lower Case Cummings”
Harvard Wake 5 (1946) 20

“The period to which MacLeish served as a barometer was notable for a great deal more experimentation than can even be suggested here. Indeed, a leading aim of such an experimentalist as E. E. Cummings is to make it impossible to describe one of his poems or to do anything less than respond to its unique essence. His idiosyncratic treatment of punctuation and typography, which either excited or distracted his first readers, is his way of catching the eye and compelling attention. His content is actually very simple. He is a lyricist of romantic love, who is also a romantic anarchist in the New England tradition, and believes that a poem is an inspired moment breaking through the bars of syntax. His preoccupations hardly vary from the time of *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923). ‘Most people’ are frozen into conventional death, whereas ‘there’s nothing as something as one’; the individual alone is alive, and that life is freshened by love, by ‘wonderful one times one.’ In his fleeting attention to ‘manunkind’ in the mass, Cummings strikes a note of colloquial satire against some of its misleaders, particularly the advertiser and the warmonger.”

F. O. Matthiessen
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1351-52

“No American poet of the twentieth century has ever shown so much implied respect for the conventions of his milieu through conscious blasphemy as E. E. Cummings. If Cummings’s verse seemed ‘revolutionary’ and radical (which it was in the sense that its wit was concerned with the roots of syntax and grammar) it was because its life was and still is so completely surrounded by conventions....The entire question of Cummings’s maturity in the writing of his poetry has been and still remains a private matter. In the light of Cummings’s accomplishments and in the recognition of the boundaries or limits that they have circumscribed, it is very nearly an impertinence for anyone to tell him to ‘grow up,’ for one must not forget that he is one of the finest lyric poets of all time....”

Cummings wrote excellent love lyrics, lyrics which contained all the compliments that a young woman would like to hear, and such compliments also enhanced the figure of a perennially youthful lover who would go to war against any and all of the conventions that were outside of or that threatened to impede or divert the course of courtly love....All these were written (or so it seems) in the same spirit that graced the songs and speeches of the *commedia dell’arte*, which traveled up from Italy in the sixteenth century to entertain the peoples of the rest of Europe.”

Horace Gregory & Marya Zaturenska

History of American Poetry
(Harcourt 1947) 337-47

“If Cummings is undistinguished as a thinker, he is always surprising as a creative craftsman. He is simultaneously the skillful draftsman, the leg-pulling clown, the sensitive commentor and the ornery boy. The nose-thumbing satirist is continually interrupted by the singer of brazenly tender lyrics. A modern of the moderns, he displays a seventeenth-century obsession with desire and death; part Cavalier, part metaphysician, he is a shrewd manipulator of language, and his style—gracefully erotic or downright indecent—is strictly his own.”

Louis Untermeyer
Modern American Poetry
(Harcourt 1950) 509

“In an age when language tends to become platitudinous and anemic, it is a splendid thing to have a poet take the most colourless words of all—the necessary anonymous neuter robots that ordinarily do their jobs without asking for wages of recognition—and suddenly give them character and responsibility. It’s as if an albino sparrow were suddenly to grow red and blue feathers, or the little switch engine in the roundhouse were shown that it could draw the Santa Fe Chief.”

Theodore Spencer
Modern American Poetry
(Roy 1952) 122
ed. B. Rajan

“Some of Cummings’s early lyrics have an Elizabethan decorativeness. His later poems make words as abstract as ‘am,’ ‘if,’ ‘because,’ do duty for seemingly more solid nouns. By this very process, however, he restores life to dying concepts. ‘Am’ implies being at its most responsive, ‘if’ generally means the creeping timidity that kills responsiveness, and ‘because’ the logic of the categorizing mind that destroys what it dissects. Here is a new vocabulary, a kind of imageless metaphor....”

He has a nose for decay wherever it shows itself. It may be in verse that caters to the stock responses of flyspecked sensibilities. It may be in ‘the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls,’ those afflicted with the occupational diseases of gentility: blindness and deafness to the natural world. It may be the ‘notalive undead’ who make up a ‘peopleshaped toomany-ness.’ He recognizes the fixed grin of death in the insane cheerfulness of the brotherhood of advertisers and high-pressure salesmen. His sales resistance to them is complete, whether their products be red shirts, brown shirts, white shirts with Arrow collars, or shrouds.”

Babette Deutsch
Poetry in Our Time
(Holt 1952) 113, 115

“E.E. Cummings has sometimes been called the clown of the typewriter keys. Upon initial encounter with Cummings’ visually startling poetry, the innocent reader might approve the epithet. But a bit of probing will reveal a subtler complexity and greater depth than the typing pyrotechnics suggest....The poems themselves break many of the standard conventions of the printed poem, and in breaking them dramatize the petty sway they have held over the imagination. Cummings’ poetry seems to cry out from the page in defiant humanity, a humanity that refuses to be twisted and diminished by a meaningless conformity with properly proper capital letters, with the rules of punctuation, with laws of syntax and strictures of spacing and placement on the page. In other words, Cummings is not merely attempting to shock the eye: he is also trying to jar the conscience and kindle the imagination.

Much of Cummings’ poetry gives the vivid impression of a child’s world, freshly discovered each day and haltingly described on a balky typing machine. His world of sunrise and ‘Just-spring,’ when the earth is always ‘mud-luscious,’ is lyrically compelling. But the poetry is certainly not all whimsicality. There are darker tones and a deeper music. There are the anguish and ecstasy of lust and love, the wry smile at a culture gone mad with things, the moving awareness of Everyman’s inevitable involvement in the cyclical dance of life.”

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1078-79

“At his worst, Cummings can achieve an almost Guesstian bathos. At his best, he creates a pure poetry in which a venerable tradition meets the modern idioms. In these later poems, e. e. resembles some of Lyonel Feininger’s paintings: at first you see only non-representation, cubes and cones, but then, behind the very contemporary style, the shapes of familiar cities come before you.”

Michael Harrington
Commonweal
(10 December 1954) 295

“This is courtly love, full of *thee*’s and *thou*’s and ballads to ‘my lady,’ and elaborate conceits which would be cloying were it not for the freshness of Cummings’s rhetoric. These tender songs, delicate in grace, ethereal in mood, are founded on emotion, the realness of the feeling of this man for this woman. For all their delicacy they are resilient and durable; he is a love-lyricist of timeless appeal....He challenges in a lyric version of civil disobedience the entire framework of our *soi-disant* civilization till the whole structure and its inhabitants threaten to fall down about his head. Cummings has satirized...extinction of personality in some of the most virulent philippics to grace literature since mad Dean Swift.”

David Burns
Saturday Review
(December 18, 1954) 11

“Are briskly vibrating sound and verbal paradox enough?...He is still a poet who is considerably more talked about than he deserves to be, a man who has made his vogue out of a large amount of—at best—casually semi-private writing.”

Carl Bode
Poetry
(September 1955) 362-63

“[Cummings’s poetry] has come...to assert, remonstrate, and define rather than simply to present, as it once predominantly did. Cummings’s gift of impressionistic evocation, though it could not be said to have departed entirely...is sinking into desuetude together with his impulse toward typographical experimenting....Regardless of the quality of change, one thing does not change: the unique Cummings voice. Or if it might be said to change, it is only in the direction of a still profounder individuality.”

Rudolph Von Abele
PMLA
(December 1955) 932-33

“It sometimes seemed as if Cummings’ governing motive was to thumb his nose at Cambridge and all it stood for, propriety, regularity, the neat and the tidy; but what, at bottom, was this motive if it was not the love of freedom that had always marked the Yankee mind? This passion filled *The Enormous Room* and constituted, in *Eimi*, the protest against the compulsions of Soviet Russia, a ‘joyless experiment,’ as he saw it, ‘in force and fear.’ With what gallantry and tenderness he painted, in *The Enormous Room*, the portraits of Jean le Negre, Mexique, the Zulu, magnificent representations in the Rabelaisian vein that expressed his high animal spirits and his love for men who could not be pigeon-holed.

With his burlesque-loving spirit, he saw the world through a child’s eyes. He liked, as he said, ‘shining things,’ he liked barber-poles and hurdy-gurdies; and he lied to play the clown in the universal circus and knock over ministers, veterans, policemen and bankers. He was an enemy of cliches, pomposity and cant, and he played havoc with the English language as a way of protesting against them. Behind his mockery lay a sense of the infinite worth of the individual, coerced and constrained and menaced by a standardized world; and he showed that the Yankee mind, the more it changed, remained the more irrepressible and the more the same. Much of Cummings’ symbolism suggested his New England inheritance. His play *Tom* was

based upon *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *The Enormous Room* abounded in symbols from *The Pilgrim's Progress*."

Van Wyck Brooks & Otto L. Bettmann
Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America
(Dutton 1956) 233

"We see him ever as an individual, liking and respecting other individuals, but hating the masses as masses, hating governments, hating war, hating propaganda (ours or anybody else's), hating machinery, hating science. Willing to settle for nothing less than perfection, he is a great hater, although he is also a great lover, perhaps the most ardent or at any rate the most convincing poet of love in our day. Whom and what he loves he loves deeply, but for him the existence of love demands the expression of anger, contempt, disgust for what is unworthy of love. That is what he is and what he has been since coming of age, though practice has refined him in the art of being nobody-but-himself."

Granville Hicks
Saturday Review
(22 November 1958) 14

"Self-transcendence through love: the poems praise this and try to bring it about, and they despise all that would prevent it. Still, self-transcendence turns out to be only self-realization. Their mode is for the most part hyperconsciously lyrical, and their forms are such as to save the lyrical impulse for the modern world, in spite of the modern world. Thus their construction is postulated on a simplistic, deliberately 'unsophisticated' concentration upon the effects—perhaps 'affects' is a better word—proper to them. The devices are well known; they proliferate and vary mightily; yet they do not represent any large range of inventive powers, nor I suspect, are they meant to be.

A reader is forced into awareness of the poems as 'behaving' as poems should—in such a way as to inhibit the 'normal' tendency to generalize and to predicate: to do, in fact, what the words I am now writing are intended to do. Thus the poems are made to misbehave. Typographically, they are set up on a page so as to force us to attend to the quality of an individual experience as it is occurring. One way of forcing awareness in these poems is by seeking out the anti-poetic and exhibiting the poetry immanent in it—which is to say, transcending its anti-poetry. So there are poems on supposedly degraded sexual love, self-consciously tough-tender—many, many of these; and in straining for effect, Cummings is too often like a Bret Harte come to the village, his sentimental subject the Luck of Patchen Street. What saves the poems—for they often are saved—is Cummings's good humor, his knowledge that only the most sacred things of the self can be kidded and still remain sacred. The end of the poems is to register joy, any kind of joy; and the source of joy is always in the uniqueness of the self. So, in general, the poems are attempts to define individuated experience in such a way as to show that its only end is realization of self....

More and more Cummings has come to refine his technique by trying literally to rescue language from the discursive, analytic abstractness that threatens to deaden it. This, of course, has been a definition of the poet's function from the very beginning: somehow to keep language—and the possibilities of *communitas* inherent in its use—from going dead and the betraying of their *humanitas* to those who use it. Cummings has, however, chosen to go about his task in a particularly thorough manner. He has not so much tried to give life to words but to their grammatical-syntactical context: to give life not to the substance of a sentence but to its structure. Thus he has wrenched words out of their regular grammatical and syntactical functions, more closely to make them the means of expressing the vital functions of the men and women whose experience they are to body forth. He has not so much made it new as renewed it, made it what it was before language got hold of it....

Reading through the bulk of Cummings' work, one begins to feel that what he is reading is so often mere technique; and the feeling is an unhappy one, because the poems are intended to make us envisage a man who is in the process of showing us how we may avoid being victimized and manipulated, and therefore depersonalized, by 'mere' technique. The poems themselves become manipulative, that is to say. Consequently, those whose experiences on which they center become only occasions for the manipulation. What results is the Harte-like sentimentalism on which I have already remarked....

Such inventions as ‘manunkind’ and ‘nonlecture,’ in which the poet would transform the word by the simple device of negating it semantically...is perhaps the other side of the coin from sentimentality, since in both cases the word’s intrinsic meaning, found to be humanly inadequate, is not transported into that better world the poet would make, but simply left behind, kicked into senselessness. The poet has his way utterly, and he cannot summon up even the minimal self-discipline which is necessary if he is wholly to communicate his new self-transcending (or self-realizing) insight into his world. Words are un- rather than re-defined in the poems. If the medium as it exists is indeed contaminated, yet the poet’s cure for it is often worse than the disease. Such are the risks run when poetics become a mode of linguistic anarchy.”

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 360, 363-65

“His *Poems, 1923-1954* contains some six hundred poems and was followed by *95 Poems* and the posthumous *73 poems*. If a tenth of all these should be thought worth reading by the end of the century, this self-described ‘failure’ will have made it into the ranks of lasting poets, without ever having made any concessions to greater popularity....

In the private language he used in both prose and verse, Cummings is praising [Harte] Crane for having accomplished what he, Cummings, was still hoping to accomplish, and what Emerson had recommended but seldom achieved: the creation of poems that would be ‘growth’s likeness.’ Cummings is praising Crane for being his kind of poet—‘drunk,’ in the ecstatic, Dionysian tradition, as Emerson had wanted the poet to be, though Emerson had wanted the drunkenness to be only metaphoric, an airy inebriation...Cummings is praising Crane for having written verse that could be defined as he later said he wished his own to be: ‘carnalized metaphysics’; and saying at the same time that the metaphysics carnalized in Crane’s poems is the *same* as his own. No poet could praise another more highly....

‘Transcendentalism’ is the proper word for the context in which the two excerpts from Eimi make sense, fit together, and reveal both man as writer and writer as man. ‘Transcendentalism’ is the link between Cummings and Crane, the link that permitted Cummings to see Crane’s work in term of the ideal he held for his own, without distorting Crane’s. But Transcendentalism seemed remote, obscure; an ‘impossible’ view for a poet to hold, all during Cummings’ lifetime. When, some twenty years after he began to write, critics discovered that Cummings was ‘Romantic,’ they used their discovery as a way of dismissing him as irrelevant, if they happened not to like his work; or else apologized for him, defending his right to be ‘irresponsible’ if he wished, if they happened to like it....

Cummings inherited his tradition from his home and made a lifelong career out of the juggling feat of keeping intact what he had been given, while still moving on. The feat was rendered less difficult for him than it might have been by the fact that the Emersonian doctrines of self-reliance and self-transcendence were major tenets in the teaching of his father, the Reverend Edward Cummings, a highly successful, respected, and nationally known Unitarian minister....

His poetry and prose give us the purest example of undiluted Emersonianism our century has yet provided. In his Introduction to the new poems included in *Collected Poems* (1938) Cummings had placed himself unequivocally in the Emersonian tradition, but there has been a subsequent failure of even his most sympathetic interpreters to understand this. The paradox must be explained by the fact that in the recent past critics young enough and ‘modern’ enough to be interested in Cummings have had no real firsthand and extensive knowledge of Emerson....When a biographer finally tells us what Cummings read, it may turn out that he absorbed much of his Emersonianism—the part he did not get from his father—through Whitman. If so, that fact would add another link to the many that connect him with his friend and fellow-rebel Hart Crane....

His epistemology is ‘intuitive’ precisely in the Emersonian sense, with the same suspicion of abstraction, the same unconcern for consistency and ‘mere logic’ and ‘mere fact,’ the same hope of seeing as with a ‘transparent eyeball,’ the same method of preparing oneself to receive nature’s epiphanies by relaxed ‘aesthetic’ attention. His aesthetic is exactly as Platonic, and just as organic, as Emerson’s, with the

same conception of poetry as a means of suggesting what must otherwise remain incommunicable, the same belief that the 'argument' (as Emerson called it) must shape the poem, and the same search for a language 'of sufficient energy' (as Emerson had put it) to convey the vision. Cummings' mystical antinomianism is a part of the same inheritance, resting on the same Protestant religious base and issuing in the same suspicion of all moral rules....

Truth, he implies, is related always to the concrete, the individual, the empiric; it must be 'perceived' (Cummings usually said 'felt') in the response of the total self to an always-novel experience. To follow 'feeling' is thus to run the risk of coming into conflict with the 'rules' of 'conventional' (read 'unperceptive,' 'unfeeling,' 'closed' and 'rationalistic') morality....Several decades of having to pay for the publication of his own books and getting reviews that revealed very little comprehension of what he meant were the price Cummings had to pay for his Transcendentalism....

Despite his dedication to growth, movement, and inventiveness, despite too his reputation as a daring experimenter in verse forms, Cummings tended to lack inventiveness. He repeated himself, writing hundreds of versions of essentially the same poem, especially in the 1930's, when he felt most deeply alienated from his culture and from most of his colleagues. He relied too much and too often on a few simple tricks to jog the imagination, to wake the reader up and make him participate in the poem. His private typography, for instance, amusing and sometimes expressive at first, became tiresome in the end, like Ezra Pound's reliance on misspelling to create the tone of his letters. His use of low dialect to create satirical effects was too easy and limited a device. His 'shaped' poems only now and then benefit very much from being shaped as they are. These and other idiosyncratic stylistic tricks too often seem merely self-indulgent or worse—substitutes for fresh insight.

The chief device was more than a device, and often worked for him very well—his dislocation of syntax and breaking up and reconstituting of words—but even this, though perhaps helpful to other poets in encouraging other kinds of freedom, has not proved, in itself, an experiment from which any other poet has felt he could directly learn anything. It was 'more than a device' for Cummings because, for one thing, it was expressive of his feeling that ordinary statement, subject as it is to the conventions of logic and logical syntax, could not contain the feeling-tone of even 'ordinary' experience, and could not begin to suggest the sense of the miraculous that he so often wanted to convey. It was functional, for him, for another reason, too; by outraging linguistic convention, it might force that freshness of *perception* he thought was the means to illumination....

Cummings' best poems are usually his love poems and his religious poems, both more often than not written as disguised and more or less disarranged sonnets. (Once again, to make minor personal adaptations in an old and rigid form was hardly to be a 'daring' experimenter. His friend Williams could not approve.) The love poems are generally, after the 1920's, religious in tone and implication, and the religious poems very often take off from the clue provided by a pair of lovers, so that often the two subjects are hardly, if at all, separable. What makes them memorable at their best is the peculiarly Cummingsesque combination of sensuality and feeling for transcendence. Cummings had no less contempt for a 'Platonism' that was not 'of this earth' than he had for a 'realism' that denied wish-dream. Like Emerson before him, he thought he knew that 'God IS' because He could be found—sensed, *felt*—in experience. Cummings wrote some of the finest celebrations of sexual love and of the religious experience of awe and natural piety produced in our century, precisely at a time when it was most unfashionable to write such poems.

By contrast, his poems of social criticism often sound thin and petulant. They are seldom more than amusing, and often not even that. For the most part, they depend upon the stock responses and elicit a stock response—not that of Philistia, of course, but that of Bohemia....They are likely to continue to impress only the very young and the partially read. A poet cannot afford simply to 'feel' when writing satiric poems....It is true that neither in ideas, nor in characteristic style, is there any great difference between *Tulips and Chimneys* in 1923 and *73 Poems* in 1963. There is not sudden reversal of belief such as may be seen in Eliot, no gradual shift from a dazzling impressionism to argument and abstraction, as in Stevens, no turning to another type of poem, as in Robinson....The development is in changing attitudes and deepening awareness, a deepened sense of what it meant to be a Transcendental poet, with a corresponding dropping away of defensive-offensive sallies into ideas and criticism. In the last poems, the old devices are used less

wastefully, and the old sense of mystery finds more concrete embodiment...In the end he less often depended on pure rhetoric to give content to his abstractions....

95 Poems (1958), his finest single volume, will illustrate. The poems in the book form a loose sequence, something Cummings had often experimented with before, never so successfully, with a metaphoric use of the seasons, reversed from the order in which the 'mind of winter' had conceived their, as the basic ordering principle. That is to say, they begin with Fall, go into Winter, and end with Spring. As in Thoreau's organization of *Walden*, Cummings' seasons are 'seasons of the soul'—of man's life; so that the Fall poems are poems of old age and approaching death, the Winter poems the poems of death, and the Spring poems the poems of rebirth. At the same time, another organizing principle is being observed. The Fall poems are those of loneliness, of solitude, and of the separated self; the Winter poems are concerned with loss of self; and the Spring poems are concerned with a new 'self' which is a 'we.' In this book, for the first time, Cummings really moves beyond Emerson...

Cummings' poetry is romantic, intuitive in precept and in method, and rhetorical as opposed to Imagist-Modernist. It is essentially a 'poetry of statement,' as Wordsworth's was and as Emerson's was—but very complex, personal, ambiguous, and dense statement, at its best, statement which challenges the reader to complete it by first participating in the making of it and then carrying it on in himself, as his own, the gift to his self of another self....No wonder all the New Critics ignored Cummings for thirty years, except Blackmur, who damned him for not writing the way Ransom and Eliot had taught poets to write, for using general instead of specific words, for being, in short, a 'Romantic' poet instead of a Modernist. Whether Cummings is a 'major poet' or not, I should not like to venture even a guess. But that he is a poet to cherish and reread, I should like to assert as strongly as I can. He and Hart Crane were the only important poets in the 1920's and 1930's who clearly and openly continued our major poetic tradition."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 520, 514-25

"Cummings belongs to the part of the modernist movement that wanted to experiment with the visual appearance of the printed page. Both Guillaume Apollinaire and Stephane Mallarme in France had scattered typography over the page, and Cummings adopted their inventions (which would later engender 'concrete poetry') to his own purposes. Numbers and letters fall like confetti down his pages, giving his *Collected Poems* the look of a volume printed by a tipsy typesetter. Cummings's typographical experiments arose in part from his visual gifts. He was a painter all his life, and his sophisticated and humorous paintings and drawings are still regularly shown in museums....

Cummings's first poems were published in *The Dial* in 1920. In his lifetime, his most frequently anthologized poems were those in which he was most sentimental. But his greatest gift was as a satirist. He could take the measure of literary falsity, patriotic cant, or intellectual humbug with a scathing phrase, he scorned conventional verbal and political pieties and conventional standards of behavior. He preached a neo-paganism of untroubled sexual pleasure, childlike egotism, and irrepressible impudence; a myth of spontaneity animated his aesthetic. Of course, the ingenuity visible in his poems about the grasshopper and the falling leaf demonstrates how unspontaneous such compositions actually are. An acrobat of words, Cummings scorned discursive logic and political strategy. If this world did not suit, 'there's a hell / of a good universe next door, let's go.' He establishes only two poles of thought and belief; there is, to him, something suspect about the middle ground of learning, on the one hand, and skepticism, on the other.

In American literary history, Cummings ranks as a memorable documentary writer because of *The Enormous Room* and *Eimi* (1933), his account of travels in Russia after the rise of Stalin (whom he hated). Both books are vivid in rapidly noted sensory detail and irrepressibly energetic in style. Cummings's early poetry remains a body of inventive and ebullient work, raising provocative aesthetic questions. Is something that cannot be read aloud a poem? If so, what do we mean by the word *poem*? Can a poem incorporate slang, obscenity, advertising jargon, dialect? Is all language material for poetry? Must the line be the unit of the poem? Does the eye have as much right to the poem as the ear? Is the sonnet dead or can it be resuscitated? Can satiric lyrics be written in puritanical America? These questions are still relevant.

Cummings's wish to believe that all people are at heart alike in love and that all desires are simple ones led him into a conventional sentimentalizing of the erotic life. But his capacity for play in language and for vivid satire of American and its institutions ensures him a permanent place in American literature."

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1677-78

"Seeking fresh and unusual effects, he began, by 1916, to create a style of his own, a form of literary cubism, breaking up his material and presenting it in a new, visually directive way upon the page ... Cummings established, by 1919, a distinctive poetic style that had its own grammatical usages, its own punctuation, and its own rules for capitalization, in the freest kind of verse. His work, published in *Tulips and Chimneys* and later volumes, met with much critical hostility, expressed in complaints about his 'exploded fragments,' 'eccentric punctuation,' and 'jigsaw puzzle' arrangements. His harsh satirical verse as well as his erotic poems served also to identify him as a social iconoclast.

But Cummings' trip to Russia in 1931 and two troublesome marriages brought about a change in his youthful and exuberant outlook. He became politically more conservative and more irascible in temper, as seen in such volumes as *Eimi*, an account of his experience in Russia, and *No Thanks*, a collection of his most experimental verse. At the same time, he continued to give voice to a basic affirmation of life, especially in whatever was simple, natural, individual, or unique, and he expressed powerful opposition to any social forces that would hinder uniqueness, forces such as conformity, groupiness, imitation, and artificiality. His poem 'anyone lived in a pretty how town' gives mythic expression to these attitudes....

Like Joyce, Eliot, Faulkner, and other literary innovators, Cummings gradually taught his audience how to read his work; and with Pound and others he carried *verse libre* into visually directive forms. The appearance on the page of much present-day poetry owes something to the flexibility Cummings introduced into American verse."

Richard S. Kennedy
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1286-87

Michael Hollister (2015)