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E. E. Cummings

Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno has written a substantial biography of E. E. Cummings, an American poet who gained great popularity and critical acclaim in his lifetime and who, over forty years after his death, still speaks trenchantly to poetry lovers. Cummings's unconventional but sonorous sonnets and typographically challenging short lyrics remain anthology favorites, and two of his prose works, *The Enormous Room* (1922) and *i: six nonlectures* (1953), continue to attract readers.

To read this biography is to realize how inventive and uncompromising a man produced these startlingly innovative poems. Cummings possessed the quintessential artistic temperament. Nobody and nothing could stand in the way of his work. In nearly all aspects of his life other than in his devotion to his poetry and painting he was irresponsible. He typically required and received financial support and various other services from his parents—especially his father—and a coterie of admiring friends. He drank too much, whored indiscriminately, and often seemed totally oblivious to the feelings of others.

Yet he inspired loyalty because, for all his faults, he could be a scintillating companion and because his companions recognized in him a supremely gifted and completely dedicated artist who needed to be free to pursue his art. For Cummings poetry was his only way of acknowledging the assistance he so readily accepted. In the case of his upright and conventional clergyman father, who disapproved of his behavior but loved, encouraged, and defended him, this recompense took the form of specific poetic memorials, including the marvelous “my father moved through dooms of love.”

Sawyer-Lauçanno has not neglected to comment critically on Cummings's verse, but his main achievement is the composition of an unflinching portrait of a complex personality—deficient in many of the arts of living but eminent in the art of poetry.

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