

“I Wouldn’t Be I”

For me, the experience of poetry has most often been a painful one. Reading poetry is usually like trying to catch a butterfly—I’m running and leaping and stretching with all I have, trying to get that damn butterfly, but it always remains just out of my grasp.

There are some poets with whom I instantly connect with, however. And it’s not always because the “meaning” of the poem is clear. More like...finding the meaning doesn’t matter. “It’s not the destination, but the journey.” e.e. Cummings is one of those poets.

Edward Estlin Cummings (known as Estlin to friends and family) was born in his Cambridge, Massachusetts home on October 14, 1894. His father was a Unitarian minister who had been an instructor at Harvard. Cummings himself eventually attended both the Cambridge Latin School and Harvard, where he studied literature and languages.

Shortly after obtaining his B.A. and M.A., Cummings signed up to be an ambulance driver in France during World War I. Unfortunately, both he and a friend were eventually imprisoned for three months on the suspicion of espionage, an event that would inspire *The Enormous Room*, his first book.

After taking some time to work on his art in New York, Cummings attempted to get his poetry published. Unfortunately, finding a publisher was anything but easy. In fact, Cummings had to pay to have his books published for decades because his work so differed from the impersonal, rationalistic poetry popular at the time. Cummings had further issues because of his poetry regarding sexual love, for it wasn’t considered an appropriate topic.

But it wasn’t just Cummings’ content that set his poetry apart from the rest; it was the formatting that really made his work stand out. As an artist, Cummings was very much aware of the visual aspects of poetry and had absolutely no qualms about experimenting with everything from syntax to capitalization to achieve a certain feel. As a poet, he seemed to take the idea of showing instead of telling quite seriously, to such an extreme that many of his poems just cannot be read aloud (if don’t believe me, try reading “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” out loud. I dare you).

Concerning Cummings, Charles Bukowski said, “There was a joy, and a rareness in the way he placed the word.” And according to Billy Collins, “He made the page look different...Suddenly, what was once a white blank place to record something became a field you could play in with words, breaking them, making them go sideways, strewing their letters across the page. This irreverence...was inspiring. It broke the mold of ‘school poetry’ (Tennyson and the Lads) and opened up many new directions...”

It wasn't until after World War II that Cummings' poetry gained recognition, when a wave of rebellion seemed to hit the poets of the new generation. I think what attracted these new artists to Cummings' works was, as Bukowski said, the joy evident in each piece. With every poem Cummings wrote, he was telling his readers to go have fun. Don't make this work for you, and don't make it work for your readers. If poetry were a playground, "Tennyson and the Lads" were playing hopscotch, while Cummings was playing hide and go seek, and inviting the other kids to join him. They couldn't resist. And they didn't.

By the time of his death on September 3rd, 1962, Cummings had earned many honors and awards. These impressive feats include (but are not limited to) two Guggenheim Fellowships, the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship, the National Book Award, and the Boston Arts Festival Award. He is buried in Forest Hills Cemetery and Crematory in Boston, Massachusetts.