

BOOK REVIEW

E.E. Cummings' Modernism and the Classics: Each Imperishable Stanza. By J. ALLISON ROSENBLITT. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xxii + 370. Hardcover, \$100.00. ISBN 978-0-19-876715-2.

In this superb volume, J. Allison Rosenblitt takes on, and largely overcomes, a considerable challenge: to tease out evidence of classical influences in that seemingly most un-classical of poets, E.E. Cummings. Even as studies on classical reception generally and classical influences on Modernist poetry specifically have flourished, Cummings has been passed over, left in the shadow of “weightier” contemporary figures such as Eliot and Pound. Rosenblitt demonstrates why this is unwise: from his formative years onward, Cummings was steeped in the world of the classics, and even those of his poems that appear thoroughly and unshakably “modern” are rooted in a milieu shaped by contact with Greek and Latin literature.

Rosenblitt begins by tracing, in great detail, Cummings’ classical education. Through impressive spadework in archives of Cummings’ papers, she shows that he was fascinated by Ancient Greek, and that his explorations in translation, while never published, led him to challenge conventional modes of expression in his English-language verse, rearranging word order to mimic the freedom in sentence structure that an inflected language such as Greek grants (36). She also detects echoes, in such familiar works as “in Just-“ with its “goat-footed balloonman”, of Cummings’ circle of literary friends at Harvard, who were given to pagan leanings and fascination with Pan and satyrs (65–69).

For Rosenblitt, the twin preoccupations with sex and death that run through Cummings’ work were both sharpened by his experience as an ambulance driver during World War I; and, she convincingly argues, Cummings returned time and again to Horace’s lyric poetry as a paradigm through which to make sense of the war and its aftermath. Dalliances with prostitutes in postwar Paris are an attempt to recapture the intense feeling of “aliveness” that the war had brought to Cummings and his compatriots, but at the same time, the shadow of death can never be erased. The Champs-Elysees, like their namesake Elysian Fields, are both lovely and filled with ghosts (184–187).

Rosenblitt’s Cummings also grappled, like many other Modernists, with the question of “literary greatness” and the felt need to equal or surpass past writers of

epic, from Homer to Milton. While Cummings never produced a work to rival “The Waste Land,” *Ulysses*, or the *Cantos*, Rosenblitt suggests that his poem “in heavenly realms of hellas dwelt” challenges the very need for epic by telling a complete tale in perfectly realized miniature, much as Callimachus had once done to escape the weight of Homer’s precedent (242).

In addition to her fine analysis, Rosenblitt has also compiled an impressive collection of never-before-published work by Cummings that bears on the question of his relationship to the classics, including his translations from Greek and Latin (most of them dating from his Harvard years). This newly published work is edited with great attention to detail and a fine sense of textual criticism. It is not, perhaps, of great literary merit; some of it (e.g. Cummings’ prose story “The Young Faun”) is merely interesting juvenalia, and Cummings’ attempts at translating Attic tragedy are often less than successful, due to the metrical straitjackets into which he placed himself. Even so, there is much here that will be of immense value to future Cummings scholars. In particular, Rosenblitt is to be commended for demonstrating (215–222) that five Cummings fragments, two of which were posthumously published as stand-alone poems, are in fact one work, an elaborate parody of “The Waste Land” that deliberately mimics that work’s structure while mocking its dense classical allusions.

Overall, this is a deeply impressive book—closely argued, thoughtful, and compelling. Classical reception scholars and students of Modernist poetry alike will be indebted to Rosenblitt for shedding new light on the rich web of influences that made Cummings the innovator he was.

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