E. E. Cummings and Wallace Stevens: Kinship and Rivalry

Glen MacLeod

In the standard biography of E. E. Cummings, Richard Kennedy tells us that "Cummings despised [Wallace] Stevens as 'a businessman': how could he be an artist?" (Kennedy 452).[1] This is the only mention of Stevens in the book, and it would seem to settle the matter of Cummings' relations with Stevens. We agree that Cummings the radical individualist would probably have despised Stevens the Hartford lawyer, insurance man, and corporate executive; and that Stevens would probably have reciprocated. But in fact the relationship between these two Modernist poets was more cordial, more ambivalent, and more complex than this. Cummings knew perfectly well that Stevens was not only a businessman but also a poet, and he sometimes admired Stevens' poetry in spite of himself. Stevens, for his part, admired Cummings as both man and poet; in one telling instance, he even gladly agreed to serve as one of Cummings' references for a major grant application. Chronologically, their careers were almost exactly parallel: they published their first books of poetry in the same year (1923) and their major collected volumes in the same year (1954). They exchanged friendly letters at long intervals over the years, and in their one recorded meeting they got along very well. It was only at the very end of their careers (a few months before Stevens' death), when they found themselves competing for the National Book Award, that their relationship chilled. It is a short but interesting chapter in the history of modern poetry.

Although Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was fifteen years older than Cummings, their poetic careers followed remarkably parallel paths. Because Stevens was late in reaching poetic maturity, while Cummings was very precocious, their first books of poems—*Harmonium* and *Tulips and Chimneys*—both appeared in 1923. Reviewing the volumes together, Edmund Wilson was the first of many critics to compare and contrast Stevens and Cummings. In Stevens he finds that the "richness of his verbal imagination" is not matched by a rich personality; the poems lack emotion (25). Cummings, on the other hand, although his "eccentric punctuation" and conventional emotions seem immature, nevertheless responds deeply to the world and in so doing provides an "example of the good life" (26-27). Partly because they were linked together this way at the very start of their poetic careers, partly because they had similar backgrounds and numerous acquaintances in common, Cummings and Stevens—although they never became personally close—shared, over the course of their careers, both a sense of kinship and a sense of rivalry.

They both were students at Harvard, and this common experience, together with the network of contacts it provided, meant that their early exposure to Modernism was remarkably similar. It was the Armory Show of 1913—the enormous art

exhibition which introduced the American public to Post-Impressionism and Cubism—that inspired both poets to modernize themselves. Stevens saw it in New York, Cummings in Boston a few months later, and it was a landmark experience for both of them. It became a central tenet of both poets that painting is as important as poetry and that the two art forms are partners. In his mature poetic career, Stevens consciously worked out his own poetic problems by analogy with the visual arts. Similarly, Cummings—refusing to choose between his two artistic talents—always considered himself a "poetandpainter."[2]

New York City became the vital artistic center for both men. Their introductions to literary Modernism were shaped, to a large extent, by the New York avant-garde which sprang up in the wake of the Armory Show. While still a college student, Cummings wrote a paper called "The New Art" that was remarkably *au courant* in its knowledge of the avant-garde circles in which Stevens was then moving. He delivered the paper as his commencement address in 1915. It singles out three literary figures to represent American Modernism. The first is Amy Lowell, perhaps an inevitable choice since she was a Bostonian, a self-proclaimed spokesperson for Modern poetry, and the sister of the current President of Harvard, James Russell Lowell. The other two are, given the time and place, much more unusual choices: Donald Evans and Gertrude Stein. Evans is now largely forgotten, but he was a friend of Stevens during his formative years in New York: Evans' poem "En Monocle" lies behind Stevens's "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," and Stevens once planned to collaborate with him on a book of one-line poems.[3] Evans ran the short-lived Claire Marie Press which published his own best-known book, *Sonnets from the Patagonian* (1913), as well as Gertrude Stein's first book, *Tender Buttons* (1913). (Stein records her gratitude to Evans in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.) Cummings quotes from these two books in "The New Art," praising Evans and Stein for their "literary sound painting" (*Miscellany* 9-10). That he should have known Stein's work so early, and that he should have known Evans' work at all, illustrates his exceptional familiarity (probably through his Harvard friend S. Foster Damon) with avant-garde literary activity in New York practically as it was happening. Cummings and Stevens converted to Modernism at the same time and under remarkably similar influences. In their Harvard background, their love of New York, their devotion to the visual arts, and even in their particular early interests in Modernist literature, these two poets had a great deal in common.

Certain basic affinities of temperament are also evident in their poetry. Stevens' early poems often have a Cummings-like aspect. "Bantams in Pine Woods" (1922), for instance, combines a delight in word-play and a raucous, nose-thumbing attitude toward authority that Cummings would applaud:

> Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
> Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

Damned universal cock, as if the sun
Was blackamoor to bear your blazing tail.

Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat! I am the personal.
Your world is you. I am my world.

You ten-foot poet among inchlings. Fat!
Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines,

Bristles, and points their Appalachian tangs,
And fears not portly Azcan nor his hoos. (*Collected* 75-76)[4]

Stevens' obvious delight in the odd sounds of this poem is comparable to Cummings' equally idiosyncratic waywardness with words. Stevens himself makes this comparison in a passage of his notebooks:

> Bringing out the music of eccentric sounds of words is no different in principle from bringing out their form and its eccentricies (Cummings): language as the material of poetry not its mere medium or instrument. (OP 196)

Another of Stevens' early poems, "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" (1922), mocks the complacent presumption of pious class privilege in a tone remarkably similar to Cummings' sonnet "The Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls." Stevens' "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" (1915) displays even more clearly the high-spirited individualism we associate with Cummings, in both its celebratory and its satiric modes:

The houses are haunted
By white night gowns.
None of them are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.
None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.
People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather. (*Collected* 66)

The monotonous respectability of all those good citizens in their "white night gowns" contrasts utterly with the violent imagination embodied in the "old sailor / Drunk and asleep in his boots" who "Catches tigers / In red weather." Stevens celebrates the fierce vitality of this disreputable sailor, and in doing so he reveals a basic sympathy with Cummings, champion of the individual against all regimented systems.

Of course, the two poets also had differences. Cummings is said to have "despised Stevens as 'a business man'"—although he probably made this comment in a moment of pique.[5] Stevens thought of Cummings as representing a trend in Modernist poetry that he deplored: "if the present generation likes the mobile-like arrangement of lines to be found in the work of William Carlos Williams or the verbal conglomerates of e. e. cummings, what is the next generation to like? Pretty much the bare page, for that alone would be new . . ." (L 801).

Perhaps these differences made them keep their distance from each other, despite their closeness to the same literary and artistic circles, for they seem to have had no contact until the 1940s. Then, suddenly—apparently on impulse—Cummings sent Stevens this hand-written note:[6]

> 4 Patchin Place
> New York City
>
> Dear Wallace Stevens—
>
> I was feeling very sick when I read(thanks to a man named Weiss, who decently left a copy of "The Quarterly Review of Literature" here)your poem Repetitions of a Young Captain;and now I feel whole
>
> —and I thank you
> E. E. Cummings
>
> July 2 1944

Cummings sometimes sent such notes of praise to writer-friends such as the poet Lloyd Frankenberg and the biographer Morrie Werner, to share his delight in their literary accomplishments, but he was not in the habit of sending them to writers he did not know personally.[7] Why did he send this note to Stevens at this time? Perhaps the poem "Repetitions of a Young Captain," which considers the power of imagination in time of war, struck a particular chord in the Cummings of *The Enormous Room*. Certainly his sending the note shows that Cummings admired Stevens as a poet and that he wanted Stevens to know it.

Stevens responded cordially to this spontaneous gesture of fellowship from a poet whose work he had known for some time:

July 8, 1944

Mr. E. E. Cummings
4 Patchin Place
New York City

Dear Mr. Cummings:

Thanks for your note. If I could have kept the poem for a longer time, I should no doubt have cut it one way or another. But, after all, things covered with thumb-prints are not all that they might be either.

I have always thought of you as a kind of neighbor, possibly a friend of a man in Springfield whom I used to know fairly well and whom, if you knew at all, you would have known by his familiar name: Jimmie Miller.

Many thanks.

Very truly yours,

Wallace Stevens

Despite the conventional "Mr. Cummings" and the formal colon, this is—for Stevens—a genuinely friendly response. His modesty about his poem's shortcomings highlights his appreciation of Cummings' generosity in praising it. He probably considered Cummings "a kind of neighbor" because of their shared Harvard and New York connections. Although "Jimmie Miller" is unidentified, the casual reference to a possible mutual friend shows that Stevens respected Cummings socially as well as professionally and that he was open to the possibility of friendship.

Apparently Cummings was shy of attempting closer contact with Stevens, for nothing further came of this initial sally. When Cummings finally did write to Stevens again, three years later, it was in a more effervescent holiday spirit:

Dear Wallace Stevens –

In no unearthly or otherwise reason, I have the honour to illimitably thank you for Landscape with Boat

", emerald
Becoming emeralds."

—Joyeux Noel
et
Bonne Année

E. E. Cummings

4 Patchin Place
December 22 1947

Again Stevens responded warmly to Cummings' generous praise, on December 29, 1947:

Dear Mr. Cummings:

I enjoyed your note—and enjoyed the idea of your sending it, especially at 2:00 A.M. or thereabouts to judge from the postmark. While it is too late to say anything about Christmas, nevertheless sincere good wishes for a happy New Year, und Gesundheit.

Always sincerely yours,

Wallace Stevens

His frank expression of pleasure in Cummings' note, the way he picks up Cummings' playful use of foreign phrases, and the hearty "Always sincerely yours" show Stevens joining the younger poet gladly in this tipsy holiday interlude.

What was it that drew Cummings to "Landscape with Boat" in 1947? The poem was first published in *Accent* in 1940, then collected in Stevens' *Parts of a World* in 1942. Cummings probably came across it in the Accent *Anthology* (1946) which contained some of his own poems.[8] "Landscape with Boat" is a parable about a painter, "An anti-master man, floribund ascetic" (*Collected* 241). As Bart Eeckhout has argued, Stevens may have had in mind the purely abstract painter Piet Mondrian.[9] The poem is sharply critical of abstraction as an overly-intellectual approach to art, and it ends with a paean to the opposing goodness of physical reality:

Had he been better able to suppose:
He might sit on a sofa on a balcony
Above the Mediterranean, emerald
Becoming emeralds. He might watch the palms
Flap green ears in the heat. He might observe
A yellow wine and follow a steamer's track
And say, "The thing I hum appears to be
The rhythm of this celestial pantomime." (*Collected* 243)

The imaginary painter in this conclusion resembles Matisse rather than Mondrian—or, even more to the point here, he resembles Cummings himself, the self-described "poetandpainter" who (except for a brief, early detour into abstraction) remained a resolutely figurative painter for his entire career. The phrase Cummings quoted in his note to Stevens ("emerald/ Becoming emeralds") capsulizes the main point of the poem: the shift from an abstract, generalized way of seeing (the adjective "emerald") to a warm appreciation of the precious particulars of the material world (the plural noun "emeralds"). Cummings probably saw the Stevens of "Landscape with Boat" as a kindred spirit: a champion of individualism against the homogenizing tendencies of modern life and art.[10]

Following this brief exchange in 1947, there was a long lapse in the correspondence. During this period, Cummings found himself increasingly worried about money. By early 1950, he and Marion were in severe financial straits. He began letting others know about their situation, and he began seeking support from foundations. In these desperate circumstances, Cummings again wrote to Stevens on February 9, 1950:

> Dear Wallace Stevens—
>
> I'm asking the Bollingen Foundation for a grant. Might I put you down as one of my 3 sponsors?
>
> —fine luck
> in any case
>
> E. E. Cummings

Spurred by financial necessity, Cummings must have hoped that—although the two poets had still never met—the reservoir of good will he and Stevens had built up over the years was sufficient to justify this appeal to the older poet whose stature had become considerable by 1950. His hopes were fulfilled when Stevens replied immediately: "Nothing would please me more than to be one of your sponsors for a Bollingen grant. I shall do my best in response to any inquiries" (L 667). Cummings' grateful response is the last item in their surviving correspondence:

> February 16, 1950
>
> Dear Mr Stevens—
>
> I have your letter
> and feel very lucky

—bien merci

Cummings

He had made a direct appeal to Stevens' good will, and Stevens had responded positively. His shift, in this note, from "Wallace Stevens" to "Mr Stevens" and from "E. E. Cummings" to "Cummings" seems to mark his awareness of a change in their relationship. With some irony, Cummings was adopting Stevens' more formal manner as a way of acknowledging the poet's kindness behind the businessman's façade.

It would be of the greatest interest to know what Stevens might have said about Cummings in such a reference letter. Unfortunately, he never wrote it. The Bollingen Archives at the Library of Congress reveal that Cummings had applied to the Bollingen Foundation for $5,000.00 a year for three years, and he had given three references: Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, and Van Wyck Brooks. Here is his project-proposal:

> perhaps,given 3 years of total freedom,it may be my wonderful luck to see a certain mystery complete herself:a mystery I should call a play;a play neither "prosaic" nor "poetic",and having much less than nothing in common with the widely worshipped dullnesses of unprose "drama" —a truthful deep suddenly joyous form;whose nearness has cheered and tormented me ever since Him(1927)[11]

The Bollingen Committee, deciding that Cummings' literary reputation spoke for itself, did not ask for reference letters. They also, regretfully, decided that they could not afford to fund his proposal.

Luckily for Cummings, other awards did come to his aid. He won a $500.00 prize from *Poetry* magazine in June, 1950, a $5,000.00 fellowship from the Academy of American Poets later that year, and finally, after years of rejection, a second Guggenheim Fellowship in 1951. His financial worries were solved for the time being, and he never again asked Stevens for a recommendation. But his having done so brought them closer together and paved the way for their first and only recorded meeting.

On January 15, 1951, Stevens gave a lecture entitled "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The event drew a large crowd, eager to hear the poet who had won the Bollingen Prize for 1949 and whose *The Auroras of Autumn* had appeared in the fall of 1950. The lecture was so well received that the Museum immediately printed it as a pamphlet. Cummings was in the audience for Stevens' lecture, and he also attended the party afterwards at the

apartment of Monroe Wheeler who had arranged the event. Wheeler recalled, "Stevens became quite elated and happy. Cummings was taunting him, as he did everyone; he loved to needle people in a very friendly way" (quoted in Brazeau 191).

This is the only recorded meeting of the two poets in person, and it seems appropriately ambivalent. They were "happy" and "friendly" together. But there was also a "taunting" aspect to Cummings' humor that was partly inspired, we may be sure, by having heard the following remarks in the talk Stevens had just delivered:

> . . . One sees a good deal of poetry, thanks, perhaps, to Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, in which the exploitation of form involves nothing more than the use of small letters for capitals, eccentric line-endings, too little or too much punctuation and similar aberrations. These have nothing to do with being alive. (NA 168)

This was a familiar complaint with Stevens. "[I] have a horror of poetry pretending to be contemporaneous because of typographical queerness," he wrote to one correspondent in 1937 (L 326); and to another he remarked in 1941, "I don't want you to get the idea that I believe in queer punctuation" (L 387). Clearly he had in mind Cummings (as well as other poets like Pound and Williams) in making all these comments, and the point would not have been lost on Stevens' audience at the Museum of Modern Art. Cummings himself must have felt a bit stung, hearing such criticism among this gathering of New York poets, artists, and critics, his colleagues and peers.

Nevertheless, the two poets seem to have gotten along very well on this occasion. Stevens, at least, retained his positive feelings about Cummings afterwards, judging from his recorded comments about the younger poet over the next few years. Samuel French Morse, who met with Stevens occasionally between 1951 and 1955, recalled: "I remember his asserting the E. E. Cummings had behaved better than anybody else during the war" (quoted in Brazeau 154).[12] Stevens was probably referring to the *First* World War and to *The Enormous Room* (1922). If so, this confirms that he had read and admired Cummings' work early on, and that he retained this admiration into the 1950's. Another brief comment from 1953 also seems to indicate a continuing good will toward Cummings on Stevens' part. Writing to thank the composer John Gruen for a recording of his *New Songs*, Stevens praised the settings of poems, singling out one group in particular: "The Cummings pieces were excellent" (L 785).

However, the friendly relations between Cummings and Stevens came to an abrupt end in 1954. In that year, Stevens' *Collected Poems* and Cummings' *Poems, 1923-1954* competed for the National Book Award. It was a difficult decision for the committee. Partisans of Stevens could point to the fact that he had received no major awards until very late in his career and that, at nearly seventy-five (he would die in June

of 1955), he was overdue for such recognition. Partisans of Cummings, on the other hand, thought the younger poet more deserving at least partly because Stevens had recently won a National Book Award, in 1951, for *The Auroras of Autumn*. In the end, Stevens got his second award and Cummings was given a Special Citation as a kind of consolation prize. According to Richard Kennedy, "Not everyone was happy about the outcome, including Cummings" (452).

The controversy enflamed the dormant rivalry between the two poets. It was probably at this time that Cummings disparaged Stevens as "a business man," not an artist. Cummings conspicuously did not attend the awards ceremony, during which (in Stevens' words) "[Christopher LaFarge, one of the judges,] did so well by Cummings that if my name had not already been on the plaque I should have been moved to give it to him" (L 867). In a letter written a few days after the event, Stevens wrote of the controversy: "Most people, I think, expected Cummings to receive the award because I had had it in 1951, so that I think the award to many has divided opinion" (L 868). A week later, he summarized the episode with barely concealed bitterness: "The excitement about the Book Award has now died down. I don't think it was a particularly popular choice. But this seems to me to be largely because people who thought that Cummings should have had it made such a fuss about it. After all, Cummings is the last man in the world to complain of being neglected. The truth is that I don't know that he himself has made any complaint—his partisans have" (L 870). The ruckus had obviously spoiled Stevens' enjoyment of the honor, and his disappointment was probably not eased by the knowledge that Cummings was fifteen years younger and had already received many more major awards than Stevens.

After this, Stevens apparently nursed a grudge against Cummings. That, at least, is the implication of Allen Tate's memory of serving on the Bollingen Prize Committee with Stevens in 1955. Cummings was a candidate for the award that year, and Tate is said to have remarked that "Stevens very much didn't want Cummings to have it" (Brazeau 178). (In fact, Cummings did not finally receive the Bollingen Prize until 1958, three years after Stevens' death.) If Tate's story is true, it makes a sadly ironic ending to the story of their relationship. Back in 1950, Stevens had promised to support Cummings' application to the Bollingen; instead, in 1955, he blocked Cummings' award from that Foundation.

Perhaps even more ironic is that, just as their friendly relations turned to mutual resentment, critics were reviewing their collected volumes together, summing up their careers in relation to each other. G. S. Fraser in *Partisan Review* contrasted the two poets in a manner reminiscent of Edmund Wilson's early review, characterizing Cummings as "sensationalist" and Stevens as "aesthetic" in their uses of language. According to Fraser, Cummings is "tough and native" with a "painful, raw honesty." Stevens is "cosmopolitan and sophisticated . . . a first-rate artist in verse," yet finally he lacks "the

matter of life" that Cummings has in abundance (125-134). Louise Bogan in the *New Yorker* characterized Cummings primarily as a satirist and Stevens, in contrast, as "contemplative," concluding on a judicious note that seems designed to rise above the National Book Award controversy: "We must be grateful for Stevens' subtle discipline no less than for Cummings' boldness and verve" (194). Charles Poore of the *New York Times* used the occasion mainly to criticize the practice of giving awards (like the National Book Award) as a kind of memorial of a career rather than for fresh achievement in the year of the award (21). His clear implication was that *neither* Stevens nor Cummings ought to have won. He has a good point. If that had happened, it might have saved the cordial relationship between Stevens and Cummings, and we might think of them as much less antagonistic than we do now.

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Notes

1 For permission to quote unpublished material by Wallace Stevens, I am grateful to Peter R. Hanchak. For permission to quote unpublished material by E. E. Cummings, I am grateful to the E. E. Cummings Copyright Trust.

2 For Cummings' interest in the visual arts, see especially Milton A. Cohen's *PoetandPainter: The Aesthetics of E. E. Cummings's Early Work*; for Stevens' interest in the visual arts, see my *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*.

3 For Stevens' relationship with Donald Evans, see my *Wallace Stevens and Company*, Chapters 1 and 5.

4 The following abbreviations will be used in the text for Stevens' works: *Collected, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*; L, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*; NA, *The Necessary Angel*; OP, *Opus Posthumous*.

5 In a telephone conversation on July 19, 2001, Richard Kennedy noted that Cummings spoke ill of Stevens not habitually but in "a moment of pique," probably in response to the controversy about the National Book Award in 1954.

6 The unpublished correspondence between Stevens and Cummings (1944-1950) is catalogued as WAS 1-5 in the Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Stevens' side of the correspondence exists as carbon copies of letters typed, probably on stationery, by his secretary at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Repetitions of a Young Captain," *Quarterly Review of Literature* I.3 (Spring 1944): 155-158.

7 Richard Kennedy made this remark in the conversation noted above.

8 "Landscape with Boat" was first published, together with "On the Adequacy of Landscape," in Accent, 1.1(Autumn 1940), 12-14. It was republished in the Accent *Anthology: Selections from Accent, A Quarterly of New Literature, 1940-1945*, eds. Kerker Quinn and Charles Shattuck (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946), along with two other poems: "The Bed of Old John Zeller" and "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit" (428-431).

Cummings' "Three Poems" included in the Accent *Anthology* are: "It was a goodly co," "Hello is what a mirror says," and "o by the by" (369-371).

9 In reading "Landscape with Boat" as a parable of modern painting, Eeckhout follows Bonnie Costello's "Effects of an Analogy: Wallace Stevens and Painting."

10 Cummings may or may not have known that Stevens shared his antipathies to Franklin Delano Roosevelt and to communism. Nor, apparently, did he realize that Stevens had reversed his view of abstract painting in 1942. In the first section of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," subtitled "It Must Be Abstract," Stevens had in mind the pure geometric abstraction of Piet Mondrian as an analogy for his own poetry. On Stevens and abstract art, see my *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, 92-96, 103-121.

11 Cummings' application form and related correspondence are in the Bollingen Foundation Records, Part I, Box 480.034, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Cummings never finished the play he refers to in this application.

12 The memory dates from the period 1951-55 when Morse was living in Hartford and spent time with Stevens. It was natural for Stevens to make this remark to Morse whom he associated with the military: Morse had been a Sergeant in the army when Stevens agreed to write the Introduction to his first book of poems, published by the Cummington Press in 1944.

Stevens' remark echoes a similar comment by Allen Tate in 1946: ". . . in looking back over the war years I see only one American poet who kept his humanity and his poetry, and that man is Estlin Cummings" (quoted in Norman 313). The dates suggest that both Stevens and Tate may have been referring to the *Second* World War. As Michael Webster has pointed out to me, Cummings' anti-war attitudes were well known at the time, through his poetry and through his statement in Oscar Williams' anthology *The War Poets*, in which Stevens also appeared. Nevertheless, it seems to me more likely that the writers meant to contrast Cummings' exemplary behavior during the *First* World War—made famous by *The Enormous Room*—with that of poets like Archibald MacLeish

who as Librarian of Congress and then as assistant secretary of state promoted Roosevelt's war efforts, subordinating literature to politics.

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