

## ‘A TWILIGHT SMELLING OF VERGIL’: E. E. CUMMINGS, CLASSICS, AND THE GREAT WAR\*

The opened door showed a room, about sixteen feet short and four feet narrow, with a heap of straw in the further end. My spirits had been steadily recovering from the banality of their examination; and it was with a genuine and never-to-be-forgotten thrill that I remarked, as I crossed what might have been the threshold: ‘Mais, on est bien ici.’

A hideous crash nipped the last word. I had supposed the whole prison to have been utterly destroyed by earthquake, but it was only my door closing....<sup>1</sup>

Here, in a passage taken from the novelized version of his own imprisonment in France in 1917, the American modernist poet E. E. Cummings describes the moment of confrontation with the first of his prison cells. He had volunteered for ambulance service in France during the First World War, but his service lasted only a few months before he and his friend William Slater Brown were arrested and incarcerated – wrongfully suspected of espionage – in a brutal French detention camp at La Ferté-Macé.<sup>2</sup>

This article considers E. E. Cummings as a war poet, drawing on the relationship between his war poetry and his engagement with the classical tradition. As a student at Harvard from 1911–1916, the Classics were Cummings’ principle field of study.<sup>3</sup> Cummings’ relationship

\* I am grateful to Mike Webster and Jonathan Thorpe and to the journal’s editors for several very useful suggestions. ‘HELEN’, ‘earth like a tipsy’, ‘through the tasteless minute efficient room’, and ‘O sweet spontaneous’ by E.E. Cummings are reprinted from *E.E. Cummings: Complete Poems 1904–1962*, ed. G.J. Firmage (New York: 1994) by the very kind permission of the Liveright Publishing Corporation.

<sup>1</sup> E. E. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* (New York, 1978 [1922]), 16.

<sup>2</sup> For biographical information, see C. Norman, *E.E. Cummings. The Magic-maker* (New York, 1972 [1958]), 66–119; R.S. Kennedy, *Dreams in the Mirror. A Biography of E.E. Cummings* (second edition, New York, 1994), 133–88. For Cummings own account, see Cummings (n. 1), with Kennedy’s introduction to the 1978 edition.

<sup>3</sup> R. S. Kennedy, ‘E.E. Cummings at Harvard: Studies’, *Harvard Library Bulletin* 24 (1976), 269–79, 281–2. For further scholarship on Cummings and the Classics, see S. Baker, ‘Cummings and Catullus’, *Modern Language Notes* 74 (1959), 231–4; Kennedy (n. 2), 52–72; L.R. Lind, ‘The Hellenism of Cummings.’ *CML* 2 (1982); M. C. English, ‘Aristophanic Comedy in E. E. Cummings’ *Him*’, *CML* 24 (2004); M. Webster, ‘*Lugete*: The Divine Lost

with the Classics fed into his approach to the war and his response to it. The poetry of Cummings' Harvard years represents military glory in terms which are classicized, aestheticized, and removed from any actual experience of warfare, while the poetry written during and after his experience of the First World War expresses a growing sense of distance from the naive patriotism of those who remained at home. In the field of First World War poetry, this is a familiar trajectory which invites simplifications and which some recent scholars have been keen to problematize.<sup>4</sup> Situating Cummings' poetry within a trajectory from idealism to disillusionment means returning, in a sense, to a more old-fashioned paradigm. But what Cummings brings to that trajectory is distinctive and surprising.

Cummings puts sex, gender, and sexual violence at the centre of his relationship to the Classics and the First World War. The Harvard-era poetry already foregrounds the connections between women, sex, the Classics, and war. However, Cummings' insight into sex and warfare was transformed by the month between his arrival in France and his deployment to his ambulance unit – a month which Cummings and Brown spent socializing with prostitutes in the demi-monde of Paris. During this time Cummings dated (but did not have sex with) the Parisian prostitute Marie Louise Lallemand.<sup>5</sup> His presentation of sex and of women in time of war, the female earth, male sexuality, and male bodies generates a poetry which is both surprisingly gentle and surprisingly shocking. He displays a deep sympathy for those who are traumatized by war, while he echoes the brutality of war in a quieter brutality within his own poetic language.

## I. Harvard

Cummings was at Harvard from 1911 to 1916, and the First World War was a distant idea. He wrote satirically of the disengaged

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and Found Child in Cummings', *Spring: The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society* (hereafter *Spring*) 19 (2012), 37–49.

<sup>4</sup> See E. Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles. Classical Reception in British Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford, 2010), esp. xii and 1–9; E. Vandiver, 'Homer in British World War One Poetry', in L. Hardwick and C. Stray (eds.), *A Companion to Classical Reception* (Oxford, 2008), 452–4, 463–4; also M. W. Van Wienen, *Partisans and Poets. The Political Work of American Poetry in the Great War* (Cambridge, 1997). See M. Rawlinson, 'Wilfred Owen', in T. Kendall (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry* (Oxford, 2007), 114–33, on the problems with this constructed version of Owen.

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy (n. 2), 142–3.

philanthropy of the inhabitants of Cambridge, Massachusetts. In mimicked voice: “My dear, our church sent / three thousand bandages only last week / to those poor soldiers.”<sup>6</sup> But the war was no more real to him than to the women of Cambridge despatching bandages. His friend, the novelist John Dos Passos, comments on this distance from the war in his own memoirs, *The Best Times*. Dos Passos wrote about a tight Harvard literary circle which included himself, Cummings, and other aspiring writers, orbiting around the literary magazine the *Harvard Monthly*:

The sound of marching feet came dimly through the walls of the sanctum upstairs in the Harvard Union where we edited the *Monthly*... The *Yellow Book* and *The Hound of Heaven* and Machen’s *Hill of Dreams* seemed more important, somehow, than the massacres round Verdun.<sup>7</sup>

When Cummings did turn directly to the subject of the First World War in his poetry, he produced arguably the worst poem which he ever published – a sentimental tribute to the ‘trampled fields’ and ‘heroic dead’ of Belgium.<sup>8</sup>

Dos Passos gets to the nub of matters with his observation that, for the Harvard set, the literary tradition seemed more alive than the war. Cummings’ ideas about war during his Harvard years come directly out of his efforts to train himself as a poet, combining a classically inspired militarism with a literary aesthetic that characterized what he later referred to as his “Keats period”:<sup>9</sup>

*I dreamed I was among the conquerors,  
Among those shadows, wonderfully tall,  
Which splendidly inhabit the hymned hall  
Whereof is ‘Fame’ writ on its glorious doors.*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> E. E. Cummings, *Complete Poems 1904–1962*, ed. G. J. Firmage (New York, 1994), 933.

<sup>7</sup> Dos Passos, *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (London, 1966), 23. Regarding the *Yellow Book* etc., Dos Passos concedes that Cummings’ literary endeavours were more progressive, but that does not affect the point about the feeling of distance from the war. The major scholarship on Cummings’ poetic development during his Harvard years are Kennedy (n. 3); R. S. Kennedy, ‘E.E. Cummings at Harvard: Verse, Friends, Rebellion’, *Harvard Library Bulletin* 25 (1977), 253–91; R. S. Kennedy, ‘E.E. Cummings: The Emergent Styles, 1916’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 7 (1979), 175–204.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Evening Post*, 20 May 1916; Cummings (n. 6), 876. See discussions in Kennedy (n. 2), 133–6; C. Sawyer-Laucanno, *E.E. Cummings: A Biography* (London: 2006), 82–5.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from the Harvard archive in M. A. Cohen ‘Cummings and Freud’, *American Literature* 55 (1983), 593.

<sup>10</sup> Cummings (n. 6), 874.

The classical side to Cummings' militarism comes through particularly in the 'Epithalamion', which Cummings wrote in 1916 for the marriage of his friend Scofield Thayer to Elaine Orr.<sup>11</sup> Drawing throughout the poem on classical imagery, he presents marriage and sex in terms of the triumph of spring. The deeply embedded militarism shows in his attempts to evoke the visual aspects of the ancient world: a military scene, for example, exalts the image of Chryselephantine Zeus (lines 43–5):

*whose foot-stool tells  
how fought the looser of the warlike zone  
of her that brought forth tall Hippolytus...*

Militarism is embedded in the central imagery of the poem, the arrival of spring and its triumph over defeated winter (lines 70–2):

*while hunted from his kingdom winter cowers,  
seeing green armies steadily expand  
hearing the spear-song of the marching grass.*

Here the 'spear-song' indicates a specifically classical flavour in the triumph of spring's 'green armies'. It is a well-drawn poetic image. But it is also aestheticized, literary, and far removed from war's realities.

'Epithalamion' ranges across a broad frame of classical reference. A more focused classical consideration appears in another poem, 'HELEN', also written at Harvard. This poem was not published by Cummings; it appears in the posthumous *Etcetera*.<sup>12</sup> A Petrarchan sonnet, it is romantic and romanticized – again very much the work of someone who has not himself seen war. However, it shows the beginnings of a more complex presentation of war and a more nuanced tone:

#### HELEN

*Only thou livest. Centuries wheel and pass,  
And generations wither into dust;  
Royalty is the vulgar food of rust,  
Valor and fame, their days be as the grass;*

*What of today? vanitas, vanitas...  
These treasures of rare love and costing lust*

<sup>11</sup> It became the opening poem of *Tulips & Chimneys* (1922 ms) and *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923); Cummings (n. 6), 3–7. See Kennedy (n. 2), 190; Sawyer-Lauçanno (n. 8), 86–9.

<sup>12</sup> E.E. Cummings, *Etcetera. The Unpublished Poems of E.E. Cummings*, ed. G. J. Firmage and R. S. Kennedy (New York and London, 1983); Cummings (n. 6), 913.

*Shall the tomorrow reckon mold and must,  
Ere, stricken of time, itself shall cry alas.*

*Sole sits majestic Death, high lord of change;  
And Life, a little pinch of frankincense,  
Sweetens the certain passing...from some sty*

*Leers even now the immanent face strange,  
That leaned upon immortal battlements  
To watch the beautiful young heroes die.*

Helen was an obvious poetic subject for Cummings and his contemporaries, but one which could be taken in varying directions. His Harvard friend R. S. Mitchell, for example, wrote a ‘Helen’ in which the reader finds Helen returned to the palace of Menelaus, reflecting on her past and Troy’s fall.<sup>13</sup> Cummings, on the other hand, pictures her at Troy above the battlefield and so highlights the military and heroic context.

‘from some sty / Leers even now the immanent face strange’: with ‘even now’, Cummings suggests that every man has his Helen, a face he would fight for. Helen is simultaneously ‘immanent’ – present again in each woman who watches any soldier off to war – and ‘strange’ – a face belonging to the classical past.<sup>14</sup> Cummings finds in Helen a recurrent type which appears here leering from ‘some sty’. This may be any path or enclosed forecourt (*OED*) but it conjures the pigsty and brings Helen into the level of the mundane, or even the dirty.<sup>15</sup> The leer on the face of today’s immanent Helen opens up undercurrents within the scene of military glory played out beneath the battlements.

Although much else changed in Cummings’ poetry during and after his experience of the First World War, he persisted in the view that

<sup>13</sup> In E. E. Cummings *et al.*, *Eight Harvard Poets* (New York, 1917), 70–1. Cf. the portrait of Helen in Rupert Brooke’s ‘Menelaus and Helen’.

<sup>14</sup> The tendency to see classical figures as archetypes was encouraged in Cummings by his interest in Freud, whose theories looked to classical figures as archetypes – most famously, of course, transforming Oedipus from a specific classical figure into a universal archetype for the Oedipal complex. For Freud in a classical reception context, see F. Macintosh, *Sophocles. Oedipus Tyrannus* (Cambridge, 2009), s.v. Freud; F. Macintosh, ‘Oedipus in the East End: from Freud to Berkoff’, in E. Hall, F. Macintosh, and A. Wrigley (eds.), *Dionysus since 69. Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Oxford, 2004), 313–28; M. Leonard, ‘Freud and Tragedy: Oedipus and the gender of the universal’, *Classical Reception Journal* 5 (2013), 63–83. For Cummings and Freud, see Cohen (n. 9).

<sup>15</sup> I am very grateful to Rob Shorrock for the excellent suggestion that behind Cummings’ choice of ‘sty’ is probably the description by William Simpson of Schliemann’s excavated Troy as ‘Priam’s pigsty’. On Simpson and Schliemann, see S. H. Allen, *Finding the Walls of Troy. Frank Calvert and Heinrich Schliemann at Hisarlik* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), 185–6.

soldiers fight with sex on the mind. The ‘leer’ in ‘HELEN’ suggests the woman’s sexual interest in the masculine display of war. Other sexual perspectives are confronted in the later poetry. Cummings writes about prostitutes touting for the custom of soldiers in Paris:

*(ladies*

*accurately dead les anglais  
sont gentils et les américains  
aussi, ils payent bien les américains. . .*

He writes of the soldier in the mud of the trenches, thinking lasciviously of his girl:

*(dreaming,  
et  
cetera, of  
Your smile  
eyes knees and of your Etcetera)<sup>16</sup>*

He openly acknowledges the wartime problem of venereal disease and consistently undercuts the widespread idealization of the noble soldier fighting chastely for the pure, untouched, and untouchable girl back home. He takes on this patriotic idealization directly in ‘come, gaze with me upon this dome’, in which the young man wants ‘to do or die / for God for country and for Yale’:

*by the high minded pure young girl*

*much kissed, by loving relatives  
well fed, and fully photographed  
the son of man goes forth to war  
with trumpets clap and syphilis*

Cummings’ early Harvard poetry does not have this same sarcastic bite, but the realism about sex in warfare is already anticipated in Helen’s leer.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Respectively from ‘little ladies more’ (Cummings [n. 6], 56–7) and ‘my sweet old etcetera’ (ibid., 275). The French reads ‘the English are nice and Americans also, they pay well, the Americans’.

<sup>17</sup> ‘come, gaze with me upon this dome’ is Cummings (n. 6), 272. See T. Dayton, “‘Writers Etcetera’”: Cummings, the Great War, and Discursive Struggle’, *Spring 17* (2010), 116–39, on ‘my sweet old etcetera’ and Cummings’ rejection of images and attitudes pervasive in contemporary patriotic poetry and wider discourse.

## II. 'dusty heroisms'

Several of the young men among Cummings' circle volunteered for ambulance duty. They sought adventure. As Dos Passos remarked of himself: 'I was all for an architecture course', (as his father desired), 'but first I wanted to see the world. The world was the war.'<sup>18</sup>

The war changed Cummings' poetry. The following poem comes from the section titled 'La Guerre' in Cummings' first poetry collection, *Tulips & Chimneys*:

*earth like a tipsy  
biddy with an old mop punching  
underneath  
conventions exposes*

*hidden obscenities  
nudging  
into neglected sentiments brings  
to light dusty*

*heroisms  
and  
finally colliding with the most  
expensive furniture upsets*

*a  
crucifix which smashes into several  
pieces and is hurriedly picked up and  
thrown on the ash-heap*

*where  
lies  
what was once the discobolus of  
one*

*Myron*<sup>19</sup>

There is a clear change of tone from 'HELEN' to 'earth like a tipsy'. In 'HELEN', 'the beautiful young heroes' die under 'immortal battlements'. As a transferred epithet, the phrase nods to the immortal gods of Homeric epic. More directly, however, the immortality of the

<sup>18</sup> Dos Passos (n. 7), 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Tulips & Chimneys* (1922 ms); Cummings (n. 6), 54.

battlements of Troy embraces the ideal of military glory immortalized by poetry. In ‘earth like a tipsy’, on the other hand, the heroisms are not shining but ‘dusty’ and they belong to a world which is also full of ‘hidden obscenities’.

Cummings placed ‘earth like a tipsy’ in ‘La Guerre’ between a poem about the inanities of humanity and one about the silence which falls between barrages of cannon. ‘earth like a tipsy’ depicts a drunken earth lurching around, breaking the artefacts of human civilization. This seems like earth under cannon bombardment. It is surprising, since the opening image of earth with a mop might suggest a post-war cleaning up and recovery. But the shaking and the smashing, the colliding and breaking, and the ash-heap all belong to the war itself, as most properly does the exposure of obscenities and heroisms. Part of the effect of the poem is the surprise occasioned by subverting the idea of mopping up; the war’s smash-up is reimagined as an act of earth cleaning itself of human artefacts.

The ‘tipsy biddy’ captures, in a remarkable and original manner, the feel of a bombardment. The experience of being shelled was an experience of earth shifting and shaking underfoot. Erich Maria Remarque’s famous description of a shelling describes how earth becomes as unsteady as the sea:

The next moment part of the wood is lifted up above the tree tops when the second shell hits, three or four trees go up with it and are smashed into pieces in the process. ...In the light of one of the shell-bursts I risk a glance out on to the meadows. They are like a storm-tossed sea, with the flames from the impacts spurting up like fountains. ...The earth explodes in front of us. Great clumps of it come raining down on top of us. ...the earth is torn up again...<sup>20</sup>

Cummings’ language is more gentle than Remarque’s, but captures the same experience: tipsiness, the punch of shells, the smashing up, the fires and ashes.

The victims of the smash-up are the crucifix and the discobolus. Cummings – who was the son of a Unitarian minister as well as a student of the Classics – foregrounds the conjunction of the Christian and the classical. This is another aspect of his war poetry which we have seen already in ‘HELEN’. ‘HELEN’ grasps a classical motif but adopts a biblical register: ‘generations wither into dust; / Royalty is the vulgar food of rust, / Valor and fame, their days be as the grass’. The language

<sup>20</sup> E.M. Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, tr. B. Murdoch (London, 1996), 45–6.



here contains a suggestion of the burial service, ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’, and also of ‘for all flesh is as grass’ (1 Peter 1:24, KJV). In the next stanza, ‘vanitas, vanitas’ echoes the Latin Vulgate, ‘*vanitas vanitatum dixit Ecclesiastes vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas*’ (‘vanity of vanities, said Ecclesiastes; vanity of vanities, all is vanity’; Ecclesiastes 1:2, and cf. 12:8). Behind the biblical language, the reader might also sense something of Glaucus’ words (Hom. *Il.* 6.145–9), in which the generations of men are likened to the generations of leaves, which come and pass. In any case, this use of a biblical register for the classical subject of Helen brings Christian and classical together in this early poem. In the later poem, ‘earth like a tipsy’, the icons of the Catholic and the classical worlds, the crucifix and the discobolus, topple and lie jumbled together on the ash-heap. The totality of European civilization is the victim of war.

This European dimension comes to the fore in Cummings’ poetry. He served under American command in an American and French ambulance unit, but he experienced the war as a French and European affair. (Indeed, his preference for socializing with the French rather than with his fellow Americans in the unit caused friction with his commander and contributed, ironically, to his arrest by the French authorities.) The association of the Classics with Europe appears in Cummings’ poetic corpus in different ways: from tourists in Venice – ‘(O to be a metope / now that triglyph’s here)’ – to the irony which attends the disjunctions of the classical heritage in America, for example in the Boston restaurant ‘The Parthenon’, where the disjunctiveness is drily highlighted by the presence of a particularly memorable customer, a ‘Jumpy Tramp’ called Achilles.<sup>21</sup> In ‘earth like a tipsy’, the discobolus is coupled with the crucifix, which summons the impact on the Protestant Cummings of his war experience in Catholic northern France.

Here it is worth bringing in a passage from *The Enormous Room*, Cummings’ account of his own imprisonment during the war. En route to the detention camp where he was to be imprisoned for three months, he and his guard of two gendarmes pass a crucifix in a grove by the side of the road:

<sup>21</sup> ‘(O to be a metope...’ from ‘MEMORABILIA’ (Cummings [n. 6], 254); Achilles from ‘one April dusk the’ (ibid., 84). The joke in ‘MEMORABILIA’ is on Robert Browning, who wrote, from Italy, ‘Oh, to be in England / Now that April’s there’ (the opening lines of ‘Home-Thoughts, from Abroad’). See also C.S. Kilby, ‘Cummings, MEMORABILIA’, *Explicator* 12.15 (1953/4); C. Barton, ‘Cummings’ MEMORABILIA’, *Explicator* 22.26 (1963).

–The wooden body clumsy with pain burst into fragile legs with absurdly large feet and funny writhing toes; its little stiff arms made abrupt cruel equal angles with the road. About its stunted loins clung a ponderous and jocular fragment of drapery. On one terribly brittle shoulder the droll lump of its neckless head ridiculously lived. There was in this complete silent doll a gruesome truth of instinct, a success of uncanny poignancy, an unearthly ferocity of rectangular emotion.<sup>22</sup>

Cummings' vivid description undercuts traditional aesthetics ('the droll lump of its neckless head ridiculously lived'). However, it remains an exquisite and aestheticized presentation. As Kennedy remarked, this is 'a passage full of cubistic obliquities'.<sup>23</sup> Cummings was himself a painter as well as a poet, and both his painting and his poetry were influenced by the work of Matisse, Picasso, and the Cubists in general.<sup>24</sup> The Cubist aesthetic pervades this passage, presenting itself most obviously in the 'cruel equal angles' and the 'rectangular emotion'.

*The Enormous Room* was published in 1922, which is the same year that the manuscript of *Tulips & Chimneys* was assembled.<sup>25</sup> It was acclaimed at publication and made Cummings' name, even though it is now largely forgotten outside specialist circles.<sup>26</sup> An aesthetic of the crucifix which is reminiscent of this passage in *The Enormous Room* appears elsewhere in Cummings' poetry, for instance in 'the bed is not very big': above the bed, 'a Jesus sags / in frolicsome wooden agony'.<sup>27</sup>

The reader of 'earth like a tipsy' may imagine a more traditional crucifix, or may be influenced by these other aspects of Cummings' corpus into imagining a more Cummings-like, Cubist crucifix. Either way, the

<sup>22</sup> Cummings (n. 1), 38.

<sup>23</sup> Kennedy in Cummings (n. 1), xiv. On this scene, see also W. T. Martin, 'Cummings' *The Enormous Room*', *Explicator* 59 (2000), and (taking a rather unkind view) P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, new edition (Oxford, 2013 [1975]), 174.

<sup>24</sup> For Cummings as a painter, see, generally, M. A. Cohen, *Poet and Painter. The Aesthetics of E. E. Cummings's Early Work* (Detroit, MI, 1987). Note that Cummings himself described *The Enormous Room* as analogous to a quilt: Cohen, *op.cit.*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> The manuscript of *Tulips & Chimneys* was assembled in 1922. It was published as *Tulips and Chimneys* (New York, 1923) in heavily edited form, with fewer than half of the intended poems. Many of the missing poems were published in Cummings' next publication, *&* (a rebellion against the alteration of '&' to 'and' in *Tulips and Chimneys*). *Tulips & Chimneys (1922 Manuscript)*, ed. and with afterword by G. J. Firmage, introduction by R. S. Kennedy (New York, 1976), is now considered to be the authoritative version. See Kennedy's introduction and Firmage's afterword for further details.

<sup>26</sup> There were negative as well as positive reviews, but on the whole the book made a splash. On reception of *The Enormous Room*, see Norman (n. 2), 106–16; Kennedy (n. 2), 242–3; P. Headrick, "'Brilliant Obscurity": The Reception of *The Enormous Room*', *Spring* 1 (1992), 46–76.

<sup>27</sup> Cummings (n. 6), 207.

crucifix is a highly aestheticized presentation of the male body, as is Myron's discobolus.<sup>28</sup> Between crucifix and discobolus, the poem offers two beautiful naked or nearly naked male bodies, smashed up by the drunk cleaning woman who is earth. These are not simply bodies, but specifically male bodies created through art. The discobolus is a work of art, as is the crucifix. Earth destroys, equally, a pinnacle of ancient art and an image which lies at the heart of Christian art. The male bodies created by the (explicitly or presumptively) male artist are wrecked by a drunken female earth, subverting female earth's normally procreative role.

The presentation of aestheticized and (in the case of the discobolus) classicized male bodies recalls the 'beautiful young heroes' who die in 'HELEN'. But, while there is continuity in this aestheticized approach, there is also a new and transformative context. The aesthetic of the male body – especially of the dying male body – was fundamentally altered by the experience of the trenches.<sup>29</sup> We can read 'earth like a tipsy' in the context of this challenge to the aesthetics of male bodies and to the construction of gender. The question of gender affects not only the crucifix and the discobolus but also the central figure of the poem – the cleaning lady. This drunk biddy is a female figure and an embodiment of earth. As a cleaning lady, however, she is not a female figure particularly associated with fertility. This distinguishes the image from some of Cummings' other war poetry, where a female earth, however damaged and abused, nonetheless asserts her capacity to regenerate and recover.

The poem seems somehow out of kilter. Like *The Enormous Room*, its aesthetics are surrealist and absurdist. *The Enormous Room* is a world-turned-upside-down narrative, and 'earth like a tipsy' is an inebriated upside-down earth. It is a poem of a very gentle brutality. That gentle brutality is itself a kind of gender confusion, which undermines

<sup>28</sup> There is no knowing whether Cummings would have associated the discobolus principally with bronze, as per the lost original, or – perhaps more likely – with marble, as per surviving copies.

<sup>29</sup> S. Das "'Kiss Me, Hardy": Intimacy, Gender, and Gesture in First World War Trench Literature', *Modernism/modernity* 9 (2002), 63: 'The aestheticization of the male body and the eroticization of male experience one notes in Read and Nichols – poets who, unlike Sassoon or Ackerley, were not overtly concerned with homosexuality – might result from the effort to find a suitable poetic language with which to articulate the specificity of war experiences'. See also S. Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge, 2005); J. Bourke, *Dismembering the Male. Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London, 1996). For imagery of the crucifixion in the First World War, see Fussell (n. 23), 126–9.

the gender polarities of an anonymous cleaning lady who opens the poem and the closing image of the iconic athletic nude of Myron.

### III. 'Ça Pue'

Cummings and Brown had the following interchange with a fellow prisoner, a Mexican national, as reported in *The Enormous Room*: 'When we asked him once what he thought about the war, he replied "I t'ink lotta bullshit!" which, upon copious reflection, I decided absolutely expressed my own point of view.'<sup>30</sup> In his poetry, Cummings' disillusionment with the war takes familiar targets. In 'lis / -ten', he writes about those back home who neither know nor want to know what it means to be gassed.<sup>31</sup> 'lis / -ten' appears in Cummings' 1926 collection *is 5*, followed by 'come, gaze with me upon this dome' – the poem we met above, with its memorable image of 'trumpets clap and syphilis'.

The refusal of those at home to recognize the horrors of gassing; the disconnect between educational ideals ('for God for country and for Yale') and war's realities – these echo the famous complaints of Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. But there is a major difference. Unlike Owen, Cummings does not associate the Classics with these complaints. Owen was affected by specific British cultural and educational forces which did not shape Cummings' upbringing or his classical education. The changes in Cummings' relationship to the Classics have more to do with a growing sense of regret and nostalgia, though that is also tinged at times with ambivalence. His presentation of the classical world becomes more liminal and blurred. These blurrings of boundaries connect his poetry to one of the central aspects of First World War literature – the issue of social and linguistic breakdown and a loss of confidence in the ability of language to articulate the war experience.<sup>32</sup>

The following poem is from 1918, published (like 'HELEN') in *Etcetera*.<sup>33</sup> It is one of several poems about prostitution which we find

<sup>30</sup> Cummings (n. 1), 132.

<sup>31</sup> Cummings (n. 6), 271.

<sup>32</sup> This has been studied from many angles, including M. Martin, 'Therapeutic Measures: *The Hydra* and Wilfred Owen at Craiglockhart War Hospital', *Modernism/modernity* 14 (2007), 35–54, on metre; Das (n. 29 [2005]), 69, on touch and intimacy: "'Frightful intimacy" is perhaps as far as language can go, and the dying kiss was perhaps its true sign, the mouth filling the gap left by language.' J. Stallworthy, *Survivors' Songs. From Maldon to the Somme* (Cambridge, 2008), 24, remarks on blurring in David Jones's *In Parenthesis*.

<sup>33</sup> Also in Cummings (n. 6), 945.

in Cummings' war corpus. He was influenced not only by his month with Marie Louise in the wartime world of Paris prostitution but also by his respect for the dignity and courage shown by the prostitutes incarcerated at the military detention camp at La Ferté-Macé.<sup>34</sup> For many writers – not only Cummings, but also men such as Robert Graves or John Dos Passos – one of the first experiences of the war zone was the encounter with prostitution.<sup>35</sup> Few writers, however, face the subject as frankly as does Cummings.

This poem is a sonnet. Like most of Cummings' sonnets, it stretches the form.<sup>36</sup> The ellipsis in line 12 is Cummings' own punctuation, and itself enacts some of the limits and lacunae of language.

*through the tasteless minute efficient room  
march hexameters of unpleasant  
twilight, a twilight smelling of Vergil,  
as me bang(to and from)  
the hugging rags of white Latin flesh  
which her body sometimes isn't  
(all night, always, a warm incessant gush  
of furious Paris flutters up the hill,  
cries somethings laughs loves nothings float  
upward, beautifully, forces crazily rhyme,  
Montmartre s'amuse! obscure eyes hotly dote  
... as awkwardly toward me for the millionth time  
sides the ruddy rubbish of her kiss  
i taste upon her mouth cabs and taxis.*

Montmartre was the red-light district of Paris. The poem places the speaker in the bedroom of a prostitute, where they have sex: 'as me bang(to and from) / the hugging rags of white Latin flesh / which her body sometimes isn't'. To huffer (*OED*: 'to conceal, keep secret; to wrap up') comes across today as a somewhat outré flourish of

<sup>34</sup> Cummings (n.1), 123–5.

<sup>35</sup> Neither Graves nor Dos Passos slept with prostitutes, but both write about them – Dos Passos (n. 7), 71, 74; Graves in his autobiography, *Goodbye to All That*, revised edition (London, 2000 [1929]), 67, 79, 103–4, 150–1, 153, 195, 247. See also M. Hirschfeld, *The Sexual History of the World War*, uncredited translation from the German (Honolulu, HI, 2006 [1941]), 92–109, 141–70.

<sup>36</sup> Cummings mentions his own preoccupation with the sonnet in his *i: six nonlectures* (New York, 1967 [1953]), 30. It is perfectly clear that he would consider this poem to be a sonnet. Compare the poems appearing under the section-titles 'SONNETS – REALITIES', 'SONNETS – UNREALITIES', and 'SONNETS – ACTUALITIES' from *Tulips & Chimneys* and from *& [AND]* (1925). See also G. Huang-Tiller, 'Modernism, Cummings' Meta-Sonnets, and Chimneys', *Spring 10* (2001), 155–72, on Cummings' use of the sonnet form.

vocabulary. It may not have seemed quite so archaic to Cummings, whose circle was steeped in the literature of the late nineteenth century, when the word enjoyed a minor vogue.<sup>37</sup> In reference to ‘Montmartre s’amuse!’, compare Cummings’ interchange with his French interrogators in *The Enormous Room*: ‘Leaning forward Monsieur asked coldly and carefully: “What did you do in Paris?” to which I responded briefly and warmly “We had a good time.”’<sup>38</sup>

In ‘through the tasteless minute efficient room’, Cummings gives language itself an agency which is charged with a classicized militarism. Hexameters march (line 2) and forces rhyme (line 10). The military behaviour of language and the poetic capacities of the military reach an epitome in the last word of the poem. Cummings sometimes puns on Latin or Greek words in his poetry, and here the tightening of the rhyme scheme as the poem proceeds (float / dote; rhyme / time) encourages the reader to read a pun in ‘taxis’. Taxis as a method of transportation, if the word merely elaborates on ‘cabs’, is doing little for the poem. But *taxis* (rhyming with ‘kiss’) puns on the Greek and evokes both battle lines and syntax.

The ‘rags of white Latin flesh’ which the body of the prostitute ‘sometimes isn’t’ explores the gap between the reality of the woman’s body and the ideas in play in the poem. Latin flesh in the sense of Mediterranean skin might more naturally seem olive: the disjunctive whiteness changes the reading and evokes classical marble statuary. The further disjunction between rags and stone heightens the gap between the body of the prostitute and the idealized beauty of classical marble. White marble is an idea which is distant – which the woman’s body ‘isn’t’. Or, more precisely, the sense of distance blurs in and out, since it is only ‘sometimes’ that the woman’s body ‘isn’t’. (Contrast the discobolus of Myron, which lies present but destroyed on the ash-heap.) ‘Latin’ also retains the meaning ‘the Latin language’. Just as the twilight is composed of Virgil’s marching hexameters, the woman’s body is composed of a flesh which is Latin, and *taxis* can be tasted on her mouth. The poem brings together sex, language, and war so that

<sup>37</sup> The *OED* provides sixteen citations for ‘hugger’ or ‘hugger-mugger’ between 1860 and 1900, including ‘hugger-mugger’ in Tennyson’s ‘The Village Wife’. The *OED* is not necessarily systematic, but this forty-year window furnishes a high proportion of the *OED* citations, suggesting a *floruit* for the word.

<sup>38</sup> Cummings (n. 1), 12.

the boundaries among the three are dissolved and they seem to be animated by the same essential ordering force.

For a reader, it is hard to know whether ‘furious Paris’ is the city alone, or whether it hints at the Homeric hero. It is also hard to know whether a kiss that ‘sidles’ forward ‘for the millionth time’ could hint at the thousands and hundreds of kisses demanded by Catullus of Lesbia (Catull. 5). (In Cummings’ corpus, Catullus is one of the more frequently referenced classical poets.) This uncertainty of reading is itself intrinsic to the poem, where the relationship between the classical and the contemporary worlds is unstable and uncertain.

There is a more obvious uncertainty in the poem: what does Virgil smell like? All we know of this twilight is that it is ‘unpleasant’. There is one extensive and memorable description of the smell of twilight in Cummings’ war writing. There, he describes the twilight on the first night of his imprisonment, as he lies in his cell observing the silhouette of a creature which has joined him on the windowsill: ‘Then I lay down, and heard (but could not see) the silhouette eat something or somebody... and saw, but could not hear, the incense of Ça Pue mount gingerly upon the taking air of twilight.’<sup>39</sup> ‘Ça Pue’ (‘It Stinks’) is the name that Cummings gave to the latrine pail which inhabited one corner of his cell. Both this passage from *The Enormous Room* and ‘from the tasteless minute efficient room’ summon the experience of a tight, enclosing space, and one text might illuminate the other. In the unpleasant twilight of the poem, if Virgil smells of anything identifiable, perhaps he smells of shit. Or perhaps he merely smells of regret and nostalgia at the twilight of the classical world. In any case, the disjunctive march of Virgil’s hexameters through a broken sonnet – a classical metre marching through the broken English form – and of his unpleasant twilight which marches across the surrounding warmth and life of Paris, creates a synaesthetic masterpiece of uncertain and unidentifiable emotion.

In ‘earth like a tippy’, Cummings emphasizes jumbling, breaking, and cleaning. The primary aesthetic of ‘through the tasteless minute efficient room’ is the aesthetic of blurring. The feeling of enclosure and control suggested by the ‘minute’ and ‘efficient’ room contrasts with the liberation felt in the ‘gush’ of Paris and in the freely tumbling nature of the language in ‘cries somethings laughters loves nothings’.

<sup>39</sup> Cummings (n.1), 21.

The feeling of escape intensifies as they 'float upward', which they do 'beautifully', and the aliveness of Montmartre is captured in the eyes which 'hotly dote'. These contradictions of enclosure and freedom, of the ease of Paris and the awkwardness of the prostitute's kiss, frame this exploration of language, war, sex, smell, and emotion, and of the Classics and the life of Paris. The poem has an elusive quality which enacts the complexities injected by experience of war into Cummings' relationship with the classical world.

#### IV. Looking back

E. E. Cummings is seldom, if ever, thought of as a war poet, and the canon of war poets seldom includes him. He himself contributed to this neglect of his war poems. It is true that the First World War appears prominently in his published poetry, especially in his first collection, *Tulips & Chimneys*, and in his third collection, *is 5* (1926). But Cummings also left some of his best war poetry unpublished. A great debt is owed to the good judgement of Firmage and Kennedy, the editors of *Etcetera*, who included twelve poems directly concerning the war and its aftermath in the volume of poetry selected posthumously from Cummings' papers. It is hard not to suspect that Cummings actively suppressed some of the war poetry. 'through the tasteless minute efficient room' is a unique exploration of the relationship between poetry, sex, prostitution, and war; it is genuinely haunting. Comparable points might be made concerning the literary value of several other brilliant and disturbing war poems from *Etcetera*. These poems deserved publication, and this posthumous volume is critical to any proper appreciation of Cummings' relationship to the war.

Selective publication, however, is only part of the story. Cummings' literary self-presentation has been equally significant in obscuring the idea of him as a war poet. His own later narrative of himself as a poet buried the earlier importance of the war. There is a striking example from *i. six nonlectures*, a series of six autobiographical talks delivered at Harvard in connection with the prestigious Charles Eliot Norton visiting professorship; the talks were subsequently published in 1953 and republished in 1967. These lectures offered an autobiographical account of Cummings' development as a poet, and they function as a kind of authorized version of Cummings' poetry.



In the second *nonlecture*, Cummings speaks about the emotional awakening occasioned by his childhood encounters with nature and with a ‘semiwilderness’ near his childhood home in Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>40</sup> Then he offers the reader this glimpse of nature reawakened by the irrepressible burst of spring:

*O sweet spontaneous  
earth how often have  
the  
doting*

*fingers of  
prurient philosophers pinched  
and  
poked*

*thee  
,has the naughty thumb  
of science prodded  
thy*

*beauty .how  
often have religions taken  
thee upon their scraggy knees  
squeezing and*

*buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive  
gods  
(but  
true*

*to the incomparable  
couch of death thy  
rhythmic  
lover*

*thou answerest*

*them only with*

*spring)*

<sup>40</sup> E. E. Cummings, *i. six nonlectures* (Cambridge, MA, 1967 [1953]), 32.

Thematically – earth, death, spring – this poem is characteristic of Cummings' work. His romantic memories of childhood invite us to read the poem as a straightforward celebration of nature over human thought and science. The human world does not seem so bad – after all, the fingers of philosophers are at least 'doting', science is only a bit 'naughty', and religions show a paternalistic care for the world which they take 'upon their scraggy knees'. We might cheer for nature and enjoy her victory, but the human world over which she triumphs is essentially harmless. The 'couch of death thy / rhythmic / lover' might simply be winter, over which spring triumphs with every rhythmic turn of the year.<sup>41</sup>

The reader of the *nonlectures* would never guess that the poem, which says nothing explicit about the war, had appeared in the 1922 *Tulips & Chimneys* as the fifth in the five-poem section 'La Guerre'.<sup>42</sup> It is a very different poem in its early context, where it echoes and expands upon the other four poems of 'La Guerre'. The first of these, the ironic 'Humanity i love you', is a bitter indictment of human failing, with an especial venom reserved for unthinking sentimental patriotism: 'because you / unflinchingly applaud all / songs containing the words country home and / mother'.<sup>43</sup> The second is the poem discussed above, 'earth like a tipsy', in which a female earth cleanses itself of human civilization.<sup>44</sup> The third poem, 'the bigness of cannon', includes a scene of shell-shocked earth, where 'i have seen / death's clever enormous voice / which hides in a fragility / of poppies. . .'.<sup>45</sup> And the fourth, 'little ladies more', is arguably Cummings' single most brilliant presentation of the prostitutes of Paris courting the custom of soldiers.<sup>46</sup>

When 'O sweet spontaneous' is situated as the final poem of 'La Guerre', the reader is led to imagine an entirely different scene – not

<sup>41</sup> And it is read in this way by some scholars: e.g. J. M. Gill, 'A Study of Two Poems: "since feeling is first" and "in time of daffodils(who know)"', *Spring* 5 (1996), 108.

<sup>42</sup> Cummings (n. 6), 58. Its very first appearance was in the magazine *The Dial* in May 1920: see M. A. Cohen, 'The Dial's "White-Haired Boy": E. E. Cummings as Dial Artist, Poet, and Essayist', *Spring* 1 (1992), 23. It appeared in the mangled *Tulips and Chimneys* as the second of two poems in 'La Guerre' (the first was 'the bigness of cannon' and the other three did not make the editor's cut). For the publication history of *Tulips & Chimneys*, see above, n. 25. In the Houghton Library archive, Harvard, there are various early and incomplete drafts in different contexts. It seems that, for Cummings, this poem perhaps initially hovered between a 'spring' poem and a 'war' poem. But when it came to his first collection, Cummings chose very decidedly to fix it in a war context. That setting changes the text, and this is what he later erased.

<sup>43</sup> Cummings (n. 6), 53.

<sup>44</sup> Cummings (n. 6), 54.

<sup>45</sup> Cummings (n. 6), 55.

<sup>46</sup> Cummings (n. 6), 56–7.

a woods in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but a battlefield. We are looking at a field in France which has been shelled into oblivion, where generative earth is presented in terms of sexual violation: ‘pinched / and / poked’ by philosophers; ‘prodded’ by science; forced to ‘conceive gods’ by the ‘squeezing and // buffeting’ of religions. Instead of the rhythmic turn of the seasons, spring after winter, we might imagine the rhythm of cannon pounding the battlefield. Standing as the concluding poem of a section which indicts humanity, contemplates the damage done to the natural world, and depicts the frank realities of sex during warfare, we now have ‘death thy / rhythmic / lover’ who has in all senses fucked the earth. As a First World War battlefield poem structured through an imagery of sexual violence, this is as quietly disturbing and as impossible to shake off as the very best of the First World War poetry.

Cummings has travelled a considerable poetic distance from his celebration of the militarized and classicized triumph of spring in ‘Epithalamion’ to the rape which is implicit in the figuring of spring in ‘O sweet spontaneous’. Yet the classical world remains present. In ‘O sweet spontaneous’, it lingers in the idea of an act of sexual violence which conceives gods.

Cummings apparently told his first biographer, Charles Norman, that ‘World War I was the experience of my generation’.<sup>47</sup> Only if we understand Cummings as (among other things) a war poet can we fully appreciate the entirety of his life and work – both including and far beyond his relationship to classical literature. We cannot know his motives in obscuring the importance of the First World War for his poetic corpus. But we are not obligated to accept his own narrative; we can allow his poetry to speak for itself.

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<sup>47</sup> Norman (n. 2), 68.