



**Terblanche, Etienne. *E.E. Cummings: Poetry and Ecology*. New York: Rodopi, 2012. Print.**

The work of modernist poet Edward Estlin Cummings has received far too little critical attention. He is underrepresented in peer-reviewed journals and in monographs, and, as Etienne Terblanche observes in this book, he is particularly neglected in comparative studies of modernist literature or poetry. *Spring: The Journal of the E.E. Cummings Society*, to which few libraries have a subscription, is the primary venue for most scholarship on Cummings. Terblanche's project is therefore a recuperative one, and the book constitutes an extended argument for revaluing Cummings's contributions to the modernist project and for placing him securely among the great modernist poets.

Quite sensibly, then, Terblanche devotes the first third of the book to diagnosing the causes of Cummings' critical neglect; he argues persuasively that Cummings' affirmation of nature put him at odds with the main stream of modernist poetry and with the New Critics' standards of objectivity and intellectualization. I appreciated this discussion, as it drew my attention to the ambivalence about nature within the modernism project that I had not previously considered. Terblanche also provides an overview of the existing ecocritical work on Cummings, which includes some of the most successful analyses of Cummings' work. Clearly, a consensus has emerged among Cummings's more dedicated critics that ecology is central to his poetic project. These summaries are important contributions to Cummings' scholarship, but I wish they could have been dispensed with more quickly in order to make more space for extended readings of the poetry.

As its title suggests, Terblanche's case for the value of Cummings' achievement rests on the ecological awareness (or "eco-logos") that is legible throughout Cummings' poetry. Although the book lacks a clear definition of ecology (a significant stumbling block for readers new to ecocriticism), Terblanche does make the case for Cummings as an ecological poet rather than an environmental one, and a definition can be gleaned from this discussion. For Terblanche, Cummings is ecological because of the radical openness of his poetry, which "points to the inclusivity of human processes within earth's processes," and emphasizes that the boundary between nature and culture is active and permeable (29).

Terblanche articulates Cummings' ecology very clearly when he writes that "In the case of Cummings ... the contemporary poem becomes a linguistic, strategically ungrammatical construct which renders a renewed natural awareness. In this sense, as well as in view of his satirical bent which sharply critiques a lifestyle which progressively drifts away from active natural harmony, he is a green poet" (54-5). His challenge is to explain exactly how Cummings' innovative typography and "deviant morphology" (to borrow Richard Cureton's term) contribute to creating this impression. In this respect, I believe Terblanche has succeeded. Cummings' poetry spans a variety of genres, and the third chapter of this book provides convincing examples of the ecological implications in Cummings' sonnets, satires, erotic poetry, and visual-verbal poems. Terblanche is at his best when he is reading particular poems, and his imaginative readings not only draw attention to the poems' ecological messages, but also illuminate some of Cummings' more obscure offerings.

Terblanche's failure to provide a clear working definition of "ecology" is not, in itself, an important one; but this lack is aggravated by the way that Terblanche seems to conflate ecology

with Taoism, which he also does not define. Taoism is clearly ecological in Terblanche's sense of that term, but to my mind the introduction of Taoism rather muddies the waters. The further conflation of Taoism with Zen and haiku also gives me pause; the fact that they may have been synonymous for Cummings and his contemporaries hardly seems sufficient justification for this imprecision. That said, the information about Cummings' interest in Taoism will be of use to Cummings' scholars, and to those interested in the connection between modernism and orientalism.

Terblanche intends for his reading of Cummings to impact our understanding of modernism more generally: "I am suggesting that at the center of the poetic projects which we now refer to as modernist exists a radical openness towards and engagement with concrete, physical life on earth—and the actuality of its dynamic continuation or unfolding in particular: and that it is through turning to the apparently 'smaller,' highly significant poets, and Cummings above all, that this natural engagement or poetic ecology becomes clear" (12). To this end, his comments about modernism and nature poetry in the earlier chapters of the book, and his final chapter comparing Cummings with Pound and Eliot, are another important contribution. Unfortunately, the readings of Pound and Eliot lack the creativity and open-mindedness that Terblanche brings to his readings of Cummings. Terblanche discusses their early representations of nature as "ambivalent" (196), but his analyses unfold in a way that seems to read those representations as purely negative. He does not, in my view, give Pound and Eliot sufficient credit for the way that their representations of nature can alert readers to humanity's dysfunctional relationship with our environment. Their nightmarish landscapes are the diagnosis of a problem, which constitutes an important step toward a solution.

- *Emily Essert – McGill University.*