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**Low Rank, High Brow:  
The "Adolescent" War Writing of  
E. E. Cummings and Kurt Vonnegut**

Rai Peterson

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American writers E. E. Cummings and Kurt Vonnegut earned their early and late Modernist reputations respectively based upon the experimental nature of their work. Cummings is best known for his puzzle-like poems, variations upon classical schemes, and enigmatic prose, while Vonnegut's experiments involved inserting line drawings into the pages of his novels, subverting sub-genres, and interjecting himself as author into his plots. Although experimentation is a hallmark of Modernist writing, each was rejected by critics for the innovations he introduced, and both were classified as juvenile writers, meaning (1) that each was best-received by adolescent readers and (2) that each wrote in an adolescent fashion. Contemporary critics count Cummings and Vonnegut as important war writers, yet the critical appraisal of each is still marred by the recurrent notion that both writers and the work they produced are somehow childish. The similarities between the lives, work, and critical responses to E. E. Cummings and Kurt Vonnegut are many, and these shed some light on what most critics admire in American writers.

Cummings and Vonnegut both enjoyed stable childhoods in ostensibly happy families, each in one large house in one big hometown: 104 Irving Street, Cambridge (Cummings) and 4401 Illinois Street, Indianapolis (Vonnegut). Both appreciated public schooling and private universities, then participated semi-willingly in the World War of his own generation. After receiving his MA from Harvard in 1916, Cummings volunteered for the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps in 1917, and Vonnegut enlisted in the Army after dropping out of the engineering program at Cornell University in 1942. Both were detained on foreign soil (Cummings as a detainee, Vonnegut as a prisoner of war), cut off from their families, and schooled by their fellow detainees and captors in empathy, sympathy, and antipathy toward their fellow man. Each wrote a semi-autobiographical book about his experiences as a prisoner.

Most importantly, perhaps, both Cummings and Vonnegut were patrilineal inheritors of the philosophy of "free-thinking." Cummings' father,

the Rev. Edward Cummings, served as minister at the Unitarian South Congregational Church, in Boston, where he advocated Plato's ideal of heaven over the "old Christian conception" that he called "that ridiculous spiritual roof-garden" in the next world where the saved would sing in choirs and look "over the battlements" at the "burning lake of brimstone and fire below" (Cummings, Edward 51-52). The Rev. Cummings told his followers that "anybody who really deserved to be in heaven would immediately insist on starting a social settlement in hell" (52). Likewise, Vonnegut—whose great-grandfather, Clemens Vonnegut, wrote a pamphlet promulgating free-thinking values that he titled "Instruction in Morals"—wrote in *Sirens of Titan* that "There is no reason why good cannot triumph as often over evil. . . . If there are any such things as angels, I hope that they are organized along the lines of the Mafia" (ch. 7). Both writers' ancestors enjoyed considerable esteem among their peers because of their beliefs, and there is marked similarity in the espoused worldviews and opinions of their descendants, Edward Estlin and Kurt, Jr. Son and grandson created unreal worlds where pacifist egalitarian values dominate, either in "unworlds" of "sun moon stars rain" (CP 515) or distant planets like Titan or Tralfamadore (Vonnegut, *Sirens*, *Slaughterhouse*). And both professed to believe in the undying nature of the human soul: or "when if by yes" (CP 515) exemplified by the space travel of Winston Niles Rumford, the time/space vision of the Tralfamadoreans, or the exquisitely long lives of Daffodil 11 Swain or Leon Trotsky Trout (Vonnegut, *Galapagos*, *Sirens*, *Slapstick*, *Slaughterhouse*).

Yet, each also conveyed an exquisite understanding of loneliness. Cummings is readily identified with his concrete poem "l(a)" whose depiction of the falling of a leaf is equated with "loneliness" (CP 673). Cummings' work is often concerned with love, so he frequently references what he perceives to be its polar opposite, loneliness, as well. (See, for example "granted the all" (CP 374) and "your homecoming will be my homecoming—" (CP 812).) In his poem "buncha hardboil guys from duh A.C." (CP 333), veterans get together and reminisce about ironically happier times in 1918 when they were together in the Ambulance Corps, instead of lonely post-war citizens. Loneliness, in Cummings' work, resides in the soul; see "morsel miraculous and meaningless" (CP 456), and "no time ago," whose speaker claims to have met "christ // jesus" and says he is "made of nothing / except loneliness" (CP 648). At least one of Cummings' characters courts an aesthetic, solipsistic loneliness: the speaker in "i will cultivate

within” decides to “cultivate” loneliness because it is “the Inimitable” (CP 329). But many are amazed, like the speaker in “so many selves(so many fiends and gods,” that people who are never alone can feel as lonely as they do (CP 609). This criticism of society—the crowd that fosters feelings of loneliness or incompatibility—is a common theme for both writers.

In his collection of miscellaneous writings, *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut professed to believe that “the number one American killer wasn’t cardiovascular disease, but loneliness” (ch. 11). In identifying loneliness as an epidemic, he criticized his own society, government, and the self-centeredness of his fellow citizens. In *Cat’s Cradle*, when the narrator asks Philip Castle why he went into the hotel business, he replies, “something to do with my life, I guess. A way to be busy, a way not to be lonesome” (ch. 73). Vonnegut’s book *Slapstick*, originally dismissed by critics but currently under reconsideration because of its progressive social ideas, was subtitled *Lonesome No More*. In that book, the narrator defends his complicated scheme for connecting the citizens who have survived WWII, saying “human beings need all the relatives they can get—as possible donors or receivers not necessarily of love, but of common decency” (Prologue). Vonnegut consistently argued that if human beings returned to civility and common decency everyone would find a sense of well-being and accomplishment. This impulse to name and abate loneliness is the same goal embraced by contemporary writers who rally against depression, but in both Cummings and Vonnegut, it takes on a metaphysical dimension, as both are concerned with discovering the purpose of human life.

Some of the similarities between Cummings and Vonnegut are attributable to comparable circumstances, some to familial philosophy, and maybe even some to imitation. Vonnegut’s children confirm that their father read and enjoyed Cummings’ poems. Younger daughter Nanny Vonnegut remembers: “We had at least 1 E. E. Cummings book in our house growing up; it seemed it was always at hand, so I assume my dad appreciated him. (“Message”). Likewise, son Mark confirms that his father “definitely read him and liked him better than most poets, but not as much as Chaucer who he liked to read aloud while beating on a pot” (“Message”). That is a solid endorsement, even without the pot-banging.

But beyond the comparison of the lives and works of Cummings and Vonnegut themselves is the refrain of the critics that each writer is “juvenile,” “childish,” or “immature.” To be sure, critics similarly dismissed a lot of Cummings’ and Vonnegut’s contemporaries: Gertrude

Stein, J. D. Salinger, Philip Roth, and Joseph Heller, to name just a few. Ironically, all of these writers broached those most serious adult topics of sex and death and war. And another writer who would be seated at the children's table if American criticism were to hold an awards banquet might be Vonnegut's hero, Mark Twain. Twain's popular reputation has, at least, settled upon his folk wisdom and humor, and on his focus on adolescent male protagonists in his most popular novels (not unlike Salinger's adjudged adolescence for writing about Holden Caulfield and the seven precocious Glass children, whom John Updike said he loved "more than God loves them"). But both Cummings' and Vonnegut's works embody almost exclusively (with exceptions like "eddieandbill" and *Wanda June*) adult characters and situations (Cummings, CP 27 and Vonnegut, *Happy*). Still, in a review for *Newsweek*, Peter S. Prescott accused Vonnegut of deliberately cultivating an audience of teenagers (see Shields, ch. 12), and much later Vonnegut replied that he was "sick" of being accused of "pandering to youth," because, he countered, "It's a lazy way for critics to say that something is wrong with me without having to describe it in detail. So they say that I'm just the kind of person that immature readers enjoy" (qtd. in Shields, ch. 13). Vonnegut thought his work appealed to younger readers because, as Vonnegut said, his books were concerned with "sophomoric questions that adults regarded as settled"—questions like, Charles J. Shields says, "whether there is a god, for instance, what the good life consists of, whether we should expect a reward for moral behavior" (qtd. in Shields, ch. 10). This sounds like a catalog of Cummings' larger philosophical questions as well, so perhaps Vonnegut himself understood why he and one of his favorite poets wrote for adults, yet were recommended reading for adolescents.

Without recounting too many of them, let me just mention a few disparaging critics who, like Yvor Winters, pronounced Cummings' subject matter "immature" (521). Carl Bode called his rhymes "childish" in the pages of *Poetry* magazine (358). Edwin Honig, writing in *The Kenyon Review*, dismissed Cummings' attitudes as "cantankerous or juvenile or merely sorry cases of pet" (486). Haskell S. Springer insulted Cummings as late as 1967, calling him an "eccentric and childish versifier" (8). Even Cummings' biographer Richard S. Kennedy felt compelled to admit that elements of his verse are "juvenile" (180).

In his recently published biography of Vonnegut, author Charles Shields recounts numerous reviews of Vonnegut's novels, particularly

*Slapstick* and *Jailbird*, in which academics accused him of being “simplistic” and “insufficiently obscure” (ch. 13). In his description of Vonnegut’s 1966 review of the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, Shields himself describes him as a childish writer, saying, “like a sixth-grader, he hunted for dirty words as a litmus test of whether the dictionary was for ordinary users” (ch. 8). Joseph Epstein, writing for *The Hudson Review*, suggested that those readers who refuse to grow up might like to have Vonnegut’s novels tucked into their caskets” (598). Is it any wonder that Marc Leeds, one of the founders of the Kurt Vonnegut Society at the American Literature Association convention in 2008, notes that its members have “probably experienced odd looks from colleagues when they found out we were working on serious scholarship about Kurt Vonnegut”?

What is it that “lazy critics” find wrong with Cummings and Vonnegut? There are subtle differences between the adjectives “childish,” “immature,” and “adolescent” when employed as epithets by critics, but it might be safe to say, in the case of Cummings and Vonnegut, that most are responding to the authors’ employment of humor and pessimism or satire, especially in their treatment of sex and war. Eleanor Sickels noted that many critics before her had “pointed out ‘naughty-boyisms’” in Cummings’ work (223). A superficial reading of Cummings’ “may I feel said he”(CP 399) or “my sweet old etcetera” (CP 275) might cause them to be dismissed as seventh-grade lunchroom humor, as would casual notice of how the narrator of *Breakfast of Champions* is preoccupied with male characters’ penis sizes and females’ bust, waist, and hip measurements. But we laugh, perhaps because we recognize these as perfectly frank and honest treatment of private thoughts, mingled as they are in their respective texts with other revelations of un-admitted notions. This “childishness” is an adult who is being honest with himself.

The relationship between murder, or war, and sex, has been explored extensively in literature. In his poetic travelogue *EIMI*, the narrator, who is a stand-in for Cummings himself, attempts a conversation with the character the Turkess. He tells her that women should hate war. She first assumes that he is making the clichéd argument that war destroys the sons and husbands of women, but the story’s narrator struggles to make clear his different meaning. He is saying that war is a kind of substitute for sex. “Not,” he says, “that I’ve gone over the top with a dreamgirl clenched in a heart of gold and a kind of knife on the end of a gun, or anything like that,” but simply that by “sex” he means “intense.” “Magic, I mean,” he says, and

then describes both war and sex as “dreamlike, amazing, actual” (206). Cummings had been to war before he says this, so this seemingly naïve or adolescent comparison is grounded in empirical wisdom.

S. I. Hayakawa flatteringly compared Cummings’ vision with a child’s in his 1938 review of *Collected Poems*, writing “No modern poet to my knowledge has such a clear, child-like perception as E. E. Cummings—a way of coming smack against things with unaffected delight and wonder” (284). He compared Cummings with a “sensitive and well-mannered child” who had grown “sick of the . . . rotten idealism of his time, a man so acutely aware of the ludicrous figure presented by people with beautiful souls in a world of brutes and slobberers” (284, 289). Similarly, Vonnegut expresses his weariness with the triteness of human nature, telling his creative writing students at the University of Iowa that he was not merely a science fiction hack, but a writer who, as Shields says, “dealt with ideas and challenges to humankind” (Shields, ch. 8). He told interviewer William Wolf, “I don’t want to write a story about a man, a love affair, or a trial. I want to write about the whole damned planet, the whole society. I try to discuss our whole planet in human terms” (qtd. in Shields, ch. 7).

Chastised as both were for their frankness, neither Cummings nor Vonnegut seems to have been begrudged his sarcastic perspective as an American hero, or captive enemy. Both Cummings and Vonnegut are accorded respect in critical circles for their anti-war stances. Greg Sumner classifies Vonnegut with “Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer, and others who returned to tell their war stories, ordinary Americans thrust into extraordinary circumstances” (Prologue). Put aside here, please, the fact that few, if any American poets and novelists from Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane, and William Dean Howells to Yusef Komunyakaa, Brian Turner, and Tim O’Brien are *pro-war* writers—and that pro-war stances are usually attributed to politicians, a class of people equally abjured by Cummings and Vonnegut. There are similarities between Cummings’ and Vonnegut’s writing about war that explain somewhat how each has turned the wonderment of his juvenile point of view into a virtue.

For example, both are anti-war writers who do not accept the rote Miss America response that mankind can attain world peace. Cummings recognizes that war is both eternal and inevitable. In his satirical poem “come,gaze with me upon this dome,” the soldier willing to die “for God for country and for Yale” and also for his “high minded pure young girl,” serves as a placeholder in a universal scene; he is the “son of man” sent

forth to war (CP 272). The very first line of the poem evokes Shelley's elegy for Keats, comparing him to Adonis and thus connecting soldiers to the continual presence of war from mythical times. While the lower-case "i" individual celebrated in Cummings' work might detest war, "this busy monster, manunkind" will go right on working en masse to develop atom bombs whose "electrons deify one razorblade / into a mountainrange" (CP 554). In the mock-interview that introduces Cummings' book about his own experience of internment, Cummings asks himself, "Doesn't *The Enormous Room* really concern war?" He responds, "It actually uses war: to explore an inconceivable vastness which is so unbelievably far away that it appears microscopic" (vii). The "vastness" is that of the individual: Cummings understands that, while individual wars are fought and won or lost, War is never vanquished, and each generation must learn the futility of war for itself.

Cummings' iconic poem "plato told" (CP 553) describes an anonymous soldier who ignored the wisdom of philosophers Plato, Lao Tsze, and Jesus, as well as General Sherman and all of society, who told him that war is futile, dangerous, even useless. Cummings alludes to the sale of scrap metal from New York's Sixth Avenue Elevated Train track, which was razed in 1939, and accuses the city of selling the scrap to the Japanese, who made armaments which were used to kill Americans in WW II. Although the Harris Structural Steel Company denied that New York's byproducts were sent to Japan, the California dealer who bought up the 26,500 tons of scrap was an exporter on the Pacific coast ("Estimate Board" 19). And although Cummings is critical of the politicians and engineers who flooded the scrap metal market with the discarded train tracks, regardless of whether the actual metal from above Sixth Avenue was, as Cummings coined, "nipponized," his subject is the anonymous soldier, "he," who learns his lesson about war posthumously when he takes a bullet or piece of shrapnel through the top of his head. The poet argues that only direct experience, that which, unfortunately, leads to death and destruction, can teach a man or a generation that war is not the answer.

Vonnegut's novel about his experience as a prisoner of war makes a similarly discouraging point about the dream of world peace. In the introduction to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he recounts a conversation with the filmmaker Harrison Starr, who argues that writing an anti-war book is futile and suggests that he might as well write an "anti-*glacier* book." Vonnegut agrees because, "There would always be wars, . . . they were as easy to stop



as glaciers. I believe that, too,” he lamented (ch. 1). This is reminiscent of a passage in *The Enormous Room* where the characters C (Cummings) and B (William Slater Brown) are quizzing the character Mexique: “When we asked him once what he thought about the war, he replied ‘I t’ink lotta bull-shit’ which, upon copious reflection, I decided absolutely expressed my own point of view” (132). Idealistic opposition to a pervasive entity might strike some as being childish or immature, but Vonnegut counters that “fighting is necessarily undignified and immature” (ch. 29). In *Slapstick* he writes: “There is no peace, I’m sorry to say. We find it. We lose it. We find it again. We lose it again” (ch. 47). Vonnegut diagnosed the chronic nature of war in *Palm Sunday*, observing that “entire nations love to blow the hell out of other nations and then come like angels to pass out glass eyes and artificial limbs and Hershey bars and all that, to rebuild everything, to get everything going again” (ch. 11).

The second way Cummings and Vonnegut turned their childish perspective into a virtue in their examination of war is by arguing that it is fought by “babies,” “boys,” or “children.” There are numerous instances in *The Enormous Room* where Cummings likens himself and his fellow prisoners to children, including when he is first put in jail and awaiting transfer to the Dépôt de Triage at La Ferté Macé, a facility he would later call “The Directeur’s little home for homeless boys and girls” (230). In his first cell he regresses, taking delight in being protected, then admiring the “huge iron can” containing feces (17). At the end of his detention in *The Enormous Room*, he likens himself to a “doll” after B is sent away (232), and says he is wished well by “a frank-eyed boy” at his release (238). He describes himself as “a young man, very young in fact” (240) when he finally reaches the American Embassy at the book’s conclusion. At times his guards are described as frightened children, and the character the Pole is dismissed as “a stupid boy” and “only a boy” (170, 183). Even a member of the evaluation team that decides his fate is described as “a tiny red-headed person . . . [who] ought to spend his time sailing kites of his own construction over other people’s houses in gusty weather” (218).

But undoubtedly the most child-like figure the narrator C encounters during the war is Jean le Nègre, who cries, shows off for attention “exactly like a child,” “cried out like a child” when attacked, and makes “a child’s gesture” when wounded (203, 207, 208). In defending Jean, C asks the Surveillant, “Do you know . . . whom you are dealing with in this man? A child”—after which the Surveillant calls Jean “a good boy” (209). Finally,

the guards beat the child out of Jean. "It was as if," Cummings writes, the child had fled into the deeps of his soul, never to reappear" (212). However, a minor incident of hiding a towel is enough to restore "the child, which was Jean's soul and destiny." Cummings then evokes Jean in memory with the monikers "Boy, Kid . . . ." (214). Miraculously, Jean does rediscover his impish character after he recovers from the beating he gets. While war or violence can cause a child to lose his innocence, it cannot cause him to grow up or lose his immaturity.

Vonnegut dedicated *Slaughterhouse-Five* to Mary O'Hare, the wife of fellow soldier Bernard V. O'Hare. She reminds him: "You were just babies then . . . you were just babies in the war." To which Vonnegut agrees: "We had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood" (ch. 1). He uses science fiction elements to examine human war-making from afar. When the world-ending substance Ice Nine is unleashed in his novel *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut creates an American Ambassador to San Lorenzo who eulogizes the war dead, saying, "We are gathered here friends, . . . to honor . . . children dead, all dead, all murdered in war. It is customary on days like this to call such lost children *men*" (ch. 114). It might seem childish to insist on the immaturity of soldiers, but Cummings and Vonnegut repeatedly reminded readers of the youth and inexperience of those whose lives are lost and ruined at war. War cannot, as popularly thought, make a man of a boy; it can disrupt the maturation process, but not accelerate it.

In 1970 American audiences thrilled to the titular performance of George C. Scott in the movie *Patton* when he slapped a soldier who dared take leave for "battle fatigue." While Americans continued to undermine psychological trauma caused by war, both Cummings and Vonnegut gave lyric descriptions of what would eventually be called post-traumatic stress disorder. Cummings says at the conclusion of *The Enormous Room*,

Not until some weeks of American diet had revolutionized my exterior did my interior completely resume the contours of normality. I am particularly neither ashamed nor proud of this (one might nearly say) mental catastrophe. No more ashamed or proud, in fact, than of the infection of three fingers which I carried to America as a little token of Le Ferté's goodwill. (230)

In Vonnegut's 1961 novel *Mother Night*, double-agent Howard Campbell confesses after his World War II experience, "It's all I've seen, all I've

been through. . . that makes it damn near impossible for me to say anything. I've lost the knack of making sense" (ch. 22). I hold with those readers who suggest that the story told in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* ends in the middle of the book. When the survivors of the fire bombing of Dresden are released from their underground prison to help locate the dead, the only sound they hear is the "Poo-tee-weet" of birds returning to the scene. The book ends with Billy Pilgrim noticing that birds are talking, saying to him "Poo-tee-weet?" (ch. 10). That would mean that all of the preposterous events that happened to Billy Pilgrim, even his becoming an optometrist (specializing in seeing), but especially his capture by aliens, his understanding that all time is relative and no one ever dies, his relocation to a zoo on Tralfamadore, the death of his wife in her Cadillac, and his sexual preoccupation with the porn star Montana Wildhack are all schizoid hallucinations. In fact, Billy's coming unstuck in time, the way he flashes from his childhood to past his own death, is a manifestation of his mental illness caused by what he has witnessed in the war. The admission of weakness is a childish trait, but Cummings and Vonnegut were among the first to allude without shame to the effects of duress upon soldiers' minds and perceptions. They gave dignity to the human consciousness that loses its stability and form in battle or imprisonment.

For Leslie Fiedler, *The Enormous Room* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are among the writings that constitute the roots of the "American anti-war myth." He shows that while our novelists are largely anti-war, our popular culture (movies, TV, magazines, and comic books) perpetuates the belief that fighting for one's country is valued. In the popular realm, combat is glorified (391). Three years before Fiedler's article was printed, Vonnegut published his novel *Bluebeard*, in which he pre-empted the distinguished critic:

Nowadays, of course, just about our only solvent industry is the merchandising of death, bankrolled by our grandchildren, so that the message of our principal art forms, movies and television and political speeches and newspaper columns, for the sake of the economy, simply has to be this: war is hell, all right, but the only way a boy can become a man is in a shoot out of some kind, preferably, but by no means necessarily, on a battlefield. (ch. 8)

There is a similar incident in the book's narrative; in a discussion between

fictional characters Terry Kitchen and Rabo Karabeckian, they agree:

“All the returning veterans in the movies are our age or older,” [Kitchen] said. That was true. In the movies you seldom saw the babies who had done most of the heavy fighting on the ground in war.

“Yes—” I said, “and most of the actors in the movies never even went to war. They came home to the wife and kids and swimming pool after every grueling day in front of the cameras, after firing off blank cartridges while men all around them were spitting catsup.”

“That’s what the young people will think our war was fifty years from now,” said Kitchen, “old men and blanks and catsup.” So they would. So they do.

“Because of movies,” he predicted, “nobody will believe it was babies who fought the war.” (ch. 32)

Cummings went to World War I as something of a pacifist, unwilling to engage in a shoot-out of any kind and avoiding conscription by joining the ambulance corps. When Vonnegut came home from the Second World War in uniform, his uncle purportedly said, “By golly—you look like a man now.” Vonnegut thought, “I wanted to strangle him. If I had, he would have been the first German I’d killed. I was a man before I went to war” (ch. 9). Cummings and Vonnegut, with their big, bleeding hearts and analytic, yet sympathetic minds, certainly were men, and anyone who says differently is a liar.

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