

2013

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### Recommended Citation

Webster, Michael (2013) "Review of Etienne Terblanche, *E. E. Cummings: Poetry and Ecology* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2012)," *Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*. Vol. 20, Article 19.

Available at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring\\_cummings/vol20/iss1/19](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring_cummings/vol20/iss1/19)

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**Review of Etienne Terblanche, *E. E. Cummings: Poetry and Ecology* (Amsterdam/  
New York: Rodopi, 2012)**

**Michael Webster**

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In this stimulating and thought-provoking book, Etienne Terblanche seeks to define and explore what he calls the “eco-logos” of Cummings’ poetry, while placing this “poetic ecology” within the context of the poetry of Cummings’ fellow modernists Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Together with a short preface, the book consists of five substantial chapters, all of them more than 35 pages in length, the last chapter more than fifty. The chapter titles are as follows:

1. Cummings’ poetic status and his *eco-logos*
2. The rise of Cummings’ ecological status
3. The scope of Cummings’ poetic ecology
4. The manner and achievement of Cummings’ poetic ecology
5. A modernist reconfiguration? Cummings, Eliot, Pound, and the modernist poetic *eco-logos*

The first two chapters are concerned with outlining and defining Cummings’ *eco-logos* as misread by many prominent early critics of modernism, and as discussed or intuited by critics who built on Norman Friedman’s pioneering work. The third chapter shows how Cummings’ *eco-logos* is not only about the ways his nature poems connect poet, language, reader, and poem to the natural world, but also how these connections permeate all of his poetry—“sonnets, lyrics, love poems, sex poems, satire, and visual-verbal ‘experiments’ ” (15). Taking its cue from Cummings’ “only consider How” (CP 363), the fourth chapter considers how Cummings achieves his *eco-logos*, examining the techniques of “the thematic-formal values of smallness, fluidity, and co-incidence” (142). Terblanche ends the chapter with a discussion of how these values function in the poetry “to achieve that imperative insight into the wisdom of ‘threeness’ ”—which is the third term that emerges from the connections between “the worlds of human signification and the world of concrete being” (164). The last chapter contrasts Cummings’ *eco-logos* with the more ambivalent and displaced connection to nature of the modernist poets T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Before he defines the nature of Cummings' *eco-logos*, Terblanche first confronts the issue of whether Cummings is *eco*-centric or *ego*-centric. After all, Cummings is the poet who affirms the primacy of the individual, the poet of the lower-case "i" who titled one of his books *EIMI* (Greek for "I Am") and another *i: six nonlectures*, and who termed the prose sections of those nonlectures "my six halfhours of egocentricity" (*six* 6). Despite Cummings' *ego*-centered (if not -centric) reputation, Terblanche quite paradoxically (yet sensibly) concludes that he is equally *eco*-centric. Rather than stress, as Cummings does, that the individual microcosm contains the complex macrocosm—or "everybody's the whole boxoftricks to himself" (*six* 6)—Terblanche focuses on how the lower-case "i" persona "ungrammatically and visually indicates a necessary smallness or humility which allows one to enter a deeper awareness of participation in the earthly process" (22). Terblanche embeds this argument in his somewhat confusing and perhaps unnecessary contention that the *ego*-centric corresponds to arbitrary signs while the *eco*-centric corresponds to motivated signs. These two types of signs then "enhance" or reinforce one another "in a loop-like manner," entwining *eco* with *ego*.

Terblanche's theoretical descriptions of *eco-logos* in the first two chapters often proceed by this sort of metaphor or analogy. For instance, an *eco-logos* functions osmotically in transgressing boundaries like "grammar, genre, and medium" (106). Or an *eco-logos* creates signs (or, more properly, signifying interactions) that mimic the activity of a *holon*, "an entity such as a living cell" that is both autonomous (bounded) and integrated with surrounding complex wholes (35). Terblanche quotes an apposite passage from Cummings' notes about how context subtly alters the "permanent" dictionary definition of words, causing them "to abandon their individual silhouettes, edges" and "fuse or melt into a movement" (34). Although he rightly points out that in an interconnected ecological world (and in the world of poetry) metaphors are not "merely" empty comparisons, Terblanche might be more precise when he says that, for Cummings, "poetry is about a movement of poet, signs, and reader towards a context, both internally (among poetic signs) and externally (outwardly)" (30, 35). Signs cannot *literally* move, but their meanings may shift according to context, as Cummings points out. However, these semantic contexts are constructed by the poet and activated (connected, reconstructed) by the reader, neither of whom exactly moves; rather, the signs create movement in the mind.

These metaphors and analogies work best when Terblanche interprets and analyzes specific poems, particularly in chapters three and four, but also in the first two chapters. An advantage of these metaphors lies in the ways they may be adapted to describe Cummings' various semiotic strategies. For example, the many ways in which language presents and mimics the movements of a grasshopper in "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" (CP 396) Terblanche terms a "radical, dynamic cross-stitching of sign-world and nature-world" (52). Later, in his excellent discussion of the iconic leaf poem "l(a," he notes how there is a "cross-stitching of opposites"—of vowel and consonant ("le / af / fa"), of the word "loneliness" and the phrase "a leaf falls," of speaker and leaf, of loneliness and "oneliness," and of the idea of "one" and the lower-case "iness" of leaf and poet (174-178). Another insight (one of Terblanche's sharpest) sees an osmotic boundary-crossing in the moment of perception that occurs in the long center line of "i / never" (CP 827), a poem about (among other things) finding a "not quite believab / ly smallest" hummingbird's nest. The line narrates the discovery of the "almost invisible where of a there of a)here of a / rubythroat's home." This discovery occurs right at the parenthesis between "a" and "here," a parenthesis that, in Terblanche's words, not only "looks like the lens of an eye [and] therefore acts as an osmotic (conceptual) boundary," but also "enacts a semiotic osmosis in which subject and object are indeed involved in a turning point . . . the co-incidence of human observer and natural observed" (184).

Throughout the book, Terblanche is keen to show that Cummings is a Taoist poet, one whose "deliberate natural smallness" and "meaningful nothingness or no mind" (17) allows us to see similar qualities in his modernist contemporaries Eliot and Pound. In this, he follows and extends the work of Norman Friedman (66), while offering further biographical and textual evidence that Cummings was interested in Taoism and other Eastern religions. In addition to citing various notes that Cummings made on Taoism and the use of a quotation from the *Tao Te Ching* in *EIMI*, Terblanche uncovers Taoism in unexpected places—in the missing "o" in a poem that satirizes progress—"o pr" (CP 392)—for example (129-131). Terblanche is also alert to how Cummings' seemingly casual use of ordinary English words can connect profoundly with his vision of life. For example, he spots the pun on the word "way" in the poem "who are you, little i" (CP 824)—in which a child's feeling that sunset is a "beautiful way" for day to become night stresses a Taoist sense of "nature's unfolding" (97). Although Ter-

blanche realizes that Cummings investigated other religious traditions, he perhaps too easily asserts that “Taoism is central to his [Cummings’] natural engagement” and perhaps too readily assumes that “Zen, *haiku*, and Taoism [are] intermingled terms in the West” (64). And Terblanche’s claims for Cummings’ Taoist poetic might have been sharpened with further discussion of how Cummings’ engagement with the Christian mystical tradition of the coincidence of opposites parallels his Taoist tendencies. For example, the book might explore the passage in which Cummings refers to S. Foster Damon’s book on William Blake in order to explain how the seasonal pattern in the structure of *95 Poems* may be a metaphor for “the secret which every mystic tries to tell” (qtd. in *Letters* 261).

The fifth chapter of the book shows how conceiving of Cummings’ natural engagement as Taoist can help us discover a similar *eco-logos* in the poetry of the Christian T. S. Eliot and the syncretic pagan-Confucian Ezra Pound. For example, the passage in Eliot’s “Burnt Norton” about “the still point of a turning world” evokes, as Terblanche says, “a space beyond opposites,” as well as offering “a significant glimpse . . . into a *continuity or dynamic wholeness* very much akin to Cummings’s” (205). This point is clear, but a bit too abstract—the discussion could be sharpened by comparing two specific passages from each poet. Similarly, Terblanche’s otherwise excellent analysis of Pound’s *eco-logos* would have been enriched by a more detailed consideration of how Pound’s notion of the Tao as “process” compares to Cummings’ “flexible semiotic process” (152) and the way it frequently depicts “processes that dissolve solidity” (157). Terblanche points out that such a process (“way”) may be seen at the end of Cummings’ “sonnet entitled how to run the world”) where the poet writes that “[I] will my rest to these // children building this rainman out of snow” (CP 390). Here, Terblanche’s point may have benefitted from a comparison to a passage like Pound’s more declarative lines from Canto 74: “The wind is part of the process / The rain is part of the process” (Pound 13; lines 346-347).

Though the fifth chapter would have benefitted from more detailed comparisons of specific passages, Terblanche is exceptionally good at reading and analyzing minute details in individual poems, and at showing how these details function in other poems. He is superb in his reading of the visual-verbal semiotics of individual letters and in his showing how these letter-readings are vital to Cummings’ *eco-logos*. For example, in “mOOOn Over tOWns mOOOn” (CP 383) not only does he note how the capital-O

moon “bulging” out in the word “fIOat” suggests “the moon breaking loose from the horizon” (or city buildings), but he also perceives how, absent the “O” of the moon, the lower-case letters spell “flat”—indicating an “emotional flatness” while showing that the round moon possesses a wholeness that the flat world below lacks (83). In the leaf poem, line seven is “one,” which is also the only immediately recognizable standard English word in the poem. Terblanche argues that the “o” in “one” acts as an “attractor point” that marks a place where “significant chaos becomes significant order” (178). In both cases the “o” functions as an icon of wholeness; in the leaf poem (CP 673), it is the oneness and the “stillness from which all dancing (being) emanates” (178). As can be seen from these examples, this is a book that will repay close reading and re-reading. Though some readers may want to question some of the details of Terblanche’s interpretations of the poetry, the attentive and patient reader will come away with many new insights into the ways in which Cummings’ poems enact a poetic ecology.

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