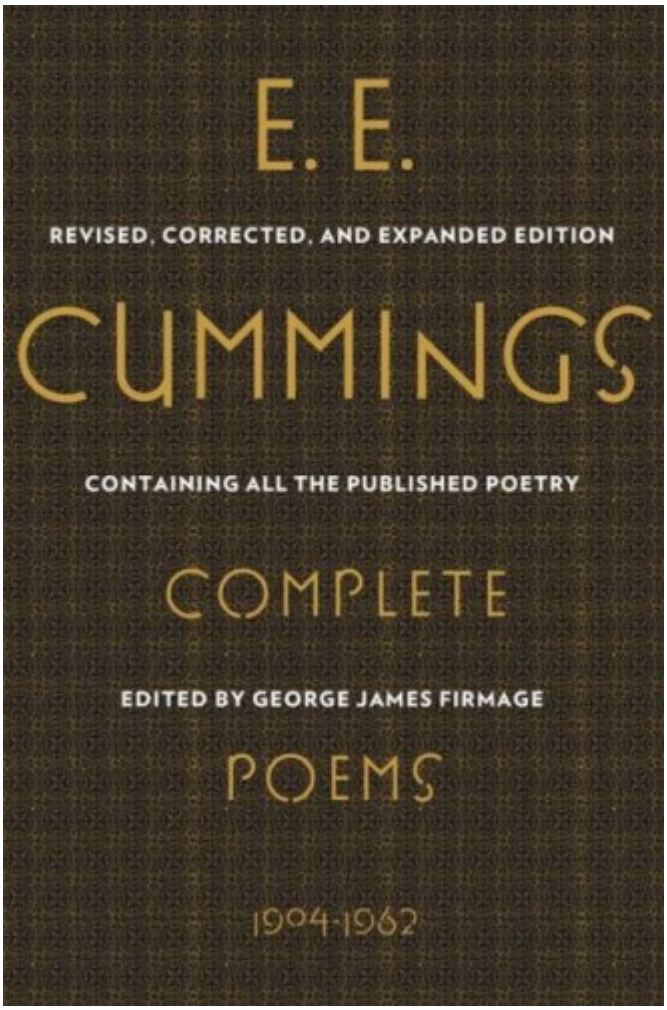
E. E. Cummings: Complete Poems, 1904–1962 and *The Collected Poems of James Laughlin*

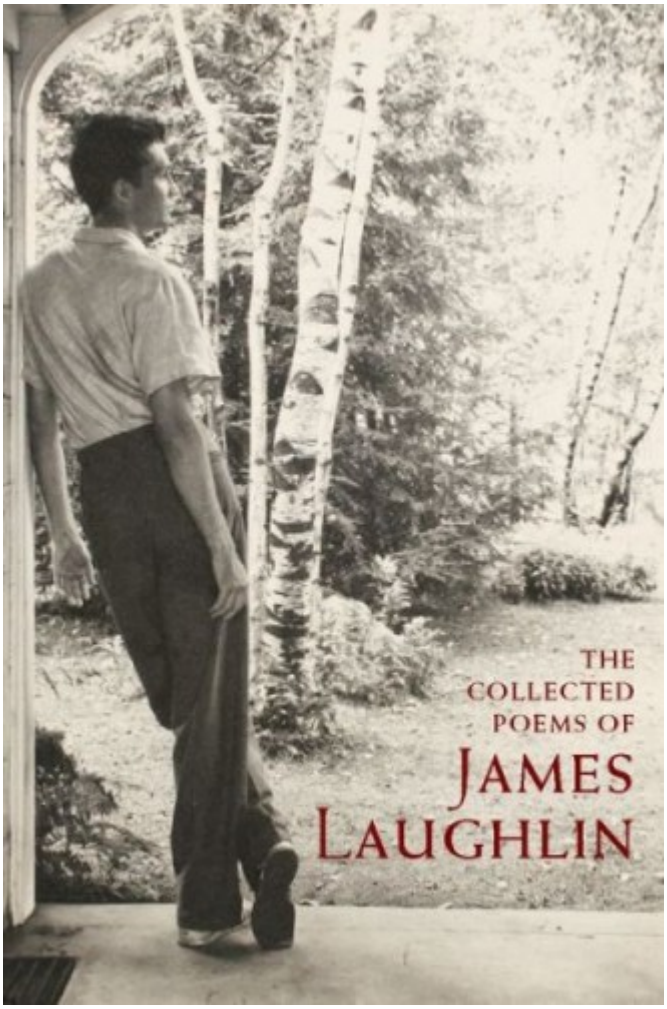
reviewed by Jon Sweeney in the July 22, 2015 issue

In Review



E. E. Cummings

Edited by George James Firmage
Liveright



The Collected Poems of James Laughlin

By James Laughlin; edited by Peter Glassgold
New Directions

Unlike many well-known poets, E. E. Cummings and James Laughlin didn’t write with metaphysical or philosophical ambition. But that doesn’t mean their poetry doesn’t matter.

Cummings wrote verse that is often praised for qualities that philosophically ambitious poets would be loath to display: childlike simplicity and whimsy. His 1958 collection, *95 Poems*, included in *Complete Poems*, is full of such wonders. For example, #16 begins: “in time of daffodils (who know / the goal of living is to grow) / forgetting why remember how / in time of lilacs who proclaim / the aim of waking is to dream.” What look to be typos in a Cummings poem usually are not, and those that are have been “corrected” in this beautiful new reprint edition by the people at

Liveright.

The poems in Cummings's 1963 volume, *73 Poems*, also lack titles, so an index of titles would be both impossible and unnecessary. Even the index of first lines, which is standard in collected editions, looks ridiculous. First lines include "a-" and "a gr," as well as "as" and "b." It seems almost silly, but readers will want to be able to look up a familiar poem. And such a method is all the more striking when we encounter first lines such as this one: "unlove's the heavenless hell and homeless home," from #91 of *95 Poems*.

James Laughlin came a generation after Cummings. While he was still a student at Harvard College in 1936, he founded the avant-garde literary house New Directions with a $100,000 gift from his steel-magnate father. The first book his house published was a poetry anthology that included work by Cummings.

The story of New Directions is in part the story of Laughlin writing poetry. Laughlin had been sending poems to Ezra Pound and had visited the master in Italy. Pound advised him to stop trying to write verse and to use his evident energy and resources to publish modernists like Pound himself. That Laughlin did with devotion, but it stymied his own poetic voice and talent for years.

But by the time he died in 1997, Laughlin had amassed 1,250 poems, enough to fill this carefully edited and produced volume, surely a labor of love for the design staff at New Directions and for Peter Glassgold, the book's editor and Laughlin's longtime editor in chief and friend.

Many have called Laughlin's poetry lightweight. It is definitely uncluttered by deep explorations of life's ultimate meaning. Yet Laughlin's careful attention to everyday matters communicates its own sort of thoughtfulness. The poems remind me of Thomas Merton's work, which Laughlin published even before Merton was ordained to the priesthood. Laughlin was also Merton's good friend, one of his appointed literary executors, and the editor who compiled *The Asian Journal* just after Merton's death.

Like William Carlos Williams, who encouraged Laughlin's poetry from early on, Laughlin did more than write in blank verse; he employed what both poets sometimes called "typewriter metrics." Glassgold describes this well: "The lines in any given stanza could not vary in length more than one typewriter character. The poems were arresting with their spare look and striking, yet seemingly unstudied

enjambments.” An example of the technique:

Some People Think

that poetry should be a-
dorned or complicated I’m

not so sure I think I’ll
take the simple statement

in plain speech compress-
ed to brevity I think that

will do all I want to do.