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E. E. Cummings at Harvard: Studies

Richard S. Kennedy

HARVARD had always been in E. E. Cummings' future. His father, Edward Cummings, class of 1883, was an assistant professor of sociology at Harvard at the time the child was born, and when little Estlin was a tot, his mother, Rebecca Cummings, embroidered a large crimson *H* on his sweater. She was successful in teaching him to hum "Fair Harvard" by the time he was two. When Mrs. Cummings took him for a walk from his home, 104 Irving Street, over to the Harvard Yard, a couple of blocks away, he loved to pass the statue of John Harvard, which in those days stood on the delta in front of Memorial Hall. On one of these occasions, he announced, "When I get a little bigger, Mullah, I'm going to be a big college boy and go to college with Fader."¹ Years passed, and Edward Cummings had published no book; so he avoided the doom of being a perpetual assistant professor by becoming a Unitarian minister at the South Congregational Church in Boston. But the plans for Estlin to enroll at Harvard remained firm, and when he showed a real knack for language study at the Cambridge Latin School, his father nursed a hope that he would have a career as a teacher, perhaps as a classics professor. Estlin eventually did get the necessary scholarly preparation at Harvard, but he never fully appreciated that side of his Harvard experience. He felt rather that for him the university was "an alma mater whose scholastic bounty was the smallest of her blessings." Any gratitude that he thought he owed to Harvard was

¹bMS Am 1892.10 (21). These call numbers refer to material in the Cummings collection in Houghton Library.

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for "my first taste of independence and the truest friends any man will ever enjoy." To describe and assess his total Harvard experience, it will be convenient to follow that division which he himself suggested, and to turn first to what Harvard did for him, as he put it, "officially."²

When Estlin Cummings entered college in September 1911, Harvard had just completed the period of unprecedented development and expansion under President Charles W. Eliot which had changed it from a college with an attached "Scientific School" and Law School and a barely attached Medical Faculty into a real university with a graduate school, nine professional schools, several museums, and an observatory. The College, which was still the heart of this educational complex, had doubled its faculty to almost two hundred and its student body to about twenty-two hundred. President Eliot's educational experiment, the elective system, had just been abandoned, because a faculty committee had discovered that many students were enrolling almost exclusively in elementary courses while others took most of their courses within a single department. The chairman of that committee, Professor A. Lawrence Lowell, had become the new president of the university, and students were now required to plan a program of "concentration and distribution" of their studies so that a liberal spread of related courses supported the educational strength of a major field.³ The student population still came largely from New England. Although Harvard had not yet begun its policy of recruiting a national student body, the expansion of admissions had begun to produce a more democratic mix in the entering classes and to leaven the conservative Brahmin lump that Harvard had been at the time Eliot took over as president. Not all the faculty were happy about this. Cummings' first Greek instructor told him that he was glad to have moved to Princeton because at Harvard he "had men like yourself sitting next to some little roughneck Irish Catholic or Polish Jew, and the problem of teaching a course in poetry to such a heterogeneous agglomeration was not by any means a simple one."⁴ Nor was everyone overjoyed about the expansion. Yet no one could quarrel with the fact that Eliot had assembled a distinguished faculty. Nowadays, any

² *i: six non-lectures* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 47 and 53.

³ Samuel Eliot Morison, ed., *The Development of Harvard University 1869-1929* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), pp. xxiii-l.

⁴ BMS Am 1892, Letter, Theodore A. Miller to EEC, 11 October 1914.

decade between 1890 and 1930 is usually referred to as Harvard's Golden Age. Although a number of the Olympian figures like James, Santayana, Child, and Norton had retired or were about to retire by the time Cummings entered on the scene, many of the great professors were still in the full vigor of their careers — Albert Bushnell Hart, Charles H. Haskins, and Frederick Jackson Turner in History; George Lyman Kittredge, Barrett Wendell, William Allen Neilson, and F. N. Robinson in English; Charles H. Grandgent and Irving Babbitt in Romance Languages; E. K. Rand and Charles P. Parker in Classics; Josiah Royce and Ralph Barton Perry in Philosophy.

Cummings remained at Harvard for five years. He took an A.B. degree, "magna cum laude in Literature especially in Greek and English," in 1915. (But he did not realize his ambition to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa as had his father and his Uncle John.) He stayed on one more year to earn an A.M. degree in English in 1916 — really more like a fifth undergraduate year since there were no special examinations and no master's thesis. In his freshman year Cummings decided to concentrate in classics, for he was well prepared in Latin and Greek, and he took courses in modern languages and literature to augment that concentration. Study in some other fields was required for distribution. He complied, usually with not much pleasure. He took more science than he liked: a year of Chemistry to make up for his deficiency in science at the Cambridge Latin School; a year of Physics; a half-year of beginning Geology (widely known as a "soft" course) under Reginald Daly, the Canadian cartographer; a year of Physiology, another easy course and one which was valuable to him for what he learned about drawing the human body; and a half-year of Cryptogamic Botany from his next-door neighbor, Professor Roland Thaxter, another course in which he could employ his drawing skills. With a second neighbor he was not so fortunate: Professor Frank Taussig almost flunked him in Economics. Cummings came early to feel that questions of money and trade were as inhumane as the medieval church had pronounced them to be and that the people who were interested in such matters were tedious fellows.

He studied only one year of Philosophy at Harvard, the full range of the History of Ancient and Modern Philosophy under young Ralph Barton Perry.⁵ His notes indicate diligent study but he did not do

⁵ The catalogue lists Perry as the instructor for the second term; no name is

well. He made a D- on his first examination on early Greek philosophy — Pythagoras, Democritus, and others. When he went on to Plato (whom he found more poetic), Aristotle, and the Stoics, he pulled the grade up to a B for the fall term; but in the spring term he fell back to a gentleman's C.⁶ This performance is not surprising. For one thing, Cummings had a creative personality, and intellectual theory and speculation did not interest him. But for another thing, he grew up with a suspicious view of philosophy professors. He regarded his neighbor, the dreamy Professor Josiah Royce, as something of a Laputan fool, and the one detailed anecdote he published about Royce makes fun of him as the prototype of the absent-minded professor.⁷ When Royce publicly denounced his colleague, Hugo Münsterberg, in a controversy about the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Cummings felt even less respect than he had before. In addition, his father frequently displayed impatience with the theorizing of the academic world he had left. As time went on, Estlin came to express open scorn for philosophers and reminded others that Mallarmé had told Degas, "One doesn't write poetry with ideas: one writes poetry with words."⁸

Language study involved words. Cummings began his classics program in freshman Greek with Homer's *Odyssey*, Books VI, VII, VIII, IX, and X, many passages of which he rendered into English hexameters. He went on to Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Medea* and Aristophanes' *The Acharnians* and *The Frogs*. It appears that his teacher, at first, was Herbert Weir Smyth, a grandiose specimen of a man with a deep, resonant voice, known among the undergraduates as "Olympian Zeus."⁹ Cummings had been taken by his father to see Smyth's production of *Agamemnon* in the Harvard Stadium in 1906, and he was thrilled now by Smyth's reading of Homer aloud in the bardic manner. His determination to specialize in Greek was confirmed.¹⁰ After a time the course was taken over by Theodore A. Miller, a graduate student in classics, from the University of Rochester, who held

given for the first term. EEC's well marked textbook, Alfred Weber, *History of Philosophy*, trans. Frank Thilly (New York: Scribner, 1912), is Houghton Library, 69c-297.

⁶ bMS Am 1892.7, Class Notes.

⁷ i: *six non-lectures*, p. 25.

⁸ bMS Am 1892.6 (60), Notes for non-lectures.

⁹ Lucien Price, "Postscriptum," in Morison, *Development of Harvard*, p. 64.

¹⁰ bMS Am 1892.4 (104) and 1892.6 (60), Notes for non-lectures.

a one-year instructorship. In this way, Cummings met the first of a series of mentors who would act as father-surrogates for his next dozen years.

"Dory" Miller soon noticed young Cummings' zest for language and his unique performances in translation. He found himself preparing his classes with young Cummings in mind as his ideal student. Unlike many classics teachers, he had a real taste for poetry and he was delighted with the verse translations that Cummings attempted for him — for example, "Medea Mater," a rendering of the betrayed Medea's anguished words just as she is about to kill her children, which was set up in *terza rima*:

My sons, my little sons! ye go to dwell
 In a city of many homes, a city vast,
But mother at the gates must say farewell.

Into another country am I cast
 Afar off, never to be reached by ye,*
Hot-foot with joy from portals unsurpassed.

Never one sweet-souled flower on that new lea
 Shall I, in time to come, pluck from the land,
To deck the shadowy marriage bed to be.

Never with swelling bosom shall I stand,
 Rearing my torch against the stars, as down
The passage man and maid move, hand in hand.

In vain those anguished throes, — with pains that drown
 Hell's fiercest anguish, — puny, they and I.
All wealth received, and yet of thorns the crown.

I reared my temples splendidly on high,
 Shrines unto hope unworshipped heretofore,
Massive, magnificent, to knock the sky!

I stood in spirit upon death's still shore,
 Tearless and proud. Had I not borne earth men?
What gift to men or gods can mortal more?

Methought ye wrapped my winding sheet, and then
 Felt I each tear that wet the ghostly gown,
Even while this soul stood penned in Pluto's den.*

Dead dreams, once real. White tresses, one time brown,
 Grey cheeks, once flushed with joyance and renown:
All broken — yet . . . I cannot fling it down!¹¹

¹¹ bMS Am 1892.5 (742). The asterisks indicate places where someone has made check marks. Perhaps Miller wished to discuss points of translation with EEC.

The poem is not coherent, nor is it completely accurate in its translation (or poetic paraphrase) of Medea's speech, but it shows in individual passages that Cummings was able to rise to his material and was able in his phrasing to express heroic grief and passion.

Although Miller was seven years older than Cummings, the two became intimate friends by the end of the year. As a warm-hearted teacher and someone perhaps even inspired by the Socratic ideal of bringing to birth beauty of the mind, he discussed Cummings' studies, his reading, his poetic experiments, and he soon began to advise him about his creative work in general. He spoke scornfully of Cummings' early idol, Longfellow, and led the young man to the medieval French masterpiece, *Aucassin et Nicolette*, to Tennyson and Swinburne, and to Shelley and Keats. It seems unbelievable that Cummings could have aspired to be a poet and never have heard of Keats, yet it was Miller who made the introduction and wrought a change in his life, altering the values of 104 Irving Street by putting before him Keats's creed, "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of Imagination. What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth,"¹² and by upholding the sacredness of pure aesthetic pleasure. When Keats replaced Longfellow as his archetypal poet, Cummings came also to accept the Romantic view of the poet as the tortured genius whom society rejects or alienates, a view which he held for one reason or another for the rest of his life. Keats "was as truly crucified as Christ was," Miller told him in one of his rather gushing letters, and suggested plans for him and Cummings to visit Keats's grave the following summer.¹³

But Miller also was eager to give every encouragement to Cummings' classical studies. He introduced him to Catullus and to Horace, and he presented him with gifts at Christmas and on birthdays, volumes of Sappho, of Anacreon, and of selections from *The Greek Anthology*.¹⁴ Although Cummings did not mark up these handsome volumes the way he did his textbooks, one is tempted to conjecture about the importance of their presence in his life. He certainly must have treasured the gifts, for they came with warm inscriptions¹⁵ from

¹² Letter, Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817.

¹³ bMS Am 1892, Letter, 14 August 1912.

¹⁴ Houghton Library, 69c-257, 7 and 7a.

¹⁵ For example in *The Greek Anthology*: "But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,/All losses are restored and sorrows end./To my dear friend Estlin Cummings on the 19th birthday October 14, 1913."

the first person outside his family who fully engaged his affections. One may guess that he browsed through these volumes frequently during his college years and after, especially that fascinating collection of Hellenistic epigrams, *The Greek Anthology*. The books represent clear evidence that he was familiar with Greek lyric poetry.¹⁶ In the poems of Sappho, whose *Hymn to Aphrodite* he quoted in a Harvard lecture in 1952,¹⁷ Cummings had an inspiration for the kind of direct and intense expression of love which he gave voice to throughout his career. In Anacreon and *The Greek Anthology* he had a host of models for epigrammatic verse, a poetic mode which became characteristic of him in much of his work during mid-career. The epigram is a short poem which makes a point incisively, usually by wit or linguistic play. Anacreon (sixth century B.C.) is known mostly for his amatory epigrams and drinking pledges, which are composed with great skill. *The Greek Anthology* or *Anthologia Graeca*, which was based on a collection of epigrams surviving in a single manuscript found in Count Palatine's library in Heidelberg, has great variety of the form: love poems, dedications or prayers to the gods, epitaphs which comment on the value of the dead individual's life, allusive exempla, gnomic wisdom, private satirical attacks, and comic views of human behavior. These poems with their brevity and thrust represent, along with the work of Catullus and Martial, a very old tradition that Cummings later joined in the number of short ironical or satirical observations that he included in each of his volumes of poems published after 1926.

Miller also showed him some sides of Boston that Cummings had not been acquainted with before. He took him to Greek restaurants like the Athenia and the Parthenon (he could speak some modern Greek) and introduced him to such Middle Eastern exotica as yaoorti (yogurt), shish kabob, and eggplant cooked in sesame oil. Cummings also recalled that one of the first erotic experiences of his life occurred when he and Miller went to see Otis Skinner's extravaganza *Kismet* and watched the naked harem girls dive into a pool on stage. Miller came up to Silver Lake in the summer and participated in all the hiking, swimming, and minor construction around the family cottage.

¹⁶ It is likely that Cummings had a good deal of acquaintance with Greek lyric poetry, not only because Miller selected books that may have been the subject of some of their discussions but also because Professor Smyth was an authority on it, taught a freshman course that made use of it, and edited *Greek Melic Poets* (London: Macmillan, 1900).

¹⁷ *i: six non-lectures*, p. 51.

He went sketching with Cummings up Mount Chocorua. He looked over the young man's accumulated collection of verse and gave him thoughtful criticism. This important friendship lasted through Cummings' junior year, at which point Miller left Harvard for a teaching position at Princeton.¹⁸

Second-year Greek covered Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Books VI and VII, Aristophanes' *The Birds*, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, and Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Cummings' professor, C. P. Parker, was an expert in Greek and Roman philosophy, but his interest in classroom instruction was so intense that he devoted most of his time to early undergraduate courses. Since he was an Oxonian, he spent much time in individual tutoring of his students and inaugurated a kind of tutorial system in the Classics Department long before Harvard College set up the tutorial program.¹⁹ He too encouraged Cummings in his verse translation. On one occasion, he mailed to Cummings' mother the rendering of the Choral Ode from Act I of *Oedipus Tyrannus* that the young man had written for him.

Out of the mouth of the Delphian rock hath a God's voice spoken,
 Naming a doer of deeds unwhispered, with bloody hand;
 Of foot more swift than the flight of the wind-fleet stallion unbroken
 It is time that he flee from the land.

For the son of Heaven in arms, with flame and the lightening's fire,
 Leapeth upon him; and follows the Furies' terrible ire.

Out of the snow of Parnassus a shining voice is uplifted,
 Bidding each man to follow the feet of the doer of ill,
 Under the tameless trees and the rock of the precipice rifted,
 Like a bull he wandereth still,

Hunted by living, flitting visions; striving in vain

To shake the mid-earth's word of doom from his tortured brain.²⁰

Cummings' intimate knowledge of the play bolstered him years later when he was translating the Speaker's text of *Oedipus Rex: An Opera Oratorio* by Jean Cocteau for Stravinsky's New York production in 1948.

Cummings took no further course in Greek until his senior year,

¹⁸ bMS Am 1892, Letters, Theodore A. Miller to EEC; 1892.4 (104), (106), Notes for non-lectures; 1892.7 (4), Sketchbook. Although Miller was always inviting EEC to visit him in Rochester or in Princeton, EEC never accepted these invitations. The friendship waned. Miller died early — 30 June 1929 in Paris.

¹⁹ Morison, *Development of Harvard*, p. 47.

²⁰ bMS Am 1892.5 (742).

when he enrolled in Greek 6 and read some Greek oratory, Demosthenes' "On the Crown" and Aeschines' "Against Ctesiphon," and a good deal of drama, Aeschylus' *Choephoroe* (*The Libation Bearers*), Euripides' *Bacchae*, Sophocles' *Elektra* (plus an independent reading of Euripides' *Elektra*). Chandler Post, his professor, held appointments in three departments, Classics, Romance Languages, and Fine Arts. He was a peppery man who sometimes terrified the undergraduates when he fired questions at them. But they recognized his range and versatility. In later years, two undergraduates who wrote for the *Lampoon* celebrated him in their satirical book, *Mondays at Nine or Pedagogues on Parade*:

Celestial systems have their central pole,
Some sun, or star round which revolves the whole.
Just so at Cambridge. Hear John Harvard's toast,
"My own pole star of learning, Chandler Post."²¹

His course, Greek 6, was no mere series of sessions in translation. He lectured on Greek history and Athenian politics, on Greek drama and the literary characteristics of the three great tragedians. Cummings was so impressed with him that he enrolled the following year in Post's course, The Art and Culture of Spain, even though he was supposed to be a graduate student in English. The course was an educational treat, the best possible way to absorb the character of a people, through their art and literature. Here he learned more about painting than he did from any other source in his whole career. Reams of notes remain from the lectures on art history, architecture, and analysis of individual works of painters and sculptors.²² John Dos Passos had also recommended the course to Cummings and their friendship became cemented in a mutual response to Post and to Spanish culture. Their experience with Post led to their spending the month of April 1921 in Spain, touring Salamanca, Seville, Toledo, and Madrid.

Cummings' interest in classical studies was largely confined to Greek, for he felt that the Roman literature lacked intensity. He took only one Latin course, Latin B, in his sophomore year, in which he slogged through Livy, Books I and II of the History of Rome, before

²¹ Paul Brooks and T. Gordon Upton (Cambridge: Harvard Lampoon, 1931).

²² bMS Am 1892.7, Class Notes; and University of Texas, Humanities Research Center, Cummings, Misc., Harvard Course Notes. All further references to the University of Texas Cummings materials will be referred to as UT, HRC.

he gained relief through Terence's *Phormio* and *Andria*.²³ The worthwhile part of the year was the time spent with Horace, and once again Cummings was able to work with verse translation. Horace's Odes have always been favorites with translators because of his clarity of language and at the same time because of the challenge of capturing his elusive moods as he develops the great commonplace themes of life and death. For these reasons, perhaps, and because he himself liked best to write lyric poetry, Cummings delighted in working with Horace, and in so doing, he produced three of the best poems he had yet written. For example, his version of Ode IV from Book I begins:

The fetters of winter are shattered, shattered,
And the limbs of the earth are free, —
Spring, and the breeze that loveth the lea!
And the old keels — gaping and tempest battered —
Men roll them down to the sea.²⁴

What he has produced is a creatively free translation. In the first line he has developed his own metaphor to express the rather straightforward "Solvitur acris hiems" (Sharp winter is breaking up) and goes on to expand it further in line two, which has no Latin equivalent at all in the Horatian poem. Further, Cummings' lines about "the old keels — gaping and tempest battered" are a poetic elaboration of the abbreviated statement "trahuntque siccis machinae carinas" (the engines drag dry keels) and he has pictured human action responding to the change of season, not the machines doing the hauling.

He takes one more liberty to make the Horatian poems his own: he eliminates the complicated pasticchio of mythological allusion, yet at the same time he holds to the spirit of the ode he is working with. Ode VI from Book IV, An Invocation to Apollo, begins (as the Loeb translation gives it): "O God, whom Niobe's offspring came to know as the punisher of boastful words, whom the robber Tityos felt and Phthian Achilles when well-nigh victorious over lofty Troy, mightier than others, yet no match for thee, though he was the son of sea-born Thetis and shook the Dardanian towers, fighting with his awful spear" — and so on for two more paragraphs. Yet Cummings' delicate render-

²³His professor was perhaps Clifford H. Moore, the editor of his textbook, *Horace: The Odes, Epodes, and Carmen Seculare* (New York: American Book, 1902). EEC's copy is Houghton Library 69c-163.

²⁴bMS Am 1892.5 (742). The typescript has the error, "leas."

ing of this poem cuts through all that tangle to give us the simple invocation:

O, blessed of the gods,
 Shield of the race of Rome,
 Are Faith and Fame at odds?
 Thy smile is Spring. — O, too long thou dost roam,
 From home.

As a fond mother stands,
 Seeking with prayerful eyes
 O'er sea and sinuous sands
 Her long-departed son, for whom black skies
 Arise,

So doth this land of ours
 Yearn for her mighty son;
 All lapped in fruit and flowers . . .²⁵

Young Cummings had always enjoyed writing poems about the seasons — especially the coming of spring. His three best Latin translations involve spring, and two of them are tempered with that sad Horatian awareness that the natural cycle brings death too, to human beings. Here is his handling of the work that A. E. Housman called the most beautiful poem in ancient literature, Ode VII, Book IV:

Farewell, runaway snows! For the meadow is green, and the tree stands
 Clad in her beautiful hair.
 New life leavens the land! The river, once where the lea stands,
 Hideth and huggeth his lair.
 Beauty with shining limbs 'mid the Graces comes forth, and in glee stands,
 Ringed with the rythmical fair.

Hope not, mortal, to live forever, the year whispers lowly.
 Hope not, time murmurs, and flies.
 Soft is the frozen sod to the Zepher's sandal, as wholly
 Summer drives Spring from the skies, —
 Dying when earth receives the fruits of Autumn, till slowly
 Forth Winter creeps, and she dies.

Yet what escapes from heaven, the fleet moons capture, retrieving;
 When through Death's dream we survey
 Heroes and kings of old, in lands of infinite grieving,
 What are we? Shadow and clay.
 Say will rulers above us the fate tomorrow is weaving
 Add to the sum of today?

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Hear me: whatever thou giv'st to thine own dear soul, shall not pleasure
 Hungering fingers of kin.
 Once in the gloom, when the judge of Shades in pitiless measure
 Dooms thee to journey within,
 Birth, nor eloquent speech, nor gift of piety's treasure
 Opens the portal of sin.
 Never, goddess of chasteness, from night infernal thou freest
 One who for chastity fell.
 Ever, hero of Athens, him who loved thee thou sceest
 Writhe in the chainings of Hell.²⁶

"The portal of sin" and "writhe in the chainings of Hell" represent terminology far too Christian for the Roman underworld, but the rest of the poem does justice to the original. Once more, Cummings engages in poetic development while following the general Latin guidelines: the gentle apostrophe, "Farewell, runaway snows," for the more declarative "Diffugere nives" (The snows having fled); the more concrete image, "the meadow is green," for "redeunt iam gramina campis" (already the grasses return to the fields); and the more lively personification, "the tree stands clad in her beautiful hair," for "[redeunt] arboribusque comae" (and the leafhair returns to the trees). On it goes, with Cummings displaying a really poetic mind thinking even more metaphorically than his master. "Nos ubi decidimus, quo" (When we have departed to the place where) becomes "When through Death's dream we survey," and "manus avidas . . . heredis" (the avaricious hands of the heir) becomes the ringing consonance of the "hungering fingers of kin." In keeping with his practice about allusions, Diana, Hippolytus, Theseus, and Pirithous disappear from the poem, and more general statements replace what they stand for.

Translation is excellent training for a young poet. His motif is supplied to him, suggested phrasing guides him, and like a painter with a model standing before him, he can concentrate on what is essential, his technique. The meanings and the sounds of the words in their patterns must then be sought out to bring the model into being, not merely to represent but to be given new dimension and proportion in an aesthetic life of its own. Cummings' efforts in translating passages in the Greek drama were useful to him, especially when he worked with choral odes, but his achievement with the Latin lyric poetry

²⁶ *Ibid.*

shows him to have profited most from playing with metaphorical language within the immense metrical and stanzaic variety of the Horatian form of ode.

No other courses in Latin appealed to him and he turned instead to the modern language which is its most direct descendant, Italian. In the junior year he elected elementary Italian under Professor George Weston, a friendly man who conducted his classes informally, and he read selections from a series of nineteenth-century authors²⁷ to prepare himself for a major educational experience in his senior year: a full year of Dante under Charles H. Grandgent. Harvard had a long tradition of Dante studies, going back to the first Smith Professor of Romance Languages, George Ticknor, the great literary historian of the early nineteenth century, who first brought Italian into the curriculum. He was succeeded by Longfellow, whose translation of *La Divina Commedia* introduced the poem to the American public. Lowell next occupied the chair, teaching Dante in the 1880s, and he then bequeathed Italian studies to Charles Eliot Norton, who offered a celebrated Dante course in the 1890s, and who published a polished prose translation of both *La Vita Nuova* and the *Commedia* for American readers.

Grandgent, a far greater scholar than any of his predecessors, took over in the twentieth century. He was a philologist, a literary historian, and an interpretive critic. He was also the foremost Dante specialist in the English-speaking world. He had produced both the *Italian Grammar* and the textbook in Italian Composition²⁸ that Cummings had used in Italian 1. He had prepared an annotated edition of the *Commedia* which has become standard in this century.²⁹ Besides numerous short studies in Dante, he was just completing his critical and historical book, *Dante*, at the time Cummings enrolled in Italian 10, the Dante course.³⁰ The first semester of work included study in the culture of the Middle Ages, the history and politics of Florence, the nature of allegory, and the reading of *Il Convivio*, *De Monarchia*, *La Vita Nuova* and the early cantos of *La Divina Commedia*; the

²⁷ Houghton Library, 69c-204, A. Marinoni, ed., *Italian Reader* (New York: William Jenkins, 1911). The book is heavily marked.

²⁸ Boston: Heath, 1904, and Boston: Heath, 1907. EEC's copies are Houghton Library, 69c-143 and 142.

²⁹ Boston: Heath, 1913. EEC's copy is Houghton Library, 69c-143.

³⁰ New York: Duffield and Co., 1916.

second semester was devoted to a close reading of the entire *Commedia*.

Grandgent was not a stimulating lecturer and there were those who found that his "rhythmic, musical, soothing"³¹ voice put them to sleep. But not Cummings. He was intensely interested in the material of the course and he sat, an alert figure, in the front row. He took extensive lecture notes and he set down careful reading notes on a series of Dante studies by Norton, Grandgent, E. G. Gardiner, and R. W. Church. He drew elaborate diagrams of Dante's Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise with the allegorical details minutely placed in the scheme. He also became fascinated with the character of Dante and with the psychological phenomenon of his injecting his personal life — his likes and dislikes, his enemies and his ideal loved one — into his vast cosmic poem. A sonnet that he wrote at the time embodies this response and his general admiration.

Great Dante stands in Florence, looking down
 In marble on the centuries. Ye spell,
 Beneath his feet who walked in Heaven and Hell,
 "L' Italia." Here no longer lord and clown
 Cringe, as of yore, to the immortal frown
 Of him who loved his Italy too well:
 Silent he stands, and like a sentinel
 Stares from beneath those brows of dread renown.

Terrible, beautiful face, from whose pale lip
 Anathema hurtled upon the world,
 Stern mask, we read thee as an open scroll:
 What if this mouth Hate's bitter smile has curled?
 These eyes have known Love's starry fellowship,
 Behind which trembles the tremendous soul.³²

The course provided Cummings' first critical exposure to allegory and his first serious understanding of the medieval mind. It pushed him toward his choice of courses in the graduate year, Neilson's Chaucer, Neilson's *The Nature and History of Allegory*, and Post's *The Art and Culture of Spain* (for Post had just published his book on *Medieval Spanish Allegory*).³³ For a young man brought up in a religious household and with adolescent emotional leanings toward

³¹ Letter, Constant Southworth to RSK, 8 September 1970. Southworth was not one of the sleepers.

³² bMS Am 1823.7 (23).

³³ Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915.

religiosity, the meagreness of Unitarianism was troubling, and his youthful poems have already revealed that he reached beyond it and absorbed some of the eschatology of the general Protestant culture that he had grown up in. Now the richness and complexity of the religion of the medieval church, which was brought vigorously to life in Dante's masterpiece, fed some of Cummings' emotional roots that reached out toward that reservoir of feeling. He was also thrilled by the Platonic idealism of the *Vita Nuova* (and its dramatization in the *Commedia*), for it matched the youthful idea of the sacredness of womanhood that he still held in the fall of 1914. Dante's world view in general intrigued him. Ever afterward he drew upon this fully detailed Christian mythic view for his verse, and in the 1930s he used Dante's allegorical scheme for his narrative, *Enni*, the most elaborate work he ever wrote.

The other modern language Cummings studied was German, beginning with grammar and elementary reading in his freshman year (breathes there a student of German who has not read Hillern's *Höher als die Kirche?*) and going on to spend a year with the great literary historian and founder of Harvard's Germanic Museum, Kuno Francke, for the course, History of German Literature in Outline. Cummings was not attracted to German culture, feeling it lacked the freedom and looseness of the French or Italian ways of life. The fact that Professor Francke was a Prussian chauvinist and an admirer of Kaiser Wilhelm did not help the situation much. In his final year Cummings enrolled in a similar cultural introduction, The History of Russian Literature, given by the Russian exile, Leo Wiener. Herein he read a number of Russian novels and therefrom he absorbed an awareness of the Russian soul which served him well in his bewildering tour of Soviet Russia in 1931.

Although Cummings' concentration was nominally in classics, he never took the full six year-long courses which were required, probably because he had exhausted his interest in Latin. Although he enjoyed Catullus, he did not want to spend further time with Cicero, Plautus, Tacitus, Lucretius, or even the minor Virgilian poems, and he certainly did not want any more Latin composition. He found Greek literature more to his taste but three years of Homer and the dramatists seemed the cream of Greek studies, and other courses stressed the Greek philosophers, Greek philology, or Greek literary history (Pindar

was reserved for graduate students). He was interested in literature, not in classical civilization. He therefore finished out his concentration in "related studies" in the division of Language and Literature: after his sophomore year he bulked out his program with courses in English and Comparative Literature.

The course with the grandest title was taught by William Henry Schofield, the man who created the department of Comparative Literature: *The Literary History of England and its Relations to that of the Continent*. Cummings never mentioned the course nor its teacher in all of his voluminous self-centered writing. Some of his lecture notes are still extant — for instance, long lists of medieval languages and dialects and the literary works written in each. It took the whole fall term to get up to Chaucer. But the attention paid to the chivalric romances must have attracted Cummings (Schofield had just published *Chivalry in the Middle Ages*),³⁴ for he went on to take the second half-course — which dragged itself only as far as the Elizabethan period. This view of European literature as a whole must have been good for Cummings, and this kind of learning was congruent with his tendency toward cultural spread in the study of five languages plus the courses in Spanish and Russian culture. He continued to read indiscriminately in all of the major European literatures after he left college.

The great figure he encountered in the English Department was George Lyman Kittredge when he enrolled in the famous English 2 "Shakespeare (six plays)." Kittredge, a protégé of Francis James Child and a man whose learning stunned even experts, began to dominate the department in the twentieth century and gradually altered its emphasis away from linguistics and composition toward literature, although he himself had published a book on *Words and their Ways in English Speech* and had edited a Latin grammar.³⁵ His courses and his books ranged widely in the earlier periods of English literature: on chivalric romances, on English and Scottish popular ballads, on the folklore of witchcraft, on Chaucer, and, most important, on "Shakespeare," as he and his mentor, Child, spelled it. Although most lit-

³⁴ Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912. A great many notes and drawings on coats-of-arms which are found among EEC's college papers suggest that perhaps he wrote a term paper on heraldry for Schofield.

³⁵ A rather solemn biography of this fascinating man is C. K. Hyder, *George Lyman Kittredge* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1962).

erature courses at Harvard had become an unconsummated marriage of lectures and assigned readings, the Kittredge method was different. It was chiefly a combination of historical criticism and *explication de texte*. After initial lectures on Shakespeare's life, on the Elizabethan theatre, and on the distinctive features of the period, he spent a month or more on each of six selected plays. Some students took the course twice in order to cover twelve plays. Cummings read *Julius Caesar*, *Henry IV, Parts I and II*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *All's Well that Ends Well* (and in good old Cambridge fashion had passages to commit to memory in each).

During class periods, Kittredge, who looked like a New England version of George Bernard Shaw, offered a series of running footnotes on the plays. Each significant word or line was scrutinized for its linguistic origins, its meaning at the time, its allusive reference to mythology or history or Elizabethan custom, its reflection of Renaissance ideas, its relevance to the particular passage or to the play as a whole. For every assignment, students were required to look up each word which was new or unusual to them and they interleaved the pages of their text with thin slips of paper pasted into place so that they would have more room for the notes. A sober summary of Kittredge in action calls him "an outstanding scholar, able in his lectures to intermingle scholarship (as to the meaning of unfamiliar words, sources of the plays, etc.) with illuminating exposition of individual plays as pieces of dramaturgy, supplemented by broad appreciation of their poetic and humanistic values."³⁰ But most student recollections are more dramatic, depicting him in the classroom as playing a well-rehearsed role of omniscient scholar: an imperious eagle-eyed old man hurling penetrating questions or answering queries with authoritative scorn as he lifted his well-trimmed white beard in the air.

Anecdotes about him abound, and words like god, prophet, or patriarch occur in most of them. In one, Kittredge, invited to an afternoon tea, is met at the door by a maid who shrinks back in alarm at his startling appearance, exclaiming, "My God!" "Not God, madam, Kittredge," he replies as he strides across the threshold. For years, when he wished to cross the street in Harvard Square, he stopped the thronging traffic by stepping forth with his folded umbrella raised

³⁰ Letter, Edwin Smith to RSK, 31 August 1970. While some members of the Class of 1915 agree with Smith, others found him "forbidding, haughty," "lacking in warmth," "cold and arrogant."

like Moses holding back the Red Sea waters. Cummings himself in a memoir of a classroom incident refers to him as "Zeus."³⁷ Yet Kittredge could be humble in the presence of greatness: "If you gentlemen will not remove your hats in the lecture hall for me," he would say, gesturing toward a bust on his left, "then please do so for Homer." Cummings relished the flamboyant individualism of the performance and he adopted some of the Kittredgean amused arrogance for his own roles in public assemblies. Best of all, he learned how to read Shakespeare with full understanding and he spent many hours of his lifetime with the plays and the sonnets.

Under another Shakespeare scholar, William A. Neilson, Cummings studied Chaucer. Neilson, a genial Scot, trained both at Edinburgh and at Harvard, was a specialist in Elizabethan drama and in Shakespeare and Burns (Kittredge even used his little volume, *The Facts about Shakespeare*, as a textbook for his own class).³⁸ He was shortly to desert Harvard to become president of Smith College. His assistant in the course, young F. N. Robinson, was later to succeed him at Harvard and to become the foremost Chaucerian of his time. Under these two teachers, Cummings' delight in Chaucer was fostered, as well as his further pleasure in chivalric romance and allegory. Neilson had the right sense of humor for teaching Chaucer, and he communicated to the students his lively pleasure in reading the work even though he used the Kittredgean method of minute examination of the text.

Cummings returned to Neilson in his graduate year for a half-year course in *The Nature and History of Allegory*, a subject on which Neilson was an expert, having done his Ph.D. thesis on medieval allegory. The lectures began with distinctions among literary terms — allegory, myth, parable, personification, metaphor, symbol. The readings began with the Bible and medieval allegories, such as the *Roman de la Rose*, *Piers Ploughman*, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and *Everyman*; then moved up through Spenser and Bunyan to satirical allegories such as the *Dunciad* and *Gulliver's Travels*; and at length to romantic works such as *Endymion*, *Prometheus Unbound*, and (for Cummings the third time) *The Idylls of the King*.³⁹ Cummings was already familiar with the emblematic habit of mind, from the New England

³⁷ bMS Am 1823.4 (104).

³⁸ New York: Macmillan, 1914. EEC's well annotated copy is HCL 69c-214.

³⁹ UT, HRC, Cummings, Misc., Harvard Course Notes.

tradition that surrounded him and from his father's sermons. But his study now showed him the means of providing further dimension to stories, plays, renderings of ordinary incident — and all of this in a variety of presentation, from didactic preachments to subtle illuminations. His first important work, *The Enormous Room*, was to employ *Pilgrim's Progress* as an allegorical narrative device. It was also to use the enormous room itself as a subtler symbol for a heterogeneous society of individuals oppressed by the authority of the state.

The English professor in whose classes Cummings sat most frequently was Bliss Perry, perhaps the most popular lecturer in the College. He was a vigorous, masculine figure, very much interested in sports: an ardent trout fisherman and a former baseball player at Williams College, who now taught the students to “bat the curves” of Emerson's poetry.⁴⁰ Although he had done graduate work at the Universities of Berlin and Strasbourg, he was not so much a scholar as a man of letters. He published novels and short stories, he wrote popular biographies of Whitman and Carlyle, he edited schooltexts of *Ivanhoe* and Burke's *Speeches*, he compiled anthologies and developed textbooks, such as *A Study of Poetry*. He had been on the faculty at Princeton, but left to take the editorship of the *Atlantic Monthly*, a position he held for ten years. President Eliot felt that there was a place on the faculty for men who appealed to undergraduates less as scholars or scientists than as men of the world who could be models of applied learning for them. He invited Perry to a Professorship of English Literature without consulting the faculty of the English Department. As a consequence, the newcomer was at first viewed as an audacious interloper. But gentlemen accommodate themselves to circumstances, and Perry was soon accepted as someone who would profess “modern literature”; that is, over the years he developed offerings in literature from Swift to Wordsworth, in Emerson, in Carlyle, in Tennyson, and in prose fiction.⁴¹

In his sophomore year, Cummings enrolled in Perry's fall-term course in lyric poetry. Perry lectured on verse forms, gave facts of biography and literary history, and occasionally would read poems aloud. Reading aloud was a common custom in American colleges,

⁴⁰ Brooks and Upton, *Mondays at Nine*.

⁴¹ Bliss Perry, *And Gladly Teach* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), pp. 235-245. The details of this appointment make clear how dictatorial President Eliot could be.

reflecting the importance of oratory in an earlier time; at Harvard, a prescribed course in Elocution survived quite a while during the period of Eliot's elective system. William Langer remembers that Perry's approach to lyric poetry was "a very manly one" and that "whenever he read a poem he got up from his chair, threw back his shoulders, and read in a measured, very effective manner."⁴² Under Perry's instruction, Cummings learned a great deal about stanzas and rhyme schemes, meters and their effects. He read samples of English lyric poetry from Chaucer up to the 1890s and was introduced to many poets he had not known before, including such sweet singers as Waller, Herrick, Lovelace, and Carew. He liked Perry well enough to take other work from him, and with additional encouragement from Dory Miller, he signed up for the half-year course in Tennyson. It was very thorough, covering all of Tennyson's verse including the plays, but Cummings (one more time, *The Idylls of the King*) grew very tired of Tennyson and scribbled Hudibrastic couplets for his classmates:

Dear God, be kind to Tennyson,
 He did no harm to anyone.
 For queen, for country, and for Thee
 He wrote for all eternity.
 He led an exemplary life
 Having children by his wife.
 Dear Lord: let Keats and Shelley wait.
 Make Tennyson thy laureate.⁴³

He did not return to Perry until his graduate year, but then took two courses in a vain reaching out for more contact with modern literature and with the principles of literary criticism. The first, Types of Fiction, made use of Perry's own textbook, *A Study of Fiction*,⁴⁴ a rather elementary work with chapters on such topics as Character, Plot, Setting, on Realism and Romanticism in fiction. It makes plenty of references to novels and novelists, but its general level of criticism is about equal to that of a correspondence school for aspiring short-story writers. In the first half-year the students read short stories, mostly American, and then went on to novels, continuing through the year in rather scattered fashion to read such works as Defoe's *Captain Singleton*, Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *The Deerslayer*, *Old*

⁴² Letter to RSK, 30 August 1970.

⁴³ bMS Am 1823.7 (23), p. 136.

⁴⁴ Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1902. EEC's copy is Houghton Library, 69c-228

Goriot, Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Middlemarch*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Return of the Native*, *Anna Karenina*.⁴⁵ Cummings wrote a term paper in which he dealt with an equally scattered series of works: *Captain Singleton*, Le Sage's *Gil Blas*, Richardson's *Pamela*, Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, Goethe's *Werther*, and Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie*. Whether it was the fault of the student or the teacher, and one may suspect it was both, the paper had no center. Unable to draw all this reading together to support any thesis, Cummings made it a long impressionistic meditation that moved from one book to another as he dreamed of them in his study. Perry wrote, "Very clever but don't do it again."⁴⁶ The second course, entitled *The English Critical Essay*, which ran during the spring term, began with Montaigne and Bacon and moved up through literary history to Arnold and perhaps Pater. Cummings seems not to have learned anything from this course either. By the time he came to write his long paper in April 1916, he was unable to produce a critical essay himself and he wrote a long clever satire entitled "MS Found in a Bottle,"⁴⁷ in which he parodied the styles and attitudes of a great variety of authors. He created a situation in which William Dean Howells, presiding over a literary gathering, introduces George Eliot, who is going to discourse on "My Favorite Insect and Why." Present are Balzac, Flaubert, Melville, Dreiser, Amy Lowell, Poe, Hawthorne, Henry James, Tolstoy, and others, all of whom make comments in characteristic fashion. Parody is a form of literary criticism, but Perry could not see it. He refused to put a grade on the paper because it was not the kind of term report he expected.

One may observe here something deficient in the Harvard program, as well as something lacking in the early twentieth-century literary scene in general. In his English studies under Kittredge, Neilson, and Grandgent, and to some extent in his classical studies, Cummings learned the method of historical criticism very well; that is, he learned the way to read a literary work by acquainting himself with the period in which it was produced and the circumstances that produced it. It is an essential beginning for the understanding of earlier literature. Also from Grandgent and Neilson he learned the

⁴⁵ Harvard Archives, HUC 8913.315.12, G. H. Shaw's notes for *Comparative Literature* 12, 1913-14.

⁴⁶ bMS Am 1892.6.

⁴⁷ UT, HRC, Cummings, Works.

rudiments of literary interpretation. But there was no one on the faculty (Professors Briggs and Copeland were as incapable as Perry) who could deal in a critically intelligent way with the literature of the previous century, which included the richest efflorescence since the Renaissance. One need not blame Harvard. In no other college or university could such a critic be found. And President Eliot's instincts were right in reaching out for the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in order to put someone on the faculty who supposedly could speak authoritatively about modern literature.

Cummings' failure to learn anything from Perry about aesthetic criticism or about making literary judgments reminds us that there was really no sound method of aesthetic analysis before I. A. Richards or the Vanderbilt critics in the 1920s. There was literary theorizing about the nature of art, there were interpretations of literary texts, there was some literary categorizing. But in aesthetic criticism — the study of literary works as beautiful objects achieving their significance through a delicate interplay of elements, especially style and structure — the modern world had not really gone beyond Aristotle's *Poetics*, which had been rigidly misapplied since the Renaissance, or beyond Horace's *Ars Poetica*, which, echoed by Sidney, Dr. Johnson, and others even down to the present, regarded literature as a kind of teaching. Coleridge's theorizing about the nature of poetry was brilliant but it had never had any application and remained to be rediscovered in the 1930s. Arnold was a man of good taste with a question-begging method of making literary judgments. What can we expect at any college or university in the early decades of the twentieth century when the task of making literary discriminations arose, except personal impressions? Cummings went on after college to write reviews for *The Dial* and critical attacks and parodies in *Vanity Fair* and to make pompous pronouncements in his later life to friends and to audiences of college students, but he never was able to apply any other criterion than his own personal response as to whether or not a work was, as he called it, "alive."

Yet in an adjacent area, the teaching of composition, Harvard made a discernible contribution to Cummings' future career. Harvard had a long tradition of emphasis on writing, especially creative writing. Even during the days of President Eliot's elective system, the one required course was English A, Rhetoric and English Composition,

Oral and Written, under the direction of A. S. Hill, whom Grandgent called the "high priest of correctness and conformity to good usage."⁴⁸ Barrett Wendell's elective composition course, English 12, also had an advanced form, English 5. In a similar advanced category was English 16, English Versification. And except for one, these were all full-year courses. Hill and Wendell were succeeded by Lewis Gates, Le Baron Russell Briggs, and Charles Townsend Copeland in handling all this advanced instruction, a substantial number of professors for a department of seven or eight. Before 1910, in fact, the Harvard English Department was much more renowned for its teaching of composition than for its teaching of literature. At Harvard, students were expected to study composition, and they were encouraged to write verse and fiction as well as good expository prose.⁴⁹ In addition to the student newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, and the satirical magazine, *The Harvard Lampoon*, the undergraduates supported two rival literary periodicals, *The Harvard Advocate* and *The Harvard Monthly*, both of which published verse, fiction, essays, reviews, and literary polemics. *The Harvard Musical Review* was another first-class magazine edited by the undergraduates. Perhaps as a result of all this, an astounding number of Harvard men became writers of some renown. Those from the 1900-1918 period alone make a long list: Conrad Aiken, Frederick Lewis Allen, Robert Benchley, S. N. Behrman, Earl Derr Biggers, Heywood Brown, Rollo Walter Brown, Van Wyck Brooks, Witter Bynner, Stuart Chase, Malcolm Cowley, S. Foster Damon, Bernard De Voto, John Dos Passos, T. S. Eliot, Arthur Davison Ficke, John Gould Fletcher, Herman Hagedorn, Robert Hillyer, Henry Herbert Knibbs,⁵⁰ Walter Lippmann, John Marquand, Samuel Eliot Morison, Robert Nathan, Charles Nordhoff, Eugene O'Neill (as a special student), John Reed, Alan Seegar, Edward Sheldon, Stuart Sherman, Harold Stearns, Wallace Stevens (who did not graduate), Arthur Train, John Hall Wheelock, John Brooks Wheelwright, Willard Huntington Wright (S. S. Van Dine). And, of course, E. E. Cummings, who enrolled in English A in 1911, studied the principles

⁴⁸ Morison, *Development of Harvard*, p. 76. Elocution had once been one of the basic "practical" courses in the English Department and had been a required subject until 1873. Thereafter, it was one of the popular electives, even though practice in speaking was routine in English A.

⁴⁹ Rollo Walter Brown, *Dean Briggs* (New York: Harper, 1926), Chapter III.

⁵⁰ It is with a nostalgic flourish that I include Knibbs, the author of one of my favorite books from grammar-school days, *The Riding Kid from Powder River*.

of argumentation, read Burke, Lincoln, and Bryce, analyzed speeches, compiled vocabulary lists, wrote weekly themes, gave both prepared and extemporaneous speeches, and was excused from the prescription after one term. "Learn to write by writing," his section leader told the class.⁵¹ No need to tell Estlin Cummings, who had been scribbling since he was five. "Cultivate the forming of figures of speech. They may serve the highest and humblest uses." This was news, and young Cummings diligently recorded images and tropes whenever he had leisure.

Part way through Cummings' college career, something happened to his verse that moved it beyond Keatsian richness to a decadent over-ripeness, and the same thing befell his prose style whenever he was trying to evoke an imaginative situation or indeed, even when he was only trying to say something impressive about art or literature. It seems reasonable to connect it with a happening he referred to only briefly in his non-lectures.⁵² One day, Josiah Royce stopped Cummings on Irving Street and said, "Estlin, I understand that you write poetry. Are you perhaps acquainted with the sonnets of Dante Gabriel Rossetti?" When the young man said no, Royce took him into his house, sat him down in the study and began to read him the Willowood sequence from *The House of Life*. Cummings was enthralled by the music and by the calculated exaltation in Rossetti's treatment of love themes. Over the months, he read Rossetti and became familiar with his career. Gradually he developed a wish to become a poet-painter like Rossetti. As a budding poet, it was the worst thing that could have happened to him. Longfellow did no harm to a schoolboy poet, but Rossetti was a disastrous influence for a maturing young man — and especially the style of the sonnets in *The House of Life*.

Rossetti's style attempts to imitate a medieval allegorical mode, thus it is full of archaic words and constructions and it makes frequent use of references (not quite personifications) to capitalized abstractions such as Love, Death, Life, Oblivion, Hope, Soul, God, and the like, with the idea that these references will bring emotional vibrations or lend profundity to what is being expressed. In this Rossetti style, religious language and mythological allusion are plentiful. In addition, it indulges in a highly self-conscious piling up of figures of speech,

⁵¹ UT, HRC, Cummings, Misc., English Notebook. In EEC's handwriting the man's name is indecipherable — something like Hinchman.

⁵² *i: six non-lectures*, pp. 29–30.

sometimes quite strained in their relevance to the poetic situation, and it frequently employs language of far greater intensity than is appropriate. For example, his sonnet "The Kiss" begins,

What smouldering senses in death's sick delay
Or seizure of malign vicissitude
Can rob this body of honour, or denude
This soul of wedding-vestment worn to-day?
For lo! even now my lady's lips did play
With these my lips such consonant interlude
As laurelled Orpheus longed for when he wooed
The half-drawn hungering face with that last lay.

Soon Cummings was writing that way. His "Water-Lilies" sonnet, with Rossetti-like vagueness and artificiality, begins:

Behold — a mere like a madonna's head
Black-locked, enchapleted with lilies white;
By Him the Prince of Artists in Earth's sight,
Eons ere her most ancient master wed
With Immortality.⁵³

And a little later when he was writing love poetry, he was going into musical swoons like this:

I miss you in the dawn, of gradual flowering lights
And prayer-pale stars that pass to drowsing-incensed hymns,
When early earth through all her greenly-sleeping limbs
Puts on the exquisite gold day. The Christlike sun
Moves to his resurrection in rejoicing heights,
And priestly hills partake of morning one by one.⁵⁴

It would not be worth commenting on if this had been only one more imitative phase that Cummings passed through, but it was not. This style, reinforced by the interest that many of the young Harvard literati took in the English decadents of the 1890s, continued to appear in some of his poems for the next decade. Whenever he wrote a sonnet, the chances were great that the spirit of Rossetti would hover over him ready to descend and fog up his expression.

Theodore Miller, the first person Cummings ever encountered who could give him helpful criticism on his poems, cautioned him about loose usage of words and he recommended after Cummings' sophomore

⁵³ Published in *The Harvard Monthly*, LV (February 1913), 170.

⁵⁴ Published in *The Harvard Monthly*, LX (April 1915), 37.

year that he take a course in expository writing "in order to clear up your tendency to obscurity in poetry."⁵⁵ Cummings did not take his advice until his senior year when he enrolled in Dean Le Baron Russell Briggs's English 5, Advanced Composition. Briggs was no doubt the best-loved professor in the Harvard Yard. He was a kind, gentle, gracious human being, slight of build, boyish in appearance even into his middle years, exhibiting a modest charm enlivened by a delightful sense of humor. He came from old New England stock with a descent from John Alden and Priscilla Mullins on his father's side and from Governor Bradford on his mother's. He had attended Cambridge High School (before the Latin School was separated from it) and went on to study Greek at Harvard.⁵⁶ Cummings must have felt a strong identification with Briggs because of his own frail appearance and his Cambridge background.

Briggs had been associated with college composition for a long time. Shortly after he became a Harvard faculty member, he inaugurated the English A program by bringing Sophomore Rhetoric down to the freshman level and adding some lectures in general orientation in the liberal arts and their relation to American society. Thus was born what has come to be a common educational practice for college freshmen all over the nation — training in writing and study of a book of essays on education and society. Briggs had always devoted himself to his students, spending hours in conferences with them and slaving at night over their batches of themes — a routine which he continued and expanded when he took over Barrett Wendell's English 5, Advanced Composition. But soon he was Dean of Harvard College and conferring with hordes of young men in need of advice, frequently in trouble, sometimes needing a prod or a warning, sometimes needing some cheering from a parental substitute, sometimes needing condolence for failure. In Cummings' day, he had gone on to become Dean of the Faculty, second in command to President Lowell, working with professors, developing educational policy, but still conferring with students and teaching his courses in composition. He had a reader now to help him but he still read most of the papers himself. In addition to all this, he had been cajoled into becoming President of Radcliffe, supposedly as a part-time assignment. But since he did

⁵⁵ bMS Am 1892, Letter, 5 August 1913.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Dean Briggs*, gives a fully detailed account of his career and of the students' love and admiration for him.

nothing half-heartedly, he soon was establishing policy, fighting for faculty, raising funds, and conferring with women students as well as continuing all his tasks at Harvard. This saintly educator, a proper product of that legendary ancestral love-match, gave his personal advice, instruction, and affection to more students than anyone in the history of Harvard.⁵⁷ "Mother" Briggs, as Cummings' friend, Scofield Thayer, called him,⁵⁸ always had time for a good word, a suggestion, a solution to a problem — in his office, after class, in his walk across the Yard to a committee meeting, in the open house he held for students every Wednesday night at his home, 76 Brattle Street.⁵⁹

Briggs's course in Advanced Composition drew a mixed group, for it was open to both undergraduates and graduate students. Some students enrolled to improve their means of expressing their ideas, but others appeared with embryonic short stories in their folders or an outline of a grandiose project, perhaps even a half-finished novel. A few had been working in verse and, like Cummings, had compiled little stacks of unpublished poems. Briggs, very sensibly, did not believe one could teach writing. A teacher could only encourage the writer, give him plenty of practice, and see that he received comment on what he produced, both from professor and from fellow-student. His thought was "he had kept a diary himself and had profited by daily writing. Why should not students write a little every day?"⁶⁰ The class met thrice a week, an unusual practice at Harvard, where the third class meeting during a week was held only "at the pleasure of the instructor." Students wrote short essays on all aspects of their thought and observation, every class meeting, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, for at least twenty-five or thirty minutes. Briggs gave careful attention to each paper. "He had an old-fashioned schoolmaster's concern for neatness of language," said John Dos Passos, "a Yankee zest for the ship-shape phrase, an old-fashioned gentleman's concern for purity of morals . . . and a sharp nose for sham and pretense."⁶¹

⁵⁷ Letters I have received from members of the Class of 1915 clearly support this opinion, which is fully amplified in Brown, *Dean Briggs*.

⁵⁸ bMS Am 1892, Letter to EEC, 17 July 1918.

⁵⁹ UT, HRC, Cummings, Assignment Sheet for English 5 indicates Wednesday nights, although Brown, *Dean Briggs*, says Tuesday nights.

⁶⁰ Brown, *Dean Briggs*, p. 57.

⁶¹ "P.S. to Dean Briggs" in Brooks Atkinson, ed., *College in a Yard* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

Many of Cummings' short essays survive, carefully marked up by Briggs and graded in his peculiar manner with an o, a v, a z, or some such hieroglyphic, the meaning of which he never would divulge to his students. These essays are not very promising. For instance, Cummings produced this little allegory on 20 October 1914:

The Unwelcome Diety [Sp]

There is but one God on the pillar of Art. He is dressed in unspeakable magnificence. A crown is upon his temples, and that crown touches the farthest of faint stars. The smoke of his worship is a curling column of soul, [Briggs: *I am pretty sceptical about this*] making sweet the temple of the world.

He is the God of all things beautiful. A red dove flutters about his head, and a white dove murmurs at his feet; and shy thoughts build their music into his temple.

He is the God of all things terrible. A blue snake writhes upon his right hand, and a black snake smiles between his knees, and dark dreams nest silently in his temple.

The temple of the world is full of peoples. These do enjoy themselves, [Briggs: *Suggest change of style*] tossing bright balls of pleasure into the misted air. Some few there be, who lay little garlands of new flowers at the feet of the God; and these men are said to have given their lives to art. Most of the multitude admire the temple, but are so glad with the flash of the colored balls which they toss in their hands that they take little heed of Him who sits in the centre. Nay, some even look askance at Him, and when the smoke of souls curls about them, they laugh or curse because they are blinded.

Yet is He the begetter of marvels, the prince of wonders; yet at his thighs shineth the sword of Art, which is a white fire and a red fire: yet his words are of life the absolute flowers.

Blessed be they that do worship at his altar! for verily, they shall be lifted up with strong wings and wings merciful.

Upon a stone beneath this God's feet some Man hath writ: "Imagination."
None hath ever seen His face.⁶²

Upon which Briggs offered this comment: "It is hard to produce satisfactory work of this nature in so short a time. You have done — all things considered — remarkably well, — but you don't command perfect confidence as to your own sturdy knowledge of your meaning (e.g. line 5)."

Sometimes at the class meeting, Briggs read a student theme aloud, made comments, called for further criticism, and after that the class

⁶² bMS Am 1892.6 (114).

members wrote their little essays about the paper they had heard read or about the discussion they had listened to. In addition, long papers, six or more pages, were to be written outside of class eight times during a term. Usually the assignments for these papers were "What you please" but some were specified to be a story, a poem, a story for children, "a Christmas story or a love story."⁶³ A few of Cummings' longer pieces are still in existence and they attest to the fact that Briggs began to clean up Cummings' prose style with frequent marginal comment and a general over-all admonition for each essay. One of these, dated 13 October [1914], "The Young Faun," is an overwritten scenario inspired by the ballet "The Afternoon of a Faun," which drew Briggs's polite rebuke: "Now and then I suspect you . . . of putting in some details for sound's sake — of indulging yourself in that for which English 5 is one of the best remedies."⁶⁴

Briggs himself had a charming prose style, casual, witty, in the best tradition of good conversation, and as a teacher of composition he held up standards of clarity, precision, and economy for his students. Thus the preciousness of Cummings' over-ornate style drew many judicious reprimands: "You show literary and poetic feeling; but to me, at least, you are foggy. You write as if you put down combinations of such words as you associate with poetry and hoped they would mean enough to pass muster. Sometimes they have poetry that burns through the fog; sometimes they seem ill-advised, not quite normal, as if caught from writers who lack a man's strength. Probably this comment strikes you as unintelligent Philistinism: yet I also love poetry; and I don't like to see a man with poetic talent — choosing false gods."⁶⁵

One of the long themes, perhaps from the later part of the college year, shows not only Cummings' improvement in style but also his having developed some appreciation for economy in expression: "The Poetry of Silence," on Chinese and Japanese poetry.⁶⁶ At the end of the year, the members of the class voted on the best story of the year, and Cummings' story for children, "The King," was awarded second prize. It was a story about a little boy who takes a toy elephant to bed

⁶³ UT, HRC, Cummings, Misc., Assignment Sheet for English 5.

⁶⁴ bMS Am 1892.6 (124).

⁶⁵ bMS Am 1892.6, "The Young Man," an allegory in a Greek setting about Death visiting a tyrant, written 1 March 1915.

⁶⁶ bMS Am 1892.6 (94).

with him at night.⁶⁷ Among all his other good deeds, Briggs had discouraged Cummings' linguistic pursuit of the decadent style in prose. Cummings' major paper of the year, a twenty-seven-page discourse on "The New Art" (which was to have a surprising future) gained Briggs's praise, "An interesting and able essay, showing a sense of style, good power of analysis, love of the subject, and a courage and persuasiveness of treatment." The paper received a grade of *y x w z y*.⁶⁸

Our view of Cummings' studies has allowed us to pick out a number of scattered instances in which his development in mind and art was shaped by his Harvard studies. At this point, if we glance back over his formal course work, it is possible to add a few pertinent general observations about this part of his Harvard experience. Study at Harvard University did not make an intellectual of E. E. Cummings, nor would he have welcomed such a label. But it did make him one of the best-educated young men in the country. The training in classical and modern languages gave him the ability to use English with great skill, not for analytical discourse but for creative expression in unique ways. His exposure to a variety of cultures, Greek, Roman, Italian, German, Spanish, and Russian, and especially to British culture from its beginnings to the twentieth century, enriched his whole existence for the rest of his life. His program of study shows only one serious omission: his failure to take any work in the History Department, a mistake that weakened his understanding of the past and deprived him of a proper perspective on his own time. This lack was partially remedied by the time spent with literary and cultural history — but even that kind of historical study has its deceptions, for art and literature reflect their time obliquely and spottily. In any case, this comment about history is really only a quibble, for the courses in history would have been given through lectures in large halls where a huge assembly of students seated alphabetically were methodically taking notes, an educational procedure that makes very little impression. In later years, Cummings never mentioned anything he supposedly learned from lectures. He spoke only of his study of languages and his study under Kittredge, Neilson, and Grandgent, both kinds of instruction which focused carefully on specific texts and examined passages in their relationship to each other or to the whole. The classical and foreign language classes were small; the classes in Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Dante were

⁶⁷ Published in *The Harvard Monthly*, LX (July 1915), 132-136.

⁶⁸ bMS Am 1892.6 (84).

large. But the educational procedure was similar. Still, for all of its value and with all of its limitations, this formal course work was only part of his education. For E. E. Cummings, the poet, his practice in writing, his work in verse for Dean Briggs during his graduate year, and his association with a few lively and intelligent fellow students — all of this in conjunction with being weaned away from 104 Irving Street — contributed most to his development as a writer and to his growth as one of the distinctive personalities of his time. A full account of this other side of his education requires another article.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

SISTER MAUREEN FARRELL, F.C.J., is associated with the Department of History of Science and Technology of the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, where her dissertation (1973) was written on the life and works of William Whiston.

WALTER GROSSMANN, Director of Libraries and Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, is editing the *Sämtliche Schriften* of Johann Christian Edelmann in thirteen volumes, of which eleven have been published thus far by Friedrich Frommann Verlag. His Harvard dissertation (1951) was "Schiller's Idea of History," and from 1952 to 1967 he was on the staff of the Harvard Library, where he was the second Archibald Cary Coolidge Bibliographer; he has contributed to three previous issues of the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN.

PHILIP HOFER, Curator of Printing and Graphic Arts in the Harvard College Library, *Emeritus*, and Honorary Curator of Asian Graphic Arts of the William Hayes Fogg Art Museum, founded the Library's Department of Printing and Graphic Arts in 1938 and headed it until his retirement in 1968. His numerous publications include fifteen contributions to previous issues of the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN, and he was the subject of an article by Peter A. Wick, "Philip Hofer, Scholar-Collector," in the issue for July 1968.

MARY HYDE, a member of the Overseers' Committee to Visit the Harvard University Library and of the Editorial Committee for the Yale Edition of Samuel Johnson's *Works*, is an author, scholar, and collector. *Playwriting for Elizabethans, 1600-1605* (published by the Columbia University Press in 1949) grew out of her dissertation; *The Impossible Friendship: Boswell and Mrs. Thrale* was published by the Harvard University Press in 1972 following its serialization in the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN.

RICHARD S. KENNEDY, Professor of English at Temple University, wrote his Harvard dissertation in 1953 on Thomas Wolfe, and *The Window of Memory: The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe* was published by the University of North Carolina Press in 1962; he has also contributed articles on Wolfe to two previous issues of the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN. At present he is at work on a critical biography of E. E. Cummings.