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## E. E. Cummings at Harvard: Verse, Friends, Rebellion

*Richard S. Kennedy*

A PROFOUND CHANGE took place in Estlin Cummings' personality during the five-year period, 1911-1916, that he spent at Harvard.<sup>1</sup> If we look at a long introspective statement which he set down in a notebook midway through his freshman year, we will see that it shows him clearly as a dutiful youngster (he was still only seventeen), devoted to his parents, inclined toward Unitarian piety, proud of his friendship with the decorous Dory Miller, the graduate student who had taught him Greek, and hopeful about his future social conduct and achievement. He was living at home in Cambridge, not in a Harvard dormitory. Even the prose style of the passage suggests a nineteenth-century New England ethos:

I am a young man living in an advanced and cultivated era, surrounded by things lovely and of good report. I have a strong mind, a healthy body, resulting from years of careful and devoted watching by father and mother, and a high reputation, everywhere I go, as a gentleman. My friends are pure, high-minded girls and clean, manly fellows. My father is a man who has worked out his own success by toil and pluck, who has maintained as a lasting gift to his son a noble soul and well-developed body. He is a man who never allowed the faintest suggestions of temptation to grip him, and expects the high and pure of his son. My mother is a woman who has kept herself strong and pure for me alone, who has built upon me, her first child, a wonderful frame of utter love and end-

<sup>1</sup> All previously unpublished poems and other writings of E. E. Cummings, including early versions of already published poems, quoted in this article are copyright © 1977 by Nancy T. Andrews. I should like to express my gratitude to her literary representative, Mr. George Firmage, for permission to quote from these materials in the Harvard Library and in the University of Texas Library. I also wish to thank W. H. Bond, Librarian of the Houghton Library at Harvard University, and William R. Holman, Librarian of the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas Library, for permission to quote from the manuscript materials held by their respective libraries.

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less aspiration, whole [*sic*] lives only as I live, hopes as I hope, and falls only when I fall. I worship a God unutterably merciful and vitally human, and who embodies all the good that I have not won and all the vast strength I have not attained. He is within as well as without, and his voice is all too small for my soul as I write. I thank him when I do right, pray for help when I err, and ask forgiveness when I sin. I avow myself to be His son as well as my parents' son; He is my first and primal Parent. When I sin he suffers; when I do right action, speak the right word, and think the right thoughts, he grows and is great over me. Yet is He unthinkably beyond my ken; unspeakably close to my heart. . . .

One friend have I of whom I speak out lovingly from my heart at all times. He is a man at college with me, older, wiser, and of perfect chivalry toward woman and man. I love him as I love no other friend; I worship him for good, and imitate him for worthiness. His life, also, has grown into mine. The honor of his friendship he has placed with perfect confidence in my trembling hands; if I do wrong, I commit an unfaithfulness to him who I admire most of my friends. If I do right, his the glory equally with the deed's.

It is important that I should realize this fact: I am of the aristocracy of this earth. All the advantages that any boy should have are in my hands. I am a king over my opportunities. No one can take away from me the possibilities of growth founded on the firm rock of inherent advantage and power.<sup>2</sup>

By the time he was five years older, Cummings was in full rebellion against his father, he hated Cambridge, he scorned the prevailing American attitudes and tastes, and he associated with a lively, spree-drinking, girl-chasing group of young men who were apprentices in the new artistic movement of the twentieth century. He also had begun to develop a distinctive poetic style and was well on his way to becoming an iconoclastic modern poet. The story of that change is a fascinating one which combines the ordinary pattern of a young man's rejection of his father's dominance and the unique course of one young American who became a follower of the new artistic tendencies of his era.

## I

Estlin Cummings had come to Harvard with good literary habits. He wrote poems as often as he had time free from his studies. Some were dreadful. Others had only a few worthwhile lines. But with continuing practice and experiment he could not help but grow as a

<sup>2</sup>Cummings, *Workbook*, dated 1 February 1912, in the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas. All further references to the Cummings materials at the Center will be referred to as UT, HRC.

poet. From time to time during the year he was able to produce successful poems which exhibited firm control. For instance, "Semi-Spring," which he turned out in April or May 1912, shows new interest in the expressive effects of alliteration and an attempt, not tried before, to render shifts of mood by having the sounds of the words echo the sense of what is being said. The first stanza of the poem speaks of the springtime scene with harshness, using a predominance of short vowels and a number of consonant-stops, in words like "scrawny," "scattering," "grim, grey," "grins," and "broken." It is followed by a stanza which basks in the pleasantness of springtime sunlight. It uses, chiefly, long vowels and a great many sibilants, glides, and nasal sonants — words like "warm," "serene," "dreamy," "coos," and "rosy eastern glow." The same pattern of contrast divides the next two stanzas, but the effect of movement toward an emergent spring is carried effectively by the stanza lengths themselves, which build from four to five to six and finally to seven lines.

A thin, foul scattering of grim, grey snow,  
Reaching out scrawny limbs, deep digs its nails  
Into the bleeding face of suppliant earth,  
And grins with all its broken, yellow teeth.

A warm, serene, soft heaven gazes down  
With dreamy eyes upon the fiend-cramped world.  
The rosy eastern glow, the sun's I Come,  
Patters about the sky, and coos, and smiles —  
Sweet babe with tender, rose-begetting feet.

From a black corpse of tree, the hideous rasp  
Of staring grackles, clucking and bowing each  
In drivelling salute, splits the soft air  
To inharmonious fragments; everywhere  
A nervous, endless, hoarse, incessant chirp  
Of sparrows telling all the evil news.

Ah, God — for the flower-air of Spring! To see  
The world in bud! To press with eager feet  
The dear, soft, thrilling green again! To be  
Once more in touch with heaven upon earth!  
One soul-toned thrush's perfect harmony,  
One little warbler's huge felicity,  
One buttercup! One perfect butterfly! <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> bMS Am 1892.5 (21). Call numbers will be given for all references to the Cummings materials in the Houghton Library. The Cummings papers were purchased

It is a good example of his ability in handling language at this point of his development, but he had a number of styles and influences to pass through before he would find his own way of expression.

The big change during his freshman year came with the discovery of Keats, and when the leisure of summer arrived, Cummings began to study the poems closely. A surviving diary-entry for 9 July 1912 contains page upon page of commentary on images or lines from *Lamia*. For instance, on the passage, "a mournful voice/ Such as once heard in gentle heart, destroys/ All pain but pity", Cummings wrote the following consideration: "Pity is made a kind of pain, not a concrete feeling. By this subservience of the key word to a minor noun preceding [*sic*] it, the thought of the reader is made to hark back, and he instinctively realizes the quality of the phrase, its alliterativeness and at the same time the truth of the description lying inside the frame of the purpose, — i.e., that pity is a kind of pain." His notes the next day, 10 July, offer a series of "Impressions Which Various Vowels Give The Ear" — such as

1. o long — largeness  
Ex. "robe" is ampler than "garment."
2. ow (as in "how") — heaviness  
Ex. "round weight" outweighs "circular weight."
3. Two short vowels in succession,  
i.e., in two succeeding words, give the idea of strained, compressed. Ex. "hid scent" and "held breath" (*Lamia*).<sup>4</sup>

During the summer, he compiled lists of images either to hoard away for the future or merely to stretch his capacities for metaphor. "Slowly the mountain climbs into the sky." "A little warbler writes his twitching flight/ Across yon parchment sky." "huge logs sleep, bearded with their own decay."<sup>5</sup> So on he goes, filling the pages of his workbook.

He attempts to draw upon imaginative depths by trials of free association in response to a summer scene:

A little pensive smoke — the robins, like dead leaves, go flying southward — the shelldrake harrows the lake — see where with outstretched lips the trunks embrace — around his brows the halo of divine unhappiness — the panting

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in 1964 by the Harvard College Library with funds from a bequest by Amy Lowell.

<sup>4</sup> UT, HRC, Cummings, Works, "A World of Men and Women."

<sup>5</sup> UT, HRC, Cummings, Workbook.

stars (like a dog) — How good to see the sun; Even through the rain — Married to memory — And all the trees painted a vivid green by rich rain — Would every man were Plato to his God — Old saints Robed in the untransparent garb of prayer — Sun, moon, earth — God, God, God!! — Nature with hoary eye stares at us from the dark as we intrude (Phosphorescent wood) — Her eyes knelt there in prayer before him — ashes of roses, ashes of angels. Sunset: shades of vivid color change and rise and fall — as if the day writhed alive upon his pyre.<sup>6</sup>

The words pour out for three more pages.

This increased awareness of imagery accompanied a new phase of Cummings' poetic expression that can best be called Keatsian because he displayed a linguistic exuberance reminiscent of Keats's descriptive style (although he was also prone to lapse into Rossetti-like lushness). During the summer he wrote a series of descriptive poems, most of which he published during the next year in the *Harvard Advocate*, among them, "Mist" ("Earth is become the seat of a new sea"), "Water Lilies" ("Behold — a mere like a madonna's head"), "Summer Silence" ("Eruptive lightnings flutter to and fro"), and "Sunset" ("Great carnal mountains crouching in the cloud"). Most of them were sonnets but two were exercises in one of Keats's favorite forms, Spenserian stanzas.

The presence of Dory Miller helped. Not only did he visit Silver Lake in July and look over Cummings' work but the two also carried on a correspondence about some of the poems, including some that Cummings never published. One, entitled "The Paper Palace," was an unusual piece about a colony of wasps, beginning "A clan of imps — morose and ugly things"<sup>7</sup> and going on to set up in contrast a description of the delicate nest they build. Some of the poems fell into the Pre-Raphaelite style. Miller was tactful in his criticism but warned Cummings that he found too many of the poems "forced — over-elaborated." His favorite, however, was a sonnet entitled "Fame Speaks," a tribute to the poet whom he and Cummings admired most:

Stand forth, John Keats! On earth thou knew'st me not;  
Steadfast through all the storms of passion, thou,  
True to thy muse, and virgin to thy vow;  
Resigned, if name with ashes were forgot,  
So thou one arrow in the gold had'st shot!

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *bMS Am 1892.5 (3)*.

I never placed my laurel on thy brow,  
 But on thy name I come to lay it now,  
 When thy bones wither in the earthly plot.  
 Fame is my name. I dwell among the clouds,  
 Being immortal, and the wreath I bring  
 Itself is Immortality. The sweets  
 Of earth I know not, nor the pains, but wing  
 In mine own ether, with the crownèd crowds  
 Born of the centuries. — Stand forth, John Keats! <sup>8</sup>

The only phrase he questioned was "virgin to thy vow," which made him uncomfortable.

The peak achievement resulting from the combination of Miller's friendship and the influence of Keats came about when Cummings worked out a free translation of the sequence in *Aucassin et Nicolette* in which Nicolette descends from her prison tower. The obvious model for the style is "The Eve of St. Agnes." The richness of the poem consists not only in the languorous diction appropriate to the romantic moonlight scene or in the echoing alliterative consonants among the waves of assonance but also in the complexity of images that grow one out of the other in surprising intricacy. For instance, the nighttime scene in which Nicolette appears at the tower window to drop down the rope of twisted cloth for her escape, is introduced in terms of the opening of a lily, which is further likened to a maiden awaking at dawn as the sun touches her (it). Yet, the light is really moonlight seen as fire burning to a snow-like whiteness when it falls upon the figure of Nicolette, whose harmony of movement is likened to delicate musical vibration when she lets the rope fall and slides down it — as silently as one of the dew-drops which the opening lily had revealed.

And as an opening lily, milky-fair,  
 When from her couch of poppy petals peers  
 The sleepy morning, gently draws apart  
 Its curtains to reveal the golden heart  
 With beads of dew made jewels by the sun,  
  
 So one fair, shining tower, which, like a glass,  
 Turned light to flame, and blazed with silver fire,  
 Unclosing, gave the moon a nymph-like face,

<sup>8</sup>bMS Am 1892.5 (505), dated August 1912. Miller's letter, bMS Am 1892, 27 August [1912].

A form whose snowy symmetry of grace  
 Haunted the limbs as music haunts the lyre,  
 A creature of white hands, who, letting fall  
 A thread of lustre from the opened wall  
 Glided, a drop of radiance, to the grass.\*

Brilliant in its way, but alongside this, the clarity and precision of his Horatian translations during the same year seem lost. Was it the medievalism of *Aucassin et Nicolette* or the medievalism of Keats that sponsored this luxuriance? Keats, more likely. After this, there seemed nowhere to go except down the Pre-Raphaelite path. Cummings needed some new models. But the time he had spent drilling himself in imagery was not wasted.

## II

When Cummings began to publish his work in the two literary magazines, the editorial staff of each rival group hoped to enlist this new talent in the service of its own periodical. The rules were such that no one could be elected to an editorial board until he had published three items in its issues. So eager were the men of the *Harvard Advocate* to have Cummings join them that they accepted and published three of his poems (including "Of Nicolette") in one month. In spite of this opportunity he really wanted to join the *Harvard Monthly*, which had the superior reputation for the quality of its verse. Founded in 1885 by George Santayana and others, the *Monthly* had published the early verse of such figures as William Vaughn Moody, Bliss Carman, John Hall Wheelock, and Edwin Arlington Robinson. Its aspirations were quietly asserted on its masthead, "The aim of the Monthly is to publish the best literary work produced by students of the University." In the spring of his sophomore year, Cummings was pleased to get a letter from the secretary, Scofield Thayer, telling him that he had been elected to the board of editors of the *Monthly*.<sup>10</sup>

Because Cummings lived at home, he had taken very little part in the varied social life of the Harvard Yard during his first two years. He was not a joiner: he stayed away from the special-interest groups and

\* Published in *Harvard Advocate*, XCV (21 March 1913), 25-26. Cummings made a few changes in phrasing, such as "drowsy-fair" for "milky-fair," when he included it in *Tulips and Chimneys*.

<sup>10</sup> bMS Am 1892, 16 May 1913.



certainly he was too unsophisticated to be part of the poshocracy of the waiting clubs and final clubs. He is remembered as someone who occasionally appeared at a smoker which his class held at the Harvard Union — a straw-haired youth, quiet but friendly, with an engaging smile, rather preferring to remain on the fringe of the festivities. But when he began his association with the *Monthly*, he gradually made new friends and he began to be drawn into a very different atmosphere from that surrounding Dory Miller.

S. Foster Damon, a handsome, blond-haired enthusiast of the arts from Newton, Massachusetts, who was two years older than Cummings, became his guide to all that was modern in the arts. Damon seemed interested in everything. He was a musician, president of the Harvard Music Society, and editor of the *Harvard Music Review*, which was a first-rate periodical, a real testimony to the good taste, maturity, and curiosity of the Harvard aesthetes. He taught Cummings to play the piano (Estlin could already play ragtime by ear) and to write music. He introduced him to Debussy, to Stravinsky, and to the delightful satiric piano sketches of Erik Satie. He took him to the El Greco exhibit at the Fogg Museum, for he considered El Greco "modern."<sup>11</sup> He made him acquainted with the French Impressionists, with Cézanne, and with Les Fauves, all of whom made decided impact on Cummings' later poetry. He took him to the Armory Show when it traveled to Boston, and Cummings was ecstatic over Brancusi. He took him to New York after a Harvard-Yale boat-race and Cummings was overwhelmed by the "modern Babylon," a different kind of visit from the one he had made years before with his father. Damon was an editor of the *Monthly*, he wrote poetry, he wrote an article on the history of free verse and received a letter from Amy Lowell about it. He took an interest in Wilde, Shaw, Maeterlinck, Whistler, Pirandello. He subscribed to *Poetry* magazine and read Sandburg, Masters, and Lindsay. He owned a rare copy of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, which delighted and bewildered Cummings. He owned a copy of Pound's anthology *Des Imagistes* (H.D., Aldington, Flint, Joyce, Hueffer) and therewith brought the Imagist Movement into Cummings' ken. He organized the Harvard Poetry Society in 1915. Besides providing all this cultural excitement, he opened the way to some old-fashioned college activities too: he took Cummings out drinking for the first time

<sup>11</sup> In his term paper for Fine Arts 9b, "The Significance of El Greco," Cummings elaborated on the "modernism."

in his life. Estlin consumed several scidels of dark beer in Jake Wirth's sawdust-strewn restaurant on Stuart Street and ended the evening, much to Damon's mirthful scorn, hanging over a bridge and puking into the Charles River. In his senior year, Cummings wrote a hexameter sonnet for Damon, a rather precious piece, celebrating their mutual intoxication with the music of Debussy.

S.F.D.

In Memory of Claude o'Dreams

Behold, I have taken at thy hands immortal wine,  
 The fume whereof is ecstasy of perfect pain,  
 Which is more sweet than unknown flowers uttered of rain,  
 More potent than the fumbling might of the brute brinc.  
 Lo, my pale soul is blown upon far peaks with thine,  
 Steeped in star-terrible silence, at whose feet the plain  
 Murmurs of thought and time illimitable refrain,  
 Upon whose brows eternity setteth high sign.

This thing hath been, by grace: one music in our souls,  
 One fane beyond the world, whence riseth sacrifice  
 Unto that god whom gifts invisible appease.  
 So be it when sunset's golden diapason rolls  
 Over our life, — then shalt thou, smiling, touch the keys,  
 And draw me softly with thee into Paradise.<sup>12</sup>

Another new friend was amiable, shy, generous John Dos Passos, dark as a gypsy, with thick-lensed glasses and a slight stutter. Like Cummings, he stressed language study — Latin, Greek, French, German, Spanish — and he specialized in English and Comparative Literature. Like Cummings, he tried his hand at drawing and painting and he earnestly worked out verses, both traditional and modern in their manner, which he published in the *Monthly*. His social consciousness was not yet awakened. Immersed in Henry James and French Symboliste poets, he was in his aesthetic period and still had no thought to tell his professors “to go take a flying Rimbaud at the moon.”<sup>13</sup> In these college years, Dos Passos and Cummings formed a friendship which overrode all their later differences in social views and lasted the rest of their lives.

<sup>12</sup> LMS Am 1892.5 (71).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Dos Passos' “Camera Eye (25)” in *The 42nd Parallel*, in which he offers a sardonic summary of his studies at Harvard. The best picture of young Dos Passos is found in Townsend Ludington, ed., *The Fourteenth Chronicle, Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos* (Boston: Gambit Inc., 1973).

More assertive and opinionated was Scofield Thayer, a student of philosophy and literature three years ahead of Cummings, who was secretary to the editorial board of the *Monthly*. A native of Worcester, Massachusetts, he had attended Milton Academy, where he had been remotely acquainted with T. S. Eliot. He had traveled extensively in Europe with a tutor before coming to Harvard. Although he left Harvard in 1913 to spend two years at Magdalen College, Oxford, he returned for graduate work in 1915-1916 and was again an active member of the *Monthly* staff. Whereas Damon and Dos Passos had met Cummings in the Harvard classroom (seated alphabetically, the last of the C's and the beginning of the D's), Thayer sought Cummings out because he admired his poetry. Although he did not see Cummings during the 1913-1914 college year, he invited him to his mother's "cottage" at Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard, in the summer of 1914 (the first of many such invitations) in order to renew their acquaintance and he corresponded with him during the following year. Thayer was an extremely handsome man, very pale, with carefully groomed black hair and dark eyes sparkling with irony. He dressed elegantly, he spoke with precision and wit, a little suppressed smile flickering around his full, curving lips, and he moved and gestured as if powered by a heavy charge of nervous energy. He was equally interested in literature, painting, and aesthetic criticism. He was as fully acquainted as Damon with the new trends in the arts, especially with Wilde, Beardsley (he later built an extensive collection of his prints), Symons, Lautrec, Picasso, Brancusi, the Post-Impressionists and Cubists in general, Joyce, and Eliot. Although he himself wrote verse, he was more of an arbiter of taste than a genuinely creative person. As Cummings put it, "He lived for the honor of art."<sup>14</sup> He had inherited a fortune at an early age, and hoped to use his money in the world of publishing to make an impact upon the aesthetic values of the American public. Meanwhile, he was a cultural force in Cummings' development. He presented him with a copy of Willard Huntington Wright's *Modern Art* in Spring 1915, a study of painting from the Impressionists to the Cubists, which Cummings marked and annotated like a textbook.<sup>15</sup> It was Thayer who was to bring the major works of Joyce and Eliot to Cummings' attention. Cummings, in flattering joke, called Thayer Willard Huntington Wright, Jr., and in his graduate year at Harvard

<sup>14</sup> hMS Am 1892.7 (90), Notes for non-lectures.

<sup>15</sup> Houghton Library, 69c-312 (New York: John Lane, 1915).

he wrote a sonnet to Thayer (with reference to a piece of Wilde's poetic prose which Thayer had introduced him to). The tone of the poem reveals Cummings' adulation of Thayer, who was soon to replace Damon as his mentor.

W.H.W., Jr.

*In Memory of "A House of Pomegranates"*

Speak to me, friend! Or is the world so wide  
That souls may easily forget their speech,  
And the strong love that binds us each to each  
Who have stood together watching God's white tide  
Pouring, and those bright shapes of dream which ride  
Through darkness; we who have walked the silent beach  
Strown with strange wonders out of ocean's reach,  
Which the next flood in her great heart shall hide?

Do not forget me, though the sands should fall,  
And many things be swept away in deep,  
And a new vision uttered to the shore, —  
If after days bespeak me not at all,  
Nor other's praise awake my song from sleep,  
Nor Poetry remember, anymore.<sup>16</sup>

Another friend from Rochester, New York, who had come to know Cummings through Dory Miller, was tall, quiet, shy J. Sibley Watson, a Captain Dobbin of a man who was to become the friend who remained most loyal to Cummings during his lifetime. He wrote short stories, criticism, and verse translations from the French, all of which were published in the *Monthly*. But his self-effacing personality made him difficult to know. He was "anonymous," Cummings said, "monosyllabic," even "mysterious"; yet for all the otherworldly detachment he exhibited, he had a deeper understanding of the world and of human beings than Cummings' other friends. And he did participate in the literary life of the Harvard Yard and in occasional nighttime gambols. Late in his Harvard career, Cummings scribbled out a sonnet to Watson — in a light and not entirely sober moment:

Softly from its still lair in Plympton Street  
It stole on silent pads, and, raping space,  
Shot onward in a fierce infernal race,

<sup>16</sup> *Harvard Monthly*, LXII (June 1916), 123. The best account of Thayer is Nicholas Joost, *Scofield Thayer and The Dial* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964).

And shivered townward on revolving feet[,]  
 Skidded, fortuitously indiscreet;  
 And now a lady doth its bosom grace  
 And now the 'phone, tingling its wild disgrace  
 Telleth that hearts be broke and time is fleet.  
 O Watson, born beneath a generous star,  
 Oft have I seen thee draped upon a bar[;]  
 Thou might'st have slain us with a bloody coutcau  
 And  
 O Watson, moriturus te saluto,  
 Infinite in thy fair beatitude;  
 But you could not do anything so rude.<sup>17</sup>

Although he was the same age as Cummings, he was two classes behind him. Yet, it was Watson who introduced Cummings to modern French poetry — to Verlaine, and Rimbaud — and who extended his acquaintance with Mallarmé; these were three poets whose attitudes and whose experiments with form were to make their impact on Cummings' work a few years later. Like Thayer, Watson inherited great wealth, and in the 1920s he and Thayer became owners of the *Dial* magazine in New York and thus were in the future to provide a new center and an international audience for the *Harvard Monthly* group.<sup>18</sup>

Long-faced Stewart Mitchell, "The Great Auk," as he was called, came to know his classmate, Cummings, when he was editor-in-chief of the *Harvard Monthly* in 1915–1916. He was a charming, witty young man from Cleveland, of somewhat more scholarly inclination and orderliness and efficiency than most of the *Monthly* editorial board. In 1920 he joined Watson and Thayer as managing editor of the *Dial*.

Arthur Wilson, a classmate of Cummings from Junction, a tiny town in Texas, was another editor of the *Monthly*. At the time Cummings was elected to the board, Wilson sent him a note telling him he was mightily disappointed that the *Advocate* had the privilege of publishing "Of Nicolette."<sup>19</sup> He and Cummings became close friends during the following year when they both were enrolled in Dean Briggs's English Composition course. He painted and wrote fiction. He is chiefly remembered at Harvard for a minor scandal. When his short story, "The Girl Who Advertised," was published in the *Monthly*,

<sup>17</sup> bMS Am 1892.5 (495).

<sup>18</sup> Watson later became a physician and head of the Radiology Department, Strong Memorial Hospital, Rochester, New York.

<sup>19</sup> bMS Am 1892, 2 April 1913.

December 1914, it stirred the wrath of the parietal authorities at Harvard, for it employed a few realistic references they disapproved of.<sup>20</sup> Wilson, as well as Damon, helped Cummings to explore Boston night life and to move beyond a little beer in a restaurant to something stronger at the Woodcock Hotel or Healy's Palace.<sup>21</sup>

The literary influence of the new friendships and the familiarity with modern art and literature do not seem to crop up much in Cummings' writing during his senior year. For Briggs's course in English Composition, he submitted a number of poems but he held himself within established forms, sonnets, haiku, ballads, couplets, or stanzaic patterns. One exception, and the one real triumph, was the haunting ballad, "All in green went my love riding/ On a great horse of gold/ Into the silver dawn." In its irregularity of line, it showed the greatest freedom from discipline that he had allowed himself. Six well-scratched-up pages in his working notebook attest to the care which Cummings devoted to this piece.<sup>22</sup> When it was published in the *Monthly* the following year, it met with praise from professors and fellow-students alike.<sup>23</sup> The first display of sympathy with the modern sensibility that appears in his writing came in the long paper he submitted to Briggs in the spring term entitled "The New Art." As we might expect, it is a critically naive piece of work. It is descriptive and impressionistic, indicating familiarity with the artistic works rather than ability to discourse maturely about them. But what is surprising is the range of the discussion into the areas of painting, sculpture, dance, music, and poetry; and what is remarkable is the fact that an undergraduate in 1915 would have

<sup>20</sup> Published in *Harvard Monthly*, LIX (December 1914), 86-99. It is likely that they objected to the fact that the Radcliffe girl in the story was the mistress of a middle-aged man and also that she took off her dress, a theatrical costume, while she talked to a young Harvard student.

<sup>21</sup> I perhaps should add another item of information that has literary significance. He was the central figure in a tragic accident that formed the basis for "The Camera Eye (20)" in Dos Passos' *The 42nd Parallel*. He and his classmate, Merle Britten, became strike-breaking motormen during a street-car strike in Boston. On 4 July 1912, while Wilson was moving his car in the City Point car barn, he accidentally killed Britten, whose head was crushed between two cars (*Boston Daily Globe*, 5 July 1912). I am indebted to Ruth Marshall of the Boston Public Library for help in gathering the details of this terrible story.

In later years Wilson became a painter in Rockport, Massachusetts, and changed his name to A. Winslow Wilson.

<sup>22</sup> UT, HRC, Cummings, Workbook.

<sup>23</sup> *Harvard Monthly*, LXII (March 1916), 8-9. Later published in *Tulips and Chimneys*.

such a comfortably discursive acquaintance with so much of the *avant garde* activity in the arts.

In the essay, he undertook to point out "the continuous development from Realism to Monet and from Monet to Duchamp-Villon" and the Cubists, and to show the interconnections among the new tendencies in the visual arts, music, and literature.<sup>24</sup> He begins with a consideration of Monet and the "broken color" technique, moves on to Cézanne and the Post-Impressionist emphasis on form, to the primitives Van Gogh and Gauguin, to Matisse's handling of line as a logical continuation of impressionism, and on to "that peculiar phase of modern art called indiscriminately 'cubism' and 'futurism,'" at which point he offers a detailed discussion of Brancusi's "Mlle. Pogany" and "The Kiss" and of Duchamp-Villon's "Nude Descending a Staircase."<sup>25</sup> For connections between art and theatre and between art, music, and dance, he describes the Gordon Craig production of "Caesar and Cleopatra" and Anna Pavlova and company in the performance of "Les Préludes" with "futuristic" sets and costumes by Bakst. When he came to music, he demonstrated that Foster Damon had taught him to illustrate a discussion by setting down the musical notation, because elaborate themes and passages dot the pages that he wrote about the Sibelius Fourth Symphony, Stravinsky's "Le Sacre de Printemps," the works of Debussy and Satie, and finally Schoenberg's "Five Orchestral Pieces." For the discussion of the connection between art and music in the new milieu, he focused on Scriabin's "Poem of Fire" and the use of the "chromola" or color organ to accompany, visually, the recent performance by the Russian Symphony Society, and he set down a comparison of Scriabin's chromatic scale and Rimington's scientific color scale as their vibrations correspond to those of musical notes.

The consideration of visual images and sounds leads naturally to a look at the new poetry. Several of Amy Lowell's poems from *Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds* are set down and admired for their "overleaping the barriers of convention": their grotesquery, their "brutality," their synaesthesia, or their "childish spontaneity and fearlessness." One of Donald Evans' *Sonnets from the Patagonian* is quoted as an illustration of "sound painting." Finally Gertrude Stein and some quotations

<sup>24</sup> bMS 1892.6.

<sup>25</sup> The essay reflects not only his reading of Wright's *Modern Art* but also Arthur Jerome Eddy's *Cubism and Post-Impressionism* (Chicago: McClurg, 1914), from which he took profuse notes.

from *Tender Buttons* are trotted out as the ultimate triumph over realism, the "subordination of the meaning of words to the esthetic significance (i.e., beauty) inherent in the words themselves." A recurrent motif throughout the essay is the hostility which Boston audiences had displayed toward the new art. But it is countered with the assumption that this is the fate of the artistic leader: "It is a commonplace that the normal attitude of the world is to regard any deviation from tradition as unpleasant, as much in art as in morals. It is the privilege of great originators to be resented."

Cummings was pleased with his achievement and with Briggs's inexplicable but approving grade, and he decided to carry the battle for the new art into the camp of the Philistines. He revised his essay, cut it drastically, and submitted it to the class marshals in competition for a "commencement part," an oral presentation at the commencement ceremonies, along with the Latin oration and the valedictorian's address. It is testimony to the enterprising spirit of the class of 1915 that this unusual commencement part was chosen, for it reached far over the heads and beyond the tastes of the usual audience of parents and alumni who packed Sanders Theatre every year at this time.<sup>26</sup> Thus, on 24 June 1915, Estlin Cummings stood on the platform at graduation time, fully enjoying the unconventionality of his subject. He had planned to refer to Duchamp-Villon's "Nude" as a "phallic fantasy," but his father forbade it. Still, he took his presentation seriously, delivering it earnestly in his rather high voice. The spirit of mischief was there, nonetheless. President Lowell had continuously been embarrassed by his sister's poetry. Now he "turned to brick"<sup>27</sup> when Cummings read the lines:

Why do the lilies goggle their tongues at me  
When I pluck them;  
And writhe, and twist,  
And strangle themselves against my fingers,  
So that I can hardly weave the garland  
For your hair?  
Why do they shriek your name  
And spit at me  
When I would cluster them?

<sup>26</sup> The text of the commencement part is published in George Firmage (ed.), *A Miscellany Revised* (New York: October House, 1965), pp. 5-11.

<sup>27</sup> BMS Am 1892.7 (90).



Must I kill them  
 To make them lie still,  
 And send you a wreath of lolling corpses  
 To turn putrid and soft  
 On your forehead  
 While you dance?

The audience, hitherto somewhat bored by all the aesthetic palaver, took amused interest at the President's discomfort. Cummings looked rather startled by the sounds of suppressed laughter. "But," as he later recalled, "what really brought down the house was Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*." He had recognized already that Stein stood at the outer limits of literary expression, and his speech even posed the question, "How much of this is really Art?" But in a note written later, Cummings confessed that such Steinian topics as

SALAD DRESSING AND AN ARTICHOKE.

Please pale hot, please cover rose, please acre in the red stranger, please butter all the beef-steak with regular feel faces.

had been provided merely as "comic relief" for a long and learned 3 act treatise." It worked. Uncontrolled laughter swept over the hall. What must have been regarded as a tedious presentation was greeted at the end with "flattering applause."<sup>28</sup> Cummings was learning early how to handle audiences.

### III

It had taken Estlin Cummings a long time to become a member of his Harvard class, and in a way he never did. He was two years younger than most of his classmates, and since he lived at home and much under the surveillance of his parents, he seemed less mature than the other college men and rather outside the social scene. As a result, scarcely anyone in the class of 1915 remembers him at college.<sup>29</sup> During his first two years he was shy and retiring in all social situations. When he did make friends his acquaintance was limited to the group

<sup>28</sup> HMS Am 1892.7, Note to an unidentified correspondent, probably Dean Briggs.

<sup>29</sup> I wish to express my thanks to the many members of the Class of 1915 who replied to my letter giving me information about Harvard or about Cummings. I am especially grateful to those alumni who granted me interviews: Dr. J. Sibley Watson, S. Foster Damon, Kenneth Conant, and Robert R. Cawley.

which published the *Monthly* or the members of the Poetry Society. He was here displaying a characteristic that marked his whole life — the avoidance of the crowd and the selection of a very few friends to whom he was intensely loyal. In company with his new friends, he gradually began to discover Boston, which was now more easily accessible since the new subway had been built out as far as Harvard Square, and he would sometimes stay overnight in Foster Damon's room after a concert, a dance, or a late-night ramble. In his senior year, his father allowed him to move into Thayer Hall and take advantage of the special privilege of the senior class to live in Harvard Yard. He began to experience more independence. He had his own checking account: a few remaining stubs indicate that during the two years he lived in Thayer he went to theatres, movie houses, symphonies, recitals, the opera, he saw Pavlova and Nijinski, he dined at the Parthenon, Posilipo's, Gee Fong, Venice, Sorrento, the Copley Plaza and other restaurants Greek, Armenian, and Italian. He now began to encounter some of the alcoholic and sexual adventure common to a college boy's life.

He had grown taller, moving toward his full height of five feet eight and a half inches. His hair was still blond, he was light-skinned, and frequently plagued with acne. He had begun to develop a slightly Oriental look. His cheek-bones were high and his eyes, set wide above them, seemed to narrow or slant. He carried his chin high as if to give himself more height and this habit sometimes made him seem aloof. But his alert hazel eyes and his engaging smile quickly banished this impression, and his eager enthusiasm about all aspects of his new life gave his face a glow.

His unofficial career at Harvard, he later declared, was "getting acquainted with the fair sex."<sup>30</sup> The acquaintance had actually begun long ago and even led to Charles Eliot Norton's coachman chasing him and two little neighbor girls out of the bushes when they were about six years old. However that may be, his college pursuit of local beauty began with his going by invitation to the Brattle Hall dances, where the boys were aware of four categories of girls: pre-debs, debs, post-debs, and LOPHs (Left On Papa's Hands). Cummings, rhythmically talented, became a very good dancer and sufficiently adept at the Tango and the Maxixe that he and Dorothy Chester, a girl he knew

<sup>30</sup> *bMS Am* 1892.7 (90).

through his father's church, entered a contest at the Boston Theatre. He also enjoyed the unorthodox dances like the Turkey Trot and the Bunny Hop that were somewhat frowned on at Brattle Hall.

One of his first loves was Amy de Gozzaldi, a dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty, the daughter of a Cambridge teacher of foreign languages. Amy, two years older than he, was an actress in the productions of the Cambridge Social Dramatic Club, which also performed at Brattle Hall.<sup>31</sup> Cummings met her when he played the part of Micah Dow in J. M. Barrie's play, *The Little Minister*, in May 1910, and came to know her better when he played Ernest Bennet (the second footman) in Jerome K. Jerome's *The New Lady Bantock* in May 1913. One part of the action called on Cummings to kiss Amy, who played the leading role of Lady Bantock, but she intimidated him by her sophistication. At rehearsals the director continually cheered him on to be more bold. At length, on the night of performance he outdid himself in a kiss that he remembered for months. During the course of production, Cummings felt somewhat outpaced for Amy's regard by the elegant young graduate student who played Lord Bantock, T. S. Eliot. But in the end he achieved a subtle triumph. A custom prevailed in the Cambridge Social Dramatic Club that the men would present gifts to the leading lady on the night of performance. Eliot brought a gorgeous bouquet of roses, but Cummings brought the ultimate gift, a poem — which later appeared in the *Harvard Monthly*:

Do you remember when the fluttering dusk,  
Beating the west with faint wild wings, through space  
Sank, with Night's arrow in her heart? The face  
Of Heaven clouded with the Day's red doom  
Was veiled in silent darkness, and the musk  
Of summer's glorious rose breathed in the gloom.

Then from the world's harsh voice and glittering eyes,  
The awful rant and roar of men and things,  
Forth fared we into Silence. The strong wings  
Of Nature shut us from the common crowd;  
On high, the stars like sleeping butterflies  
Hung from the great gray drowsy flowers of cloud.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> An informal history is given in "Recollections of the Cambridge Social Dramatic Club" by Richard W. Hall, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Historical Society*, XXXVIII (1961), 51-67. Miss de Gozzaldi is now Mrs. Richard Hall. I am grateful to her for her reminiscences of Cummings.

<sup>32</sup> *Harvard Monthly*, LVI (June 1913), 128.

Cummings was always more ready than Eliot to address a lyric to a lady.

He continued to see Amy, stopping by to see her (too shy to come to tea), taking her for a ride in the family Ford, or taking her dancing at the Copley Plaza (he introduced her to gin fizzes there). He was allowed such liberties as an embrace while they rode the Scenic Railway at Revere Beach. But he shortly became more attracted to a beautiful, golden-haired girl from Brookline who was attending Miss Haskell's School, Doris Bryan. Her letters to Cummings in 1915 show her to be a warm, vivacious young charmer, almost a character out of an early Scott Fitzgerald story. She was enthusiastic about parties, dances, clambakes, card games, tennis, boating, swimming, much pleased with her new roadster (a Scripps-Booth with bright red wire wheels), devoted to her little dog Scottie, and struggling to be a proper New England girl and to keep her passionate nature under wraps. In her letters she would lapse into French whenever she touched on a delicate subject ("... c'était justement parce-que je vous aime si beaucoup, que j'ai hésitée hier soir, comprends-tu?").<sup>23</sup> She called Cummings "Billiken."

He took her to dances, to Revere Beach, to baseball games, for moonlight drives around Fresh Pond. He visited her at the seashore during the summer. He wrote poems to her, including a long one, in which his ardor overcame his powers of poetic expression. (It began "Never to utter/ The wonder of you; (O God!) the wonder of you, —")<sup>24</sup> Another, also in *vers libre* but in the decadent style he was affecting during his senior year, displayed the intensity of his youthful passion but it was disciplined by a pattern of near-haiku stanzas:

There is a moon  
Sole in the blue night,  
Amorous of waters tremulous;  
  
Blinded with silence  
The undulous heaven yearns  
Where in tense starlessness  
  
Anoint with ardors,  
The yellow lover stands in the dumb dark,  
Svelt and urgent.

<sup>23</sup> bMS Am 1892, 9 May 1915.

<sup>24</sup> bMS Am 1823.7 (23), pp. 199-200; AMS version entitled "Doris," p. 102.

(Again, love,  
I slowly gather of thy languorous mouth  
The thrilling flower.)<sup>35</sup>

He gave her a copy of Wilde's "Salomé" for Christmas.

They had many long, intense discussions about their private thoughts, but she sensed that Cummings was not ready to commit himself to her future. In fact, she wondered if "any men love a girl for anything besides physical attraction?"<sup>36</sup> They drifted away from each other during 1916.

Cummings and his friends respected the chastity of the Cambridge and Brookline girls they knew. When they wanted more excitement they picked up girls from Central Square in East Cambridge or on Tremont Street in Boston. But, even so, there were limits. When Cummings reached a furtive hand inside the dress of one of these casual partners, she sternly told him, "Closed for the winter." His mother was very understanding about the freedoms of the automobile age. On several mornings she patiently swept the hairpins out of the Ford so that the Reverend Edward Cummings would not have to remonstrate.<sup>37</sup>

Some notes survive to give us a glimpse of one of these late-night (not very romantic) outings. One evening in December 1916, Cummings and Foster Damon had dinner in Boston and afterwards bumped into three friendly shop-girls on the street. Cummings had encountered one of them before at Revere Beach (he had nestled with her in the back seat of his father's Ford and had been apprehensive about their demeanor when a policeman strolled by across the street). They took the girls to the Hayward Restaurant and drank gin rickeys, then whiskey sours. Damon was embarrassed by a smutty story one of the girls told and went off to get more drinks. When he returned he discoursed for their amusement in a sort of Russian double-talk, pretending to be a foreigner. At midnight they sought another place but found it closed. Two chauffeurs approached offering to drive to the Cedarcrest Inn, where dancing and entertainment were available. On the way in the car, some mild petting ensued, made troublesome by the situation that there were three girls and by the fact that one of the girls became sick from mixing her drinks and upchucked out the

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101. This poem, altered only in spacing and punctuation, later became "Amores II" in *Tulips and Chimneys*, Cummings' first volume of verse, 1923.

<sup>36</sup> *bMS Am* 1892, 15 September [1915].

<sup>37</sup> *bMS Am* 1892.7, "Cambridge."

car window. Upon arrival the sick girl retired to the rest room but the others drank and danced. At one point, Damon went to the piano and rolled out a polonaise and Cummings followed the act with "Poor Butterfly." The ride home was attended by some indiscriminate petting and quarreling until one by one the girls were dropped off in South Boston. Cummings recorded the evening in great detail, especially the conversation and phrasing of the girls as they would gossip, talk about their work, or offer back-seat protestations ("oo, just a minute, a *button's killing me*, dear; honest i'll let you put it right back").<sup>38</sup>

Another episode from this period has been recounted in so many versions that it has become a piece of folklore surrounding Cummings. The central feature of these stories is the threat of a family scandal on an occasion when the Reverend Edward Cummings' Ford was found parked outside a brothel. Cummings' own notes, written years later, give the following information about the episode. One night Cummings was taken by Arthur Wilson down to the area around Scollay Square to visit one Marie Hayes, whose bad reputation was apparently known to the police. Wilson became very drunk, and Cummings departed in search of some oranges to help his friend to sober up. While he was gone, the police came upon the Cummings automobile with its clergyman's license plates parked outside Miss Hayes's apartment. They blew its horn to summon the owner, and getting no response, "had it towed away," so the notes read, "to a garage (from which I subsequently got it: cynical remarks, grins, at me by cops the next morning.)" He had gone down to the police station with Jack Churchward, a young friend whom he knew through the South Congregational Church.

Jack and I went into the station, gave the Captain some of (his father's) cigars . . . at trial, slipped the clerk of the court \$5 and he showed me in ("you wait outside" — to Jack): judge, clerk said something about my being young "we all of us make mistakes". . . . WHAT WERE YOU DOING AT THAT HOUR OF THE MORNING IN THAT APARTMENT (address?) i answer: "Why to tell you the truth, I was stopping with a sick friend" (with great sincerity). He looks: TEN DOLLARS.<sup>39</sup>

All this sort of activity appears to fall into the classic pattern of the young man getting some wild oats ready to broadcast. But for Cum-

<sup>38</sup> bMS Am 1892.7, Notes dated "December 21."

<sup>39</sup> bMS Am 1892.7, "Cambridge."

mings it has additional significance. It was for him the discovery of a sphere of life so different from the high-minded atmosphere of the South Congregational Church and of 104 Irving Street that it seemed as exotic as chivalric romance. It was an extension of life into new areas of experience so different from the middle-class culture of Cambridge that it had the shock to provoke creativity. As time went on he would draw upon it for his writing. He continued to seek out the forbidden pleasures of drink and its release from the inhibitions of New England puritanism and to reach out for sexual titillations which his parents would have regarded as dangerous or vulgar. He continued to explore the seedier side of Boston, to frequent the saloons of Washington Street, to visit Scollay Square with its drunks, its prostitutes, its down-and-outers, its Salvation Army preachers, and to attend the Howard Athenaeum, the burlesque theatre, with its crude parodies of popular songs and its broad comedy sketches.

But not all of his amusements involved drink or sex. He discovered new delights in the popular arts in general. He observed with studious fascination a variety of popular performers: clowns, acrobats, sideshow spielers, performing animals (a poem addressed "To a Little Seal," which he had seen at Keith's, begins "Thou of the body beautiful/ Born of God's pure joy/ Unto the happy sea/ For frolic and shining play"),<sup>40</sup> tap dancers, ragtime piano virtuosos, chorus girls, singers of sentimental songs — and sought them out in the various places they performed: circuses, carnivals, amusement parks, vaudeville houses, moving-picture palaces, charity bazaars. Even in the streets. For example, one of his notes catches a moment as he responded with a rush of pleasure to an organ grinder and his daughter:

The most beautiful face I ever saw I saw at 7 o'clock on this evening of Friday December 1st, on Washington near Eliot, on right hand side as you go to the Parthenon. An oldish Italian with a moustache was turning the crank of the hurdy gurdy; he would speak to her, and she'd lean back smiling against it. She was so beautiful that I did not dare look at her or even give her money.

God will there be hurdy gurdies in heaven? <sup>41</sup>

#### IV

It is against this background of Cummings' new freedom from family restraints, of his adventures in the livelier Boston precincts,

<sup>40</sup> bMS Am 1892.5 (601).

<sup>41</sup> bMS Am 1892.7 (121), Miscellaneous Notes.

and of his studying people who were different from the Cambridge élite — together with his growing acquaintance with revolutionary painting, music, and literature — that we can see what took place in Cummings' writing during his final months at Harvard while he was enrolled in Briggs's course, English Versification, a course designated as "primarily for graduate students." English 16 as described in the "Detailed Statement" of the English Department does not sound as if it would set a poet's pulse racing:

Course 16 treats of the origin and development of the material forms most important in English Literature, — such, for instance, as alliterative verse, the heroic couplet, the sonnet, and blank verse, — and also considers a few questions in the theory of poetry, — among others, the value of metre as an idealizing medium, the action of the imagination in poetic composition, the differences between classic and romantic poetry, the relative limits and characteristics of the Epic, the Lyric, the Drama, and so on.

But year after year the course drew the most interesting young literary men at Harvard. In the spring term of 1916, thirty students enrolled (ten, including Cummings, were graduate students). Among the group were Joseph Auslander, Briggs's favorite, who kept quietly to himself but later published six volumes of verse; S. N. Behrman, who dropped out to become a dramatist rather than a poet; Foster Damon, who became the biographer of William Blake and Amy Lowell; Robert Hillyer, the conservative of the class and foe of *vers libre*, who was to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1934 for his *Collected Verse*; Stewart Mitchell, editor-in-chief of the *Harvard Monthly*, who was later to take a Ph.D. degree and become Director of the Massachusetts Historical Society; and Dudley Poore, who became a free-lance writer and an associate of Dos Passos and Cummings in New York during the twenties and thirties.<sup>42</sup>

Briggs's procedure was the same simple formula he followed in English Composition, a lot of writing by the student and a lot of comment in the classroom. The textbook for the course was Raymond Alden's *English Verse, Specimens Illustrating its Principles and History*, a splendid, sensible, scholarly treatment of the subject. Besides identifying all the metrical forms, he gives the theory behind accent in lines of verse. Besides illustrating all the various feet, verses,

<sup>42</sup>I am grateful to Miss Mary Meehan of the Harvard University Archives for digging out Briggs's class list.



and stanza forms, he describes their common uses. Besides defining assonance, alliteration, and onomatopocia, he discourses on tone-quality, especially tone-color (German *Klangfarbe*) by means of which sounds of words can increase their expressiveness. Most important, Alden's aim in the book is "to give the materials for the inductive study of English verse" and in so doing, he provides, for each item, pages of examples from the major poets in the language. It is only in conclusion that, modestly, he offers his theoretical essay, "The Time-Element in English Verse." Briggs's assignments required students to produce examples of all the different verse forms, from Middle English alliterative lines up to free verse. In the classroom he read aloud samples of student work and called for discussion as well as supplying his own critical response.

A good many of Cummings' exercises and notes from this course survive, testimony to his continuing seriousness about versifying and to his skill in shaping language to each new form. A composition book holds many pages of his notes on such matters as stanza forms, the difference between the Pindaric and Cowlean ode, and the scansion of classical forms such as Sapphics, Alcaics, and the various choral odes. He has written an imitation of the early alliterative verse, "When in the northland new is the springtide"; he has produced hexameters, "The day went down in crimson; softly came the night"; blank verse, "The dear spring with fleet hands strews the dim earth"; Alcaics, "O muse my blessing, source of my confidence" — so on in extensive variety, rhyme royal, Sapphics, heroic quatrains: he seems to have been tireless.<sup>48</sup>

But his favorite way to fulfill these assignments was to turn out parodies. He gets his hexameters under way for one exercise in this fashion:

O Ella Wheeler Wilcox, thin patient and very  
 Very prolific child of the scarcely famouser Sappho  
 Why, when I read thy verse, is my heart encircled with loathing.

His heroic couplets "After Dryden" carry out a long satire about Theodore Roosevelt and the Kaiser. Another uses the couplets in the manner of Pope, "Others their thirsty Pegasi may slake." Still another, "I saw the author of Christabel," is done in the bouncy, irregular meters

<sup>48</sup> bMS Am 1892.5 (750), Poems written for classes; UT, HRC, Cummings, Poems for College Composition Class.

of Coleridge's experiment. In his trial of Whitmanesque verse, he scarcely had to parody — his imitation almost sounds authentic as he declaims the assertions:

I sing the world imperfect! I worship men and women,  
God being shown me in them, from day to day immortal.<sup>44</sup>

Briggs was rather conservative about form and felt uneasy one day when Cummings produced a startling fourteen-line poem in couplets which were highly irregular in meter and line-length:

When God lets my body be,  
From each brave eye shall sprout a tree;  
Fruit which dangles therefrom  
The purple world will dance upon.  
From my lips that did sing  
A flower shall bring forth the spring,  
Which maidens whom passion wastes  
Will lay between their little breasts.  
My strong fingers beneath the snow  
Into strenuous birds shall go;  
My love walking in the grass  
Their wings will touch, e'er they pass.  
And all the while shall my heart be  
With the bulge and nuzzle of the sea.<sup>45</sup>

It was what Scofield Thayer called one of his "mortuary pieces." Briggs's comment reflected his troubled response, "Almost too much variety, — or rather, too many licences of doubtful worth. E.g., your six-syllable verses. Variety in distribution of accent is, of course, good if not too unsteady." Nor did he care for some of the phrasing: "The bulge and nuzzle of the sea" he found "bold rather than happy." On "wastes" and "breasts" as a rhyme he grudgingly conceded, "This will do for a rhyme if need be." Although Briggs did not recognize it, Cummings had produced his first really singable lyric. The strangeness of some of the tropes had thrown the critic off and he vented his discomfort in comments about mechanics. During the past few years,

<sup>44</sup> bMS 1823.7 (23), p. 104; UT, HRC, Cummings, *Poems for College Composition Classes*; bMS Am 1892.5 (237).

<sup>45</sup> bMS Am 1892.5 (730). [See Plate III.] Cummings worked this over in several versions before publishing it in *Tulips and Chimneys*. For a full discussion of these varying versions, see Irene Fairley, "Syntactic Deviation and Cohesion." *Language and Style*, VI (1973), 216-229.

Cummings had grounded himself so solidly in traditional verse that he could build upon it yet do so uniquely. The poem was a variation on the sonnet form with three four-line units and a final couplet. Its diction and rhythmic irregularity drew upon the English Renaissance tradition of song that ran all the way from Wyatt to Carew as well as upon the idiom of folk song. Briggs did not approve of the flower laid "between the little breasts," but the image is common in ballads, such as "Lady Alice," as well as having its similarities to the fragrant bosom of many a Restoration Phyllis. All in all, the poem can produce in a reader or hearer that feeling of recognition combined with surprise which is the mark of successful originality in art.

Cummings was loosening up as a result of all this exercise. In the midst of the routine, he suddenly tossed off a poem which was entirely different from all the others. It made skilful use of slang and it worked a raucous description of a tavern brawl into swift, running tetrameter couplets:

In Healey's Palace I was sitting —  
 Joe at the ivories, Irene spitting  
 Rag into the stinking dizzy  
 Misbegotten hall, while Lizzie,  
 Like a she-demon in a rift  
 Of Hell-smoke, toured the booths, half-piffed.

I saw two rah-rahs — caps, soft shirts,  
 Match-legs, the kind of face that hurts,  
 The walk that makes death sweet — Ted Gore  
 And Alec Ross; they had that whore  
 Mary between them. Don't know which,  
 One looked; and May said: "The old bitch  
 Lulu, as I'm a virgin, boys!"  
 And I yelled back over the noise:  
 "Did that three-legged baby croak  
 That you got off the salesman-bloke?"

The beer-glass missed. It broke instead  
 On old man Davenport's bald head.  
 I picked a platter up, one-handed.  
 Right on her new straw lid it landed.  
 Cheest, what a crash!

Before you knew,  
 Ted slipped the management a new  
 Crisp five, and everyone sat down  
 But May, that said I'd spoiled her gown,

And me, that blubbered on her shoulder,  
 And kissed her shiny nose, and told her  
 I didn't mean to smash her . . . Crowst,  
 But I was beautifully soused!  
 I think Al called me "good old sport,"  
 And three smokes lugged out Davenport.<sup>46</sup>

For the first time, Cummings was trying out the new freedom of diction and subject matter and disciplining it within a standard verse form. Briggs did not know what to make of it. His comment: "So far as four-accent verse goes, this is all right (March 8 was a day for heroic couplets). Please don't forget that a clean subject is never harmful."

Since Briggs was conservative about meter, line, and diction, he was not overjoyed about the direction that modern poetry was taking. For him, Matthew Arnold's freedom of line and W. E. Henley's sober unrhymed stanzas from *In Hospital* offered about as much deviation from poetic norms as he liked. Some of the work now coming out in *Poetry* magazine and in *Others* (Alfred Kreymborg's new monthly, which welcomed work by unpublished authors, the "others" who did not appear in *Poetry*) was not to his taste, especially Sandburg and Lindsay in their use of slang. He also felt uncomfortable about the notoriety and influence of the President's sister Amy. Some of the students like Robert Hillyer and Joseph Auslander agreed with him, and a running argument took place in the classroom with Damon and Cummings leading the opposition. Cummings had already undertaken a defense of free verse the year before in an essay for Briggs. He had used as his example for analysis a poem of his own, which began:

Night, with sunset hauntings;  
 A red cloud under the moon.  
 Here will I meet my love  
 Beneath hushed trees.<sup>47</sup>

He argued very cogently that this subject was "peculiarly ill-suited for rhymed treatment; rhyme being a hammer, and hammers having no place in a facric landscape — whose distinguishing quality . . . is Silence."<sup>48</sup> Now at the end of the spring term 1916, he carried his side

<sup>46</sup> bMS Am 1823.7 (21), p. 184. Healy's Palace was at 642 Washington St.

<sup>47</sup> Later published in *Harvard Monthly*, LIX (November 1914), 69-70.

<sup>48</sup> bMS Am 1892.6, "Free Verse," dated 13 October [1914].

of the contention over into a major paper, forty-seven pages long, "The Poetry of a New Era."<sup>49</sup> It is not a critically sophisticated work but it shows us the trend of his taste and the kind of reading that he had been doing.

The essay is really an elaboration of the section on poetry in his discourse on "The New Art." It points to the dawn of a new spirit of art that had been gradually lighting up the sky for the last twenty-five years, a spirit that the English-speaking public only became aware of "after the 1912 Cubist Exhibition." He refers to Willard Huntington Wright's article on Modern Art in the January issue of *Forum*, which describes the further developments in the work of Matisse, Picabia, and the English Vorticist school, and he quotes approvingly Wyndham Lewis' editorial in the July 1915 issue of *Blast*, which attacks "mere imitation and inherently unselective registering of impressions" in art. In poetry, Cummings names Mallarmé and Whitman as precursors of the new spirit of revolt against dead tradition, he admires Masters, Brooke, and Maschfield for being upholders of "the spoken word" in poetry, and he calls Pound and Lowell the Picasso and Picabia of the new poetry. What he singles out especially for praise is the attempt of the Imagist school to bring to the English-speaking world a foreign technique indirectly related to Poe and Whitman through the French Symboliste school. This is carried out by means "of that super-subtle instrument *vers libre*." He mentions Pound's anthology *Des Imagistes* and Amy Lowell's *Some Imagist Poets* (and quotes from her statement of principles in the Preface). He quotes from John Gould Fletcher's preface to *Irradiations*, and from the Note on T. E. Hulme in Pound's *Ripostes*. He is aware of the attack on the new poetry. He mentions Howells' huffing and puffing in *Harper's*, O. W. Firkins' strictures on Imagism in the *Nation*, and John Livingston Lowes's criticism of *vers libre* when he arranged prose passages from Meredith into lines of free verse and compressed Amy Lowell's free verse into prose paragraphs and then asked "Which is which?"<sup>50</sup>

Rather than attempting to counter these articles critically, Cummings merely offers a series of illustrations which display the variety of achievements in the new poetry and he makes a brief approving comment about each poem. Among the poems that he copies out are Aldington's "The Poplar Bromios," Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy

<sup>49</sup> UT, HRC, Cummings, Miscellaneous.

<sup>50</sup> "Unacknowledged Imagist," *Nation*, CII (24 February 1916), 219.



*Houghton Library*

PLATE I

E. E. CUMMINGS

HARVARD GRADUATION PORTRAIT, 1915

# The New Lady Bantock

OR

## FANNY AND THE SERVANT PROBLEM

A QUITE POSSIBLE PLAY IN FOUR ACTS

BY

JEROME K. JEROME

### CHARACTERS

FANNY . . . . . MISS AMY DE GOZZALDI  
VERNON WETHERELL, LORD BANTOCK (her husband) . . . . . MR. T. S. ELIOT  
MARTIN BENNET (her butler) . . . . . MR. ALLEN W. JACKSON  
SUSANNAH BENNET (her housekeeper) . . . . . MISS SARAH EVARTS  
JANE BENNET (her maid) . . . . . MISS ELEANOR H. HINKLEY  
ERNEST BENNET (her second footman), . . . . . MR. E. ESTLIN CUMMINGS  
HONORIA BENNET (her still-room maid) . . . . . MISS LUCY B. DREW  
THE MISSES WETHERELL { MISS ELIZABETH C. BEALE  
(her aunts by marriage) { MISS DOROTHEA L. WILLISTON  
DR. FREEMANTLE (her local medical man), . . . . . MR. H. S. LANGFELD  
GEORGE P. NEWTE (her former business manager), . . . . . MR. R. W. BEACH  
SHOW GIRLS } (her quondam } MISS KATHARINE THAXTER  
FROM } companions) } MISS GRACE A. BADGER  
"OUR EMPIRE" } } MRS. R. W. BEACH  
} } MRS. H. L. BLACKWELL  
} } MISS DOROTHY WHITE  
} } MRS. S. S. YATES

The scene takes place in Fanny's boudoir, Bantock Hall, Rutlandshire.

*Houghton Library*

PLATE II

PROGRAM

CAMBRIDGE SOCIAL DRAMATIC CLUB

1 MAY 1913

When God lets my body be,  
 From each brave eye shall sprout a tree;  
 Fruit which dangles therefrom These syllables  
 The people would ~~swirl~~ dance upon.  
 From my lips / that / did sing  
 A flower shall bring forth the Spring,  
 Which maidens whom passion wastes  
 2 Will lay between their little breasts.  
 My strong fingers beneath the snow  
 Into streamers birds shall go;  
 My love walking in the grass  
 Their wings ~~will~~ touch, <sup>on her face</sup> as they pass.  
 And all the while shall my habit be  
 With the bulge and ruggl of the sea.

Bold rather than leafy

This will do  
 for a rhyme  
 if need be

leafy

Distribution  
 account

8  
 7  
 6  
 5  
 4  
 3  
 2  
 1

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PLATE III

Houghton Library: BMS Am 1892.5 (730)

An early version of Cummings' poem, "When God lets my body be," written for English 16 -- with Dean Briggs's marks and comments



In just-Spring  
When the world is mud-luscious  
The queer old baloon-man  
Whistles far and wee,  
And Bill and Eddy come pranking  
From marbles and from piracies,  
And it's Springtime.

When the world is puddle-wonderful  
The little lame baloon-man whistles  
Far and wee,  
And Betty and Is'bel come dancing  
From hop-sotch and still-pond and jump-rope,  
For it's Springtime,  
And the world is ooze-suave,

And the goat-footed baloon-man  
Whistles  
Far  
And  
Wee.

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PLATE IV

Houghton Library: bMS Am 1823.5 (165)

An early version of Cummings' poem, "In just-Spring," written for English 16.  
Pencil marks on the left and at the bottom indicate his later plans for a visual  
rearrangement on the page

Night" (he particularly admires the use of detail and the introduction of ordinary objects such as the "toothbrush" into the poetic scene), F. S. Flint's "Fragment," H. D.'s "The Garden" and "The Pool" (he thought she was a man), Amy Lowell's "The Traveling Bear" and "Stravinsky's Three Orchestra Pieces, Grotesques for a String Quartet," Pound's "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter," "Liu Ch'e," and "Fan Piece for her Imperial Lord" (he praised the spirit of "oriental condensation" in these and other poems from *Catbay*). His final pages are reserved for "the two greatest poems," Pound's "Doria" and "The Return."

Cummings wanted to be part of the modern movement. What the essay shows is the variety of poetic expression he had before him as models. As time goes on we see him trying on one influence after another but he was really looking for a style all his own. Chiefly he sought a diction and phrasing which would be unusual when compared to the common notion of what was appropriate for poetry. Among the parodies that he wrote during the term is a piece referring to Kreymborg's magazine. It reveals that he was aware of and able to imitate the various styles of contemporary poets and finally that he sought, for himself, something entirely different. In this instance he uses for his own style a mixture of long, Latinate, somewhat learned terms and a colloquial phrase in describing a commonplace situation.

#### "OTHERS"

William D. Howells	"Scorn not the sonnet, critic"? Any one Can do it, Amy Lowell says. By by, Poesy! I wipe my broken-hearted eye; The days of minstrelsy are surely done. The "Spoon River Anthology" has won The sympathy of all our smaller fry; No one could call the muse of <i>vers libre</i> "shy"! Nowadays rhymesters have to shoot and run.
Amy Lowell	Well well, I don't know after all but what 'Tis better so. Perhaps The ancient forms are really getting stagnant, And need Rep- lenishing from the newer well. Tut Tut!

- You know it never rains but what  
It storms —  
And after all,  
These new bards have  
The pep!
- Vachel Lindsay    Time was, I cursed the newer charioteers  
Who drive the wain of Art at break-neck pace;  
Time was, I thought th' entire human race  
Had been absorbing much too many beers;
- John Masfield    Time was, I felt assured that this round earth  
Was really going straight, straight, straight to H-ll;  
Time was I thought of leaving home and hearth  
For gaudy climes of gelded culture . . . Well,
- Robert Frost    I was quite wrong, and I will tell you why,  
And you will be surprised, — I'll wager that.  
You see it was like this. Yesterday I,  
Opening the kitchen door, saw our old fat
- E. Estlin  
Cummings    Phlegmatically feministic cook  
Weeping great buckets over Rupert Brooke! <sup>61</sup>

Note that after the free-verse sample he has pressed the Lindsay-Masfield-Frost-Cummings lines into sonnet form.

Although Dean Briggs did not encourage free verse, the students were writing it anyway, and over the next few months of 1916 Cummings began to develop a whole series of new and unusual poems that he showed to his friends in the Poetry Society but did not publish in the *Monthly*. In a list of poems which he labeled "Index 1916," <sup>62</sup> compiled apparently in the summer, Cummings listed his best work of recent vintage, according to verse or stanza form — sonnet, ballade, villanelle, Alexandrine, blank verse, and so on. The largest group, fifty-nine poems, is headed "D.S.N." [Designatio Sine Nomine?] and it includes all his unrhymed poems in such forms as haiku, *vers libre*, and long Whitmanesque lines. Many texts of those poems which are listed still survive. Some of them are early versions of poems which were later published in *Tulips and Chimneys*. For instance, his best-known poem, a nostalgic harkening back to childhood games presided over by a disguised nature god, appears in this form:

<sup>61</sup> bMS Am 1892.5 (476).

<sup>62</sup> UT, HRC, Cummings, Miscellaneous.

In just-Spring  
 When the world is mud-luscious  
 The queer old baloon-man  
 Whistles far and wee,  
 And Bill and Eddy come pranking

From marbles and from piracies,  
 And it's Springtime.

When the world is puddle-wonderful  
 The little lame baloon-man whistles  
 Far and wee,  
 And Betty and Is'bel come dancing

From hop-sotch and still-pond and jump-rope,  
 For it's Springtime,  
 And the world is ooze-suave,

And the goat-footed baloon-man  
 Whistles  
 Far  
 And  
 Wee.<sup>53</sup>

Some others are grouped together as "Impressions" — "The sky a silver consonance," "Behold, indecisively emerging," "The skinny old voice," and "Stinging gold" are typed on one odd page found among his college papers.<sup>54</sup> The impact of the new art is everywhere evident. "Stinging gold," for instance, shows that Cummings has combined the principles of impressionism (the emphasis on the rendering of light and color; the free-verse technique as a literary form of "broken brushwork") and the principles of imagism (compression, precision, the rhythms of common speech, the presentation by means of images):

Stinging gold  
 Swarms upon the spires,  
 Silver chants the litanies,  
 The great bells are ringing with rose —

<sup>53</sup> bMS Am 1823.5 (165). [See Plate IV.]

<sup>54</sup> bMS Am 1823.5 (358). A later version of "Behold, indecisively emerging" is published as "Emerging indecisively from" in *Poems 1905-1962*, ed. George Firmage (London: Marchim Press, 1973), p. 618. The others appeared later in *Tulips and Chimneys*, somewhat altered in phrasing and arrangement on the page.

The lewd fat bells.

And a tall wind  
Is dragging the sea for a dream,  
For soon shall the formidable eyes  
Of the world be  
Entered  
With sleep.

In his images, Cummings has been providing the "freshness and novelty" that T. E. Hulme called for in modern verse. The sunlight on the church tower rendered in terms of swarming bees (suggesting church domes as well as spires), the additional colors presented in terms of sound (litanies as silver, bell-ringing as rose), the sudden shock of bells hinted to be Rabelaisian friars as well as swinging testicles — all this creates a complex of feelings that clash together, appropriate for the resounding bells. Then the wind image soothes the disturbance to prepare for the sleeping world, and the sea like the unconscious is plumbed for a quiet dream (quiet because long vowels in combination with nasals, glides, and sibilants suggest it).

At one point while he grouped and regrouped his poems, he had established one category of "Odes." Only one page remains, containing "Spring, slattern of seasons" and "Humanity/I love you." The first of these, in less tightly curbed free verse, represents one of Cummings' distinctive approaches to a subject. He takes a traditional theme (the praise of spring), makes use of the traditional device of personification, and employs the archaism of the second person singular in his address — and then selects detail and chooses language that runs counter to the tradition. Yet the details are appropriate: spring is a muddy, sloppy time and the effects that the season brings upon the natural world should not always be prettified:

Spring, slattern of seasons,  
Thou hast muddy legs  
And a soggy petticoat;  
Drowsy is thy hair,  
Thy eyes are sticky with dream,  
And thou hast a sloppy body  
From being brought to bed of crocuses;  
When thou singest with thy whisky voice  
The grass rises on the head of the earth  
And all the trees are put on edge.

Spring, omnipotent goddess,  
 Thou dost inveigle into crossing sidewalks  
 The unwary june-bug and the frivolous angle-worm;  
 Thou dost persuade to serenade his lady  
 The musical tom-cat on the back fence;  
 Thou stuffest the parks with overgrown pimply chevaliers  
 And giggly gum-chewing little girls who desire only  
 To be naughty;  
 And not content, spring, with this,  
 'Thou hangest canary birds in parlor windows.

Spring,  
 Of the dissolute slobber of thy breasts  
 And the indecent jostle of thy thighs  
 I am so very fond,  
 That my soul inside me  
 Hollers;  
 For thou comest,  
 And thy hands are the snow  
 And thy fingers are the rain,  
 And I hear the screech of dissonant flowers,  
 And first of all I hear your stepping, —  
 Freakish feet,  
 Feet incorrigible,  
 Ragging the world.<sup>56</sup>

Certain surprises in the images go beyond the novelty of the Imagist school into the wrenching world of Cubism: The cross-over of senses and associations in "the screech of dissonant flowers" and the reversal of expectations in the slobber of breasts and the jostle of thighs.<sup>56</sup> More than anything else that was startling for the time, however, was the joyous spirit of basic sexuality. Four years of trial had to pass before Cummings could get the poem published in a magazine.

One poem in the D.S.N. list pushes into real innovation in technique. Perhaps the very fact that Cummings was working with cubist imagery released some additional creativity. At any rate, it is the first time he tried using verbs as nouns. He introduced the device into a poem about sunset in the city in which the harshness of the cityscape

<sup>56</sup> bMS Am 1823.7 (21), p. 7. An earlier version somewhat longer and rougher is bMS Am 1823.7 (25), p. 203.

<sup>57</sup> Cummings turned this reversal around again when the poem was published in the *Dial*, LXVII (May 1920), 582, much to the distress of Edward Cummings, who wrote to him objecting to the word "slobber."

is depicted through twisted and distorted word usage, through architectural images that are made to suffer, and through the imagery of noise, breaking, scraping, colliding, shouts and crashes.

Writhe and gape of tortured perspective,  
Rasp and graze of splintered horizon,  
Crackle and sag of planes,  
Clamors of collision,  
Collapse;  
As peacefully

Lifted  
Into the frightening beauty of sunset  
The perfect young city,  
Putting off dimension  
With a blush,  
Enters the becoming garden of

Her agony.<sup>57</sup>

But Cummings placed the words in such a way and provided echoing vowel and consonant sounds in such a way that an interchange of sounds could take place in the reader's mind and thus add further complexity to the statement of the poem. To illustrate: the "r" sound in "writhe" and "tortured" can be sensed in place of the "g" in "gape," thus adding "rape" to the words of violence. The "g" from "gape" and "graze" can be heard with "rasp" to suggest "grasp" and thus add the idea of squeezing. "Gape" coming before "graze" can suggest "gaze," thus emphasizing the sense of open-mouthed gazing in wonder at the overwhelming cityscape. The "n" from "planes" introduces the idea of "clangor" into "clamor," doubling the kinds of noise. "Crackle," "clamor," "collision," and "collapse" all have both the "k" and "l" sound and this draws them together in an intensification of what they state — that is, the crackle and the clamor have more force and the collision and the collapse have more noise. But the unusual controlling image of the poem is the disruptive city seen as a young woman. In this plane of meaning, the dissolving of visual detail at dusk is "putting off dimension," and the addition of "blush" is not only appropriate to sunset color but also suggests disrobing (removing the ugly appearance and becoming beautiful in her nudity).

<sup>57</sup> BMS Am 1823.5 (354).

The garden at the end continues the contrast to city geometry. The word "agony," after the spatial pause, brings us back to the beginning of the poem again; architecturally, the place of the "tortured perspective" is really the same as it had been, but sunset has metaphorically provided a garden for retreat and pleasure. With a few changes in word and in typographical arrangement, this new contribution to modern poetry became "Impression II" in *Tulips and Chimneys* seven years later.

## V

The giant steps into new realms of expression that Cummings was taking indicate that he was looking at the world from new perspectives and that he had begun opening new aspects of himself and considering who and what he was. All this had to begin with a change in his view of his home life and his new attitude toward his father. In earlier years the relations between father and son were excellent, but the close relations and the supervision had to give way if Estlin was to mature emotionally. There were two difficulties, however, and very normal ones indeed.

First, Edward Cummings continued to treat Estlin as a child. He still called him "Chubb," a nickname derived from "cherub," the wallpaper pattern in the room he had occupied in childhood. Besides the name, his manner of talking to Estlin, telling him what to do, cautioning him about his behavior, responding to his ideas — all these communicative signals reflected an address to a youngster. As Edward had grown older, he had become more dogmatic about his beliefs in the way to live life, and since he was a minister, he had adopted a more didactic tone, although his views were certainly not conservative. He became then, in his son's eyes, more preachy. The aphorisms Estlin had heard as a child ("If you don't like doing something, act as though you did and pretty soon you will," "Pick quick. Choose the best and leave the rest," "Smile before breakfast and shine inside") now sounded dreadful. (He had long ago removed the motto he had chosen from a list of his father's and placed in decorated letters over his study table: "Anything worth doing at all is worth doing well.") Since Edward Cummings loved his son deeply, he wanted to share his experiences and guide them. He constantly thrust himself into Estlin's affairs, and unwisely so. When Estlin invited visitors to Silver Lake, Edward wanted to join their company — go on a hike, go in a boat, sit with them in the evening. As



a consequence, Estlin built himself a tree house down the lake to which he could retreat. Ever since late adolescence, he had been becoming more and more withdrawn and secretive in order to protect himself from the dominance of his father.

The second difficulty was Estlin's own view of himself, especially in comparison to his father. His sister had inherited Edward's broad shoulders and height. Estlin, measured against the wall regularly and in vain, did not grow much until the middle of his college career and, "slight, delicate, nervous,"<sup>58</sup> he felt dwarfed by his father's height and bulk and awed by his strength. He was also overwhelmed by the fact that his father had so many accomplishments. In one frequently quoted summary of his father's many activities, Estlin, many years later, made him sound like a real American hero, a combination of Benjamin Franklin and Daniel Boone:

He was a New Hampshire man, 6 foot 2, a crack shot & a famous fly-fisherman & a first-rate sailor (his sloop was named *The Actress*) & a woodsman who could find his way through forests primeval without a compass & a canoeist who'd stillpaddle you up to a deer without ruffling the surface of a pond & an ornithologist & taxidermist & (when he gave up hunting) an expert photographer . . . & an actor who portrayed Julius Caesar in Sanders Theatre & a painter (both in oils & watercolours) & a better carpenter than any professional & . . . a plumber who just for the fun of it installed all his own waterworks & (while at Harvard) a teacher with small use for professors — . . . a preacher who . . . horribly shocked his pewholders by crying "the Kingdom of Heaven is no spiritual roofgarden: it's inside you" & . . . (long before any Model T Ford) he piloted an Orient Buckboard with Friction Drive produced by the Waltham watch company . . . & my father was a servant of the people who fought Boston's biggest & crookedest politician fiercely all day & a few evenings later sat down with him cheerfully at the Rotary Club & my father's voice was so magnificent that he was called on to impersonate God speaking from Beacon Hill (he was heard all over the common) . . .<sup>59</sup>

Given this father-son situation, it is a wonder that Estlin ever made much of a success as a human being at all. He had a dominant, energetic father who mastered all the areas he entered, who would always be physically a giant compared to his ordinary self, and who had a voice like God. But the rebellion gradually began to take place. At first in trivial ways. Estlin was troubled with acne, especially on his back and chest. Embarrassed by his appearance, he refused to go to the Sargent

<sup>58</sup> bMS Am 1892.7, "Cambridge."

<sup>59</sup> *i: six non-lectures* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 8-9.

Gymnasium for physical exercise, and in spite of his father's remonstrances he would not explain why. Soon after, when he was in college, he refused to wear long underwear in the winter, and no amount of argument could sway him. He no longer went regularly to church nor to the citizenship class for young people. He took up tobacco, first smoking a pipe and later cigarettes. He began to bathe less frequently, a turn of events that especially irritated his father, who held, "we can't all of us be honored by titles and degrees but we can all be Knights of the Daily Bath."<sup>60</sup> He began to be careless in his dress and appearance. (His mother occasionally stole his shoes and shined them.) He did not change his underwear frequently enough nor did he care about rips and tears in it. His parents, troubled about appearances, asked him "what if he were taken up in an accident."<sup>61</sup> His beard was light because he was very blond and he did not begin to shave until later than most men, nor did he have to shave every day during these early years. Yet, when he lived at Thayer Hall, he slacked off in shaving and occasionally had a scraggly, unshaven appearance.

Although he indulged in these gestures against his early training, he could turn himself out well for his own social purposes. He began, too, to hold himself straight with his shoulders back to give himself his fullest height. He began now his habit of holding his chin high in an almost arrogant pose. The postures were those of a young man of new self-confidence. Certain details of his social life, although unknown to his father, ran directly counter to his father's principles. His drinking was the chief activity in opposition to his father's temperance work and also to oft-stated paternal sayings ("I'd never give a penny to a son of mine who drank").<sup>62</sup> In his wandering into Scollay Square with its pimps and prostitutes or in his visits to the old Howard burlesque theatre, he invaded territory his father, who was a supporter of the Watch and Ward Society, would very much have wanted him to avoid. Estlin was in many ways following the pattern of the minister's son who kicks up his heels and rushes toward iniquity or who delights to shock by conduct which runs counter to his father's preachments and to his role as a guardian of public morals.

But there was a real change in Estlin's attitude toward his father's attributes. Once he had admired his father's sonorous voice. Now he

<sup>60</sup> bMS Am 1892.7, "Cambridge."

<sup>61</sup> bMS Am 1892.7, Notes beginning "By the family."

<sup>62</sup> bMS Am 1892.7, "Cambridge."

thought he talked too loud. Once he looked to his father as wise, solemn, all-knowing. Now he thought him rather pompous and overly dependent on the *Boston Transcript* for his opinions. The closed-mouth approach to sex that was common in the household, as well as in Cambridge in general, contributed to further estrangement. Estlin's father talked to him only once about sex and only years after he had learned all the secrets of this adult province from Sandy Hardy, the man-of-all-work at Joy Farm, and from his friends.

At this time, Estlin began to dredge up out of his memory subjects for grievances against his father, and they invariably involved his mother. He remembered his father's jibe at his mother's fatness — an ironical remark about "that swan-like neck" — and the tears in her hurt eyes. He remembered overhearing his father scolding his mother for her mishandling of the household accounts, referring to his "hard-earned money" and pointing out that she had not brought a cent to their marriage. "All this overheard by me," Cummings noted, "who am (supposed to be) doing my lessons in library. I REVOLT ag my F: would like TO KILL HIM." When he read Tennyson's "Guinevere" in *The Idylls of the King* he considered that Arthur's self-righteous reproaches to the queen sounded, "exactly like my F's to my M."<sup>63</sup> Certainly this period of Oedipal crisis, though necessary, was hard on both father and son. Estlin later was fully aware of the complete range of attitudes that he had harbored toward his father: "My father was a true father — he loved me. And because he loved me, I loved him: first, as a child, with the love which is worship; then, as a youth, with the love which gives battle; last, as a man, with the love which understands."<sup>64</sup>

That understanding was still far in the future. In the meantime, Estlin was associating his father with everything he opposed in American culture. In fact, he mythologized his father into the American Philistine. A satirical sketch that he scribbled out a few years later under the heading "Soliloquy of a New England Soul, circa 1920"<sup>65</sup> is based on some twisting of his father's opinions and frequently makes use of his phrases. It begins "i do not believe that any of us should be unhappy for an instant, since poverty and misfortune are sound proofs of the Allwise's Allwisdom. To question the advisability of either is

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> bMS Am 1823.4 (104), Notes for non-lectures.

<sup>65</sup> bMS Am 1892.5, Miscellaneous Notes.

to be sacrilegious; to express dissatisfaction with either or both is to be criminal. The people who do this should be punished: they are just as bad as the people who didn't stand up for The Star Spangled Banner during the war." It goes on about poets: "i do not believe that a man can be an artist and lead an unclean life or have dirty fingernails. Look at Longfellow, he had such a beautiful home life, and where will you find a deeper, truer or more beautiful poem than The Psalm of Life, with that rich haunting line 'and things are seldom what they seem.' A poem to me means a beautiful thought." On it goes, in this vein and beyond, to offer opinions on modern art, on wages for labor, on strikes, and finally on the question of equality. In general, the dogmatic tone and the views on poetry and art are exaggerated versions of those of Edward Cummings, who looked on cubist painting as "crazy quilt" stuff. Estlin had thrust him aside as an authority figure. Yet as the Harvard years revealed, he was still dependent on some intellectual authority. He merely turned to other father figures like Dory Miller or Foster Damon for guidance and support. His full maturity would be slow in coming. He would pass through a succession of surrogate fathers in the years to come.

His turning to aestheticism and the new art was congruent with his breaking away from the domination of his father's views. The result was a release of creativity. What happened in his own writing ran parallel to the rebellion against his father, and only as territories of his life became freed did a unique personal style in his verse begin to emerge. As this development continued to take place, it was accompanied by his ever-vigorous challenge to established opinion and traditional forms of expression in the American literary scene. That, for a while, was another form of the battle with his father. The Oedipal wrestling bout was renewed off and on over the next decade, with Edward Cummings taking most of the falls. But Estlin's struggle with the American public was continual and it lasted the rest of his life.

## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

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