

In Memoriam: John M. Gill

Susan Petit

When my husband died at age 84 on May 6, 2006, the E. E. Cummings Society lost one of its most devoted and productive members, a man inspired by Cummings for more than forty years.

Born November 13, 1921, to John and Irene Gill in Seattle, Jack entered St. Edward's Seminary in Kenmore at fourteen. As he said later, no fourteen-year-old knows what he wants, and though he did profit from seven years of Latin and four of Greek, he realized at twenty that he had no vocation. Four months after leaving with a junior college diploma, he went into a dramatically different but still all-male world when he was drafted into the infantry. A series of comic-opera events followed: he missed basic training because of an operation on his shoulder but was sent to Ranger school (intended for those who excelled in basic training), and later he was chaplain's assistant to a non-existent chaplain on Kauai, where he became a habitué of the Lihue library. Jack then saw combat in a heavy weapons company in New Guinea. Made company clerk because he could write, he first had to teach himself to type; ultimately, he was put in charge of the correspondence section of the 123rd Infantry. This assignment was not as safe as it sounds; in the invasion of the Philippines, the headquarters where he was assigned found itself for a while between enemy lines. In August 1945 his unit, one of the first to land in Japan, was told to expect fierce resistance. They made a combat landing only to find excited children on the beach instead of armed adults. When Jack returned to Seattle in December 1945, he had a Bronze Star, a Philippines Liberation Medal, an Asiatic-Pacific Service Medal, a Victory Medal, and—the decoration that meant the most to him—the Combat Infantryman's Badge.

Jack earned a B.A. and an M.A. in English from the University of Washington in Seattle, married, taught at Vanport Extension Center (now Portland State), and, when the Korean War led to mass faculty layoffs, became Oregon director for the National Conference of Christians and Jews. After moving to New York in 1954, he taught English and journalism at the College of New Rochelle. While he was a Ph.D. student at New York University, he was simultaneously an NYU instructor and was put in charge of the freshman English program. His son John was born in Washington; his son Mark in New York.

No one taught Cummings in the classes Jack took. As he recounted in an article for *Spring* ("A Study"), in an NYU debate he even attacked Cummings' typography. Maybe remorse led him to re-evaluate his judgment, or maybe it was his personal and professional difficulties: he and his first wife divorced, and, in search of better assignments and higher pay, he taught in many institutions, including the University of

Wisconsin-Milwaukee (where he finished his dissertation), Stanislaus State College, Honolulu Community College, the University of Hawaii, and, finally, the College of San Mateo, where he would stay from 1969 until 1992. While there, he also taught at the University of California-Santa Cruz Extension and at Stanford. In those stressful years Cummings became Jack's inspiration to live fully, to prize feeling over thought, to become, not just be. This attitude represented a major change for someone whose M.A. thesis was "Samuel Pepys as a Critic of the Restoration Shakespeare," whose dissertation was "Bernard De Voto and Literary Anticriticism," and whose first published article was on Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University*.



Jack Gill in Paris

I met Jack when he arrived at CSM in 1969 to be chair of the English Department. Having been hired the previous year right out of graduate school, I was the least senior department member—except for him. Jack was both the chair and a faculty member; when he had to cancel a class, he would sometimes first teach the students a poem by Cummings, and I once even heard a student address him as “Mr. Cummings.” Jack needed to remind himself often that “notbeingdead isn’t beingalive,” for besides teaching regular, overload, and summer classes, he served in 1975 as president of the Association of Departments of English, while from 1976, when he stepped down as chair, until 1978 he was a member of the Steering Committee of the MLA Delegate Assembly. He even was past president of the English Council of the California Two-Year Colleges from 1982 to 1987 without having been its president. Jack’s ongoing hobby was collecting books, particularly literature, criticism, history, mysteries, and Hawaiiana; at his death he had some 70,000.

In retirement, in addition to pricing poetry books for the sales of the Friends of the Palo Alto Library, Jack finally had time for scholarly work, focusing on F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, and his main interest, E.E. Cummings. He was delighted to present at half a dozen Cummings sessions at American Literature Association conferences and to see his articles in *Spring*. As time passed, *The Enormous Room* occupied more of his thoughts, and after our marriage in 1984, he and I often visited the building in Normandy where it is set. Each year that we returned—1989, 1992, 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2001—we learned more, especially once we met Claude Froc, the *documentaliste* of the Lycée des Andaines, who provided us with valuable materials, including photographs. Jack did not live to give his scheduled presentation at the ALA in 2006, “A Forgotten La Ferté-Macé Letter: E.E. Cummings to Scofield Thayer,” but I was privileged to read it for him. A pilgrimage to Patchin Place was always in order when we went to New York, and Jack sometimes regretted that when he was at NYU he had never tried to see Cummings. Yet no doubt he had not been ready then; he had to mature into the Cummings scholar he would become by the time of his death.

Jack constantly strove to live up to Cummings’ exhortations to live fully, to say YES to life, to put feeling first. These were his bywords from many years before I met him until his last days, when he was determined to overcome spinal stenosis and arthritic hips, only to be felled abruptly by a brain tumor. Although “time from time [has] set [him] free,” his friends and colleagues, even if forgetting the details of his life, will remember his generosity, kindness, intelligence, and devotion to “beingalive.”

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John M. Gill's Publications in *Spring*

- Gill, John M. "A Study of Two Poems." *Spring* 5 (1996): 105-111. [A reading of "since feeling is first" (CP 291) and "in time of daffodils(who know)" (CP 688).]
- . "The *Enormous Room* and 'The Windows of Nowhere': Reflections on Visiting La Ferté Macé." *Spring* 7 (1998): 94-123.
<http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/gill7.htm>.
- . "(Re)Valuing 'anyone'." *Spring* 8 (1999): 78-86.
- . [Untitled note comparing two editions of *The Enormous Room*.] *Spring* 9 (2000): 179.
- . "The *Enormous Room* Remembered." *Spring* 11 (2002): 159-182.
- . "E. E. Cummings: New York Writer." *Spring* 12 (2003): 130-38.
- . "'All These Fine People Were Arrested as Espions': Detainees in *The Enormous Room*." Forthcoming in *Spring* 14.
- . "A Forgotten La Ferté-Macé Letter: E.E. Cummings to Scofield Thayer." Forthcoming in *Spring*.