

## Cummings Centennials (1914–1915)

Michael Webster

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The school year 1914-1915 was Cummings' senior year at Harvard, the year he moved the few blocks from 104 Irving Street to Thayer Hall in Harvard Yard. (In the fall of 1915, Cummings continued his education at Harvard, studying for his M.A.) Other residents of Thayer Hall included S. Foster Damon, John Dos Passos, and Robert Hillyer. According to Charles Norman, Cummings "adorned his mantelpiece with four or five elephants and his walls with 'Krazy Kat' comic strips" (34).

In his junior and senior years, Cummings' studies shifted from a concentration on Latin and Greek to courses in English and Comparative Literature. Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno reports that though Cummings started out as a Classics major, he eventually graduated with an "AB in Literature with concentrations in Greek and English" (59). Among the courses Cummings took was the year-long Literary History of England and Its Relations to that of the Continent, which covered European literature up to the Renaissance. He also continued his Greek studies with Greek VI, which studied Greek drama, and he studied Chaucer with William A. Neilson.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Cummings took George Lyman Kittredge's course that studied intensively six Shakespeare plays. Kennedy writes: "most student recollections depict [Kittredge] in the classroom as playing a well-rehearsed role of omniscient scholar: an imperious eagle-eyed old man hurling penetrating questions or answering queries with authoritative scorn as he lifted his well-trimmed white beard in the air" (*Dreams* 63).

In his senior year, Cummings took a couple of year-long courses that deserve special mention. The first, Kennedy asserts, was "a major educational experience" for Cummings, the "year of Dante under Charles H. Grandgent . . . the foremost Dante specialist in the English-speaking world." Not only did Cummings read *The Divine Comedy* in Italian, but he also studied "the culture of the Middle Ages, the history and politics of Florence, the nature of allegory, and . . . [read] *Il Convivio*, *De Monarchia*, [and] *La Vita Nuova*" (*Dreams* 60). Kennedy reports that Cummings was "intensely interested in the material of the course and sat, an alert figure, in the front row. He took extensive lecture notes [and] drew elaborate diagrams of Dante's Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise with allegorical details minutely placed in the scheme" (60). The second year-long course Cummings

took was Dean Briggs' Advanced Composition.<sup>2</sup> Kennedy writes that "Briggs was no doubt the best-loved professor in the Harvard yard. He was a very kind, gentle, gracious human being," who, like Cummings, was "slight of build, very boyish in appearance," and who, also like Cummings, "had attended Cambridge Latin School and went on to study Greek at Harvard" (69). Students in the course wrote poetry, prose, and essays; probably one of Cummings' first compositions was a sentimental war poem about a grieving mother, "From a Newspaper August 1914." Kennedy informs us that "his father later had copies of it typed with a new title, 'The Casualty List,' and inserted into the pages of *Eight Harvard Poets*" (134).<sup>3</sup> Sentimentalism did not preclude aestheticism: one of Cummings' essays from October 1914, "The Young Fawn," is characterized by Kennedy as "an over-written scenario inspired by the ballet 'The Afternoon of a Faun,' which drew Briggs's polite rebuke, 'Now and then I suspect you . . . of putting in some details for sound's sake—of indulging yourself in that for which English 5 is one of the best remedies' " (70). Later in the year, Cummings would write an essay on Chinese and Japanese poetry called "The Poetry of Silence," which Kennedy sees as showing "an improvement in style and some appreciation for economy in expression" (72). Cummings also wrote for the class a children's story, "The King," "about a little boy who takes a toy elephant to bed with him at night" (Kennedy 72). It was published in *The Harvard Monthly* in July 1915.

Cummings' most substantial work for the class was his 27-page term paper, "The New Art," which, in shortened form, the poet delivered as a "graduation part" at the Harvard commencement ceremonies on June 24, 1915. In the longer text, Cummings wrote that the essay traces "the continuous development [in painting] from Realism to Monet and from Monet to Duchamp-Villon" (qtd. in Kennedy 83). In addition, Kennedy writes, the essay undertook "to show the interconnections among the new tendencies in the visual arts, music, and literature" (83). The audience at the Sanders Theatre seemed to accept Cummings' discourse on the aesthetics of the new music and painting; but when the speaker came to treat poetry, he ruffled the audience by quoting from the imagist verse of Amy Lowell, sister of Harvard's president A. Lawrence Lowell. S. Foster Damon recorded the audience's reactions: "Sanders Theatre shuddered in sibilant horror as he recited: 'Why do the lilies goggle their tongues at me' " (qtd. in Norman 43). Damon continued:

One aged lady (peace be to her bones!) was heard to remark aloud: “Is that our president’s sister’s poetry he is quoting? Well, *I* think it is an *insult* to our president!” Meanwhile, the president’s face, on which all eyes were fixed, was absolutely unperturbed. (qtd. in Norman 43-44)

Maybe not entirely “unperturbed”: later, Cummings recorded in his notes that Lowell “turned to brick” (qtd. in Kennedy 84). After Amy Lowell, the young orator quoted from Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, which functioned admirably, Cummings wrote later, as “comic relief” (Kennedy 84-85). Whatever the audience reactions, the “New Art” speech showed, as Kennedy writes, a remarkably “discursive acquaintance with so much of the avant-garde activity in the arts” (83).

This acquaintance was in part due to the tutelage of friends and mentors like S. Foster Damon and Scofield Thayer. As the previous “Cummings Centennials” article noted, it was Damon who introduced Cummings to much that was new in the arts, lending him copies of *Poetry* magazine and taking him to see the Boston version of the Armory Show in 1913. Much of the discussion in “The New Art” of art, dance, music, and literature is indebted to Damon’s influence. Cummings told Charles Norman: “Practically everything I know about painting and poetry came to me though Damon” (38). [See fig. 1.]

It was Damon who loaned to the young poet Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) and Ezra Pound’s anthology *Des Imagistes* (1914) (*Dreams* 78-79). Damon also probably introduced Cummings to Alfred Kreyborg’s little magazine *Others*, which began pub-



**Figure 1:** Photo of S. Foster Damon and E. E. Cummings, circa 1914

lication in July 1915. Perhaps most importantly for Cummings' future poetic career, Damon showed Cummings Ezra Pound's *Ripostes*, which contained the poem "The Return."<sup>4</sup> Years later in the mid-1950s, Cummings wrote in his notes that this poem "made me(for better or worse)the writer I am today." He was impressed by the poem's modern treatment of a classical subject, but he noted that the "inaudible poem—the visual poem,the poem for not ears but Eye—moved me more" (qtd. in Kennedy 106).<sup>5</sup> In 1957, Cummings wrote to Charles Norman that he would never "forget the thrill I experienced on first reading 'The Return' " (*Letters* 241).

In addition, Damon and Cummings continued to explore cultural events and nightlife in Boston. Sometime in 1915, Cummings found a new girlfriend, whose name Kennedy gives (and only in his notes) as Doris.<sup>6</sup> Kennedy writes that

Her letters to Cummings in 1915 show her to be a warm, vivacious charmer, almost a character out of an early F. 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 new dog Scottie, and struggling to be a proper New England girl. . . . In her letters she would lapse into French whenever she touched on a delicate subject. (87)

Kennedy says they "drifted away from each other during 1916" (88).

Two days after Cummings delivered "The New Art," Scofield Thayer embarked from Liverpool, returning from two years of study at Oxford (Dempsey 27). Sometime that summer, Thayer sent Cummings a copy of *Blast II*, the "Review of the Great English Vortex" edited by Wyndham Lewis (Kennedy 94-95). Thayer sent a great many books, apparently, among them perhaps Willard Huntington Wright's *Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning* (1915), which greatly influenced Cummings' aesthetics. Milton Cohen writes that the book "virtually became Cummings's bible in the teens and twenties . . . from which he typed out long paragraphs verbatim in his notes" (120). In his letter to Thayer thanking him for the books ("your weighty package from Brentano's"), Cummings wrote: "'Blast' is a very important addition to my limited library. Could I procure the first number thru B.?"<sup>7</sup> Among the Vorticist etchings, essays by Lewis, and poems by Pound in *Blast II*, Cummings found most intriguing T. S. Eliot's poems "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" and "Preludes"—which he

promptly copied out.

Despite his continued fascination with the new art, the poems that Cummings published in 1914-1915 in *The Harvard Monthly* show little evidence of this interest. With the exception of a few memorable phrases, most of the poems Cummings published are overloaded with Pre-Raphaelite imagery (“her hands / Hurting the dark with lilies”) and rather precious metaphors (“In green cloisters throng / Shy nuns of evening, telling beads of song”) (CP 867 and CP 868). The themes of love, longing, and twilight that predominate in these poems would reappear in better form in Cummings’ more mature work. And while Cummings’ intense craftsmanship is evident in these poems, it is somewhat obscured by the elaborate and outdated diction. However, a refrain in “Nocturne,” published in March 1914, presages one of Cummings’ earliest triumphs. The lines “All silently I loved my love / In gardens of white ivory” (CP 864) were given a bit more medieval spine some two years later when he wrote: “All in green went my love riding / on a great horse of gold / into the silver dawn” (CP 15). The shift from vague symbolist longing to the creation of a scene in indelible images is a measure of Cummings’ growth in these years. Kennedy writes: “Six well-scratched-up pages in his working notebook attest to the care which he devoted to this piece. When it was published in the *Monthly* [in March 1916], it met with praise from professors and fellow-students alike” (*Dreams* 83).

While some of the poems from this period not published in the *Monthly* exhibit similar Pre-Raphaelite or even Yeatsian diction (“The white rose of my soul / Is blown upon the ways” [CP 918]), others experiment with a rather tame free verse: “Moon-in-the-Trees / The old canoe awaits you. / He is not, as you know, afraid of the dark” (CP 921). This poem ends with Cummings reaching for a more personal extravagance: “In the nostrils of my nights / An incense of irrevocable mountains.” The sonnets written in appreciation for his friends and mentors Dory Miller, S. Foster Damon, J. Sibley Watson, and Scofield Thayer are often embarrassingly gushy. The one exception is Cummings’ attempt at humor in the poem dedicated to Watson (CP 927), but the wit is not well-controlled and falls flat.

However, Watson was at least partly responsible for a much more successful sonnet, “this is the garden:colours come and go,” (CP 144). In her memoir, Hildegard Watson reports that in the summer of 1915, Cummings and her husband “motored to Rochester [N.Y.] to the Watson house, where Estlin wrote the now famous sonnet. . . . Mrs. Watson placed it in her guest book where, later, I came across it. It is arranged—and punctuated—

differently from the published version; there is no “u” in “color,” and there are capitals at the beginning of each line!” (87). Here is the first stanza of this sonnet as transcribed by Hildegard Watson:

This is the garden. Colors come and go:  
Frail azures fluttering from night’s outer wing,  
Strong silent greens serenely lingering,  
Absolute lights like baths of golden snow.

The poem appears with the same punctuation and capitalization in *Eight Harvard Poets* (1917). When the sonnet was published in *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), Cummings removed most capital letters, retaining only those in words that begin sentences, along with the two crucial capitals in the words “Death’s” and “They.” He also made two simple changes in punctuation in the first line—substituting a colon for the period after “garden” and a comma for the colon after “go”—adding more momentum to a line that nevertheless still lingers slightly.

In his role as one of the editors of *The Monthly*, Cummings was quite able to critique some of the excesses of Harvard aestheticism. Robert Hillyer remembered Cummings the editor: “Some aspirant handed in a poem that began with the line: ‘Thou hast faun eyes.’ Cummings’ comment took graphic form—a small horned deer with large and soulful eyes. On another poem he wrote, ‘Good but poor.’ This always seemed to me an excellent phrase, accurately descriptive of much that is published” (qtd. Norman 33). Much of Cummings’ Harvard poetry could be described the same way: “Good but poor.” However, even though “All in green” and “this is the garden” show that Cummings’ reading of Dante and Chaucer was helping to focus and discipline some of his belated romanticism, it was only after he received his M.A. in 1916 and left Harvard that he began to experiment with creating his own poems “for not ears but Eye.”

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## Notes

1. Information on Cummings’ coursework at Harvard was gleaned from Kennedy 60-71 and Sawyer-Lauçanno 59-62 and 76-79. A version of this article appeared in the *EEC Society Blog*, March 23, 2016.
2. LeBaron Russell Briggs (1855-1934), Dean of Men at Harvard and President of Radcliffe College from 1903 to 1923.

3. See also Gillian Huang-Tiller's "A Note on George Firmage and E. E. Cummings' Copy of *Eight Harvard Poets*" in *Spring* 14-15, pp. 274-75.
4. Sawyer-Lauçanno says that Damon showed Cummings the book in the fall of 1915 (72). Cummings' copy of *Ripostes*, now at the Harry Ransom Center, is the 1913 American edition.
5. Besides adding the first phrase, I have corrected Kennedy's transcription by capitalizing "Eye." The quote may be found in the Cummings papers at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1892.7 (90), "Notes for a nonexistent lecture (California)," folder 25, [labeled "Ezra"], sheet 258.
6. Her full name was probably Doris Bryan. Perhaps the answer is found in these letters at the Houghton Library: MS 1892 (113) Bryan, Doris. 28 letters; 1915. No. 3, 9 & 10 with one photograph each; and MS 1892.1 (16) Bryan, Doris, recipient. 3 letters; [n.d.].
7. *Dial*/Scofield Thayer Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, YCAL 34, box 30, folder 794. For the influence of T. S. Eliot on Cummings' poetry, see my "Cummings Rewrites Eliot."

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### **Cummings' contributions to *The Harvard Monthly* in 1914-1915:**

Cummings, E. Estlin. "Nocturne." *The Harvard Monthly* 58.1 (March 1914): 18-20. ["When the lithe moonlight silently" (CP 864-65)]

—. "Sonnet" *The Harvard Monthly* 58.3 (May 1914): 79. ["For that I have forgot the world these days" (CP 866)] [PDF 292]

—. "Night" *The Harvard Monthly* 59.2 (Nov. 1914): 69-70. ["Night, with sunset hauntings" (CP 867)]

—. "Out of the Bengali." *The Harvard Monthly* 59.3 (Dec. 1914): 85. ["I spoke to thee with a smile"—rpt. as "Orientale" (CP 32)]

—. "Sonnet." *The Harvard Monthly* 59.4 (Christmas 1914): 115. ["No sunset, but a grey, great, struggling sky" (CP 868)]

—. "Longing." *The Harvard Monthly* 60.2 (April 1915): 37-38. ["I miss you in the dawn, of gradual flowering lights" (CP 869)]

—. "Ballad of Love." *The Harvard Monthly* 60.3 (May 1915): 91-92. ["Where is my love! I cried." (CP 871)]

—. "The King." *The Harvard Monthly* 60.5 (July 1915): 132-136. [Short story, not reprinted.]

—. "Ballade of the Soul." *The Harvard Monthly* 60.5 (July 1915): 141-142. ["Not for the naked make I this my prayer" (CP 872)]

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