

Three Memorials

Michael Webster

George James Firmage

In the thirteenth issue of *Spring* we mark the passing of three dedicated Cummings scholars, George James Firmage, Philip Gerber, and John R. (Jack) Gill. Firmage, a literary agent who lived in London, dedicated much of his life to producing readable and accurate editions of Cummings' works. To Firmage we owe the collection of Cummings' ephemeral pieces called *A Miscellany Revised*, and it was Firmage who guided Cummings' posthumous books, *73 Poems* (1963) and *Fairy Tales* (1965) into print. With Richard S. Kennedy, Firmage produced the invaluable Liveright typescript editions of *The Enormous Room* (1978) and many of Cummings' single books of poems. Most notable perhaps among these editions was the first, *Tulips & Chimneys* (1976), in which Firmage, through painstaking research, re-established the original 1922 text of 152 poems. For the first time, the general reader could read and view the poems in the arrangement and order Cummings had intended.

Firmage was extraordinarily attentive to Cummings' exacting strictures on punctuation, spacing, and placement on the page. For example, Firmage did not fail (as I have) to place a space before the apostrophe in the first line of "Buffalo Bill's" (CP 90); nor did he fail (as Kennedy did in the *Selected Poems*) to allow each poem to occupy its own single paper space. The rationale behind the typescript editions was to present Cummings' lines as he intended them to be spaced: according to the mono-width spacing of each letter of the typewriter. This sort of unitary spacing had seldom been used in book production, but some visual poems like "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r" (CP 396) were carefully "drawn" or spaced on the typewriter and thus are very difficult to set correctly in the variable width fonts of commercial printing. Indeed, a letter to his aunt Jane (March 11, 1935) shows Cummings' frustration in trying to set up the radically typewritten poems of *No Thanks*:

am fighting—forwarded and backed by a corps of loyal assistants—to re-translate 71 poems out of typewriter language into linotype-ese. This is not so easy as one might think; consider, if you dare, that whenever a typewriter "key" is "struck" the "carriage" moves a given amount and the "line" advances recklessly or individualistically. Then consider that the linotype (being a gadget) inflicts a preestablished whole—the type "line"—on every smallest part; so that the words, letters, punctuation marks & (most important of all) spaces—between these various elements, awake to find themselves rearranged automatically "for the benefit of the community" as politicians say. (*Letters* 140-141)

Certain poems that appear in *Spring* (among them “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r”) have been and will be printed in Courier, a font which mimics the mono-width spacing of the typewriter. Regrettably, the most recent editions of Cummings’ single books of poems have abandoned the typescript concept in favor of simply reprinting the same typeset versions that appear in the 1994 *Complete Poems*.

At his death, George Firmage had nearly finished a new edition of *EIMI*, a monumentally complex task that not only involved editing the lengthy and typographically innovative text, but also creating detailed notes explaining the names and backgrounds of characters and translating the many foreign terms in the text.¹ The new edition of *EIMI* is scheduled to be published by Liveright in the fall of 2007. Besides *EIMI*, Firmage was also working on new editions of the plays and the *Miscellany*. A publication date for these editions has not been set. Firmage’s passion for getting it right was not proprietary. A few years ago, I waited with dread for his reaction to a list of 5-6 small errata that had been found in the *Complete Poems*. After all, who was I to tell the Great Firmage about errors?! When he received my letter, he called me from London to thank me for sending the list, promising corrections in the next printing.

Philip L. Gerber

In August, 2005, we received the following sad news from Eugenia Gerber, wife of Philip Gerber:

I am sorry to inform you that my husband, Philip Gerber, who was an avid scholar/admirer of Cummings’ work, passed away on January of this year. The issue of *Spring* 11 has been on my desk for some time, and I have been intending to write to you. As you may know, Phil was a member of the Board of Consulting and Contributing Editors of *Spring* and a dedicated reader of *Spring*.

Long time readers of *Spring* will recognize Gerber as the author of a study of Charles Norman, Cummings’ first biographer. More recently, he published an epic essay on Cummings’ classic four-line poem, “mr u will not be missed” (CP 551). Few essays in *Spring* have made me smile as much as this one did. A longtime teacher at SUNY Brockport, Gerber also presented at least two unpublished talks on Cummings: “Puzzle Poems: E. E. Cummings in the Classroom” (New York State English Council, Syracuse, NY, 1982), and “E. E. Cummings: The Rochester Connection” (Memorial Art Gallery of University of Rochester, Rochester, NY, 1989). He also published a ground-breaking work, “E. E. Cummings and the Season of the Censor,” the first article (as far as I know) to explore frankly the sexual content of many of Cummings’ poems.

With over fifty items listed in the MLA Bibliography, Gerber was a highly productive scholar who wrote extensively on Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, and Robert Frost. Eugenia Gerber wrote:

Thank you for your letter. I too am sorry that you never had a chance to meet Phil. He was an interesting man, a devoted scholar with many irons in the fire. I have just begun the process of having his huge collection of books cataloged and appraised. What a job!

For a long time, Phil had been intending to do a book on Cummings, but he had too many projects and, it turned out, not enough time. In researching Cummings he became fascinated with Cummings' father. One thing always led to another in Phil's work.

He was a fine historical/cultural scholar who enjoyed illuminating odd or forgotten corners of writers' lives and works. Unlike "mr u," Gerber's devoted scholarship and subtle humor will be sorely missed.

John M. (Jack) Gill

The Enormous Room is a great book, but it can be confusing to readers encountering it for the first time. Much of Jack's scholarship on the book was devoted to clearing up its obscurities and exploring and disentangling its various levels of reality, fiction, and imagination. For Jack, this meant visiting, with his wife Susan, the town of La Ferté-Macé (not once, but several times) and tramping about in the actual three-building complex itself. (Today it is a French high school, the Lycée Nationalisé Polyvalent et L.E.P. des Andaines.) Jack's trips were fruitful: exploring the boundaries of the building allowed him to discover the ways in which Cummings stretched the boundaries of genre in *The Enormous Room*. Many of these discoveries are detailed in the two articles he wrote about his visits to La Ferté, "*The Enormous Room* and 'The Windows of Nowhere'" and "*The Enormous Room* Remembered" (published in *Spring* 7 and 11).

Jack and I corresponded frequently by e-mail about his discoveries and interpretations, and though we had our differences, what I remember most was Jack's willingness to listen, balanced by his profound desire to discover and understand truths about Cummings' unusual book. Jack has two more articles slated to appear in *Spring*. The first is a discussion of characters in *The Enormous Room*, a further exploration of Jack's quest to understand the geography, both physical and human, of the French detention center that sparked a classic of American literature. The second will be a paper that was inspired by a 1917 letter from Cummings to Scofield Thayer that I found sleeping in the archives of the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Again, this letter sheds more light on the actual conditions at La Ferté Macé, comparing them with the sometimes surprising differences found in the book.

As Susan Petit details in the memorial essay that follows, *The Enormous Room* was not Jack's only scholarly interest. For *Spring 5*, he wrote "A Study of Two Poems," a reading of "since feeling is first" (CP 291) and "in time of daffodils(who know)" (CP 688) and for *Spring 8* "(Re)Valuing 'anyone,'" a study of "anyone lived in a pretty how town" that Paul Headrick cites in this issue. For *Spring 12*, Jack wrote "E. E. Cummings: New York Writer." In September, 2005, he e-mailed me about the article:

I appreciate your including my "E.E.Cummings: New York Writer" in *Spring 12*. I spent ten years in graduate school and teaching at NYU in the 50's and early 60's very near Patchin Place but not knowing Cummings. He often visited Washington Square Park surrounded by the buildings of NYU, but I never knew it. The New York paper was an attempt to make up for that.

Jack had other projects in mind as well. He wrote me about one of them that I regret he did not live to finish:

Thanks for sending along the email from Slater Brown's daughter.² Most interesting. I have been so wrapped up in the Thayer paper for the last few weeks that I neglected to write you about the note you appended to that article about the Joe Gould notebooks at NYU, my old Alma Mater. I am glad you added that as I think those notebooks do corroborate the point about Cummings and Gould I was making. The notebooks also demonstrate that there was no such thing as an "Oral History of the World"; Gould had four or five topics which he obsessively wrote about. There is nothing oral or about the history of the world in them. One of my Cummings projects is to try to do something about Cummings and Gould expanding, among other things, the ideas I suggested in that article.

The beginning of the sonnet that Cummings wrote in memory of *New York Times* book reviewer Peter Monro Jack may be applied just as aptly, I feel, to George Firmage, Philip Gerber, and Jack Gill:

we miss you,jack—tactfully you(with one cocked
eyebrow)subtracting clichés un by un
till the god's truth stands art-naked (CP 605)

Bibliographies of Firmage's and Gerber's work on Cummings follow. A bibliography of Jack Gill's work on Cummings is appended to the following memorial essay by his wife Susan.

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Notes

- 1 Of all Cummings' works, the one major text that lacks notes at the *Spring* website is *EIMI*. There's a reason for this—it is an impossible job.
- 2 For Rachel Brown's e-mail, see "News, Notes & Correspondence."

A Partial Firmage Bibliography

Firmage, George J. *E. E. Cummings: A Bibliography*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1960. [Descriptive list of publications by Cummings.]

Complete Poems

- Cummings, E. E. *Complete Poems 1913-1962*. Ed George J. Firmage. New York: HBJ, 1972.
- . *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*. Ed George J. Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1994.

Early Editions:

- Cummings, E. E. *A Miscellany*. Ed. George J. Firmage. New York: Argophile Press, 1958.
- . *73 Poems*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963.
- . *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised*. Ed. George J. Firmage. New York: October House, 1965.
- . *Three Plays and A Ballet*. Ed. George J. Firmage. New York: October House, 1967. [Contains the plays *Him*, *Anthropos*, *Santa Claus*, and the ballet *Tom*.]

Typescript Editions [Most have an afterword by Firmage.]

- Cummings, E. E. *Tulips & Chimneys, The original 1922 manuscript with the 34 additional poems from &*. Ed., with an Afterword, George James Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1976.
- . *The Enormous Room: A typescript edition with drawings by the author*. 1922. Ed. George James Firmage. Introduction Richard S. Kennedy. New York: Liveright, 1978.
- . *No Thanks*. 1935. Ed., with an Afterword, George James Firmage. Introduction Richard S. Kennedy. New York: Liveright, 1978.
- . *ViVa [W]*. 1931. Ed., with an Afterword, George James Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1979.
- . *XAIPE*. 1950. Ed., with an Afterword, George James Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1979.
- . *Etcetera: The Unpublished Poems of E. E. Cummings*. Ed. George James Firmage and Richard S. Kennedy. New York: Liveright, 1983.
- . *Hist Whist and Other Poems for Children*. Ed. George James Firmage. Illus. David

Calsada. New York: W. W. Norton, 1983.

—. *is 5*. 1926. Ed., with an Afterword, George James Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1985.

Recent and Forthcoming

—. *Fairy Tales*. Ed. George James Firmage. Illus. Meilo So. New York: Liveright, 2004.

—. *EIMI*. 1933. Ed. George James Firmage. New York: Liveright, 2007.

A (Very) Partial Gerber Bibliography

Gerber, Philip L. "E. E. Cummings's Season of the Censor." *Contemporary Literature* 19 (1988): 177-200.

—. "Boswell in America: The Case of Charles Norman." *Spring* New Series 2 (1993): 57-69. See: <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/issue2/Gerber2.htm>.

—. "missing mr u (not)." *Spring* 10 (October 2001): 70-101.

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.”

—College of San Mateo, San Mateo CA

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*.