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“No Shepherd of a Child’s Surmises”:

J. V. Cunningham as a Montana Poet

J. V. Cunningham’s readers may be disconcerted to see his poetry treated in a regional context. Cunningham’s poems are not in the least provincial. They address perennial issues in human experience—love, friendship, marriage, and mortality—and draw deeply if unobtrusively on the Anglo-American poetic tradition represented by such writers as William Shakespeare, John Donne, Ben Jonson, Jonathan Swift, Walter Savage Landor, Emily Dickinson, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, and Louise Bogan. Further, Cunningham is one of the best epigrammatists in the English language. His skill and range in the genre are such that his only peers are Jonson, Robert Herrick, and Landor. In addition, Cunningham is a master metrist. Though he lived in an age when most poets cultivated free verse, he explored and enriched the resources of conventional versification. His individually distinctive management of his craft connects us with an art of rhythmically organized speech that began millennia ago in places like China, India, Egypt, and Greece and that persists, albeit in a marginalized condition, down to our day.

Yet Cunningham spent his most formative years in Billings, Montana, and he always considered himself a native of the state. More than four decades after he had last lived in it, he introduced a lecture at Mount Holyoke College on Dickinson by saying apologetically: “I am a renegade Irish Catholic from the plains of Montana. . . . Consequently, I speak without authority on a nineteenth-century New England spinster” (*The Collected Essays* 353). On another occasion, commenting in the third person on his

own writing, he referred to "his early life on the Montana plains," noting that "he found that the patterns of his deepest feelings were most often clothed in the landscapes of that time" (*The Collected Essays* 414). He came from a family who, as he put it, "were all construction people and railroaders" ("Interview" 2) and who had laid the track and served the trains that crossed the Great Plains, deserts, and mountains from Council Bluffs, Iowa, to the Pacific; and many of his poems depict the austere beauties of the American West and its lonely open spaces. As cosmopolitan as he became in spirit and intellect—in addition to composing poems Cunningham wrote brilliant and entertaining essays on such varied subjects as the Roman poet Statius, Shakespearean tragedy, and the poetry of Wallace Stevens—he always stayed connected to his youthful experiences in Montana.

### Cunningham's Life

Cunningham was born in Cumberland, Maryland on August 23, 1911. He was the second of four children—three boys and a girl—of working-class Irish-Catholic parents. In the mid-teens, his father, a steam-shovel operator who worked for the railroads, moved the family to Billings. In 1923, at the insistence of Cunningham's mother, who was concerned about obtaining the best possible education for her children, the family moved to Denver. There Cunningham enrolled in the Jesuit-run Regis High School and took a rigorous curriculum that included four years of Latin and two of Greek. Having skipped two grades in the schools in Billings, he graduated in 1927, at age fifteen. The year before, however, Cunningham's father had been killed while working in California on the San Pedro harbor; his steam shovel had toppled over on an incline and crushed him. After his father's death, financial constraints apparently prevented Cunningham at that time from continuing his academic studies, except for a semester at St. Mary's College in Kansas.

In his late teens, Cunningham worked as a copyboy for the *Denver Morning Post* and then as a "runner"—a messenger/office boy—for Otis and Company, the largest brokerage house on the Denver Stock Exchange. And in 1929, while he was working for Otis, there occurred what he termed, “the dominant experience of my life” (“Interview” 6). On October 29—Black Tuesday—the market crashed. “The day had a finality, inarguable, absolute,” Cunningham recollected later, “though in fact the day seemed not to end. The ticker tape ran on past midnight Mountain Time, we slept a few hours in office chairs, and were back at work at 8 a.m.” (“Commencement,” 13-14). Scarcely less traumatic was the aftermath of the crash. Cunningham particularly recalled the suicides of two of its victims:

One [was] in the large lobby of the Equitable Building, filled with people. I'd come back from a run, paused a moment before going into the office, and casually looked across the lobby, all the way across. A man put a gun to his temple, and you heard the shot. Perhaps a day or two later, I was in the corridor, waiting for a call, when a body landed on the skylight within ten or fifteen feet of where I was standing. (“Interview” 6)

Cunningham soon found himself, like so many others, unemployed. With his older brother Tom, he set off on a year of wandering through the Southwest, trying to eke out a living by freelance writing for trade journals of the day—business magazines, such as *Dry Goods Economist* and *The American Lumberman*. This work was even less profitable than it sounds. Cunningham and his brother made little money and were intermittently homeless. There was, as Cunningham said of this period, “a good deal of starving involved” (“Interview” 11).

In 1931, Cunningham wrote from temporary lodgings in Tucson to the poet Yvor Winters, then a graduate student and instructor at Stanford University. Cunningham had earlier corresponded with Winters about poetry, and on this occasion he explained his plight to Winters and asked “if it was possible to go to college and stay alive”

("Interview" 10). Writing this letter proved to be a life-changing act. Winters immediately wrote back, urging Cunningham to come to California. When he arrived, Winters and his wife, Janet Lewis, put him up in a cottage/shed behind their house, and Cunningham gradually recovered the physical and psychic health that his itinerant existence had undermined. He enrolled at Stanford, majoring in classics as an undergraduate and eventually receiving a doctorate in English. (The title of Cunningham's doctoral dissertation is "Tragic Effect and Tragic Process in Some Plays of Shakespeare, and Their Background in the Literary and Ethical Theory of Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages." Cunningham subsequently cut down and rearranged the dissertation and published it in 1951 as *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespearean Tragedy*.)

Thereafter, Cunningham held a series of teaching posts at the Universities of Hawaii, Chicago, Harvard, and Virginia. In 1953, he was hired by Brandeis University, where he taught until his retirement in 1980. If he felt deep personal debts to such individuals as Winters and Morris Rosenfeld (the owner of a bookstore in Denver who encouraged the teen-aged Cunningham's interest in modern literature), he felt a great professional affection for Brandeis. Not long before his death, he commented on the irony of an Irish-Catholic Westerner's finding a home in an institution created principally by the energies of the Jewish community on the East Coast.

Cunningham was married three times: from 1937 to 1942 to the poet Barbara Gibbs; from 1945 to 1949 to Delora Gallagher, a scholar of Shakespeare and the Renaissance; and from 1950 until his death to Jessie MacGregor Campbell, a scholar of Jane Austen and nineteenth-century fiction. Cunningham had one child, a daughter by his first marriage. For the last thirty years of his life, he lived in Sudbury, Massachusetts.

One other biographical fact deserves mention, especially in connection with Cunningham's Montana background. He was a dedicated smoker. The Canadian writer, Barbara Hodgson, once observed in conversation about Joni Mitchell that the singer-

songwriter's having smoked from an early age was probably a result of her having grown up in Alberta and Saskatchewan. "It's a prairie thing," Hodgson said. Perhaps Cunningham's youth in the same Northern Plains region contributed to his lifelong passion for tobacco. In any case, he wrote a graceful and touching (if not exactly politically correct) epigram entitled "Night-piece" about enjoying cigarettes of an evening in the company of his wife:

Three matches in a folder, you and me.  
I sit and smoke, and now there's only two,  
And one, and none, a small finality  
In a continuing world, a thing to do.  
And you, fast at your book, whose fingers keep  
Their single place as you sift down to sleep. (*The Poems* 63)

Eventually, however, the cigarettes caught up with Cunningham. In later years, he suffered from emphysema, and he died of heart failure, brought on by the disease and by a hip fracture, on March 30, 1985, at Marlborough Hospital in Marlborough, Massachusetts.

### Cunningham and the Plain Style

Cunningham's style is at odds with assumptions we commonly entertain about poetic speech. Many of us share the view set forth by *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (2nd. ed.) when it speaks of "Poetry" as "lofty thought or impassioned feeling expressed in imaginative words." We expect that the diction of

poetry will differ markedly from that of prose. We expect that the language of poems will be more figurative, perhaps, or more sensory. And we anticipate that poetry will feature, in association with its unusual verbal properties, obvious emotional urgency.

Cunningham's poems, however, are little ornament, and his mature verse, far from sounding unconventional, impresses instead by its colloquial directness and clarity. Further, though Cunningham's poems are serious, they are also clever and often are unabashedly humorous.

Cunningham, in brief, writes in "the plain style." This term refers to one of the three "modes of speech" (*genera dicendi*) in which young writers and orators received instruction in the ancient schools of rhetoric and which are discussed in detail by such authors and educators as Cicero and Quintilian. The other two styles are the middle (or pleasant) and the high (or grand). The most important point to make here about the plain style is that our English adjective gives but a poor sense of the original terms for and intentions of the style. In Greek, the words denoting the plain style are *ischnos*, meaning "lean, spare," and, less frequently, *leptos*, meaning "fine, light, delicate." Though Roman writers introduce a wider range of terms for the style, the nearest Latin equivalent to *ischnos* and *leptos* is *subtilis*; and Cicero and Quintilian most often use this term in referring to the plain style. *Subtilis* derives from *subtexo* ("to weave beneath, to connect, to join") and means "subtle, discriminating, finely woven." Cunningham himself alludes to the word's etymological associations when he describes his own plain style as being "crisscrossed and webbed with subtlety and distinctions" (*The Collected Essays* 408). In other words, the plain style aims at nimble sophistication.

An early admiration for the poems of Swift, Landor, and Robinson, all of whom write with impressive directness and cogency, first drew Cunningham to the plain style (“Interview”14). This development was reinforced at Stanford, where, with the Renaissance scholar, W. D. Briggs, Cunningham studied the poetry of Ben Jonson, arguably the most various and effective practitioner of the plain style in English. And from his work *Classics*, Cunningham acquired a deep appreciation of the ancient rhetorical tradition mentioned above. Finally, his youth in Montana and the American West may also have affected the formation of his stylistic preferences. The hardscrabble conditions in which he grew up, plus his experience of dire want during The Great Depression, made him prize the essential in life and literature and shy away from unnecessary embellishment and superfluous decoration.

In view of Cunningham’s interest in the plain style, it is natural that he developed an interest in the epigram, for it is a type of poetry singularly well suited to the style. Epigrams are by definition short, witty poems. Indeed, the etymology of the word indicates the condensed quality of poems in the genre. *Epigramma* means “inscription” in Greek, and in classical times many epigrams were literally inscribed on public monuments to address or commemorate important civic events. A case in point is Simonides’ famous distich for the Spartans who perished defending the pass at Thermopylae against Xerxes’ huge Persian army:

Go tell the Spartans, thou that passest by,  
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.

(Trans. William Lisle Bowles)

If we associate the epigram with "wit," we should think of that quality in terms of dexterous compactness rather than in terms of any particular tone or subject. As Simonides' poem illustrates, epigrams can be serious, even at their most clever. This point is relevant to Cunningham's epigrams, which range from low naughtiness,

Lip was a man who used his head.  
He used it when he went to bed  
With his friend's wife, and with his friend,  
With either sex at either end.        (*The Poems* 55)

to criticism of social hypocrisy,

This is my curse. Pompous, I pray  
That you believe the things you say  
And that you live them, day by day.   (*The Poems* 46)

to broader yet equally trenchant satire,

This Humanist whom no beliefs constrained  
Grew so broad-minded he was scatter-brained.        (*The Poems* 45)

to poignant reflection on the human condition,

Life flows to death as rivers to the sea,  
And life is fresh and death is salt to me.        (*The Poems* 56)

In "On Doctor Drink," Cunningham says, "I like the trivial, vulgar and exalted" (*The Poems* 59), and this might serve as a motto for his epigrams. Their register of subjects and tones includes the humble and the lofty, and everything in between.

As well as epigrams, Cunningham wrote fine poems in more familiar lyric veins. These share, with the epigrams, concentration of statement and rigor of thought, but are



richer in sensory detail and more digressive in argument. “The Dogdays” exemplifies this latter aspect of Cunningham’s work. The title refers to the sultriest and unhealthiest period in summer, a time traditionally associated with the appearance in the evening sky of Sirius, the Dog-star. The poem itself concerns a love that failed.

The morning changes in the sun  
As though the hush were insecure,  
And love, so perilously begun,  
Could never in the noon endure,

The noon of unachieved intent,  
Grown hazy with unshadowed light,  
Where changing is subservient  
To hope no longer, nor delight.

Nothing alive will stir for hours,  
Dispassion will leave love unsaid,  
While through the window masked with flowers  
A lone wasp staggers from the dead.

Watch now, bereft of coming days,  
The wasp in the darkened chamber fly,  
Whirring ever in an airy maze,  
Lost in the light he entered by.

*(The Poems 4-5)*

Cunningham opens his poem by speaking of the early stages of day—morning—and of the early stages of a romantic relationship. However, the relationship is risky—it is “perilously begun”—and it may lack strength to endure the full light of noon and experience. Indeed, with the striking phrase that starts the second stanza—“[t]he noon of unachieved intent”—Cunningham indicates the aspirations or expectations of the original feeling have not been sustained or realized. Life and change go on. But no longer are they accompanied or guided by “hope” or “delight.” In the third stanza, love has evidently succumbed an enervation that does not permit positive action and communication. And at the end of the stanza, Cunningham introduces a wasp that, stunned by the season’s heat and light, flies into a room in which it will lose itself and will be “bereft of coming days.” It will, that is, die.

The image of the wasp deserves special comment and praise. Not only is it striking on its own terms, it also masterfully serves the theme, by rendering conceptual articulation of it unnecessary. Cunningham does not have to tell us that when love goes wrong its light blinds and confuses rather than illuminates. He does not have to speak of the desolation and emotional paralysis we feel when an experience that initially promised to lead us outward to a richer life leads us instead into a baffling labyrinth—“an airy maze”—of disappointment and despair. The image says everything.

Like all of Cunningham’s poetry, “The Dogdays” is powerfully distilled, but it is also more oblique and (what may seem a paradox in view of the obliquity) more imagistic than the work with which he is customarily identified. Cunningham also employs this more richly detailed style in his fifteen-poem verse narrative *To What*

*Strangers, What Welcome* (1964). And we see the style in one of the two poems he wrote explicitly about Montana, poems to which we shall now turn.

### Cunningham and Montana

Cunningham addresses Montana most specifically in “Montana Pastoral,” which he wrote in 1941, and “Montana Fifty Years Ago,” which dates from 1966-67. As its title indicates, “Montana Pastoral,” situates itself in the long tradition of pastoral poetry initiated by such Greek and Roman poets as Theocritus and Virgil. (For a fine discussion of “Montana Pastoral” in relation to the pastoral tradition, see Steven Shankman, “J. V. Cunningham's 'Montana Pastoral' and the Pastoral Tradition,” in Shankman's *In Search of the Classic* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994].) Pastoral verse typically praises the salutary charms and benefits of rural life. The bucolic world of Cunningham’s poem, however, is hardly cheering or nourishing. Nature is not a kindly mother who lavishes grapes and apples on happy harvesters, nor do shepherds pasture sheep and pipe amorous ditties to local nymphs. Instead, Cunningham evokes a harsh and menacing landscape:

I am no shepherd of a child's surmises.

I have seen fear where the coiled serpent rises,

Thirst where the grasses burn in early May

And thistle, mustard, and the wild oat stay.

There is dust in this air. I saw in the heat  
Grasshoppers busy in the threshing wheat.

So to this hour. Through the warm dusk I drove  
To blizzards sifting on the hissing stove,

And found no images of pastoral will,

But fear, thirst, hunger, and this huddled chill.      (*The Poems* 17)

Some years after writing this poem, Cunningham described it as “a curt autobiography . . . in which the details of fear, thirst, hunger, and the desperation of this huddled chill were hardly a just summary of his first twenty years but rather an epigrammatic presentation of the salient motives those years communicated to his later life” (*The Collected Essays* 418). One see what Cunningham means when he characterizes the poem as “curt” and “epigrammatic.” Though “Montana Pastoral” is not an epigram, its argument is compact, as is its form, which consists of five tightly managed iambic pentameter couplets. The poet announces at the outset that he is without illusions—he is “no shepherd of a child’s surmises”—the reason being, he goes on to explain, that experience has schooled him in privation. The serpent has taught him fear. The weedy drought-ridden land has taught him thirst. He has learned hunger from the uncertain harvests, periodically destroyed as they are on the Great Plains by grasshopper plagues. The blizzard has instructed him in his vulnerability to the cold.

According to Cunningham, most of the poem's details derive from springs and summers that he spent as a boy on a dry-land ranch owned by one of Cunningham's

father's friends "thirty-six miles from Billings, over the rimrock in the Wheat Basin country." However, he added that the "huddled chill" came from a later experience. In late fall or early winter of 1930, when he and his brother Tom were driving south from Denver to Santa Fe, they "ran into a sudden blizzard and stayed for some days at a little cabin just short of the top of Raton Pass, just north of the New Mexico border" ("Interview" 9).

Overall, "Montana Pastoral" reads like a compressed version of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). As the Joads do, Cunningham experiences an environment that can be hostile even in the best of times. By the end of the poem he finds himself on the road, and though he does not name the vehicle he drives, it is probably no more reliable than the Joads' Hudson truck. Economic disaster has engulfed the nation, and personal calamities have befallen him.

Though "Montana Fifty Years Ago" draws on impressions of the same dry-land ranch that inspired much of "Montana Pastoral," this later poem, Cunningham related once, "is an attempt to summarize not so much my own experience, but to put into form the kind of situation out at the ranch" ("Interview" 4).

Gaunt kept house with her child for the old man,  
Met at the train, dust-driven as the sink  
She came to, the child white as the alkali.  
To the West distant mountains, the Big Lake  
To the Northeast. Dead trees and almost dead  
In the front yard, the front door locked and nailed,  
A handpump in the sink. Outside, a land

Of gophers, cottontails, and rattlesnakes,  
In good years of alfalfa, oats, and wheat.  
Root cellar, blacksmith shop, milk house, and barn,  
Granary, corral. An old *World Almanac*  
To thumb at night, the child coughing, the lamp smoked,  
The chores done. So he came to her one night,  
To the front room, now bedroom, and moved in.  
Nothing was said, nothing was ever said.  
And then the child died and she disappeared.  
This was Montana fifty years ago.                    (*The Poems* 93)

If we juxtapose this poem with “Montana Pastoral,” we notice several things immediately. For one thing, “Montana Fifty Years Ago” is not spoken in the first person; rather, it is narrated impersonally. For another thing, the poem does not rhyme but is in blank verse—unrhymed iambic pentameter. (At the risk of indulging in overly sensitive reading, we might note that the verse features some interesting expressive prosodic variations. For instance, the trochaic first and third feet in the line, “Nothing was said, nothing was ever said,” suggest the absolute taciturnity of the people described.) For yet another thing, the details of the poem are more numerous and more specifically rendered than those in “Montana Pastoral.” To take an obvious example, the “serpent[s]” of that poem are “rattlesnakes” in “Montana Fifty Years Ago.” Similarly, in the latter poem, Cunningham communicates a sense of drought not by referring generally to parched grasses but by mentioning the dead and near dead trees in the front yard of the ranch and by speaking of the dusty sink and its handpump in the house. So, too, “Montana Fifty

Years Ago” gives us an ampler feeling of daily life than the earlier poem does. The poet enumerates the routines that occupy the characters from dawn to dark—the caring for crops and livestock, the rounds of chores. He provides as well a fuller sense of place by referring to the outbuildings and areas around the house; and he indicates the cultural poverty of the environment by indicating that the only reading material is an old *World Almanac*. And whereas “Montana Pastoral” has only one person in it, the narrator, “Montana Fifty Years Ago” depicts a drama involving three people, the gaunt housekeeper, her employer and (eventually) lover, and the sickly, coughing child whose death ends both the poem and the relationship between the couple.

Another striking difference between the poems concerns their methods of presentation. “Montana Pastoral” is deductive. As was noted previously, the poem moves from a general statement to particular observations that derive from and support the statement. In contrast, “Montana Fifty Years Ago” is inductive. It begins and develops by means of the presentation of particulars and, at the end, draws a general conclusion from them: “This was Montana fifty years ago.”

Moreover, if “Montana Pastoral” is definitive and summary, “Montana Fifty Years Ago” treats its subject reticently. The narrator does not pretend to know all that lies behind what he describes. Like Robinson, who in his great study of domestic passion, “Eros Turannos,” suggests that it is folly to think “the story of a house / Were told, or ever could be,” Cunningham evokes a milieu and a tragedy that occurs within it. But he recognizes, as Robinson does, that he cannot know the whole truth.

The different times and conditions in which Cunningham composed the two poems account for some of the differences between them. “Montana Pastoral” is a young

person's work. Cunningham is discussing experiences that are still raw and recent. If he speaks with blunt authority, it is because his topic is his life, in all its painful immediacy. However, the Cunningham who writes "Montana Fifty Years Ago" is twenty-five years older and sees things from a more mature perspective, which is not to say that the later poem is necessarily better but which is to note that it expresses a self that has survived critical trials and rites of passage and is now more flexibly observant than the wounded young self of "Montana Pastoral" was. Similarly, in the later poem Cunningham views Montana through a wider lens. However unprepossessing or forbidding the ranch seems, Cunningham regards its inhabitants with empathic interest and communicates something universal in their circumstances and sorrows. Critics frequently say—and rightly so—that Cunningham's poetry impresses us through its exactitude and intelligence. But as "Montana Fifty Years Ago" demonstrates, Cunningham's poems can also move us by their quiet, heartfelt acknowledgment that our insight is limited and that we sometimes experience feelings or witness events whose significance eludes definition.

Whether writing of Montana or the world beyond, Cunningham was one of the finest poets in English in the twentieth century. He was as well one of the most original, though his originality is not of a type we readily recognize today. Rather than breaking with tradition, he modulates, enriches, and transforms it from within. If we give Cunningham short shrift in our current anthologies and surveys of our nation's verse, it is because he is so bracingly accomplished in his chosen *métier* and so independent of our narrow fashions. Contemporary critical neglect notwithstanding, his work will always have readers. It is by turns funny, insightful, intellectually stimulating, and moving, and its style is rock solid.



Not long after Cunningham died, X. J. Kennedy wrote a "Terse Elegy for J. V. Cunningham," in which he spoke of Cunningham's having

. . . penned with patient skill and lore immense,  
Prodigious mind, keen ear, rare common sense,  
Only those words he could crush down no more  
Like matter pressured to a dwarf star's core. (113)

And Kennedy added:

Let eyes unborn wake one day to esteem  
His steady, baleful, solitary gleam. (113)

In the meantime, may living eyes continue to read Cunningham's poems for their wit, insight, and generosity, and for their love for the state of his birth and the larger world.

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Timothy Steele