

## POET OF PLAINNESS

RICHARD M. ELMAN

The snow falls  
With its inveterate meaning,  
And I follow the barbed wire  
To trough, to barn, to the house,  
To what strangers, what welcome  
In the late blizzard of time.

The five books of poetry which have thus far been published by J.V. Cunningham yield very few examples of "inveterate meaning." In each poem meanings have been carefully assigned, specified, complicated, even denied. It is additionally noteworthy that Cunningham has rarely, if ever, used what has been called free verse up until now. But as he uses it above it is as sparse, intense, and scrupulously formal as his writings in the traditional measures. This is a poetry of the dying fall, carefully arranged to strike on the word "time." *To What Strangers, What Welcome*, Cunningham's first small collection in some years, is a lovely Alan Swallow pamphlet of fifteen short poems, printed and bound

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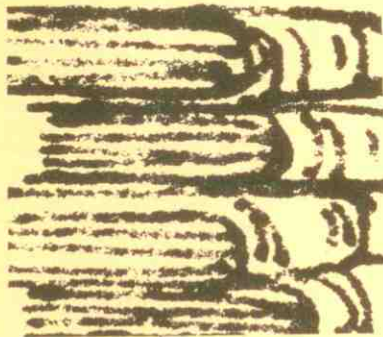
RICHARD M. ELMAN, *novelist and critic, has contributed articles to various magazines, including Commentary and the Saturday Review.*

with fine paper. It would make a lovely gift, a choice manual on the art of poetic diction and versification for the aspiring writer of verse; it is also tough-minded and aware — an example of a personality indistinguishable from its expression in language. When our younger poets look around for models worthy of their imitation, they could benefit greatly by choosing Cunningham, but this does not seem likely. His manner is too skillful to be imitated in a callow way; and there is, after all, something emotionally off-putting about a poet who can compose definitive critical essays in the dispassionate third person about his own writings.

Cunningham's manner of truth-telling may be disturbing, but he is a master of the plain style out of which all variant styles are apt to spring. Like his early mentor, Yvor Winters, he is not a convinced modernist. Again, like Winters, his poetry is as abrasive as his critical writings. There is nothing blunted or politic about Cunningham's satire; it usually goes for the jugular vein. It is poetry of wit, a poetry of allegory and personification as well as metaphor, didactic, syllogistic, but not without strong feelings. In Cunningham's own words:

If I love you — as I do —  
 To the very perfection  
 Of perfect imperfection,  
 It's that I care more for you  
 Than for my feelings for you.

But if self-loathing is one of the dominant emotional responses displayed by such a poetry, there are judg-



ments made about the world which are usually well-aimed. "The poem is the trial," Cunningham has declared. "Experience is defendant, and the jury/Peers of tradition, and *the judge is fury.*" In accord with such a motto — the title of his second book — there has been a never-ending production of certain extremely funny "grub street" epigrams which, although occasionally scurrilous and splenetic, are also a kind of rude justice. Here are a few:

You ask me how *Contempt* who claims to sleep  
 With every woman that has ever been  
 Can still maintain that women are skin deep?  
 They never let him any deeper in.

o o o o

*Soft* found a way to damn me undefended;  
 I was forgiven who had not offended.

o o o o

After some years *Bohemian* came to this —  
 This Maenad with hair down and gaping kiss  
 Wild on the barren edge of under fifty,  
 She would finance his art if he were thrifty.

Combined with his self-styled professionalism which he has expressed as a "white passion" for "exactitude of statement," his skill with the classical moods and measures, a fervent but lapsed Catholicism, an imagery which alternates between alcoholic blariness and a desert aridity, the vision of the poet which emerges from the early epigrams is not calculated to make for good public relations, even among the dwindling audience of poets and critics who still read poetry. If they have not been among Cunningham's targets, they are still apt to share widely divergent views on what is a poem. When

I showed one aspiring critic his verses, I was told: "Ogden Nash takes more liberties."

I find it rather amusing that Cunningham's short lyrics should be measured in terms of the liberties they take. So, apparently, does Cunningham. In a wonderfully mocking verse written some years back entitled *For My Contemporaries* he justified himself in this manner:

How time reverses  
 The proud in heart!  
 I now make verses  
 Who aimed at art.

But I sleep well.  
 Ambitious boys  
 Whose big lines swell  
 With spiritual noise,

Despise me not!  
 And be not queasy  
 To praise somewhat:  
 Verse is not easy. . .

Whether in verse or prose, when Cunningham writes of what he is about, it is as if it were the "history of a style" which he has defined in its native state as "dry, abstract, tightly formal." But because he is a prolific confessor, he has confessed to many early attempts "to court and possess and at the same time disinterestedly to understand roughly what was then called sensibility . . . the fall of light among the tea cups." The rational part of Cunningham's mind rejected this as "the quest of the opal" which "derives its color and attraction from flaws in the stone" and which, as a consequence, is apt to produce waste "and the perception of waste. . . the ring without the jewel, the promise without the fulfillment." But even in his most passionate commitment to the defense of reason, to the distinction between subject and object, Cunningham admitted that there were values in the quest: "curious accessions of insight and energy, intimations beyond the routine." It is this tension between these two ways of knowing which is not only felt and central but often enough explicit in his poems. In an early *Timor Dei* Cunningham wrote:

Thou didst pervade my being  
 Like marsh air steeped in brine;  
 Thou didst invade my seeing  
 Till all I saw was thine.

But within the same book, in a poem entitled "Reason

and Nature," after alluding to the myth of Narcissus who stared into a pond to see his face, Cunningham pointed out:

If the water  
Concealed it, could he, drowning see it  
better?

I know both what I see  
And what I think, to alter and to be,  
And the vision  
Informs that vision of confusion.

By insisting on the "sullen clarity/of passions in their station, moved by propriety," Cunningham was leaving his verses open to the charge of priggishness. The results were often "cold landmarks for reflection's gaze." His world might have been the mind, but his mind — being of the world — gave off few hints that it was aware of its precarious tenancy. But whenever these hints were present the poetry was of an extremely high order of intelligence, consciousness and formal perfection. Cunningham had said his aim was "to specify the void." Was it only accidental that his most moving lyrics asked questions? In *The Judge is Fury*, Cunningham asked:

Who knows his will?

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## THE TRACK OF THE WOLF

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Who knows what mood  
His hours fulfill?  
His griefs conclude?

There followed a brief vivid declaration about the sustenances of illusion before the poem again concluded on questions:

Who knows what themes,  
What lunar senses,  
Compel his dreams?

There is a haunted quality to Cunningham's mature poetry. It is as if despite a strenuous application of his rational faculties the void has become an abyss "austere/as winter air." Cunningham echoes Dante's *e la sua volontate* but he also asks questions of personal identity: Who are you? Where am I? Who? In one poem confusion gets the better of him; he writes:

He trembles  
Though the taut face dissembles.  
I know him: I am he.

But, though such reaffirmations of knowing made his vision of the void momentarily coherent, he was never rid of his dreaded questioning. *To What Strangers, What Welcome* is a diary of a journey west, presumably to the dry farm regions of his birth, but the quiet but terrible irony is that the return to the source is outdistanced by the time which is bringing the poet to his own dissolution. Cunningham's perception of this process of time is a kind of refrain to the title poem; time becomes, at last, his "mute exile." Finding in human love "unfulfilled fulfillment," Cunningham argues with himself:

"We live in the given. Consequence  
And lack of consequence, both fail us.  
Good is what we can do with evil.

But the void remains unspecified, "as much my own as is the thought of death." In the final poem in this allegorical cycle of search and return, the poet sits "in the last warmth/of a New England fall," thinking he is:

"A premise of identity  
Where the lost hurries to be lost,  
Both in its own best interests  
And in the interests of life."

It is in the latter interest that his poetry must be recommended.