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“On J. V. Cunningham”  
Approx. 1,150 Words

## On J. V. Cunningham

*The Poems of J. V. Cunningham*

Edited with an Introduction and Commentary by Timothy Steele

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Any poet would die to have his or her work issued in an edition like this one. (In fact, such editions are created *only* for the dead.) It's a handsomely designed volume presenting the author's entire poetic output, eruditely introduced and thoroughly annotated by a partisan scholar. The role of poet is played, in this case, by J. V. Cunningham, while poet/professor Timothy Steele performs the scholar's role with scrupulous attention to both the broad themes and the details of Cunningham's achievement.

For the reader, the question is whether Cunningham's work is worth this sort of treatment. The jacket copy argues in his favor: “The lifework in verse of one of the finest and liveliest American poets of the twentieth century,” it reads in part. I suspect most readers will disagree. Cunningham was a clever craftsman, and he wrote a dozen (at least) admirable poems; but his devotion to one of the deadest of dead forms, the epigram, makes reading his work a

frustrating experience, because no matter how well he constructs these exercises, there’s just no *there* there.

Not to say that Cunningham’s work is dismissable. He is one of the more interesting minor poets in the American canon—and this isn’t meant as faint praise. After all, the majority of any poetic tradition consists of minor poets; some of them achieve a handful of major poems, others produce consistently non-major work with a character so distinctive that it makes them well worth reading. Cunningham, I think, falls into the latter group.

The qualities that distinguish Cunningham as a poet are his intellectual wit, distrust of openly emotional language, a sly sense of humor, and an addiction to brevity at almost any cost. In fact, where most poets who work in traditional forms do so because those forms offer musical dimensions they can’t write without, Cunningham uses verse (metrical and rhymed most often, sometimes syllabic) as an engine of compression. Trouble is, he seldom seems able to tell when density crushes sense. Here’s an example, entitled “With a Book of Clavier Music”:

Discursive sense, unthought, unclear,  
Is in this music planned;  
Error is not of nature here  
But of the human hand.

Even his admiring editor, in his note to this piece, goes to extraordinary lengths (quoting a long passage on Baroque musical notation from a music reference book) to explain what the lines might mean—but finally admits defeat:

If Cunningham has in mind this Baroque practice, “unthought,” “unclear,” and “error” refer to the music’s being incompletely indicated in the score; and the

“human hand” is the composer’s. However, Cunningham may mean the adjectives “unthought” and “unclear” to indicate that music, though having a “planned” structure, is not limited to specifically articulated ideas or material contents. If this interpretation is correct, then “error” is a synonym for “mistake”; and the “human hand” is that of a performer who fails to render a musical score (unerring in its conception or “nature”) as its composer wrote it. Cunningham may also be referring to the idea that music “plans” (in the sense of “arranges” rather than “intends”) inchoate impressions and wandering reveries.

This is a long way to go to avoid saying that the poem fails. Unfortunately, the majority of Cunningham’s poems fail in the same way, walking stiffly along in a daze from having their heads too tightly wrapped in restrictive forms.

When Cunningham succeeds, it’s because he achieves a fine balance between musical form and emotional disclosure. This occurs in the epigrams on occasion; here are a few examples:

*They*

Of all the gods that were  
Remains one deity:  
*Who do they think they are?*  
*They can’t do this to me.*

\* \* \* \*

I had gone broke, and got set to come back,  
And lost, on a hot day and fast track,  
On a long shot at long odds, a black mare

By Hatred out of Envy by Despair.

\* \* \* \*

I married in my youth a wife.  
 She was my own, my very first.  
 She gave the best years of her life.  
 I hope nobody gets the worst.

\* \* \* \*

*Night-piece*

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  
 Its single place as you sift down to sleep.

When Cunningham lets the music flow a bit more freely, he achieves even more satisfying effects, as in “Montana Fifty Years Ago”:

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.

Here's another, rigorously formal but powered by genuine feeling, entitled "To My Wife":

And does the heart grow old? You know  
In the indiscriminate green  
Of summer or in earliest snow  
A landscape is another scene,

Inchoate and anonymous,  
And every rock and bush and drift  
As our affections alter us  
Will alter with the season's shift.

So love by love we come at last,  
As through the exclusions of a rhyme,  
Or the exactions of a past,  
To the simplicity of time,

The antiquity of grace, where yet  
We live in terror and delight  
With love as quiet as regret  
And love like anger in the night.

Writing this good needs no critical excuses, and Mr. Steele keeps his distance in the notes in deference to the obvious.

Which leads to one question that lingers after one has finished this volume: Why does Mr. Steele labor so mightily to make Cunningham look good? His critical notes consume 68 pages at the back of the book, not counting a somewhat condescending appendix in which Steele explains the poet's versification to readers he seems to assume are unfamiliar with the tradition.

Perhaps Mr. Steele took too seriously one of Cunningham's finest poems, "To the Reader":

Time will assuage.  
Time's verses bury  
Margin and page  
In commentary.

For gloss demands  
A gloss annexed  
Till busy hands  
Blot out the text,

And all's coherent.  
Search in this gloss  
No text inherent:  
The text was loss.

The gain is gloss.

Gloss may be gain in Cunningham's poetry, but in Steele's commentary it too often serves to highlight Cunningham's defects instead, distracting from his real achievement: the twenty or so strong, musical, trenchant poems upon which his reputation must finally rest.