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## Cummings, Sweeney, and the Controversy over "Thanksgiving (1956)"

Kevin Kiely

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*To Pamela Mary Brown*

My staunch friend Jack Sweeney (himself a poet) who runs the Harvard "record room," & this year is also teaching.

—E. E. Cummings, 13 March 1957

The epigraph from Cummings points to John L. Sweeney's attributes: friend, poet, "runner" of the Poetry Room, and professor. John L. Sweeney (1906-1986) was the Irish-American millionaire, poet, patron, and curator of the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard from 1942-1969. Sweeney's copy of Cummings' *The Enormous Room* (1922), one of fifteen personally signed volumes from the poet to Sweeney, is inscribed "To Jack and Máire from Marion and EEC Merry Christmas and love 1959," with a crayon drawing of an elephant (UCD Spec-C: 36.W.3). Cummings' distinguished career as a poet should not overshadow his work in other genres, as when he responded to his detention during wartime by writing *The Enormous Room*. This is a book which was widely reviewed in post-World War I America and was later reprinted in England by Jonathan Cape. Among its supporters were Ezra Pound and T. E. Lawrence. Though in the '20s, '30s and '40s Cummings had befriended writers associated with Sweeney (such as Conrad Aiken and Archibald MacLeish), he and Sweeney did not meet until the early 1950s.

In the 1970s, while researching his biography of Cummings *Dreams in the Mirror*, Richard Kennedy wrote to Sweeney, whose responses are now at the Houghton Library. These letters locate the Cummings-Sweeney friendship to the 1950s without giving an exact year: "first met EEC at Mt Holyoke . . . can not remember year; Cummings had been a guest at the Lamont Library Reading Room 1952-3." Sweeney adds that "it was at the home of William and Alice James that we came to know Cummings and Marion well" ("undated" 1970s, Houghton). As Sweeney also promoted Cid Corman and the *avant-garde* represented by Robert Creeley and Charles Olson, his promotion of Cummings was in keeping with his wide sensibility extending over many poets and their poetry.

*Xaipe* (“Rejoice”), published in 1950, displays the typography that established Cummings’ reputation as an *avant-garde* poet of the time, and the collection contained several politically incorrect poems that foreshadow the later controversy over “Thanksgiving (1956).” For example, a protest poem against Roosevelt begins:

F is for foetus(a  
  
punkslapping  
mobsucking  
gravypissing poppa but  
who just couldn’t help it no (CP 635)

“The poem is primarily abusive” writes Robert Wegner, “depending for its effects on the force of expletives rather than on any device of precision or witty association” (131). Poem #46 of *Xaipe* (CP 644) was deemed by some to be anti-Semitic, and some critics associated Cummings’ use of an offensive racial slur with Pound’s racism as broadcast on Rome Radio during World War II.<sup>1</sup> However, this did not affect Cummings’ reputation when compared with Pound’s infamous incarceration for treason. F. O. Matthiessen viewed Cummings as merely a “romantic anarchist” (119). Cummings’ poem “Thanksgiving (1956)” occasioned quite a different controversy. It is significant that while Cummings never read poem #46 in public (Kennedy 434), he often read “Thanksgiving (1956)” and it was “always met with a spontaneous burst of applause, the only poem in a program that the audience would single out for this treatment” (Kennedy 458).

Sweeney “himself a poet” is so designated by Cummings—except that Sweeney’s poetic output was small and sporadic, with his first poems published in *transition* in 1936 and 1938. “An Arch for Janus” was written at the invitation of the Harvard chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, published in the *Harvard Library Bulletin* (1954), and significantly praised by T. S. Eliot. Himself a Harvard man, Eliot would write to Sweeney in 1955 to say he liked the latter’s Phi Beta Kappa poem, “An Arch for Janus.” In the letter, Eliot noted that while he found some lines difficult to scan, he nevertheless found the poem moving, in particular its reference to John Quincy Adams (UCDA LA52/102).

In 1961, Sweeney had four poems published in *Poetry* (Chicago), the only time his work appeared there. Three of his poems also appeared in an

anthology edited by Conrad Aiken, *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (1944, 1963), which included a broad range of poets from Emily Dickinson to Anne Sexton. Sweeney's poems were never collected, though he made a recording in May of 1978, reading eleven of his poems—his entire known output (Woodberry, Harvard W45L6). Sweeney's poems are: "Separation," "Exaction," "The Wind's Head," "An Arch for Janus," "Projection for John Dee," "Sunion," "Premonitory Memorial," "The Bed of Diarmuid and Grainne in Glen Columcille," "Loch Inchiquin," "A Consideration," and "Christmas Poem."

Regardless of Cummings' reputation (he too endured neglect), he was celebrated in a special edition of the *Harvard Wake* in the spring of 1946 edited by José Garcia Villa with Sweeney in the background as curator of the Woodberry Poetry Room. This issue of the *Harvard Wake* included colleagues of Sweeney's, such as the poet and classicist Horace Gregory who considered Cummings "one of the finest lyric poets of all time" (qtd. in Norman 314). When Cummings delivered his *i: six nonlectures* as Charles Eliot Norton professor at Harvard in 1952-53, Sweeney organized the recording of the lectures (including the poems read by the poet), but his patronage went far beyond these actions. The nonlectures are typical of the poet's anarchic style: direct, conversational, anecdotal, and include readings of such famous poems as Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," Burns' "My Love is like a Red, Red Rose," Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed," and Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Only the fifth nonlecture, "i & now & him," has an extended section of Cummings reading his own poems, introducing them by saying: "I turn with good courage to a few brief poems; letting them (at any rate) sing for themselves" (*nonlectures* 82).

In writing to Sweeney, Cummings occasionally added elephants (in blue crayon) to his postcards, a sign of the esteem he had for Sweeney. Richard S. Kennedy notes that "for special people [Cummings] signed his name accompanied by an elephant drawing" (32). Possibly also, these totemic elephants refer to the Hindu god of success, Ganesha. Dupee and Stade identify the aesthetic of Cummings' epistolary style (and in particular his typographical presentation on the page) as beginning in the post-1918 period, "when he began using a typewriter" (xviii). This synthesis in style is succinctly stated: "Insofar as conscious art is detectible in his letters it is recognizably akin to the art of his verse and prose, since he was as thoroughly all of a piece as any fine and celebrated poet has ever been" (xv). In

completing their appraisal of Cummings in the epistolary genre, Dupee and Stade correctly note that in his letter-writing, “the medium is notably different but the voice, with its disciplined spontaneity, is the same” (xvi). Academic scholarship draws on letters from poets and writers as hugely significant material *per se*; such letters can be explored for riches alongside the writers’ more formally creative works. This is especially so in Cummings’ case where the poet and the letter writer are closely related. Sweeney’s “safe-keeping” of not only Cummings’ letters to him—amounting to eighty-two items—but also of all the letters he received from the poets he championed is an act of patronage in that he was amassing important literary artifacts of modernism for posterity.

After his year as Norton professor at Harvard, Cummings was suffering from nervous exhaustion and returned to Silver Lake with his wife Marion to recuperate at Joy Farm, their New Hampshire homestead. However, he missed the companionship of the Sweeneys: “Marion and her undersigned have mightily missed you & you Máire!” (8 Aug. 1953, UCD LA52/75). Months later he felt the same: “Marion-&-I miss you-&-Máire tray bo cool!” (15 Jan. 1954, UCD LA52/75). While these latter one-line greetings on individual postcards cannot be classified as poetry or verse, as evidence of Cummings’ distinctive style, they remain interesting.

In 1956, Cummings called on Sweeney’s help in the controversy over his poem “Thanksgiving (1956).” The year began with Sweeney writing: “as you know I have always felt very deeply the truth of your ‘dying is fine)but Death!’ While my father was dying I grasped this truth more firmly by seeing it. He remarkably and I think beautifully lived his real self with contentment and ease and grace while he was dying” (18 Feb. 1956, Houghton). Unfortunately, Sweeney made no comment about the elegy he wrote for his father, P. M. Sweeney, titled “Premonitory Memorial.”

Sweeney, together with Archibald MacLeish and David McCord, executive secretary of the Harvard Fund and chairman of the Boston Arts Festival Committee, invited Cummings as Boston Festival Poet for 1957.<sup>2</sup> The honor came with a stipend of \$500 plus travelling expenses, with a request that Cummings write a poem for the occasion. The previous year’s recipient, MacLeish, would present the Festival Medal. An audience of between 6,000 and 8,000 was expected to gather on the lawn of the Boston Public Garden, next to the Boston Common that Sweeney’s penthouse overlooked.

Among the festival poets before 1957 had been Irish writer Padraic Colum, as well as Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg. Cummings considered the

offer and duly replied that he could not attend or accept the honor because of the demand for a poem: "I realize what a 'festival poem' should be; something quite foreign to my own feeling" (qtd. in Kennedy 453). However, after McCord said that he could submit whatever poem he wished, Cummings sent him "Thanksgiving (1956)." Months passed and Cummings heard nothing. His poem was inspired by the Hungarian Uprising of October 1956:

**Thanksgiving (1956)**

a monsterring horror swallows  
this unworld me by you  
as the god of our fathers' fathers bows  
to a which that walks like a who

but the voice-with-a-smile of democracy  
announces night & day  
"all poor little peoples that want to be free  
just trust in the u s a"

suddenly uprose hungary  
and she gave a terrible cry  
"no slave's unlife shall murder me  
for i will freely die"

she cried so high thermopylae  
heard her and marathon  
and all prehuman history  
and finally The UN

"be quiet little hungary  
and do as you are bid  
a good kind bear is angary  
we fear for the quo pro quid"

uncle sam shrugs his pretty  
pink shoulders you know how  
and he twitches a liberal titty  
and lisps "i'm busy right now"

so rah-rah-rah democracy  
let's all be as thankful as hell  
and bury the statue of liberty  
(because it begins to smell). (CP 711)

In every respect, the poem is quite clear in its self-justificatory denuncia-

tion of America's shirking from defending Hungary in the period of its occupation by Soviet Russia. The Soviet troops ended Hungary's revolt mercilessly. Whatever we may say about Cummings' grasp of American Cold War foreign policy, he demanded national action; however, the poem does not specify what kind of action. The protest accuses his country of a breach of trust, strongly voiced in the last stanza. Cummings sees the weakening of the democratic principle of upholding international freedom in this instance as cause for public protest. Ultimately, the poem is a plea for idealism rather than any practical political policy, since American troops would never have entered Hungary in 1956 at the risk of escalating the Cold War.

In May 1957, after the Boston Arts Festival Committee found the poem, as Kennedy states, "contrary to the spirit of the Festival" (455), Cummings sent a cablegram stating his lack of interest in attending: "kindly therefore consider our association terminated upon receipt of this" (qtd. in Norman 334-35). Peter Temple of the Festival Committee phoned, trying "to persuade Cummings to give them something else" (Kennedy 455). One of Cummings' biographers, Charles Norman, refers to phone calls and a meeting with Temple without offering any hearsay content (334-35). On seeing the poem in question, Temple disapproved of its appearing in the Boston newspapers on the day of the festival, and, according to Cummings' account, wrote that "neither would anybody dare to give it the slightest publicity" (qtd. in Kennedy 455; Sawyer-Lauçanno 513). Spectacularly, Sweeney entered the fray. Of course, he knew the poem from the previous year, since the poet had sent it to him in November 1956. Sweeney had responded to Cummings in February 1957, revealing his own pugnacity and support: "Bravo 'Thanksgiving 1956'" (Houghton). And, a further postcard: "Viva La Libertine!" (30 Mar. 1957, Houghton). Sweeney's support remained strong; as will be seen, he was quite unabashed by the Boston Festival Committee. His support also points to Sweeney's faith in the poem and its linking of politics and poetry.

In his official communications to the Festival Committee, Sweeney's tone was different from McCord's. Sweeney not only supported the poem but surreptitiously pleaded to the committee to support the poet's individual voice: "[He] had written the poem to vent his anger at the Eisenhower-Dulles response to the Hungarian crisis and to try to express his admiration for the courage of the Hungarians," Kennedy writes (454). Sweeney was politically active but diplomatic. He knew that Cummings had declined to

take part in the festival and was working carefully to find a compromise to allow the poet to read. There was much negotiation, and Sweeney exchanged many phone calls with all parties concerned. Not all the evidence of these calls and negotiations has survived; however, Charles Norman presents some of the evidence (334-35). Cummings' brief but crucial letter of May 1957 to Sweeney attested to a resolution: "Temple considered your gesture magnificent." He did not give details of the "gesture." Cummings concluded to Sweeney: "McCord suggests you choose appropriate poems for the Boston Festival Audience" ("undated" May 1957, UCD LA52/75). It seems then that McCord agreed to accept Sweeney's imprimatur on what was acceptable for Cummings to read and so effectively allowed the poet to make his own choice. Freedom of speech would reign. The debacle was over. MacLeish introduced the Cummings poetry reading at The Boston Arts Festival at 8.30 p.m. Sunday, 23 June, to an audience of over 7,000. Robert Taylor in the *Boston Herald* wrote: "With wicked mimicry [Cummings] caught the intonations of a fatuous politician; with delicacy and sentiment he recalled his parents; with unalloyed disdain he read a poem (called 'thanksgiving') denouncing official apathy during the Hungarian revolt. Expressing a strong point of view with Swiftian savagery, it caused gasps among the audience, but was received most warmly" ("Reading" 14).

Writing to Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, who was among the Sweeney party at the reading, noted the diversity of the audience: "the two Merwins [Bill & Dodo], us, Allen [Tate], Moira Sweeney, Bill Alfred—all ages, all degrees of innocence and cynicism," and then commented that "Cummings read outrageous and sentimental poems, good and bad of both kinds" (Lowell 280). It seems that "outrageous" most likely referred to "Thanksgiving (1956)." If so, it indicates how open Sweeney was to a range of poetry, including protest poetry at a public performance. (Three years later Lowell would, as festival poet, recite "For the Union Dead," also a protest poem.)

A few weeks after Cummings' festival reading, Sweeney sent a press cutting to Cummings from *The New York Times* showing that a public protest about Hungary had caught his attention: "Miss Liberty Marks 73d Birthday . . . Speakers paid special tribute to the Hungarian struggle for independence from the Soviet Union" ("Miss Liberty" 16), and he also sent a postcard from London to cheer on the poet: "Rod Steiger was overheard in a London bookshop asking for the poems of eec" (9 Sept. 1957, Hough-

ton). It is probable that Sweeney, too, would have absorbed in his own way some of the exertions of getting Cummings through this event from start to finish. Marion Cummings wrote to Charles Norman: “The Festival reading was a great strain. An audience of 7000 & background of traffic noises, dogs barking, children screaming in the gardens & air planes overhead. . . . Unfortunately it was in the 90s & between that & the air conditioned restaurants etc. C. [Cummings] came back here with his medal & a dreadful gripe. He’s had a fever all week & has been very wretched” (qtd. in Norman 338). Sweeney’s actions as patron in relation to this reading are considerable, especially in terms of his complete support for what was inherently a political poem, showcased in public through his intervention. The event shows that he cared less for committee arts policy than the maverick autonomous voice of the poet in asserting his personal truth.

In the new year, Cummings wrote to Sweeney about a story he had been reading with a distinctly Irish connection: “may all the blessings of heaven be upon Michael O’Donovan for his *First Confession*” (8 Jan. 1958, UCD LA52/75). O’Donovan, who wrote under the name Frank O’Connor, had given a series of lectures at Harvard in 1953 and 1954, which were later published.<sup>3</sup> Cummings and Marion decided on a trip to Europe for the summer of 1959 and forwarded their travel plans, which included a wish to visit Sweeney in Ireland (16 May 1959, UCD LA52/75). When Sweeney returned from Portugal, he replied magnanimously: “wonderful! The week commencing Monday May 25 would suit us fine” (undated [May 1959], Houghton). The poet and his wife were booked on the Queen Mary to arrive in Southampton, thereafter “visiting London-Dublin-Clare-Shannon-Sicily-Paris-Verona” (16 May 1959, UCD LA52/75). When they arrived at the Sweeneys’ house on 28 May, Marion contracted influenza and Sweeney’s doctor attended her. Meanwhile Cummings revelled in “the vocality of the locality” (qtd. in Kennedy 472). Sweeney’s hospitality was a fine art in itself as he drove them from Corofin to Dublin to continue their vacation (8 June 1959, UCD LA52/75). Such graciousness and hospitality was part of the patron’s actions on behalf of many of his guests. Marion wrote from aboard the *R.M.S. Mauretania* to MacNeill Sweeney: “I must say that the lovely things out my window—the swans, the lake, the castle ruins and the soft hills made it the pleasantest illness I ever had.” She insisted that she “pay the medical bill owing to Dr McNamara, and send something to Bridey, the maid” (19 June 1959, UCD LA52/75).

In September, Sweeney wrote a revealing note to Cummings hinting at

his own dark brooding and dysphoria, showing he could speak freely with him: “I’m booked to fly Bostonward on August 24 and the prospect is darkening my spirits. I’ve even run out of adrenalin recently: can’t get myself into a state about people and things that don’t concern me. A very low ebb or neap or whatever—very low!” (12 July 1959, Houghton). His postcard to Cummings reveals this dark melancholic side to his personality in contrast to the mild levity noted by other of his correspondents. This intensity is also in his poems. In “Projection for John Dee,” melancholy is evoked when the sixteenth century neo-Platonist mathematician returns in crisis to his library at Mortlake—not unlike Sweeney facing a return to the Woodberry Poetry Room. Dee is described as “exiled from hope, / No aery sprite, no fishy slave / No sudden music will ever serve his part” (lines 14-16). Dee rests his hope in Uriel, an angel who is called upon “to appease, console, rejoice / The still vext wisdom of his riddled heart” (lines 19-20). For Sweeney at this moment in time, Boston seemed a dark prospect, and his usual frenetic immersion amidst poets, their needs and forthcoming events at the Woodberry, seemed of no great concern. However, he got beyond this affliction to spend another ten years in Boston. Significantly, he had a friend in Cummings, who treated him as a fellow poet—an aspect of Cummings’ biography and epistolary history that has been neglected. Indeed, within a few months, Sweeney shared his wit and interest as in the following, sent to Cummings about an overheard conversation in a London restaurant that had amused him: “He: but darling, for Pound you’ve got to have a huge knowledge of background. Her: Oh yes, yes, worse than Eliot, worse than Eliot!” (24 Sept. 1959, Houghton). The humor in this criticism of Pound’s and Eliot’s work is located in the value of “worse” associated with “knowledge.” Sweeney’s alertness to the exchange and his willingness to share its humor indicates his recovery from the “darkening” and his immersion into the work of the Woodberry.

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#### Notes

1. [Editor’s note] For discussions of this poem and the controversy that followed its publication, see Kennedy (431-434), Friedman, *Growth* (154-155), and Webster, “‘hatred bounces’.”
2. David McCord (1897-1997), Harvard Graduate 1921, was a poet and editor of *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*.

3. See Frank O'Connor, *The Mirror in the Roadway: A Study of the Modern Novel*, based on a series of lectures at the Harvard Summer School on Joyce, Lawrence, Hardy, Austen, Flaubert, Dickens and Freud.

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