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## Three Memorials

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## Three Memorials

Michael Webster

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### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

### **Phillip L. Gerber**

In August, 2005, we received the following sad news from Eugenia Gerber, wife of Phillip 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 R. (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.<sup>2</sup> 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.
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—. "Boswell in America: The Case of Charles Norman." *Spring New Series* 2 (1993): 57-69. Available online at: <http://www.gvsu.edu/english/cummings/issue2/Gerber2.htm>.

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