

31 QUOTATIONS



J. V. Cunningham

(1911-1985)

J. V. Cunningham is almost unknown, yet the poet Richard Wilbur called him “our best epigrammatic poet.” He excels at strongly rhymed couplets. As a teenager working at the Denver Stock Exchange he witnessed two suicides in the days following the stock market crash of 1929. He rode freight trains during the Great Depression of the 1930s, doing odd jobs. Yvor Winters the poet and critic befriended Cunningham, let him live free in a shed on his property and helped him earn degrees at Stanford. The two poets were both Neoclassicists, a small minority in a period of expressionistic Modernist innovation. Their aesthetics emphasize economy, clarity, balance, antithesis, wit, formality, and morality. They write in traditional meters against the overwhelming 20th-century tide of free verse. During World War II, Cunningham taught mathematics to Air Force pilots. After the war he taught writing and English at University of Chicago, University of Virginia, Washington University, Harvard, and Brandeis. He is an intellectual poet, translated the Latin poet Martial and wrote several hundred short poems, many epigrams in the style of the Latin poets, often politically incorrect, witty and ribald:

GOD

God is love. Then by inversion
Love is God, and sex conversion.

MONISM

The Monist who reduced the swarm
Of being to a single form,
Emptying the universe for fun,
Required two A's to think them one.

LIBERALS

This Humanist whom no beliefs constrained
Grew so broad-minded he was scatter-brained.

NEW CRITICS

Here lies New Critic who would fox us
With his poetic paradoxes.
Though he lies here rigid and quiet,
If he could speak he would deny it.

BOHEMIANISM

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.

SEX

You wonder why Drab sells her love for gold?
To have the means to buy it when she's old.

Lady, of anonymous flesh and face
In the half-light, in the rising embrace
Of my losses, in the dark dress and booth,
The stripper of the gawking of my youth.
Lady, I see not, care not, what you are.
I sit with beer and bourbon at this bar.

Good Fortune, when I hailed her recently,
Passed by me with the intimacy of shame
As one that in the dark had handled me
And could no longer recollect my name.

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.

MEN

It is a pact men make, and seal in flesh,
To be so busy with their own desires
Their loves may be as busy with their own,
And not in union. Though the two enmesh
Like gears in motion, each with each conspires
To be at once together and alone.

WOMEN

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.

LOVE

And what is love? Misunderstanding, pain,
Delusion, or retreat? It is in truth
Like an old brandy after a long rain,
Distinguished, and familiar, and aloof.

UNREQUITED

The dry soul rages. The unfeeling feel
With the dry vehemence of the unreal.
So I in the Idea of your arms, unwon,
Am as the real in the unreal undone.

FEMINISM

Career was feminine, resourceful, clever.
You'd never guess to see her she felt ever
By a male world oppressed. How much they weigh!
Even her hand disturbed her as she lay.

Kiss me goodbye, to whom I've only been
Cause for uncloistered virtue, not for sin.

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

CURSE

This is my curse. Pompous, I pray
That you believe the things you say
And that you live them, day by day.

DUALITY

I who by day am function of the light
Am constant and invariant by night.

PAIN

Soft found a way to damn me undefended:
I was forgiven who had not offended.
The man who goes for Christian resignation
Will find his attitude his occupation.

Time heals not: it extends a sorrow's scope
As goldsmiths gold, which we may wear like hope.

LOST IN THE LIGHT

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.

MEMOIRS AND FICTION

Fiction is fiction: its one theme
Is your allegiance to your scheme.
Memoir is memoir: there your heart
Awaits the judgment of your art.
But memoir in fictitious guise
Is telling truth by telling lies.

PLEA

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

DEATH

Life flows to death as rivers to the sea,
And life is fresh and death is salt to me.

All in due time: love will emerge from hate,
And the due deference of truth from lies.
If not quite all things come to those who wait
They will not need them: in due time one dies.

When I shall be without regret
And shall mortality forget,
When I shall die who lived for this,
I shall not miss the things I miss.
And you who notice where I lie
Ask not my name. It is not I.

From almost naught to almost all I flee,
And almost has almost confounded me,
Zero my limit, and infinity.

Naked I came, naked I leave the scene,
And naked was my pastime in between.

EPITAPHS

Within this mindless vault
Lie Tristan and Isolt
Tranced in each other's beauties.
They had no other duties.

Here lies my wife. Eternal peace
Be to us both with her decease.

An old dissembler who lived out his lie
Lies here as if he did not fear to die.

