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An Interview with J. V. Cunningham

Timothy Steele

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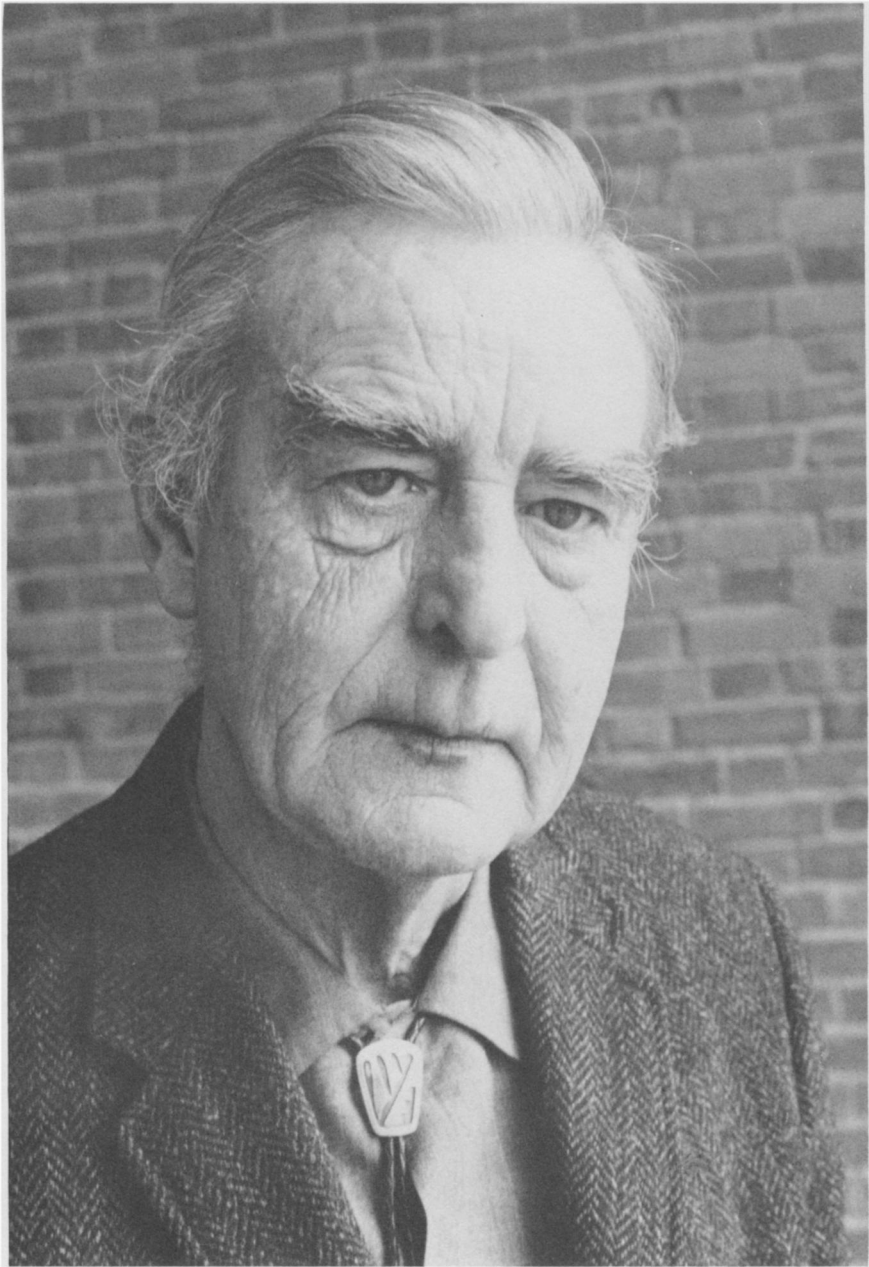
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An Interview with J. V. Cunningham

Timothy Steele

The following interview took place during the afternoons of September 12th, 13th, and 14th of 1983 in the basement study of J. V. Cunningham's home in Sudbury, Massachusetts. Though Cunningham had expressed doubts about being interviewed, he approached the occasion cordially. At one point in earlier correspondence, he had suggested: "The session—or sessions—should be planned, but still should have an oral context—like Homeric epic—to compare big things with little." Following this suggestion, I sent in advance a roster of questions, and these provided the basis of discussion. Once the interview began, however, it ranged independently over many topics concerning Cunningham's writing and career.

Anyone who meets Cunningham and who has read his poetry cannot help but be struck by the extraordinary—one might say almost physiognomic—resemblance between the man and his work. Lean and acute, Cunningham conveys an impression of great intelligence and scrupulosity. He is no more given to wasting words in conversation than to wasting them in poems, and when he says something one feels in the utterance a weight of care and reflection. At the same time, his speech and personality possess a quiet sympathy which makes him an engaging as well as an enlightening conversationalist. As the tapes wound from spool to spool on the low table between us, he spoke with precision yet without any indication of constraint.

J. V. Cunningham was born in Cumberland, Maryland, on August 23, 1911. As he remarks in the interview, his family moved west when he was young, and he grew up mainly in Billings, Montana, and Denver. After his graduation from high school and a semester at St. Mary's College in Kansas, Cunningham worked in Denver and traveled for a while in the Southwest, doing freelance writing for the trade journals. Eventually, he entered Stanford University, where he received a B.A. in Classics and a Ph.D. in English. He subsequently taught at a variety of universities, including Hawaii, Chicago, and Virginia. In 1953 he joined the English Department at Brandeis, where he served until his retirement in 1980. As many readers know, he died on March 28, 1985, before this interview could be printed.

If twentieth-century literature has been distinguished by a number of notable poet/critics, Cunningham is arguably in a class by himself as a poet/scholar. In addition to publishing his remarkable poems, he has produced scholarship impressive equally for its range of interests and for its rigor of historical and philological analysis. He has written a landmark monograph on Shakespeare's tragedies, *Woe or Wonder*, an important study of Emily Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson: Lyric and Legend*, and seminal essays on, among other subjects, the Roman poet Statius, the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, and Wallace Stevens' verse.

Yet it is as a poet that he is best known. At the age of twenty, he began publishing poems in magazines like *Poetry* and *Commonweal*, and now his poetic output, though comparatively compressed (his *Collected Poems and Epigrams* runs to only 142 pages), represents the steady achievement of over half a century of work. Of the work itself, commentators have frequently and rightly praised its agility and wit and, less frequently but no less rightly, its considerable emotional power. These characteristics are clearly displayed in Cunningham's epigrams, a form which, popular in Antiquity and the Renaissance, he has almost singlehandedly revived in this century. Overall, Cunningham's poetry exhibits a style which is lively and lucid and free of rhetorical eccentricities. This style has classical antecedents, but Cunningham's subject matter and approach have always been contemporary and fresh. In this sense, his poetry is a happy blend of traditional technique and original vision, and he richly deserves his place as one of the most moving and skillful poets in American literature.

T.S.

TS: Could you tell us a little about your family background and your youth?

JVC: I was born in Cumberland, Maryland. Now my mother's family was an old Irish-Catholic family in western Maryland and around Zanesville, Ohio. Her uncle was editor/publisher of *The Cumberland Times*, but I know very little about my mother's family because we moved west when I was quite young.

My father was a steam shovel runner, and his family were all construction people and railroaders. His parents were immigrants from Ireland. The family legend was that Grandfather Cunningham got on a boat for

America after he hit a man at a horse fair and didn't want to wait and see what happened. My father was born in Council Bluffs, Iowa—in other words, at one of the main junctions of the railroads. The oldest of the family, Uncle Dick, was a powder-man. My Uncle Jerry was a switchman on the Northern Pacific. My Aunt Kate's first husband was a steam shovel runner, as was her son, Morris Sisk, both of whom, I believe, died in industrial accidents. And when my Aunt Nell and her husband Uncle Bart took the train to California out of Ogden, she said, "Here's where we built thirty miles of the lake," referring to the rebuilding of the main line of the Union Pacific out of Ogden on landfill from Promontory Point.

My father's family settled down largely in Billings, Montana. My father was working on building something for the Western Maryland Railroad when I was born. When my older brother, two years before, had been born it was in upper New York State, where my father was working on the first building of the New York Aqueduct. My younger brother, two years younger, was born near Scranton, Pennsylvania, and I'm not sure what job my father was on at the time. But before my mother was married, her younger sister, who had been a Dominican novitiate, had contracted tuberculosis, and the sisters had sent her home, and she had died of TB. The fear of tuberculosis was apparently the motive that brought my mother and father west to join his family in Montana.

TS: How old were you when your family settled in Billings?

JVC: Probably four. We lived in several places, but all on the south side of town, the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak. And my father got a job, which to him was demeaning and a comedown, as a crane operator at the Great Western Sugar Company at the far south side of Billings: you see, as a steam shovel runner he was a skilled workman. I went through, as did my older and younger brother, St. Vincent's Parochial School, across the tracks, and all of us skipped two grades in the process. A most important part of our lives was the summers we spent—and we went out every summer—on a dry-land ranch, thirty-six miles from Billings, over the rimrock in the Wheat Basin country. This was through Tom Menamin, my father's former fireman (a steam shovel crew consisted of the operator and fireman); his Uncle Jim Wilson had homesteaded out there.

TS: Is the landscape of "Montana Pastoral" derived from those summers and the ranch?

JVC: It is exactly that, but, at the end of that poem, there is the incident of driving through blizzards and “this huddled chill,” which refers to an experience of many years later. On the other hand, the poem “Montana Fifty Years Ago” is an attempt to summarize not so much my own experience, but to put into form the kind of situation out at the ranch.

TS: At what point did your family move to Denver?

JVC: It was in early 1923. The date I could find out exactly with a little research, because I remember vividly the headlines of the paper the day we came into the Denver station were about the Denver Mint robbery, which was one of the great robberies of those times. My father had quit the job as a crane operator and gone back to being a steam shovel operator, and I believe my mother’s condition was that we get out of Billings and move to where the children could get a better education. To my mother, as to, I’m sure, innumerable mothers of various classes at that time, the dominant idea was that the children should be higher in the social world, in the real world, than their parents had been.

I finished the eighth grade at St. Elizabeth’s School in North Denver on Tennyson Street. The next fall, I entered, as did my older brother, Regis High School, the Jesuit high school, on the northwest boundary of town. There I got the traditional and even, I think, at that time somewhat old-fashioned education: four years of Christian doctrine, four years of English, four years of Latin, two years of Greek, three and a half years of mathematics, three years of laboratory science—biology, chemistry, physics. And, of course, history. It was thorough, and I didn’t find it oppressive.

TS: It was while you were living in Denver that your father died, wasn’t it?

JVC: Yes. My father, as a steam shovel operator, worked wherever there was a job, worked away from home. He worked, for instance, on the initial building of the Moffat Tunnel through the Rockies and on the redoing of the pass through the Sierras at Truckee. Well, he had a job down in San Pedro Harbor, had been away from home for at least nine months and was due to come back in several weeks when, on the 28th of January, 1926, after Mass on a Sunday morning, in his Sunday clothes, he went out to move the shovel to the place where it should be to begin work on Monday morning. Apparently there was an incline, and, for some reason, the

shovel ran away. He dropped the dipper — that was the normal practice to break a runaway — and the dipper apparently caught on an outcrop, and the shovel went completely over. He didn't live too much longer. I have his gold cufflinks, one quite smashed and the other perfectly all right.

TS: What happened after your father died?

JVC: Well, California had, just before the death of my father, introduced the first, I understand, of Workmen's Compensation Acts, so that there was a rather large sum of money for people in our circumstances. My mother invested in an apartment house opposite the Cathedral and a few blocks from the Capitol in Denver, and we moved there. I graduated from high school in '27 and worked that fall as an office boy for *The Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph*. Then my mother, I imagine with the charity of the Jesuits, sent my younger brother and me for the second semester to St. Mary's College in Kansas. Curiously, one of my friends there was Kermit Kilmer, the son of Joyce Kilmer. And there was also a young man who later had some career in musical composition, Remi Gassmann. So my brother and I went through that semester and then came home. I think my brother went back for another year.

TS: Was there any particular reason you didn't go back?

JVC: Money, I think. Then my mother, through some friend or other, heard of a job, and I got it, as a copyboy on *The Denver Morning Post*. My basic ambition at the time was to become a newspaperman, so this was lovely. I began probably in August of 1928. I went to work, if I remember correctly, at five in the afternoon and got off at two in the morning. I edited fillers, learned to write headlines, and so on. And, unless my memory is wrong, the paper's star reporter at that time was H. Allen Smith.

Now *The Denver Morning Post* had been established by *The Denver Post* — it was the major paper and an evening paper. They had established the *Morning Post* to drive out the evening paper of the competition. That was *The Rocky Mountain News*, which was the major morning paper, and they had *The Denver Times* competing with the evening paper. However, *The Denver Post* and *The Rocky Mountain News* composed their differences by cancelling *The Denver Times* and *The Denver Morning Post*, which was announced on the evening of the Smith-Hoover election. I remember the election very well, because my job was to carry the results from the tele-

type out to the front of *The Denver Post*, where the street was packed with people watching the returns up on the board. That was the end of my newspaper career, and, strangely, I'm not sure how, it was the end of my ambition to go on as a newspaper person.

Anyway, within a short time, I got a job with what was the largest brokerage house in Denver, Otis and Company. It dominated the Denver market and was an operation of Cyrus Eaton, the Cleveland-Canadian financier. They had the one board room in town and occupied a large part of the ground floor and the floor above it of the Equitable Building on Seventeenth Street. I was called a runner, an office boy. Mostly we carried orders to the wire room, things to various banks, picked up bonds, and so forth, and then waited until something else came up.

TS: You were working for Otis and Company when the Market crashed in 1929. What was that like?

JVC: That perhaps has been the dominant experience of my life. I had been ill. I ran across a colleague, another runner, on the street. He told me things were bad, I'd better get back. I came back. The next week was black Thursday, then black Tuesday.

I recall, a few years ago, when the fiftieth anniversary of the Market Crash was being memorialized, going to one of the few cocktail parties I have gone to in recent years and coming up to a group of people who were discussing the crash. They were younger than I, and this woman said, quite firmly and positively, "I understand that very few people, much fewer than has ever been realized, lost their lives as a consequence of the Stock Market Crash." I looked at her and said, "I don't know what the statistics are; I only actually saw two." Which as a matter of fact I did. One in the large lobby of the Equitable Building, filled with people. I'd come back from a run, paused a moment before going into the office, and casually looked across the lobby, all the way across. A man put a gun to his temple, and you heard the shot. Perhaps a day or two later, I was in the corridor, waiting for a call, when a body landed on the skylight within ten or fifteen feet of where I was standing.

Things went on until, the following March, they fired about half of us. I then got a job with The International Trust Company, working in a safe deposit vault, which was a curious life: except for lunch, you were in the vault all day long.

TS: Was it at this period that you began seriously studying modern poetry?

JVC: Yes, and it would be nice if I could give you a clear account of this. I, of course, read poetry, was taught poetry, in grade school and high school. I was active in establishing a newspaper in the Jesuit High School. I acted in Schwartz's Shakespeare Company, which played four or five blocks from our house in Denver and about which I found many years later an article in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine*. I played small roles: Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*, the Douglas in the Edwin Booth version of both first and second *Henry IV*. But after high school, in some way I got independently interested in poetry. I was active at St. Mary's in inventing a literary magazine that had one or two issues, and I wrote one or two poems for it. And there was a bookstore in Denver, The Bookery, on Walton Place between Sixteenth and Seventeenth Streets, that carried almost all the little magazines. That and the Denver Public Library became my life away from the brokerage house.

I don't know how to put it, because the truth is that people become interested in stamp collecting, in all sorts of things (I as a matter of fact was briefly interested in stamp collecting), and I just got hooked and followed my nose; for more recent poetry, through the anthologies of Jesse Rittenhouse and Margaret Widdemer, through John Hall Wheelock, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, through the very early Untermeyer anthologies, and so on, to, in effect, the modern movement, what was then called the advance guard.

I have been interested, over the years, in noticing in the accounts of people of my generation how they came on the movement. What was involved was very well put by Red Warren in an interview such as we are involved in, in *The Southern Review* about a year or so ago. When he went to Berkeley from Vanderbilt, where he had, of course, been associated with Tate and Ransom, he found that the people at Berkeley were not aware of Eliot, Pound, and so on. He said, "They hadn't got the Word."

Now the curious thing is that I got the Word, so to speak, alone. I really pursued it. In this sort of thing, you need documentation to support your memory, because memory is the mother of mythology. But I have, for instance, a copy of Stevens' *Harmonium*, and, in my own handwriting of the time, I have my signature and the date, December 26th, 1929. With

dates about that time, I have copies of Williams' *Spring and All* and Mina Loy's *Lunar Baedeker*. I also typed out — we didn't have xerox machines — Stanley Kunitz's *Intellectual Things* from the Denver Public Library and James Agee's *Permit Me Voyage*. I read through *The Dial* from its re-founding in 1920. I read through the book pages of *The New Republic*. I read through *Poetry*. On all these I made notes, so much so that, some years later, without really going back, I wrote an article on the history of *Poetry* out of the notes I took at this time. I was, in other words, committed.

At the same time, I was also reading—I really am astonished at how much I read; how much I understood is a different matter—the ante-Nicene Fathers in translation and Swift's poems in the old edition.

TS: Was there anyone with whom you shared all this?

JVC: I did run into two men who were interested, in general, in modern art. One had all the Proust that was available in translation and had planned year after year to read it on his vacation. I don't know if he ever did.

TS: What about the owner of The Bookery?

JVC: Morris Rosenfeld. Yes, he was an extraordinary man, an old-fashioned American communist, an IWW communist. I remember, for instance, that he had a copy of *Ulysses*, which he rented out to be read in the rear room and which he let me take home, as I came home from the brokerage office when he was closing up shop. Since the Stock Market in Denver opened at eight in the morning, I had it back to him by then. And I read *Ulysses* in this way. During the Sixties at one of those student-agitation affairs about the English program, I mentioned this, and a very bright young graduate student said, "That's strange; we all read *Ulysses* in senior high school." But I'm afraid it wasn't in The Modern Library at the time.

Not many years ago, a girl at Brandeis, who had taken a number of courses and done a certain amount of independent work with me, just before graduation came to me and said, "Do you remember Morris Rosenfeld?" And I said, "The only man I know of by that name had a bookstore in Denver." She said, "Yes, he's my uncle."

TS: How long did you stay on working in Denver?;

JVC: Until September, 1930. Then my older brother started freelancing through John Bartlett in Boulder and wanted to go on a trip picking up

stories for business magazines. My mother wanted me to go with him, as a chaperon, I would almost say.

Now Bartlett, who, as people may remember, was Robert Frost's favorite student in his days of teaching in New Hampshire, was a literary agent, specializing in selling items to what were called the trade journals, that is, business magazines. Perhaps the best-paying of them was *Dry Goods Economist*. I also remember *The American Lumberman* and *The American Tobacconist* and innumerable others. Tom wanted to go through the Southwest—there was a woman in Phoenix who was a kind of ultimate quest—so I quit my job at The International Trust and in an old Studebaker, with my books and notes taking up a good part of the back seat, we set off south to Trinidad, and then drove down to Santa Fe. It was this occasion I alluded to earlier. We ran into a sudden blizzard and stayed for some days at a little cabin just short of the top of Raton Pass, just north of the New Mexico border. That experience was responsible for “the huddled chill” in “Montana Pastoral.”

TS: I understand it was in Albuquerque that you assembled an anthology of what was then the new American poetry. How did that come about?

JVC: I knew that Norman Macleod, the poet and editor of a little magazine, lived in Albuquerque. I found his number and address in the phone book and called. He was not in Albuquerque, but his wife and their young baby were and a graduate student at the University of New Mexico, Duke Hendon, who took quite a liking to me and I to him. He had gotten a professor at the university—a very nice man named St. Clair—to schedule a graduate seminar in modern American poetry for the second semester of that year, and he suggested to me making an anthology of texts that would not be available in whatever anthology they were going to use. He supplied the legal-size stencils for mimeographing, and, in two weeks or so, I typed up from my notes and books and what was available in the Albuquerque libraries an anthology of modern American poetry, excluding authors that were widely available and recognized, such as Robinson and Frost, together with introductions, mostly from my notes—R. P. Blackmur in *Hound and Horn*, Allen Tate—and then at the end notes, partly my own, partly from other sources, like Zukofsky on Williams. The stencils were not run off until after I'd left Albuquerque, and I imagine Duke Hendon sent me copies. I may remark that he was a remarkable man, suffering from something like polio. A year later, he had a

job at Gunnison, at Western State College of Colorado, and died within a year.

The anthology I thought was completely lost. Then I heard that a man in Michigan had one and that there was one in Albuquerque. I found one complete copy and an incomplete copy somewhere in my papers fifteen or eighteen years ago. [More recently, a copy turned up for sale for \$3,250.00 in the catalogue of a book dealer in Berkeley.] It made perfectly clear what I'd thought was so: that I had by the age of nineteen pretty completely entered into the modern poetic tradition. I had read it. I had selected it. I had appreciated it. I had not necessarily imitated it. I had in those notes and texts the sorts of materials that later were put together to form that movement in criticism that John Crowe Ransom sort of accidentally called *The New Criticism*. The anthology is dated the beginning of February, 1931—that is, the beginning of the second semester at the university, but it was completed before we left Albuquerque.

TS: When exactly did you leave Albuquerque, and where did you go afterwards?

JVC: We left Albuquerque, I think, Christmas night, not Christmas Eve—I remember stopping for midnight Mass at Isleta Pueblo—and then drove west to Phoenix. From Phoenix we went to Tucson, where we lived back of a house on South Third Street, if I remember, in what was called a TB cottage: it was paneled halfway up and then screened. People who do not know the area do not realize that, even in the warm days of winter, it gets pretty cold in Tucson at night. It gets down toward freezing. And I remember—and it is the turning point of my life—one early February night—I don't know how long I had thought about it or how it came to me—I sat down and wrote a letter to the only man I knew of, and had had a couple of exchanges with, who was associated with an American university, and asked him if it was possible to go to college and stay alive. This was Yvor Winters.

I had written him a year or so earlier as a result of seeing in a footnote in an article by Allen Tate in *The Sewanee Review*, a reference to the little magazine, *Gyroscope*, and a post office box in Palo Alto where it was available. I had written for copies. Winters answered immediately. I didn't have the money, though it wasn't much, when I got the answer, and waited a while. He then independently sent copies, and asked if I wrote anything. I remember answering, sending a poem or two. One, I think,

was the one—later in a two instead of a three stanza version—entitled “Noon.” And a short prose piece, dealing mainly with Lawrence, but, as I recall, first trying out the idea of the difference between a rational and, so to speak, an irrational sequence in a work. Winters told me later that his reply had been returned—we had left Denver—“Address Unknown.” So that was, up to that point, my association with the man.

Now it is an extraordinary fact that, to that short one-paragraph letter I wrote, probably at one o’clock in the morning, he instantly replied, got his friends and students to write to me, and got his next-door neighbor to allow him to fix up a shed behind his house where I could stay. As a consequence, the following December I worked my way out to San Francisco, called Winters, and he told me what train to take to Palo Alto and said he would be standing on the station platform by the mailbox, wearing a long white scarf. I got off the train, and there the man was. He took me to his house and to the little shed, a very nice little shed, prepared for my occupancy. I was to do the dishes. Otherwise, they fed and housed me. In brief, Winters was a man of great generosity.

At the same time, of course, he was a dominant personality, and so, in my early days, was I; and I would imagine that we got along well for eight or ten days. Of course, I had been on the road, really a good deal of starving involved, we weren’t making much with John Bartlett and I was not really in good condition, psychically. So it wasn’t idyllic. But I must say that Mrs. Winters, Janet Lewis, was not merely kind but human, and made perhaps all the difference.

I guess I should throw in, because it is important to me, that on coming back from the Southwest trip in the late spring or early summer of 1931, through the Bartletts I met several times Robert Frost’s daughter, Marjorie, whom I liked very much. I lent her books; we had some brief correspondence. By a strange coincidence, she met a student at the University of Colorado from Billings, Montana, and married him. Many years later, in 1959, when I visited Billings I discovered that my grade school pal was mayor of the city and also a friend of Marjorie Frost’s widower, who still had some of the books. As a matter of fact, an indirect offer was made to give them back, but, of course that would have been silly. There were several, but the two I remember were an India paper edition of the translation of *The Magic Mountain*, which was not the best reading for a woman in a sanatorium, and Eliot’s monograph on Dante.

TS: Marjorie Frost had tuberculosis?

JVC: Yes. Then she married, and in 1934 she died in Billings as a consequence of complications after childbirth. She remains a very vivid picture in my mind. When Frost spoke to me at Brandeis not too many years ago, I thought of speaking to him of it, but it wasn't a situation in which you could talk.

TS: What did you study during your undergraduate years at Stanford?

JVC: When I went to Stanford, I planned to major in mathematics. But I found that doing real mathematics, reading Horace, writing a poem or an article in the same night was impossible, and for a reason people may not quite understand. Real mathematics takes over. It is as obsessive a state as, or even more so than, the most passionate love affair. You give your life to it; it takes you. And I had to give it up. Some years later, and this is analogous, I had to do the same thing with chess. When I found myself coming awake at three or four in the morning, moving the pawn to Queen's Eight, it was time to run. So I switched to Classics, partly because in Classics you didn't need to buy any books. There were plenty of texts, more texts than anyone could use, in the library. But also, obviously, I was concerned with and involved in the subject. I took, in the English Department, the History of Criticism from W. D. Briggs, a course in the English novel from Briggs, a course in medieval literature, and so on. I never, by the way, took a creative writing course.

TS: In recent decades, creative writing courses have become increasingly prominent in English department curricula. What do you think of this development?

JVC: It might be observed that the idea implied, almost asserted, in the term "creative writing" is not so good. There is a kind of pretension about it. There is a spiritual claim, the creative versus the inert, the organic versus the inorganic, and all that sort of thing. Anyone who is committed to the discipline of English should be able to write well on something and preferably on a variety of somethings. That among these somethings can be the sort of thing which does not involve dealing with prior texts as such, which in effect is the traditional discipline, would seem obvious.

TS: A development related to the increase in creative writing courses in universities is the increase in courses dealing with contemporary literature. What is your feeling about this?

JVC: I will only say that there is a difference, a complete difference, between being involved in a teaching situation with what is regarded as the approved tradition of the elders—that is, teaching *Tom Jones* or Shakespeare—and the teaching of texts that are currently newsworthy and felt to be in immediate fashion. My own feeling is that the older world, in which the second took place in private living rooms, in coffee shops, or at a bar, and the first belonged to the schools, was more the right thing. Now I may perhaps be prejudiced in this sense: in my own academic career, the only course I took in English, or in any language, that got beyond the later seventeenth century was the course in the English novel from Briggs, which ended, as I remember, with Conrad.

TS: Turning to your writing career, you've managed throughout it to combine poetry and scholarship. Have you ever felt, in your case, that the two disciplines were in conflict, or have they been in general mutually supportive?

JVC: My general feeling is that I write scholarship with the right hand and I write my poems with the left, with no depreciation of the poems, of course. The primary conflict I have discovered, as distinguished from what a good many people obviously feel, is a simple matter of energy. I have only so much energy. If you are doing this, you are not doing that.

There are other problems involved. There is the problem of what people expect of you, and you tend to act up to what people expect of you more than you wish you would. I have found that being thought of as a poet is at times not something I'm comfortable with. I also know that the idea of the poet, the role, has seemed to have had really devastating effects on the personalities and personal lives of too many people I have known.

TS: In your criticism, you've been skeptical of the Romantic notion of the poet and of the lofty role in which the poet is sometimes cast. Referring to Shelley's dictum, you've said that poets "are not 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world,' and a good thing it is that they aren't."

JVC: I think I simply regard writing a poem as a professional task, and hence in the same province as writing an article involving a textual emendation in Shakespeare.

TS: Tradition is a principal concern of your scholarship. To what extent do you feel that you belong to a particular line of poets and embody in your own way and time certain poetic traditions?

JVC: I do not think of myself as belonging to any particular line of poets or embodying any specific great tradition. At the same time, I am perfectly aware that there are relations between what I do and what has been done. I ran across a note I made some years ago, wondering about what were — and this is in answer to your question — the sources of the bare plain style I find congenial, though certainly do not try to write in all the time. In that, I noted a small poem of Robinson, not the typical Robinson, but a small straightforward poem, “An Old Story,” some Landor, and the poetry of Swift.

TS: Your mention of Robinson suggests another topic. In your brief biography of him, you remark that “metrical speech is a language which, like any language, must be learned young or never.” How and when did you learn to write in meter?

JVC: I simply do not know. But since the question of meter is fairly fundamental to the whole literary/poetic situation at the present time, let us deal with it. I think a large part of the problem of meter, and not just of writing in meter, comes from the development in the later nineteenth century of the teaching of the poetry of one’s own language in the schools, so that there developed something that would be comparable to the study of prosody in Latin and Greek. Out of this situation, as well as out of the critical thought of the time and of ours, there came a feeling of artificiality about meter.

Now it is perfectly true that meter is artificial, if you mean by that that it is a matter of art. But so is speech. What you mean by meter is a certain organization of normal speech patterns, or, to put it more accurately, a selection of the admissible ones, in a particular system, out of the total number. I once published a lecture, pointing out that a good number of our phrases and sentences are perfect iambic octosyllables or decasyllables. There are all sorts of examples: “Some people do, some people don’t.” Or, one I rather like: “We ought to be in Cleveland in an hour.” But, even more, I remember a friend telling me about an unhappy love affair and a long-distance conversation he had, and this stuck in his mind: the woman said, “How often shall I see you in a lifetime?” I didn’t point out to him then that part of the memorability of that was that it was an iambic pentameter, absolutely regular.

The result is there’s been a good deal of rather false teaching. Any linguist knows that English speech is not made up of syllables that are ac-

cented or unaccented. It is made up of syllables of various forms of accent, and only one strong accent in any complete articulation. Consequently, there is a necessary translation in scanning, a translation that, I think, is made fairly clear in the scanning exercises I recall from my early education, in which you pronounced the poetic line in a language completely different from any language one uses in life. “*This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlocks.*” If you tried to talk that way in any other situation, you would be thought to be posturing. Something of that perhaps came over into the feeling about meter.

TS: In other words, people looked on the translation, on the method of scansion, as the reality of metrical composition, and didn’t understand that it was a particular convention of reading or scanning which they were objecting to, and mistook the convention for meter itself?

JVC: Yes. And this links up with the basic premise of the importance in meter of norm and variation. Once you get this idea in, then the variations are meaningful and regularity is meaningless. And you start to write a poem in which you try to be metrical and keep violating meter. Now that’s playing chess and making up the rules from time to time to suit your convenience.

TS: You’re probably best known for your epigrams. When, early in your career, you were trying out forms and techniques, what qualities of the epigram most attracted you to it?

JVC: I don’t know. But I am, so to speak, a short-breathed man, and simply found that I had an almost unthought-out preference for brief definitiveness of statement, so that there was a traditional form just waiting for me to find it. That, at least, would be part of the answer.

I feel that in a sense brevity has been my flaw. I think I have made in scholarship a number of contributions in passing that never were seen, simply because they should have had a couple thousand words around them. And with my knowledge of and respect for the ancient rhetorical tradition, I think that what I’ve done is in that sense not the thing to have done.

TS: You mention the rhetorical tradition. You refer in several places in your prose to Cicero’s *Orator* and his definition of the plain style. To what extent do you think the rhetorical tradition has influenced your work?

JVC: That interest, in the terms in which you put it, came later; that is, at

a time at which influence, in the sense that one usually thinks of it, is not so likely to happen. What I do believe was probably important was this. In the Jesuit high school, we used in English courses a series of textbooks called *Model English*. What I remember of those is that they involved the old exercise of imitation. I can recall being asked to take a paragraph of Macaulay—the one of the New Zealander looking on the remains, some centuries later, of European civilization—and to write a paragraph on an analogous subject, keeping the same grammatical structure, the same complex or compound sentences, yet using totally different content.

Now it was, I think, or could have been, this sort of exercise that gave me that feeling for what puzzles people sometimes when I speak of the form of a poem, meaning the inner form, the structure you would imitate if you were given this exercise. Strict Chaucerians go out of their way to say very nicely to me that they don't believe my little essay on the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. And they don't because Chaucer is supposed to have at this point broken through the literary conventions of his day. They see only the mere fact that he's dropped the idea of the dream-vision; they don't see that he's kept the underlying scheme of the dream-vision prologue, with its serial descriptions of characters. He's kept, that is, that sequence which, if I were writing an imitation of one of his dream vision prologues, with the stipulation that it be applied to describing members of contemporary society, would furnish me with the necessary succession of topics.

TS: In your commitment to meter and to exactitude of statement, you have been going against the temper of the times. Has this been difficult for you or have you sensed a community of readers and writers which has been sustaining?

JVC: One needs, when he starts to write, an audience. There comes a time when a felt audience is not necessary, except at intervals to reassure one that he is being heard and responded to at least somewhat within the terms that he thinks he is speaking. I have on the whole been fortunate enough to have had enough response, enough audience, to feel that I have been heard.

Now to the part of the question about the temper of the times. I think I dealt with that matter too briefly—I looked it up the other day—in the introduction to *The Collected Essays*, in which I say that, if my work is not of my time, it is part of the evidence of what the times were. But one really

ought to go a little more deeply into it. The whole procedure of applying, to a contemporary situation, the kind of reconstruction one makes to understand that fragment of a previous society that has been preserved to us, and then of making this construction a kind of prescription as to what the modern or post-modern temper is, or should be, is really rather preposterous. You don't analyze the times. You get it. You can't avoid getting it. You belong. So that phrase, "The temper of the times," is essentially propagandistic.

TS: You've observed that one of modernity's features is an alienation from the past, especially the religious past. Several of your poems deal with or refer to the Catholicism of your youth. What are your religious beliefs?

JVC: My answer to that is, if I can trust my judgment, I have no religious beliefs. At the same time, religion was an integral part of my boyhood. I was an altar boy for years. I was neither reluctant nor pushy about it; it was just part of life. And this obviously lives with one. I can give you an incident which came back to my mind not too long ago. One evening, around 1950, I came back from visiting friends to our barracks apartment at the University of Chicago, opened the door of the apartment, hesitated briefly, and went in. Then it struck me as odd that I had made this brief hesitation. It puzzled me for a short while, and all of the sudden it came to me. When I was in high school the Jesuits had, each Lenten period, a three-day retreat for the student body, three days of fasting, abstinence, and complete silence, if you could manage it, together with various exercises and a number of talks by various priests. And I remember one afternoon this priest speaking to us; he spoke of our guardian angels. And he said, "Have you ever paused at the door to let your guardian angel precede you?" I thought, "My God, no, I never have." So for some time after, perhaps not too long, I made a practice of pausing and letting my guardian angel precede me; then, of course it dropped out. But it returned to me that evening in Chicago, though why? I thought of the events of the day and recent things and could find no prompting cause. At all events, if it is ever part of your life, it remains in some way part of your life.

TS: To continue with the subject of modernity, in one of your essays you observe in passing, with reference to Gertrude Stein, *Finnegans Wake*, Pound's *Cantos*, and the verse of Hart Crane and Dylan Thomas, "Surely there has not been such a collection of artificial languages in esteem since the latter days of the Roman Empire, and this among readers who believe

they believe in the absolute virtue of the accents of real speech.” Is there a way to explain the simultaneous elevation of the natural and the manneristic? How have these evidently contradictory beliefs or practices coincided with and reinforced one another?

JVC: Now let me ask you a question. Do you feel that that statement is accurate?

TS: Yes.

JVC: Yes. I don't know how to answer the question. I will make some observations. Going back to those days when I came from the brokerage house to find my way into the world of, let us say, the advance guard, I found it not a unified movement. It was not as if you were Robert Herrick coming into the world of Ben Jonson. People were going all sorts of different ways. They belonged together more or less, as the various ingredients in a Chinese dish. At that stage, the various ones were distinguishable in taste. Now what happened shortly after, with the advent of the New Criticism, and it occurred very, very quickly in the late Thirties, the triumph of modernity, was something like having what is left over of that Chinese dish warmed up the next day. The individual elements have now fused, and there is a kind of homogeneous Chinesity or modernity, which is something other than that originally diverse and merely associated-with-each-other experience. Is that clear?

TS: Yes. I was wondering, too, specifically about the question of real speech and mannerism. I'm thinking, for instance, of Eliot, who emphasized throughout his career the importance of real speech, and of the way that that emphasis ended up producing a poetry like his own, which often, I think most people would agree, is not particularly reflective of real speech.

JVC: The dialogue in the second part of *The Waste Land* would not represent even an edited transcript of a tape recording of what one heard on such an occasion. Even more extreme are long passages in Ezra Pound's *Cantos* in which he is writing a kind of Artemus Ward version of the vernacular. Nobody ever talked that way. The truth is the notion of real speech needs fumigation.

TS: Another paradoxical situation that you've observed is that, though many of the attitudes of modernity achieved orthodoxy in the Thirties, subsequent poets and critics have adopted them as new. Do you have any

account for this phenomenon of recycled novelty?

JVC: No, but I was interested in your stating this. It is a very strange thing. I came into the modern movement in the late Twenties, and I was about the last in age to whom the modern movement was not public property. Then it triumphed—let us date it by Eliot's tenure of the Norton Professorship at Harvard in 1933-34. The tide came in. There came the war. The modern movement became part of the educational system, as is illustrated by the girl who said she had read *Ulysses* in senior high. Then the tide came in again. And the second time it came in, it came with a missionary feeling of discovery about something that had already been discovered and sold. Everybody belonged to a very special group to which everybody belonged. It was almost as if George Washington had brought the news that Columbus had discovered America.

TS: This suggests a comment I remember your making some years ago in conversation. You remarked that the canon of modern poetry hasn't changed much in the last fifty years and that modern literature in the sense that you understood it when you were twenty is still modern literature. Do you think that there will be a change in the canon?

JVC: We are probably due for a drastic revision of the judgments on the literature of the 1910s, the Twenties and Thirties. This does not mean that the judgments of a few years ago were wrong, and anyone's are right, because the new ones will go through in their day another revision. A clear case: it was just about the time of the last war that Eliot lost his pre-eminence. After that, he was a revered figure, but no longer The Poet. Stevens became one of the substitutes, as did, a few years later, and even more dominantly, Williams. So there are, and must be, alterations in the semi-official rating book.

TS: For many today, Pound is the preeminent figure of the modern movement. What is your estimate of him and of how his work will be viewed in the future?

JVC: Pound is a curious case. He was, as he apparently said at the end of his life, a complete failure. He was a strange, almost mythological character. One thing to be said is that Pound is not from the West. He happened to be born in Hailey, Idaho, when his father was there working for the United States Mint, and he did spend a few very early years with part of the family in Michigan. But he grew up in Philadelphia, and went to

Hamilton College and the University of Pennsylvania. However, it is not wholly a mistake of outsiders to see him as a Westerner, for he went to England like Joaquin Miller or, indeed, like Buffalo Bill.

I haven't gone back to the *Cantos* very much over the years. I think they simply are dead. I even think that the few that some people pick out don't really stand up. There is a kind of remaining sentimental allegiance that keeps people hoping to say good things about Pound, though then you run into the difficulty of not giving in to the irrational opposition to his irrationality in politics. I think Pound is a footnote, and I say this as one who was once immersed in him.

TS: What happened after you graduated from Stanford?

JVC: When I graduated in March of 1934, my mother was in the hospital with terminal cancer. I returned to Denver and sat up with her in St. Luke's Hospital for a little over three months. I'd come to the hospital at nine or ten at night, dodge out for coffee—there was a shop a block or so up the street on Colfax—and stay until the nurses came on duty at five-thirty or six in the morning. Then, my memory is, the day after the funeral—it could perhaps have been two or three days—I got a letter in the mail from Briggs, chairman of the English Department at Stanford. Was I in a position to accept a full tuition scholarship for graduate work at Stanford and a teaching assistantship in English? I had a young brother and a much younger sister on my hands, a mortgaged house, and not the slightest idea of what I would do either with myself or with them. My younger brother had a job with Singer Sewing Machine, but it didn't pay much. People ask me why I went into teaching; it was from my point of view pure chance, and a godsend. It was obviously the thing for me to do.

I was able then to take my younger sister, with the aid of John Conley and his family, and have her placed in the Dominican school at San Rafael, California, and get my brother into the University of California, Berkeley. And with that, it seemed things had worked out.

TS: Speaking of schools and teaching, you've had a long and happy association with Brandeis University. I wonder if you could talk a bit about that.

JVC: Brandeis deserves much more than I can say. In 1953 I was at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, as lovely a place to live as I can think of, or it was at that time. But I had already spent eight years as a full-

time instructor at Stanford and seven years as an assistant professor at Hawaii and Chicago, so that, at the end of my first year at Virginia, that made sixteen years as Instructor and Assistant Professor. And Virginia promised five more years.

Then I got a telephone call one August afternoon — and this was another unsolicited, unthought-of chance — from a man with a notorious Jewish accent — people who know him know what I mean — Joseph Cheskis, at Brandeis University, as he said. I had heard vaguely of Brandeis, but just vaguely. He wanted to know if I was interested in a position. My wife and I drove up to Waltham, and talked to Abram Sachar, the President of Brandeis. They offered me fifty per cent more than I was making at Virginia, and I was to set up a new graduate program in what Max Lerner, an important character in Brandeis in the early years, always had put down in the catalogue as American and English Literature, which I always changed in proof to English and American Literature. It was one of our long battles.

The buildings that have come up since would obscure to any present visitor the paucity that was there when I came. We had a campus that was the remains of a failed veterinary school. They had just finished the fourth year and just graduated the first senior class. Brandeis was a gamble, not only for me; the whole institution was a gamble. There was a sense of risk, if you will, of adventure. And coming at the same time I did was Irving Howe, who, together with some of those who had already come, formed the nucleus for what could be a viable enterprise.

To round the story off, within about ten years, there was published — my memory says in *PMLA*, but at all events somewhere sufficiently official — a list of the leading graduate schools in English and American Literature, and Brandeis, though not at the top, of course, still was there in ninth or tenth position. Whatever the merits of that or any survey are, nevertheless it did indicate that we had made it. I would find it difficult to write a novel that would convincingly, in realistic convention, show how one came from St. Vincent's Parochial School in Billings, Montana, to Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, but that's what happened.

TS: Though you did quite a bit of reviewing early in your career, it seems you subsequently turned almost entirely from criticism to scholarship. Was this a conscious decision?

JVC: It was. The tradition of scholarship was to me a kind of conversion, though I can't remember any blinding light on the road to anywhere. There were at Stanford what one, I think, could properly call great men in the academic tradition. Briggs, of course. Hardin Craig, for all that he and I didn't get along and for all he sometimes tended to go haywire a bit, nevertheless was a great scholar. Even the man in Middle English who much disliked me, Arthur Kennedy, was very good at his facts. In Classics, there was B. O. Foster, who was my principal teacher, Sonny Boy Harriman, who published little, if anything, but who introduced me, in the early 1930s, to the whole linguistic structuralism movement that has had such strange developments and has come out into almost the current counterpart of The New Criticism, with, of course, other elements and streams contributing to it. And in 1935 a refugee from Germany, Hermann Fränkel. But quite independently of these, and not directly as a consequence of any desire to emulate a particular man, I was interested simply in scholarship as such.

TS: In view of what you say about scholarship, it's not surprising that you've often expressed distrust of critical methods for producing, independently of philological and historical analysis, interpretations of literary works, interpretations which may be interesting in and of themselves but which are essentially opinion and contribute no hard knowledge to our understanding of the texts they address.

JVC: I do not really care for the development of special forms of handling a text, the sort of thing that originally was associated with The New Criticism. My perhaps slightly-unfair-analogy for this is that you learn to construct a machine that looks something like a mimeograph machine. You slip in the text of the poem on this side, turn the wheel, and on the other side comes out a prose paragraph or two of explication.

TS: I gather The New Criticism influenced not only the study of literature, but the teaching of it, too.

JVC: I remember some of the courses in English at Stanford. Kennedy's was perhaps an extreme example. His course in Middle English consisted really mostly of his reciting bibliographies. I found this very useful because, in the first place, I was interested in the subject and in the bibliography and, in the second place, I did not want to know what Arthur Kennedy felt about the texts as works of literature. But we had that curious

revolution as a result of which you had these courses in which you had to deal with the text, you had to fill up an hour with discussion on the text. You couldn't get rid of thirty minutes with biography and bibliography. You had to take the naked *Ode to a Nightingale* and fill the class hour up. You also were not supposed to, as I remember, recite it: that would have taken up some time. In brief, both the instructor and the student who had to write papers needed methods, needed, if you will, gimmicks to get through.

Now in the old tradition, you could take up a large part of the hour with difficulties in the language, with parsing, and so on. I had a marvelous course in Livy from Foster; he was the Loeb translator of Livy, and, though he died before completing the project, he did most of it. There were maybe six or eight of us, and the course consisted of us in turn reading aloud a paragraph in Latin. Then both from what he knew of the text itself and from the way you pronounced it, he asked you questions. He knew where you didn't miss the point, and so forth. We read Livy; it was a living experience. But we didn't analyze Livy. We didn't—well, I have a term for it—we didn't produce a substitute experience.

TS: Though the body of your work is compressed, your production of poems has been fairly steady, to judge from the appendix in Charles Gullans' bibliography, which lists the dates of composition of the poems in your four main collections. Have you pretty much followed, throughout your career, the same procedures in writing your poems?

JVC: When I began writing, I did a good deal not merely of rewriting, but of smashing an original version to pieces and doing it completely over, maybe several times. Since about 1940 what I write I tend to write almost straight off. The corrections, the redoing is in the process of writing it down, and then it's through. Now one must put in this footnote: what I write is short and, consequently, is compassable in a single experience of writing.

I often find that I have odd lines here and there that suggest something, and, of course, much that I write is suggested by a phrase in language, and then I find a kind of meaning that this phrase could assume. For instance, there's a little epigram which reads:

Genius is born and made. This heel who mastered
By infinite pains his trade was born a bastard.

I recall the genesis of that. I was sitting over coffee, just toying with the idea of finding a good rhyme for “bastard.” Then I thought of “mastered,” and then I thought of mastering an art. Then I thought of genius—is it born or made?—and of genius as the capacity for taking infinite pains. In brief, all these, so to speak, fossils in the language entered into it. When I had finished, I could think of a number of real situations, real persons, to whom it would refer.

TS: What are you working on at the moment?

JVC: Nothing big, just a little of this and that, some Sappho, some Shakespeare, *Hamlet* and Real Life, and so on.

TS: This brings us to the last question I have. You mentioned at the outset the family legend about your grandfather and the skirmish at the horse fair. You yourself have had a long-standing interest in horses and horse racing. Is it true that Brandeis presented you, as a retirement gift, a trip to Saratoga?

JVC: Yes, and that was one of the nicest things that has happened to me—the going-away gift of the university. This is usually a dinner and a plaque, or something like that, but was in my case a trip to Saratoga for my wife and me and the department chairman and his wife for the Travers. We had a really glorious time. We saw a pseudo-Elizabethan play one night and stayed at Lake George. And if you are going to be ushered out, that is as nice a way of doing it as can be done.