

convey the moral authority of Greek and Roman antiquity, artists, craftsmen, and writers were able to foster the impression that a new Rome was at hand. Paul Revere, who created many engravings of revolutionary iconography, was one key promoter of the new republican imagery. Another was Thomas Hollis, a radical English Whig who never left the mother country but who contributed to revolutionary fervor in the colonies by publishing and shipping to America books, prints, and medals that exalted the republican ideal.

Interest in the ancient world was hardly new among the educated American elite. In inventories of colonial libraries, the titles of classical texts appear almost as frequently as those of popular works of Christian devotion. Homer's *Iliad* turns up often, along with two standard reference books on antiquities: John Potter's *Archaeologiae Graecae* (1697) and Basil Kennett's *Romae Antiquae Notitia* (1696). Charles Rollin's *Ancient His-*

tory (first published in 1729) was a colonial bestseller.

Such books, and the illustrations that accompanied them, emphasized the Baroque aspect of classicism, especially the glories and plunder of war. But the neoclassical style of late-18th-century America transformed the bellicose images into ones of inevitability and harmony. Minerva and Liberty, for example, were no longer depicted as warlike and authoritarian but as peace-loving symbols of reasoned republicanism, allied with literature, science, and the arts. Ancient virtue was represented not by military action but by serene poise and balance. By adapting classical iconography in this manner, the image makers of the emerging nation were able to address some of the troubling questions raised by revolutionary struggle against the mother country and to present the upstarts with a flattering vision of themselves. A modern political consultant could not have done better.

The Inaudible Poet

“Is That a Poem? The Case for E. E. Cummings” by Billy Collins, in *Slate* (April 20, 2005),
www.slate.com.

Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but it also has a more pragmatic use: Its practice by lesser lights keeps a luminary's work refracting through the poetry canon. Pity poor E. E. Cummings, a poet so inimitable that his fame is fading, writes Collins, a former U.S. poet laureate.

Cummings changed the rules by breaking nearly all of them. “In the long revolt against inherited forms that has by now become the narrative of 20th-century poetry in English, no poet was more flamboyant or more recognizable in his iconoclasm than Cummings,” writes Collins. “By erasing the sacred left margin, breaking down words into syllables and letters, employing eccentric punctuation, and indulging in all kinds of print-based shenanigans, Cummings brought into question some of our basic assumptions about poetry, grammar, sign, and language itself. . . . Measured by sheer boldness of experiment, no American poet compares to him, for he slipped Houdini-like out of the locked box of the stanza, then leaped

from the platform of the poetic line into an unheard-of way of writing poetry.”

Cummings came up hard in the poetry world. Born in 1894, he had, by age 25, placed poems in avant-garde magazines and published two books, *The Enormous Room* and *Tulips and Chimneys*. However, as late as 1935 he was driven to self-publish a poetry collection titled *No Thanks*, dedicated to the 14 publishers who had turned down the manuscript. For much of his life his poetry paid very little, and “well into his fifties, he was still accepting checks from his mother.”

But in the decade before his death in 1962, several major collections were published, and he once read to 7,000 people at the Boston Arts Festival. Today, Cummings is variously denigrated for spawning the “desiccated extremes” of so-called language poetry, and lauded as “the granddaddy of all American innovators in poetry.” Despite this influence, he is no longer much read.

“Because he is synonymous with sensational typography,” writes Collins, “no one

can imitate him and, therefore, extend his legacy without appearing to be merely copying or, worse, parodying.” It doesn’t help matters that his “most characteristic” poems are nearly impossible to read out loud; Cummings himself described his work as “inaudible.”

“He has become the inhabitant of the ghost houses of anthologies and claustrophobic seminar room discussions,” Collins observes ruefully. “His typographical experimentation might be seen to have come alive again in the kind of postmodern experi-

ments practiced by Dave Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer, not to mention the coded text-messaging of American teenagers. But the eccentric use of the spatial page that accounted for Cummings’s notoriety must be seen in the end as the same reason for the apparent transience of his reputation. No list of major 20th-century poets can do without him, yet his poems spend nearly all of their time in the darkness of closed books, not in the light of the window or the reading lamp.”

OTHER NATIONS

Japan’s Unfinished War

“Victims or Victimizers? Museums, Textbooks, and the War Debate in Contemporary Japan”
by Roger B. Jeans, in *The Journal of Military History* (Jan. 2005), George C. Marshall
Library, Lexington, Va. 24450–1600.

Are the Japanese determined to whitewash their nation’s militarist past and wartime atrocities? Protesters in China this spring were only the latest foreigners to say so. But the perception, widespread outside Japan, is at odds with the reality of a nation divided over its past, says Jeans, who teaches East Asian history at Washington and Lee University. “By the 1990s, it looked as though the long battle to include the truth of Japanese wartime aggression in Asia in textbooks had been won. In 1995, a survey of the 12 most popular textbooks in Japanese schools showed they agreed [that] Japan pursued a ‘war of aggression.’ . . . They also included the [1937] Nanjing Massacre, as well as Japan’s use of poison gas and slave labor.”

Then, in 1996, University of Tokyo professor Nobukatsu Fujioka and others who condemned this “masochistic” and “anti-Japanese” view of history founded the Society for the Creation

of New History Textbooks. A middle-school textbook produced by the society was one of several approved by Japan’s Ministry of Education in 2001 as suitable for use in schools. But when many Japanese groups, including one headed by novelist and Nobel laureate



When Japan’s Ministry of Education published history textbooks that appeared to deny responsibility for Japanese atrocities committed during World War II this past spring, Tokyo demonstrators (above) joined the protests that erupted throughout Asia.