

## BEYOND THE DARK DIVIDE: THE FRONTIER POETRY OF ORANGE SCOTT CUMMINS, THE PILGRIM BARD

By Michael L. Johnson

In his 1973 book *The Cowboys* William H. Forbis geographically and demographically defines the American frontier of the late nineteenth century about as precisely as anyone could:

In 1876, the centennial of the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. was still divided into two parts, one settled, one wild. The boundary between them was the 98th meridian, a line where diminishing annual rainfall caused Eastern forests to stop and grasslands to begin. To the east 31 states were settled by 42 million people. To the west of the meridian lay all or parts of seven states and nine territories, populated by a mere two million souls.

On the map accompanying Forbis's text, that watershed meridian--a dark line--runs from Canada down the eastern edge of the Dakota Territory, lops off the eastern third of Nebraska, and descends on down into Mexico pretty much through the middle of Kansas, the Indian Territory (which would become Oklahoma), and Texas. On one side was what Forbis terms "the fastidious East," and on the other side, the savages, wild beasts, deserts, and general lawlessness (scornful of the tenderfoot East) that drew the opprobrium of "even the most farsighted Easterners."<sup>1</sup> Though a few spots to the west, especially the area around San Francisco, are marked with the gray that indicates a more characteristically Eastern population density (over six inhabitants per

square mile), most of the Wild West, including the *frontier* proper (the region around or just west of the meridian), is free of them.

The situation that Forbis so tidily depicts was, of course, changing in 1876, as it had been before and still is--though versions of the invidious East/West cultural split continue to thrive. However much the history of the West is being rewritten, quite justifiably, these days, at least one commonplace surely still holds: in the late nineteenth century a lot of pioneering people were moving into the frontier region. Among them was Orange Scott Cummins, whose family moved from Iowa to Paola, Kansas, just over the Missouri border, in 1869, from where, after a brief stay in what was soon to become Wellington, Kansas, he moved on to settle near Medicine Lodge, Kansas, in Barber County, just west of Forbis's 98th meridian and home later on to Carry Naton. There he lived until 1893, when he made the short run south into the Cherokee Outlet of Oklahoma Territory, staking his claim in Woods County, where he lived near Winchester until he died in 1928. Thus Cummins began living on the frontier in the early 1870s, but the frontier--as a mentality, a code of conduct, a lifestyle characterized by a sense of, a drive toward, what lies beyond and yet borders on the familiar and is tangled with it--began living *in* him many years before. That inner frontier awareness engendered in him broad, diverse, and sometimes contradictory cultural sympathies. It structured his unorthodox religious responsiveness to the

world. Above all, it made him a poet, perhaps even, in some respects, *the* poet of the American frontier--in spite of neglect by literary historians and of the fact that most of his work is, as Yvor Winters says disdainfully of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" but simply accurately here, "the poetry of the country newspaper."<sup>2</sup>

Cummins was born (or, as he, with his habit of periphrasis--"feathered songsters" and the like--might well have said, "humbly intruded upon this terrestrial sphere") in Harrison County, Ohio, on May 12, 1846. His mother, Mary Ann Clyde, was Irish. His father, George Irwin Cummins, a Scot, was a Wesleyan Methodist minister and spent his life evangelizing, working for his church now and then as a missionary to various Indian tribes. Cummins was two when his family moved to Iowa. There he spent his childhood and adolescence playing and growing up with Indian children (a situation that lent some credibility to the story, little discouraged and at least obliquely cultivated by Cummins--who wore his hair very long, had black eyes and at least a fairly dark complexion, and affected Indian clothing that his parents had adopted him, as he puts it in "Cono, and Indian Legend," from "the dark Mesquiquies.")<sup>3</sup> Cummins had only some months of formal education though early on he learned to read, probably from his father, and showed a burgeoning interest in writing. (Certainly Cummins read a great deal, especially in the early part of his life, but, since his library--including manuscripts--was destroyed, along with his home, in a fireworks accident on July 4, 1893, we will never know in detail what he read nor be able to date the composition of many of his poems, whose chronology he freely jumbles in the published collections.) In 1864, at the age of 17, he was taken into Company A of the 3rd Iowa Cavalry, serving the Union (and perhaps, as he apparently claimed, also the Confederacy) as a scout behind enemy lines. He was discharged just after the Civil

War, returned to Iowa, and in 1867 married Mary Melinda Martiu, who soon would accompany him to Kansas, where he would begin to write in earnest (and *on* virtually anything--gypsum, bark, whatever he had at hand) and became known as the "Pilgrim Bard."

An incident during Cummins's brief stay in Wellington en route to Barber County illustrates both the civic dedication that led him to assume various roles (as, among other, a U.S. marshal and a U.S. land commissioner) in "civilizing" the frontier and his rejection of any trappings of civilization that seemed too Eastern. T.A. McNeal, later editor of the Medicine Lodge *Crescent* (after the editor of its predecessor, the Barber County *Mail*, had, for reasons that remain obscure, been stripped by "self-appointed 'regulators'" and coated with sorghum molasses and burrs--because of a lack of tar and feathers--and run out of town)<sup>4</sup> and a friend of Cummins's relates the incident in the chapter on "Picturesque Figures" in his *When Kansas Was Young*:

There was a vacancy in the office of justice of the peace and the lawyers finally persuaded the poet to take the job. One of the first cases to be brought before Squire Cummins was filed by D. N. Caldwell. Caldwell was sick and J. M. Hoover attended to the case for him. On the other side were John G. Tucker and Mike Sutton, both now dead. The attorneys filed various motions which Cummins didn't understand and argued and wrangled for hours. Cummins at that time was keeping a hotel [Wellington's first, called the Frontier House]. When the dinner bell rang the wearied and disgusted justice announced that the court would adjourn until 1:30. Then straightening up he said, "Now that the court has adjourned I want to tell you d--n lawyers

what I think of you. I told you to start with that I didn't have sense enough to be justice of the peace, but every one of you promised to help me. You have helped me, haven't you? Yes, you have helped me like h--l." When 1:30 came the justice didn't appear in the court room. After waiting an hour the lawyers sent a messenger after him. He sent back by the messenger this answer: "Tell them damned lawyers that I have resigned and say for them to go to hell."<sup>5</sup>

If indoor life in Wellington repelled Cummins, outdoor life in underpopulated Barber County more than equally attracted him. At the beginning of her *Medicine Lodge: The Story of a Kansas Frontier Town*, Nellie Snyder Yost tells of his arrival in late January 1871: when Cummins, now a buffalo hunter, came upon the junction of Elm Creek and the Medicine Lodge River, he "was deeply impressed by the country he saw there, by the wild beauty of its deep canyons and its red hills, carved by erosion into towering mesas and buttes." At that place in 1867, the little-to-be-honored Medicine Lodge Peace Treaty, perhaps "the greatest peace agreement ever consummated between red and white in the United States,"<sup>6</sup> had been signed by chiefs of the Kiowas, Comanches, and other tribes, as well as by government peace commissioners. Some miles south of that place, on Mule Creek, Cummins would build his cabin called Last Chance--because it was the last chance, more or less, for pilgrims headed further west to eat a square meal under a roof--run a freighting business, and write, probably mostly while roaming through the area, poetry occasioned by all manner of events, especially "incidents of border life."<sup>7</sup> And that place, again in late January 1871, is also the opening setting for his "Reminiscences of the Early Days," a

novella-length work in prose, now usually titled "The Legend of Flower Pot Mountain" and far better known than any single poem he published, that Yost rightly argues "merits rating as Americana."<sup>8</sup>

A ghost story of sorts, "The Legend," published in 1886 in the first edition of Cummins's *Musings of the Pilgrim Bard* and reprinted in the enlarged 1903 edition, consists mostly of what purports to be the journal, dated from 1849 to 1854, of a woman named Leonora Day that tells of the doom, at the hand of Kiowas, of a wagon train headed down the Santa Fe Trail "to California, the fabled land of gold." From the beginning of the frame narrative, through the journal (itself, as one could easily show on the basis of stylistics, at least in large part Cummins's work), until the frame narrative resumes briefly at the end, "The Legend" exemplifies in more various aspects than McNeal's anecdote the interplay of polarities that defines his temperament and his poetry. Thus, though he attributes "a legendary history" to Flower Pot Mountain, he apparently intends the reader to take his story (from his nighttime vision on top of the mountain--hill, actually--of Indian ghosts dancing around Day and her husband burning at the stake, to Day's ghost telling him where her journal is hidden nearby, to the end of the text) as true; but he also suggests finally that "every one shall draw his own inference." Though his frame narrative begins solemnly enough with a scene in which he is "afoot and alone" some nine miles west of Medicine Lodge, he can't resist the humor of noting that he is also "unarmed, except that I carried a Spencer rifle and two Colt's 44's." After he reaches "the lofty summit," his reaction on seeing a buffalo grazing there is the oxymoronic one of the hunter: "I could not resist the temptation of killing a buffalo in such a romantic place, so with one shot from my Spencer I laid him prone on the earth." Though he hereafter claims to "always feel a sublime security when alone

in the wilderness" (because of God's omnipotent watchfulness), he will soon be "paralyzed with terror" at the vision of Indians dancing around "two human beings . . . being roasted alive." What he experiences, through the journal and otherwise, takes him from being "an unbeliever in ghosts" to one for whom "much has changed my skeptic creed."<sup>9</sup>

After the vision Cummins discovers the journal in a box under a flat stone under a certain tree on the plateau of Flower Pot Mountain, right where Day's ghost has said it would be. His opening of the box seems realistic enough, yet he remarks that he only "imagined" the "musty smell" of its contents. The manuscript is "yellow with age, yet entirely legible." Indeed, the rhetorical habit of conjoining experiences and attitudes with *yet* (or its variants, explicit or implicit) very much characterizes the journal itself. The "happy yet ill-fated little colony" comes to a bad end, yet Day "can not but think that these valleys will be peopled by my race; that the dread[ed] savage must yield to the inevitable." That habit readily applies to Indians: as the guide of the wagon train, "the Old Mountain Trapper," conventionally has it in his own story incorporated into Day's journal, "to meet a good Injun was to meet one as he'd been dead so long that the smell o' him wouldn't attract the coyotes or John-crows"; and Day observes early in the journal that Indians are portrayed as "noble . . . by artists in the east" and yet are anything but so. For her they do not respect the corpses of their own dead, and "yet all have the same superstitious idea concerning a hereafter"; they "seem friendly at present, but all alike are consanguine beggars." And when the wagon train first arrives at Flower Pot Mountain, Day records that it "loomed up in the distance like an evil spirit sent to remind us that Paradise and its counterpart were uncomfortably together."<sup>10</sup> And so on, this last conjoining reminding that in the 19th century the frontier was frequently thought of in both "and" terms: *oasis and*

*desert, heaven and hell.*

That such polar conjoinings--and typically what I would call the "frontier-gothic" moods they entail--figure, intentionally or not, in much of Cummins's poetry as well as in his prose (and in the man himself) McNeal discerns in his introduction, titled "The Author," to the 1903 edition of *Musings*. He recalls that he first met Cummins in Barber County when "He was engaged in the business of transporting the bones of the deceased buffalo to Wichita, then the greatest bone market in the world" (which bones were ground up and used in making cleanser and fertilizer, among other applications) and that he found him a man in whom, "under a rough exterior and amid environments most discouraging, there burned the fires of real genius and existed a soul full of poetic fancy." Cummins's poetry, McNeal avers, is both "marked with quaint humor" and "filled with remarkable sweetness and pathos," the work of a poet who, though well read, "knows little or nothing of the so-called culture and artificial life of the East," "a real poet" who "is entitled to rank with Engene Field and James Whitcomb Riley," writers probably best known for, respectively, "Little Boy Blue" and "When the Frost Is on the Punkin." And McNeal remarks, by another polar conjoining, that even Cummins's profanity (in which he, gentle though he was, frequently engaged) "was strikingly artistic when occasion seemed to demand."<sup>11</sup>

A mordant example of such conjoining may be found in Cummins's relatively early four-stanza poem "Song of the Hide Merchant," first published in 1885 in the *Medicine Lodge Cresset* (which "Damued littin' name" was taken, according to Yost, from *Paradise Lost*, where Milton uses it in reference to the torches that illuminate hell).<sup>12</sup> Surely one of Cummins's best poems, particularly in regard to its tight economy of language (something he seldom accomplished in longer poems or, for that matter, in longer lines), it portrays, partly by

assuming his persona, one Simon Lebrecht, "Simon the Jew," a Medicine Lodge merchant who made a fortune buying the hides of the tens of thousands of cattle that died in the bitter winter of 1884-85:

I care not though the fierce winds roar,  
Each blizzard adds a few hides more;  
Their hidless frames line every stream;  
And the sun withhold[s] its friendly beam.

'Tis an adage old that long has stood,  
Ill is the wind that blows no one good;  
When one man loses another must win,  
Their loss is my gain, I gather them in.

Cummins probably intended no vicious anti-Semitism (and one wonders if he himself made some small profit on the bones of the dead cattle), but, as he relates in a prefatory note, the joke was lost on Lebrecht, who, though appreciating the free advertising, took exception to being called "a damn yew."<sup>13</sup> In any case, the poem plays throughout with intertangled oppositions of loss and gain, poverty and wealth, grisly disaster and good-humored resistance to despair in a way that clearly illustrates the oppositional inclusiveness, if not unproblematic charity, of Cummins's temperament. (Probably his attitude toward Jews was as self-divided as his attitude toward Indians or, for that matter, toward women, whose virtues he praises in a number of poems but whose suffrage he regarded as out of the question.)

Humor characterizes a good deal of Cummins's poetry. Indeed, it provides a counterbalancing tone for many of his descriptions and judgments. It softens the harsh vision of frontier weather in "March Wind," a poem whose opening seems to echo Poe's "Raven" in its phrasing ("And the pebbles keep a knockin'--/Knockin' 'gainst the fragile wall . . .") and flirtation with fancies about the supernatural stirred by the natural in extremis. And it leavens the portrayal of cruelty in "Satirical Ode to an Old Gray Horse," a poem concerned with a preacher's abuse of his buggy horse that can

"endless pastures await" but whose master will, ironically, find a less paradisiacal reward.<sup>14</sup> Still, the frontier gothic, in all its avatars, is Cummins's forte, for he never really was "an unbeliever in ghosts" and was continually drawn to the darker, more hyperbolic, more violent and/or mysterious realities of frontier life, however much his poetry may occasionally mediate them by levity. He was very much a poet concerned, obsessed really, with the relation, which became more blurred as he grew older, between the contemporary and the ancient; the historical and the legendary; the empirical and the visionary; the waking world and the dream world; the realm of practical fact and the realm, to use a phrase that occurs, with variations, throughout his work, "beyond the dark divide"--the ultimate frontier, toward which, as in the photograph of him as a scout, right hand shading his eyes, that serves as the frontispiece of his 1923 book *Twilight Reveries* he seems always looking.



Orange Scott Cummins  
From *Twilight Reveries*, p. 1.

Cummins's concern or obsession with relations across these "divides," all their versions more or less "dark," runs through dozens of his poems. In "Lines" (dated 1899) he apostrophizes a decaying old cottonwood tree, asking it to "tell us of the long ago" and seeing it finally, in his closing and somewhat Biblical address to the reader (his poems almost invariably end with a moral tag), as a *memento mori* that triggers hope of an afterlife:

Mortal, thou may'st a lesson read,  
 For thou art passing like this tree;  
 The poor in purse, the ghouls of greed,  
 None can escape the stern decree;  
 Blind worms are waiting at the goal,  
 And if thou hast a single spark  
 To light thee, as the way grows dark,  
 'Tis this, beyond death's portals, lives  
 the immortal soul.

In "Under the Elms" (dated 1899) a dead soldier's spirit crosses "the waters wide" to join the "maiden fair" who pines for him. In "After the Fire" (dated 1893), a poem in blank verse mostly about the destruction of his home, Cummins writes out, "past the witching hour," the "weird vibrations of a fevered brain," a quasi-Edenic vision of an earlier time, in which "True Christians" worship multiple "unseen Gods" and "Even the heathen hath his solemn rites" and which involves, among other things, a sense of Keatsian ambiguity, another *yet* conjoining:

Is it a vision, no, 'tis not a dream,  
 Mine eyes are closed not, yet I gaze  
 and see,  
 My home intact, just as on yester morn  
 . . .

In "The Hunter's Camp" he ruminates on an area (soon to become Alva, Oklahoma, "a thriving city of the west") where, as a younger man, he had often camped; where "Nature is much the same yet sadly shorn / Of all that nature's slaves so much adore"; where "The game, the glory of the wilds, was gone . . ." the past, however much still mingled with the present, giving way to "a

rushing, surging sea / Of human beings, wending madly on . . ."; where, finally, his "fitful dream dispelled, / Instead of vision glared reality . . ." In "Retrospect" (dated 1886), a poem about the arrival of the first "iron horse" in Medicine Lodge in 1886, his sense of historical occasion heightens into a near-mythical praise of the progress that divides a "desert drear" from "stately halls with fronts of stone." In "An Interview with the Shade of Sitting Bull" (dated 1891), that great chief, summoned by the speaker, returns "from the shadow land" and tells, somewhat humorously, how he was sent "to the white man's Hell" (where conditions are harsher than even in "Dakota's land") and how Custer took his own life "in Big Horn vale." In "Cono, an Indian Legend," written in Longfellow's trochaics, Cummins deals with a story that, though he may have taken it as an account of his own infancy (that of an Indian baby given to white parents by the chief of the Mesquiquies), is presented as "but an Indian legend" that has Cono appear almost as if from a nether world, through "a wall of darkness." In "Farewell, Old Home" (dated 1894), another blank-verse poem about his burned home, which he sees paradoxically as having been "the homestead of a wandering Pilgrim," he feels himself, though 34 years from his death,

Draw nearer to the silent river's  
 margin,  
 Where glean the snow white sails of  
 death's lone ferry  
 Waiting to waft us from the mystic  
 portals.<sup>15</sup>

In a number of poems, Cummins's frontier-gothic themes involve such classical, as well as Christian or Indian, allusions to interconnections and transitions between worlds, across, as it were, metaphysical frontiers. But the poems of his best known to his contemporaries are typically more eclectic or "nonsectarian" in that regard. Also, they are typically narrative (though not balladic) in their development. Three

examples (all undated), which I would like to explore less briefly, are "The Maid of Barber" (dominantly in iambic-tetrameter couplets), "Owaaneo--Pale Flower" (dominantly in long, metrically shifting, unrhymed, somewhat Whitmanian lines that end with falling rhythm), and "The Outlaw" (in fourteen couplets familiar to readers of Whittier and others).

"The Maid of Barber" tells of the love of Walt, "The fairest Cow Boy in the land," and Malena, a "sweet and guileless child" who came with her tyrannical father (her mother long dead) to "the western wild" of Barber County. The characters of this Romeo-and-Juliet tale are, Cummins alleges in a prefatory note, "real and not fictitious" though beyond that he had "drawn largely on imagination, assisted by a thorough knowledge of the country embraced in the poem." The plot runs as follows: Walt and Malena fall in love; her jealous father works to prevent their seeing each other and then tells Malena he has killed Walt for defying his "mandate" not to see her; Malena (apparently) dies of a broken heart and is buried; after watching her funeral from "Far on a height," Walt retrieves her coffin from the ground, opens it, and finds her alive; they vow eternal love and flee "Through canon dark and prairie wide"; a storm comes up; Walt, gone to untether their horses, is drowned in a flooding brook; Malena finds his corpse, goes mad while watching over it for some days, and dies after singing a lullaby that chides the circling vultures and promises the death-united lovers a place where the birds' "darkenings cannot come." Plenty of gothic stuff here! In this poem, as in the "The Legend of Flower Pot Mountain," where a woman named Nora Raymond, after apparently being drowned in a flood, recurrently returns to the area around the Medicine Lodge River as an Ophelia-like living-dead apparition, it is "death's darksome river" that marks the divide between the corporeal and the spiritual. For

Cummins that divide, however absolute in some sense, is also an ambiguous frontier that allows the intermingling of the opposite realms it delimits--a situation paralleled in a subtext of "The Maid of Barber" that concerns the cowboy generally, who, like Walt (or Cummins himself--or his son Walter, 1880-1918?), may be "compared to savage beast" but should be counted among "gentlemen."<sup>10</sup>

Another poem based on "real" characters but also imaginatively elaborated, "Owaaneo--Pale Flower" has its "foundation," as Cummins explains in a prefatory note,

laid in the village of Quasqueton, on the Wapsipinecon river in Buchanan County, Iowa [Cummins's childhood home], during the Pike's Peak gold excitement. The ill-fated family alluded to who were massacred by the Indians, consisted of James McFee, his wife and two children, a boy and a little girl, Ida. The bodies of Mr. McFee and wife and little boy were found in a horrible mutilated condition; but the little girl was carried away by the blood-thirsty wretches and her whereabouts was shrouded in mystery.

Cummins, of course, tackles that "mystery" as he tells his protracted version of the story in a nutshell above, much of it a ghost chapter, as it were, recounting the fate of Ida, his "first fond childhood idol," after the other family members were slain during their trip across "the desolate plains" to the Rockies. The narrator (Cummins in propria persona, the reader of his poems is almost always asked to believe) first learns of her fate many years later when, as a young man hunting buffalo somewhere in the region of the massacre, he is "caught in a fearful blizzard," led to safety at the bottom of a canyon by a "phantom light" (or perhaps, as he speculates, "a vivid hallucination"), and

there, "wellnigh fallen asleep" by his campfire while thinking of Ida but then suddenly awakening (apparently), beholds the ghost of her father. "Surely . . . no dream," this "form of a man" tells him that Ida is alive: "Three days journey from here, she rules as our Indian priucess, / Loved and revered by all the hordes of wild Comanches . . ." He asks the narrator to rescue her from that circumstance (recurrent in Western lore) and "restore her once more to her people" so that "my spirit may rest." After the ghost vanishes, the narrator, even as he asserts his belief that "truth is stranger than fiction," tried to persuade himself that "'twas naught but a fitful vision." But he remembers that he has often "courted the shades and halo of superstition," and, trusting "to an Alwise Ruler on high," he undertakes the quest, crossing "Soon o'er the western divide" into a world more Indian than white, where Ida, by a transposition the reverse of that in the legend of Cummins's own infancy, became Owaaneo.<sup>17</sup>

What the narrator finds, after some days' travel, is not Owaaneo but an unconscious Comanche warrior pinned under a dead horse in a ditch. (Cummins had suffered a similar accident near a Union camp outside Atlanta, Georgia, in 1865.) Believing that Indians love whiskey, he administers "fire-water" to "recall an Indian from death's dark portals." The Comanche revives a little, then falls asleep; some hours later so does the narrator. Shortly, however he is awakened by the voice of the Comanche, who, after drinking more whiskey, tells the narrator, "by the aid of signs," that he was the one who saved Ida's life and subsequently cared for her like a father; that "her will was the law infinite" of his tribe; and that "Ten sleeps ago . . . her spirit began its journey, / o'er the sunless, moonless path to the red man's great hereafter." Having told of Owaaneo's death, the Comanche himself dies. The narrator then returns, "Back o'er the desert

waste, safe to the western village," filled all the way with thoughts of how "truth is stranger than fiction"<sup>18</sup>--though, of course, the strange truth he has told is, by another of Cummins's crossings between worlds, fiction.

Yet another such crossing occurs in "The Outlaw." Partly a tale warning against the evils of alcohol (with which Cummins himself may have struggled), it is an exemplum of the "tender heart" that frames a dream-vision of the kind such hearts can "weave." Declaring that he is one who, "if I see a fellow man beneath me, in the mire, / I reach at once a helping hand, nor tarry to inquire," the narrator tells of how he tries to persuade "a dissipated son," whose sister has died in despair at his life, to return to his heartbroken mother and straighten out his life but fails as the man sinks deeper "in the rum fiend's power" and drives his mother to death as well. Some time later the narrator sees "an outlaw hanging from a rough old elm limb," cuts him down, recognizes him as a "fond mother's fair haired boy," and feelingly buries him by a river in a shallow grave. That night, while the narrator is alone and nulling "o'er the wrecks o'er life's was strown," and "angel form," the outlaw's dead sister, appears at his door, "come from lands afar to visit with the dead." Since he alone showed sorrow for her dead brother, she asks him to go with her to the grave. He agrees, and

We mounted, and as speeds the  
wind, across the prairie wide, Full  
many a weary mile we rode to the  
one river's side, We reached the  
spot, she quick dismounts, and  
kneels with maniac scream,  
And startled by the wailing cry, I  
wake, 'twas but a dream. A dream,  
yet I can close my eyes, though  
years have passed away,  
That vision will remain with me, until  
my dying day.<sup>19</sup>

Again, of course, several crossings are involved: not just a crossing by the dead,



"from lands afar," of the dark divide to meet the living and visit the dead but also a crossing from waking into (what is unexpectedly discovered to be) dreaming and back to waking and a crossing of the years from long ago to the narrative present and even on to the narrator's "dying day."

"The Outlaw" makes an appropriate poem with which to conclude this treatment of the Pilgrim Bard's poetry, for he himself was something of an outlaw--though not a criminal one and certainly, by all accounts, a tender-hearted one. His life was, as he puts it in "Owaameo--Pale Flower," "changeable, roving . . . from the days of my childhood," pilgrim-like indeed.<sup>20</sup> No wonder his poems deal so much with different, even contradictory, and yet intermingled realities and values, with crossings and counter-crossings of outer and inner frontiers. The temperament from which they spring doubtless owes something to "the code of the West," which was, as Forbis describes it, "compounded of hard-fisted frontier desperation and Victorian-era social values," both "a canon of ethics" and "a rationalization for rapacity" whose practice was full of "inconsistencies."<sup>21</sup> But it owes something also to the folklore he gathered in the West and its "book of nature" and much to the poets he doubtless read and was influenced by: Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, Poe, Burns, Goldsmith, maybe Hardy, others as well--and, of course, the Bible. And I wonder how much it was shaped in its uniqueness by a mother who, Cummins relates in "Stories about a Good Little Boy," sang him the haunting (to say the least) lullaby that ends with these lines:

Our life is but a tale, a dance, a dream.  
A little wave that frets and murmurs  
by,

Our hopes like bubbles floating on the  
stream,

Born with a breath, yet broken by a  
sigh.

Lullaby,--lullaby,--lullaby.<sup>22</sup>

Probably her death in 1896, along with the

deaths of other women he knew and loved (including that of Katie McWilliams, a niece Cummins cherished like a daughter, from a gunshot accident during the Indian raids of 1878), empowered his tendency strongly to associate women with movement across one dark divide or another, to see them as figures connecting opposite worlds of life and death, white and red, order and violence--most all the fissured yet interanimating polarities that characterize the outer and inner frontiers of his poetic landscape.

When the white-haired Pilgrim Bard died on March 21, 1928, apparently of cancer, after several years of being what was then called feeble-minded, he was widely eulogized for his gentleness, good will, extraordinary vocabulary (for a little-schooled person), poetic style, and love of Western nature. According to Jean M. Brown, "'Dynamite' Dave Leahy, dean of the Kansas newspapermen of his day" and one of his many admirers, "said Cummins should have been poet laureate of Kansas."<sup>23</sup> When he at last crossed the dark divide that had so obsessed him, he had lived the romance of many contradictory roles and become publicly the legend he had long been in his own eyes; and his poetry, most of which is included in *Musings of the Pilgrim Bard* (which Theodore Roosevelt read and praised) and *Twilight Reveries*, stretched to eight volumes--though a few are no more than pamphlets. He was one of a kind, yet he was also, in some ways, quintessentially a Western American. Had he had more formal education and different models (especially in the plain-style tradition), he might have been a better poet; for his command of technique at times very much impresses. But had his life been otherwise, some of the most intriguing qualities of his motley temperament--J.S. Qualey calls him "probably the most bizarre . . . poet the old West knew"<sup>24</sup>--might have been suppressed and his poetry not be the extraordinary record it is; nor would he

have been the precursor of the less gothic, poets of today, who continue to write about  
 though perhaps no less romantic, cowboy ambiguous frontiers.

#### NOTES

1. William H. Forbis, *The Cowboys* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1973), p. 19.
2. Yvor Winters, *Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English* (n.p.: Swallow, 1967), p. 172.
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