Review of James Dempsey, *The Tortured Life of Scofield Thayer* (University Press of Florida, March 2014)

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James Dempsey's ambitions for his life of Thayer are clear: "My hope is that this book will set the figure of Scofield Thayer back where it belongs, at the center of that madding press of movements, talents, and personalities that has been subsumed, for better or worse, under the encrusting rubric of modernism" (xii). Dempsey's clarity of purpose is a great strength, and it leads to a biography which is well-structured, focused, and intelligible on every level.

The book rightly concentrates on Thayer's life in the 1910s and 1920s, and especially on his involvement with *The Dial*. These are the years during which Thayer was a major fixer in the world of the modernists. Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism* (1998) has significantly raised the profile of *The Dial* among scholars of modernism, and this biography of Thayer addresses a gap in scholarly literature which will have been felt by many. It is particularly interesting to read in Dempsey about Thayer's ambivalence towards the modernist art which he and *The Dial* championed.

Dempsey has produced a sympathetic treatment of Thayer which is nonetheless honest and straightforward about Thayer's shortcomings. The book is beautifully written, lucid, and readable. Dempsey has an excellent eye for detail based on primary research. For example, the patent which contributed to Thayer's father's vast fortune—an invention which "made the changing of shuttles so much more efficient that a weaver could run four looms at once rather than the typical two" (8)—is the sort of detail which never clutters, but rather helps draw the reader into an intuitive sense of the era.

One of the greatest strengths of Dempsey's book lies in the exceptionally well-chosen quotes (from archival and also from published material), which offer the perspectives of other men and women on Thayer. The book is generously full of these perspectives. One is highlighted by Dempsey at the outset:

Thayer's Oxford friend Valentine Farrar, who died of a bullet wound to

> the head in the trenches of the Great War, made the prescient remark that Thayer would be remembered for something other than his philosophy or his verse. "If you do any permanent work," he said, "I doubt if it will be in a genre which will appeal to you." (x)

This remark by Farrar indicates one theme which consistently emerges from the book: Thayer was not a man who understood himself. He was declared legally insane in 1937; but, as Dempsey convincingly shows, he exhibited signs of mental illness and paranoia for many years before that legal judgement (183).

In *Essays in Criticism* (2004), Ian Donaldson writes of his alarm at biographers who fall into the seductive fallacy of supposing that they know more about their subjects than their subjects ever knew about themselves. Donaldson concedes that there might indeed, in unusual cases, be ways in which the biographer *does* know more about the life of the subject: "Peter Conradi, to take an extreme case, clearly knew more about Iris Murdoch than she in her last years knew about herself" (305). The case of Thayer would be another such exception. Here is a man always suffering from a lack of self-knowledge and eventually from psychotic mental illness. Dempsey has done an excellent job of handling Thayer's unreliable perspective on himself.

Donaldson's piece considers how "biographical uncertainty" (the title of his article) relates to the wider task of the biographer: "How much can biographers ever know about their chosen subjects, and how much should they try to know? These two questions, epistemological and ethical, lie at the heart of all biographical work" (306). Thayer is very much a case in point to the issues raised by Donaldson. Thayer's psychosis renders his perspective unreliable to an extent far beyond the usual questions of subjectivity. Ethical complications include the fact that Thayer's guardians prohibited any biography (xii, 180-2). Specific epistemological problems, beyond the fact of the psychosis itself, include the absence of dates on Thayer's personal notes (184)—and a lack of dates seems a particularly notable inconvenience for a biographer when a man is descending gradually into madness.

Dempsey does not address these issues at a theoretical level, nor is there any reason why he should. The point is that he has clearly put a great deal of thought into exactly these issues, and the biography profits greatly from this. When they arise explicitly, ethical and epistemological questions are

handled with a light touch (e.g. at x, xii, 50, 180-2, 184). More importantly, Dempsey's own engagement with these questions shows through in his ability to write with honesty about the damage which Thayer clearly did to several women with whom he was involved, and it shows too in Dempsey's handling of the brutal and unsettling narrative of Thayer's breakdown in the mid-1920s. Dempsey's narrative of the breakdown is exposed and affecting, but avoids any suggestion of voyeurism on the part of biographer or reader.

There are perhaps things that could usefully be added to the final chapter (which discusses Thayer's poetry). For example, Dempsey says: "In Thayer's next published undergraduate poem, 'Clouds,' another sonnet, seemingly inspired by Shelleyan odes, he is again gazing heavenward. He sees the clouds as 'unwieldy galleons' sailing through the skies..." (191). The phrase evokes Alfred Noyes, "The Highwayman": "The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas." This allusion might be worth noting, especially as Dempsey says that Thayer wrote an essay at Harvard championing Noyes' poetry (15). It might also be worth commenting on the title of the poem "Ad Amicam Meum" (192) (incorrect Latin: lack of gender agreement). These are minor quibbles, however. Dempsey has taken a biographical subject who presents unusual and considerable challenges, and he has tackled his subject thoughtfully, fearlessly, and with conviction.

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Note

Writing this review from the perspective of an interest in E. E. Cummings, I noticed an inconsistency: Dempsey writes, "E. E. Cummings probably first met Elaine on May 20, 1916, at a Cambridge party Thayer hosted" (37). Later he says, "They [Cummings and Elaine] must have met at the beginning of April 1916 or even earlier, certainly before her engagement to Thayer" (59). The mistake has been picked up from Sawyer-Lauçanno (86). On errors in Sawyer-Lauçanno, see Webster's review. Kennedy has Elaine and Cummings meeting briefly in March, then more fully on the 20th of May (111).

Works Cited

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