J.V. Cunningham was born in Cumberland, Maryland. He completed high school in 1927, but his education was interrupted by the death of his father and the financial difficulties that resulted. Cunningham vainly tried to find work during the Great Depression but was often without food or a place to live. After several years, Yvor Winters discovered him and invited him to study at Stanford University, where he completed both his bachelor’s and graduate degrees. He taught at a number of other prestigious universities, such as the University of Chicago, Brandeis, and Harvard, as well as Stanford.