

His Dream, Her Reality: Two Principles of Mental Functioning in E. E. Cummings' *Him*

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In everyday life, dreams are regarded as the epitome of pleasurable experiences, as the idiom “In one's wildest dreams” makes clear. In dreams, even the greatest failure can become a world-historical success. Psychoanalysis asserts that this is the defining characteristic of dreams: to quote Freud's famous formulation in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “[A] dream is the fulfillment of a wish” (154). Even people who disagree with this claim must acknowledge that dreams are often used by writers to reveal a dreamer's concerns, particularly the ones he dare not mention out loud. Richard Kennedy's biography of E. E. Cummings, *Dreams in the Mirror*, documents Cummings' strong interest in Freud, including a period of psychoanalysis under Freud's colleague Fritz Wittels (299-303), so one might expect a Freudian reading of Cummings' works to prove fruitful. This is unquestionably true of the three-act prose play *Him*, but although Kennedy mentions the Freudian undertones of the play, particularly the early drafts (290-1), he does not analyze the play in detail. In particular, he does not consider the remarkable degree to which the play's male and female leads, Him and Me, respectively embody what Freud called “the pleasure principle” and “the reality principle.”

Any reading of *Him* should begin by acknowledging that it is confusing. Kennedy goes further than that—perhaps too far—when he refers to the play as a “fascinating assembly of parts” that Cummings was unable to “unify,” with a “mechanical resolution” and “tiresome verbal nonsense” (292-3). In fairness to Kennedy, he also mentions the play's “brilliant insights,” its “moving poetic speeches,” and its “provocative ideas.” Be that as it may, given that Freud was very much on Cummings' mind while he was writing the play, it is not surprising that *Him* invites a Freudian analysis, or that such an analysis demonstrates a degree of unity in the play that Kennedy, for all his insight, failed to appreciate.

First, however, some biographical background is in order. Kennedy informs us that, in the first draft of the play, the main character was called Edward, and he was in love with a woman named Anna (Kennedy 290). Anna, in turn, is in love with a man named Jan, who, in an earlier draft, was

a Janitor who lived in the basement of Edward and Anna's building. Cummings went by "Estlin," but his first name, like his father's, was "Edward," and while he was writing *Him*, Cummings was embroiled in a tempestuous affair with Anne Barton, who eventually became his second wife. Kennedy says of the "final product" that it is "unnecessarily complex [and] never completely clear in the ideas that it presents," but on one point it is plain as day: whatever else Cummings was doing in *Him*, he was also working out deeply personal problems. These problems remain, albeit in disguised, distorted, and symbolic form, in the published version of *Him*, just as they remained, undisguised, in Cummings' personal life (299).

To turn to the play itself, there are a number of things in it that invite a Freudian analysis. However, the most prominent of these is Him's dream, of which he gives an account in Act III, Scene V. Furthermore, since psychoanalysis established itself as a distinct scientific discipline with the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, it seems appropriate to begin a Freudian analysis of *Him* with an analysis of this dream. In addition to granting insight into Him's psychological development and his concern with reproduction, this analysis will show Him to be, as it were, a dreamer—or in Freudian terms, one who is excessively concerned with the pleasure principle at the expense of the reality principle.

Him's dream begins with Him and Me standing "in a sort of room," and Me "seemed to be telling [Him] something. But [he] was only tremendously glad to feel [her] so near. . . ." (Cummings 125). Him is unsure whether Me is even speaking to him, let alone what she might be saying. Although Me portrays herself as failing to understand Him—for example, in their first scene together, when she says "I know I'm stupid. I can't help it" (10)—there are hints that Him, not Me, is the one who fails to understand what is really going on. The first time we see them together, Me, looking at herself in the mirror, says "I look like the devil." Him responds by mumbling "Absently, without looking up [from the notebook in which he is scribbling] or turning, 'Wanted: death's brother'" (6). Perhaps Me's concern is superficial; nevertheless, she is concerned about something concrete and immediate, while Him is lost in contemplating a scenario that sounds like a punchline for an overly-complicated joke. (Incidentally, Freud devoted an entire book to *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, in the sixth chapter of which he argued that many of the same mental processes are at work in jokes as in dreams). Later in that same scene, just after referring to herself as "stupid," Me calls Him "stupid" for not realizing that she has lost

the mirror she keeps in her handbag (Cummings 11). The two occurrences of “stupid” so close to each other suggest that Me’s attribution of negative qualities to herself is a way of preserving Him’s ego by refusing to identify those qualities in him—a sort of inverted projection, as it were. When Me calls Him “stupid,” there is a tension that suggests she is not going to keep up the charade of her own ignorance much longer—a tension that reaches the breaking point in the final scene.

To return to the dream: Me takes Him’s left hand and leads him “somewhere else in [the] room—and through the roomshaped soft darkness I tiptoed wadingly” (126). As Freud points out, enclosed spaces often function in dreams as symbols for the womb (*Interpretation* 389), the original enclosed space that each of us experiences, and in this case the “soft darkness” of the room enhances that symbolism. Furthermore, for someone who pays as much attention to the sounds of words as Cummings does, the phonetic similarity between “room” and “womb” could only strengthen the association between the two. For good measure, immediately after listing a number of typical symbols for the womb, Freud notes that “Rooms in dreams are usually women; if the various ways in and out of them are represented, this interpretation is scarcely open to doubt.” It is easy to make too much of “typical” symbols, and one of the standard jokes at Freud’s expense is that he did just that, but in this case, with Him and Me’s entire relationship turning upon the question of whether to have a child, and with further evidence from the dream itself, it is perfectly reasonable to interpret the dark room as a symbolic womb. In other words, since the dark room is later revealed to contain their child, Me takes Him by the hand and leads him through what is presumably her own womb—and considering that is far from the strangest thing to happen in this play, one can easily sympathize with Kennedy’s failure to apprehend it. After walking for a bit, Me points “to something,” and Him “could not quite see—but through this dark softness [he] seemed to feel—another person, lying very quietly with an entire quietness that queerly frightened [him].” At this point, Him asks for Me’s permission to continue his account. Before he began to relate the dream, Him asked Me to interrupt him if it became “too queer” (Cummings 125), and she agreed. At this point, the womb symbolism notwithstanding, there has been nothing particularly unusual or startling about this dream, so Him’s hesitation at this point suggests less a fear of what he has already shared than a reluctance to share the remaining portion. He is aware, however dimly, that Me no longer shares his wish for a child, assuming she

ever did. Thus he is afraid, however subconsciously, that she will understand his wish, and finally give him the definite refusal that she has until now avoided as assiduously as he has avoided voicing the wish in the first place.

When Me gives Him permission to continue, he reveals that the shape he sensed in the darkness was a girl. “[Her eyes] were big and new in the darkness. They seemed to be looking at as if we had known each other somewhere else. They were very close—so close that my breath almost touched them” (126). In spite of this extreme closeness, the girl is shy, “more shy than you can ever imagine, a shyness inhabiting very easily and very skillfully everything which is profoundly fragile and everything which we really are and everything which we never quite live.” This paradox, of being almost close enough to touch a thing one nevertheless cannot achieve, is perfectly familiar – as the cliché puts it, so close and yet so far. Cummings avoids descending into cliché through Him’s powerful sense of a life not truly lived, and, in the case of the child he is dreaming of, a life that may literally never be lived. For the moment, however, he is in the dream, and, “[J]ust as I almost touched this shyness—it suddenly seemed to touch me.” It is difficult to paraphrase Him’s reaction to this contact, and directly quoting it in its entirety would be excessive, but we ought to note “a peering frailness, perfectly curious about me; curiously and perfectly created out of my own hope and out of my own fear.... I did not see any more, then” (126-127). Here he explicitly names the ambivalence that has gone into making the dream, hope and fear together. The hope is his hope for a child, and, in light of Me’s own ambivalence toward having a child, his fear is that he will drive her away permanently. As Milton Cohen points out, “Him’s ambivalence toward the child mirrors Cummings’ tangled feelings toward his daughter [Nancy]; fear of responsibility, desire for paternity, guilt over neglecting her, and finally, bitterness in blaming her for his failed marriage to [Nancy’s mother] Elaine” (Cohen 609-10). The fear and desire in Him’s case are plain; he himself has mentioned them. The bitterness in his case is an anticipatory one, and if there is one thing sadder than blaming a child for a failed relationship—especially a child whom one has neglected—it is blaming an unborn child for the same. But what of the “guilt over neglecting her”? Surely Him cannot feel guilty over neglecting a child that has not even been conceived, let alone born. Or rather, if he does, the guilt is presumably coming from some other source, and has focused on the child in order to enable Him to avoid recognizing its true ori-

gins. Here we have a subtle clue that, however absorbed he may be in play-writing, Him is not completely oblivious to Me's growing ambivalence toward him: to the extent that he realizes his own responsibility for that ambivalence, he feels guilty for neglecting her.

In any case, Him's imaginary daughter does reach out and touch him. After a pause of unspecified duration, he resumes his account: "Then I stooped a little lower and kissed her hair . . . her head, herself, her silence" (127). To break that silence, and to

find out if she were perhaps real, I spoke to her—and her voice answered as if perhaps not speaking to me at all, or as if it felt embarrassed because it knew that it was doing something which it should not do; and yet, I remember her voice was glad to feel, close by it, the unreal someone whom had been. (Cummings 127)

This is a fascinating passage. Him doubts the reality of his wished-for daughter, who, we have already noted, has become the focus of guilt concerning his relationship with Me. Here again, as with Me at the beginning of the dream, is not sure what a female he loves is saying to him, signifying another breakdown in the communication that is central to any sustained relationship, marital, paternal, or otherwise. This breakdown, however, is even more pitiful than the first, since Him cannot even communicate with another being who exists solely in his own mind, which may help to explain his writer's block. His inability to understand either Me or the child is a reflection, or, to put it psychoanalytically, a symptom, of his inability to understand himself. Here, too, we learn that guilt over his relationship with Me is not the only feeling for which the child has become the focus: the embarrassment that Him hears in her voice is his own embarrassment, projected onto her. He is embarrassed that he cannot express his wish to have a child, except by telling Me about a dream. He is embarrassed that "O. Him," the "Man in the Mirror," is not only someone with whom he could "never seriously compete" (27), but that Me could well be having an affair with this someone, as he suspects (26). But surely this is one of Cummings' jokes; Him could not really believe that his lover is having an affair with his reflection! Not in waking life, to be sure—but in the twilight world of the subconscious, a joke can be just as revealing as a dream. It is one thing to feel inferior to another actually existing human being, and even such a feeling can be neurotic if it is not well-founded, but to feel inferior to an

image that does not even exist unless one steps in front of a mirror? Such a feeling says more about Him than it does about Me. He fears that she is in love with a projection, with an outer, not an inner self. In fairness to Him, he does recognize that, if we measure a person's reality by his effectiveness, even this unborn child is more real than he is: though he cannot save his relationship with Me, the child is close to bringing it to an end.

"Then the darkness seemed to open," Him continues, "I know what I saw then: it was a piece of myself, a child in a crib." (127). The focus of his dream switches back to Me: "So you and I together went out of this opened darkness where a part of ourselves somehow seemed to be lying—where something which had had happened to us . . . held a girl doll and a boy doll." On the most literal level, the child would indeed be a part of Him, as it would of Me, but in this case, the description of the child as a part of Him reinforces its nature as a part of his wish. *His* wish, not *Me's*: Him lets slip, possibly by accident, that he sees the child as "something that happened to us"—which is to say, not as something that the two of them looked forward to and planned. This conception of the child fits in well with the image of Him and Me as dolls in her hands.

"Perhaps you closed the door, gently," Him says to Me, "but I remember nothing about coming into the light." Thus ends the account of his dream. If the room symbolizes a womb, Me closing the door is a tolerably obvious symbol of childbirth. Again, it is revealing that Him only broaches this as a possibility; no matter how much he may want to consciously pretend otherwise, his subconscious knows, and keeps finding ways to make plain that it knows, that Me may not want a child. Finally, he "remembers nothing about coming into the light." This image admits several different readings. Him may mean that he does not remember the time he became an artist, when he began to see the world in a new light. Considering the childbirth element, it may mean that he does not remember his own birth or childhood. In this context, however, the most likely meaning is that Him has in some sense remained in a prenatal state, wrapped in the comforting darkness of the womb, and refused to emerge into the light of the adult world—in a word, to grow up. This, too, reflects a personal problem of Cummings, who jotted in his notebook during the period of his psychoanalysis: "I have never grown up / assumed the responsibilities of a man" (qtd. in Kennedy 302). In the play, however, it underscores the hopelessness of Him's wish: how can he possibly raise a child when he is himself one? Such is Him's dream. It is multilayered, manifold, and compelling—and

Freudian through and through.

The final scene of the play has been referred to already, and it is time now to consider it in detail. In brief, Me points out the people, the “real people” in the audience, out beyond the “invisible wall,” and tells Him “They’re pretending that this room and you and I are real” (Cummings 145). What does this have to do with Freud? At the end of the twenty-second lecture of his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud summarizes the opposition between what he sees as the two basic principles of mental functioning thus:

The ego discovers that it is inevitable for it to renounce immediate satisfaction, to postpone the obtaining of pleasure, to put up with a little unpleasure and to abandon certain sources of pleasure altogether. An ego thus educated has become “reasonable”; it no longer lets itself be governed by the pleasure principle, but obeys the *reality principle*, which also at bottom seeks to obtain pleasure, but pleasure which is assured through taking account of reality, even though it is pleasure postponed and diminished. (444)

In this context, the reality principle is operating through Me not only by allowing her to realize the fictional nature of her and Him’s existence, but by making her implicitly acknowledge that Him’s happiness and hers depend upon the wishes of the author writing them, and the audience that will determine whether their show remains in production. Him, in contrast, would rather disappear inside his own dreams or artistic visions—in a word, his wishes—than acknowledge painful reality. This, according to Freud, is the defining characteristic of a neurotic: “whenever a neurotic is faced by a conflict, he takes flight into illness” (*Introductory* 475), “illness” being the state of mind in which one’s wishes take precedence over cold, hard facts.

Let us return to the beginning of the scene. The room in which Him and Me live, which has been rotating throughout the play to show us a different angle every time, has returned to its original orientation (Cummings 144). In a sense, we have returned to where we started, but like Him’s own regression into childhood, ours is not a perfect return: Him’s hat is missing from the sofa, and there are flowers on the table. According to the stage directions, “Me and Him occupy the same positions with respect to each other and to the room itself as when Scene 5 of Act Three was interrupted

by darkness.” Though the world is moving around them, Me and Him are in a kind of stasis, not sure where to go or what to do. The reference to “Scene 5 of Act Three [being] interrupted by darkness” reminds us that, just before darkness engulfs the stage at the end of that scene, Him asks Me if she is thinking, and she responds in the affirmative (131). When the final scene, Act III, Scene VII, opens, the first line of dialogue is Me’s “I am thinking” (144). The suggestion is that, whatever the other scenes that do not feature Him and Me may be, Act III, Scene VI is a dramatization of what Me is thinking. If this is true, it goes a long way toward explaining why she would want to end the relationship with Him: how could she do otherwise when she has begun to feel like the main attraction at a carnival freak show, as the final tableau of Scene VI makes her?

To his credit, after spending most of the play primarily concerned with himself and his alter ego or egos, Him does try to find out what Me is thinking here. It may be a classic case of too little, too late, but he does try. Of course, even the way in which he tries demonstrates just how far he still has his head in the clouds: “And may I ask what you are thinking? Anything everything nothing or something: which is it?” Me’s laconic response —“The last”—underscores the unfocused nature of the question that prompted it; again, as when we first see them, Me is the more grounded of the two. Him pauses. “Is it something about the window . . . About the door . . . About what’s behind you?”¹ “No . . . No . . . Not exactly. No.” We can only speculate what might be behind Me at this point; in any case, Him will not be daunted: “But you’re thinking about something in this room, aren’t you?” “Yes,” Me says (145), even though, strictly speaking, she is thinking about something outside of the room. Even now, on the very last page of the play, she resists telling Him what she is really thinking, in a desperate attempt to hold on to a love she has realized cannot be saved. Him prompts her to tell him what she is thinking, and her evasion continues: “Can’t you guess? I’ll give you time.” This exchange is deeply ironic: although Me has made her mind out to be inferior to Him’s, she is the one who knows what is going on, while Him can only beg her to tell him.

After Him insists that he cannot guess what Me is thinking, she reveals, “quietly,” that the room “has only three walls.” This alludes to the idea of the fourth wall, a common theatrical term for the imaginary wall that separates the characters on stage from the people in the audience, and, by extension, helps to preserve the illusion that what is occurring on the stage is real. By denying the existence of the fourth wall, Me implicitly acknowl-

edges the illusory nature of herself and Him, and this implication is made explicit a few lines later. Him points toward the “invisible wall” and asks, “[W]hat do you see there?” obviously expecting that Me will see a wall with a mirror on it. Instead, she answers, “People.” Him is startled, but he retains enough presence of mind to ask, very sensibly, “What sort of people?” “Real people,” Me responds. “And do you know what they’re doing?” Him’s attention is focused on her, rather than the invisible wall, and he can only ask, “What are they doing?” Turning to face the audience, Me answers, “They’re pretending that this room and you and I are real.” She says this while standing at the door of the room, which, on her own account, is a fictional furnishing that will lead nowhere but off the set. Standing in the middle of the room, Him whispers, “I wish I could believe this.” Here again, we have the room / womb symbolism. Although Me is positioned at the exit of the room, ready to be born or reborn into the real world, Him is still in stasis, trapped in the middle of the womb, and unlike in his dream, Me is not holding his hand to lead him into the light. As with his child, all he can do is flee from reality into his wishes, the very definition of a neurotic. Him’s characteristic neurosis was referred to earlier as regression, but regression is not quite the right word when one has refused to grow up in the first place. Instead, it seems to be a primordial neurosis, as it were—an elementary inability to face reality. Me suggests as much when she says that Him “can’t [believe this] . . . Because this is true.” Him’s neurosis will take any form it pleases—the creations of the artist, the dreams of a dreamer, the unadulterated escapism of the circus (Cummings 12-13), in order to avoid facing the most painful reality of all: that nothing he knows is real.

There are a number of other Freudian elements in *Him*. For instance, although Cohen points out that Cummings read Freud’s book on jokes (Cohen 591-2), we have barely touched on the jokes in this play. Nor have we analyzed Act II, the whole of which consists of a dreamlike series of scenarios that Him is considering including in his play. Finally—there is no need for a longer list here—there are the overtly sexual symbols used throughout the play; to give just two examples, there are the gun and the flower, a pun on pistol and pistil, as well as symbols for male and female genitals respectively (Cummings 23). All of these are possible avenues for scholars who are interested in building on the foundation of Freudian analysis of *Him* that Kennedy and Cohen have laid. In any case, this contribution to such analysis is hereby concluded.

Note

1. [Editor's note] By having Him ask Me if she is thinking about "what's behind you," Cummings is probably referring to the "immortal dictum" of Krazy Kat, "it's what's behind me that I am." Cummings quotes this phrase with approval at least three times in his *oeuvre*, most notably in "The Adult, the Artist and the Circus" (111). (See Olsen 222.)

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