

Explication of "An Imaginary Dialogue," the Dust Jacket Blurb for *Him*.

E. E. Cummings

This little essay has in it almost all I don't know about art. My metaphor of the voices is only apparently syntactical [grammatical]; actually it is dimensional. Grammatically speaking, the middle voice refers to a particular form which Greek verbs assume when they wish to represent their subject as both the agent & the object of action; in other words, as performing [*in margin*: see discarded scene 3 beginning] some act upon himself, or with reference to himself—instead of either actively doing something to someone else or passively having someone else do something to him. This action, intermediate between active & passive, immediately suggests the English word reflexive. And speaking reflexively: I call myself a poet.

At a deeper level, this reflexive voice expresses the author, or creator, a 3dimensional being; by contrast with the Public (whom we shall meet later as [subsequently entitled] "mostpeople") who inhabits a strictly 2dimensional domain: the realm of either-or. For this denizen of flatness, everything [& everyone] is either [strong or weak], either good or bad, either right or wrong, [white or black], either sense or nonsense. If you should tell him that today the strength of weakness has triumphed, he would merely stare. Not for him do the witches of Macbeth sing

"When the battle's lost and won"

—for him, you either win or you lose. The idea of winning by losing or of losing by winning leaves him coldly incredulous. If you quoted the tremendous pronouncement of Saint Paul—"I die daily"—your auditor would shrug his shoulders & give you that pityingly cynical leer which has doomed a thousand civilizations. His awareness doesn't extend beyond the so-called fact that you're either alive or dead. He is, in short, a simple fellow. — who probably enjoys slavery . . .

In my essay, this simple fellow has charged a work (or rather play) of art head on; as a bull charges the colour of a cloak in the *corrida*—& just as he was about to pulverize the object of his attention, that object inexplicably disappeared. Of course he is incensed; he is also puzzled. What does this mean? "But surely, Mr Author, you know what you're making?" he storms.

The cloakman, the creator, the play's progenitor, will play with him briefly before dispatching him. "Beg pardon, Mr Public, I surely make what I'm knowing." The charging brute, the Public, knows what he's doing; the fearless nimble acrobatic human being, the Author, does what he's knowing. And this makes the animal even angrier—"nonsense" (he snorts) "isn't everything in life." Now the killer, the creator, moves in close. "And so far as you're concerned, life is a verb of two voices: active, to do, & passive to dream." Clear enough. "Others believe doing to be a kind of dreaming." Obscure, suspect; possibly poetic—

"Our revels now are ended: These our actors
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air.
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made of, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep." [The Tempest IV, i 148-158]

But bulls don't read Shakespeare. How could doing be a kind of dreaming? Ridiculous. But worse is to come. "Still others have discovered (in a mirror surrounded by mirrors) something harder than silence but softer than falling: the third voice of life, which believes itself; & which cannot mean because it is."

There is nothing left of the bull now. He never heard of a lonely old eccentric of Aix en Provence; to whom shortly before his death, came a disciple [would-be pupil] all [the] way from Paris by the name of Emile Bernard. "How do you see Nature?" the master asked sternly. "For me," the disciple [would-be pupil, dramatic,?] answered, "everything reflects everything else." Cézanne beamed. "Vous voyez juste," he said proudly; "vous irez loin." ["You see rightly . . . you will go far."] Here is our mirror surrounded by mirrors—but the Public is his own mirror; realities, not reflections, are what interest him. At the same time he half-realizes that here is something beyond his simple scope, something complex & mysterious, which makes neither sense nor nonsense: & at the very bottom of his unlife he is afraid. But he is a bull: & bulls cannot be afraid. So he tosses his head

[horns] & ripostes “Bravo!” adding, with a sarcasm which he mistakes for irony, “but are such persons good for anything in particular?” “They are good” (comes the answer) “for nothing except walking upright in the cordial revelation of the fatal reflexive.” An erect ribbon of steel flashes: the cloakman becomes a swordsman; who stands, poised like a real dream, before his victim. Down, down goes that glaring head: “And your play is about one of these persons, Mr Author?” Silence. Then: “Perhaps.” (—& now the creator is on tiptoe—) “But let me tell you a secret.” The ribbon becomes a shooting star. And as [while?] that huge incarnation of collectivity crumples we hear the poet [maker] saying “I rather hope my play is one of these persons.” He has become his poem.

on “3rd Voice”

quote--nothing false or possible is love

Work Cited

Cummings, E. E. “*Him*; dust jacket blurb [explication].” ts. (with ms. revisions); [n.p., n.d.] bMS Am 1892.6 (55) 3s. E. E. Cummings Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Transcription Notes:

This text may be tentatively dated late 1940s or early 1950s. It may have been written for the new edition of *Him* issued by Liveright in 1955. Words in brackets indicate an alternative word or phrase added by Cummings without crossing out either alternative. In three cases ([& everyone], [strong or weak], and [white or black]) the brackets are Cummings’ own. Doubtful readings are indicated by a question mark in brackets. All doubtful readings are of words added in pencil or pen in the margins or between the lines of the typescript. The translations of the French phrases are my own. [Michael Webster]