

**The Modernist Sonnet and the Pre-Postmodern
Consciousness: The Question of Meta-Genre in
E. E. Cummings' *W [ViVa]* (1931)**

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I

What is a modernist sonnet, what is pre-postmodern consciousness, what do they have in common, and what do they have to do with the question of meta-genre? Putting these seemingly different terms together, I am suggesting that there is an affinity among them, in spite of the on-going debate that demarcates the boundary between (high) modernism and postmodernism. Charles Olsen, for one, inaugurated the term "postmodern" to mark the period for poetry after World War II.¹ Others locate the distinction in changes in economics, textual and cultural production, social and political position, and the discourse of language. Fredric Jameson deems that postmodernism begins with the assimilation of modernist aesthetics into commodities by consumer culture, while the radical rejection of popular taste or appeal in modernist art and literature characterizes an elitist aesthetic modernism.² However, in spite of such distinctions based on periodization, economics, or various discourses, the reality remains that experimental, subversive, fragmented, collagistic, parodic, and self-reflexive styles, as well as the use of the vernacular, appear in both modernist and postmodern literature, often blurring the boundaries between the two. The works of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, William Faulkner, and many other acclaimed modernist writers have all been re-examined in a postmodern context, not as autonomous aesthetic texts, but as socially and culturally informed discourses or related texts.³

E. E. Cummings may be re-examined in the same way, as his Cubist experiments with language and typography not only create open forms for aesthetic freedom, but also evoke a meta-linguistic and meta-poetic experience. His unorthodox and self-reflexive verse uses apparently fragmented form and juxtaposed imagery to underscore the materiality, plasticity, and artificiality of poetic form and of language itself; it may thus be fairly characterized as postmodern.⁴ Similarly, Cummings' long-standing engagement with the sonnet form is not a mere modernist experiment or desire to innovate with the traditional form and its themes, but is rather a self-reflexive structuring that bares the bones of the genre itself, conveying a larger theme of the relation of form to cultural reality. If we consider the

ideas underlying some postmodern terms such as *metafiction*, *metanarrative*, or *metahistory* as ways to reveal a “structural” consciousness, Cummings may be said to add the meta-sonnet to the postmodern lexicon. He articulates this awareness in *W [ViVa]*, his fifth volume of poetry. In this paper, I argue that Cummings takes the sonnet to the level of meta-genre, and that his unique ordering of and experimentation with the sonnets in *ViVa* bespeak a pre-postmodern consciousness, calling attention to what is at stake with the artificiality of form or structure.

In this light, Cummings seems to respond to modernist rejection of the sonnet and its limitations. In “The Poem as a Field of Action,” William Carlos Williams vehemently states: “Do you not see now why I have been inveighing against the sonnet all these years? And why it has been so violently defended? Because it is a form which does not admit of the slightest structural change in its composition” (291). In Williams’ view, the notion of the sonnet had become so fixed that he could only opt for a total abandonment of the form. Similarly, other modernist poets such as Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Stevens abandoned the sonnet tradition in favor of *vers libre*. Cummings, however, finds fertile ground for experimentation and articulation in the very field of restrictions which Williams and other modernist poets rejected. Cummings *dissects* his sonnets as a modernist poet would do for free verse—through fragmentation, collage, word splitting, word joining, typographical play, pastiche, parody, and idiosyncratic punctuation, along with a perpetual consciousness of modernity and a penchant for mockery. But Cummings also articulates his vision by calling attention not just to the revolution of the word or form (which he apparently succeeded in carrying out), but also to “structure” and what “structure” signifies to both genre and culture.⁵ Of course, Cummings’ attention to *structure* is not accidental. In his *i: six nonlectures* he reflected on how, in what he called his third literary period, his literary interest shifted from content to structure and to the potential inherent in the sonnet’s structure: “The Rhymester diverted my eager energies from what to how: from substance to structure. I learned that there are all kinds of intriguing verse-forms, especially French; and that each of these forms can and does exist in and of itself, apart from the use to which you or I may not or may put it. . . . I’ve been writing sonnets ever since” (29-30).

With this statement, Cummings shows his insight into the “making” of a poem, and even to the possible unmaking of it. But Cummings’ last remark certainly does not simply mean writing the traditional

sonnet and observing the set rules *per se*, since he evidently did not follow this path in his writing career. So why would he say that “I’ve been writing sonnets ever since”—without any emphasis on his extreme modernist experiments with the genre? This seemingly matter-of-fact, yet cryptic, sentence, I believe, is a self-reflexive statement toward his sonnet writing, as he expresses no difference between the traditional and experimental sonnet. Either his experimental modernist sonnets are in fact “sonnets,” or his audience has to rethink what makes a sonnet a sonnet. Consequently, any objections to the Cummingsesque sonnet can only call into question the restrictions of the man-made form.⁶ This deadpan articulation of his sonnet writing, including reading the traditional sonnets of his favorites at the end of his lectures, is truly Cummings’ ingenious sleight of hand in bringing his structural play with the sonnet beyond the modernist consciousness.

It is this pre-postmodern turn through Cummings’ conscious manipulation of the sonnet beyond the modernist “structural change in its composition” that I further explore. Cummings’ violation of the established sonnet rules and form (8-6 or 4-4-4-2 line pattern) occurred as early as his 1922 manuscript *Tulips & Chimneys*. Through the sixty-five experimental sonnets that constitute the *Chimneys* section, Cummings’ expression of modernism questions and re-forms the genre. Cummings fragments the pristine, transcendent plane of the New England genteel sonnet—characterized by rigid formal restrictions and a demand for decorum—into a tripartite division of sonnets-realities, sonnets-unrealities, and sonnets-actualities. Underscoring the visual more than the rhetorical, a collage of three layers of contrasting states more than a unified sonnet plane, Cummings’ three-part sequence demands that the reader note his reworking of the substance and structure of the sonnet form, evoking a multi-dimensional reality of modern love against the façade of the genteel artifice.⁷ The fragmentation and collage of the sonnet in both form and content to portray modern relationships is further explored in *is 5* (1926), Cummings’ fourth volume of poetry, which begins with five burlesque sonnet-portraits of five prostitutes in the first section and ends with five sonnets addressed to a beloved in the fifth and final section. The two sets of five sonnets frame the volume like bookends, yet are removed from expected mathematical logic (as the title of the collection indicates, two and two is 5, not the harmony of 4). Cummings’ extra-mathematical shaping conveys to the reader his challenge to the unreality of the set themes and form of the sonnet tradition. This structural consciousness, manifested through the nu-

merical arrangement of the contrary states of the sonnets like two opposing hands (or a pair of five distinctly different fingers) holding the “unworld” (or Cummings’ “mostpeople”) within, continues the theme of diverse, heterogeneous realities harmonized not by sameness, but by difference. In *is 5* at least, the five “dirty” and five “clean” Cummingsesque sonnets form a perfect 10, articulating a new sense of freedom and self-transcendence, a structural consciousness and thematic order that modernist Cummings presents through the sonnet genre; this presentation is truly a significant postmodern move.⁸

II

However, it is in *W [Viva]* (1931) that Cummings turns the sonnet on its head, revealing the sonnet form as an artificial construct that can be both deconstructed and reconstructed. Never before had Cummings made such a self-reflexive use of the sonnet as a meta-structural device throughout an entire poetry sequence as he does in *W [Viva]*.⁹ Those who are familiar with the Petrarchan (*abba abba cde cde* or *cdc cdc*) or Shakespearean (*abab cdcd efef gg*) sonnet forms soon realize that this collection of poems embeds an experimental sonnet in every seventh poem, forming a *patternedness* that culminates in a set of seven final sonnets after poem sixty-three, making the total seventy poems, with sixteen sonnets in the entire book.

These embedded sonnets are readily identifiable. They stand out as fourteenliners among other experimental verses because the appearance of the form remains intact as one unit, in spite of Cummings’ frequent half-lines breaking down the single sonnet plane. And even if one pays little attention to the embedded sonnets in the first sixty-three poems, the last seven consecutive sonnets will remind the reader of the earlier poems, pushing him/her to identify similar structures and to uncover poems that resemble the fourteenliners of the final seven. The idea behind this arrangement is indeed at first curious and later astounding.

Through the device of the embedded sonnets, Cummings does not so much rewrite or experiment with individual sonnets as he evokes or questions the larger conception of *structure*. In 1964 when most critics expressed strong reservations about Cummings’ poetic maturation, Norman Friedman correctly came to Cummings’ defense in his book on the poet’s growth as a writer. In support of Friedman, I would add that Cummings’ different strategic uses of the sonnet form as a meta-structural device and a cultural statement show a maturation of his thinking from his first volume of poetry to his later ones. In addition to revolutionizing and making the

sonnet new or “alive” while depicting the experience of love in its actuality, Cummings’ continued experimentation with the form in *ViVa* suggests a heightened consciousness of *structure* itself. This experimentation is extended from a self-reflexive genre critique to the critique of culture and its imposed *structural* thinking. The sonnet is an apt vehicle for such a critique because it comes not only with a set of expectations based on its generic pedigree but also with a long culture built around it. Its prestige confirms what John Guillory terms the “cultural capital” that institutionalized literature has conferred on the genre.¹⁰ Cummings’ consistent return to the sonnet form for thematic ordering in separate volumes thus shows not only how such capital can be wisely spent by the modernist poet, but also how that expenditure is capable of critiquing modern systems or man-made structure itself.¹¹

In the title of his fifth volume of poetry, *W [ViVa]* with the two overlapping capital “V’s” in signifying “ViVa” or “LONG LIVE,” Cummings noticeably hints at a *structural* pattern for this volume in the form of a parallel or a juxtaposition. Kennedy notes that the “Long Live” slogan often appears on the walls of Southern Europe, signaling support for whatever cause (*Revisited* 76). The VV slogan no doubt originates in the nineteenth century Italian patriotic and nationalistic slogan, “Viva V.E.R.D.I.”¹² In any case, Cummings’ *ViVa*, published after the economic crash of 1929, quickly turns the “structural” sign into parody, as many anti-war, anti-business, anti-unlove, and anti-unfeeling poems in this volume provoke the reader to re-think the title’s implications, as well as asking her to ponder what might be worthy of praise and “long life.” From the very beginning, *ViVa* poses a self-reflexive stance in its “structural” parallels.

A paratactic structural design is not only hinted in the title but is also suggested in the first poem of *ViVa*. This poem satirizing the modern world begins with a comma, followed by a “mean-” and “unb / uria // ble” (and possibly unbearable) humanity, experienced through four interrupted, fragmented lines, first as a “hum” and later as a “nit”: “hum / a) . . . (nit / y)” (*CP* 311, lines 1-8):

,mean-
hum
a)now

(nit
y unb
uria

ble fore(hurry
into
heads are
legs think wrists

In this poem, humanity and life are revealed in Cummings' anatomy as fragmented forms, unrelated body parts, and scattered objects. They occupy space with neither a discernible nor meaningful structure, going through life, making money, babies, and excrement, which Cummings condemns as "putrescence"—no life, no self:

argue)short(eyes do
bang hands angle
scoot bulbs marry a become)
ened
(to is

see!so
long door
golf slam bridge train shriek
chewing whistles hugest
to
morrow from smiles sin

k
ingly ele
vator glide pinn
)pu(
acle to

rubber)tres(plants how grin
ho)cen(tel

und
 ead the

 not stroll
 living spawn imitate)ce(re
 peat

 credo fais do
 do neighbours re babies

 while;

After the initial shock of the excessive language distortion and sharp satire, readers may notice that the poem counters the word-fragments with the chiasmic stanzaic pattern, 2-3-4-5-6-5-4-3-2, pointing to a larger thematic design and visually calling attention to Cummings' carefully embedded structural parallels. When combined, the word "mean" in the first line and the word "while" in the last line evoke a framing temporality that contests the wasteland-like space of the rest of the poem. Furthermore, the act of making the word "mean-while;" alerts the reader to possibilities of linguistic change and structural reform, while the semicolon at the end of the poem connotes both simultaneity and looking ahead. Cummings' *structural* self-consciousness manifests itself through the opening poem, not only becoming the point of entry to the entire collection *W[ViVa]*, but also reflecting the *patternedness* of the embedded sonnet in every seventh poem, articulating a pre-postmodern "simulacral" signification.¹³

Beginning with Einstein's curved space and concluding with the image of a "crooking" trigger finger, the seventh poem, (the first embedded Cummingsesque sonnet) is a case in point:

Space being(don't forget to remember)Curved

 (and that reminds me who said o yes Frost
 Something there is which isn't fond of walls)

 an electromagnetic(now I've lost
 the)Einstein expanded Newton's law preserved
 conTinum(but we read that beFore)

Cummings), moving from self-important new scientific explanations of space and the universe to the possibility that hubristic humans could destroy nature, murdering both life and mystery. As humans turn the elephant into a manufactured billiard ball, recalling Einstein's curved space as another *structural* parallel, we quickly sense parody and sarcasm about the supposed "Upwardlooking" stance of Man, as well as the sonnet's self-reflexivity of *structure* represented in several layers.

The first embedded sonnet turns out not to be a transition to perfection or completion as the numerical order 7 would suggest, but is instead a self-reflexive indictment of humanity, which has become a product of structure, in particular, scientific formulae. Cummings himself notes that the poem is "a parody-portrait of one science worshipping supersubmoran in the very act of reading(with difficulties)aloud to another sw ssm" (*The Explicator* 9.5).¹⁴ However, beyond merely critiquing the prevalent science in his day, Cummings' insistence on using the sonnet form to reflect on man-made structure or mechanized modern science against the natural form of God's creation—man and the elephant alike—cannot be taken lightly. At this point, I would like to add that Cummings is prophetic to some extent about structural consciousness under the mutual influence of science and the human mind. For example, Richard Kennedy seems unintentionally to step into Cummings' critique, revealing the human tendency to impose the preset structure that Cummings exposes through his use of embedded sonnets in *ViVa*. In *Dreams in the Mirror*, Kennedy gives a brief account of *ViVa*: "The book contains seventy poems; every seventh poem is a sonnet, except that the last seven poems are all sonnets. That makes a total of *fourteen* sonnets, corresponding to the fourteen-line stanza of the sonnet" (319; emphasis mine). Kennedy apparently follows what his experience of the sonnet tells him *should* be in the text, rather than what is really in the text. But the structure of the collection is not a neat $7 + 7$ —there are *nine* embedded sonnets, not seven. Following a preset logic, Kennedy misses counting two more sonnets, #56 and #63, in the collection. Perhaps Cummings has another design in mind, as the nine embedded sonnets (each the seventh poem) along with the final set of seven sonnets could signal a perfect ten: $9 \text{ sonnets} + 1 \text{ set} = 10$. Yet the total number of sonnets in this volume is 16, defying our trained instinct to look for macro-patterns of 14 as equivalent to a conventional sonnet stanza for a thematic ordering.

Poem XIV (sonnet 2) portrays a couple uneasily awake before dawn by contrasting mundane lust with "heavenly things" (line 2). The

sonnet begins with the expressed consciousness of human time—“what time is it i wonder never mind” (line 1)—and ends with the lover’s feeling for natural time in the last line: “and there’s the moon, thinner than a watch-spring,” indicating the lover’s awareness of human bondage to temporal structurality and materiality, self-reflexive in the missing “i” in the space between “thoroughly” and the apostrophe “s” in line nine:

might those be stockings dribbling from the table
all which seemed sweet deep and inexplicable
not being dollars toenails or ideas
thoroughly ’s stolen(somewhere between

our unlighted hearts lust lurks
slovenly and homeless and when
a kiss departs our lips are made of thing (CP 324; lines 6-12)

Poem XXI (sonnet 3) comes close to a mixed structure of the Petrarchan form in the second quatrain and the Shakespearean form in the third quatrain and couplet. Visually, it is a “drunken” form in structure, as all of the split and rejoined words demand recomposing: “helves surling out of eakspeasies per(reel)hapsingly / pro(re)gress heandshe-ingly people / trickle curselaughgroping shrieks bubble” [to recompose: selves hurling out of speakeasies perhaps reelingly / pro(re)gress-ingly he and she people / trickle curse laugh groping bubble shrieks]. This “structureless” sonnet, at least in terms of its word formation, deals with a late night bar scene and drunken patrons thrown into the street during Prohibition. The imperfect, vulgar rhyme of “people” and “bubble” (lines 2-3) blatantly contrasts with the expected form of the sonnet, revealing the actual human world beyond artificial structure: “And How replies the upsquirtingly careens / the to collide flatfooting with Wushyuhname / a girl-flops to the Geddup curb leans / carefully spewing into her own Shush Shame” (CP 331; lines 9-12).

Poem XXVIII (sonnet 4) discloses the displacement of human love relations via the narcotic and mechanized sexuality of the movies, “the Californian handpicked thrill mechanically / packed and released . . . the expensively democratic tyrannically dumb” (CP 338). Cummings ends the sonnet asking for an awakening: “Awake,chaos:we have napped.” In the next embedded sonnet, poem XXXV (sonnet 5), Cummings further uses the

mixed Petrarchan and Shakespearean form to reflect on the set rules and to caution against the destructiveness of enforced structure or form. As if opposing closure himself, Cummings inverts the rhetorical structure of the sonnet by opening it with a resolution pronouncing the inevitable death of all that is:

what is strictly fiercely and wholly dies
his impeccable feathered with green facts
preening solemnity ignoring,through
its indolent lascivious caring eyes

watches;truly,curvingly while reacts
(sharp now with blood now accurately wan)
keenly,to dreamings more than truth untrue,

the best mouth i have seen on any man—
a little fluttering,at the enchanted dike
of whose lean lips,hovers how slenderly
the illustrious unknown

(warily as
their master's spirit stooping,Crusoelike
examines fearingly and tenderly

a recent footprint in the sand of was) (*CP* 345)

Almost without punctuation (except for one semicolon in line 5, two short pauses at the ends of lines 7 and 8, and a few Cummingsesque commas), the poem begins by mixing an imperfect Petrarchan quatrain (rhyming *abca* rather than the expected *abba*) with an imperfect, broken Shakespearean quatrain (rhyming *bdcd* rather than the expected *cdcd* and with a line break between lines 7 and 8), conveying both a syntactic and formal freedom. Further, the regular rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sestet *efg efg* is juxtaposed to the split half-lines in line 11 and the line space between the two half lines, as well as another line space separating the final two lines. Thematic elements of the unknown (dreamings, facial movements, and traces on the sand), three times symbolized by intrusive line spaces, only enhance

the structural playfulness of the poem.

With the mixed form and the heavy enjambment in his fifth sonnet, Cummings proceeds from the ominous proclamation in the first line to a contrary movement without predictable form and meaning. As if denouncing rigidity, he dabs his sonnet plane with visual allusions taken from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. From the bird's "indolent" eyes, to the man's "fluttering" mouth and his "hovering" lean lips, to a footprint left in the sand, all of the visual signs return to the primal structure. Cummings recomposes his sonnet plane where the natural, the remnant of the civilized, and the unknown wilderness (set aside in the parentheses) are juxtaposed and conjured in one space. With the parrot-bird casually and affectionately watching ("his impeccable feathered with green facts / preening solemnity ignoring"), the master ("the illustrious unknown") and his dreaming, and the fearful, yet intriguing, presence of the other's mark left from the past, the sonnet courts a Crusoe-like, yet life-affirming, fusion with native forms, countering the doom of the "strict" structure and "assumed" wholeness.

III

The self-conscious use of the sonnet as a signifier of structure (or construct) comes to the foreground in poem XLII (sonnet 6), in which the notion of *structure* becomes the theme in itself, as the poem centers on a concern for *structure* in the opening line: "structure, miraculous challenge, devout am" (CP 352). However, most of Cummings' readers will understand what he means by the devout structure of "am," not as the artificial edifice of the traditional form, or the mechanized automaton, but the self-transcendent individual, "I Am," which anticipates his further articulation of the "true" individual in *Eimi* (1933) and *No Thanks* (1935):¹⁵

structure, miraculous challenge, devout am
upward deep most invincible unthing
—stern sexual timelessness, outtowering
that noisy impotence of not and same

answer, beginning, ecstasy, to dare:
prouder than all mountains, more than all
oceans various

and while everywhere
beneath thee and about thyself a small

hoping insect, humanity, achieves
(moult beyond difficult moult) amazing doom
who standest as thou hast stood and thou shalt stand.

Nor any dusk but kneelingly believes
thy secret and each morning stoops to blend

her star with what huge merciful forms presume

In this poem Cummings draws a tighter structural parallel between the truly erect, the upward “am,” and an almost regular Petrarchan rhyme scheme, with the exceptions of the second Shakespearean stanza (*cdcd*) and the transposed rhymes of the final two lines of the sestet: *efg egf*. But juxtaposed with the regularity of form is a different structure that Cummings evokes, which cannot be subsumed by its poetic conventions. Dramatizing the miraculous and devout structure of “I Am,” in its enactment blending “her star with what huge merciful forms presume” (l. 14), Cummings’ self-reflexive sonnet becomes unmistakable, as the sonnet also recalls the deformed human structure of the opening poem.

In poem XLIX (sonnet 7), “a light Out)& first of all foam” (*CP* 359), Cummings introduces the erotic as *structural* in an ironic sense through the use of time and space connectives, “first,” “next,” “third,” and “And.” The regularity of the external rhyme scheme is replaced with the internal rhyme and eye rhymes on repeated “o” sounds. Poem LVI (sonnet 8) is an oddly minimalist sonnet, recalling the structural parallel between the clock and the moon, between the mechanical and the natural temporality of the second sonnet (*XIV, CP* 324). The speaker of sonnet 8 is conscious of the fragility of the “extremely little” house of the mind—the human edifice or the sonnet’s scanty plot of ground—to win the beloved away, in comparison with the natural lure of the enchanted moon:

lady will you come with me into
the extremely little house of
my mind. Clocks strike. The

moon’s round, through the window

as you see and really i have no
servants. We could almost live

at the top of these stairs,there's a free
room. We almost could go(you
and i)into a together whitely big
there is but if so or so

slowly i opened the window a
most tinyness,the moon(with white wig
and polished buttons)would take you away

—and all the clocks would run down the next day. (CP 366)

As if parodying the Petrarchan praise of love, the speaker's invitation to his lady to enter the "extremely little house of / my mind" (2-3) is nothing but a mental and intangible construct. The self-reflexive image of the mind's window, twice evoked in this sonnet, symbolizes the speaker's consciousness of the openness of the outside—the moon can shine through and take the love away. With very few polysyllabic words and shortened lines to reflect the "littleness" of the mind or man-made form, Cummings renders the *structured* space for love questionable. The restored regular couplet at the end enhances the failure of the human structure as the two lines of the couplet pull away from each other to create a visually distant pair: "and polished buttons)would take you away / —and all the clocks would run down the next day." Poem LXIII (sonnet 9) is the final embedded sonnet in the sequence of nine segments before the final set of seven sonnets that concludes the collection of poems in *W [Viva]*. The rhyme scheme of sonnet nine resembles a Petrarchan sonnet, with the first quatrain split in the middle of the third line, creating a breathing space—"hills invent the air) / ... breathe simply my each how" (1.3)—and with the second quatrain all in half rhymes and two half rhymes in the sestet. The enjambment throughout the sonnet opens the structure. Even a colon in line 7 anticipates continuation rather than signaling a pause. The free-flowing imagery of the sonnet culminates in the final, open-ended line with the motion of the word "swim": "and i guess / though wish and world go down,one poem yet shall swim" (14):

be unto love as rain is unto colour; create
me gradually (or as these emerging now
hills invent the air)

breathe simply my each how
my trembling where my still invisible when. Wait

if i am not heart, because at least i beat
—always think i am gone like a sun which must go
sometimes, to make an earth gladly seem firm for you:
remember (as those pearls more than surround this throat)

i wear your dearest fears beyond their ceaselessness

(nor has a syllable of the heart's eager dim
enormous language loss or gain from blame or praise)
but many a thought shall die which was not born of dream
while wings welcome the year and trees dance (and i guess
though wish and world go down, one poem yet shall swim

Using the structural form to reflect on structure in genre and culture and thus creating a sense of openness and natural feeling, Cummings gives a new immediacy to his sonnet experimentation. In terms of this structural consciousness, it is important to note that not one sonnet follows a precise rhyme scheme, perfect or imperfect. Using a mixture of interlaced rhyme, alternate rhyme, rhymed couplets, half rhymes, or no rhyme at all, variously employed and juxtaposed to form new structures, Cummings neither unifies nor resolves the contradictions of the sonnets. Between the semblance and dissemblance of the sonnets the reader experiences the open or empty form itself, exposing the artificiality of the bi-partite structure (8-6 or 4-4-4-2) that the genre's rhetoric of perfection, completion, and harmony inevitably conceals. Cummings reveals through his embedded sonnets the human tendency for imposing structure, under which human beings are being acted upon—moved by science, by mechanical forces, and by laws—rather than being the creators of action themselves. This self-reflexive experimentation further challenges established boundaries between modernism and postmodernism.

IV

Cummings ends *W [ViVa]* with a set of seven sonnets. With no expected progression toward transcendent structure or idealized form in the traditional sense, this arrangement makes it very clear that Cummings is again playing on the number seven in a self-reflexive way, which illustrates how the embedded nine sonnets and the final seven (16 total) direct our attention to the *structure* itself, as an artifice or fiction that can be destabilized and remade. Although Cummings says that his books tend to start dirty and end clean, the contrasts between the first nine embedded sonnets and the final seven and between all the sonnets and other poems function more like a simultaneity of two opposing forces, resembling the interlocking *W* more than any structural transcendence implied by the numerical order of seven. In poem LXIX, the next to the last sonnet, Cummings presents the image of the “terse / and invisible” hands “knitting the structure of distinct sunset” (8). Note that the *structure* referred to here is not that of sunrise, but sunset, not the sublime or the highest truth, but real earthly feelings, the non-transcendent—or rather Cummings’ self-transcendence. Cummings further asks his listener and/or readers if they know the identities of the workmen (l. 14) who are building these *natural* things, which again points the reader toward a self-reflexive *structural* consciousness:

so standing,our eyes filled with wind,and the
whining rigging over us,i implore you to
notice how the keen ship lifts(skilfully
like some bird which is all birds but more fleet)
herself against the air—and whose do you
suppose possibly are certain hands,terse
and invisible,with large first new stars
knitting the structure of distinct sunset

driving white spikes of silence into joists
hewn from hugest colour

(and which night hoists
miraculously above the always
beyond such wheres and fears or any when
unwondering immense directionless

horizon)

—do you perhaps know these workmen? (CP 379)

The final poem and sonnet ends in an affirmation of the speaker's love, no longer a construct that compels his heart:

here is the ocean, this is moonlight: say
that both precisely beyond either were—
so in darkness ourselves go, mind in mind

which is the thrilling least of all (for love's
secret supremely clothes herself with day)

i mean, should any curious dawn discuss
our mingling spirits, you would disappear
unreally; as this planet (understand)

forgets the entire and perpetual sea

—but if yourself consider wonderful
that your (how luminous) life toward twilight will
dissolve reintegrate beckon through me,
i think it is less wonderful than this

only by you my heart always moves (CP 380)

Commenting on Picasso's Cubist art, Domenico Porzio remarks that a Cubist plane invites an "intellectual vivisection," arranging "the forms in a plane so that an object or figure could be recognized not through perspective illusion, but through an analysis of its form and also so that it could be seen from several points of view" (64). Like Picasso, Cummings recreates the sonnet plane from different angles in *ViVa*, not only to provoke what Porzio terms "intellectual vivisection" of the set form, but to provide a cultural reading as well. Cummings' self-conscious manipulation of the sonnet form is a significant contribution to poetic modernism and looks forward to the heterogeneity, multiplicity, and self-reflexivity of postmodern poetry, especially in his engagement with the ideology of

structure through the meta-sonnet and in his resistance to the “Upwardlooking MAN,” who has given in to convention, new science, or new technologies that only serve further to displace humanity. Charles Olson phrases it well in his 1953 essay “The Resistance”: “In this intricate structure are we based, now more certainly than ever (besieged, overthrown), for its power is bone muscle nerve blood brain a man, its fragile mortal force its old eternity, resistance” (175).

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Notes

1. See Allen and Butterick, *The Postmoderns*, p. 10.
2. Jameson states: “This list would seem to make two things clear at once: first, most of the postmodernisms mentioned above emerge as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism, against this or that dominant high modernism which conquered university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations. Those formerly subversive and embattled styles—Abstract Expressionism; the great modernist poetry of Pound, Eliot or Wallace Stevens; the International Style (Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies); Stravinsky; Joyce, Proust and Mann—felt to be scandalous or shocking by our grandparents are, for the generation which arrives at the gate in the 1960s, felt to be the establishment and the enemy—dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 111-12).
3. For a discussion of American modern poets in the context of postmodernism, see Brown, *The Poetry of Postmodernity*, pp 8-10.
4. Postmodern thinking, evolved from structuralism and poststructuralism, finds language and form no longer a natural vehicle for expression, but rather artificial constructs, ultimate human products that can be deconstructed and reconstructed as John Carlos Rowe notes in his chapter length definition of structure: “structuralism helped legitimate the purely ‘man-made’ character of postmodern social reality” (*Critical Terms for Literary Study* 35).
5. Concerning Cummings’ significant achievement in *ViVa*, Friedman observes that “*ViVa* is not so much the emergence of the transcendental vision as the forging of a style for its expression. The problem, as we have seen,

is to counteract the abstract tendency of language, and the solution is to make nouns out of verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and so on, thereby preserving motion in the midst of stasis, structure in the midst of function” (*The Growth of a Writer* 79).

6. Gary Lane comments on Cummings’ love of form, referring to his turn “from substance to structure”: “The last phrase is not to be misunderstood. Cummings always retained a firm commitment to the ‘substance’ of his personal truth—he never ceased telling his readers how to live—but he discovered quite early that poetry works prior to intellection, that it communicates feelings rather than ideas, and that only through the imaginative organization of the poet—the inspiration and hard work that underlie structural coherence—can a poet generate significant intensity” (8-9).

7. For the genteel tradition, see George Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays*. For the cultural phenomenon in literature, see Malcolm Cowley, ed., *After the Genteel Tradition*. I discuss Cummings’ reaction to the established Petrarchan form typified by New England genteel culture in “Modernism, Cummings’ Meta-Sonnets, and Chimneys.”

8. This point is beyond the scope of the current study, but I will elaborate on it in another paper on Cummings’ sonnets in *Is 5*.

9. There are five years separating *Is 5* (1926) and *ViVa* (1931); in between, Cummings had a play, *Him* (1927), *Anthropos* (short play 1930), *No Title* (nonsense short fiction 1930), and a collection of ninety-nine reproductions of his own art, *CIOPW* (1931).

10. Guillory defines the concept of “cultural capital” in Marxist terms as literature institutionally imbued with symbolic value that can be distributed, accumulated, or even “exchanged,” (“Preface,” *Cultural Capital*, viii-ix).

11. By “spending” the “capital” of the sonnet, I mean that Cummings—himself a member of the privileged class—successfully encodes subversion and revisionism into a genre (the sonnet) to convey a great deal of symbolic capital in English literature; in so doing, Cummings questions the very culture that elevated the genre to privileged status. He seems to predict Roland Barthes’ concept of “structural man” in “The Structuralist Activity”:

We can in fact presume that there exist certain writers, painters, musicians in whose eyes a certain exercise of structure (and no longer merely its thought) represents a distinctive experience, and that both analysts and creators must be placed under the common sign of what we might call structural man, defined not by his ideas

or his languages, but by his imagination—in other words, by the way in which he mentally experiences structure (214)

12. In Italy, “VV” probably stems from “Viva V.E.R.D.I.,” or Viva Vittorio Emanuele Re D’Italia,” [Long live Victor Emanuel, King of Italy], slogan for patriotic Italians of the nineteenth century. As Friedman indicates, perhaps this sign was co-opted by the fascists in the 20s and 30s. However, Friedman correctly notes that as Cummings uses it, the “W” has no political implications (*Growth* 75).

13. In “The Structuralist Activity” Barthes defines structure as: “a simulacrum of the object, but a directed, interested simulacrum, since the imitated object make something appear which remained invisible, or if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object. Structural man takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it” (214-15). What follows, according to Barthes, is the “simulacral” result: “there occurs something new, and what is new is nothing less than the generally intelligible: the simulacrum is intellect added to the object, and this addition has an anthropological value, in that it is man himself, his history, his situation, his freedom and the very resistance which nature offers to his mind” (215).

14. Cummings’ December 11, 1950 letter responding to Richard B. Vowles’ analysis of the poem was printed in *The Explicator* 9.5 (March 1951):

Dear Sir—

please let your readers know that the author of “Space being(don’t forget to remember)Curved” considers it a parody-portrait of one scienceworshipping supersubmoron in the very act of reading(with difficulties)aloud,to another sw ssm,some wouldbe explication of A.Stone&Co’s unpoem

—thank you

15. I discuss Cummings’ further patternedness of the sonnet in the shape of a V to convey the idea of self-transcendent “I AM” in my “Reflecting *EIMI*: The Iconic Meta-Sonnet, Manhood, and Cultural Crisis in *No Thanks* (1935).” [Editor’s note: While this sonnet certainly addresses the structure of an I Am, , it also describes the poet’s feelings before the structure of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris.]

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