

"almost all I don't know about art":

**E .E. Cummings Explicates His Dust Jacket
Blurb for *Him***

Michael Webster

As a way of introducing his art to the public, E. E. Cummings occasionally would write a dialogue between the artist and his imagined audience. Sometime in the late 1940s or early '50s, Cummings typed out an explication for the first of these dialogues, a blurb written for the dust jacket of his 1927 play *Him*. (The others are the Introduction to the second edition of *The Enormous Room*, a squib called "Knot for Morons," and his 1945 "Forward to an Exhibit.") In these dialogues the artist, like Socrates, always triumphs over the befuddled average man—however, unlike Socrates, it is the public, not the artist, who asks the questions while the artist gives the triumphant smart-alecky answers. That Cummings would take the time to explicate one of these seemingly minor humorous works is puzzling; that he would call his short blurb for *Him* "almost all I don't know about art" is astounding. But Cummings' explication reveals the thought and erudition that lie behind his light nonsense, showing us that nothing alive is trivial and alerting us to one of the fundamental thought-worlds that structures his work: the notion of "the third voice of 'life' " (quoted in *six* 64).

In the *six nonlectures*, Cummings calls the blurb "An Imaginary Dialogue Between An Author And A Public," but in his manuscript explication, he calls it a "little essay." (As John Edwin Cowen points out in this issue of *Spring*, Cummings also called his Jottings, a collection of aphorisms, an "essay." Perhaps he is thinking in both cases of the French meaning of the word, which is "attempt.") Though I think that "Imaginary Dialogue" is the more accurate description, nevertheless it remains difficult to pigeonhole the genre of this blurb or "essay." This sort of difficulty in defining genre is no surprise to students of Cummings. Throughout his career, the poet consistently challenged traditional genre limitations, writing two memoirs that may also be classified as travel books but are often miscalled "novels," delivering a series of "non-lectures," publishing in 1940 a short allegorical "morality play" about Santa Claus and Death, and most famously, redefining and re-aligning grammar, punctuation, and poetic forms to such an extent that many of his poems are meant "to be seen & not

heard” (*Letters* 267).

In *Him*, the drama for which this blurb was written, the realist “Room” portion of the set revolves 90 degrees with each new scene in which it appears; three old women called Weirds spout prophetic nonsense; dadaist vaudeville sketches make up most of the second act, and a freak show—complete with a tattooed man, a 600 pound lady, and a “King of Borneo” who eats an “ee-lectrick light bulb” (137)—caps the third act. The program note that Cummings wrote for the first performance warns against approaching the play through the lens of traditional generic categories:

WARNING: *him* isn’t a comedy or a tragedy or a farce or a melodrama or a revue or an operetta or a moving picture or any other convenient excuse for “going to the theatre”—in fact, it’s a PLAY, so let it PLAY; and because you are here, let it PLAY with you. (quoted in Norman 222-223)

This destabilizing of genre categories is part of Cummings’ overall aesthetic tactic of “defamiliarization”—which is one translation of Russian Formalist theorist Victor Shklovsky’s concept of *ostraneniye*, which literally means “making strange” (Lemon & Reis 4) or “enstranging” (Sher 6). As Shklovsky famously wrote, the purpose of various “enstranging” devices is to wake up readers or viewers, and shake them out of their automatic, habitual, deadened, knowledge-based perception so that they “may recover the sensation of life.” For Shklovsky, “art exists . . . to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*” (Lemon & Reis 12).

As Milton Cohen points out, even though Cummings could not have known of Shklovsky’s theories, the poet’s writings in the 1920s were much preoccupied with ideas of how art could create heightened perceptions (see Cohen 100 and 250). For example, in one of his theoretical jottings Cummings wrote that “Perception is related to Un-familiarity” (quoted in Cohen 100).¹ The concept in the blurb of the “third voice of ‘life’ ” is another example of how his theory pressed beyond realist imitation or depiction to construct an aesthetic of reader involvement, a kind of self-reflexive awareness of life on the part of both creator and audience. The blurb does not explain the play’s meanings; rather, it prods the Public to venture outside of its habitual thought patterns, even as it mocks that same Public for its narrowness. Instead of responding directly to the Public’s demand for knowledge—“What is *Him* about?” the Public asks—the Author launches into a riddling disquisition on aesthetics. The blurb offers neither praise nor

summary of *Him*; rather it presents an aesthetic, a discourse, as Cummings says in his explication of the blurb, on “almost all I don’t know about art.”²

Cummings’ blurb presents his aesthetic from both the creator’s and the audience’s point of view, but as we have seen, the Author gets all the good lines, making the Public look foolish. Cummings’ explication of the blurb is even more aggressive: in it, he compares the Public to a hapless bull who is baffled, tormented, toyed with—and finally put to death by the matador, or Author. Such a dismissive attitude towards the public makes one wonder how much Cummings’ intent in writing a bizarre play like *Him* was essentially dadaist: to ridicule the bourgeois public. I think not much, for he told Charles Norman: “I’m not writing ‘difficult’ so that simple people won’t understand me. I’m not writing “difficult’ for difficult people to understand” (172). Indeed, despite its non-sequiturs, its bewildering variety of characters and scenes, and its often poetic language, much of *Him*, especially its folk, vaudeville, and circus elements, is accessible and highly entertaining. We may speculate that more than 20 years after writing the play when Cummings was writing his explication of the blurb, he probably recalled the almost unanimous chorus of incomprehension and derision from uptown reviewers (see Norman 222-230). (In contrast, the bohemian Greenwich Village public flocked to see the play: *Him* ran for six weeks at the Provincetown Playhouse, playing to packed houses and closing only because of “budget difficulties” [Norman 216, 231].) However, since the blurb itself was written before the play was published or performed and thus before any negative reviews had appeared, we may assume that Cummings must have thought that his riddling “Imaginary Dialogue” would be enlightening to the public in some way. Perhaps the blurb was meant to educate the “Great American Public” that the narrator of *The Enormous Room* called “the most aesthetically incapable organization ever created for the purpose of perpetuating defunct ideals and ideas” (224).

However, a Cummings education is not the usual one of learning accepted norms and ways of thinking. Rather, the poet’s education seeks to liberate the mind from “defunct ideals and ideas.” In fact, *The Enormous Room* characterizes education as an aesthetic “handicap” that must be “entirely and thoroughly and perfectly annihilated by that vast and painful process of Unthinking which may result in a minute bit of purely personal Feeling. Which minute bit is Art” (224). Like the program note that urges audience members to un-think the usual categories, to “relax, stop wondering what it’s all ‘about’ ” (qtd. in Norman 223), Cummings’ blurb asks the

public to suspend the “about” question in favor of educating themselves in the contradictory complexities of the third voice of life, a voice that transcends the usual binary categories that are essential equipment for living in the “really unreal world” (CP 558).

In his manuscript explication of the blurb, Cummings predicts that education will prevent the Public from simply absorbing the play as an experience, as *play*: their ideas and their knowledge will cause them to see only the estranging nonsense and miss the fun. They will have the experience and miss the feeling. Likewise, we over-educated academics are apt to dismiss the play as unstructured because it presents such a mixture of realism, poetic prose, dadaist nonsense, Freudian blather, Jungian symbolism, and vaudeville shtick—just as we are apt to dismiss a humorous blurb, failing to see any sort of aesthetic theory in its double-talking nonsense. Which raises the question: why couch an “essay” on aesthetic theory in a seemingly nonsensical blurb?

The answer is that Cummings’ way of writing criticism was to make a work of art—the “Imaginary Dialogue” is a modernist mini-play complete with obscure allusions to Greek verb forms, Shakespeare, and Cézanne. In addition to hiding a possibly serious essay in a comic blurb, Cummings also hides his erudition and knowledge. Cummings’ manuscript explication tells us that the third voice of life is a metaphor taken from the middle voice in the Greek verb system. The learned allusions are buried deeply here because Cummings’ aesthetic is one of presence, of transcendent and even accessible aesthetic experience. (The modernist allusions in the blurb are more like the covert ones in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* than the overt quotations of Eliot’s *Waste Land*.) Comparing the artistic blurb with its manuscript explication reveals a further paradox: while the blurb hides Cummings’ Harvard-acquired classical education, the explication tweaks the Public (the bull) for its deficient education. The Public, it seems, was getting an education in defunct ideals and ideas when what it really needed was to learn ancient Greek.

Cummings’ manuscript explication instructs the public that his “metaphor of the voices is only apparently syntactical [grammatical]; actually it is dimensional” (s. 1). Schoolmaster Cummings further explains that the Greek middle voice is “intermediate between active & passive” and thus “immediately suggests the English word reflexive.” At the “dimensional” level of the metaphor, “this reflexive voice expresses the author, or creator . . . a 3dimensional being.” In contrast to the creator, the

Public “inhabits a strictly 2dimensional domain:the realm of either-or.” The “denizen of flatness” sees only dualistically: “everything [& everyone] is either [strong or weak], either good or bad, either right or wrong,[white or black],either sense or nonsense.” Educated in a flat dualism, the Public can only stare blankly when told “that today the strength of weakness has triumphed.”

Those who speak with or see through the middle or third voice understand how weakness can be strong, or (in another example that Cummings offers from *Macbeth*) how a battle may be both lost and won. Transcending dualism is, as Jewel Spears Brooker points out, a major dialectic within modernism, which often posits a “‘both / and’ logic of complementarity” (Brooker 3). Such a logic often rejects the synthesis of opposites, preferring instead to find ways in which the opposites complement one another. For Cummings, the middle or third voice is metaphorical of the artist (and by extension, the aware reader) who lives in the complexity of a three-dimensional world, where seeming opposites interpenetrate and complement one another, and paradoxical metaphors like Saint Paul’s “I die daily” carry the tremendous force of lived psychological truth. Perhaps this is what F. Scott Fitzgerald meant when he wrote in *The Crack-Up* that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (69). Following Keats, we could call this third dimension a “*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (41-42). Or we could simply say that art recreates the complexities and paradoxes of life, where it is perfectly possible to lose and win at the same time. In addition, the poet’s voice has a third paradoxical dimension, combining a personal individual voice with the impersonal voice of the muse. As Cummings puts it in one sonnet: “And if i sing you are my voice,” (CP 531).

Although Cummings’ characterization of the Public as a hapless “charging brute” of a bull who is unable to understand metaphor and paradox certainly is a caricature of the average modern human, the “Imaginary Dialogue”, the program note, and Cummings’ explication nevertheless aim to create an audience who understands how art works. After all, many (if not most) readers will protest that they are not like the Public, that they do understand how a war can be lost and won at the same time. Cummings’ rhetorical strategy puts most readers in the position of an individual who resists being cast as the stupid captive of an unthinking dualism. It’s a dan-

gerous strategy because it puts Cummings in a position of supercilious authority while it stigmatizes individuals as a dimwitted abstract collective—the Public or “mostpeople.” However, at the same time this picture of a bewildered Public is designed to open readers to experience the work of art (or play) as reflexive (and reflective) artists.

This change of mindset from the flatness of received knowledge to the roundness of the third voice is hinted at in the first substantial exchange between the Author and the Public:

Public: But surely you know what you’re making—

Author: Beg pardon, Mr. Public; I surely make what I’m knowing.

(qtd. in *six* 64)

Because a maker speaks in the third voice, the Author cannot *know* what *Him* is “about”—the maker makes a play, not an “about” (a criticism). Though he doesn’t say so in his explication, Cummings refers in this passage to the contrast between the present active voice of the Greek verb γιγνώσκω [*gignosko*], “I know,” and the middle voice of the same verb stem, γιγνομαι [*gignomai*], “I become, happen, am made/born, am” (Jones 63). The poet (and the audience) in the middle voice becomes, happens, makes himself through art, rather than simply knows. Right after the drawing the distinction between knowing and making, Cummings introduces his voice metaphor, contrasting the either/or (active or passive) mindset of the Public with the third voice of a poet like Shakespeare.

Public: So far as I’m concerned, my very dear sir, nonsense isn’t everything in life.

Author: And so far as you’re concerned “life” is a verb of two voices—active, to do, and passive, to dream. Others believe doing to be only a kind of dreaming.

For Cummings, the poet does and dreams at once: he is a “do-Dreaming” “me” who in “sleePdeep” curls around his soul-mate “You” (CP 395). According to the explication, the “Others” who “believe doing to be only a kind of dreaming” actually refers to only one Other, Shakespeare, who through the character of Prospero reflects on the evanescence of the doing and dreaming of art and life:

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]

Prospero's speech comes at the end of a play or magic spell that was very real for the characters who did not know that they were being played with and upon. His magic spells are metaphorical of Shakespeare's art, which enfolds these characters within "the baseless fabric of [a] vision." Prospero's doing is really only a dream-play of Shakespeare's, like Cummings' dream-play *Him*. Dreaming is a kind of doing for artists like Prospero and Shakespeare, who make what they know. Artists make an action, an "insubstantial pageant," a play, out of their dreams. And indeed, life is one such dream that will surely fade away when we "sleep" at the end of "our little life." The metaphor that ends Prospero's speech also contains a paradox: our life is a dream, but we sleep only after life is over. To see the paradox as true (even though it is nonsense) is to see a third way.

The explication comments that the Public will not see this third way if they do not read the tradition with open eyes: "But bulls don't read Shakespeare. How could doing be a kind of dreaming? Ridiculous." Here, the no-nonsense, bull-headed Public seems to me to be a stand-in for professional critics, who should know and dream better but are only full of bull. The particular critic-bull who doesn't read Shakespeare was no doubt John Hyde Preston of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, who complained that a speech by one of the Three Weirds about horseradish, playing cards, a Gypsy, "a woman called Metope" and "a stuffed platitude" was quite incomprehensible (95-96; cf. *Him* 18-19). Cummings' friend Slater Brown responded by pointing out that if "Mr. Preston will read the first act of *Macbeth*, he will find the witches there talking in similar lyrical nonsense. But of course Shakespeare is very enigmatic too" (qtd. in Norman 213).

Paradox and enigmatic nonsense are of course among Cummings' strong points. However, unlike the play, where the allusion to the three

witches of *Macbeth* is quite clear, the allusion to *The Tempest* in the dialogue-blurb for the play is quite, as Cummings says in his explication, “obscure,suspect;possibly poetic” (s.2). The next allusion in the blurb is less poetic, but even more obscure. The Author says:

Still others have discovered(in a mirror surrounded with mirrors),something harder than silence but softer than falling;the third voice of “life”,which believes itself and which cannot mean because it is.

Though Cummings’ play *Him* is full of references to mirrors—for example the hero, named Him, claims that the play he is writing “is all about mirrors” (29) and Him also has an alter-ego, “Mr. O. Him, the Man in the Mirror” (30)—and though the play also refers to “a still deeper mirror” (29), I think it would be impossible, unaided, to see that the quotation about “a mirror surrounded with mirrors” refers to a discussion between Paul Cézanne and Emile Bernard. According to Cummings’ manuscript explication, when Cézanne asked his pupil Emile Bernard, “How do you see Nature?” Bernard responded: “For me, . . . everything reflects everything else.” “Vous voyez juste,” Cézanne responds proudly, “vous irez loin.” [“You see rightly . . . you will go far.”] Cummings comments: “Here is our mirror surrounded by mirrors.” Bernard’s definition of Nature, by the way, anticipates by some 70 years Barry Commoner’s First Law of Ecology: “Everything is connected to everything else” (qtd. in Ruckert 108). Cummings is saying that all of nature is reflexive, existing in the third voice of life. It is also *reflective*, a continual interchange that is somewhat like thought or reflection, but much more is a process or experience, the “something complex & mysterious” that is very far from the either/or “realities” of daily life in the modern world.

We have seen that Cummings claimed he was not trying to be difficult, and also that the blurb is allusive and complex because it is a work of art—a modernist dialogue. T. S. Eliot famously asserted that “it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and that variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results” (“Metaphysical” 65). For Cummings, art must be “obscure” and “poetic” simply because it mirrors the multiple mirrorings of nature. In the *nonlectures* he says: “Art is a mystery” (*six* 68, 82) and “art is every mystery of nature” (*six* 68).

However, both Cummings and Eliot assert as well that though art has its complexities, it must be approached in a receptive, open state of mind. For Cummings, actual aesthetic experience “is not in the least mysterious. This feeling is merely incredible.” It is a feeling that combines both exaltation and humility—a feeling very much like beginning to fall “seventy feet in the Cyclone rollercoaster at Coney Island” (*Miscellany* 307). And so in his program note Cummings counsels his audience to relax and open themselves to the experience of the play: “it’s a PLAY, so let it PLAY; and because you are here, let it PLAY with you. . . . DON’T TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT, LET IT TRY TO UNDERSTAND YOU” (qtd. in Norman 223). Similarly, Eliot says that the reader who has reached “a state of . . . *purity*, does not bother about understanding; not, at least, at first. I know that some of the poetry to which I am most devoted is poetry which I did not understand at first reading” (*Use* 144). This suspension of understanding is necessary at first because a logical either/or mentality cannot open itself to the third voice of life and art, “which believes itself and which cannot mean because it is” (*six* 64).

This third voice reflexively inhabits selves (it “believes itself”), but it also integrates selves, allowing those people who create art and/or who experience its aesthetic power to become one with nature and with art. As we see in the last lines of the dialogue-blurb, these people are able to live this oneness not so much because they have read Shakespeare or know about Cézanne’s concept of nature but because they are open to a reflexive, reflective, complex, mysterious “third” universe where opposites coexist peacefully. The Author says that such people are

. . . good for nothing but walking upright in the cordial revelation of the fatal reflexive.

Public: And your play is all about one of these persons, Mr. Author?

Author: Perhaps. But (let me tell you a secret) I rather hope my play is one of these persons.

Human beings, animals who “walk upright,” may do this walking “in the cordial revelation”—*inside* art, letting it play *with* them rather than letting thought-categories block their access to it. And this walking in art, reveals the “fatal reflexive,” the inevitable complexity and inter-relatedness of nature. Furthermore, a decently constructed artwork will reflect reflexive nature, and thus art “is one of those persons.” As Cummings says in the last line of his explication, “the poet [maker] . . . has become his poem.”

However, this integration of art and life does not occur in the explication, which fails as art mainly because the bull / matador metaphor is too much of a caricature. After all, the “Imaginary Dialogue” and the program note do not envisage killing the Public. Rather, they seek to educate the Public, opening them out from a rigid dualism into an actual world of living through / in art and nature. At his best, the poet does not want to eliminate the public but enlighten them.

Perhaps Cummings, too, felt that his explication was an artistic failure, for he did not publish it, and he appended to the bottom of his explication this note: “on ‘3rd Voice’ / quote—nothing false or possible is love” (s. 3). Though this sonnet is definitely a work of art, at first glance it does not seem to be immediately applicable to the previous discussion of the middle or third voice, the third dimension, and a fatally reflexive nature. However, the poem does show how love exists at right angles to a coercive dualistic either/or logic, represented in line five by “a schoolroom in the month of may.” And though the sonnet defines love in a somewhat abstract metaphysical manner, the integration of the lovers that it depicts is analogous to the integration of selves with nature and poet with poem (CP 574):

nothing false and possible is love
(who’s imagined, therefore limitless)
love’s to giving as to keeping’s give;
as yes is to if, love is to yes

must’s a schoolroom in the month of may:
life’s the deathboard where all now turns when
(love’s a universe beyond obey
or command, reality or un-)

proudly depths above why’s first because
(faith’s last doubt and humbly heights below)
kneeling, we—true lovers—pray that us
will ourselves continue to outgrow

all whose mosts if you have known and i’ve
only we our least begin to guess

In this sonnet, love is neither “false” nor “possible,” but rather it is a third state—imagined. Though the next three lines speak the grammar of logic

and ratio, they actually show/say how love is beyond binary thought: “imagined” and “therefore limitless” love is to giving as keeping is to give. So the “ratio” is: love is greater than giving as much as giving is greater than keeping. Similarly, love is greater than yes as much as yes is greater than “if.” Limitless love is beyond the either/ors of “obey” or “command” and “reality” or “un-.” In the normal everyday un-world, even in May we must submit to commands and the demands of time in a musty schoolroom; life is simply a black(death)board, an “un-” where the now and permission of “may” turn into the when of clock time and eventual death (rather than becoming the unstated freedom and release of nature). The un-life of the deathboard is only a kind of waiting that negates the “now” of the third voice with the thought of “when” (can I get out of this classroom).

In the sestet, love finds itself below the dualistic logic of why and because and above the simplistic belief binary of faith or doubt. Love is a “we” that prays to outgrow the selves of the lovers; it’s an “all” whose mosts each lover has known as an individual “i” and “you”—but an all that only their collective “our” and “least we” can begin to guess. (Notice: “all / mosts”—the knowing of the ego is only an “almost” kind of knowledge that is eclipsed by the beginning, third guess of the “least [part of] we.”) As he often does, Cummings associates the grammar of first, second, and third person with a movement from dualism to a transcendent third voice. So here the first person “i” combines with the second person “you” to become the transcendent third person (or voice) of “we.” To find this imagined, limitless love, the lovers pray that they will continue to outgrow themselves—as Cummings says in his explication, to “die daily.” That’s why the poet is “good for nothing but walking upright in the cordial revelation of the fatal reflexive.” The “fatal reflexive” is another name for nature, seen through the third voice of life.

—*Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI*
webssterm@gvsu.edu

Notes

1 Cummings papers at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, call number BMS Am 1892.7 (25), sheet 175. These papers will be cited in the text by call number, followed by the volume number in parenthesis, and folder and sheet number (if any).

2 Manuscript at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, call number

bMS Am 1892.6: Prose (55) Him; dust jacket blurb. TS. (with A.MS. revisions); [n.p., n.d.] 3s.(3p.)

Appendix: Ratios and Thirds in “nothing false and possible is love”

Ratios:

keeping	< giving	< love
if	< yes	< love

Thirds:

either	or	third voice
false	possible	love (imagined, limitless)
must (submission; schoolroom)	must (decay, death)	may (permission; spring’s month)
life (as death- [black-] board)	when (time, death)	all now
obey / reality	command / un-	love (universe)
doubt	faith	humbly heights below lovers (we)
why	because	proudly depths above lovers (pray, outgrow)
i (almosts, known)	you (all mosts, if)	we (our least, begin, guess)

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