

THE CONCEPT OF THE ARTIST IN THE TWO PLAYS BY

E. E. CUMMINGS, SANTA CLAUS AND HIM

by

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I

E. E. Cummings was intrigued by the idea of existence. He knew that life contained certain mysteries which he wanted to understand and express. He realized that in order to solve these mysteries, he must first come to a complete understanding of himself. He felt that if he was to convey any messages to an audience, he must primarily recognize what he, as an artist, represented. The idea of being, as opposed to the idea of thinking, was an essential theory in regard to Cummings's works. He was thought of as an artist during his lifetime; but more important to Cummings than reputation for this role was the idea that he be an artist.

A sense of the conflict of the human faculties enters into Cummings's theory of the artist, and he is very adamant about which faculty should have precedence over the other. To Cummings, thinking was not as important as feeling. What he wanted to evoke from his readers was not a thought, but rather a response. He wanted people to understand innately through his art that he was an artist.

A working definition of what the word "artist" means to Cummings is essential to further study of his work: a short, somewhat general characterization of the artist's role. To Cummings, an artist is a person who has something within himself which he needs to express. This definition may seem superficial, but what differentiates

Cummings's artist from a more unself-conscious person is that he wants to understand why and how he is going to express himself.

In the opening pages of Six Nonlectures, Cummings tries to answer the question, "Who am I?"¹ Such an attempt to define himself reiterates the notion that man must first become aware of, and understand, himself before he can comprehend others. In order to be an artist for the public, Cummings had to explore his three self-proclaimed mysteries: "love, art, and selftranscendence or growing."² His endeavor to consider and define these three mysteries occurs throughout his work.

A theme which is central to Cummings's concept of artistry concerns a basic conflict, that of understanding versus knowledge. Cummings abhorred the idea of the second term because it had scientific connotations which he very much dreaded. His feelings regarding science as a way of life are succinctly expressed in his poem, "voices to voices, lip to lip.":

(While you and i have lips and voices which
are for kissing and to sing with
who cares if some oneeyed son of a bitch
invents an instrument to measure Spring with?³

¹E. E. Cummings, Six Nonlectures (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 3.

²Six Nonlectures, p. 81.

³E. E. Cummings, Complete Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1972), p. 264.

Cummings's preference for the natural, exemplified by "Spring," as opposed to the scientific, demonstrated by a "oneeyed son of a bitch," is effectively vivified in the above passage.

The differentiation between a society which naturally understands and one which scientifically thinks is quite important to Cummings. In his essay, "A Poet's Advice to Students," he defines the incongruities between feeling and knowing:

A lot of people think or believe or know they feel--but that's thinking or knowing or believing; not feeling. . . . Almost anybody can learn to think or believe or know, but not a single human being can be taught to feel. Why? Because whenever you think or you believe or you know, you're a lot of other people: but the moment you feel, you're nobody-but-yourself.⁴

Cummings's message is clear: until one begins to feel, he is not truly himself. As long as one retains the qualities of thinking, believing, and knowing without having understanding, that person is a conglomerate or mirror-image of other people. When the moment of understanding and feeling occurs for a person, he becomes an individual instead of a stereotyped characterization of others.

Cummings makes an important statement concerning the possible study of his art in Six Nonlectures: "I find it [his stance as a writer] expressed most clearly in the

⁴George Firmage, E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised (New York: October House, 1965), p. 335.

later miscalled novel, the two plays, perhaps twenty poems, and a half a dozen of the essays."⁵ It is especially helpful to consider in this respect the two plays, Him (1927) and Santa Claus (1946); because in them, Cummings dramatizes his feelings about the artist. He puts into words, actions, and interactions his concepts of what an artist is, and what his relationship to society is. The two major characters, Santa Claus and Him, demonstrate Cummings's idea of individuality which is caused by feeling and understanding.

One of Cummings's mysteries which man must solve in order to progress and become an artist is selftranscendence, or growing. According to Cummings, once a man reaches selftranscendence, or that state in which he understands himself, nothing "which anybody can think or believe or know . . . has power over a complex truth which he, and he alone, can feel."⁶ Man must achieve selftranscendence so that he will more completely understand himself. It is exactly this type of soul searching which is the framework for action in both of the plays. The hero, or non-hero, of each play is a representation of Cummings's artist. Both men want to express themselves but are confused about exactly what their ideals are and how best to present them

⁵Six Nonlectures, p. 4.

⁶Ibid., p. 82.

to the public. Only through self awareness can they understand what their true ideals are.

In this respect, Cummings, an artist, attempts to define the artist and artistry via a specific art form, the play. Cummings's feelings about plays in general, and his ideas about how plays should be presented are expressed in several essays. Since Cummings has chosen to dramatize his theories about the artist by using the stage, it is interesting and profitable to discover his responses to that medium.

In May of 1926, Cummings reviewed three productions for The Dial: Little Eyolf, The International Theatre Exposition, and the Grebs-Flowers middleweight championship fight. In his analysis of the second extravaganza, Cummings quotes freely from Friedrich Kiesler's text which appears in the show's program. Cummings is in agreement with what Kiesler says and admits that he is enlightened by Kiesler's assessment of the theatre. One of Kiesler's quotations which Cummings cites and which seems representative of Cummings's own vision of the theatre is: "We have no contemporary theatre. No agitator's theatre, no tribunal, no force which does not merely comment on life, but shapes it. . . . The peep-show-stage is a box appended to an assembly room. This box owes its form to technical considerations; it is not the result of deliberate artistic purpose. . . . Speech and action cease to be organic, or

plastic; they do not grow with the scenery, but are decorative, textual byplay. . . . The play falls halfway between nature and art."⁷

Cummings's feeling about the natural versus the scientific which he exemplified in his poem, "voices to voices, lip to lip," is again demonstrated in his use of Kiesler's quotations. Cummings presents the theatre as not being a true representation of nature because it is illusionary rather than reflective. The scientific society that Cummings fears is represented by the sterile "assembly room" image. The theatre, instead of being something "organic," owes its existence to "technical considerations." Cummings's use of Kiesler's quotations reinforces the notion that the conventional theatre does not represent the natural genesis of life that is so important to Cummings.

However, Cummings is not saying that the theatre cannot represent naturalness. Kiesler continues his essay by commenting on a "space-stage, a kind of four-sided funnel, opening towards the audience."⁸ In this case, Cummings is in complete agreement with Kiesler's theories. For Cummings, a play should be something in which a viewer can participate. A play ought to be more than a mere "art

⁷Firmage, p. 146.

⁸Ibid., p. 147.

form" for the spectator to watch for two hours, proceed home, and promptly forget. A phenomenon which allows complete audience participation is discussed by Cummings in an essay from the June 1926 issue of Vanity Fair entitled, "Coney Island, A Slightly Exuberant Appreciation of New York's Famous Pleasure Park." In the essay, Cummings presents three concepts of the theatre which are relevant to his feelings about theatrical art. First, he suggests "that the circus is an authentic 'theatric' phenomenon."⁹ Spontaneity is what excited Cummings about the circus and is what he wanted to see portrayed by the theatre. His second theory regarding the theatre concerns the idea "that the conventional 'theatre' is a box of negligible tricks."¹⁰ Cummings feels that the theatre fails when it is false and not natural. Coney Island, as a combination of the world of the circus and the world of the theatre, represents his third concept of the theatre: "The incredible temple of pity and terror, mirth and amazement, which is popularly known as Coney Island, really constitutes a perfectly unprecedented fusion of the circus and the theatre."¹¹ It is the union of these two entities that is important because only from that union can naturalness

⁹Firmage, p. 151.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 150.

arise. In Cummings's words: "We repeat: the essence of Coney Island's 'circus-theatre' consists in homogeneity. THE AUDIENCE IS THE PERFORMANCE, and vice versa."¹² The underlining and the capitalizations in the above quotations are Cummings's. He obviously feels very strongly about what he is writing and wants to make the reader understand what type of theatre he is attempting to define: the theatre in its natural form.

Put simply, the theatre of which Cummings speaks, IS. As Cummings states, "all genuine theatre is a verb and not a noun."¹³ It is more important for a play to be something than it is for a play to be about something. A play must grow and develop, and more important, the audience must grow and develop along with it. The audience and the play should homogeneously be able to interact and benefit from one another's presence. Instead of being "stick" figures representing illusions, the characters must be people involved with living and reality. Cummings embodies his thoughts concerning the theatre and an audience's reaction to it in a prefatory note included on the program of the Provincetown Playhouse production of Him:

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

¹² Firmage, p. 151.

¹³ Ibid.

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. Let it dart off and beckon to you from the distance, let it tiptoe back and snap its fingers under your nose, let it sweep up at you from below or pounce down on you from above, let it creep cautiously behind you and tap you on the back of the neck, let it go all around and over and under you and inside you and through you. Relax, and give this PLAY a chance to strut its stuff - relax, don't worry because it's not like something else - relax, stop wondering what it's all 'about'--like many strange and familiar things, Life included, this play isn't 'about,' it simply is. Don't try to despise it, let it try to despise you. Don't try to enjoy it, let it try to enjoy you. DON'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT, LET IT TRY TO UNDERSTAND YOU.¹⁴

By stating, "Let it try to understand you," Cummings shifts the burden of responsibility for understanding to his play. For it is not up to the audience to interpret the play, but merely to go along for the ride. The spectator should abandon his role as removed viewer and become part of the action. His only responsibility is to put himself in the atmosphere of Coney Island - "in a homogeneously happening universe, surrounded by the rhythmic mutations of the ocean and circumscribed by the mightily oblivion-coloured rush of the roller coaster."¹⁵ By letting the play play, and experiencing the exuberance of Coney Island, the playgoer benefits from the "circus-theatre" that Cummings creates.

¹⁴Charles Norman, E. E. Cummings: The Magic Maker (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), pp. 222-23.

¹⁵Firmage, p. 153.

II

The play is an important art form for Cummings because it gives him a chance to put into action his ideals concerning natural genesis and knowledge versus understanding. In a play, his words are translated into characters who vivify his thoughts. Through a play, Cummings can incorporate his policy of organicism into something that is tangible and real. This is a more effective technique than trying to evoke feelings only by black words on a white page. If a playgoer, rather than forcing himself to think about the play's message, takes Cummings's advice and allows the play to "play with" him, then he can innately understand the play instead of having to know it scientifically. Cummings is not saying that his plays have no morals, but that a person should, instead of actively searching for a moral, let the play deliver the moral to him. By putting his words into actions, Cummings provides the spontaneity and naturalness which he feels are essential to art and understanding.

That Cummings's plays do have a moral is demonstrated by his short, five-scene play Santa Claus. The moral, and Cummings's feelings about a scientific society, are made exceedingly clear to the reader or listener. In Six Nonlectures, Cummings states the fifteen-word definition of his artistic technique: "Would you hit a woman

with a child? No I'd hit her with a brick."¹⁶

Through Santa Claus, Cummings ably demonstrates this technique and does make his ideals clear to the audience. The action of the play is rather sparse. There are five characters: Death, Santa Claus, Mob, Child, and Woman. The actions are few because it is the interaction of the characters which is of primary importance. Scene One of this blank verse allegory begins with a meeting between Santa Claus and Death. Cummings's description of the performers is as follows:

(Death, strolling - he wears black tights on which the bones of his skeleton are vividly suggested by daubs of white paint; and his mask imitates crudely the face of a fleshless human skull. Enter, slowly and despondently, a prodigiously paunchy figure in faded red moth-eaten Santa Claus costume, with the familiar Santa Claus mask-face of a bewhiskered jolly old man.¹⁷

A reason for Santa Claus's unhappiness is explained in his conversation with Death. It seems that Santa Claus has "so much to give; and nobody will take."¹⁸ Death replies that his "problem is also one of distribution, only it happens to be the other way round."¹⁹ In this short

¹⁶Six Nonlectures, p. 64.

¹⁷E. E. Cummings, Santa Claus (New York: Henry Holt, 1946), p. 3.

¹⁸Santa Claus, p. 3.

¹⁹Ibid.

description and verbal exchange, Cummings sets up the tone of irony which pervades the remainder of the play. Santa Claus, the "jolly old man," is not merry at all. His mask is a facade and is not a true representation of his inner feelings. Meanwhile, Death, who should be somber, is strolling merrily along and offers aid to the pathetic Santa Claus figure. The early introduction of paradoxes sets the mood for ironic occurrences which appear later in the play.

The personalities are further developed in the first scene when Santa Claus wonders why people will not accept something that is free. Death volunteers an explanation:

You're speaking of a true or actual world. Imagine, if you can, a world so blurred that its inhabitants are one another--an idiotic monster of negation. . . . A world so false, so trivial, so unso, phantoms are solid by comparison.²⁰

Death states Cummings's feelings about the corruption and foolishness of a scientific society. Cummings uses Death to express what he said in his sixth nonlecture about the world's being "a soi-distant free society, dedicated to immeasurable generousities of love; but dominated by a mere and colossal lust for knowing, which threatens not simply to erase all past and present and future human existence but to annihilate (in the name of Liberty) Life Herself."²¹

²⁰Santa Claus, p. 4.

²¹Six Nonlectures, p. 103.

The "monster of negation" which society has made of itself is a real threat to Cummings's world of nature. Feeling has vanished and knowledge has taken its place. The "lust for knowing" has eradicated the idea of understanding by forcing everyone to know in order to survive.

The concept of knowledge versus understanding is reiterated by Death when he says that knowledge without understanding is a fact, "In this empty un-understanding world."²² The conflict between knowledge and understanding is highlighted by Santa Claus's response to Death's query concerning what gift Santa Claus is trying to give. Santa Claus's answer is a simple, "I don't know."²³ However, Death does know--what Santa Claus is attempting to give is understanding. The effect of the short exchange is like that of a Cummings's "brick." Though he exists in a world of knowing, Santa Claus does not know--he understands through his feelings, he does not know through his mind. As a result, the image of Cummings's artist is reflected in Santa Claus. He understands that he has something to give, but he does not realize what it is or how to give it. He can find the answers only by attempting to understand himself.

²²Santa Claus, p. 5.

²³Ibid., p. 4.

Death helps Santa Claus in his first attempt to answer the questions by telling him that the gift is understanding. Death knows what understanding is and also understands the difference between knowledge and understanding. But he realizes that understanding cannot exist in the world in its present "monster" state, so he tells Santa Claus that he should try to dispense knowledge rather than give understanding because knowledge is the only thing people know. To get into "this 'knowledge' racket,"²⁴ Santa Claus must become a scientist, or "a knowledge salesman."²⁵ Ironically, he must sell falseness to a false society. Death and Santa exchange masks, revealing visages of a fleshless human skull for Death, and the face of a young man for Santa Claus. After trading masks, Death suggests that Santa Claus try to sell something which does not exist. Santa Claus is finally convinced that he should use this approach when Death explains to him that people do not exist. The first scene ends with Santa Claus preparing to put his salesmanship on the line by attempting to sell stock in "wheelmines."²⁶

Santa Claus has been taken in by Death. He has lowered himself to the level of a scientist. But, he still

²⁴Santa Claus, p. 6.

²⁵Ibid., p. 5.

²⁶Ibid., p. 6.

feels that he must give something. In Scene Two, he tries to sell wheelmine stock to the Mob. He does a fine job because he believes in what he is doing. Although he has been tricked by Death, he still has feelings about something he must give to the public. His ends are still pure, but his means are corrupt. Wearing Death's mask, Santa Claus makes convincing cliché-ridden speeches to the Mob. Cummings is quite satiric when he has Santa Claus explain the validity of science in the world:

Remember: Science is no mere individual. Individuals are, after all, nothing but human beings; and human beings are corruptible: for (as you doubtless know) to err is human. . . . Think - only think! at last the monster, man, is freed from his obscene humanity!--While men were merely men, and nothing more, what was equality? A word. A dream.²⁷

Santa Claus ironically promises to make people what they already are: an unfeeling stereotyped mob. According to Santa Claus, the days of individualism are past. It is now man who is the "monster," not society. And it is humanity that is "obscene" in a scientific society. "Those dark ages"²⁸ of individualism need no longer bother modern man. The "flames of Science"²⁹ will show him how to think instead of how to understand.

²⁷ Santa Claus, p. 9.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

The actions of Santa Claus in this scene are not representative of Cummings's artist because they are not natural and do not mirror his actual self. But the incongruity can be explained by two facts: Santa Claus is wearing Death's mask, and he is artistically naïve. The innocent young man takes Death's help in good faith. He, unlike Death, does not realize the corruption that exists in the world. He is therefore willing to take Death's word at face value. Santa has been conned by Death, and in turn, becomes a conman. But because he is wearing the mask, he is only an illusion of Death. He does not recognize the fact that he is a conman because he has not yet come to a realization of who Death truly is. He cannot yet see both sides of the issue as can Death. He convinces the Mob that he is not a conman because he does not see that that is what he represents. The ultimate paradox in this scene is that, because of his naïveté, Santa Claus cannot know that he is doing wrong in selling knowledge. Yet it is his lack of true knowledge which allows his arguments to be so convincing to the Mob.

The fact that Death has planned to trap Santa Claus is made evident in the first line of Scene Three when Death, hearing an angry Mob offstage, says, "I've got him now."³⁰

³⁰Santa Claus, p. 10.

Santa Claus rushes onstage and tells Death that the Mob wants to kill him because some men have died in a wheelmine accident. Though Santa Claus did not previously understand who Death was, in the conversation which ensues, he now sees who Death actually is. But Santa still needs advice, so he accepts Death's idea that he must convince the Mob that he (Santa Claus) does not exist.

Santa Claus, realizing that he has been tricked by Death, confronts the Mob. He delivers a speech in which he repeats what Death said in the first scene about a world that is "an idiotic monster of negation." However, "Santa is lamenting the deadness of most people rather than lampooning it."³¹ After reaffirming the effects of science on a world, Santa attempts to save his life by proving that he does not exist. He tells the crowd that no one can deceive a child, so he will ask a little girl who he is. The Mob agrees that they will abide by the Girl's decision. Although Santa Claus is still wearing Death's mask, the Girl sees through it and proclaims that the figure is Santa Claus. The crowd yells that there is no such thing as Santa Claus. Upon hearing this, Santa says that since he does not exist, he cannot be guilty. Thus, the scene ends with Santa Claus exonerating himself. The

³¹Norman Friedman, E. E. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 144.

scientific society has proven itself foolish, for merely because they think that something does not exist, it has no place in their world. Their knowledge has provided Santa Claus with both an escape and also a chance to broaden his outlook on life by understanding the absurdity of their scientific knowledge.

Scene Four opens with Santa Claus strolling along, rather pleased with himself. The enlightenment he received in the previous scene has improved his artistic vision and his view of himself in relation to society. An idea which Cummings establishes both in Santa Claus and Him concerns the artist's relationship to the world. In Him, the playwright hero states: "An artist, a man, a failure, MUST PROCEED."³² Santa Claus, as an artist, follows one of Cummings's primary credos and proceeds. He has grown in that he has seen another side of life represented by the corruption of the Mob. He achieves this epiphany by understanding that corruptness exists in everyone, including himself. He realizes that he exhibited his corruption when he was disguised as Death. By looking at that potentially corrupt side which exists in every man, he begins a process of self-awareness, increasing his understanding of himself, and thereby of society.

³²E. E. Cummings, Him (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), p. 13.

When Death enters the scene, Santa Claus ironically thanks him for saving his life by giving him advice. Santa then returns the favor by giving Death his Santa Claus costume because the lady with whom Death has a date likes "plump fellows."³³ Thus, Santa Claus and Death completely exchange outward appearances. Later in the conversation, love, which is one of Cummings's three mysteries, is introduced. The point is made that Death has never loved, but that Santa Claus has loved at one time. Death realizes what understanding is, and Santa Claus is proceeding toward that realization, but the fact that only Santa understands love is a fundamental difference between the two characters. Although they change outward appearances, their inner selves remain the same.

Death leaves in order to keep his date, and the Child who identified Santa Claus in Scene Three enters. She immediately recognizes Santa, even though he is completely dressed as Death. It is made apparent through their conversation that the Child is the daughter of Santa Claus. They are both searching for one person: she, her mother; he, his wife. The final passages of the scene, aside from being the most lyrical in the play, are keys to the lost identity and self-awareness of Santa Claus:

³³Santa Claus, p. 14.

Santa Claus. I should never be afraid of anything in the sky and on the earth and anywhere and everywhere and nowhere if I were only sure of one thing.

Child. What.

Santa Claus. Who was that somebody else?

Child. That somebody we lost?

Santa Claus. Yes.

Child. Can't you guess who?

Santa Claus. Can I?

Child. You.
(She dances away)³⁴

Santa realizes that now, more than ever, he must "find" himself, so that he can rediscover his lost "love."³⁵

Scene Five begins with the entrance of a weeping woman. Her words echo those of Santa Claus when he was lamenting the emptiness in the world:

Knowledge has taken love out of the world and all the world is empty empty empty: men are not men anymore in all the world for a man who cannot love is not a man, and only a woman in love can be a woman; and, from their love alone, joy is born - joy! Knowledge has taken love out of the world and all the world is joyless joyless joyless. Come, death! for I have lost my joy and I have lost my love and I have lost myself.³⁶

She has given up and is willing to lose her life if she cannot have her husband and her child. Santa Claus then enters,

³⁴Santa Claus, p. 16.

³⁵Six Nonlectures, p. 82.

³⁶Santa Claus, p. 17.

dressed as Death. Thinking that Death has come to take her away, she is excited at hearing the voice of her lost lover. A tumult is made offstage by the Mob and she characterizes the Mob as "deathless lifelessness."³⁷ She understands that a world without love is death in life.

The Mob appears on the stage carrying the corpse of Death on a pole. They had been fooled once by Santa Claus dressed as Death, but they were not to be fooled by Death as Santa Claus. They have ultimately done something right in overthrowing the symbol of lovelessness, but their pride in thinking they killed Santa Claus paradoxically prevents them from truly understanding what they have done.

The play ends with the mother, father, and child being reunited. Santa Claus unmask and reveals that his true identity is that of a young man. Cummings gave his own analysis of the ending when he wrote a letter to Allen Tate on June 6, 1946. The letter contained a line drawing of the young man removing his mask and an interpretation of the drawing. The explanation stated, in part:

It illustrates the play's almost final moment - Santa revealing himself to Woman - because that's the play's climax. And it symbolizes the whole aim of "Santa Claus" - which is to make man remove his deathmask, thereby becoming what he truly is: a human being.³⁸

Cummings satirizes scientific society throughout the play

³⁷ Santa Claus, p. 17.

³⁸ Friedman, p. 149.

by saying that man is no longer an individual in such a society. In this postscript, Cummings allows his spectators to understand the purpose of the play, which is that man is, more than anything else, a human being.

The moral of the story is probably best summed up by Norman Friedman in E. E. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer when he states, "love conquers all."³⁹ The conflict of the play is a confrontation between two men who have understanding. The difference between the two figures is the desire to love. Death does not want to love, but Santa Claus does. Through the combination of love and a deeper understanding of himself, the artist understands what he wants to express, and how he is going to express it. At the beginning of the play, Santa Claus was the representation of the idea that "love and individuality are scarce commodities in the modern world."⁴⁰ He was searching for something, not realizing what it was, nor how to find it. But he proceeded, instead of stagnating, by continuing his search. Through his growth and improved self-awareness, he finds that what he is trying to give is understanding and the way to give it is through love.

Santa Claus, as a figure, represents an entire class of people. He is not a specific person, but a symbol

³⁹Friedman, p. 147.

⁴⁰Norman, p. 234.

of Cummings's "artist." Cummings achieves character-viewer interaction by allowing the individual spectator to empathize with the character Santa Claus. Instead of being forced to be objective in his involvement with the character, the viewer is allowed to be subjective. The playgoer can become Santa Claus and experience the same feelings and changes that the character undergoes. Cummings moves away from the "pennyintheslot peep show,"⁴¹ which he derides in his articles on the theatre in The Dial, to the more organic, circus-like theatre which he advocates in other essays. Rather than placing a specific person in a specific situation, a basic tenet of most plays, Cummings puts a universal symbol, Santa Claus, into confrontation with a universal dilemma, understanding one's self. Cummings continues his idea of the scientific versus the natural by replacing a contrived, scientific situation with a real, natural one.

III

Cummings's concern for naturalness is exemplified by the setting of the stage in Him. In the essay discussed earlier, Kiesler had already introduced the idea of a "space-stage, a kind of four-sided funnel, opening towards the audience." Cummings incorporates this concept into his setting for the discussions between the central

⁴¹Firmage, p. 143.

character, Him, and his wife, Me. The room in which their confrontations take place is four-sided, but one side is invisible and faces the audience. This set is used five times during the play. When it is used first, in the second scene of the first act, Me is looking into an invisible mirror which is hanging on the invisible wall. The wall to the audience's left is blank, the middle wall has a door, and the wall to the audience's right has a window. In the next Him-Me scene, the room has turned one-quarter revolution to the right, and now the mirrored wall is on the audience's left. The rotation of the room allows the viewer to realize that there is indeed a fourth wall and that it is not illusionary. Thus, instead of making the stage merely a picture frame, Cummings makes it into a natural, organic whole. The invisible wall literally separates the stage from the audience, but it is more than a division. It invites the spectators to become involved with the characters. The funnel effect of the stage encourages the playgoer to abandon any preconceived notions he may have had concerning a play and enter the real, natural world that Cummings is presenting on the stage.

The idea of letting the play "play" is discussed by Cummings in his introduction which appears on the program for Him. Also relevant to understanding Him is the "Imaginary Dialogue Between an Author and a Public as Imagined by E. E. Cummings," which is printed on an inside

flap of the original edition's jacket:

AUTHOR: Well?

PUBLIC: What is Him about?

AUTHOR: Why ask me? Did I or didn't I make the play?

PUBLIC: But surely you know what you are making . . .

AUTHOR: Beg pardon, Mr. Public. I surely make what I'm knowing.

PUBLIC: So far as I'm concerned, my very dear sir, nonsense isn't anything 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. 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.

PUBLIC: Bravo, but are sick persons good for anything in particular?

AUTHOR: They are good for nothing except 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.⁴²

In this imaginary dialogue, Cummings asserts some of the concepts which he later stated in Santa Claus. When he says, "I surely make what I'm knowing," he establishes

⁴²Norman, p. 210.

the concept that knowledge is something which must be forced upon a person and not something that comes naturally to an individual. One has to "make" knowledge, as contrasted to intuiting understanding. Cummings's concept of self-awareness is manifested by the "third voice" and the "cordial revelation of the fatal reflexive." "The third voice" represents the voice of Cummings's artist. It is only this type of individual who will go beyond doing and dreaming in order to come to an understanding of himself. Only after coming to a realization of himself can he comprehend both the world within and the world without. The existence of two worlds is further insinuated by Cummings when he makes the parenthetical remark about "a mirror surrounded with mirrors." There are several ideas encompassed by Cummings's mirror imagery, one of which is that the natural art of Cummings can only be achieved by holding a mirror up to nature and reflecting the true picture of reality. Also inherent in the mirror motif is the idea that there are two sides to a person: the man outside the mirror, and the man in the mirror. Cummings goes into further development of this topic when Him talks about his other self, Mr. O. Him. The final sentence of the imaginary dialogue combines the ideas of mirrors and naturalness. Cummings says that it is more important for a play to be something (a reflection) than it is for a play to be an illusion of something.

The idea of illusions created by the mask imagery in Santa Claus, and the resultant bad connotations, are continued in Him. Three old ladies, or "the three Weirds,"⁴³ are introduced in the first scene of Him. At this point, their backs are facing the audience, but they later confront the audience and reveal that they are wearing identical facemasks. The sameness of the facemasks, combined with their cliché-ridden language and nonsensical exclamations might remind the audience of the "monster of negation" in Santa Claus. They represent the society which does not want to change. "The three Weirds" are content to rock in their chairs, constantly moving forward and backward, but never proceeding. They function as the death in life figures of the play.

However, "the three Weirds" are not Cummings's only representations of death in the play. A doctor is also introduced in the first scene. The doctor is Cummings's symbol of the science and knowledge which ultimately degrades man. The audience's first view of both the doctor and Me occurs as "the three Weirds" are looking at "a flat surface on which is painted a Doctor anesthetizing a Woman."⁴⁴ Me's living head is in a cutout hole where the

⁴³Him, p. 4.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 3.

painted-on Woman's head should be. The doctor's actual head is in a similar position in relation to the painted-on picture of the Doctor.

The illusionary atmosphere created by the masks and the presence of painted-on characters is furthered by the upcoming actions of the doctor. He appears in Act Two disguised as several different characters. He is represented as a businessman, an orator, a detective, an American tourist, a circus barker, and an upholder of the moral code--all figures of the conman in society. Although the doctor changes his physical appearance, the audience always realizes that he is the same man. The different scenes in Act Two portray the many guises that an "intelligent man" may assume. But the fact that the characters are always played by the doctor reiterates the idea that modern man remains, in reality, unchanged. The fact that Santa Claus and Death could change costumes but not change identities is repeated in Him. The doctor is representative of the notion that although a man's exterior may change, he cannot escape being himself.

Him, who is presented in this scene, also assumes more than one identity. When he is first introduced to the "three Weirds" as "Mr. Anybody," they do not pay any attention to him. But when he assumes another identity, the "Marquis de la Poussière," he is accepted by the identical sisters. They cannot relate to him until he attempts

to do what they, as representatives of society, have already done, conform. A basic difference between the doctor and Him is that the doctor wants to conform to society, while society is attempting to force its conformity upon Him by making him change identities.

A second difference between the two men is vivified in the second scene of the first act. This scene gives the audience its first look at Him and Me in their revolving setting. In this scene, Him explains that he is attempting to discover himself. This search for self-awareness is in opposition to the doctor's attempts to hide from himself.

With this reemergence of self-awareness, it is helpful to refer to Cummings's three mysteries: "love, art, and self-transcendence, or growing." The character Him comes into contact with each of these mysteries, and his attempt to understand these ideas forms the basis of the play. There are many different scenes, enacted in quite divergent styles, but the thread upon which the play is woven consists of Cummings's mysteries. Him is a playwright and the "art" with which he is concerned is a play. The action of writing a play also serves as the basic plot line. Him is about an artist writing a play about a man writing a play. The interior play is contained in Act Two. The first and third acts involve Him's struggle to understand the play and himself, and Me's attempt to understand

Him and their relationship together. Intertwined with the basic plot concerning "art," are the two other mysteries, "love" and "self-transcendence." Love is represented by Me's feelings for Him and his relation to that love. Self-transcendence is seen in both characters. Me is physically growing because she is pregnant with Him's child, and Him is growing in that he is attempting to follow his own advice and proceed. The advice about proceeding occurs early in the play (Act I, Scene 2), and deserves careful attention.

In the first confrontation between Him and Me which happens in this scene, each character is attempting to come to a clear understanding of something. Me wants to understand their relationship as lovers, and Him wants to understand himself in terms of being an artist. Each is basically concerned with his or her own problem, and the ensuing conversation is somewhat disjointed because neither is really listening to the other. The selfishness and self-awareness of these passages are explained by Him when he attempts to explain to Me how he understands himself as "artist."

In his explanation, Him alludes to the circus by saying, "Damn everything but the circus!"⁴⁵ Although he is not responding to Me, he continues the circus imagery

⁴⁵Him, p. 12.

by stating, "the average 'painter' 'sculptor' 'poet' 'composer' 'playwright' is a person who cannot leap through a hoop from the back of a galloping horse, make people laugh with a clown's mouth, orchestrate twenty lions."⁴⁶ This is Him's definition of the "average artist," not the artist he and Cummings are attempting to define. The artist with whom Him is concerned, referred to in Him's next speech, is "a human being who balances three chairs, one on top of another, on a wire, eighty feet in the air with no net underneath, and then climbs into the top chair, sits down, and begins to swing. . . ."⁴⁷ Him's artist is not super-human, but "a human being" whose "position is precarious and isolated from his audience."⁴⁸ Him continues passionately speaking to Me about the artist he must be: "I feel, I am aware--every minute, every instant, I watch this trick, I am this trick, I sway--selfish and smiling and careful--above all the people. (To himself) And always I am repeating a simple and dark and little formula . . . always myself mutters and remutters a trivial colourless microscopic idiom--I breathe, and I swing; and I whisper:

⁴⁶Him, p. 12.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Bernard F. Dukore and Daniel C. Gerould, "A Mirror Surrounded by Mirrors: E. E. Cummings's Him," Player's Magazine (Dec.-Jan., 1969), p. 56.

'An artist, a man, a failure, MUST PROCEED.'"⁴⁹

As he states in the passage, Him is "selfish." But he is not selfish in the sense that he wants everything for himself. He is more "concerned first and always with his own self-discovery as an artist."⁵⁰ The anguish that accompanies such a proceeding toward self-awareness is discussed by Cummings in "The Agony of the Artist (with a Capital A)." In this essay, Cummings says that the agony of the artist comes, not from his failure to be recognized by the world, but "from his own personal struggle to discover, to appreciate, and finally to express himself."⁵¹ Cummings continues by stating, "'to become an Artist' means nothing: whereas to become alive, or one's self, means everything."⁵² These exact feelings are personified by Him when he imagines himself as a circus acrobat. Cummings further asserts the anguish of the artist in his examination of the above scene in Six Nonlectures. Cummings puts forth the notion that Him is a human being isolated from "a vast multitude of un-understandingly enthralled spectators."⁵³ Nevertheless, the agony of the artist is not

⁴⁹ Him, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Robert Maurer, "E. E. Cummings's Him," Bucknell Review, 6, No. 2 (1958), p. 13.

⁵¹ Firmage, p. 193.

⁵² Ibid., p. 193.

⁵³ Six Nonlectures, p. 81.

the isolation, but the very act of proceeding so as to come to grips with himself. Him states frequently that he "feels" and "is" what he attempts to understand. Echoing Cummings's precise feelings about himself, Him wants to be an artist.

At the beginning of scene 2, each character was trying to understand something. Although they do not gain a complete understanding at the end of the scene, they have at least begun to proceed. Him has now set a goal for himself, which is to be an artist. He understands his end, but he does not clearly understand how he is to get there. Me's understanding of their relationship increases because she now realizes that Him must choose between herself and his play. As a result of this scene, everyone, including Him, Me, and the audience, recognizes that Him's, and the play's, objective is to understand the artist's relation to himself, society, and love. Now that the purpose is understood, it is the responsibility of the remainder of the play to lead everyone naturally to the fulfillment of that purpose.

Some of the play's obligation is met in the next Him-Me confrontation which occurs in Act One, Scene 4. In this scene, the audience is introduced to the author of the interior play, Mr. O. Him, *The Man in the Mirror*,⁵⁴

⁵⁴Him, p. 30.

when Me begins asking Him about his hat. Him explains that it is not his, but "the Other Man's hat."⁵⁵ The man who is really Me's lover owns the hat. The hat becomes a symbol of Him's other self - "the part that is not the artist, the part that he thinks Me is in love with."⁵⁶ Him's realization of two selves indicates that he is proceeding. He is no longer viewing himself merely as "artist," for as Cummings states: "we should go hugely astray in assuming that art was the only self-transcendence."⁵⁷ Him seems to be understanding that there is more in life than art. For there is also love, Cummings's "mystery-of-mysteries."⁵⁸ Through Him's attempts to understand himself, he is understanding more about the two other mysteries, love and art.

When Me fails to comprehend what Him is talking about in regard to another man, he tells her that there are actually two men in the room and introduces her to the "Man in the Mirror."⁵⁹ This reflection of Him is his other self. Earlier in the same scene, Him had attempted to do away with the other man by putting an automatic pistol to his own

⁵⁵Him, p. 26.

⁵⁶Maurer, p. 15.

⁵⁷Six Nonlectures, p. 82.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Him, p. 27.

head. But Him realizes that killing one self would mean killing both since they are mutually interdependent.

IV

The concept of two selves is earlier considered by Cummings in an essay which appeared in the February, 1926 issue of Vanity Fair. The title of the article is, "I Take Great Pleasure in Presenting," and the subject of the piece is a penguin. Cummings suggests that a penguin is admirable because it "possesses a double existence" and "is two individuals."⁶⁰ The first individual is the awkward, strutting form which the penguin presents when he is out of the water. The second individual is the one that is able to glide through the water easily and beautifully. The fact that the penguin is a bird and acts like a fish is indicative of the dual nature of the animal. The wings which seem so pathetic out of the water enable the penguin to soar when in the water. Cummings divides the two selves presented by the penguin into "conscious" and "unconscious": the penguin on land being the former, and the penguin in the water representing the latter. Of the "unconscious," Cummings says, "it is existence . . . an illimitable realm in which the human mind flies, as contrasted with a microscopic domain in which the mind's wings are next to useless."⁶¹ Cummings also makes use of

⁶⁰Firmage, p. 138.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 140.

the word "illimitable" when referring to human beings in Six Nonlectures: "every human being is in and of himself or herself illimitable."⁶² In both cases, Cummings is re-asserting the fact that man's capacity for understanding has no boundaries. Him is beginning to realize that he is not tied down to one self, but that he has the capacity to understand all that he desires. By understanding that human beings are illimitable, and through the act of releasing Mr. O.Him from within himself, Him proceeds, coming a step closer to being an artist.

Him releases Mr. O.Him by allowing him to be the author and hero of the interior play. At the end of Scene 4, Him explains that the hero and heroine of Mr. O.Him's play are the mirror images, the other selves, of Him and Me. When Me asks Him what the other play is about in Scene 1 of Act Two, Him replies, "About? It's about anything you like, about nothing and something and everything, about blood and thunder and love and death--in fact, about as much as you can stand."⁶³ The play upon words foreshadows the burlesque atmosphere which pervades Act Two. There is also an earlier reference to burlesque in Act One, Scene 4 when Him says to Me, "You aren't mad, am I?"⁶⁴ This piece

⁶²Six Nonlectures, p. 82.

⁶³Him, p. 35.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 28.

of dialogue happens to be the title of an essay Cummings wrote in 1925 concerning burlesque. In the article, Cummings re-establishes his idea that art must be natural when he says, "since 'art,' if it means anything, means TO BE INTENSELY ALIVE, the former [burlesque and the works of Lachaise, Marin, and Stravinsky] constitute art . . ."65 Art must not be pretentious. It must be art for art's sake.

Mr. O.Him's play fulfills two specific purposes. First, it is art for art's sake. At one point, Him says, "This play of mine is all about mirrors."66 In order for the play to be natural, it must present reflections of reality and not illusions of something false. The interior play, as well as Him, is a play of reflections and is organic and spontaneous. At the same time, it allows the audience to interact by permitting the people to come naturally to an understanding of the import of each scene through subjective association with the characters. Second, and more important, the play reveals caricatures of what Cummings's artist is not. In Santa Claus, Cummings demonstrated non-artistic qualities in Santa's wheelmine speech. In Him, the doctor portrays the conman who is the antithesis of the artist Cummings is trying to define. The interior play's function is quite significant. It is a parody of

⁶⁵Firmage, pp. 129-30.

⁶⁶Him, p. 29.

the conventional theatre, and most important, it presents both Cummings's idea of "art" and his representation of "non-artist." By looking at "non-artists" (conmen), Him "is trying to find out who he is by discovering who he is not."⁶⁷ By being "art," and presenting scenarios of "non-artists," the inner play is part of the process by which Him, Me, and the audience will naturally be led to a conclusion about the artist.

The interior play is divided into nine scenes. Scene 1 consists of the curtain's rising upon a bare stage and descending again after a time interval of one minute. At the conclusion of the scene, Him and Me discuss the inner play offstage. Him relates the meaning, if there is any, of the scene: "It meant nothing, or rather: death."⁶⁸ Death as presented in this scene is represented by a total lack of action. "The three Weirds" are living death because they fail to proceed although they have the opportunity. True death is the total absence of motion, there being no opportunities for any semblance of life. There is no rocking back and forth, there is nothing. And according to Him's response, nothing is synonymous with death.

The first scene gives the audience Cummings's ideal of death. The next seven scenes represent the

⁶⁷Friedman, p. 69.

⁶⁸Him, p. 35.

living death that many individuals experience. The second scene includes three drunken middle-aged men and an old maid who are characteristic of life in death. The old maid characterizes the men as "typically depraved old things" who are "just lovely."⁶⁹ The men are not human beings, they are "things." And to make the situation even sadder, they are "typical." The men are mere stereotypes of middle-aged man. Instead of being themselves, they are fulfilling a role. The old maid categorizes herself by admitting that the men are "lovely." She acts appalled, but in truth, she sympathizes with the old men. They have all accepted a role in society and they act out their part. Since they have all conformed, they cannot represent the artist because he is a non-conformist.

Scene 3 casts the doctor in the role of a soap box orator who is trying to sell a cure-all to the American people. The orator manufactures a disease, calls it cin-derella, and tries to hawk a cure for it. This scene points up the corruptness of science and the gullibility of the general American public. The orator is not a representation of the artist because he is not himself, and an artist is, above all else, himself.

Scene 4 concentrates on Will and Bill who are business partners. An intruder (played by the doctor) enters

⁶⁹Him, p. 36.

the office, and in the ensuing scuffle, Will is killed. The conversation is reminiscent of "Who's on first?" with quotations such as, "you killed Will, Bill."⁷⁰ The important image of the scene, however, is that of the "monster of negation" created in Santa Claus. Via this scene, Cummings shows that people in a scientific society become so identical that it is impossible for a person to distinguish himself from another person. The identities become so blurred that one does not even know when one has killed one's self. The artist cannot be considered as part of such a mob because he is isolated from society, "eighty feet in air"⁷¹ on a wire.

Scene 5 involves a negro spiritual company giving a presentation of Frankie and Johnnie and their confrontation with an upholder of the "moral code." When it seems to this upright personage that the players are going to become obscene he leaps up and gives a long-winded speech about contracepting vice. This John Smith represents a "non-artist" because he is attempting to put restraints upon something natural and prevent it from being organic and artful. An "artist" would consider such an action outrageous.

⁷⁰Him, p. 47.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 12.

Scene 6 presents a plainclothesman (played by the ubiquitous doctor) and an Englishman carrying his unconscious in a trunk. On the burlesque level, this is a spoof of Freudian psychology. But more than that, it differentiates between Freud's and Cummings's idea of the "unconscious." Freud's unconscious, according to Cummings's parody, is something that is physically carried around and something that has been originated in the United States. It is something that is bandied about and which can be lost. To Cummings the unconscious is inherent in every human being and originates in human beings, not in countries. It is not something which needs to be discussed, but rather, something which each individual must realize within himself. Cummings makes light of something he feels very deeply about because he hopes to show the absurdness of making something natural into something scientific. Cummings's artist is not represented in this scene since all of the characters fail to understand what the unconscious really is while the "artist" would innately understand it.

Scene 7 is a rather simple presentation of typical American tourists. Two American men meet on board an ocean liner, exchange nonsensical clichés, and go on their way. This scene is a straightforward characterization of the stereotyped, insensitive American tourist abroad. Each pays no attention to what the other says and merely

goes on about his own business. This scene does not reflect Cummings's artist, since he is just the opposite of these stylized, nonfeeling puppets who are ruled by convention.

Scene 8 is a farcical burlesque of Mussolini's rise to power. The action is quite amusing, but the import of the scene is more critical. Cummings is demonstrating that the history of man is unimportant. What man should be concerned with is the present and the future. Cummings makes a farce of man's history because it is irrelevant to what man is now. Cummings is reinforcing, in a satiric and comedic manner, the notion that man must be concerned with proceeding. Man must not stop to review, for if he does, he fails to proceed. The artist as seen by Cummings and Him is not represented in this scene since their artist is constantly moving forward while these characters are living in the past.

Scenes 1 through 8 in this act are presentations of death in its various forms. The tone is satirical and pessimistic. Cummings gives demonstrations of what his artist is not to the audience. He gets the audience involved by using the burlesque form to present his "non-artists." At one point (Act Two, Scene 5), someone rises from the audience and interacts with the characters onstage. Such involvement by the audience permits them to understand subjectively what Cummings is saying about "non-artists."

Although the audience has been enlightened by these scenes, Me seems rather unimpressed. She is characterized as seeming somewhat bored and at a loss as to realizing what the scenes signify when she makes such typical comments as, "Is that all?"⁷² For her, the scenes appear to be lacking something. That something may be love. What Me is seeking is an understanding of love. Since there is no love involved in Mr. O.Him's play so far, she cannot react favorably towards it. During the Him-Me exchanges at the end of each scene, she often seems inquisitive and expectant: "What was that about?" and "What comes next?"⁷³ She wants to find a scene with love in it so that she may have some genuine feelings about the play.

The idea of love finally enters--in the ninth and final scene--of Mr. O.Him's play. All of the scenes up until this point have been mock-serious, but this scene is quite serious. It involves a discussion between a Gentleman (the doctor) and the Interlocutor (Him) and a confrontation between the Gentleman and a mob. The discussion between the Gentleman and the Interlocutor principally involves the false realities of society as represented by money, and the degeneration of man as represented by war. When the mob enters, the Interlocutor flees the scene,

⁷²Him, p. 39.

⁷³Ibid., p. 64.

leaving the Gentleman holding a piece of bread. Unlike the individual-mob confrontations in Santa Claus, the mob in this scene is sensitive while the Gentleman is insensitive. The Gentleman is "talking business," while the crowd is "a human being."⁷⁴ In this discourse between the Gentleman and the crowd, the key word "give" occurs frequently. The crowd wants to be given the bread, but the Gentleman will not oblige them because if he gives, he will "be doing something quite unspeakably stupid."⁷⁵ After much discussion about who is dead and who is alive, the Gentleman finally acquiesces to the crowd's demands. He asks himself, "am I crazy?"⁷⁶ and when the crowd tells him that he is dead, he agrees and gives them the bread. At the end of the scene, he begins undressing and starts a process of rebirth. By his act of giving, the Gentleman becomes alive. He begins by questioning himself and then after committing an act of charity, an act of love, he comes to a clearer understanding of his situation. The fact that all three mysteries, "love, art, and selftranscendence or growing," must unite in order for true understanding to be possible is foreshadowed in this concluding scene. Him is expressing himself through the art of Mr. O.Him. By virtue of this

⁷⁴Him, p. 81.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 84.

art, Him is becoming more aware of himself, and through this awareness, he understands that in order to be totally alive, he must be able to love.

The interior play naturally and dramatically reinforces the idea that Him is beginning to realize that there is more to life than art. The play proves that art is an important part of life by being spontaneous and involving the audience in its action. By omitting love from all but the last scene, Cummings proves that a world without love is false and pitiful. At the end of the inner play, Cummings shows that only through an act of love, such as giving, can one escape from death and be allowed to proceed. Thus far, the play has naturally led everyone to the idea that love and art must be tempered together in order to proceed toward the third member of the triad, selftranscendence. Such a fusion of the three mysteries is not an easily accomplished task. The difficulties that are encountered by an artist are demonstrated in the final act of Him.

Him comes to a recognition of his problem as an artist, but he still does not understand how to solve it. Him realizes that he must synthesize love and art, but he cannot seem to make the two mysteries come together. He has changed his thoughts during the course of the play in that now he understands that art is meaningless without love and he did not realize that at the beginning of the

play. His confrontation with the problem of combining the two ideals of love and art is exemplified in the first scene of Act Three.

In this scene, Him tries to prove to Me that he understands that she is the embodiment of love. In his attempt to explain his feelings to Me, Him, without realizing it, uses the key to the fusion of love and art, self-transcendence. The fact is shown when Him says, "All my life I've wondered if I'm any good."⁷⁷ In his attempt to understand Me, he is wondering about himself. Him continues these thoughts of self-awareness and combines them with the idea that Me represents love when he states, "I mean that you have something which I supremely envy. That you are something which I would supremely like to discover . . . through you I have come to understand that whatever I may have been or may have done is mediocre. You have made me realize that in the course of living I have created several less or more interesting people--none of whom was myself."⁷⁸ Him desperately wants to know who he actually is. He is trying to understand himself, and through that struggle is approaching a clearer understanding of his love for Me. This scene demonstrates the interdependence of the three mysteries on each other. To understand love,

⁷⁷Him, p. 95.

⁷⁸Ibid., pp. 95-96.

Him must understand himself, and to understand himself, he must understand art, and to understand art, he must understand love. The three mysteries form a continuous triangle.

But his attempt to come to a better understanding of himself, love, and art is unwittingly thwarted by Me. She acts in opposition to her own instincts and begins to think rather than intuit. She begins to use the scientific word "know" repeatedly in response to Him's declaration of love: "I have no mind. I know that. I know I am not intelligent . . . I know I haven't any brains . . . I know what I'm really like and what's more I know that you know. . . ." ⁷⁹ Earlier in the same scene she states, "the nicest things happen by themselves." ⁸⁰ Now she is going against that statement and forcing herself to think. She is trying to appeal to Him's intellect, while Him is trying to appeal to her emotions. Neither is successful because they do not yet understand themselves. The first scene of Act Three ends with Him putting his hat on and leaving the room. The fusion of art and love does not occur because the third member of the triad, selftranscendence, has not yet been realized by Him and Me.

⁷⁹ Him, p. 96.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 93.

V

However, Him still proceeds toward an understanding of himself, and that fact is dramatized by the next Him-Me confrontation in Scene 5 of the third act. In this scene, the hat has been replaced by a vase of flowers. It is possible to assume that Him discards that part of himself which was involved only with art and replaces it with Cummings's symbol of life, nature. An emergence of a new man had been foreshadowed by the rebirth of the Gentleman at the end of Act Two, and Him fulfills the prophecy by becoming someone who he was not at the beginning of the play. Him now better understands the relationship of love and art because he understands himself more clearly.

Him makes allusion to the fusion of love and art when he tells Me about his dream in which Me bears a child. The child is the product of a union between love as represented by Me and art as represented by Him. The child is therefore proof that love and art can unite and that they are not opposites. Another sign of Him's progress occurs when he restates what Me had earlier said: "The nicest things happen by themselves."⁸¹ Him begins to see that it is more important to let art naturally happen than it is to force art upon someone, as he did when he kept quizzing Me about Mr. O.Him's play. At the end of Scene 5, Him

⁸¹Him, p. 125.

finally recognizes that his concern for art has blinded him to the truth: "Beauty has shut me from the truth. . . . How should what is desirable shut us entirely from what is? No! That must not be quite all: I will not think that the tragedy can be so simple. There must be something else: I believe that there IS something else: and my heart tells me that unless I discover this now I will never discover it."⁸² Scene 5 ends when Him realizes that art and love must be fused and that he must now discover how to make such a synthesis occur.

Scene 6 begins with the presentation of nine freaks by a Barker played by the doctor. These freaks represent the nonconformists in a conforming society. They are freaks to the public, but they are individuals to Cummings. They are uniquely themselves in a society in which each person is a carbon copy of the other. The queen of these individuals is "Princess Anankay." As it turns out, the princess is actually Me, and she is holding a child in her arms. At the end of the scene, "the three weirds" say, "It's all done with mirrors!"⁸³ and Him utters a cry of terror. The sisters' exclamation is correct for two reasons. First, the statement demonstrates how weird the sisters actually are by showing that they think childbirth

⁸² Him, p. 130.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 144.

is accomplished with mirrors. Second, the weirds are correct in the Cummings's sense of mirrors. Mirrors reflect nature as it is, with no distortions. And in this scene, Cummings is depicting the most natural of all processes, childbirth. Him's cry of terror is one of recognition. He now sees the loneliness that is the agony of the artist and cries out in anguish. The agony of the artist is highlighted in the final scene of the play.

In this final Him-Me confrontation, the room has made a full circle and is in the same position as at the beginning of the play. Me looks into the mirror and tells Him that there are people on the other side of the imaginary wall. Thus, art and life, play and audience intersect in this scene.⁸⁴ Him wishes that he could believe what Me is saying, but he cannot because he has not yet become fully aware of himself. He has almost reached a solution to his problem, but not quite. Him has grown during the course of the play in the sense that he understands more than he did when the play started. At the beginning, Him was only concerned with art. Now he recognizes that art and love are not mutually exclusive, but are interdependent. He now understands that it is his responsibility as an artist to become himself and express the fusion of love, art, and selftranscendence which results from an

⁸⁴ Friedman, p. 72.

understanding of himself. The fact that the play ends with Him wishing that he could believe in what he sees expresses Cummings's feelings about existence. To Cummings, life is a natural and endless phenomenon. If he puts a definite end to his play, then he is contradicting himself. By leaving Him still faced with a dilemma, Cummings is demonstrating that there is no end to life, that life and "every human being . . . is illimitable."⁸⁵

VI

The play Him fulfills its purpose to Him, Me, and the audience by dramatizing Him's growth. It leads everyone to a conclusion concerning the artist and his relationship to himself, art, and love. Cummings demonstrates that neither the artist nor art nor love is able to stand alone. Cummings shows that the artist is a failure when he is alone by portraying him in his pitiful condition in Paris.⁸⁶ The fact that art cannot successfully function by itself is dramatized by the seven middle scenes of Act Two. The idea that love is always reaching out for someone is demonstrated by Me's actions throughout the play, especially her persistent questioning of Him. The artist, art, and love are dependent upon each other in order to be effective.

⁸⁵Six Nonlectures, p. 82.

⁸⁶This reference is to Act III, Scene 3 in which Him visits Paris. He does not have Me with him and appears lost and hopeless.

The realization of such an interdependence is the key to the solution of the artist's problem. However, by ending the play with the artist in a dilemma, Cummings proves that there are no definite or ultimate solutions. Nevertheless, the growth of Him during the play naturally leads Him, Me, and the audience to an understanding of the interdependence of the three mysteries, "love, art, and self-transcendence," which enables everyone to have a clearer understanding of the relationship of the artist and the three mysteries. Him, because of his clearer understanding, comes to the realization that he is a human being who must rely on love, art, and an understanding of himself, functioning in unison, in order to be an artist.

The triad of love, art, and selftranscendence in Him is reflected in the trinity of man, woman, and child in Santa Claus. Cummings states in his essay "Jottings," "It takes three to make a child."⁸⁷ Such a statement holds true for the themes of both of the plays. In regard to love, art, and selftranscendence, an understanding of the interdependence of the three mysteries is necessary in order for Him to be reborn and the artist born. In Santa Claus, the reunion of Mother, Father, and Child results in the revealing of the human being that is the artist. The discovery of the meaning of both the triad and trinity

⁸⁷Firmage, p. 330.

allows both heroes to be artists. Also inherent in the triad and trinity is the idea that the artist is only one part of the triangle. The artist cannot function unless he realizes that the other two parts are also there and that he must understand his relationship to them. In both plays, the heroes reach a recognition of the other two entities and are proceeding toward an understanding of them.

The artist's relationship to the three mysteries is quite important. But also of concern is the relationship of the artist and society. Him is on a tightrope high above the crowd, and Santa Claus is never associated with the "un-understanding mob." Individuality is part of their function as artist. They must remain apart from the conformity that is the result of a scientific, knowing society. Concerning the artist, Cummings says, "One thing, however, does always concern this individual: fidelity to himself."⁸⁸ These heroes continually strive to be themselves.

By being themselves, they automatically exclude themselves from the scientific society which knows rather than feels. Cummings demonstrates in both plays the foolishness that comes from knowledge. In Him, a crowd is gullible enough to believe that there is such a disease as "cinderella," and even so foolish as to believe that science can

⁸⁸ Six Nonlectures, p. 82.

invent a cure for it. In Santa Claus, the "un-understanding mob" quickly buys up shares in a nonexistent "wheelmine." Both examples show that a knowledgeable person is indeed ignorant. A short Cummings's quotation from the essay "Jottings" sums up knowledge best: "knowledge is a polite word for dead but not buried imagination."⁸⁹ A knowledgeable man has no imagination and is foolish enough to flaunt the fact.

Cummings does not allow his artist to be a part of such a pathetic world. At the end of Six Nonlectures, he expressly states his views concerning the artist, scientific society, and the three mysteries: "I am someone who proudly and humbly affirms that love is the mystery-of-mysteries, and nothing measurable matters 'a very good God damn': that 'an artist, a man, a failure' is no mere whenfully accreting mechanism, but a givingly eternal complexity--neither some soulless and heartless ultrapredatory infra-animal nor any un-understandingly knowing and believing and thinking automation, but a naturally and miraculously whole human being--a feelingly illimitable individual; whose only happiness is to transcend himself, whose every agony is to grow."⁹⁰

⁸⁹Firmage, p. 330.

⁹⁰Six Nonlectures, pp. 110-11.

Some of the key words in the above passage are "whole," "illimitable," "failure," and the artist's "only happiness." The first three, much like the triad and the trinity, are interdependent. Cummings uses the word "whole" to characterize the fullness of his artist. His artist is not a flat, one-dimensional character, but rather, a rounded, multi-faceted figure. In this roundness exists the idea that the artist is "illimitable." No matter how many ideas he can conceive, Cummings's artist is always able to conceive one more. An artist is "whole" in that he understands himself, but he is "illimitable" because he is always grasping for more understanding. The idea of "failure" is included in the statement because an artist is not perfect. The artist is always attempting to understand more and in some cases may fail. But what is most important is that he continue to seek. The artist must proceed. During his proceeding, the artist will reach points at which the three mysteries come together clearly in his mind. These points occur when the artist transcends himself and he can see himself in relation to love and art. Such moments are pure joy and happiness for the artist.

Cummings may have felt that happiness when he wrote Him and Santa Claus. In those two plays he demonstrates all of the qualities mentioned in his quotation. Cummings shows that life without love is meaningless by presenting a society without love. He shows that science is abominable

by presenting the unfeeling automatons that science creates. He shows the agony of the artist through Him's cry of terror and Santa Claus' pain of growing. And most important, by having Santa Claus remove his mask to reveal a human being, and by having Him explicitly state that an artist is a human being, Cummings demonstrates that an artist is all of the above qualities. He is a human being.

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