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# An Ontological Crisis: Rethinking E. E. Cummings' *Fairy Tales*

Aaron Moe

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*For Daphne*

*If all this sounds “picky,” perhaps it is because—to return to a previous assertion—the writer is E. E. Cummings. One expects more than mediocrity; one hopes for something exceptional. But the stories are not exceptional.*

— Alan Ostrom<sup>1</sup>

(From “Fairy Tales: The Other Cummings”)

*What actually happens, from the moment when the circus first occurs to us until the moment when we dismiss it as “childish,” is nothing less than a BATTLE.*

— E. E. Cummings

(From “The Adult, the Artist, and the Circus”)

*Let me cordially warn you. . . . I never did, and still don't, know.*

— E. E. Cummings

(First nonlecture's opening words)

Alan Ostrom is one of the few scholars who has published criticism on E. E. Cummings' *Fairy Tales*, but his article reads less like a thoroughly engaged exploration and more like a negative, hasty, and dismissive review. We might be tempted to dismiss Cummings' *Fairy Tales* as something that is not “serious” literature, but then we are dealing with a trickster who celebrated the world of a child. Perhaps Cummings is most serious when writing in a genre where we least expect a serious exploration of philosophy or poetics. Unlike Ostrom's claim that *Fairy Tales* are merely stories written by “a father who happens to be a writer,” Norman Friedman suggests that Cummings took them “absolutely seriously” (65, 268). Friedman continues, “they derive from the same vision which informs his work for adults: an open and receptive attitude toward existence, a lovingness toward individuals, and an emphasis upon spiritual self-dependency” (268).

If Ostrom and Friedman entered into a debate, I think I would side with Friedman, especially in light of how the tension between the child and the adult emerges in many of Cummings' works. This essay's epigraph, taken from "The Adult, the Artist, and the Circus," could easily read, "What actually happens, from the moment when [fairy tales first occur] to us until the moment when we dismiss [them] as 'childish,' is nothing less than a BAT-TLE" (252). We also note that on July 15, 1932 in Gilbert Seldes' column in the *New York Evening Journal*, Cummings published an impassioned defense of art—titled "A Fairy Tale" (*Miscellany* 249–51). Readers familiar with *EIMI* readily observe similar ideas at work in the piece, but I am struck by how Cummings unabashedly embeds—through the title—his defense of art in the domain of fairy tales. The refrain throughout this short manifesto, "once upon a time," further conflates art, fairy tales, and the "indescribable Is" of being "incredibly alive" (251). Do we dismiss *Fairy Tales* on account of the genre's "childish" stereotype?—or do we investigate the possibility that *Fairy Tales* contributes to our understanding of Cummings' poetics?<sup>2</sup>

The only decent reason to refrain from an academic engagement with *Fairy Tales* stems from the feeling of trespass. Three of the four *Fairy Tales* were written by Cummings for his daughter, Nancy, when she was a little girl. Given Nancy's birth year of 1919, Friedman surmises they were written sometime before the mid 1920's. The fourth ("The Elephant and the Butterfly") is presumed to have been written after Cummings' reunion with Nancy, around 1950, and Cummings may have written it for his grandson (Friedman 259, 281). When biographers discuss the relationship between Cummings and his daughter, they often use *Fairy Tales* as one way to demonstrate the struggle of a father who cannot let his daughter—whom he loves—know who he really is. As Ariel S. Winter highlights, each of the parable-like *Fairy Tales* can be seen as a manifestation of this biographical tension ("E. E. Cummings").<sup>3</sup> Given the personal nature of *Fairy Tales*, one must be respectful in handling them. I cringe, somewhat, at the title of this essay, as I imagine many an eye-roll from those who see no place for the mention of ontology in conjunction with stories that have an intimate origin. Indeed, my intent is not to "scholarize" that which is sacrosanct: a father writing stories for his daughter. But in reading and re-reading "The Old Man Who Said 'Why'" to my daughter, I could not help but notice that Cummings explores not *an* ontological crisis, but perhaps *the* ontological crisis he spent a life time confronting.

Cummings' *Fairy Tales* ought to be discussed seriously, and not just because the genre has regained popularity in today's mediated culture (I think of the TV series "Once upon a Time" and "Grimm"); rather, the three fairy tales from the 1920s provide glimpses into Cummings' poetic vision in its early stages. In "The Old Man Who Said 'Why,'" the old man threatens the cosmological way of being of the faerie and all the people of the air. As the story unfolds, Cummings sets into action a range of tropes that would become repurposed (or recycled) with varying nuances throughout his life's work including light, silence, air, stars, moon, petals, flowers, dreams, growing, falling and rising, knowing and being, birth, childhood, movement, and The Verb. Even in the context of Cummings' total works, however, the tropes in "The Old Man" resist cliché. Cummings' innovation stems from how he revisited or recycled a couple of dozen tropes without their becoming stale. The tropes refuse to ossify into nouns; rather, they are alive in The Verb of art ever realizing their protean possibilities.

This article focuses on a thematic reading of "The Old Man" that pays attention to both the tale and to the tale's intertextuality with Cummings' other works, taking T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" as a guiding methodology. Eliot argued that "the *whole* existing order [of works of art] must be, if ever so slightly, altered" when an artist creates a new work. That is to say, "the relations, proportions, values, of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted" in light of the new work (38), and indeed, the opening lines of Chaucer's *General Prologue* cannot be read the same way once one reads the opening lines of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The same phenomenon holds true on the microcosmic order of one poet. A reader's discovery of a work by a poet can be a catalyst for altering how that reader sees the "relations, proportions, [and] values" of the poet's complete works. Despite the fact that Cummings wrote "The Old Man" early in his career, it has not often been read, or if it has, discussions of it have not readily been published. In a sense, this "old" text is quite new—especially if one was not aware of its existence until after a decade of reading and teaching his other works (as was my case). Bibliographies compiled by scholars inevitably omit *Fairy Tales*, as does Cummings in his nonlectures when he lists his life's work up until 1953: "my writing consists of a pair of miscalled novels; a brace of plays, one in prose the other in blank verse; nine books of poems; an indeterminate number of essays; an untitled volume of satire; and a ballet scenario" (six 4). But Cummings did, after all, write *Fairy Tales*, and it's time that they be drawn into discussions surrounding the

nonhero's work. I continue in the vein of Friedman, who offered some initial insights regarding the relationship between "The Old Man" and Cummings' poetics (268-271). A serious reading of "The Old Man" in the context of Cummings' total vision demonstrates how the tale alters one's perception of some of the major tropes within Cummings' works.

"The Old Man" presents an ontological crisis. The rising action begins when a "murmuring seemed to come from all the other stars" (*FT* 8). This murmuring crescendos into a swarm of "millions and millions and millions and millions and millions of people" who, as air people, have wings and are flying to the faerie who just might be able to solve the common crisis (*FT* 8). The crisis arises because the old man insistently and perpetually "says 'why?' " We note that this old man no longer *asks* why, he merely *says* why as an expression of a monotone existence.

Before discussing the crisis further, it is important to observe how Cummings used what would become the essential tropes of his later work in order to characterize the faerie and the people of the air. The faerie "lived on a farthest star" (*FT* 7). *No Thanks* begins with the moon and ends in the stars, which reminds us that the location of the faerie's home has a symbolic resonance in Cummings' later work. We can see the faerie as a wise, transcendent, and spiritual being: "Everybody in the air and everywhere and in all the stars respected him, and took their troubles to him whenever something went wrong" (*FT* 7). This is the faerie who breakfasts each morning upon a "plate of light . . . and a glass of silence" (*FT* 8)—two other important tropes in Cummings' work. Along with the faerie, Cummings' characterization of the people of the air resonates with another ever-present and crucial trope in Cummings' work. Perpetual movement marks their way of being:

All the people on the stars and everywhere and in the air had wings too. . . . In fact, the people were flying most of the time. They would open their wings and fly down to breakfast. . . . When it was lunch time, they would fly from the air . . . and have a delicious luncheon made of star-petals and air-flowers. Then they'd fly upstairs and have a little nap, and when they woke up they'd fly out the window to play again away up in the air. And after supper they'd fly to bed and fall fast asleep, to dream all night about rainbows. (*FT* 7)

Provocatively, in the oft-mentioned foreword to *is 5*, Cummings explicitly establishes how his poetics of *The Verb* arises out of “that precision which creates movement” (CP 221). He sees his work as “competing” with “roses and locomotives(not to mention acrobats Spring electricity Coney Island the 4th of July the eyes of mice and Niagara falls)” (CP 221). This list exemplifies entities or beings that epitomize, for Cummings, a verb-ful ontology. Even the eyes of mice and roses, in their mysterious stillness, participate in *The Verb*.<sup>4</sup> The people of the air, then, anticipate later explorations of what it means to resist the noun. Many of Cummings’ later visual poems, extreme in their typographical movement, resist the noun, but even in a relatively tame typography of “whippoorwill this” (1958), the movement surprises:

whippoorwill this

moonday into

(big with unthings)

tosses hello

whirling whose rhyme

(spilling his rings)

threeing alive

pasture and hills

(CP 751)

The jumbled syntax of the first three stanzas jars the reader, and this jarring nudges what would otherwise be static words into motion. The motion continues as the eye reconstructs the syntax into *this whippoorwill tosses hello into moonday (big with unthings)*. Though there are other possible reconstructions of the syntax, my suggestion creates a spiraling motion, beginning on the right of the first line *this whippoorwill*, progressing counterclockwise down to the left of the fourth line *tosses hello*, continuing back into the right of the second line *into moonday*, and then down into the left of the third line (*big with unthings*). This counterclockwise, compressing spiral “whirl[s]” in harmony with the “whirling” whippoorwill (line 5),

who is part of a nocturnal realm of “unthings,” or rather, beings who resist the noun and are alive in the movement of The Verb.

My point here is that from movement to light, stars, silence, and dreams, the exposition of “The Old Man” establishes several significant tropes Cummings recycled throughout his life’s work. Therefore, it seems appropriate to entertain the possibility that “The Old Man”—written around the same time as the publication of *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923)—contains some of the seeds for Cummings’ poetic vision, and that the writing of this tale enabled Cummings to coalesce several of the tropes together. In doing so, it set the stage for his life’s work. In “The Old Man,” the *people of the air* are, above all, perpetually acrobatic, and we cannot overlook the many acrobats of the air that populate Cummings’ pages: trapeze performers, leaves, snowflakes, confetti, grasshoppers, cats, bats, the moon, rain, thunderstorms, a flock of birds, and perhaps most of all, letters. There are indeed, “millions and millions and millions and millions of winged people” in the tale and in Cummings’ works (*FT* 8). As a tale that profoundly foreshadows Cummings’ later work, the people of the air, then, with all of their movement, epitomize a way of being—an ontology—that Cummings celebrated.

An old man who is a dead noun threatens the fairie’s verb-ful ontology of acrobatic flying: “this little old man never moved and sat all by himself looking and looking and looking at nothing” (*FT* 12). He epitomizes the stillness of a noun (rather than the stillness of a verb), and the old man arrived in this state through the epistemological process of repeating “why.” Perhaps one reason why Ostrom failed to further explore “The Old Man” was that he assumed the inspiration for the story stopped at the obvious fact that many youngsters, at some point, fall into the potentially annoying, repetitious “why?”—and perhaps Nancy did so to Cummings. I suggest, though, that Cummings took the repetitious “why” and let it become the face of an old man who replaces being with knowing. Even in his nonlectures from 1953, quoted in the epigraph above, Cummings attacked “knowing.” Cummings saw “knowing” as a threat to the ontology of existing in The Verb.<sup>5</sup>

But there may be another, more profound approach to understanding in the tale the place of asking why—or in the old man’s case, saying why—that Ostrom failed to consider: Freudian psychology.<sup>6</sup> From Cummings’ letter to his mother on September 13, 1926, we know that Cummings “absorbed” Freud’s *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* on the way

to New York. Earlier on May 3, 1922, and therefore nearer to the time he wrote the first three fairy tales, Cummings writes his sister and “expects [her] to be conversant with two books: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and *WIT and the Unconscious*” (*SL* 111, 86). In *Interpretation*, Freud locates the origin of many dreams back to the “obscure or entirely forgotten impressions of childhood, often going back to the first three years of life.” He continues, “In analyzing my own dreams . . . it happens no less frequently that in the latent content of a dream I come unexpectedly upon a scene from childhood, and that all at once a whole series of my dreams link up with the associations branching out from some experience of my childhood” (Freud 203). One cannot help but wonder if Cummings saw the dreamscape of “The Old Man” as a place where several “associations” began “branching out” within his poetics.

Later, Cummings’ psychologist Fritz Wittels—who was a “disciple of Freud” and whom Cummings saw as a “genius. . . another father, as someone who saved his life, as someone who set him free” (Kennedy 301, 302)—wrote explicitly about the child who asks why. Since Wittels published his book in 1931 and worked with Cummings in the late months of 1928 (see Kennedy 301–2), it would be anachronistic to suggest Wittels’ perspective as a source for the tale. I include a discussion here, though, because Wittels’ work encourages us to look again at the psychology of a child who asks why. For Wittels, when the child asks why, he or she becomes a hybrid creature: “the interrogative why is one of the most centaur-like pictures of childhood, in which stern logic and the child’s instinctual nature are united” (Wittels 336)—and we note the MIND / body and the HUMAN / animal assumptions at work in the centaur-like picture. The process enables the child “to find his way slowly into the logical category” (336)—that is, from the horse up to the mind of the man—and the impetus for the questioning is the Freudian “fearfully repressed question regarding the child’s own origin” (337). However, to be an acrobat—to participate in *The Verb*—the body must move. Instead of moving “slowly into the logical category” of stasis, one must move toward the horse-body and legs of the centaur. The hierarchy within the unified duality must flip (mind / BODY), but in the tale, the old man’s body does not move. He no longer even *asks* why; he merely *says* it, and each repetition distances him from the verb of movement and entrenches him further into the “logical category.” This is why the old man can no longer inhabit the moon—that



recurrent, crucial, and most celebrated trope in Cummings' work. The old man becomes an intruder, and he must be given another chance at ontology.

The faerie, in a brave moment, confronts the man, and his repeated attempts further establish how "the old old old man sitting on the steeple [of the moon] didn't move" (*FT* 12). Finally, the faerie "bellowed with all his might: 'What are you doing up here anyway?' "—to which, the "very very very very very very old man . . . said: 'Why?' " (*FT* 12). Though throughout *Fairy Tales* Cummings repeats words, here the repetition of "very" emphasizes the old epistemology pervasive throughout Western ways of thinking.<sup>7</sup> For Cummings, "feeling is first" (*CP* 291)—being alive in The Verb supersedes thinking—but the old man continues to say why, pushing the faerie beyond the brink of frustration, until the faerie gives one final warning: "if you say why again, you'll fall from the moon all the way to the earth" (*FT* 14). The man says why, which commences a cosmological plummet reminiscent of Satan's fall from heaven in Milton's *Paradise Lost*; it is a fall that likewise rivals Gandalf's later plunge through time and space in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. The old man must fall a great distance to return to an existence within The Verb:

And the little very old man smiled; and looking at the faerie, he said "why?" and he fell millions and millions and millions of deep cool new beautiful miles (and with every part of a mile he became a little younger; first he became a not very old man and next a middle-aged man and then a young man and a boy and finally a child) until, just as he gently touched the earth, he was about to be born. (*FT* 14)

We may expect punishment, but Cummings delivers grace. The millions of "deep cool new beautiful miles" dramatize just how entrenched the old man was in the stillness of nouns, knowing, and saying (but not genuinely asking) "why." Any shorter fall, and the old man would not be ready for birth.

This tale reminds Friedman of Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (269), and we may also be reminded that Cummings read the ode to close his first nonlecture (*six* 15–20). Cummings begins the poetry reading of that nonlecture, though, with the ending of Wordsworth's "My heart leaps up": "The Child is father of the Man; / And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety" (*six* 14).<sup>8</sup> "The Old Man" extends Wordsworth's ideas, for Cum-

mings' tale locates wisdom in the child because of the child's ontology: the child, for Cummings, resists epistemology as she or he dwells in The Verb of growing. The faerie does not punish the old man, but rather gives him another opportunity to succeed in the battle between the ontology of existing in The Verb (the wonder of a child) and the epistemology of existing in the deadness of a noun (the fate of most adults).

As mentioned, Cummings revisits and confronts the ontological crisis between being and knowing in many works. In several poems, Cummings conflates being with childhood. For instance, "the(oo)is" develops the trope of the wide-eyed wonder of a child, who, in turn, further develops the ontology of "AM" (1958):

the(oo)is

lOOk

(aliv

e)e

yes

are(chIld)and

wh(g

o

ne)

o

w(A)a(M)s

(CP 740)

This child who "lOOks" exists in the affirmative "yes" and in the world of "(A) . . . (M)," silent, safe from "w . . . a . . . s" (line 11), and growing in the cradle of the parentheses. When Cummings discusses "the(oo)is" in a letter to an unidentified correspondent, he suggests that the "alive eyes-which-say-yes" is an "intense stare . . . belonging to a child who is(reminds me of)myself" (*Letters* 268).<sup>9</sup> He wrote this letter on July 4, 1960—two years and two months before his death. For Cummings, then, the trope of the child endured throughout his life, and it enabled him to succeed in his battle. He did not dismiss the circus; he did not dismiss fairy tales; he did not dismiss the ontology of the child.

In another poem (1950), Cummings explores how the birth of a foal ushers the new creature into The Verb. The foal—and the poem—descends only to rise:

the little horse is newLY  
Born)he knows nothing,and feels  
everything;all around whom is  
perfectly a strange  
ness(Of sun  
light and of fragrance and of  
Singing)is ev  
erywhere(a welcom  
ing dream:is amazing)  
a world.and in  
this world lies:smoothbeautiful  
ly folded;a(brea  
thing and a gro  
Wing)silence,who;  
is:somE  
oNe. (CP 657)

The poem exhibits two cycles: the lines per stanza (1-2-3-4-3-2-1) and the punctuation ( , ; . : ; , ; . : . ). The pattern of lines per stanza resonates both with inhalation / exhalation and rising / falling, while the pattern of punctuation ebbs and flows between the openness of a comma and the closedness of a period. When we read the poem, we descend into the birth of a foal who “is:somE / oNe” only to rise with the capital letters N-E-W, that float up to a “Wing.” In the context of this essay, the “Wing” reminds us of the people of the air who fly from star to star. However, such a direct, one-to-one parallel strains the text too much. We can conclude, though, that the celebration of the birth of a foal, with his ontology of “gro // Wing” and

therefore existing in The Verb, nevertheless revisits themes from “The Old Man.” If someone ironically wondered *why* the old man had to fall, “the little horse is newlyY” reminds us that, for Cummings, the fall into birth leaves only one direction to go, which is up. When the old man arrives on earth moments before his birth, he is ushered into the idealized, certainly, but pure ontology of childhood. Epistemology has not yet created a crisis for the infant. There is hope for the old man and for us all when we see the story as a parable about ontology and as a cautionary tale about the dangers of epistemology. The tale, above all, is an invitation to resist adulthood through embracing the isful ontology of The Verb.

“The Old Man” also reminded Friedman of a poem by Cummings published in 1944 involving “why,” but Friedman quoted only the second stanza. The poem in full juxtaposes the epistemology of “why” with the ontology of god’s inhalation and exhalation during creation:

when god decided to invent  
everything he took one  
breath bigger than a circustent  
and everything began

when man determined to destroy  
himself he picked the was  
of shall and finding only why  
smashed it into because

(CP 566; Friedman 269)

The world of the child, the “circustent,” shaped Cummings’ poetic and philosophical vision. When god breathed everything into The Verb, the breath, “bigger than a circustent” (line 3), was therefore full of acrobats and people of the air. The “man,” reminiscent of the man who said why, is stuck in “was” and the epistemological loop of “smash[ing]” “why” into “because” (line 6, 7–8).

For the life of me, I cannot figure out critics such as Ostrom who worked so ardently and diligently to dismiss something like *Fairy Tales*. He expected “verbal inventions” and “intellectual ‘bite’ ” but was left wanting (65). For me, at least, a faerie who breakfasts upon light and silence and who lives on a star with an “apple tree which was a thousand miles tall and had red and green apples on it as big as balloons” seems very inventive, as does enjoying a luncheon of star-petals and air-flowers (*FT*

10, 7). Cummings gives us a dreamscape where characters dream rainbows (FT 7), and we cannot overlook that the dream, for Freud (and thus for Cummings) is a “reveling of the mind in the free use of its own forces” (Freud 82). “The Old Man,” then, becomes a place that manifests the forces of Cummings’ unconscious during the early formation of his poetics—forces that set into motion several significant tropes it took him a lifetime to explore. The innovative nature of “The Old Man” seems more than evident in that it, to use Eliot’s theory, alters how one sees the rest of Cummings’ acrobats, his ontology of The Verb, and his repudiation of nouns. I cannot, for instance, read “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” again without thinking of the people of the air. Concerning Ostrom’s claim that the tale lacks of intellectual rigor, I hope that I have demonstrated ways in which the tale has “bite.” I can only guess that Ostrom is like R. P. Blackmur who also worked quite hard to reduce Cummings’ work to “baby-talk” (340). The irony is that the world of the child not only shaped Cummings’ poetry and poetics, but it enabled him to succeed in the full-out battle against the deadness of adulthood—something that Blackmur and Ostrom seem to have forgotten.

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## Notes

1. Ostrom decapitalized Cummings’ name throughout his essay. Written in 1978, Ostrom did not have access to Friedman’s arguments concerning the capitalization of Cummings’ name, but he would have seen Cummings’ signature. From today’s vantage point, his decapitalization of Cummings’ name speaks to his general misapprehension of what Cummings accomplished, even in a fairy tale.

2. Another scholar took Cummings' *Fairy Tales* seriously: Paul Rosenfeld. In "The Conscious Faerie-Tale: History of the Origin of a Romantic Literary Genre," Rosenfeld mentions Cummings' "The Old Man Who Said 'Why'" amongst several other authors' works (including Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*) that exemplify the "conscious faerie-tale, a literary genre with a brilliant career" (646). Rosenfeld only mentions Cummings' "The Old Man" early on, but he nonetheless locates the tale within a rich tradition. He sees conscious faerie-tales as the "work of sophisticated and deliberate craftsmen" (648), and his word choice aptly describes Cummings' approach to language—a craftsman, obsessed with Making (see CP 221)—even when writing a fairy tale.
3. Winter provides a thorough recapitulation of the history of Cummings' *Fairy Tales*. He draws on the biographies by Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno, Catherine Reef, and Richard S. Kennedy as well as Michael Webster's "A Memorial: Nancy T. Andrews, daughter of E. E. Cummings." His blog exposes readers to the many children's stories written by unexpected "'adult' authors" ("Introduction"). To date, he has blogged about children's books written by a host of literary and artistic icons including Cummings, Andy Warhol, Chinua Achebe, Gertrude Stein, Graham Greene, James Baldwin, James Joyce, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, Umberto Eco, and Virginia Woolf.
4. There is a difference, for Cummings, between stillness as a noun and stillness as a verb. I think of the poem "n" which "reads" *nothing can surpass the mystery of stillness* (CP 814). Like many of Cummings' other visual poems, though, the typography takes the phrase, which is otherwise an idea or a noun, and transforms it into a verb. Several letters become iconic as they enact the mystery of stillness in all of their isolation on a line. As will be discussed, the old man in the fairy tale is marked not by a verbful, mysterious stillness but rather by the stillness of was.
5. A philosophy that privileges ontology over epistemology emerges elsewhere in Cummings' works, including two notes. The first juxtaposes three equations:

IS = the cold 3rd singular of the intense live verb, to feel.

Not to completely feel = thinking, the warm principle.

incomplete thinking = Belief, the box in which god and all

other nouns are kept. (qtd. in Kennedy 217)

These three equations privilege The Verb over thinking, belief, and nouns. The second note involves Cummings' discussion of cubism and the "cubic pulp" of a room:

It is the Selfing of things. You have doubtless had the common experience of sitting in a dusk-nibbled room, say Elaine's, the probable room-full-of-furniture is not disintegrating; there is integrating delicately a cubic pulp. The nouns are gone, the adjectives have fainted, an adverbial stress seizes (i am still talking about the room). There is what we mistakenly call a moment [which is actually] a point Now, a Verb = Is. Distinctness. or: this cubic pulp SELFS. (qtd. in Kennedy 203)

In the fairy tale, the old man does not SELF. His fixated obsession with saying why places him in the deadness of a noun. To use language from *EIMI*, the old man exists in the Shuttness of Was (*EIMI* 1, 8). For further discussion of the two quotations above, see Martin's "'IS' as an Action Verb."

6. For a discussion on Freud's influence on Cummings' poetics, see Cohen's "Cummings and Freud." Despite how Cummings voraciously read Freud and encouraged his family to do the same, Cohen highlights how "Freud's influence on Cummings' other writings has received almost no critical attention" (592). Cohen begins that attention by exposing how Freud provided "models that confirmed, and perhaps even inspired, the artistic techniques [Cummings] was then devising"—techniques including Cummings' use of oxymoron and opposites (596, 596–602). However, more work could be done especially in light of 1) the pervasive presence of the dream throughout everything Cummings wrote; and 2) the fact that he internalized Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* during the early formation of his poetics (1920s).
7. In an e-mail exchange, Michael Webster observed how Cummings used the word "very" seven times here and how later in *EIMI*, Cummings structured the book on the recurring pattern of seven (1-6-1-6 etc.) and charged seven with the symbolic resonance of rebirth, renewal, creation, and resurrection (See "*EIMI* Notes" 91 / 89). It is uncanny, to say the least, that the number seven emerges precisely before

the old man commences his rebirth in the early fairy tale. Furthermore, I am very tempted to see the seven *very*'s as suggestive of the duration of seven cosmological days of uncreation—seven cosmological days of becoming a WAS. Regardless, the connection between “The Old Man” and *EIMI*'s use of seven reinforces the claim that Cummings worked out his poetics—(un)consciously—in the seemingly insignificant genre of the fairy tale. Perhaps a better way of saying it is that “The Old Man” provides provocative glimpses into the early stages of what became Cummings' bewildering poetics.

8. In *i: six nonlectures*, Cummings says that Wordsworth's “My heart leaps up” and “Intimations of Immortality” are some of the poems he “love[d] best” (14). Provocatively, the people of the air in “The Old Man” dream “all night about rainbows” (*FT* 7). Whether this is an intended allusion to Wordsworth's rainbow or not does not diminish the connection. The battle against adulthood for Wordsworth and for Cummings involved responding to and dreaming about the sudden apparition of a spectrum of color.
9. In an e-mail exchange, Michael Webster alerted me to Cummings' letter on “the(oo)is.”

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