

Notes for Cummings: A Resource for Students and Teachers

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About fifteen years ago after hearing someone at an American Literature Association conference say that “there is so much about Cummings’ poems that we still don’t understand,” I thought to myself that a lot *was* known, but it was scattered about in books and people’s memories, and that someone should gather together a list of various arcane references in Cummings’ poems. That someone turned out to be me: I began compiling notes, at first mostly for my own use, and later publishing them online at the *Spring* web site for all.

At the time, I was writing a response to Richard S. Kennedy’s article “E. E. Cummings, a Major Minor Poet.” Kennedy maintained that even though Cummings produced a wide variety of poems, many which “dazzle” with their “unique style and . . . wit and sentiment,” the poet also produced “a great deal of chaff throughout his career” (44, 40). Thus, Kennedy contended, Cummings was a “major minor” poet. My response basically said that thinking in terms of major and minor was wrong-headed, especially in the case of Cummings, who consciously practiced indifference to such categories. In the course of his essay, Kennedy remarked that many of Cummings’ poems “use slang or advertising terms that go out of date within a year” and moreover, that understanding his poems too often depended on obscure biographical allusions (40). These topical obscurities are one reason, Kennedy maintained, that “much of what [Cummings] published was ephemeral stuff” (37). However, Kennedy seemed to forget that the works of major modernist writers like James Joyce and T. S. Eliot are replete with recondite biographical and topical allusions and yet are far from being considered “ephemeral stuff.” Of course, Eliot’s poems have been heavily annotated over the years, and thus their allusions are obscure no longer—at least to scholars like Kennedy. Then, too, Cummings’ allusions seem to come almost exclusively from the realms of popular culture or the personal, while Eliot rather famously mixes portentous allusions to authors like Petronius or Dante or Shakespeare with references to pop songs like that “Shakespearian Rag.”

But even Cummings’ seeming lack of erudite literary allusions should not lead us to dismiss a great deal of his poetry as “just verbal experiments,

gimmicky puzzles, or linguistic jokes” (Kennedy 40). Without proper careful annotation, one might make a similar charge against the greatest modern masterpiece of all, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. If this enormous book, so full of linguistic play and topical allusions to the vanished world of 1904 Dublin, cannot be properly understood without the 650 pages of notes dedicated to its elucidation, then why shouldn’t Cummings’ more modest poems be given their own more modest notes? Kennedy asks: “what value can a hexameter sonnet about Joe Gould [CP 410] have for us, unless we know that he was a Harvard graduate who became a homeless street person whose urban primitivism Cummings viewed with romantic admiration and amusement?” Well, as Kennedy’s question implies, a fully annotated text would go a long way in helping decide what value this text has for us. Modernist art is famous for including the ephemera of everyday life, and if scholars and students and ordinary readers are to have any chance of grasping and loving it fairly, then they must have Notes.

Let’s take the sonnet on Joe Gould as a test case to see in what ways the knowledge that annotations supply can help us develop an interpretation and understanding of Cummings’ poems.

little joe gould has lost his teeth and doesn't know where
to find them(and found a secondhand set which click)little
gould used to amputate his appetite with bad brittle
candy but just(nude eel)now little joe lives on air

Harvard Brevis Est for Handkerchief read Papernapkin no laundry
bills likes People preferring Negroes Indians Youse
n.b. ye twang of little joe(yankee)gould irketh sundry
who are trying to find their minds(but never had any to lose)

and a myth is as good as a smile but little joe gould’s quote oral
history unquote might(publishers note)be entitled a wraith’s
progress or mainly awash while chiefly submerged or an amoral
morality sort-of-aliveing by innumerable kind-of deaths

(Amérique Je T'Aime and it may be fun to be fooled
but it's more fun to be more to be fun to be little joe gould)

As Kennedy indicates, one does need some biographical information about Joe Gould to read this poem. Cummings was one of many in the Village

who supplied Gould with a regular handout, partly out of friendship and partly to support Gould's "work": he claimed to be writing and compiling a massive *Oral History of Our Time*. This claim has been thrown into serious doubt by writer Joseph Mitchell, whose book *Joe Gould's Secret* found that Gould never produced anything resembling an oral history; instead, he was obsessively writing and rewriting on the same subjects: the death of his father, the death of his mother, the time he spent with the Indians of North Dakota, and a spoof of science and statistics called "The Dread Tomato Habit." The various versions of his four "essays" were interrupted continually by digressions on Unitarianism, Time, Art, or whatever subject occurred to Gould (Mitchell 655-664). It is these digressions that constitute the short selections that Gould very occasionally published in modernist little magazines like *Broom* ("Social Position," 1923), *Exile* ("Art," 1927), and—his crowning achievement—*The Dial* ("Marriage" and "Civilization," 1929). All of his musings on democracy, social status, equality, marriage, etc. are seen from an autobiographical perspective. For example, Gould begins his disquisition on civilization thus: "I have never been able to adapt myself to civilization" ("From Joe" 320).

Gould maintained the fiction of writing a vast oral history, carrying around a portfolio full of papers, in part at least to keep the contributions coming in to the Joe Gould Fund. As Rushworth Kidder wrote, Gould was "doing nothing . . . but cadging drinks" (112). To be precise, however, Gould wasn't exactly doing nothing—he was wandering the streets, writing and rewriting his "essays," and, as the *The Village Voice* recently re-discovered, sometimes writing a daily diary. The eleven Gould notebooks found in the archives at NYU are not an oral history, but rather an "often mechanical day-by-day account of Gould's life from the years 1943 to 1947. . . . The diary's 1100-odd pages are first and foremost a record of baths taken, meals consumed, and dollars bummed. It's clear that Gould's favorite subject was himself" (Hutchinson and Miller).

Gould's writing took one other form, also autobiographical. This genre, perhaps his most entertaining, was short doggerel verse. Since his *Dial* article appeared in one of the last issues of that esteemed arts journal, Gould was fond of declaiming

Who killed *The Dial*?

"I," said Joe Gould,

"With my inimitable style,

I killed *The Dial*.”

(quoted in Norman 157)

Cummings’ sonnet imitates Gould’s nursery-rhyme cadences, while it mirrors the would-be oral historian’s self-regard by repeating the phrase “little joe gould.” Yet if this sort of verse was the best Gould could muster, one wonders what the Greenwich Village literati saw in the guy. I think they liked the myth that Gould created of an independent writer, primitive yet sophisticated, who thumbed his nose at technology and progress, wrote, drank, wandered the streets, and befriended the People—“Negroes Indians Youse” (CP 410). Cummings’ sonnet and the articles that the literati printed in the little magazines promote that myth. Both Gould’s *Broom* and *Dial* articles mention his pride at having invited “a Negro deckhand to visit me” (“Social” 149). His *Dial* article takes an anti-progress stance that surely would have been appreciated by the Cummings who wrote that “Progress is a comfortable disease” (CP 554). Tilting at the windmills of modernity, Gould calls automobiles “unnecessary” and dismisses them as “buzz wagons” (320). No doubt many of the literati thought that Gould was doing valuable sociological and even literary work in compiling his legendary *Oral History*. However, others, like Cummings, may have guessed that when one needs a handout, “a myth is as good as a smile.”

Does it help the student of Cummings’ sonnet on Joe Gould to know that the phrase “a myth is as good as a smile” is a play on the proverbial phrase “a miss is as good as a mile”? At the very least, I don’t think, as Kennedy apparently did, that allusions to ephemeral matters somehow harm a poem’s chances of being considered “major.” For one thing, Cummings’ phonetic transposition in this line is rather dazzling: he cleverly shifts the “s” sound at the end of “miss” to the beginning of the word “mile,” creating “smile”—while at the same time giving the word “miss” a lisp: “myth.” In addition, Cummings may also be referring to another proverb, “a nod is as good as a wink (to a blind horse),” further winking at the non-existence of the *Oral History*, while incidentally referring to Gould’s preference for horses over automobiles. Switching animals, we might even speculate that the mile/smile conflation somehow refers to a relatively new (at the time) advertising slogan: “I’d walk a mile for a Camel.” Gould, of course, walked many miles (carrying his mythical manuscript) to cadge drinks and to find discarded butts to wedge into his celebrated cigarette holder.

Indeed, the octave and sestet divide Cummings’ sonnet neatly into the

two Joe Goulds: the real smoker of found butts and the mythical bohemian author. The octave presents the very real hungry homeless man who long ago went to Harvard and (more recently) “used to amputate his appetite with bad brittle / candy” but just now, in the era of the Depression and the “nude eel,” “lives on air.” This man’s Yankee “twang” annoys the delicate ears of the genteel poets at the Raven Poetry Circle while it angers the leftist café intellectuals who are in worse shape than Gould because they are “trying to find” not their teeth but “their minds.” They will never find these minds because they “never had any to lose” while Gould at least had some teeth (and presumably, a mind) to lose in the first place. The hungry Gould resented these well-fed middle-class comrades who stuffed themselves behind the barricade of a hedge at the Brevoort Hotel’s outdoor café, so he wrote a poem predicting that they would “die! . . . Of overeating” (qtd. in Mitchell 654).

The sestet ascends from this realism and its critique of the intelligentsia to announce that “a myth is as good as a smile.” Working his scare quotes into the text, Cummings shows that he knows that the “quote oral / history unquote” is mostly about Joe: it is “a wraith’s / progress,” a sort of *Pilgrim’s Progress* written by a starved ghost, an “amoral / morality” tale of the origins and early life of a mythical and not-quite-alive person named Joe Gould. As Mitchell points out, Gould put a great deal of effort into creating his persona, “a mask for himself . . . a character a good deal more complicated . . . than most of the characters created by the novelists and playwrights of his time” (693). Gould wrote in one of his published “essays”: “I have a delusion of grandeur. I believe myself to be Joe Gould” (qtd. in Mitchell 660). While it was partially the brutal realities of his existence that kept Gould “mainly awash while chiefly submerged,” it was also his mythmaking that created an unreal existence, a “sort-of-aliveing by innumerable kind-of deaths” (CP 410).

The sonnet’s concluding couplet is entirely enclosed in parentheses, indicating that it, like the other parenthetical remarks in the poem, is an aside by the author. The casualness of the aside is emphasized by the allusions in the couplet to those fleeting icons of mass culture, popular song and advertising. The title of the first song, the patriotic “America, I Love You” (1915), comes disguised in French, perhaps to indicate the author’s ironic, cosmopolitan voice in as few syllables as possible. Cummings had quoted this song before in “Poem, or Beauty Hurts Mr. Vinal,” exhibiting the concluding lines of its chorus—“America, I love you! / And there’s a

hundred million others like me!”— as an example not only of mindless patriotism but also as a symptom of the kinship between the slogans of advertising and the formulas of genteel poetry (CP 228). The remainder of the sonnet’s couplet refers simultaneously to the 1934 song “Fun to Be Fooled” [By Harold Arlen (music), and Ira Gershwin and E. Y. (Yip) Harburg (lyrics)] and to a 1933 Camel cigarette ad slogan: “It’s fun to be fooled . . . it’s more fun to know.” Kennedy includes this last among his examples of allusions to “advertising terms that go out of date within a year” and thus doom poems like “little joe gould has lost his teeth” to irrelevance and permanent minor status. But digging out the advertising allusion makes the poem more relevant and interesting, if only because the reader can now see the implicit contrast between “fun to know” and “fun to be.” And when we know that Cummings usually prefers being over knowledge, the allusion opens up several new avenues of interpretation.

Moreover, the context of the advertisement itself can illuminate our divagations. The Camel ad campaign was a response to Lucky Strike’s claim that toasting (their “It’s Toasted” slogan is parroted by the Weirds in *Him*) their tobacco lessened throat irritation and cough. Camel countered that their tobacco was less harsh because it was moist and fresh and that their “more expensive . . . naturally mild” tobaccos required “only a moderate application of heat.” To illustrate the point, the Camel ads showed the banal secrets of seemingly impossible magic tricks. It may be fun to be fooled by these tricks, the ads claimed, but it was more fun to know how they worked. In other words, Camel claimed that their ads provided the consumer with real knowledge, while the toasting touted in the Lucky Strike ads was only a cheap trick. At the bottom of every Camel ad was the clinching slogan: “No Tricks—Just Costlier Tobaccos.”

People are fooled by advertising or patriotism or ideology, “but it’s more fun to be more,” to create a fun persona, “to be little joe gould.” Of course, Joe’s persona also fooled many people and created some fun in doing it. Gould’s trick was creating his bohemian myth, and the banal secret motivating the trick was simple: he needed to eat and drink. But Gould’s “sort-of-aliveing” is superior to the tired slogans and formulas of the mass market—Gould created a character, a being. Cummings says it is not, as the advertisement would have it, more fun to *know*—rather, it is more fun to *be*, a word that is repeated five times in the last two lines. The slogan points at least two ways at once, however. It is to be doubted that we can have much fun if our knowledge is somehow tainted and warped. As

Gould put it, the intellectuals who were trying to find their minds in the thickets of ideology had “completely lost their sense of humor” (qtd. in Mitchell 650). So the poem also tells us that Being requires a flexible mind, comfortable with myth-making. In addition, to interpret the being that is the poem requires knowledge.

DANCING ON GLASS

REMARKS:
The ladies, the ladies present a remarkable example of the lovely persistence of spirit, in not taking glass pieces of glass into a hot stomach. They are surrounded by the heat and the painful heat—continued.

EXPLANATIONS:
Notice especially the position, are explained their loss in a combination of other more modern dress with individual style. They have the same glass around the edge of the shoulder; the glass on which they stand is broken, but the ladies, instead of their feet being so close on the edge of glass.

EXPLANATIONS:
One of the tricks of cigarette advertising is to pretend that "Best Treatment" is an exclusive process, making one cigarette better than any other.

EXPLANATIONS:
All cigarette manufacturers use best treatment. The first Camel cigarette ever made, and every one of the billions of Camels produced since, has received the necessary best treatment. Harsh, raw tobacco requires intensive processing under high temperatures. The more accurate tobacco, which are naturally mild, suit for only a moderate application of heat.

EXPLANATIONS:
It is a fact, well known by leaf tobacco experts, that Camels are made from the **BEST EXPENSIVE** tobacco than any other popular brand.

Try Camels. Judge them critically. Compare them with others for richness, for throat-ease, for good taste. They'll win you!

NO TRICKS - JUST COSTLIER TOBACCO

TOBACCO

IN A MATCHLESS NAME

© 1942 Camel Cigarettes Co., New York, N.Y.

In “you shall above all things be glad and young” (CP 484), Cummings writes that lovers should avoid thinking, “for that way knowledge lies, the foetal grave / called progress, and negation’s dead undoom.” For Cummings, the problem with knowledge is that it lacks understanding, that it functions within the blind closed circle of progress, a “foetal grave” in which the individual is dead before he/she is born. The spurious and banal knowledge of advertising, with its pseudo-scientific claims of “mildness” and “throat-ease,” “lies” not only in the grave but also on the page. This sort of knowledge tells lies, and one can never be born into the dooms of truth and selfhood in this dead un-world of negation. We must have understanding of this unworld, however, to transcend it. Having knowledge of the pseudo-knowledge of advertising certainly helps us interpret the con-

cluding couplet of Cummings' poem. And annotations must strive to avoid negation and to offer knowledge useful and necessary for understanding the text in question.

Cummings' stance against certain kinds of knowledge may have influenced critics like Kennedy to disparage the sometimes arcane and seemingly trivial knowledge required to read his poems fully. Perhaps there is a fear of being swamped ("mainly awash while chiefly submerged") in notational ephemera while losing the living poem. (One thinks of editions of *The Waste Land* in which the notes creep up the page, almost submerging the poem.) But this resource can make the poem come alive, too. The act of reading activates knowledge, turning it into understanding. For example, once we file away Rushworth Kidder's observation that Cummings' phrase "that way knowledge lies" echoes King Lear's "that way madness lies," we begin to understand more fully the threat Cummings perceived in knowledge (*Lear* III, iv, 21; Kidder 131-132). The reader does not need to know the *Lear* reference to understand the plain prose meaning of the passage; however, knowing the reference helps us see Cummings' view of the craziness of a certain kind of knowledge.

While this sort of reference to *King Lear* may not be strictly necessary to understanding the poem, in order to understand a great deal of *EIMI*, notes are absolutely necessary. For example, without some knowledge of the Soviet system of the five day week and of the meaning of the Russian word for "Sunday," it is impossible to understand this passage: "shall we not worship, this bright sunny voskresaynyeh? It's the day I was born; also it's a day which doesn't exist (thanks to the 7thless 6thless weekless so-called 5 day week)" (91/89). For a short period, the Soviets took the usual calendar and superimposed on it 72 five day weeks (360 days), plus five national holidays. Each worker was assigned one day of the five as a day off. Such a system eliminated the weekend in favor of a cycle of four days on and one day off. Cummings mentions quite pointedly that he was born on a *voskresaynyeh*, or Sunday, "a day which doesn't exist." This is a clue to the book's structure: *EIMI* begins and ends on a Sunday (May 10 and June 14), with four other Sundays in between. So there are six Sundays with six days between each of them, making a total of 36 days. Cummings' insistence on the existence of Sunday (plus a six-day week) thus counters the Soviet arithmetic of the five-day week (88/86) and the five year plan achieved (supposedly) in four years (154/150). In addition, once we realize that the word for Sunday (*voskresaynyeh*) in Russian means

“Resurrection,” we can connect this 1-6-1-6-1 structure of Sundays with a major theme in the book: rebirth.

At the beginning of his superb *Joyce Annotated*, Don Gifford sets out the annotator’s creed: Notes exist to inform “a reading” of the text in question; notes are never complete, and though unfortunately, “some . . . notes will prove inadequate or inaccurate,” they should attempt to stick to information and strive to “avoid interpretive comment” (1). I can only hope that the notes published online at the *Spring* web site can meet the exacting standards Gifford set, including the implication that one must constantly strive for greater accuracy and completeness. Indeed, the online format is ideal for hosting these notes, allowing for frequent additions, updates, and corrections. And unlike this musty, lovable medium of print, the online world offers many more possibilities for annotations in the form of photographs or audio. So I invite the reader to go back to Cummings’ texts and then venture online to <http://faculty.gvsu.edu/websterm/cummings/notes.htm> and discover the wonders of the five day week, the scratchy sounds of “America, I Love You,” and the visual splendor of not one, but three advertisements emblazoned with this half-truth: “It’s fun to be fooled . . . it’s more fun to know.”

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