

Cummings' Escape to the Woods: Theorizing Modernism during the 1918 Influenza Pandemic

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Grey troops at drill spliced into a colorized field in front of the woods at [Camp Devens, Mass.](#), circa 1917.

Much later in his life, when E. E. Cummings was typing up the notebooks that he kept during basic training at Camp Devens, Mass., he wrote that the notes made him feel uneasy: “into me, as I perceive these hieroglyphics, is coming once again whatever it was that drove me almost crazy” (quoted in Rosenblitt 225). My May, 2020 post, "[E. E. Cummings at Camp Devens: The Influenza Pandemic of 1918](#)," reported how Cummings describes this "almost" craziness in an October 1918 letter to John Dos Passos as "an interior struggle, a spiritual combat, an invisible war, enormous and tiny," that nevertheless was "very good for one's health." Cummings tells his friend and fellow writer that the source of this "interior struggle" is "fear, still, always, and every day, fear."

The conclusion of the May, 2020 post makes clear that besides experiencing a sort of nameless existential dread, Cummings mainly feared death, whether from combat at the front or from the influenza pandemic. Certainly the more pressing fear was the flu, which "by the end of September [1918]" had infected "about one-quarter of the total camp, resulting in 757 deaths" ([CDC timeline](#)). Elizabeth Outka points to a telling difference between the fear of death in a war and a similar fear during a pandemic:

[T]he ideological structures that both the state and its citizens could build around a war corpse— it's heroic / it's barbaric / it's a meaningful sacrifice / it's a pointless horrific death caused by corrupt governments— were not structures that could typically work when death came from an invading virus rather than an invading army. Flu corpses presented instead a crisis of representation. Difficult to spin politically or narratively, the flu death was more pointless, less understandable, and less preventable than one from the war.

Outka, *Viral Modernism* 33

On September 29, Doctor Roy N. Grist reported that the draftees were “demoralized and all ordinary

work is held up till it [the influenza] has passed. All assemblages of soldiers taboo" ("[Letter](#)"). On November 12, Cummings wrote to Scofield Thayer about this period of enforced idleness:

a poker-circle invades my lit [bed--also literature?]. The buttox of a player (who had the politeness to manually remove my leg from a place which impeded his complete comfort as he sits) rubs my upper leg. . . . The player lays his fuming cigarette with its moist butt on my blanket. He spits on the floor right at the foot of my bed, for he is emotionally stressed or something. little buttons of green mucous—. to sleep in.

Letter to Scofield Thayer, November 12, 1918 [Beinecke Library, Yale University (YCAL MSS 34 Series IV, Box 30, folder 786)]

No wonder Cummings escaped to the surrounding woods in order (as he wrote in the letter to Dos Passos) to "bathe in the superior blood of Thought. Martyred Goddess!" We may assume that the blood of Thought was preferable to possibly infected droplets of green mucus. Also, writing solo in the woods would allow him to escape from the overcrowded camp. (See photo below of the "Writing and Reading Room.") But during his sojourns in the woods, rather than observing and taking notes on the local flora and fauna like Thoreau, Cummings explored his aesthetic and emotional responses to modernist art and literature. Cummings went to the woods to think about aesthetics.

The "Writing and Reading Room" at Camp Devens, circa 1917 [[U. S. Army photo](#)]

Before reporting for duty at the camp on July 24, he had lived in New York for four months, writing sonnets like "my girl's tall with hard long eyes" (CP 133) and being transfixed by the Cézanne paintings he saw in uptown art galleries (Kennedy 163-171, Cohen 43). While at Camp Devens, Cummings' reading of [the installments of James Joyce's *Ulysses* then being published in *The Little Review*](#) inspired him to draft an essay on modernist art that outlined an aesthetic that envisions artwork, creator, and audience as a living totality. In that same November 12 letter to Scofield Thayer that mentions the smoking, spitting poker player, Cummings singled out for praise [a passage from the "Hades" chapter of *Ulysses*](#), in which Leopold Bloom meditates on death during the burial of Paddy Dignam:

"Monday he died. Three days. Rather long to keep them in the summer. Just as well to get shut of them as soon as you are sure there's no.

*The clay fell softer. Begin to be forgotten. Out of sight. The caretaker moved away -- --"

E. E. Cummings to Scofield Thayer, November 12, 1918; MS at the Beinecke Library, Yale University (YCAL MSS 34, Series IV, Box 30, folder 787). [Cf. *Ulysses*, 111; 6.870-73.]

Cummings does not comment directly on Joyce's depiction of a burial. Rather, he tells Thayer: "Sco, that * [asterisked] line is as good as anything ever done by any body in any world. Nor am i unsure, by god. will the Dial print my crit of Joyce? will it? if it will, i will write it." The essay that Cummings drafted actually says rather little about *Ulysses*, striving instead to place the new prose work into a larger aesthetics of modern artistic production. As in his graduation "part" of three years earlier, "[The New Art](#)," the poet sought to define what was common in his response to the "many branches—painting, sculpture, architecture, the stage, literature, and music" of the new modernist arts (5).

To find connections among the many arts of modernism, Cummings classified them as melodic, harmonic, or orchestral "gestures." (This sort of synesthetic approach to relating the arts was common at the time--see Cohen, pp. 196-203.) Here is Cummings' chart of works of modernist art classified as musical "gestures":

[melodic] Brancusi (especially the polished brass [Mlle. \[Pogany\]](#) at the last Independent)
Ezra Pound ([?????](#)) [(Doria)]

[harmonic] [Gleizes \(skyscraper motifs\)](#)
The best of [Matisse](#) (before he imitated Matisse)

[orchestral] T. S. Eliot ([Preludes](#) and [Rhapsody on a Windy Night](#))
Schoenberg ([Five Orchestral Pieces](#))
[The Woolworth Building](#) [See "[at the ferocious phenomenon of 5 o'clock](#)"]
The Russian Ballet ([Parade](#), [Till \[Eulenspiegel\]](#), [L'Après Midi \[d'un Faune\]](#), and [Petrouska](#) [sic])

MS at Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (70) folder 1, s. 1. (Reproduced also in Kennedy 179)

Although Cummings' three categories imply a movement from the first to second to third person [I, you, we], unlike Stephen Dedalus' exclusively literary categories of lyric, epic, and dramatic (*Portrait* 232-233), any of the seven arts may be placed in any of the categories. For example, sculpture by Brancusi is classified as *melodic*; the "best of Matisse (before he imitated Matisse)" is *harmonic*; and T. S. Eliot's "Preludes" and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" share the crowded *orchestral* category with Schoenberg's *Five Orchestral Pieces*, the Woolworth Building, and various dances by the *Ballets Russes*.

At the bottom of the chart, Cummings wrote an addendum to the orchestral gestures: “to these the months latterly have added, James Joyce (*Ulysses*).” Cummings is a bit flippant about why he declines to call these art-gestures “modern,” saying that he prefers “the adjective ‘musical,’ if only because it is a favorite with the many’s mindlessness” (s. 1).

By adding the term “gesture” to his musical metaphor, Cummings shows that the synesthesia of modernist art is more than mere high culture fashion—rather, it engages the body more than the mind. The most complex of Cummings’ orchestral gestures also mix the sensations of various arts in various ways. Both of the Eliot titles are musical metaphors and the ballets *Petrushka* and *Parade* are products of choreographers, dancers, musicians, and scene and set designers. Joyce’s *Ulysses* is of course written in a variety of styles and introduces the stream of consciousness technique that presents how the brain feels and reacts to the five senses.

By invoking synesthesia, gesture, and music, Cummings points not to the totality of the artwork, but to the totality of an aesthetic experience that engulfs the entire being. Combining a military metaphor with his own feelings of “interior struggle, a spiritual combat, an invisible war,” Cummings asserts that aesthetic experience shatters the “shells of identity” [(39), s. 208]; the experience of art knocks him out, like “the contact of a naked fist with the lower jaw” (s. 41). This overwhelming kayo of perception, this identity death, claims much more for poetry and art than the diminished romanticism of a Robert Frost, who says that the poem provides the harried reader with “a momentary stay against confusion” (2). The psychological experience of Cummings’ reader / spectator is far more harrowing than the soothing pop psychology of I. A. Richards, who blandly claims that “poetry balances the warring impulses of the reader” (Tompkins 220). For Cummings, a peak aesthetic experience is disorienting, shattering, and terrifying, and it results in a newer self and greater sense of being.

Cummings’ reading in Willard Huntington Wright’s [Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning](#) (1915) gave him a way of understanding Cézanne, who, Wright said, sometimes “deformed nature’s objects . . . in order to make form voluminous” (156), thus creating a kind of sculpture in line and color. Cummings was fascinated by the notion of sculpted, solid form that nevertheless pulses and moves with the light and color of nature. In a 1922 letter to his mother, Cummings wrote of painting “chasms . . . and bumps . . . [and] ‘getting form by colour’ ” (quoted in Cohen 122). But this formal understanding was preceded by the actual *experience* of seeing Cézanne’s paintings.

Cézanne is not mentioned among the modernist artists and their works classified in Cummings’ three-fold chart of musical gestures, most likely because Cézanne was seen as a precursor, and a misunderstood one at that. Cummings tells us that at first, he “threw his belief” into the “dislocated nature” of Cézanne’s paintings. Wright had taught Cummings to see only the formal, anti-realistic aspects of Cézanne’s dislocations:

Like an excited very little dog I barked furiously at these discomforting still-lives. What apples! they ought to roll and fall off this tilting table, and they don't. Quelle table! It has legs and doesn't rest on them. Wonderful. Hooray! What an insult to reality!

Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (70) folder 5, s. 44

So, when Cummings was in New York in the spring and summer of 1918 before being called up for the draft, he rushed off to a Fifth Avenue gallery to see some Cézannes for himself. There, in “a tastefully upholstered twilight,” he was met by the painting of [La Montagne Ste. Victoire](#) “whose reproduction in colours was the frontispiece” to Willard Huntington Wright’s [Modern Painting: Its Tendency and Meaning](#) (1915).

Before the painting itself, he was confronted with something he didn't and couldn't *know*: his senses and knowledge obliterated, his being realized a destabilizing sort of enlightenment in one overwhelming aesthetic experience:

As my eyes explored, a curious sensation of fearful nausea came over me. I felt. I was being skillfully sucked into the picture's accuracy! I stood, perfectly helpless, dead with terror. Out of this frame a slow swiftness surely was, reaching, for my mind. The sense of hearing quickly deserted me. Then sight - - - Suddenly: easily splashes of hideous sensual electricity drenched my completely nervous concentration. Touch. The sensation that I can only describe by saying that the picture had Touched me.

Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (70) folder 5, s. 45

At Camp Devens, Cummings began to organize his rather nebulous effusions about Touch into a theory of aesthetic response. He even created a “ladder” that attempts to understand and rank various aesthetic experiences, starting from the photographic Real at the bottom and moving upward to the vital Actual or Tactile:

category

Artist / example

qualities

Actual, Tactile (art, truth)	Cézanne; Joyce, <i>Ulysses</i> ; <i>Petrushka (Ballets Russes)</i>	vitality, “a new dimension” “instigation of the actual by the real” (ss. 35, 48)
impossible	Redon	dreams, mysticism
possible (the perhaps)	Renoir	musical
probable (normal)	Monet	normal (life)
the Real (truthfulness, the subnormal)	Rodin	photography (“a positive of the developed negative: life”)

Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1892.7 (70) folder 5, s. 47
and MS Am 1892.7 (69), folder 1, sheet 3.

Cummings states the short form of this chart at the beginning of quite a few drafts of his essay:

It took photography to assert the real, the subnormal. Photography is truthfulness, reality.

Life is normal.

Art is vital.

Houghton Library, Harvard University, [MS Am 1892.7 (69) folder 1, s. 3]

Art exists on a vital plane of being that Cummings called the Actual or the Tactile. The overwhelming aesthetic experience of art reduces the self to Touch and then rebuilds a new self. He describes leaving the gallery in New York like this:

As I staggered from the gallery, there formed in my mouth gradually the terrific syllable: sum [“I am” (Latin)]. As I whispered it to the elevator, I found on my lips an electric taste, as if I were tasting the picture’s Touch. Sum. I went out, very dizzy, into the normal rumpus of the Avenue— .

Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1892.7 (70) folder 5, s. 45

In the gallery, Cummings found a confrontation that changed him, that made him an “I am,” a *Sum*. The process of self-becoming is thus nearly identical with the processes of experiencing and making art. In the woods, Cummings recalled this moment of self-making in New York as a way to defy and confront the

"almost" craziness and fear of death (and thus loss of self) that plunged him into an "interior struggle" at Camp Devens.

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