

T I M W E N Z E L L

Literary Conscientious Objector e.e. cummings and The Great War

The Mexican War had just begun in the summer of 1846 when Henry David Thoreau, living in Concord, Massachusetts, engaged in an act to denounce the war—he refused to pay his state’s poll tax. As a result of this passive protest, he was thrown in jail for a night, upon which he wrote “On Civil Disobedience.” During his one-night stay, his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson visited him behind bars. Emerson was against the war but continued to pay his poll tax, thinking it pointless to protest something of such magnitude, and to protest by *not* doing something, he believed, was even more futile. When Emerson asked Thoreau, “What are you doing in there?” Thoreau replied, “What are you doing out there?” (Zinn 154).

Emerson was not able, at this point, to see the value of Thoreau’s actions, nor was Thoreau himself. While his initial motive was to protest America’s brutality in The Mexican War, he became, in the course of one night’s stay, inspired by his unexpected and thoroughly humanizing view of the world from behind the bars of his own cell, a view wholly apolitical and individual. In “On Civil Disobedience,” Thoreau states, “I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar” (Thoreau 67). His protest via a “peaceable revolution” was not just through a refusal to pay poll taxes; it was a

protest against any force that diminished the individual. Governments, wars, corporations, and the machinery of the Industrial Revolution were all culpable in this diminishing act.

In essence, Thoreau's reflections on his own society could only come from such an outside view. His protest over what he felt were unjust actions, combined with the confinement to a grey cell and metal bars, enabled him to see the individual removed from the society and unchained from all institutions. His reflections were those of a prisoner unjustly jailed, and in this regard, he found himself on a higher level of consciousness than the townsmen, the State, the country, and The Mexican War. His ability to see the world in an entirely new way can be directly attributed to his experience as a prisoner.

The writer as prisoner quite often finds the prison a place to become more free; for the writer, jail time operates as sanctuary from an outside world, on a higher moral (transcendental) plane, especially if the imprisonment itself is unjust. The moral cause becomes the impetus to write. Like Thoreau's imprisonment during The Mexican War, in 1917 E.E. Cummings spent three months in La Ferte, a French prison camp, during The Great War for "acts of treason." From this same prison vantage point, a writer unjustly imprisoned, Cummings was able to articulate this new world in his writing, first put forth in his novel *The Enormous Room*, and later in the form and content of his poetry. While Cummings' stay of three months in France certainly had more impact on his writing than the one night Thoreau spent in jail in Massachusetts, both nevertheless produced literature that, through the veil of war, espoused the importance of the individual.

The point is that time spent in jail—a night, or three months, or twenty years for that matter—has relatively little meaning. Cummings' "fictional" narrator comments that his time in prison becomes irrelevant: "events...no longer succeed each other...each happening is self-sufficient, irrespective of minutes, months and other treasures of freedom" (Cummings 114). For this reason the narrator (whom Cummings calls "C") "does not purpose to inflict upon the reader a diary of alternative aliveness and non-existence at La Ferte...because the diary or time method is a technique which cannot possibly do justice to timelessness" (144). That the narrator makes this clear becomes significant in understanding the spiritual

journey he will take in his quest to become more human and “accentuates the metaphysical nature of his experiences at La Ferte” (Boire 335).

To fully understand the motivations of the narrator as he moves through his experience outside of the confinement of time, it is important to acknowledge that C, the narrator, is actually Cummings himself. In the fall of 1917, he was serving as an ambulance driver in the northern French sector of the Western Front along with his friend William Slater Brown when he was arrested by the civil police on charges of treason. According to most historians, these charges stemmed from intercepted letters sent home to the United States by Brown lamenting the low morale in the French Army. Brown, however, disputes these historians. Interviewed later in his life, Brown stated, “it was not those dumb, jejune letters of mine that got us into trouble. It was the fact that C. and I knew all about the violent mutinies in the French Army a few months before Cummings and I reached the Front. We learned all about them from the poilus [French front line soldiers]. The French did everything, naturally, to suppress the news. We two were loaded with dynamite (“William Slater Brown And *The Enormous Room*”). As Cummings refused to dissociate himself from his friend, and subsequently his friends’ actions, he was, along with Brown, sent to a prison camp for suspicious aliens and prostitutes found in the war zone (Dougherty 288).

Cummings’ father learned of his imprisonment and he sent several letters to President Wilson, several of which are included in the Foreword to *The Enormous Room*. As a result of these letters, he was released from La Ferte in December 1917. Cummings intended to sail back to Europe in 1920, but on his father’s insistence he wrote *The Enormous Room*, an account of his war experience, in a tree-house that he and his father had built (Dumas 29).

Though Cummings’ war experience—and his prison experience for that matter—was not typical, it does in fact become his theater of war. He was not fighting on the Front as Graves and Sassoon, had done, but he nevertheless spent most of his time trying to keep sane until his release. “Yet huddled together with the flotsam of war, living on the grudging patronage of a government too busy with routine to be kind, and too suspicious of its prisoners to be fair, Cummings experienced the indignity, the brutality, and the mechanical cruelties of war as a personal disaster” (Kazin 325). Yet this “personal disaster,” as Kazin calls it, hardly seems to be a disaster when evaluating the purpose of *The Enormous Room* and its subsequent place in literature as a celebration of the human experience.

Cummings describes a prison like no other; it is filled with characters from all nationalities, many of whom he finds a special attachment. Nevertheless, the novel,

by its very remoteness from the actuality of war, of the horror of compounded death on the Front Line, “mirrored and intensified its inherent meaninglessness; it became a maze in which men clawed each other to escape or to keep their reason. And the central theme of their imprisonment was chaos” (Kazin 325). In this way Cummings is able to address the insanity and pointlessness of The Great War: the prison works as microcosm and as allegory.

At Le Ferte, C learns that the prison, a huge room with one large door and several windows twenty feet above the ground housing hundreds of prisoners, is a “co-educational receiving station” for prostitutes hanging too close to the front and for men suspected of espionage. Cummings writes:

For who was eligible to La Ferte? Anyone whom the police could find in the lovely country of France (a) who was not guilty of treason, (b) who could not prove that he was not guilty of treason. By treason I refer to any little annoying habits of independent thought or action which en temps de guerre are put in a hole and covered over, with the somewhat naïve idea that from their cadavers violets will grow whereof the perfume will delight all good men and true and make such worthy citizens forget their sorrows. Fort Leavenworth, for instance, emanates even now a perfume which is utterly delightful to certain Americans (Cummings 32).

The authorities of La Ferte—the Director, Surveillant, Gestionnaire (accountant), and plantons (orderlies), are all denigrated by Cummings. He calls all of them Appolyon and calls the Director an “omnipotent Satan.” He names two other figures of authority Black Holster and Wooden Hand, and gives the plantons various Dickensian qualities, orderlies who are deformed with tin legs, wooden hands, and huge glass eyes and all who work as Non-Real entities for “the Almighty French Government.”

Most of the novel, however, revolves around the prisoners of the Enormous Room in a place that works in many respects as an allegory for the trenches of the Western Front: for one, the prisoners live in a filthy disgusting world of their own excrement and sleep on wooden planks over a mud floor—and most don’t clearly know why they are imprisoned, a symbolic parallel to those fighting a world war for no clear reason. These prisoners are from different countries involved in the war and become a microcosm of those entrenched on the front. However, the masses of soldiers killed in the Great War become irrelevant in Cummings’ prison. They are not faceless dead soldiers. Instead, Cummings seems clear in separating

these prisoners from their nationalities by giving each of them identity through nicknames: The Wanderer, Bathhouse John, The Schoolmaster, Skipper, The Machine Fixer, The Lobster, The Fighting Sheeny, Afrique, The Frog, Rockyfeller, Washing Machine Man—the names themselves evoke distinct human character and thus reflect the central theme of *The Enormous Room*. This is about the individual against the institution, the solitary human consciousness against the absurd machines of authorities, of governments, of wars. And in the essence of purely horrific elements akin to *The Great War*, it is of spiritual re-birth through contact with these individuals.

Cummings devotes several chapters to four characters whom he calls “Delectable Mountains,” persons in higher spiritual stature than the rest of the prisoners, those who have a most profound impact on his memory there. These are Zulu, The Wanderer, Surplice, and Jean Le Negre, all of whom develop close relationships with narrator Cummings. Le Negre, who is arrested for buying a uniform and medals, for impersonating an officer in the British Army and fighting in the streets of Paris, is a large black man who arrives much like R.P. McMurphy in Kesey’s “Cuckoo’s Nest,” and whose infectious, life-loving personality infects the other prisoners and whose pure brute strength angers the authorities.

The Delectable Mountains are a direct reference to characters of the same name in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, though for Cummings these men are symbols of the artist and writer; “they are individuals who remain intensely human within the confines of a monstrous, inhuman system. In effect, they are those beings who are involved continually with the actual business of life, the process of becoming one’s own self” (Boire 337). So The Delectable Mountains are, in one respect, an extension of Cummings himself, and thus an extension of the narrator C; in this way they become the mountains of Bunyan’s allegory.

These mountains, the narrator and Cummings—as artists and individuals—are all pitted against the system of institutions, of bureaucracy, of prison, of war. As such, this vast and dehumanizing system is represented by the archetype Apollyon in *The Enormous Room*. A whole chapter of the novel is devoted to Apollyon and his instruments of power—Fear, Women, and Sunday. As a complete authority figure, he is served by the host of other characters from those just below human, and somewhat more lenient, to the next to lowest species of human organism (outside of the lowest species, the *gendarme proper*). These nominal subspecies of Apollyon wielded the weapon Fear upon the prisoners.

Though there were women prisoners during Cummings’ actual confinement in La Ferté in 1917, these women become another weapon of power for Apollyon. The

men of the prison were forbidden to consort or even to speak to or look at the women in the prison, “but of course it was very easy for the guards to provoke the men into such communication, after which the offender could then be punished” (Dumas 115). The women were also the victims of this Apollyonian machinery: they often suffered more deprivation and were treated less humanely than the men.

Sunday, the prisoner’s day of rest, seemed a day when the prisoners could relax and escape the routine of prison work. Regular duties were suspended, but in place of these suspended duties was their leisure time; in this the Apollyon subordinates provoked the prisoners into committing punishable offenses. Sunday was also the day on which women could be used as a more effective weapon, so the day itself came to be the most feared; subsequently, there was a sense of relief among the prisoners when the routine and Monday morning returned. The time outside of the constraints of the mechanized ritual of prison life was thus a period of suffering rather than of enjoyment.

It was in this manner in which Apollyon maintained control. In *The Enormous Room*, the presence of such an order—instigating such insanity and disorder—can be directly traced to Cummings’ experience with the French authorities. “Cummings’ real disillusionment is not just an initiation into the ugly realities of war. It is a loss of faith in the systems and categories taught him by the experiences of his first twenty-three years of life” (Daugherty 290). After his initial arrest, Cummings goes through an interrogation in which his identity becomes distorted. The authorities mispronounce his name, they think he is Irish and not Scottish, they have no knowledge of Harvard University, where Cummings attended, and they imprison him after he is asked the question, “Do you hate the Germans?” and he replies, “No, I love the French.” In this convention—and in what ultimately changes Cummings as an artist and a thinker—is that “in the name of *le gouvernement francais* or *le patriotisme*, men may be accused of thought crimes, held without trial, beaten, and starved, machine-gunned if necessary” (Dougherty 291).

So how does any individual rebel against such an enormous system? For Cummings, the influence of his father and the sanctuary of a tree fort enabled him to create such a rebellion. In writing *The Enormous Room*, his celebration of the individual came hand in hand with his dismissal of the institution, namely the French government, but in larger terms, of the insanity of The Great War. Because the primary institution in 1917, both inside and outside La Ferte Mace, was the theater of war, *The Enormous Room* in essence becomes a war novel. From the point-of-view of the reliable narrator C, we see a view of a fictional world firmly ground in Cummings’ world of truth.

“The inherent importance of *The Enormous Room* will be considered as a part of the literature of that well-known disillusion which followed The Great War; as a modern extension of the American radical tradition of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman; and as an anticipation of the post-modern world of the 1960’s” (Daugherty 289). Indeed, literary historians have come to consider the novel’s importance “as a narrative of disillusion, taking its place between the memoirs of Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves, and the imaginative fictions of Hemingway and Dos Passos” (Daugherty 289).

That it fits into any kind of context today has more to do with the evolution of literature and the merging genre of memoir and fiction than anything else. Cummings, a poet, was certainly trying his hand in the art form of the novel, and much of the writing in the novel clearly reflects his poetic nature and the experimentation of forms that find their place in his later poetry. This experimentation is thus a product of his experience within a series of corrupt systems that needed replacement. “The style of *The Enormous Room*, its events and its hero’s decision to unlearn the social and artistic conventions in which he was educated, all display Cummings’ loss of confidence in the certainties of his past” (Daugherty 292).

Because Cummings was couching his rebellion against the system in a confusion of genre (was it fiction? was it memoir? was it poetry?), initial reviewers were unsure how to receive it. For example, John Dos Passos, a friend of Cummings, wrote a review in *The Dial*, saying, “It’s not an account of a war atrocity or as an attack on France or the holy Allies timely to the Genoa Conference that *The Enormous Room* is important, but as a distinct conscious creation separate from anything else under heaven” (98).

Indeed, Cummings’ friend is doing him the favor of a positive review of his novel as truly *novel*, and in essence a work of literature that departs from anything written before it, which is certainly the case. But Dos Passos is also attempting to get Cummings off the hook—for other reviewers saw the novel in an unpatriotic way. One reviewer writes: “[*The Enormous Room*] appeared when a much heavier-handed kind of social comment was expected in America, and of course it was not immediately known in England. It was objected to on the grounds that it was not ‘patriotic’” (Dumas 111). Another reviewer, Thomas L. Masson in the *New York Times Book Review*, treats the work as non-fiction and thus vilifies Cummings’ politics:

“If he really likes the Germans and thinks them a much better people than the French, why not say so clearly? Why smother us with word pictures of what was happening to him and leave us in too much painful doubt about his own honest opinion?...his book is a Bolshevik Book none the less because it is vague” (6-7).

It is clear that Cummings’ insistence that his work be considered a novel was partially to deflect the spectre of any anti-war sentiment that might be heaped upon it; yet through the years since its publication, it can still be argued that it is both fiction and memoir, but it nonetheless remains a distinct piece of anti-war literature.

Consider the 1932 Introduction to the second edition of *The Enormous Room*, set up by Cummings in the guise of a question and answer format:

“Doesn’t *The Enormous Room* really concern war?

It actually uses war: to explore an inconceivable vastness which is so unbelievably far away that it appears microscopic.

When you wrote this book, you were looking through war at something very big and far away?

When this book wrote itself, I was observing a negligible portion of something incredibly more distant than any sun; something more unimaginably huge than the most prodigious of all universes—

Namely?

The “individual.” (Introduction vii-viii)

Clearly, Cummings wants to emphasize the value of the individuals characterized in the novel rather than the vilification of institutions, for “a human being, able to feel, instinctively and emotionally, shares in the eternity of nature. The individual represents the ‘enormous’ whole, and by doing so transcends mere institutions, such as the *gouvernement française* or *La Ferte Mace*” (Dougherty 295).

This transcendence of “mere institutions,” as Thoreau had put forth in “On Civil Disobedience,” marks the decay of the individual within the walls of the institutions of Mexican Wars and Great Wars, of governments and corporations and futile factory work—all of them prisons, all of them the common enemy of both Thoreau and Cummings. However, Cummings does not meet this enemy in a passive manner, nor does he isolate himself from his cause as Thoreau has done, but with a universe that rises out of the institutional hell into one teeming with

individual, personal relationships. For anyone protesting The Great War, or any other wars for that matter, the institutional hell must be overcome by active revolt against any system that takes away the individual, and lives lost on the battlefield bear more responsibility than any other. In this way Cummings firmly states his objection to The Great War.

Perhaps an even clearer connection to Cummings' motivation to write *The Enormous Room* can be drawn from the words of Ammon Hennacy: "Pacifism does not mean to stand up and do nothing. It means to do something: to use the strongest weapon, spiritual force, rather than the weaker weapon, violence...this can't be learned in a book. It has to flow from a life of integrity..." (Sayre 62).

Ammon Hennacy was one of the most outspoken of twentieth-century pacifists and conscientious objectors. It is interesting to note that many autobiographies of American conscientious objectors were opponents of violence and institutions, and the content of their writings advocated the value of the individual autobiographies "whose insights and examples have had a significant though little-known impact on later American non-violent movements" (Sayre 63).

Cummings' insistence that *The Enormous Room* was a fictional examination of the human condition and not an anti-war "novel" was partly to prevent him from being branded as a pacifist and C.O. Because the conscientious objectors were so unpopular, they had to defend their actions verbally. Cummings knew the stakes: besides the improbability of publishing something so overtly connected to the cause of the C.O., Cummings was well aware that "the most vivid picture of jail conditions and the most sordid treatment of war opponents was to be found in the cases of conscientious objectors" (Peterson 259). Many of these American prisoners were sent to Fort Leavenworth, and were systematically shackled, bound by their hands and feet, for 14 days at a time, then released into the prison yard for 14 days, where they were given raw food, an axe for chopping wood, cooking utensils, and shelter at night. This routine was repeated—shackled and sent to the prison yard, shackled and sent to the prison yard—"indefinitely for the term of 20 or 30 years, to which these men have been sentenced, or until they are broken, either physically or mentally" (Thomas 184).

The common thread of all conscientious objection, in The Great War and in all wars before and since, had to do with the ultimate relationship between the state and a man's conscience. More importantly for Cummings, however, is that man's relationship between his conscience and the state of his confinement to institutions. This was the central theme of all objectors to the idea of a war occurring for no apparent reason: that the individual had the complete right to

deny participation in any institution in which he did not feel had a just and moral cause. That Cummings' imprisonment stemmed from his knowledge of mutinies in the French Army bears this out.

It is interesting to note that Cummings was unfairly accused by both the French government and the critics as sympathetic to the German people. The fact is that roughly half of all objectors to The Great War in the United States were Mennonite, and many of them were German-speaking. In many ways, because they were not understood because of their language, the suffering of foreign conscientious objectors was as great or greater than those participating in the theater of war (Sayre 64).

As Cummings departed his great experiment in the novel and moved into his more familiar territory of poetry to stay, he wrote a poem in 1931 concerning the conscientious objector, "i sing of Olaf," a name richly ground in German ancestry: "i sing of Olaf glad and big/whose warmest heart recoiled at war:/a conscientious object-or." (Cummings, "Complete Poems" 640).

The first lines of this poem reflect in many ways his experiences at La Ferte and the many languages which merged in one vast arena: Cummings sings *of* Olaf, and given his richly German name, and that so many of those Mennonite objectors could not speak English, he speaks for them. Ironically, though their cause was justified on the grounds of using, as Hennancy explains, "the use of spiritual force rather than violent force," (402) there was no institution of language from which to defend themselves. The other aspect of these lines is the unconventional "object-or," instead of Objector, implying a measure of conformity as an option—"Object- or conform."

From here it is the language of Cummings' poetry that becomes the vehicle for his dispossession of systems, for his rebellion of convention. It is apparent in both the form of "i sing of olaf" that cummings views the world in a different way after La Ferte Merce. In an early poem written, before his ambulance experience, before the war, before his imprisonment, he writes in the poem "Our Flag": "O flag of the nation! O red, White and Blue!/O symbol of liberty, waving anew!/All through our lives may we reverence thee,/The nation's bright ensign for liberty!" (1055).

Writing after his war experience, Cummings' flag now becomes a vehicle for irreverence in "i sing of Olaf;" for in this he has Olaf speaking for the first time in the poem, in which "Olaf....responds, without getting annoyed, I will not kiss your fucking flag." An interesting note is that the word "fucking" was deleted in many publications of this poem, and it also indicates the sanctity of patriotism in removing that particular word from in front of "flag." Cummings also evades a

direct connection by putting the statement into a quotation by someone other than the poet—that is, Olaf is allowed to speak the little English that he knows, albeit four-letter profanities. This technique reflects the same manner Cummings treats his affront to war in *The Enormous Room*.

The poem, in its entirety, “is a poem dominated by suggestions of scatology and emphasis upon the discrepancies of which institutional life is always compounded” (Dumas 85). The poem, though it speaks of war and the plight of the C.O., is more directly an attack on those who run the theater of war: the officers (“wellbeloved colonel”), and products of military schools (“trig westpointer most succinctly bred”), non-commissioned officers (“an host of overjoyed noncoms”). Finally, the Apollyon that Cummings describes in *The Enormous Room* becomes the President in this poem (“our president, being of which/assertions duly notified/threw the yellowsonofabitch/into a dungeon, where he died”).

The closing of the poem does not spare society from his attack either and directly addresses the reader in the last lines, “unless statistics lie he was/more brave than me: more blond than/you.” “Blond” in this sense means purer—that is, Olaf has more integrity and bravery than most American citizens. His bravery is grounded in his becoming an individual through his actions, using the spiritual force rather than the weaker weapon violence, as Ammon Hennacy contends. “While most people are content to do their duty, even a duty carried out when the laws and conventions are suspended, individuals perform the most heroic tasks: they remain themselves” (Dumas 85).

Not only do they remain themselves, they become reborn, and that, to Cummings, is our ultimate responsibility as individuals. “We can never be born enough,” Cummings states. “We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing: the mystery happens only and whenever we are faithful to ourselves” (Boire 330). This is as true of conscientious objectors as it is of Cummings, whose rebirth as an artist and poet came after his release from La Ferte Mace. At the end of the novel, the narrator returns home to New York on New Year’s Day, the first day of the new year, a time to be reborn. In the last paragraph of *The Enormous Room*, Cummings writes:

“The tall, impossibly tall, incomparably tall, city shouldering upward into hard sunlight leaned a little through the octaves of its parallel edges, leaningly strode upward into firm, hard, snowy sunlight; the noises of America nearingly throbbed with smokes and hurrying dots which are

men and which are women and which are things new and curious and hard and strange and vibrant and immense, lifting with a great ondulous stride firmly into immortal sunlight” (331).

Thoreau, in the same manner, is reborn after his night in jail: “A change to my eyes came over the scene—the town, and state, and Country, greater than any mere time could effect. I saw yet more distinctly the state in which I lived” (32). From these comparable passages, Cummings has clearly become a descendant of Thoreau and a writer of The Lost Generation; his New York skyline at the end of the novel “symbolizes the life of personal integrity and freedom for which he went to prison” (Dougherty 300).

The New Year 1918 for Cummings is the beginning of his new self. While the Great War would end later that year, Cummings abandoned the conventions of language after his experience in La Ferte, and his unlearning process enabled him to achieve those “things new and curious and hard and strange and vibrant and immense” as a poet reborn into the world, a literary conscientious objector to any and all systems that did not do justice or integrity to the flourishing of the individual.

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