

## **The Enormous Room Remembered**

John M. Gill

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During World War I in the autumn of 1917 E. E. Cummings was interned by the French authorities for about three months in a massive prison building in La Ferté-Macé. Now housing a *lycée*, the building is the locale of most of the action of *The Enormous Room*. In May 1984 at this Lycée des Andaines the students in the class of Terminale G2 and some faculty members fashioned an exhibition of the history of their school building. To accompany this exhibition they issued a pamphlet: "L'Histoire Extraordinaire Du Lycée des Andaines." This eighty-one page pamphlet, tracing the history of their school building, includes eight pages about and by Cummings.

In an article in *Spring 7*, I recounted how on three visits to this Norman town and to this *lycée* my wife, Susan, and I had found no one who had heard of Cummings except the Town Historian, who thought of him as a German spy. Only by rare good fortune did we encounter on a later visit to the *lycée* one of the faculty members who had been engaged in that 1984 exhibition; only through his gracious thoughtfulness did we discover that there had been such an exhibition with its accompanying pamphlet. This was M. Claude Froc, the *Documentaliste* at the school.

When he heard the name E. E. Cummings and obviously recognized us as Americans, M. Froc's face lit up with understanding. He chatted with us at length and showed us a large box of photos and papers from the exhibition of 1984. M. Froc called particular attention to the pamphlet which the twenty-two students, three other faculty members, and he had produced for it. He also showed us a number of photographs and other documents from the exhibition depicting the building during its long history as a seminary, a hospital, a prison, and a school. We had a lengthy and stimulating talk about Cummings, his incarceration there, and *The Enormous Room*. After our previous failures to find out much of anything about Cummings in La Ferté-Macé, it was a delight to discover that not only was Cummings remembered in this place where he and Slater Brown were incarcerated but also that a knowledgeable and thoughtful librarian would share information, photographs, and documents. He offered to loan me four of the more germane photographs and gave me a few documents, such as the invitation to the 1984 exhibition. We discussed at some length the exact location of the Enormous Room. M. Froc led us on an extensive tour of the buildings. As we strolled around we agreed on the location not only of the Enormous Room but also of other areas, such as the dining room, the corridors, stairways, and the *cours* (outdoor exercise yards) mentioned in Cummings' book. Though the building over the years has been greatly altered, we visited the location of the Enormous Room, now a warren of classrooms. Finally, M. Froc, expressing regret that there were no longer any copies of the pamphlet available, photocopied for me the pertinent pages about Cummings.

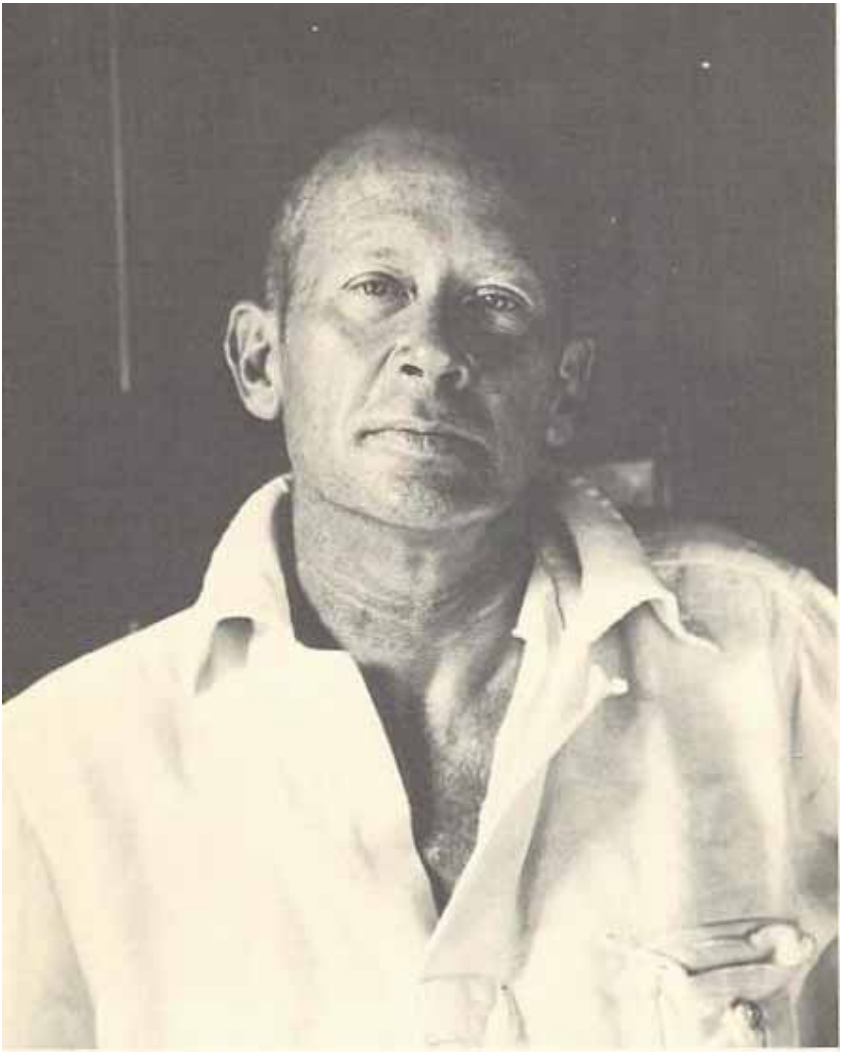
## 1. “UN PRISONNIER CÉLÈBRE: EDOUARD CUMMINGS”

Since the pamphlet “L’Histoire Extraordinaire Du Lycée des Andaines” is not readily available even in France, I will analyze it in some detail and quote from it rather liberally.

There was considerable surprise, according to M. Froc, when the students and faculty arranging the exhibition and writing the pamphlet discovered that an American writer whom they termed “UN PRISONNIER CÉLÈBRE: EDOUARD CUMMINGS” had been incarcerated there when it was a prison. It is apparent that these writers were enthusiastic about this “famous” American author: “E. E. Cummings fut certainement l’un des plus grands poètes que l’Amérique ait produit.”<sup>1</sup> They were proud of his association with their school. About a tenth of their pamphlet is devoted to Cummings and *The Enormous Room*. Its cover sheet succinctly outlines the building’s history as: “séminaire, hôpital, prison, héros de roman, lycée.” Their school building is the “héros” of Cummings’ “roman.”

Cummings is prominently displayed in eight pages of this short eighty-one page pamphlet. These pages begin with a full-page photo of him standing, head slightly tilted, his left arm on his hip (Figure 1). At the back of the pamphlet is a section “ORIGINE DES ILLUSTRATIONS” which references this photo to “Editions Bourgeois.”

The second of the eight pages, headed “UN PRISONNIER CÉLÈBRE: EDOUARD CUMMINGS,” presents a succinct one-page biography. This is a brief factual listing of significant events in the life of “CUMMINGS, Edouard Estlin,” with special reference to his French connections. The authors briefly note the birth of this “poète et peintre américain,” in “Cambrige [sic] (Massachusetts) dans une famille de pasteurs”<sup>2</sup>; they mention his studying at Harvard. They become voluble only in their account of the correspondence that landed Cummings and Slater Brown in La Ferté-Macé. There are throughout a number of minor but unfortunate errors such as: “Il meurt à New-York le 2 Septembre 1952.”<sup>3</sup> Since the authors of the pamphlet capitalize all surnames, one problem that immediately strikes the eye is that Slater Brown becomes BROWN SLATES: “L’ami intime de CUMMINGS, BROWN SLATES a vu sa correspondance saisie.”<sup>4</sup> The authors of the pamphlet do, however, make many telling observations. About Brown’s correspondence, they indicate, “Celle-ci contenait des appréciations fâcheuses sur l’état d’esprit des soldats français, des réflexions décourageantes sur le sort qui attend les troupes américaines.”<sup>5</sup> They add, that even though Cummings’ own correspondence was not censored, “son intimité avec BROWN SLATES, sur lequel il semble régler sa conduite et dont il partage les idées, le rend suspect au point de vue national.”<sup>6</sup> They record that Cummings was incarcerated in September 1917 “au camp de triage de La Ferté-Macé” and that he was freed three months later on December 18. They continue, “En 1922, il écrit son premier ouvrage ‘La salle commune’ (The Enormous Room) dans lequel il raconte son expérience de la grande guerre.”<sup>7</sup> They indicate that after the war Cummings renewed his life in New York “sans oublier Paris où il reviendra souvent.”<sup>8</sup> One final



**Figure 1: Cummings in 1952** (We present here a cropped version of this photo)

French touch is added to Cummings' life after the war, "il est lié avec les surréalistes (notamment avec ARAGON)."<sup>9</sup> Despite the errors, then, this is an interesting and informative brief biography, a fine introduction of Cummings to this French audience.

Having indicated in this short biography that Cummings had published a number of volumes of poems, the authors add in a single sentence that he also wrote plays, a script for a ballet, a travel account of a trip in Russia, and “un volume de souvenirs ‘Je’ (1953).” The next section of the pamphlet is a single page titled “LES OUEVRES DE CUMMINGS,” a schematic listing of a selection of eleven of Cummings’ characteristic writings divided into three columns, “ANNÉES,” “OEUVRES,” and “NATURE.” The chronological listing begins with the 1922 entry “‘La Salle Commune’ (The Enormous Room)” with the comment in the column “NATURE”: “Récit dans lequel il raconte son expérience de la grande guerre.”<sup>10</sup> The book that had been termed in the short biography “un volume de souvenirs ‘Je’” is here recorded as “Moi, six absences de cours.” While most of the comments listed after the works under “NATURE” are brief and factual, indicating “recueil de poèmes” or place of publication (which for “1/20 (21 poèmes - 1 au-dessus de 20)” indicates “Publié à Londres”), or in the case of “Eimi,” simply, “Journal qu’il écrivit lors de son voyage en U.R.S.S.,” three are longer and more informative. The authors note for “Moi, six absences de cours” that it is a “Publication de ses discours qu’il fit à Harvard au cours desquels il réaffirme son amour du complexe et du mouvant contre tout monolithisme et de ‘l’ignorance sensible’ contre tout savoir présomptueux.”<sup>11</sup> For “Lui,” the authors suggest it is a play which is “un portrait de l’artiste en nonconformiste absolu. Pièce injouable: 105 personnages.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, for “Pas de remerciements” they note that there is at the front of the book a list of the publishers who did not wish to print it.

These first three pages of the eight devoted to E. E. Cummings in “L’Histoire Extraordinaire” reveal, I think, that these students and professors gathered an impressive knowledge and understanding of the life and works of the American writer who was incarcerated in their buildings 67 years previously.

The last five pages devoted to Cummings compose a section entitled, “LE CAMP DE TRIAGE DE LA FERTÉ-MACÉ, HÉROS DE ROMAN AMÉRICAIN.” These begin with a brief and most interesting analysis of the reasons Cummings was imprisoned and they continue with almost three pages of quotations from *The Enormous Room*. Though Cummings’ book is entitled “‘La Salle Commune’ (The Enormous Room)” in the brief bibliography in the previous section, here it is called “L’Enorme Chambrée.” This “unique oeuvre en prose” is described as the outcome of the writer’s adventures during World War I. Turning again to the correspondence, the authors suggest, “Son ami SLATES BROWN [sic] et lui-même tentèrent d’écrire une lettre qui passerait à travers la censure mais les autorités françaises ne le comprirent pas ainsi et ils furent tous les deux arrêtés et inculpés de trahison.”<sup>13</sup> The book, then, is Cummings’ impressions while he was imprisoned, “une attaque amère contre les injustices et les dégradations causées par la guerre.”<sup>14</sup> Noting that for Cummings “le monde dans son ensemble était une cause d’émerveillement,” the authors find that “On retrouve beaucoup de ses impressions sur le monde dans son roman mais encore plus sur les hommes.” This brief analysis concludes pungently: “Ses paroles empreintes de colère se déversent comme un tor-

rent et nous frappent par la force d'esprit et l'intrépidité qu'elles dénotent."<sup>15</sup>

This is followed by a brief paragraph of quite general appreciation of *The Enormous Room* by John V. A. Weaver (1893-1938), a minor American poet and novelist who served as literary editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* from 1920 to 1924. Weaver is quoted as saying about Cummings' book:

Le style est celui d'un maître de la littérature, brillant bien que familier, intellectuel bien que profondément humain. Au coeur de ces situations poignantes, des éclairs d'humour authentique donnent plus de vie à chaque image. C'est un livre étonnant, un livre très bien écrit et j'irai même jusqu'à dire que c'est le livre le plus intéressant que la guerre a produit à ce jour . . . [sic]. Une réussite littéraire de haut niveau.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly the French authors of the pamphlet agree.

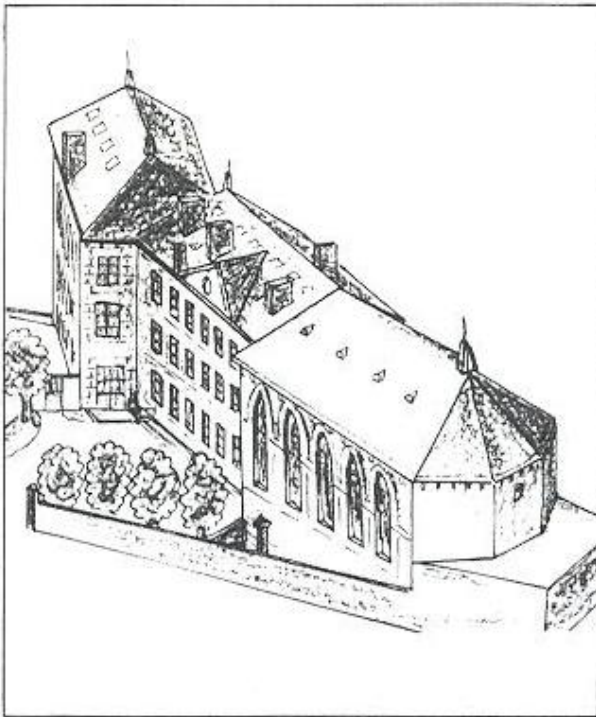
Weaver's paragraph is followed by approximately three pages of quoted passages from an unacknowledged French translation of *The Enormous Room*. There are many omissions from Cummings' text in these paragraphs, but there are no ellipses. The quoted material alternates with brief summarizing interjections by the authors which carry the narrative along.

In this pamphlet on "L'Histoire Extraordinaire" of the building, it is interesting that, in the section of quotations from *The Enormous Room*, so little concerns the building itself; it concentrates more on C's approach to and arrival in La Ferté-Macé (C is the narrator, based on but not fully E. E. Cummings). Also there is nothing on C's activities while incarcerated in the buildings, nothing on any of his fellow prisoners or their guards, no commentary on his life as a prisoner there. The focus in this section of the pamphlet is on the "famous" American writer who happened to be incarcerated in La Ferté-Macé.

These quotations begin with the arrival of C and his two gendarme guards at the railway station in Briouze; they include C's denigration of that Norman town a few miles from La Ferté-Macé. The pause while C drinks at a little spring on that ten-mile night hike from Briouze to La Ferté-Macé is recorded, though not the one before the crucifix. The arrival in the town of La Ferté-Macé is presented at some length along with C's confusion of Macé with Marseilles and his memorable depiction of it translated as "C'était une ville de Faire-Semblant, créée par le sortilège du clair de lune" (*The Enormous Room* 39). The account continues with the description of the buildings as C first sees them, ugly and desolate, his incorrect assumption that it was the town's "gendarmerie," his being taken to the small room of a prison official to establish his identity, and being led then to the "chapelle" to pick up his *paillasse* (mattress stuffed with straw). The quotations continue with C walking down the corridor, climbing the stairs to the doors of the Enormous Room, and staggering with his *paillasse* into the square blackness. It concludes with a single sentence from C's description of the room, giving its dimensions.

Between the second and third pages of these quotations from *The Enormous*

*Room*, the authors of the pamphlet have inserted a page containing three schematic outlines of two sections of the building. There are three sections to the building which, for convenience, I will label “the Church,” “the Middle,” and “the Wing.” As one faces the front of the building, the Church is on the right, the Wing is on the left, and the Middle is set back from the other two, as the drawing of the building on the invitation to the exhibition makes clear (Figure 2). In the outline sketches, then, two are of floors of the Church, one labeled “Réfectoire” and the other “Chapelle”; these show clearly that the refectory in which the inmates ate was a large room on the ground floor of the Church (Figure 3).



**Figure 2: Drawing of the building**

This jibes with the descriptions of these locales which C gives. There is no sketch of the Middle. The third outline sketch is of the Wing. Like the two others, this a simple schematic sketch of the walls giving only the general shape of the building. This sketch is labeled “‘The Enormous Room’ / 3ème niveau / Aile droite.”<sup>17</sup> I will

return to the point made here that the Enormous Room is listed in the Wing and on its third level. It should be noted that “3ème niveau” is the French computation. Americans would term this the fourth story. C, while dwelling in this French building, uses the French designations for the four floors: “ground,” “first,” “second,” and “third.”

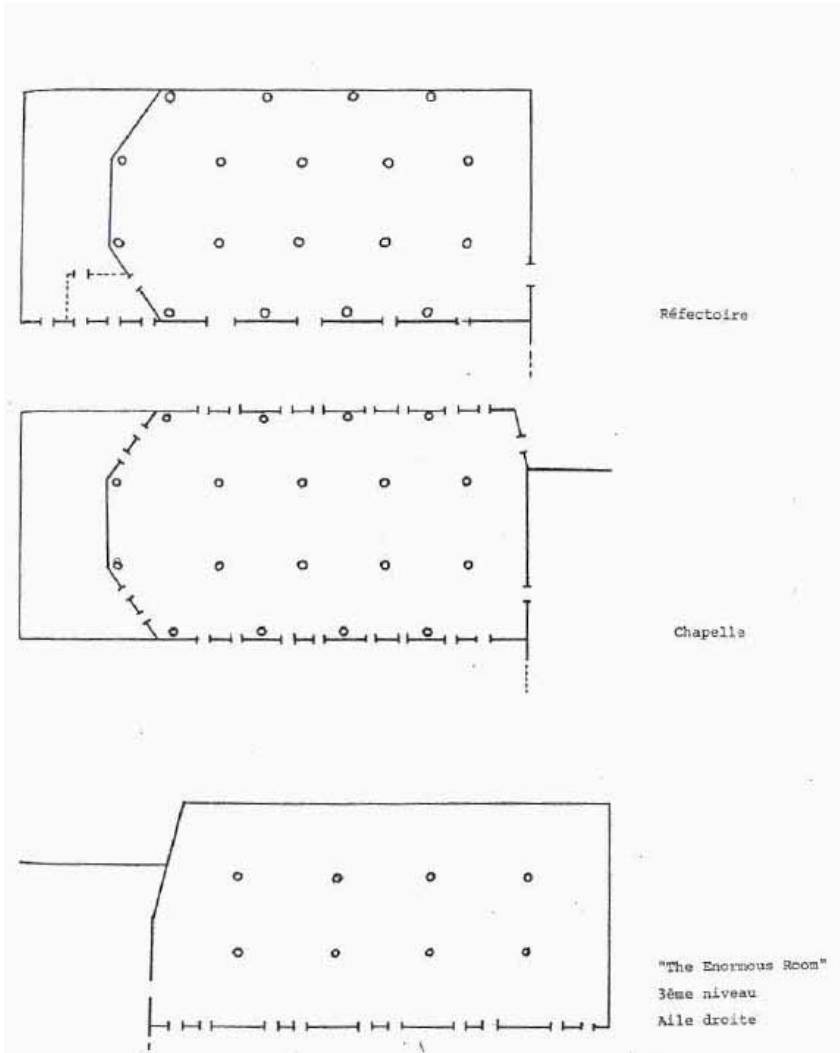


Figure 3: Outline sketches of the Church and Wing

These eight pages devoted to Cummings conclude with a few final comments from the authors of the pamphlet and two photographs. The authors state briefly that “le roman continue ainsi alternant les descriptions du lieu, des personnages qui y vivent, des anecdotes dont l’auteur a conservé le souvenir.”<sup>18</sup> They indicate that above all in the chapters following those they have cited Cummings sketches a “galerie de portraits” of his companions in misfortune but also of “les surveillants.” They note that he ends his book with his liberation and departure from the “triage” of La Ferté-Macé. Although the building is often, as elsewhere in the pamphlet, termed a prison, more technically as C notes, “La Ferté Macé was not properly speaking a prison, but a Porte or Camp de Triage” (60).

The final comment of the students and faculty who authored “L’Histoire Extraordinaire Du Lycée des Andaines” shows considerable pride in the fact that the “famous” American writer E.E.Cummings had been incarcerated in the building which is now their lycée: “Sans doute pouvons-nous affirmer que l’actuel lycée est le seul établissement scolaire français dont les bâtiments servent de cadre à une oeuvre littéraire américaine.”<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 4: Le réfectoire des hommes**

Finally, the eight pages of the pamphlet devoted to Cummings conclude with two photographs. The picture of the men in the dining room, taken some 19 months before Cummings was there, is captioned, “Le réfectoire des hommes — clichés pris



le 20 Février 1916” (Figure 4). The second photograph of a dormitory room is captioned “Grand dortoir des hommes — cliché pris de 20 Février 1916 / ‘L’énorme chambrée ?” (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Grand dortoir des hommes—“L’énorme chambrée ?”**

That question mark inserted by the authors of “L’Histoire Extraordinaire Du Lycée des Andaines” in their caption of the photo of a dormitory room presents interesting conundrums: where is this room and whose room is it?

## **2. “Héros de Roman Américain”**

*The Enormous Room* is a compelling but confusing book. Part of this confusion many readers feel stems from the fact that most of the action of the book—the prison chapters—occurs in a bewildering building. Many readers are as perplexed and nonplused as C is when he awakes on his first morning in La Ferté-Macé. His first words to B on their reunion in the Enormous Room are, “Please be frank . . . Strictly entre nous: am I dreaming, or is this a bughouse?” (46). Readers are often bewildered by the welter of places, the comings and goings hither and yon, the puzzle of staircases and corridors, the maze of barbed-wire fences and rooms and stone walls. Consequently, precisely locating the Enormous Room from clues in the text of Cummings’ book as well as positioning the women’s quarters, the *cours*, the corridors and staircases, the kitchen and dining hall, the fences and stone walls, the gates,

the *cabinots* (isolation cells), and the rooms of the prison authorities will present substantial insights leading to a more comprehensive understanding and appreciation of Cummings' book. Criticism of *The Enormous Room* has in general avoided the depth and wealth of such details in it. For many readers the book remains a confusing hodgepodge.

This is especially significant in that C, after his account of his first day in La Ferté-Macé, asking "where does Time come in at all?" abandons a chronological approach to the timelessness of prison life: "the diary or time method cannot possibly do justice to timelessness" (82-83). This timelessness in *The Enormous Room* is not a wispy vagueness. C's method of timelessness is anchored in fact and detail. Consequently, without a linear narrative thread or "the time method" in C's mode of presentation, attention to the details of locale becomes even more crucial. A careful analysis of these details can help clarify some of the confusion and also at the same time reveal more of the book's subtlety and complexity.

I will begin such an analysis by noting the dilemma provoked by that question mark in the caption of the photo, "L'énorme chambre?" Discussion of the reason for the question mark will lead directly to one of the crucial aspects of the Enormous Room itself, one that firmly establishes its precise location from evidence in the book. Next, I will explore the significance of such positioning of the room by discussing the location of the women's quarters as well as the men's and women's *cours* and other locales, suggesting that motives for some of the confusing actions the characters undertake lie in the relative location of areas of the building. Understanding basic elements of the building—for example, that there are two staircases, that the male inmates must use the ground-floor corridor and not others, that the women can see into the men's *cour* but that the reverse is not true, that most of the male inmates' activities outside the Enormous Room itself center around one specific area—all this helps in understanding *The Enormous Room*. Using the text with significant assistance from the photos in the pamphlet, I will present something like a tour of the building with a brief explication of its major areas and their functions in C's narration. It is my hope that the confusion that many readers feel will thus be alleviated.

The question mark in the caption "L'énorme chambre?" suggests, then, that the authors of the pamphlet were unsure if the old photo of what is clearly a dormitory room with *paillasses* on the floor, taken when their school was a prison during World War I, was in actuality a picture of the dormitory lived in and described by Cummings. M. Froc pointed out the reason for this hesitation: the oblong windows in the photo. The thought was that if this was a picture of the Enormous Room, the room must have been in the Middle section of the building because of the oblong shape of the windows there. If, on the other hand, the room was on the third floor of the Wing as specifically stated in the outline sketch (Figure 3), then, because of the arched windows here in the Wing (Figure 6), this might not be a photo of the Enormous Room.

With the question mark in mind, the initial task is to establish from clues in Cummings' book the precise location of the Enormous Room. First of all, concern-



Figure 6: The front of the building



Figure 7: The back of the building

ing the windows which were the cause of the question mark, there are three compelling clues from C's descriptions of them which locate the Enormous Room in the Wing and not in the Middle. The first is the number of windows on the front and back sides of the building; there are nine in the Middle section and ten in the Wing (Figure 6 for the front and 7 for the back). C specifically mentions that there are "ten windows" on the back side of the Enormous Room (52).

The second reason for believing that The Enormous Room is in the Wing and not in the Middle is that, though C does not specifically mention that the windows of the room are arched as are those of the top floor of the Wing (but not those of the Middle), it is informative to note that those arched windows are similar to those in the Church. Along with "the two rows of wooden pillars" and the "vaulted ceiling" which C describes as elements of the Enormous Room and which are also evident in the Church (Figure 8), these arched windows may be part of the reason for C's significant suggestion that the Enormous Room is "unmistakably ecclesiastical in feeling" (50); in fact, he terms them "ecclesiastical windows" (148).

The third and perhaps most incontrovertible evidence from Cummings' book that the Enormous Room is in the Wing is C's description of the peepholes in the windows there. When he awakes on his first morning in this strange room, he inspects it, strolling its length with B, the character based on Slater Brown, and with other inmates. He notes that there are windows on all four sides of the room. Since there are three separate but contiguous sections of the building, this is surprising until one realizes that the Wing and the Church jut out from the Middle (Figures 2 and 6). C notes that the windows on three sides are "carefully rendered useless"; that is, they are boarded up for security reasons by the French prison authorities. As a result, the inmates can see out clearly from only the "ten windows" on the back side of the building not boarded up (51-52). C discovers that first morning that in two places in the boarded-up windows the inmates have created peepholes which give them at least limited views: "the inhabitants had contrived a number of peep-holes—one in the door-end and one in the left-hand long wall [as he strolls down the room with his back to the door]; the former commanding the gate by which I had entered, the latter a portion of the street by which I had reached the gate" (51). This gate and the street are in front of the building.

These peepholes are a singular and significant element in the life of the inmates of the Enormous Room. The "common peep-hole, situated at the door-end" commands, C later writes, "a somewhat fragmentary view of the gate together with the arrivals, male and female" of the new inmates (137). One day for example, the men, hearing the announcing bell, rush "to the window facing the entrance gate"; here, C notes, "at least two dozen men were at the peep-hole, fighting and gesticulating and slapping each other's backs with joy." They are trying to watch the momentous arrival of one of the Delectable Mountains, Jean le Nègre (197). Then, of the sad day when B and other inmates are shipped to the horrible prison at Précigné, C writes, "through the little peephole I caught a glimpse of them, entering the street" (228).



**Figure 8: Interior of the church**

These peepholes, then, affording an extremely limited view of the gate and the street from the blocked windows at the front of the building, demonstrate that the Enormous Room is in the Wing. One photo from the pamphlet is of guards at the gate on the street during the time the *lycée* was a prison; this gate is directly in front of the Middle (Figure 9). This photo shows that the windows of the jutting-out end of the Church look out over the gate. The windows of the jutting-out end of the Wing do likewise (Figure 2). As the outline sketch indicates, the Church clearly does not contain the Enormous Room (Figure 3). Consequently, the peephole C mentions as being in the door-end of the Enormous Room with its view of the gate is in one of the windows on that jutting-out end of the Wing. The other peephole in “the long wall” of ten blocked windows has a view of the street below.

None of this can apply to the Middle. C describes two distinct peepholes on two

walls, both, as we have just seen, in the front of the building, one at the “door end” at a window overlooking the gate and a separate one in “the long wall” with a view of the street. Since the Middle juts out in the back, not the front (Figure 6), it has only one wall which overlooks the street and the gate, the “long wall” with its nine windows. Consequently there is no “door end” window in the front of the Middle for that second peephole which C records. Since the Middle juts out in the back, that would be the only place there could be for C’s second peephole. Palpably there is none here: a peephole in the back would be pointless since, as C describes on many occasions, the male inmates have ten clear windows facing in that direction. He describes many sights and many events seen from the back windows of the Enormous Room. For example, on his first morning there he comments on seeing “the washing-shed” behind the Wing, the “merest fraction of the barbed-wire pen” which will turn out to be the women’s *cour* behind the Middle, and the “bleak lifeless abject landscape of scrubby woods” in the distance (51 -52). Later he notes that he “looked from a window in The Enormous Room” and saw the wife of the Wanderer giving their baby a bath in a pail (165). And again, “We looked out of the windows which composed one side of the otherwise windowless Enormous Room; looked down, and saw—just outside the wall of the building . . . [four of the women inmates]. They were all individually intoxicated” (119). Likewise many events occur at the open windows in the back: the hilarious episode of the inmates lowering a pail on an improvised rope of ties, shoe laces, and belts to obtain water; the *planton* (guard) ordered to fire but not able to find his cartridges (178-180); the spitting contest out an open window (89).

In short, C’s description of the windows and their peepholes convincingly rules out the Middle as the location of the Enormous Room. There is no other place in the complex which could have had those two peephole views from the front of the building as well as those ten clear windows at the back except the Wing.

It is of crucial assistance in understanding the uses of the building in Cummings’ months at La Ferté-Macé to realize that the French authorities incarcerated both women and men there. One of the major tasks of the *plantons* was to keep the two inmate groups separate. C indicates that the “authorities had miscalculated a little” in that the men could see, as I have noted, “a merest fraction of the barbed-wire pen,” that is, a minute corner of the women’s *cour*, from the back windows of the Enormous Room. He was told his first morning that a *planton* had orders to keep “les femmes out of this corner of their cour at the point of a bayonet to deprive them of the sight of their admirers,” since the windows of the Enormous Room were “thronged by fighting men at the time of the girls’ promenade.” He adds that it was the punishment of “pain sec or cabinot for any of either sex who were caught communicating with each other” (52).

The women inmates’ quarters, then, had to be in a different section of the building from the men’s in the Wing, or else the groups and individuals would be constantly meeting on the stairs and corridors. C definitely places the women inmates’ quarters in the Middle; indeed, he terms it “the women’s wing” (58).



**Figure 9: Plantons at the gate**

On his first morning in the Enormous Room, C, like all new inmates, is obliged to take a bath. The bath attendant, Reeshar, leads him out of the Enormous Room down the stairs and outside; they hurry “following the wall of the building,” that is, the side of the Middle that juts out in the back. C continues, “At the corner, which I had seen from the window upstairs, the barbed-wire fence eight feet in height began.” After going through a gate, C is “following along a wall at right angles to the first”; that is, he is walking along the back wall of the Middle in the direction of the Church. He finds himself in a lane between “walls of wire and stone . . . ; on my left, barbed-wire separated me from the famous cour in which les femmes se promènent . . . ; on my right, grey sameness of stone . . .” After a few steps in this lane between the stone back wall of the Middle and the wire that is a fence of the women’s *cour*, C notices, “right over my head, the grey stone curdled with a female darkness”; hearing “a putrescent explosion of thick wriggling laughter,” he “started, looked up, and encountered a window stuffed with four savage fragments of crowding Face,” then, above and behind these, “a single horror of beauty—a crisp vital head, a young ivory actual face . . .” (55). These are five women inmates at a window in their quarters, a window in the back of the Middle directly above the women’s *cour*.

There is another “stone wall” here that C mentions. He describes the women’s *cour* as a rectangle “with a stone wall at the further end of it and otherwise surrounded



by wire” (55). One of the three wire fences confining the women in their *cour* is the one C has just passed. This “stone wall at the further end” of the women’s *cour* should not be confused with the stone wall of the lane which is the back wall of the Middle. This second stone wall is one of the fences of the women’s *cour*; it is joined to the building and juts out at right angles from it. It is a joint fence for the women’s and men’s *cours*.

The first time he is in the men’s *cour* C perceives that “the two *cours* adjoined. They were separated by a stone wall ten feet in height, which I had already remarked (while en route to les douches) as forming one end of the *cour des femmes*” (57). Since the women’s *cour* is right behind the Middle, the men’s *cour* next to it is behind the Church. The women, therefore, from their windows in the Middle could see over that stone wall into the men’s *cour*, and the men could see them at their windows. The duties of the *plantons* in the men’s *cour* included “to report any signs, words, tokens, or other immoralities exchanged by prisoners with girls sitting in the windows of the women’s wing . . . , also names of said girls, it being *défendu* to exhibit any part of the female person at a window while the men were on promenade . . .” (58). Needless to say, this did not stop the constant flirtation. Like the women’s *cour*, the men’s had barbed-wire fences but only on two sides; the other two sides, one of which is the joint wall with the women’s *cour*, were stone walls running at right angles to the building and parallel to each other.

Because it runs as far as the building itself and has no gate in it, the joint wall separating the women’s and men’s *cours* forces C to take a circuitous route that first morning as he leaves his bath and is ordered to go to the men’s *cour*. His route is confusing. He leaves the bath and comes out of the building into the same lane of stone and wire by which he had come. However, because of that stone fence separating the two *cours*, he cannot continue the way he had come and walk straight ahead to the men’s *cour* next to the women’s. Rather, he must walk back toward the Wing. Consequently, he proceeds back the way he came past the women’s *cour* “filled with women, girls, children, and a baby or two.” C adds, “I thought I had recognized one of the four terrors who had saluted me from the window . . .” He exits by the barbed-wire gate he had entered and goes back into the Middle. Then, once inside, he must walk back the other way; now with his back to the Wing he proceeds “down a long gloomy corridor” towards the men’s *cour* behind the Church. At the end of this ground-floor corridor, he goes through a door, finds himself outside in the same kind of barbed-wire and stone lane he experienced walking beside the women’s *cour*, and enters the men’s *cour* through “a little dingy gate in the barbed-wire fence” (56). He is now only a few feet from where he had been when he exited from his bath; that high stone wall separating the two *cours* intervenes.

Linking the Wing and the Church, the ground-floor corridor C walks down on this occasion is also the invariable route used by the male inmates whenever they leave the Enormous Room, head down their stairs, and walk to their *cour*, the dining room, the kitchen, the Church itself, or other areas and rooms at the Church end of this corridor. Once they are outside the Enormous Room proper, most of their



activities occur at sites around this end of the corridor.

One should note that there are staircases at both ends of this ground-floor corridor. The staircase outside the Enormous Room, that is, the one at the joining of the Wing and the Middle, is the route to and from the room. For convenience, I will term this the Wing staircase. The male inmates use this Wing staircase on their way to and from the ground-floor corridor. Almost none of the action of the book takes place at this Wing end of that ground-floor corridor.

The other end of this ground-floor corridor and the other staircase, the one at the joining of the Middle and the Church (I will term this the Church staircase), have a far more significant role in the activities of the inmates. At the Church end of this corridor near the bottom of this staircase is the door leading outside to the men's *cour*; in this area also are the kitchen, the dining room, some of the *cabinots*, the doctor's office, and some other small rooms. The male inmates are often led up this Church staircase for sessions with various prison authorities, such as the *Surveillant* and the *Gestionnaire*. This is the staircase by which the women come and go to all their activities outside their quarters on the first and second floors of the Middle.

Some examples will clarify all this. His first night in La Ferté-Macé, bewildered, exhausted after the long walk from Briouze, C recognizes that there are two staircases in the building. He is first led "up a stair-case" to the *Surveillant's* room for his initial interview. Afterwards, he descends "the terribly worn stairs" and is led off the staircase into the Church where he was told to pick up his *paillasse*. Then: "Back,down a corridor,up more stairs" where he is confronted by a door with two huge padlocks, the door of the Enormous Room (40-42). On that first night, then, he uses both the Church and the Wing staircases. The next morning, his first in the building, he is directed to the baths and to the men's *cour* which he reaches, as we have seen, only by walking a circuitous route. Leaving the men's *cour* that morning, C describes the return to the Enormous Room: "We filed from the cour,through the door,past a little window which I was told belonged to the kitchen,down the clammy corridor,up the three flights of stairs,to the door of The Enormous Room" (63). Thus, the inmates walked up the Wing staircase to the top or "third" floor (French designation) to enter their room. These "three flights of stairs" to the Enormous Room, along with others of C's comments, such as his reference to "the wing of the building whose troisième étage we occupied" (179), demonstrate that the Enormous Room was on the third or top floor of the Wing.

C often mentions the Church staircase at the other end of the corridor along with those other areas and activities converging around it. He describes in detail, for example, how he and his fellow inmates went from the Enormous Room to the dining room on his first visit there. He notes, "At the end of the corridor,opposite the kitchen window,there was a flight of stairs." Here the *Surveillant* stands on the third stair from the bottom of this Church staircase; passing him, C expects the line of men "to continue ahead through the door and into the open air,as I had myself done in going from les douches to le cour,but it turned a sharp right and then sharp left,and I perceived a short hall,almost hidden by the stairs." And so,walking through this

hall, C in “a moment” enters the dining room, which is on the ground floor under the Church (66-67).

In this area also is the Doctor’s office. For his medical inspection C is led out of the men’s *cour* “through the little gate in the barbed-wire fence into the building” where he proceeds to the Doctor’s office there on the ground floor (74). Likewise, the Church staircase here is used by the men ordered to the rooms of some of the other prison officials. Leaving the Doctor’s office, for example, C is ordered by the Black Holster (the head guard) to proceed: “I turned to the stairs on the left, and climbed.” At the landing on the first floor, the door opposite him stands open; C looks in and sees the *Surveillant*. This is the room where C is led on his first night for his initial interview. C is on this landing when “a scurrying and tittering made me look left, along a dark and particularly dirty hall.” Hearing women’s voices, C notes, “I almost fell with surprise” and he wonders, “Were not these shadow faces peering a little boldly at me from doors? How many girls were there—it sounded as if there were a hundred.” Some of the women had rooms on this first floor; others, as we will see, were on the second. Then the Black Holster “gave me a good shove in the direction of another flight of stairs.” Ascending again, “at the top of this flight I was confronted by a second hall.” He is now on the second floor where a shut door “indicated the presence of a being directly over the *Surveillant*’s holy head” (74-75). This was the *Gestionnaire*, who doled out some of C’s money to him. Leaving, C goes down “the two flights” of stairs. Walking “along the dank hall on the ground floor,” C regrets that “no whispers and titters had greeted my descent. Probably the furious planton had seen to it that les femmes kept their rooms in silence.” Finally, “We ascended the three flights at the farther end of the corridor, the planton of all plantons unlocked and unbolted the door at the top landing, and I was swallowed by The Enormous Room” (78-79).

It is important to note in this account that C does not return to the Enormous Room from his visits to the prison officials on the Church staircase the direct way along an upper-floor corridor; these are corridors with women’s quarters. The rules of separation of the two inmate groups force him to go down the Church staircase to use the ground-floor corridor before mounting the Wing staircase to the Enormous Room. Further evidence that the male inmates did not traverse the upstairs corridors is demonstrated when Judas, acting as “chef de chambre,” and desiring (with hearty blessings from his fellow inmates) to demonstrate to a visiting inspector the hideous quality of their coffee, leaves the Enormous Room and, instead of merely walking down an upstairs corridor from the Wing to the Church staircase, carries the pail “downstairs, along the hall, and up one flight” to a room where the *Directeur* himself, in the presence of the investigating official, is forced to declare that the coffee is “perfectly impossible” (109).

While the men come and go by way of the Wing staircase, the women use the Church staircase. There is a single exception to this; some of the women use the Wing staircase in “a somewhat exciting incident” C sketches. For an assignation with some male inmates, completely contrary to the rules, of course, “three or more girls . . . managed in the course of the afternoon to escape from their quarters on the second

floor,rush down the hall and upstairs,and gain that landing which was the only and well-locked door of The Enormous Room” (93-94). They do, needless to say, find a way to get through that locked door.

The men’s *cour*, the kitchen, the dining room, and the *cabinots* loom large in the day-to-day activities of the inmates at La Ferté-Macé. All are near the Church staircase end of the ground-floor corridor. C illustrates the relative location of the men’s *cour* and the kitchen, for example, with his account of the men proceeding from the men’s *cour* through the door into the building; then, as we have seen, they pass a little window of the kitchen on their way down the corridor. The dining room is also on the ground floor of the Church near the Church staircase. In addition, C also mentions that a “little room is in the rear of the cuisine,a little room filled with the inexpressibly clean and soft odour of newly-cut wood.” C and B split wood here (104). C also saws wood in the lane between the building and the barbed-wire fence of the men’s *cour*, the lane the men use coming out of the *cour* and entering the door of the building: “In the little space outside the cuisine, between the building and la *cour*,I sawed away” (231). Here also, in good weather, the men peeled potatoes for their soup (164).

Also in this general area at the Church-end of the ground-floor corridor and the Church staircase, C sees “in one corner of the *salle à manger* a little door”; this opens on “a sort of minute bar and a little closet filled with what appeared to be groceries and tobacco” (69). This is the canteen which C and B, in deference to the more impoverished of their fellow inmates, use sparingly. On the outside of the building near here, the inmates leave through a gate to “catch water” at an old pump up the street: “A little way from the *cour*,the stone wall which formed one of the boundaries(and which ran parallel to the other stone wall dividing the *cours*)met the prison building;and here was a huge double-door,twice padlocked,through which the water seekers passed on to the street” (62). This gate is at the back “at the end of the building itself [that is, the Church end] or in other words the canteen.” The men went directly into the street there, then to the right, in front of the building up the incline some 300 yards to the pump to “catch water” for the cook (157).

Cells for punishment, which C terms “*cabinots*,” are a real horror of La Ferté-Macé. Three of these are on the ground floor at the foot of the Church staircase in the general area I have been discussing. These small cells had “no light and no floor,and the ground . . . was always wet and often a good many inches under water”; the occupants, women or men, were forced to sleep “on the ground on some planks” (61-62). One such *cabinot* is “at the foot of the stairs and opposite the cuisine.” On one occasion, C sees this being spruced up; even a bed is installed for the view of visiting inspectors. Other *cabinots*, C says, were “upstairs” (113). At one of the ground-floor *cabinots* occurs that episode which C insists is “the experience,à propos les femmes,which meant and will always mean more to me than any other,the scene which is a little more unbelievable than perhaps any scene that it has even been my privilege to witness . . .” This is a fire with “a peculiarly nauseous choking whitish-blue smoke.” C and the men watch five or six *plantons* “carrying out of the nearest

cabinot two girls, who looked perfectly dead.” The men hear the screams and stare at all this as they leave their *cour* on their way back to the Enormous Room. C describes the *Directeur* at the scene: “the Fiend Himself . . . paused, quivering, on the fourth stair from the bottom of the flight leading to the women’s quarters.” Some of the women as well as the *Surveillant* and *Gestionnaire* also witness this scene from that Church staircase (123-124). Another memorable event also occurs in this same area. After a fight in the Enormous Room, Jean le Nègre is removed to one of these ground floor *cabinots* by some *plantons*. As the door is opened and he is about to enter, some women descend their staircase carrying their water pails. Egged on by the women, Jean takes on the four *plantons*: “He took the nearest *planton*, and tossed him down the corridor so that he struck against the door at the end of it” (210-211).

While much of the activity of the male inmates which C describes occurs, of course, in the Enormous Room itself, most of that occurring outside the room is centered around the Church-end of the ground-floor corridor and the Church staircase. If the reader recognizes this factor as well as the relative location of these areas, C’s accounts become much less confusing.

### 3. “L’énorme chambrée?”

That question mark in the pamphlet photo of a dormitory captioned “L’énorme chambrée?” lingers. Like all readers who treasure Cummings’ book, I would be delighted to know that Figure 5, a photo printed in “L’Histoire Extraordinaire Du Lycée des Andaines” of a World War I dormitory room, is a picture of the Enormous Room. However, as M. Claude Froc pointed out, some of the faculty and students who worked on the exhibition and the pamphlet felt that the oblong shape of the windows seems to place the room depicted in the photo in the Middle. Yet, the one unassailable fact about all this is that the Enormous Room was the top floor of the Wing. What, then, is this a picture of?

Could it after all be of the Enormous Room? The room in this photo does seem to have the look we would expect from C’s description. Here are the famous pillars; here are a number of *paillasses* on the floor; here are clear windows on one side. However, a number of sticking points remain, such as the oblong, not arched, shape of the windows and the clear indication in the photo that the room does not have the “vaulted ceiling 25 or 30 feet above the floor” that C noted (50).

There seems, also, to be a window or a part of a window on the right of this photo. C carefully points out that one of the two peepholes is located in a boarded-up window in the “long wall” opposite the ten clear windows. This window in the photo is on a long wall opposite clear windows, but it is certainly not from a peephole. However, there may be an answer to this: the photo was taken about nineteen months before C arrived in La Ferté-Macé; could the prison authorities have decided to board up the windows in the interval? On the other hand, there is no indication that the arched windows of the top floor of the Wing were somehow altered into an oblong shape conforming to the windows in the photo. C refers to the windows as

“ecclesiastical” (148). Even more telling is the fact that the authors of the pamphlet, students and faculty who were intimate with the building now their lycée and writing its history, did not in their extensive research discover that the arched windows of the top floor of the Wing had been reconstructed. If they had, there would be no reason some of them would have thought that the shape of the windows in the photo might place the Enormous Room in the Middle. Likewise, there is no indication that the ceiling was altered. The question mark in “L’énorme chambre?” lingers.

Could this be a photograph of the women inmate’s quarters in the Middle?

As we have seen, C refers to the Middle as “the women’s wing” (58). He places the women’s quarters there indicating that the women, like the men, have clear windows in the back. The women “sitting in their windows” in the Middle could watch the antics of the inmates in the men’s *cour*: “The most open gestures were indulged in for the benefit of several girls who had braved the official wrath and were enjoying the morning at their windows” (59). There is no question but that the women’s quarters are in the Middle.

The photo of the guards at the gate shows some of the windows on the front side of the Middle (Figure 9). Some of these are shuttered in squares; at least one of these squares is open in an otherwise shuttered window. In the photo of the dormitory room the light on the right seems to be coming through a window but one smaller than the oblong windows on the left (Figure 5). Could this be a square or squares of an otherwise shuttered window, a window shuttered like those in the photo of the front of the Middle?

There are *paillasses* on the floor of the dormitory room in the photo. The women as well as the men had *paillasses* on the floor in their quarters. At least once C observes the women’s quarters through an open door. Pondering the suffering of his fellow male inmates who had to sleep on the floor (he and B had “ambulance beds”) (225), C notes that he “recollected glancing through an open door into the women’s quarters, at the risk of being noticed by the planton in whose charge I was at the time (who, fortunately, was stupid even for a planton, else I should have been well punished for my curiosity) and beholding *paillasses* identical in all respects with ours reposing on the floor . . .” C suggests this is a large room with a number of women living there, including a baby, “girls of eleven and fifteen,” and a “dozen or so older females” (121). These women may have included some wives of the prisoners, “*femmes honnêtes* . . . voluntary prisoners, who had preferred to freedom this living in proximity to their husbands. Many of them had children; some babies” (60). C says specifically, “The Wanderer’s wife and his two daughters and his baby lived in the women’s quarters” (162). Other women there included the *putains* (prostitutes). Those women involved in the “exciting incident” who “escape from their quarters on the second floor” are specifically named in a list of *putains* (94, 118). That many women lived on this second floor is indicated by C’s noting that at times while he and B and other male inmates are “waiting their turn to enter the bureau of M. le Gestionnaire” on the second floor or “ascending the stairs” there, that is, the Church staircase, they see five or six women carrying pails filled “to the brim of everyone knew what” (114). Not all

the women live on the second floor of the Middle; some also live on the first. The Spy's daughter (presumably as a reward for his "squealing") "lived downstairs in a separate room apart from les putains" (145). When C outside the *Surveillant's* room on the first floor thinks he hears and sees women down the hall, he estimates there may be "a hundred" (75).

If the photo is not of the Enormous Room on the top floor of the Wing, it could be of one of the rooms of the women in the Middle, possibly that large women's quarters C saw with the *paillasses* on the floor.

#### 4. *The Enormous Room Remembered*

In C's description of the locations and the relative proximity to one another of the diverse places in this prison building, there is only one significant inconsistency. On that first baffling morning, still nonplused by the stultifying situation in which he suddenly finds himself, C is accosted by the bath attendant who pell-mell rushes him downstairs to his required bath. He finds himself hurried out of the Enormous Room, "down two dirty flights of narrow mutilated stairs," and out of the building to his bath (54). This would place the room on the second floor instead of on the third. However, in view of C's references to "three flights" of stairs from the ground floor corridor to the Enormous Room (63, 79), as well as his statement that a window of the room is "three stories above terra firma" and his flat assertion that it is the "troisième étage we occupied" (179), the "two flights" of stairs C mentions is inconsistent. Interestingly, another episode of heightened emotion, this in *Crime and Punishment*, includes a similar discrepancy about the number of flights of stairs. Sidney Monas in his "Translator's Preface" to the novel notes that Dostoyevsky "left some inconsistencies"; these include, "Escaping after the murder, Raskolnikov goes down three flights of stairs where clearly two are meant" (vii). In C's case, at least, perhaps the inconsistency is meant to suggest the bewilderment of the moment.

Even before he entered the prison building, E. E. Cummings himself was also bewildered. He had misunderstood where he was. He thought that his gendarme guards during their grueling ten-mile night hike to his prison were telling him that it was in Marseilles. He soon recognized his error; his huge three-sectioned prison building was in La Ferté-Macé.

Now it is a *lycée*. Students and faculty were surprised and delighted to discover that this "famous" American writer, as they called him, had been a prisoner in their building and had written a book about his experiences there. They included him in an exhibition of the history of their building and in a pamphlet which displayed photographs of him and of the buildings at the time of his incarceration there. Readers of *The Enormous Room* should be grateful to them for their enthusiastic, assiduous, and insightful work on Cummings. I thank M. Claude Froc for his invaluable assistance and for his generous permission to publish excerpts and photographs from "L'Histoire Extraordinaire Du Lycée des Andaines."

It is inspiring to know that E.E.Cummings and his *The Enormous Room* are remembered with acclaim in a small rural Norman town where he was imprisoned so many years ago.

—Palo Alto, CA

## Notes

1. "E.E.Cummings was certainly one of the greatest poets that America has produced."
- All translations are by the author.
2. "American poet and painter" in "Cambridge, Massachusetts, in a family of ministers."
3. "He dies in New York [sic] on September 2, 1952 [sic]."
4. "The correspondence of Cummings' intimate friend Slater Brown was seized."
5. "This contained some troublesome estimates of the morale of the French soldiers, some discouraging remarks about the fate which awaited the American troops."
6. "his intimacy with Slater Brown, on whom he seems to base his conduct and whose ideas he shares, make him suspect from the national point of view."
7. "In 1922, he wrote his first work 'The Common Room' (The Enormous Room) in which he relates his experience of the Great War."
8. "without forgetting Paris to which he will return often."
9. "he is linked with the surrealists (notably with Aragon)."
10. "Narrative in which he relates his experience of the Great War."
11. "Publication of the lectures which he gave at Harvard in the course of which he reaffirms his love of the complex and the ambiguous against all monolithisms and of 'sensitive ignorance' against all presumptuous knowledge."
12. "a portrait of the artist as absolute nonconformist. Unstageable play: 105 characters."
13. "His friend Slater Brown and he himself tried to write a letter which would pass through censorship, but the French authorities looked at it differently and both of them were arrested and accused of treason."
14. "a bitter attack against the injustice and degradations caused by the war."
15. "the world as a whole was a cause of wonder . . . One again finds many of his impressions of the world in his novel but still more on mankind . . . His words stamped with anger pour out like a torrent and strike us by the vigor of the thought and the integrity which they denote."
16. "The style is that of a master of literature, brilliant although informal, intellectual although profoundly human. At the heart of these poignant situations, some flashes of authentic humor give more life to each image. It is an astonishing book, a very well written book, and I will even go so far as to say that it is the most interesting book that the war has produced to this day . . . A literary success at a high level."
17. "'The Enormous Room' / 3rd level / Right Wing"
18. "The book continues in this fashion, alternating descriptions of the place, the

people who live there, [and] anecdotes which the author has remembered.”  
19. “Without doubt we are able to assert that the current *lycée* is the only French school establishment whose buildings serve as the setting of an American literary work.”

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