Radically Avant-Garde? The Strange History of E. E. Cummings' *The Enormous Room*, Reconsidered

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> The objections that are raised against the "freakishness" of modernist poetry are usually supported by quotations from E. E. Cummings.
>
> —Laura Riding and Robert Graves, 1927

In 1922, a banner year for literary modernism that saw the publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a little known painter sent a letter to his younger sister, advising her to change her thinking on art. His opinion was quite straightforward; she should

> [put] aside all lackadaisical antique 5th hand notions about "Beauty" "Ugliness" "The Right" "The Art of Living" "Education" "The Best" etcetera ad infin…. Nothing can possibly enter and be entertained by the mind of anyone except as some-body's tool…—except:the person or mind in question has FIRST OF ALL,FEARLESSLY wiped out,THOROUGHLY AND UN-SENTIMENTALLY defecated WHAT HAS BEEN TAUGHT HIM OR HER. (*Letters* 84-85)

That such advice should come from E. E. Cummings is perhaps surprising, given the reputation he enjoys for being a supremely playful sentimentalist. However, while he does indeed maintain those qualities, they should not obscure a very different quality that coexists with Cummings' playfulness, particularly in his early work: a radical vision for change in art and politics. In 1922 he was living in Paris finishing the poems published a year later as *Tulips and Chimneys*, a collection that would mark his arrival in poetry and lead him to focus his artistic energy in that form.[1] Also in that year, the leftist press Boni & Liveright published his aesthetically experimental and politically controversial *The Enormous Room*, a "miscalled novel," as Cummings later called it (*six* 3), in which he relates his unusual experience of being imprisoned by the French during World War I. As a critique of governmental ineptitude and the cruelties of wartime it was hardly unique, if nonetheless compelling. In addition to the syntactical and visual experimentation that will mark his entire career, the book's jarring combination of autobiography, fiction, history, epic, and war-novel, makes clear Cum-

mings' "unsentimental defecation" of traditional notions of "Beauty" and "The Right." Yet these are not merely the idiosyncratic choices of an eccentric nonconformist. Cummings' early effort to "fearlessly wipe out" his cultural education participates in a growing rejection of established Euro-American artistic and political institutions, a rejection galvanized and energized by the European avant-garde.

Reaction to *The Enormous Room* upon its publication was polarized, and both criticism and praise were expressed as often in political terms as aesthetic ones. Many critics recognized the art movements Cummings drew upon, such as Cubism, Futurism, Vorticism, and Dada—groups that, along with Surrealism, Peter Bürger labels the "historical avant-garde"—movements which came and thrived at a specific cultural moment when art that avoided or subverted the institutionally and commercially supported styles carried an intense, politically oppositional charge.[2] Unable to categorize it generically, many early critics of *The Enormous Room* dismissed the art of the text for the same reasons they dismissed all things "modern": unnecessary opaqueness, lack of beauty and passion, and loss of the "great" tradition. Culturally conservative publications like *The New York Times* attacked his book, mixing notions of art with politics. An incensed Thomas L. Masson asked in *The New York Times Book Review*, "if he really likes the Germans and thinks them 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?" (10). Masson went on to declare: "This is a Bolshevist book none the less because it is vague" (23). Negative appraisals of this sort continue through at least 1930, when R. P. Blackmur's "Notes on E. E. Cummings' Language" attacks the poet for being a part of "the anti-culture group; what has been called at various times vorticism, futurism, dadaism, surrealism, and so on" (1). For early reviewers, no matter their political or aesthetic stripe, the formal and political interest of Cummings' avant-garde style were inseparable.

Likewise, this conflation of political and aesthetic sensibility characterizes the novel's supporters, since those who could get beyond the fact that this "novel" was not exactly a novel had a tendency to support it in both political and artistic terms. Friend and Harvard classmate John Dos Passos reviewed *The Enormous Room* for *The Dial*, claiming, "It's not as 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 heav-

en" (qtd. in Headrick 47). This line of praise continued to the early 1930s as well. Looking back in 1933, Isidor Schneider found, for better or worse, that the book had consistently eluded categorization, praising the fact that "in *The Enormous Room* art and protest were projected together by the same impulse" (qtd. in Headrick 55).

While early Cummings criticism reads his avant-garde aesthetic *as* avant-garde, and views this association in political terms, criticism after World War II tends to move away from the social and political context of his early work in order to emphasize the degree to which his style is idiosyncratic, and his politics individualist. Cummings himself emphasized this individualism from the early 1930s until his death in 1962. Biographer Richard S. Kennedy, for instance, argues that in *The Enormous Room*, "[his] opposition to authority is related to Cummings' hostility toward civilization *per se*, a feature of the Romantic individualism that he had worked out for himself as a philosophy of life" (*Dreams* 48). Kennedy's foreword to the definitive typescript edition of *The Enormous Room* disconnects the social and the political even further: "In spite of the earnest social criticism, the thematic emphasis in *The Enormous Room* is rather upon affirmation and particularly upon the values of individualism" (xv). Focusing exclusively on the individual, however, risks missing the unique social and political context that eventually led Cummings to rethink his early commitments to radical political movements. In an era when the academics are emphasizing more and more the political commitments of artists and "schools" of art, the conventional wisdom of Cummings off splashing through puddles in pursuit of balloon-men leads quite predictably to his continued absence from critical work on modernism and the avant-garde.[3] By diminishing the political, publicly-oriented basis for the early work that founds his signature style, we may well minimize the critical appeal of an artist who influenced many artists of his time (and many since) and limit inquiry into the breadth and reach of the avant-garde, particularly as the avant-garde relates to broader definitions and understandings of literary modernism.

One of the most important of the aesthetic questions that should lead scholars to place Cummings in the central position he deserves in the understanding of the avant-garde and modernism is this: how do the visual and performative innovations of the avant-garde transform literary narrative? What, after all, does a Cubist portrait "look" like in words? How can the absurdity of Dada performance be made readable? What might the narrative of a consciousness caught in "sur-reality" sound like? Cummings

actively sought such translations from visual art to literature. In the years he wrote *The Enormous Room*, between his 1919 discharge from the Army to his 1921 departure for Paris with Dos Passos, Cummings considered himself a "cubist" painter, having earned some recognition for his two 1919 New York Independent Show entries, "Noise" and "Sound," which were highly praised by prominent Cubist painter Albert Gleizes. In 1923 Cummings wrote that despite the attention his writing was drawing, he still firmly believed he was "primarily a painter" (qtd. in Kennedy *Dreams* 247). During this "painter" phase of his career, he wrote hundreds of pages of sound experiments in which he tried to associate specific punctuation and phonemes with specific colors, connecting these in turn to specific emotions, complete with the various connotations their different names evoked.[4]

What this attempt to correlate visual, aural, and literary phenomena suggests is that the historical avant-garde provided Cummings the aesthetic vocabulary to mate rebellious form to rebellious content in his critique of war-time government policy in *The Enormous Room*. And, as I have suggested, the novel quite literally reflects this influence. When divided into three sections, the novel mirrors, in order, three important stages in avant-garde development. It opens with chapters (describing his incarceration) marked by Cubist imagery and word play.[5] This is followed by an expansive middle section (covering his time in The Enormous Room) where narrative is structured by spatial perception and the Dada logic of chance.[6] It concludes with a short section (describing his regained "freedom") that attempts to reconcile these innovations with convention, resulting in a hybrid, "pre-surrealist" form of consciousness. Thus, the book reproduces in its very aesthetic form the avant-garde's conceptual assault on traditional art, revealing in miniature the "avant-gard-ization" of modern artistic consciousness.

Cummings' primary means of assault is to present readers with a consciously manipulated narrative surface designed to be obtrusive. Though not unreadable—Cummings did not believe language could or should be entirely nonsensical—the miscalled novel frequently draws attention to the manipulation through surprising descriptions.[7] Early on, such a surprise addresses quite explicitly the material nature of language. On his walk to La Ferté prison, the narrator C reflects, "the unknown adventure lying before me,and the delicious silence of the night(in which our words rattled queerly like tin soldiers in a plush-lined box) boosted me" (37).

Here words are treated as tangible entities with which Cummings associates physical texture ("tin," "plush") and sound ("rattled"). Words take on a reality *as words*; they have an existence unconnected to their "use-value" or to the meanings they may be intended to convey—we do not even know *what* C says, just that it has physical effects, effects which are not literally possible. While playful and perhaps even silly in a manner we expect from Cummings, it is important to see such moments in the broader context of contemporaneous experimental art. Artists of every historical avant-garde persuasion foregrounded their shaping presence, as well as the qualities of medium, genre, and method that necessarily influence production, whether drawing attention to distortions of perspective or the material qualities of their medium.[8] Indeed, this was Blackmur's objection to Cummings and all of "his kind": "All the 'thought' is metonymy, yet the substance is never assigned; so in the end we have only the thrill of substance" (29). To Blackmur, this obsession with metonymic substance deprived modern art of intellectual substance, and thus of any potential social significance. What he misses, however, is that the very process itself, the very lack of clearly stated objective, is itself a motivator of "thought" and, because of this, has social importance.

Further, Cummings regularly confronts his readers with the heavy, manipulative hand of the artist, and because of this, reading *The Enormous Room* is often a trying experience. Traditional expectations are frequently thwarted and challenged. Spaces following most punctuation are gone. Foreign words and sentences are incorporated without visual cues. Noun-adjective and verb-adverb pairs do not go together. Descriptions defy the laws of logic and physics. Traditional names are not used to identify characters. The difficulty is, of course, determined, for it is a hallmark of modernism to exceed literary boundaries as they had been constituted prior to 1900.[9] For many avant-garde artists, the sentiment, if not the bluster, of F. T. Marinetti's claim that "museums, libraries, and academies [are] cemeteries of empty exertion, Calvaries of crucified dreams, registries of aborted beginnings!" articulated a belief that convention and tradition could terminally cripple artistic expression (23). The response Cummings has to such factors appears foremost in *The Enormous Room*'s unusual narrative surface, as critic Robert L. Wolfe noted in a 1926 review of Cummings' poetry: "Gifted in the plastic arts as well as in literature, he abandons the voice, with its single dimension, for the surface, which has length and breadth" (qtd. in Brogan 289).

This attention to language as artistic medium, to medium as a surface with "length and breadth," is given political import when the material qualities of an art object dominate the subject, both in the finished product and in the artist's conception of the artistic process. By breaking the realism of a continuous, coherent narrative world, Cummings could expose the artist's hand in creating that world, as well as challenge conventional understandings of time and space, thereby exposing the roles of culture and the human mind in constructing "reality," potentially leading readers to come to terms with their own expectations and their complicity in the formation and execution of these expectations.[10] Nearly without exception, avant-garde artists hoped to force people out of these normalized, ritualized modes of perception, interpretation, and appreciation. Further, many thought that formal experimentation had the further political advantage of being the means to reach "the masses," who did not have the benefit—or, perhaps, the burden—of years of formal and cultural practice in art appreciation. Experimental art in each case sought to circumvent and expose these cultural codes and thus provide readers and viewers with an accurate depiction of the real relations of production around them. In the case of Cummings' war memoir, the experimental form reveals how the seamlessness of Realist narrative can help hide political atrocities, in this case the Allies' actions against their own people in an effort to create unified opposition to Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany.

Cubist Dissonance

That Cubism sought a language for political change is often forgotten in current references to the movement. Labeled hermetic and ahistorical by some Futurists who followed them—and by critics ever since—Cubists themselves saw their art as a direct engagement with the world around them, and not just the art world. Transformation of the art world was part and parcel for the transformation of society. The expression of Cubism's populist aims, however, also set the stage for the difficulties avant-garde movements would have with actually engaging an uneducated audience, as well as lay the foundation for future accusations of political disinterest. In *Cubism* (published in English in 1913), Gleizes and Jean Metzinger note, "that the ultimate end of painting is to reach the masses, we have agreed; it is, however, not in the language of the masses that painting should address the masses, but in its own, in order to move, to dominate, to direct, and not in order to be understood. It is the same with reli-

gions and philosophies" (195). Cubism will seek its social goals on its own terms—not by engaging the masses with a predetermined "mass art." While Cubists themselves saw this as a necessary step to help the masses break out of their culturally constructed viewing habits, their intentional avoidance of "mass" expression lends itself to accusations of elitism.

Thinking of himself primarily as a cubist painter at this time, Cummings sought in his paintings a dissonance created by the intersection of straight, angular planes with soft, flowing, organic curves. As early as his 1915 essay, "The New Art," Cummings said of their style that Cubists "take this design from geometry. By using an edge in place of a curve a unique tactual value is obtained" (*Miscellany* 17). Paintings in his own "Noise" and "Sound" series, in their sweeping use of color and form—simultaneously geometric and fluid—take advantage of dissonance's tactile, emotional characteristics. In delaying intellectual response, these paintings also show the influence not only of German Expressionism, but of Marcel Duchamp, whose famously controversial *Nude Descending a Staircase* Cummings saw as a student when the Armory Show traveled to Boston, and which he celebrated in "The New Art." Cummings' exposure to this visual language of the avant-garde also included *Blast*'s first issue (1914), which Cummings read carefully (Cohen 45). These experiments in visual dissonance create their own habits of perception in the viewer, and Cummings attempts to create similar responses in his reader.

As such, Cummings' stylistic habits in *The Enormous Room* parallel this use of a seemingly "unnatural" tweaking of our expectations for natural representations. The reader's first indication of this dissonant description is saved for the second page, and, perhaps not coincidently, the arrival of French authorities, when "a spic not to say span gentleman in a suspiciously quiet French uniform allowed himself to be driven up to the bureau" (4). Into the "natural" story of a neatly dressed officer's arrival, Cummings inserts the "angular" descriptors "suspiciously quiet." I say "angular" because semantically they do not fit, and thus stand out from the "plane" of conventional description in the same way a prominent straight line in a Picasso head draws attention to its dissimilarity with surrounding lines. Cummings' descriptors jut out as they do because, to begin with, he is using an aural adjective ("quiet") to describe a visual experience. A uniform cannot literally be noisy or quiet. And even if it can analogously, no further context is given which could cue a reader to what C means by this description. Does "quiet" mean the uniform was plain? Does it mean the

man acted quietly? That the car drove quietly? This is not clear, and the confusion—admittedly minor—the descriptor causes creates a dissonance between the phrase and the narrative around it. The use of "suspiciously" only heightens this dissonance, because pinning down what exactly is suspicious is entirely dependent on understanding what is "quiet" and why. Extending the musical metaphors I am using, the dissonance of both "quiet" and "suspiciously" echo, thus intensifying each other. Further, these echoes travel in waves both up and down the sentence, casting doubt on the sense of what the reader has just read and of what will follow. The waves are mere "ripples" at this point in the book, but Cummings appears to be merely softening up the reader for what will follow.[11]

The first four chapters of *The Enormous Room*—what I am calling the Cubist portion of the book—make clear that Cummings intends to lead readers away from culturally constructed reading habits by inserting Cubist moments of perception within an otherwise linear, chronological narration. En route to his first prison-mandated shower, for example, C is confronted with a startling vision:

> I started,looked up,and encountered a window stuffed with four savage fragments of crowding Face: four livid, shaggy disks focussing hungrily;four pair of uncouth eyes rapidly smolder-ing;eight lips shaking in a toothless and viscous titter. Suddenly above and behind these terrors rose a single horror of beauty—a crisp vital head,a young ivory actual face,a night of firm alive icy hair,a white large frightful smile. (55)

While the final head makes use of dissonant description ("crisp vital head…firm alive icy hair"), this scene takes the dissonance of juxtaposed angular and "natural" imagery even further by entirely removing the images from their meaning-giving contexts. These are not people C describes, but, rather, fragmented pieces disconnected from one another and from their owners. The quantified inventory of "disks," eyes, and lips gives a new perspective to each of the parts, and allows viewers, and/or readers, the chance to reconsider the relationship of lips to face, and faces to their sense of self. Cubist portraiture converts these people into purely material imagery, an act that speaks to Cummings' interest in Cubists' use of planes to represent the curved lines of nature and the dissonance this creates. It also speaks to issues of depth and perspective. Visually, a Cubist portrait "flattens" the visual plane by eliminating Renaissance techniques of depth (one point linear perspective, appropriate and consistent vanishing points,

and so on). The "linguistic plane" of C's vision shows similar flattening, though we must conceive of it primarily in psychological terms. By sticking strictly to the visual, to the material, C limits access to his emotional response to the event and allows no access to the psychology of the women (who are not even presented fully as people). In both cases, the flattened, artificial planes become the entire representation, plunging the reader in a more fully Cubist mode of perception and denying unselfconscious entry into a well-developed diegetic world.

This disruption of "realistic" representation, however, was decidedly not a break with the real world. In fact, what Cubism sought was a more authentic sense of what constitutes *real*. One of Cubism's early defenders, critic Jaques Rivière, declared that "the true purpose of painting is to represent objects as they really are; that is to say, differently from the way we see them. It tends always to give us their sensible *essence*, their presence, this is why the image it forms does not resemble their *appearance*" (184). Art's claim to reality is *not* sacrificed, and it is this last idea that Cubism's critics have so often forgotten. Cubist painter Fernand Léger lamented that "many superficial people raise the cry 'anarchy' in front of these pictures because they cannot follow the whole evolution of contemporary life that painting records. They believe that painting has abruptly broken the chain of continuity, when, on the contrary, it has never been so realistic, so firmly attached to its own period as it is today" (12). Thus, Cubism tries through fragmentation and abstraction to render the modern condition more accurately, a move each subsequent avant-garde movement will follow.

This heightened perception of reality, this Cubist "double vision," is most famously the ability to observe, simultaneously, multiple points of view. Cummings called this his "seeing around" aesthetic, and in *The Enormous Room* C characterizes one especially dense passage of his own prose as "telegraphic technique" (96). In terms of how Cummings applied the lessons of painting to his writing, Cohen notes:

> One of Cummings's most daring translations of his 'seeing around' aesthetics was to apply the visual dynamics of complementary colors to the psychological dynamics of antithetical words. In retrospect, it seems perhaps a small step to assume that if complementary colors are optically related and mutually enhancing, the same could be true of contradictory words, emotions, even ideas. But it is a small step that only a genius could take. (129)

One could argue about the assertion of genius, of course, but the importance of translating painting techniques to writing is that the contradictions and contrasts in words can carry over to other personal and social uses of language. The surprise that dissonance generates can arrest the automatic flow of words, causing readers to pause and reconsider each of the two words in themselves *and* simultaneously, thus creating the same "double understanding" that Cubist double vision creates. Just as a viewer must balance the multiple planes or materials of a Cubist work and try to experience the simultaneity of these, so, too, must the Cummings reader balance both the adjective and the noun to which it refers grammatically, but not lexically or sensibly. These artistic attempts to bring readers and viewers to rethink the way they interpret perceptual phenomena are part of a larger attempt to rethink and reshape inherited understandings of Art itself, as well as the institutions that perpetuate it.

This is where I believe we get to the political rub: the dominant notions of art are only constructions, constructions created by real people, circulated and enforced by real institutions. The first step in resisting an ideology peddled as "natural" is often recognition. Recognizing the fragmented nature of subjectivity (the possible ends of cubist portraiture) only intensifies the political potential, for the claims made by traditional art to "authenticity" can now be understood in context. They are but one "truth" among several—not univocal, not complete, not natural, not transcendent.

This outward, social direction of avant-garde activism makes it difficult to see even the inward turning moments of Cummings' experimentation as strictly individualist in political orientation. Consider, for example, how the Cubist fragmentation of narrative surface functions in the very personal and very individual context of self-perception and identity. Destroying the coherence and unity of identity—whether that of the narrator himself or the people he encounters—is one way to illuminate some of the changes to the transcendent ego that Cummings utilizes. Central to this is an emphasis on the material surface of art and self, and on the malleability of these surfaces. Early on, C observes that "with half-shut eyes my Ego lay and pondered. . . . Suddenly the t-d woke up, [and] straightened and buckled his personality" (9). By having C refer to his perceptive capacities in the third person, as "my Ego," Cummings draws attention to the disconnected state of the narrator's memory (reflecting back in time), subjectivity (C experiencing at the time), and "Ego" (existing, presumably, transcendentally). While the "ego" is perfectly in keeping with a Cartesian under-

standing of self, referring to it as nearly entirely alienated from oneself highlights its constructed nature, as though it can take on a life of its own.

That the Ego's status is under attack is reinforced by the unusual materiality of the officer's sense of self—the uniform *is* this man's identity. The officer "buckled his personality," suggesting the created, performative nature of personality. Personality in this instance is not a source intrinsic to the officer seeking expression, but a commodity, an accoutrement. He looks to it first to define himself, rather than to some transcendent, "true" subjectivity. By disrupting the subject's visual "wholeness," the visual and material aspects of the portrait and the person are emphasized, denying possible speculation on a character's defining "truth" or "core being." What this does is draw attention away from the subject's consciousness as the sole repository of meaning and perception. This in many ways parallels the Synthetic Cubist's use of found, tangential objects for representation in a collage. We note what is represented, of course, but that interpretation is mitigated by our simultaneous interpretation of chair caning, rope, or, with the officer, a helmet, or tin-derby ("t-d").

This contrast between subjectivity and substance is another form of dissonance, and beyond the commentary it may provide on the representational characteristics of language, beyond even what it may say about human psychology and our desire for symbolic meaning, the fact of the matter is that Cummings uses the technique for political ends. More often than not it is lower-level government officials who are described this way in *The Enormous Room*, and this illustration of the conscriptive power of uniforms and titles encourages one to see the political critique it offers. When a "tin-derby" does something, when a "Black Holster" does something, when a "bed-slippered rooster uh-ahing" does something to the prisoners, the action of the individual is only partly his own. The synthetic representation connects the individual's actions more intimately to the actions of the state, especially when the hat, badge, or gun, is the state-given symbol of their power to do such things.

But Cummings does not limit his attacks to our ideas of "natural" representation, nor does he limit his experimentation to Cubist techniques. As we will see, he introduces Dada notions of the absurd to question conventional notions of narrative and the logic upon which such notions rest. Transitions between the modes of structuring the world that *The Enormous Room* proposes are not always easy for readers or narrators. In the chapter describing C's first day in prison, and thus his first day in this new world,

Cubist descriptions and portraits multiply in number and intensity. As if mimicking the transition from a causal, temporal understanding of the world to a spatial one, and as if anticipating the effects this will have on modernism's readers and viewers, the narrator C undergoes an adjustment period—a conversion, if you will—when he enters prison. That the text during this transition is frequently characterized by Cubist experimentation suggests a logic to the chronology of avant-garde's development, that the innovations of Cubism are necessary stages on the way to Dada anti-art, that the movement itself lies somewhere between traditional realism and Dada anti-art. When C enters confinement—an entrance into a new diegetic world that parallels his entrance into a new aesthetic mode—he initially clings to his traditional realist categories of perception; but eventually these are worn down, and the plot-oriented style of the first three chapters begins to disintegrate. The minute he physically sets foot in The Enormous Room, "the hitherto empty and minute room became suddenly enormous; weird cries,oaths,laughter,pulling it sideways and backward,extending it to inconceivable depth and width,telescoping it to frightful nearness" (43). This Cubist shift of perspective fits chronologically into the series of events, but the spatial and aural perceptions it proposes are fragmentary and distorted. These are the first indications of how C's perceptions adapt to the confinement, and of how he participates in *creating* this new world. His mind and imagination still have infinite reach, but it requires a change in the nature of space, one where it becomes untethered from linear time at the same time C is untethered, in effect, from the real world. It is important to see that the infinite reach is not *outside* the space of confinement, but is instead an infinite world *inside* La Ferté. Time and being work differently in this world, we learn, and they are disorienting by any standard—or even radically "modern"—perception of space.[12]

Dada Logic

As Cummings' Cubist experiments give way to the Dada influence that dominates *The Enormous Room*'s central section, issues of language give way to issues of narrative.[13] This is appropriate. Dada was not marked by a unique aesthetic—it shares techniques with other avant-garde movements—but Dada's attitude and agenda are unique in their extremity. As Dada artist Hans Richter describes it, "Dada had no unified formal characteristics as have other styles. But it did have a new artistic ethic from which, in unforeseen ways, new means of expression emerged" (9). That

"artistic ethic" is to destroy "Art." Yet this is not a rejection, necessarily, of art, artists, and artistry. Instead, Dada wages its anti-art campaign, trying to destroy capital-A "Art" as well as many other social, cultural, and economic institutions, which they see perpetuating a small-mindedness that makes art elitist and separated from life. Extending this logic to narrative and politics, we see that by challenging Realist narrative conventions, for instance, Dada could rethink the "stories" a culture uses to understand itself and thereby expose the oppressive potentiality inherent in such stories. In the case of *The Enormous Room*, Cummings uses these techniques to expose the normative impulse of narrative, particularly as it was employed to make "sense" of WW I's absurd cruelties.

However, being the courteous avant-gardist he is, Cummings explains to the reader the method to his, as even the narrator himself sees it, madness. As C indicates, "with the end of my first day as a certified inhabitant of the latter institution [his present prison, La Ferté] a definite progression is brought to a close. Beginning with my second day at La Ferté a new period opens" (82). While this marks quite clearly a change of scene, it is the phrase "definite progression" that signals the major textual change in what follows. Linear, chronological time, which gives narrative a logic of progress, will no longer be appropriate to the world of the prisoner. Time in captivity, C begins, is:

> like a vast grey box in which are laid helter-skelter a great many toys, each of which is itself completely significant apart from the always unchanging temporal dimension which merely contains it along with the rest . . . How,in such a case, could events occur and be remembered otherwise than as individualities distinct from Time Itself? Or,since one day and the next are the same to such a prisoner,where does Time come in at all? Obviously, once the prisoner is habituated to his environment…..events can no longer succeed each other: whatever happens,while it may happen in connection with some other perfectly distinct happening, does not happen in a scale of temporal priorities—each happening is self-sufficient,irrespective of minutes months and the other treasures of freedom. (82)

In narrative, the linear, sequential progress of time is normally important as a context that can give meaning to events, most often by implying causality. In the Enormous Room, however, time is now fit only to "contain" events. Succession, and with it causality, is no longer relevant. So, when he

loses his "scale of temporal priorities," C turns to space and spatial reasoning for a new scale of priorities. Such a turning invokes Dada and its turn to the absurd in an effort to undermine rationality.

The seamlessness, coherence, and plausibility of the fictional world and the events that take place within it were among the first things Dada attacked as absurd. Realist narrative, at its heart, is linear progression: one plot point follows another, building and accumulating to something larger than itself, to a story. Even if the story is frequently interrupted and delayed with techniques like flashbacks and multiple plot lines, it is still a reasoned move calculated to produce a specific effect. Reason was the logic that dictated the order, an order that, at least in realist fiction of the 19th century, tried to maximize comprehension and minimize reader awareness of the necessarily constructed nature of the linguistic progression. Dada frontman Tristan Tzara framed Dada's response in terms of a struggle for independence: "Logic is a complication. Logic is always false. It draws the superficial threads of concepts and words towards illusory conclusions and centres. Its chains kill, an enormous myriapod that asphyxiates independence" (130). What if, Tzara and many other avant-garde artists asked, one broke open this seamless construction and revealed both the constructedness of art and the logic of its construction—the invisible logic often granted the status "natural"? Dada took this reasoning to its extreme, championing an ideal of purely random associations. In an attempt to remove hidden ideologies from art, Dada turned to chance—to the random—to find a "pure" logic, a logic from which and to which no ideological baggage was attached, or could be attached—except the ideology of having no preexisting purpose. As Richter wrote, "Dada not only had *no* program, it was against all programs. Dada's only program was to have no program. . . and, at that moment in history, it was just this that gave the movement its explosive power to unfold *in all directions*, free of aesthetic or social constraints" (34, ellipsis and emphasis original). As ideology finds expression in reasoning, and as narrative logic is no different in this respect, Cummings could, by untying narrative in a Dada manner, contribute to the broader avant-garde rethinking of art, ideology, and the roles they play in the construction of reality.

That *The Enormous Room* is set in World War I, which Dada developed largely in reaction to, is significant with respect to the miscalled novel's political message. Rather than a noble enterprise to save civilization or further the "progress" of humankind, the war to Cummings and

many other artists was utter nonsense, and therefore treatments of it merited a corresponding aesthetic. Dada was a movement largely shaped by anti-war sentiment, particularly in its Zurich origins. Hugo Ball later recounted that Dada was formed "to remind the world that there are independent men 'beyond war and Nationalism' who live for other ideals" (246). In honor of what Ball called "the death-throes and death-drunkenness" (247) consuming the Europe around it, Dada made absurdity one of its fundamental tenets.

As part of their effort to destroy such ideas of "progress," there were two main weapons in the avant-garde's general—and Dada's particular—assault on rational, logical thought, that great conceptual tool on which realist literature depended. The first of these was associative logic. According to Cummings' notes, he was intrigued by Joyce's use of associative connections in *Ulysses* (Cohen 76). Cummings opposed these to linear/logical associations where "point a" leads to "point b." Instead, the associative works radially from "point a," making any number of connections, creating unusual analogies and juxtapositions. For example, when interned for his second night C sees a prisoner begging for cigarettes: "In the huge potpourri of misery a central figure clung,shaken but undislodged. Clung like a monkey to central bars. Clung like an angel to a harp" (26). The two sets of metaphors are startling when compared; this is further emphasized when the boy is later referred to as "the angel-monkey." The relationship between the cell bars, a zoo cage, and a harp is primarily associative, as is the extension of the metaphors to the boy as zoo animal and celestial harpist. Superficial visual similarity is the only "logic" that guides the connection, a choice that deliberately undermines the conventional prestige and authority of scientific rationalism.[14] Deliberately inverting established value systems points to the avant-garde's desire to spoil expectations, and, when taken to the extreme, to shock.

More radical than associative logic, chance often underlies Dada absurdity, since chance as a structural principle circumvents normal categorical reasoning. Perhaps its most famous practitioner, Marcel Duchamp, practiced a variation he called "canned chance," using the term to refer specifically to his *Three Standard Stoppages (1913-14)*, a set of three curved rulers. His notes describe the creation as such: "If a (straight horizontal) thread one meter long falls from a height of one meter straight onto a horizontal plane twisting *as it pleases* and creates a new image of the unit of length" (33). One can see in this process the way the element of chance

is isolated and set loose within a set of prescribed parameters, much as C will set loose a series of portraits more or less at random. For Duchamp, creating useless scientific instruments by introducing chance into a carefully controlled and prescribed experiment undermines not just scientific rationality, but science's authority as an institution—for one must wonder what similar elements of chance are functioning in what society has enshrined and institutionalized as "real" science? Cummings' conversion to a random sequence of portraits undermines the authority of narrative in a similar way, for what elements of chance and whimsy have other authors introduced into their "real" stories?

One cannot establish, except *ex post facto*, a reasonable intellectual purpose to a sequence if it is determined at random. Rather than marking off days with nicks in the bedpost or scratches on the wall, as the stereotype tells us prisoners will do in order to maintain a connection to the outside world, C embraces his unmooring, and this decision determines his method. Rather than struggle to impose a existing, "reasonable" purpose to his life as a prisoner, C redefines what is "reasonable" and abandons given means of structuring his life in prison in just the way the avant-gardist abandons traditional artistic structure. As C describes it:

> the diary or time method is a technique which cannot possibly do justice to timelessness. I shall(on the contrary)lift from their grey box at random certain(to me)more or less astonishing toys;which may or may not please the reader,but whose colours and shapes and textures are a part of the actual Present—without future and past—whereof they alone are cognizant who—so to speak—have submitted to an amputation of the world. (83)

The "outside" has no life in the book from this point on, serving more or less as a background prop. The utter distance and complete disconnection from the characters' lives in prison make the "real" world seem quite *un*real. As if to make modernist alienation more concrete, C characterizes this separation as an "amputation" from the world. In reality, prisoners are not amputated from the conceptual structures of the world, even if their access to its material resources are limited. Instead of recreating the prisoners' experience, Cummings makes imprisonment a metaphor for the modernist world, one where traditional means of structuring and describing the world are left "outside." While in this new modernist world we find that "chance" will more or less structure the narrative. Individual "toys" of stories will be "lifted. . . at random." In the variation we find in *The Enormous Room*,

structure based on chance within a limited sphere tries to eliminate structural ideology, since any planned structure has a masked ideology.

Yet as is the case with Richter's claim that Dada was "against all programs," Cummings' use of chance itself implies a political ideology—one that in this case marks a protest against the coercive force of "expectation." For this reason, Richter may be misleading in claiming that the lack of a program "gave the movement its explosive power to unfold *in all directions*, free of aesthetic or social constraints" (34, emphasis original). The "explosions" were, in fact, aimed in very specific directions, and tracing these directions can reveal their underlying political impetus. Cummings, if subtler, is nonetheless locked on to the traditions—and ideologies—he aims to explode.

The narrative of *The Enormous Room*'s central portion is in many ways unremarkable, for there really is no narrative progression to follow, but readers are denied the ease of chronology. Individual "events"—Cummings' "more or less astonishing toys"—are straightforward enough, but in general the reader has no sense of how these "toys" relate to each other. The portrait style of chapter four is expanded, with entire chapters dedicated to "portraits" of individual prisoners. Between these portraits, no connection is given. Within the portraits, we rarely know if one event happened before or after another, and we never have a concept of how much time elapses. The order of descriptions within individual portraits and the sequence of the portraits themselves could be rearranged without loss of meaning or effect. With each new chapter we readers are repositioned—not in time, but in space—to events surrounding the new "subject." Overall, one has no sense of how long C has been imprisoned, even by the time he prepares to leave La Ferté. We are surprised to learn it was only three months, given the richness and fullness of life described. We might expect accumulating C's range of experiences requires a great deal more time.[15]

One important political ramification of Cummings' Dadaist denial of rational logic and temporal progress—his "portrait method"—is that readers meet each character as a person. The stories the French government tells of the person are presented ironically and in ways which completely contradict the portrait compiled from C's experience of him or her. C notes, for instance, that few of the prisoners can read or write:

> Worst of all,the majority of these dark criminals who had been caught in nefarious plots against the honour of France were totally unable to speak French. Curious thing. Often I pondered the unut-

terable and inextinguishable wisdom of the police,who—unde-
terred by facts which would have deceived less astute intelligences
into thinking that these men were either too stupid or too simple to
be connoisseurs of the art of betrayal—swooped upon their help-
less prey with that indescribable courage which is the prerogative
of policemen the world over,and bundled same prey in the La Fer-
tés of that mighty nation upon some,at least,of whose public build-
ings it seems to me that I remember reading

<div align="center">Liberté. Egalité. Fraternité. (84)</div>

Since nationalistic stories of betrayal and treason by outsiders—and most
of La Ferté's prisoners are foreign nationals—follow a common logic read-
ers have heard over and over, and perhaps even mouthed themselves, see-
ing this logic completely disconnected from the reality it is meant to de-
scribe offers readers a glimpse of their complicity in perpetuating such sto-
ries. When political and economic leaders present narrative justification for
actions that are not in the best interest of most of their readers or viewers,
they expect—more than that, *require*—the help of those same readers and
viewers in bridging over logical gaps to create narrative with a sense of
wholeness, completeness, and *inevitability*. Readers who learn to see these
gaps, who catch themselves providing the fill, are readers who have over-
come "unthinking inertia" and can now, in theory, position themselves to
evaluate critically any fundamental inequalities of the status quo. In many
ways, this new "avant-garde" vision—its perspectives and its ability to ex-
pose the invisible modes of relation normally understood as "natural"—
amounts to a rethinking of "reality," an acknowledgement that what we
take for granted as "real" and "true" is in large part a construction. And if it
is a construction, there will inevitably be an ideology informing it, just as
there will inevitably be alternative modes of constructing it.

Visions of Sur-Reality

The avant-garde movement most squarely addressing the issue of
alternative realities is Surrealism.[16] Developing in the years immediately
after the publication of *The Enormous Room*, Surrealism is best known for
its promotion of "sur-reality," which Louis Aragon defined in 1924 as "a
relation in which all notions are merged together" (qtd. in Breton 66). That
same year André Breton would emphasize "thought's dictation, in the ab-
sence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or mor-
al preoccupations" (59). This surreality is thus a state of mind in which the

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workings of the unconscious are given equal footing with those of waking consciousness, where the dream, for example, is as "real" and "authentic" as the phenomena experienced when awake. Cummings does not create Surrealism, obviously, nor would I claim he predicts it in large measure, but in wrestling with a narrator who must face what he used to think of as the "real world" after having undergone a radical, "avant-garde," change in both how he perceives the world and how he constructs his understanding of it, Cummings anticipates the important questions Surrealism raises, as well as some of its answers.

The spatial "container" of the book's middle begins closing when the official commission finally arrives at the detention center. Their arrival and subsequent move to free C signals an end to the spatially determined portraits and initiates a return to chronological, linear narrative logic. One subtle signal of this literary return, of sorts, is a repeated kitchen scene. After the official interview, C declares, "we could have eaten the French government" (220), which echoes his earlier "true" claim "I could eat an elephant" (8). The difference between these claims is telling, however. The first claim to eat an elephant is hyperbole—his claim is exaggerated and unlikely, but it is potentially true. The absurdity of his claim is only a matter a degree. The French government, however, has no nutritional value, and thus the absurdity of C's second claim is a question of kind. The distinction between these two claims characterizes some of the differences in experimentation between the first and third sections of the novel. Both use a traditional narrative logic based on chronology, but the Cubist experimentation of the first section is primarily absurdity by degree—it is still, after all, typical storytelling, however unusual its appearance. A Cubist painting, despite the dissonance of angular and organic lines, is still attempting a "true," albeit heightened, presentation of reality. Absurdity in the final section is a matter of kind, because "reality" and the "truth" of it no longer conform *categorically* to expectation; "reality" as C once understood it is no longer recognizable to a consciousness transformed by the avant-garde.

Like the imprisonment and transformation of traditional narrative by the avant-garde, C's imprisonment and transformation change his very consciousness and leave him unable to narrate in expected ways. In a moment of candor, he tells his readers:

> To convince the reader that this history is mere fiction(and rather vulgarly violent fiction at that)nothing perhaps is needed save that ancient standby of sob-story writers and thrill-artists alike—the

> Happy Ending. As a matter of fact, it makes not the smallest difference to me whether anyone who has this far participated in my travels does or does not believe that they and I are(as that mysterious animal "the public" would say)"real." (228)

C's return to the "real world" forces him to acknowledge the power of literary tradition and reader expectation. A conflict thus arises between his previous understanding of "the real" and his new, avant-garde-derived understanding of it. From this point on, C is unable—and unwilling—to submit to what Cummings calls "lackadaisical antique 5th hand" standards of narrative integrity. The concluding chapter, though chronological, is completely unsatisfactory storytelling by realist standards because C's powers of naming and description—his ability to label and categorize the reality he is charged with describing—have left him. More importantly, he does not miss them. C will give his readers the proverbial "Happy Ending," but not as they expect it.

C's narrative powers of naming and describing begin to deteriorate as soon as he learns of his impending departure, as if just the thought of returning to the "real" world partially re-imposes that world's logic of time and space. C's first response to the news establishes the inability to fully re-establish linear cause and effect: "'I? Am? Going? To? Paris?' somebody who certainly wasn't myself remarked in a kind of whisper" (237). What should be a simple cause and effect sequence—I leave the building, I get on a train, I get off in Paris—is broken visually with question marks after every word, as if the words themselves cannot go back so easily to conventional temporality. Also established in this response is his alienation from himself. His perceiving consciousness, which had fully and confidently adjusted to the spatial life of the Enormous Room, splits here—part remains in spatial mode of perception while another part mouths the words and thoughts remembered from his temporal life. Soon after, C writes, "I am standing in The Enormous Room for the last time. I am saying good-bye. No,it is not I who am saying good-bye. It is in fact somebody else,possibly myself' (238). Several parenthetical questions are inserted where C describes the goodbyes: "Mexique?"—"is he The Young Skipper, by any chance?"—"or four was it?" (238). These are all questions the previously confident narrator easily could have answered. He is unable to name friends whose very names he himself created. The two modes of thinking and seeing are not compatible, and his spatial orientation is not adequate when he is forced back into the world of linear, causal narration,

i.e., "into the *real* world." *The Enormous Room* thus identifies a contradiction central to the modern concept of consciousness, a contradiction which Surrealism will eventually reconcile by granting all modes of perception equal authenticity.

It is not a simple return to causal narrative for C because he is no longer certain what is "real." Stuck in his spatial state of mind, his narrative becomes choppy and staccato, as he is unable to link impressions into a temporal narrative. From the moment he utters the broken, "I? Am? Going? To? Paris?" C's sentences are simple and declarative, when they are even used:

> "Parfaitment."—Pettish. Apollyon. But how changed. Who the devil is myself? Where in Hell am I? What is Paris—a place,a somewhere,a city,life,to live: infinitive. Present first singular I live. Thou livest. The Directeur. The Surveillant. La Ferté-Macé,Orne,France. "Edward E. Cummings will report immediately." Edward E. Cummings. The Surveillant. A piece of yellow paper. The Directeur. A necktie. Paris. Life. Liberté. La liberté. "La Liberté"—I almost shouted in agony…. I turned,I turned so suddenly as almost to bowl over the Black Holster,Black Holster and all;I turned toward the door,I turned upon the Black Holster,I turned into Edward E. Cummings,I turned into what was dead and is now alive,I turned into a city,I turned into a dream— (237-8)

It is appropriate this paragraph ends as it does, an incomplete sequence left open ended with a dash. Had it the teleology of an effective temporal narrative, the sequence would have an end result that is a predictable outcome of the progression of thoughts and actions. But C remains disoriented because his spatial mindset cannot immediately adapt to temporal sequencing and causality. It is also appropriate to the surrealist characteristics of this section that the end "result" of these musings is C's conversion "into a dream." Even without unpacking all the complicated possibilities for this phrase, the equation of "dream" with what throughout the book has been his waking perception is striking in its presentation of the real.

C's questions are primarily spatial in the last two chapters, as that was his most recent mode of thinking, whereas the questions in the transition from the first to second part were primarily temporal ("I don't remember *when* we…"). His perceptive capacities have adapted to the Enormous Room, and are now out of synch with anything "outside": "At the outset let me state that what occurred subsequent to the departure for Précingé of B

[and others] is shrouded in a rather ridiculous indistinctness" (229). It is "ridiculous" because it is standard, traditional narration which he cannot find—something which should be ready at hand for any Western writer. And the "indistinctness" originates in causal narrative's inability to account for C's perceptual phenomena. The "stories" that consciousness creates to place experience, to give it a context, and endow it with meaning, are broken. Spatial perception—an organization of phenomena based on a logic other than chronology—interrupts the flow of time, breaks its seamlessness, and with it the illusion of descriptive completeness. Significantly, the reality that this new consciousness creates anticipates what André Breton and others will call "sur-reality."

As C acknowledges to his readers, being caught between modernist perceptions of the world and the reading public's very traditional demands for the illusion of completeness leaves the modernist narrator in a precarious position: "I felt myself to be, at last, a doll—taken out occasionally and played with and put back into its house and told to go to sleep" (231-2). From this point on C *is* a passive rag-doll of a narrator. No longer is he in charge of creating narrative, no longer is he exercising control though his power to name. Instead, description continues to be fragmented and woefully incomplete. Whereas initially we could see "around" Cubist images and figures, we now get only unrelated fragments of surface description, as if C can only partially describe the subject in front of his eyes before it has passed in time and been replaced by something else. The net result is a montage effect, perhaps modeled on the collage experiments of many avant-garde artists, or perhaps even cinema. Here, for example, is how he describes a dinner on his ship home: "Man with a college degree returning from Spain, not disagreeable sort, talks Spanish with that fat man who's an Argentinian. –Tinian? -Tinish,perhaps. All the same. In other words Tin. Nobody at the table knows I speak English or am American. Hell,that's a good one on nobody" (241). C's use of montage is not surprising, given its foundational place in modernist aesthetics of all media, but his specific use of it here suggests that montage is a form that reflects the experience of the dislocated subject, the modern experience. Caught between the spatially-oriented world of modernity and the temporally-organized world of the past, the subject is left with nothing but a sequence of impressions that form only the vague outline of a narrative—a narrative that only materializes with extensive help from the "outside," as it were. Sequences of impressions are Surrealist when these sequences are absorbed

as they are received, not shaped by a consciousness beholden to learned ideas of Reason or Progress. Instead, the subject opens itself to sur-reality: that state of mind where each impression is granted an equal claim to authenticity, an equal status as "real."

The book's use of collage illustrates how the technique evolved as different movements of the historical avant-garde employed it. In the Cubist section of the novel—as in Cubism itself—collage offered the simultaneity of multiple perspectives experienced at once. In the final section of the novel, however, Cummings uses collage to convey confusion, to convey a mind's attempt to mate temporal and spatial modes of perception. Rather than crystallizing or heightening existing human perceptive habits, as Cubism does, the Surrealist (or pre-Surrealist, in this case) use of collage seeks a complete shift in perception that involves changing the very nature of what the subject considers "reality." As we learn through C's transition, mating such views of the world is disorienting. But, perhaps it is nonetheless more "honest." For in both uses of collage, the typical illusory third dimension of perspectival art is flattened to emphasize the material surface of the art—whether in paint or word. That illusory, or "3rd dimension," is replaced, however, with a different *third* dimension. A Picasso or Braque collage adds it with tactile materials like rope, newspaper, or chair caning. In the case of Surrealist art, the dreamworld is introduced as a third dimension that extends what has been reduced to a two-dimensional world of the waking. By introducing a highly contrived third dimension to its work, both can draw readers and viewers' attention to the fact that the artwork they had previously accepted as "naturally" three-dimensional was in fact always two-dimensional. The claim to depth and representation of three-dimensional reality which art had previously made was, in fact, as artificial and contrived as rope glued on a canvas.

And this contrived claim to truth is exactly what Cummings hoped to expose in the book's final chapter, "I Say Good-Bye to La Misère." As C explains, his objections to Happy Endings and the audience's concern about how "real" he may or may not be is as much political as it is artistic. After stating that he does not care if his reader "does or does not believe that they and I are(as that mysterious animal 'the public' would say)'real,' " C qualifies his intent:

> I do however very strenuously object to the assumption,on the part of anyone,that the heading of this my final chapter stands for anything in the nature of happiness…. A definition of happiness I

most certainly do not intend to attempt;but I can and will say this: to leave La Misère with the knowledge,and worse than that the feeling,that some of the finest people in the world are doomed to remain prisoners thereof for no one knows how long—are doomed to continue,possibly for years and tens of years and all the years which terribly are between them and their deaths,the grey and indivisible Non-existence which without apology you are quitting for Reality—cannot by any stretch of the imagination be conceived as constituting a Happy Ending to a great and personal adventure. (229)

C links his artistic and political agendas quite explicitly in this passage. Having immersed the reader in "the grey and indivisible Non-existence" of prison life, he acknowledges that readers are now returning to what they call "Reality." Cummings' staccato, discontinuous presentation of C's narrative hinders the ease with which a reader might slip back into habitual modes of reading, and thus of habitual modes of conceiving the reality of a story, without giving that constructed reality any claim on the world that continues around them when they close a book. But this point is so important that C explains the political implications of this style as well. The tradition of Happy Endings is exploded, not just for the artistic limitations it places on the writer, but because of the ideological limitations it places on the reader. C worries that once readers learn of his release—the "all's well that ends well"—the injustices he has carefully catalogued for two hundred twenty-some pages, will be forgotten in the joy of apparent justice being served. He reminds readers he was not happy—he was filled with sorrow that his innocent friends were still imprisoned—and so his readers should not relax and anticipate the pleasures of a Happy Ending. Instead, readers should focus on the injustice. "That I write this chapter at all," C concludes the chapter's opening paragraph, "is due,purely and simply,to the dare I say unjustified hope on my part that—by recording certain events—it may hurl a little additional light into a very tremendous darkness…" (229).

The Modernism Debate

The Enormous Room shines "light into a very tremendous darkness" by adapting the techniques of avant-garde visual artists to narrative form. In doing so it blurs the lines separating the world of "Art" from the lived world. You may recall that the last chapter opens with the claim, "To convince the reader that this history is mere fiction(and rather vulgarly violent fiction at that)nothing perhaps is needed save that ancient standby of

sob-story writers and thrill-artists alike—the Happy Ending" (229). Easy to miss is C's fear that a Happy Ending will "convince the reader that this history is mere fiction," yet this phrase is extremely important if we are to parse the implications of the peculiar artistry of this "miscalled novel." Because of the intense experimentation, it is easy to assume that such authorial intervention automatically makes this work fiction. Why else would a writer so consciously impose his or her hand in crafting the feel and shape—the very reality—of the diegetic world? Yet C calls his work "this history." It is appropriate that such reflection occur in the Surrealist portion of the novel, for just as Surrealism will use the dream world to question the authority of waking consciousness, so, too, Cummings uses "fiction" to question the authority of "history," the claim of that genre to represent objective truths and reality. This confrontation between genres confuses *The Enormous Room*'s status in social and cultural circulation, and, as we saw, this confusion polarized early critics, who either resented or celebrated fiction's intrusion into the institutionalized category of "history." This generic confrontation links *The Enormous Room* even more firmly with the broader project of the avant-garde, not just in the specific artistic techniques we have been cataloguing, but also in the avant-garde-wide attempt to merge art with life.

Central to Peter Bürger's categorization of Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism as part of the "historical avant-garde" is his desire to recover their unique socio-historical moment and their function in that moment. In brief, these movements wanted to break art's categorical separation from the rest of the world. As he describes it, "When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again…. it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content" (49). In *The Enormous Room*, the attempt to "vulgarize" fiction, and the attempt to let that "rather vulgar fiction" stand as history, signals Cummings' desire to change the nature of his society by changing the nature of art's place in that society.[17]

In contrast to understandings of modernism that place the avant-garde at its margins (or even in opposition to its more celebrated figures), the readable avant-gardism of *The Enormous Room* helps to reveal modernism's broad indebtedness to the experimentation of the European avant-garde. Especially influential in severing the avant-garde from modernism in the critical consciousness has been Andreas Huyssen's theory of "the Great Divide" between high art and mass culture. This high/low distinction be-

comes the basis for separating experimental artistic modes of the time into "sufficiently discernable trends": "despite its ultimate and perhaps inevitable failure, the historical avant-garde aimed at developing an alternative relationship between high art and mass culture and thus should be distinguished from modernism, which for the most part insisted on the inherent hostility between high and low" (*Great Divide* viii). Huyssen immediately allows for individual peculiarities—modernists with an interest in the low and avant-gardists opposed to mass culture—but my argument here is that Cummings is more than just an unusual case. Frequently grouped with the "high modernists" Huyssen opposes to the avant-garde, Cummings' credentials as an innovator in the mainstream modernist vein are without question. Indeed, Riding and Graves cite Cummings as the preeminent poet of modernism in their seminal 1927 *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. But as we have seen, Cummings' early work is heavily grounded in avant-garde thought and practice, and more importantly, those very same standard modernist innovations are the ones that find their conceptual ground in the avant-garde. Thus, *The Enormous Room* suggests that the "high modernism" Huyssen severs from the avant-garde would largely be impossible without it.[18]

In the story-telling structure, Cummings' narrative concerns are driven in large part by a Dadaist desire to undermine existing literary practice and thereby undermine the normative political power of narrative. The experimentation of the more typically "modernist" ends of the book is mainly linguistic, and significantly this concern with language is also driven, to a large degree, by the avant-garde's general assault on artistic surface. Cummings' many and varied uses of narrative surface make it nearly impossible to associate *The Enormous Room* with just one avant-garde movement, while at the same time make it essential to see his work in the context of an avant-garde agenda. We must further see the way an avant-garde agenda facilitates both the aesthetic and political confrontation Cummings and many other modernists seek. These radical impulses run counter to Huyssen's claim that modernists wanted nothing to do with the masses or mass culture. Similarly, Bürger's position that modernists merely opposed "traditional writing techniques" (Schulte-Sasse xv) becomes nearly untenable. The avant-garde in many ways allows modernism to happen, and in ways that make it more than the simple "salient motor" that Eysteinsson describes. If so, the avant-garde amounts to a continually present technical and theoretical prerequisite, a constant and necessary habit of

conceptualization, which, in effect, allows the artist access to other realms of creation.

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Notes

1. Cummings originally entitled the poetry collection *Tulips & Chimneys*, and the loss of his unconventional ampersand in publication angered him so much that it became the title his next collection of poetry, *&* (1925).

2. Bürger's label offers a practical way to distinguish European movements of the teens, twenties, and thirties from later movements like Abstract Expressionism in the U.S.; it also distinguishes these movements from the generic adjective "avant-garde."

3. Cummings criticism of the last ten years has continued to look at Cummings' experimentalism as an expression of his individualism rather than as evolving out of the broader avant-garde revolution of the teens and twenties. Michael Webster's innovative work on Cummings' visual poetry, *Reading Visual Poetry after Futurism*, draws compelling parallels with Marinetti and the Futurists, but claims, "away from the anti-art ferment of Europe, E. E. Cummings would develop his own idiosyncratic verbal and visual syntax and put it to the service of an ideology of individualism and artistic integrity" (2). Taimi Olsen has also noted Futurist qualities in his work, even with an eye to the communal deviance central to *The Enormous Room*. But rather than note the political implications, the diverse "noise" of the prison becomes an occasion for individual spiritual transcendence. Though the detention center "acts as a classroom, a center of rebellion, and an embryonic utopian community" where prisoners share "spiritual ideas, [and] cultural values," Olsen translates this vibrant communal interaction to a familiar theme: Cummings' narrator "connects the theme of spiritual freedom to political and social freedom, associating individualism and personal autonomy with both personal growth and human rights" (64).

4. For a comprehensive examination of Cummings' painting and its influence on his poetry, see Milton Cohen's *POETandPAINTER*. Looking at Cummings' notes, Cohen observes, "In punctuation, for example, Cummings saw not only pictorial and kinetic possibilities, but also colors: commas were somewhere between yellow and red, periods between black and white, colons between veronese green (in one note) and blue (in another)" (210). Kennedy, too, notes that in the months following his 1916 Har-

vard commencement, Cummings spent much of his time "playing" with language to learn its qualities. He used *reams* of paper in the course of a few months, but the end result was a deep knowledge of the material nature of language—how different combinations and sequences could be used to effect varied responses (see Kennedy, *Revisited* 32).

5. Cummings was apparently jailed because of "seditious" letters written by friend William Slater Brown (*The Enormous Room*'s "B"), detailing low French morale and in one case asking authorities to assign him and Cummings to a French aviation squadron, provided they did not have to harm Germans. Late in his life, Brown disputed this explanation for their imprisonment. In a 1988 letter to Christopher Collier—written at age 91—Brown writes, "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…. The French did everything, naturally, to suppress the news" (Friedman and Forrest 90). The letters remain, however, the most plausible scenario, as *The Enormous Room* itself proposes; see 13-4. For details of the actual letters, see excerpts in Charles Norman's *E.E. Cummings: The Magic Maker*, pp. 72-78.

6. The Enormous Room, after which the book is entitled, was the living area of the "holding center" in which Cummings was imprisoned. As C, the book's narrator, describes it, "it was in shape oblong, about 80 feet by 40," and was designed so that "les hommes were not supposed to see anything which went on in the world without" (50-1).

7. Webster notes that "Cummings usually provides enough visual, thematic, and grammatical clues to enable the reader to parse the meaning of items, like punctuation marks, that he has endowed with new semantic content. His practice thus contrasts sharply with Marinetti and [Kurt] Schwitters, who reach the limits of semiotic intelligibility" (132).

8. One of the more telling anecdotes about the medium's primacy concerns Alanson Hartpence's response to an inquisitive art patron. William Carlos Williams claims that when a confused lady viewing an abstract painting asked Hartpence what a figure was, Hartpence looked closely and responded, "That, Madam, is paint" (240).

9. It is important to remember that even in 1922 such experimentation was outside the norm, when not unknown. Though Gertrude Stein began her radical aesthetic experimentation during the century's first decade—and indeed Cummings borrowed a rare copy of *Tender Buttons* from a friend in the mid teens and read from it during a Harvard Commencement event—it

was far from mainstream style in the early twenties, even within bohemian artistic circles.

10. *The Enormous Room*'s technical difficulties, however, attempt to generate change in a manner best articulated by Theodor Adorno. For Adorno, the difficulty of an avant-garde test shakes readers out of the easy interpretive patterns that convention affords them, patterns that inevitably reinforce the political status quo and lead to a false consciousness akin to Hegel's "unthinking inertia."

11. It is interesting to note that musicologists discuss dissonance as it relates to "counterpoint," the contrasting of two or more melodic lines. Significantly, counterpoint is often discussed in terms of "the horizontal-linear point of view," which suggests interesting correlations between the linear progression of both music and language.

12. Critic John M. Gill has made a number of trips to La Ferté-Macé, where the actual prison is located. Through interviews with older residents and archival work, he has been able to speculate on what Cummings' experience would actually have been like. Significant at this point in the essay is his proposition that the Enormous Room was in fact fairly open and light, with many windows looking out to surrounding areas. This depiction contrasts sharply with the closed, claustrophobic system the book offers. The only views out described in the novel are via peepholes that offer an extremely limited view of an obscure corner of the women's courtyard. Otherwise, visually we are always inside the prison, even though C tells us he left many times to fetch water and perform other duties. See John M. Gill's "*The Enormous Room* and "The Windows of Nowhere" and his "*The Enormous Room* Remembered."

13. Cummings' liberal borrowing from multiple movements should not be surprising, for the movements themselves largely did such, and critics have tended to exaggerate antagonism between avant-garde groups. Marcel Duchamp, the premier Dada artist, was considered a "cubist" throughout his early career. Gleizes and Metzinger acknowledge Cubism's debt to Impressionism (47-8); Umbro Apollonio notes Futurism's indebtedness to the "chronophotography" of the 1880s and 1890s and to Duchamp's *Nude* (14-5). Of Dada's origins, artist Hans Richter recalled, "Like all newborn movements we were convinced that the world began anew in us; but in fact we had swallowed Futurism—bones and all. It is true that in the process of digestion all sorts of bones and feathers had been regurgitated. The youthful élan, the aggressively direct approach to the public, the provocations, were products of Futurism, as were the literary forms in which they were

clothed: the manifesto and its visual format" (33).

14. Cummings would continue his assault on scientific reasoning in the years that followed. His third book of poetry, published in 1926, takes this to an extreme in its title, *is 5*. As Cummings explains in the foreword, "whereas nonmakers [the unpoetic] must content themselves with the merely undeniable fact that two times two is four,[the poet] rejoices in a purely irresistible truth(to be found,in abbreviated costume,upon the title page of the present volume)" (*CP* 221).

15. Any mention of "space" and "modernism" evokes, for many readers, Joseph Frank's 1948 essay, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature." This is unfortunate, because Frank's use of the word "spatial" is misleading. He writes of the modernist style that "the meaning-relationship is completed only by the simultaneous perception in space of word-groups that have no comprehensible relation to each other when read consecutively in time" (15), a process which he also calls "a spatializiation of time and memory" (27). But really, the modernist's play is with the nature of time, and since modernists are questioning ordinary perceptions and uses of time, Frank chooses "spatial" almost by default. Significantly, it is the spatialization *of time*, not a pure concern with the nature of space. Frank's "spatial" form makes you think about time and the nature of time. *The Enormous Room*, on the other hand, makes you think about the nature of space. It works outside of time, like Frank, but it does this to consider the nature of space, not only to disrupt the flow of time. Time is not a factor in *The Enormous Room*'s middle. It is "the always unchanging temporal dimension which merely contains" (82). Readers of Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* might remember that he characterizes modernism by its temporal logic, the postmodern by its spatial logic: it is "a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic" (25). This may indicate how thoroughly avant-garde theory and practice permeates modernism and its offspring.

16. The exact chronology is complicated, as any Surreal qualities in the book mean Cummings in some way "anticipated" Surrealism. The first Surrealist manifesto was not published until 1924, though André Breton, the architect of Surrealism, was active in Paris Dada after 1918. Cummings spent some time in Paris before the manuscript's publication, and traveled in overlapping circles, so it is conceivable that he was familiar with Breton's ideas. What I would argue instead is that the book reveals Surrealism to be the inevitable result of extending a particular line of avant-garde logic to its conclusion.

17. Bürger's historicization also emphasizes the different social function of

the historical avant-garde today: "In late capitalist society, intentions of the historical avant-garde [to emancipate by destroying art's autonomy] are being realized but the result has been a disvalue" (54). That is, Bürger argues that art is being integrated with everyday life just as the avant-garde wished, but rather than serving an emancipatory function, this integration has further denigrated the individual. Contemporary critics who characterize modernism and the avant-garde as "elitist" and thus "conservative," often overlook this historical development.

18. Astradur Eysteinsson best articulates my understanding of the relationship between the avant-garde and modernism in *The Concept of Modernism*. Chapter 4, "The Avant-Garde as/or Modernism," traces the conceptual history of the relationship, concluding "'modernism' is necessarily the broader term, while the concept of the 'avant-garde' has proven to enjoy a good deal of 'free-play' *within* the overall reach of modernism. At the same time, nothing that is modernist can escape the touch of the avant-garde" (177). Further, he "work[s] on the assumption that while texts such as *Ulysses*, *Der Prozeß*, *Nightwood*, and *The Cantos* are modernist works, they are also avant-garde in their nontraditional structure and their radicalized correlations of form and content, and that while the avant-garde movements are historical phenomena in their own right, they are also the salient motors of modernism" (178).

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