

E. E. CUMMINGS: THE CREATIVE ARTIST
IN "THE ENORMOUS ROOM"

by

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ABSTRACT

The Enormous Room is an autobiographical novel organized around the journey in The Pilgrim's Progress. The links between the two works, however, do not end with the organization: both the novel and the allegory are based on prison experiences; both contain autobiographical and didactic elements. Furthermore, both novelist and allegorist use the journey as an image for the life of the spirit. Neither the path of Christian's journey nor that of Cummings' is the way of the world.

While Cummings does carry more than one of his themes by accommodating The Pilgrim's Progress, he ironically inverts Bunyan's ideas for the same purpose. The Puritan cleanliness ethic, for example, is inverted, placing cleanliness next to ungodliness in The Enormous Room.

Whereas this inversion has given rise to great dispute, the individual character studies in the novel remain indisputably one of its greatest achievements. To a certain extent characterization in The Enormous Room depends upon animal imagery in The Pilgrim's Progress; but where Bunyan's imagery is concentrated, Cummings' is diffused; where Bunyan's animals evoke fear and horror, Cummings' are humorous or merely picturesque.

It is in the area of setting that Cummings and Bunyan are perhaps farthest apart. Bunyan's pilgrimage begins in the City of Destruction and extends across the earth, terminating in the Celestial City. Cummings' journey, on the other hand, is strictly circumscribed geographically, but within the geographical limits he creates a changing setting through precise descriptions of the prisoners at La Ferté.

The comparison and contrast between the two works concludes with an examination of the excremental vision in the novel. Norman O. Brown's link between excrement and death in Life Against Death: A Psychoanalytical Meaning of History is reapplied to illustrate the final connection between Bunyan's allegory and Cummings' novel.

The topic of characterization examined in the first chapter appears for re-examination in Chapter II. There characterization is related to the humour in the novel and the role of games; both are then linked to the roles assumed by three of the main characters: Count Bragard, Jean le Nègre, and Surplice.

In the third chapter the humorous situations of the novel, examined in Chapter II, are shown to be balanced by tense episodes. Just as the dramatic situations in the novel are balanced so too are the emotions of the narrator, fluctuating between anguish at the inhumane

treatment in the prison and delight in the Delectable Mountains and the sight of New York upon his return to America.

The sense of unity and mystery associated with the sight of New York is expanded in Chapter V, "The Fusion of Subject and Object in The Enormous Room." There the "mysterious" relationship between the individual perceiver and the external world is examined and an attempt is made to answer two fundamental questions deriving from this relationship: how can an external and material object be transmuted into the interior and immaterial self and how can this transmutation be expressed in words.

Finally in Chapter V the partial visions of the first four chapters are related to the whole novel: the artist's vision is studied in terms of form and content, character and situation. We return to a genre study, claiming the term "novel" for Cummings' work and thematically linking it with the contemporary war novels. In form another claim is made for this novel - the claim to be like poetry, painting, and photography.

For each of the five chapters an introductory remark or series of them have been selected to present in a meaningful way the issues expressed in the particular chapters. The aim of presenting these remarks is twofold: to show precedents and antecedents for the ideas and their expres-

sion and to link the concerns of the novelist with those of other creative artists. Such a presentation is in keeping with a central concept in Cummings' artistic vision, that of unity.

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"Art - defined by an unknown playwright of the 20th century as "a question of being alive" (not "a matter of being born") - is the one question which only matters." ¹

¹ E.E. Cummings, "A Fairy Tale," A Miscellany Revised, ed. George J. Firmage (New York: October House Inc., 1967), p. 250.

INTRODUCTION

Background Material and Approach

"A real novel," according to the critic Albert Thibaudet, "is like an autobiography of what might have been possible."² A real novel, E.E. Cummings could well reply, is the illumination, through a narrative, of the vision of life whose formation is the writer's autobiography. E.E. Cummings' The Enormous Room is such a novel. Written at the request of his father, Dr. Edward Cummings, the novel recounts the experiences of the writer and his friend, William Slater Brown, during the final four months of 1917. Shortly after being assigned to Section Sanitaire Vingt-et-Un, Ambulance Norton-Harjes, Croix Rouge Américaine, the two men were arrested and removed to Camp de Triage de la Ferté Macé, because Brown had written supposedly subversive letters to friends in America. This action gave rise to voluminous correspondence between the writer's father and, among others, Richard Norton, head of the Norton-Harjes

² Albert Thibaudet, Réflexions sur le Roman, I (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), p. 12.

Ambulance corps, an unnamed major on the staff of the Judge Advocate General, A.E.F., in Paris, and President Woodrow Wilson. This correspondence secured Cummings' release from La Ferté and he returned to New York on board the *Espagne* in December. Two months later Brown was released from the prison at Précigné and joined Cummings in America.

The official and personal correspondences assembled in Charles Norman's biography of Cummings,³ some of which are included in the Foreward to The Enormous Room, present an outsider's view of the imprisonment. E.E. Cummings, with Brown's assistance, provides us with the view from within the Enormous Room in the form of the novel itself.

In a letter dated October 6, 1920 and addressed to Stewart Mitchell, the managing editor of The Dial, Cummings describes the procedure involved in writing The Enormous Room:

Here I've been working (as worked the sons of Egypt to build the pyramids, you understand - in other words like H.) upon a little historical treatise of vast import to my Family and Nobody in General - comprising my experiences in France, or more accurately en prison. Honestly to say, I haven't done nawthing else. Strenuous is no name

³Charles Norman, E.E. Cummings: A Biography (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1967), pp. 62-89. rev. ed. ;

therefor - 3 pages a day, since my family left, on an average 2 hours to the page. ID EST, a six hour day, splendid for the good of humanity, and if so, and so forth. 4

Two interesting points are made in this letter. The first is that Cummings seems not to expect a spectacular reception for his first novel, and according to the late critic and scholar Ben Ray Redman, the book was a "Pot-Boiler with Ideas" and a commercial failure.⁵ But more significant is Cummings' emphasis on the agony of the artist, a theme which he is to develop five years later in an article for Vanity Fair.⁶

In a letter which he wrote to Malcolm Cowley dated April 30, 1951, Cummings comments in retrospect on the writing of The Enormous Room:

TheER wrote itself as a(n however microscopic gesture of thankfulness toward my father; who, despite every effort of Norton Harjes & l'armée française, boosted not only me but B out of hell. B & I were together at the writing, which sans his memory of events would have proved impossible. And he can probably tell you when this happened ... perhaps, & here's hoping, I [as an artist] Just Grewed 7

⁴Quoted in Charles Norman, p. 92.

⁵NYTBR, June 15, 1958, p. 4.

⁶Cf. "Most people merely accept this agony of the Artist, as they accept evolution." in "The Agony of the Artist (with a capital A)," A Miscellany Revised, pp. 189-193.

From this comment, couched in an organic metaphor, we learn little about Cummings as a creative artist or about the creative process in the novel. It could be argued that the writer is here being modest or perhaps just secretive. And yet, even if we granted that Cummings is the most illuminating commentator on his own art, his desire for secretiveness or aversion to analysis inevitably blur his comments on creative art. This particular view is supported in the Introduction to The Enormous Room, whose organizing principle is a dialogue between Cummings as artist and a critic - interviewer:

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

Namely?
The individual. ⁸

The organic metaphor recurs, revealing no more than it did in the Cowley letter. It is not that Cummings fails to grasp the difference between criticism and appreciation; rather it is that he chooses to disregard the

⁷Norman, pp. 96-7.

⁸E.E. Cummings, Introduction to The Enormous Room (New York: Random House, Inc., 1934), p. viii. All future references to this novel will be taken from the above edition; page numbers will appear with the cited passages.

one and over-emphasize the other. Perhaps, as he stated in the letter to Cowley, the "gesture of thankfulness" played a significant role, yet we are urged beyond the writer's statements to an examination of the artistic process and finally to a judgment of the creative artist. In short, we will be examining Cummings' control and manipulation of language as a medium and analyzing his other organizational principles in order to explain how he fulfils the difficult task of fusing content with form to produce and sustain artistic vitality in The Enormous Room. This analysis should also allow for an assessment of the novel in relation to Cummings' later works.⁹

The method employed in Chapter I of the thesis is that of comparison and contrast: the chapter begins with an evaluation of the critical comments linking The Enormous Room with The Pilgrim's Progress. It then proceeds to a discussion and explanation of their similarities in terms of characterization and setting. It also examines the excremental vision of the novel in some detail, presenting that vision from the perspective of Norman O. Brown's psychoanalytical study, Life Against Death. Chapter II returns to the matter of characterization, this time examining it in relation to both the

⁹This topic has been pursued in depth from the point of view of "theme and symbol, only secondarily of style" by James P. Dougherty, DA, XXIII (1962), p. 1363.

humour in the novel and the role of games as exemplified in the work of anthropologist, Johan Huizinga.¹⁰ Chapter III, dealing with the concept of balance, builds on the previous two chapters, expands their subject matter, and anticipates the final two chapters. Chapter IV treats in detail the fusion of subject and object; here Cummings' later works, particularly the poetry, are used to demonstrate this principle. The final chapter is an examination of Cummings' vision in the novel; the title "The Unified Vision in The Enormous Room" has been chosen to emphasize the culmination of the thesis, linking form and content as well as character and situation.

The specific development of each chapter depends, of course, upon its subject and the kind of presentation best suited to it. For each of the five chapters an introductory remark or series of them have been selected to present in a meaningful way the issues expressed in the particular chapters. The aim of presenting these remarks is twofold: to show precedents and antecedents for the ideas and their expression and to link the concerns of the novelist with those of other creative artists. Such a presentation is in keeping with a central concept in Cummings' artistic vision, that of unity.

¹⁰Specifically Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture. Boston: Beacon Press, 1966.

The claim for a unified vision in The Enormous Room is made with an awareness of the observations of some early critics, who stated that "the form of the novel [was] not brought to completion"¹¹ and that the book's "exquisite finesse in portraiture"¹² stands in marked contrast with its "brutal inchoate raving [spiralling] into a maze of meaningless sounds."¹³

These critics' observations would be indisputably correct if we accepted The Enormous Room as a war novel in the tradition of John Dos Passos' Three Soldiers or Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms. If, on the other hand, we insist on considering Cummings' novel as a new form - an experiment, and a significant one in the writer's development as an artist, then we cannot overlook the criteria for such literary criticism. Henry James' reminder in The Art of Fiction seems most appropriate in this connection:

Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange

¹¹John Peale Bishop, "Incorrect English," Vanity Fair, July 1922, p. 20.

¹²Quoted in David E. Smith, "The Enormous Room and The Pilgrim's Progress," TCL, II (July 1965), 67.

¹³Ibid.

of views and the comparison of standpoints; and there is a presumption that those times when no one has anything particular to say about it, and has no reason to give for practice or preference, though they may be times of honour, are not times of development - are times, possibly even, a little of dulness.¹⁴

Henry James' statement is well worth keeping in mind for the final section of this thesis when we consider E.E. Cummings as a novelist, particularly as author of one of the three most noted American novels based on World War One.

¹⁴Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," The Major Critics, Holmes, Fussell, Frazer eds. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 267.

"THE ENORMOUS ROOM" AND "THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS"

I. Critical Remarks Linking the Two Works: An Evaluation of That Criticism

"When at the first I took my pen in hand
Thus for to write, I did not understand
That I at all should make a little book
In such a mode ..." ¹⁵

"Here I have seen things rare and profitable;
Things pleasant, dreadful, things to make me
stable
In what I have begun to take in hand;
Then let me think on them, and understand
Wherefore they showed me was, and let me be
Thankful, O good Interpreter, to thee." ¹⁶

"Never has any great work been accomplished by human creatures, in which instinct was not the principal mental agent, or in which the methods of design could be defined by rule, or apprehended by reason. It is therefore that agency through mechanism destroys the powers of art, and sentiments of religion, together." ¹⁷

¹⁵John Bunyan, "The Author's Apology For His Book," The Pilgrim's Progress, Introduction Louis L. Martz (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 2.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁷Reflections from Ruskin, sel. & arrang. R. Dimsdale Stocker (London: Gay & Hancock, Ltd., 1908), p. 18.

Of the interpretations of The Enormous Room in recent years David E. Smith ¹⁸ and Kingsley Widmer ¹⁹ (and in former years John Peale Bishop ²⁰) have identified The Pilgrim's Progress as a source and key to an understanding of Cummings' novel. The seventeenth-century allegory is the point of departure for Cummings, and when properly collated with The Enormous Room can lead to some valuable insights into the method of characterization and the nature of the journey in that novel.

By way of introducing this particular source study we might mention that Cummings' biographer, Charles Norman, and Sheridan Baker ²¹ have both commented on the value of Cummings' use of source material as a way to understanding the early poetry. Norman remarks, for example, that a reading of Keats' letter to Benjamin Bailey dated July 18, 1818, ²² concerning the Proserpine myth as it appears in Paradise Lost, strikes to the heart of what Cummings is stating in "Chansons Innocentes

¹⁸Cf. TCL, II (1962), 67-75.

¹⁹"Timeless Prose," TCL, IV (1958), 3-8.

²⁰Vanity Fair, (July 1922), 20.

²¹Sheridan Baker, "Cummings and Catullus," MLN, 74 (March 1959), 231-4.

²²Quoted in Norman, p. 38.

Preface to E.E. Cummings: A Biography was not to write a critical biography.

In contrast, David E. Smith, who does for The Enormous Room what Norman and Baker do for the poetry, takes care to point out both the similarities and the differences between the novel and its source, The Pilgrim's Progress. Professor Smith is generally correct in claiming that

E.E. Cummings probably used Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress as an organizing principle of The Enormous Room because he suspected that for most people in his generation its spiritual power and moral lessons were either forgotten or misunderstood.²⁵

But we must go even further than this statement if we wish to understand Cummings' intention in the novel. Looking ahead for a moment to Anthropos: or the Future of Art, a parable published eight years after The Enormous Room, we find Cummings attacking didacticism in art. And yet we cannot deny, even in the light of this later work, that Cummings' intention in The Enormous Room - as Professor Smith has suggested - is in part,

²⁴"Chansons Innocentes III," E.E. Cummings: Poems 1923-1954 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1954), p. 23.

²⁵Smith, p. 67.

if not exclusively, to instruct. That work is a fusion of the two ways of writing: writing to instruct and writing to delight.

In his article Professor Smith goes on to demonstrate that the influence of The Pilgrim's Progress on The Enormous Room extends beyond the obvious structural and thematic similarities to touch on similarities between the methods of characterization and setting. Professor Smith's findings, valuable although not exhaustive, will act as a springboard for my own closer analysis of themes, characterization, and setting in the works of Bunyan and Cummings.

II. A Comparison and Contrast: General Remarks and Methods of Characterization

"They [poets] untie writing and then tie it up again differently." ²⁶

"Now let us try to understand the zoo as a concatenation of differently functioning and variously labelled mirrors, all of which are alive. These living mirrors, mistakenly called "animals," are for the most part grouped in systems or "houses," like the "birdhouse" or the "monkey house," and each house or system furnishes us with some particular verdict upon ourselves. In passing from house to house, from one system of mirrors to another system of mirrors, we discover totally unsuspected [sic] ²⁷ aspects of our own existence."

To begin with, let us make a few general statements about The Enormous Room and The Pilgrim's Progress. John Bunyan began composing The Pilgrim's Progress in 1675 during a six-month imprisonment in the bridge-house at Bedford, England. E.E. Cummings began composing The Enormous Room in New Hampshire

²⁶John Cocteau, quoted in "Jean Cocteau as a Graphic Artist," A Miscellany Revised, p. 102.

²⁷E.E. Cummings, "The Secrets of the Zoo Exposed," A Miscellany Revised, p. 175.

two years after his release from a French detention camp in 1920. Both works contain autobiographical and didactic elements.

Another general point: both Bunyan and Cummings use the pilgrimage from hell to heaven as an image for the life of the spirit. The traveller in Part I of The Pilgrim's Progress is Christian; in The Enormous Room it is Cummings-as-narrator. The travellers in Part II of The Pilgrim's Progress are Christian's family, Christiana and her children; their pilgrimage is paralleled in Chapter VIII of The Enormous Room by the Wanderer's wife and three children. A related point is implicit in both works: neither Cummings' way nor Christian's is the way of the world.

The last general point, stated on the title page of Bunyan's allegory is perhaps the most important: the Pilgrim journeys "From This World To That Which / Is To Come." ²⁸ Cummings makes ironic use of Bunyan's movement toward the extramundane: the American writer's new world is not outside time and space as is Bunyan's, but on this earth, projected forward in time:

In the course of the next ten thousand years it may be possible to

²⁸Bunyan, p. xvii.

find Delectable Mountains without going to prison - captivity I mean, Monsieur Le Surveillant - it may be possible, I dare say, to encounter Delectable Mountains who are not in prison (The Enormous Room, p. 307.).

Cummings carries more than one of his themes by both accommodating and at the same time ironically reversing Bunyan's Puritan values. Cummings, for example, dwells on the outward appearance of both the protagonist - prisoners and the antagonist - officials. What he is doing, in effect, is presenting the authoritarian man to the inferiorly-dressed prisoners. And this distinction in dress is at the heart of the dissension arising between Cummings and the prison officials. But Cummings does not stop there. Once he equates an unkempt outward appearance with positive values, he reverses Bunyan's scheme by negating personal cleanliness. Professor Smith remarks tellingly on Cummings' inversion of values:

Cleanliness is next to ungodliness in Cummings' ludicrously inverted scheme of things. The only physically clean beings are the non-prisoners. The "very definite fiend," Apollyon, who is the director of the prison, is an impeccable dresser, a terrifying little monster whose most disgusting feature is his inhuman fetish for personal cleanliness ... It is a perfectly obvious irony

that, behind his puppet-like facade of cleanliness, Apollyon is responsible for the filthiest of prisons.²⁹

Cummings' adaption of Bunyan takes us further to the thematic centre of The Enormous Room. According to Bunyan, Apollyon is a monster and a fiend; Cummings' Apollyon, the Directeur at La Ferté Macé, is likewise monstrous and fiendish. The conflict arising between Cummings and the Directeur, central to the theme of The Enormous Room, finds expression in the novelist's re-application of Bunyan's animal imagery:

So he [Christian] went on, and Apollyon met him. Now the monster was hideous to behold; he was clothed with scales like a fish (and they are his pride), he had wings like a dragon, feet like a bear, and out of his belly came fire and smoke, and his mouth was as the mouth of a lion. When he was come up to Christian, he beheld him with a disdainful countenance, and thus began to question with him.³⁰

On the surface these details of description are not particularly significant, but in the light of The Enormous Room's special use of animal imagery, Bunyan's apparently straightforward description of Apollyon becomes highly significant.

²⁹Smith, p. 69.

³⁰Bunyan, p. 58.

The most striking images in Bunyan's description of Apollyon center on animals, nearly all of which are unpleasant and even fierce, such as the monster, the dragon, the bear, and the lion. Through these images the sense of fear and horror is reinforced. Where Bunyan has centered this animal imagery on Apollyon though, Cummings has diffused it: the Zulu is described as "the floating fish of his slimness half a bird" (p. 252); the Wanderer walks "kindly like a bear" (p. 225); Jo-Jo becomes the Lion-Faced Boy.

Not only has Cummings diffused Bunyan's concentrated imagery, but he has also tempered the sense of fear and horror aroused by Bunyan's animals: where Bunyan's lion had been ferocious, Cummings' is merely picturesque; where stood the preponderant bear of The Pilgrim's Progress, now stands the kind and awkward animal of The Enormous Room; and the fish, once proud, is now only streamlined.

A particular use of animal imagery is made in the case of M. le Directeur and the high-ranking among his officials. Their pride is established by associating them with the most recurrent of all symbols of pride and defiance - the rooster. The clearest instance of this association occurs in the description of the Sur-

veillant:

... teetering a little slowly back and forth, and his lean hands joined behind him and twitching regularly, a képi tilted forward on his cadaverous head so that its visor almost hid the weak eyes sunkenly peering from under droopy eyebrows, his pompous rooster-like body immaculately attired in a shiny uniform ... (p. 92).

Once again though, Cummings' method is not to concentrate the imagery of pride on one character. The rooster image, only slightly varied but greatly amplified, had been used to describe the Interrogator at Vingt-et-Un:

His neck was exactly like a hen's: I felt sure that when he drank he must tilt his head back as hens do in order that the liquid may run down their throats. But his method of keeping himself upright, together with certain spasmodic contractions of his fingers and the nervous 'uh-ah, uh-ah,' which punctuated his insecure phrases like uncertain commas, combined to offer the suggestion of a rooster; a rather moth-eaten rooster, which took itself tremendously seriously and was showing-off to an imaginary group of admiring hens situated somewhere in the background of his consciousness (pp. 56-7).

Shortly, this official comes to be known as the rooster (p. 57); in much the same way as the liberty-loving, hairy-chested farmer becomes simply The Bear; and the bulbous-lipped, weak-eyed Gestionnaire, the Hippopotamus.

The rooster image recurs in the description of Monsieur Petairs, although in this instance it is confined to the external appearance of the man and does not intimate pride as it had in the case of the government officials:

His Adam's-apple, at such moments, jumped about in a longish, slack, wrinkled, skinny neck which was like the neck of a turkey. To this turkey the approach of Thanksgiving inspired dread. From time to time M. Petairs looked about him sidewise as if he expected to see a hatchet. His hands were claws, kind, awkward and nervous (p. 100).

The image of the cock, used descriptively and symbolically, is naturally incorporated into the colloquial expressions in the novel: Muskowitz, in terms reminiscent of the Surveillant, is a Cock-eyed Millionaire and the Young Pole after the Sunday morning fight is "as cocky as ever the next morning" (p. 233).

Cummings extends his use of barnyard imagery to include the pig and the cow. Using the technique previously applied to the Interrogator at Vingt-et-Un, Cummings names one of the Surveillant's permanent plantons "the beefy one" (p. 82) and then refers to him variously as "the beefy bull" (p. 85) and "the beefy-necked" (p. 86).

While still in Vingt-et-Un the narrator describes the very fat gendarme (v-f-g) as having "pig-like orbs" (p. 28). Later, he refers to M. le Gestionnaire's "neat pig-like face" (p. 104); later still, our attention is drawn to the Butcher's "buried pig's eyes" (p. 261). Each time the narrator focuses on a different feature of these pig-like men: in the manner of a movie camera he first presents a general appearance of the eyes; then he moves back for a shot of the face as a whole. Finally he returns for a close-up of the eyes embedded in the mounds of flesh.

From the innocuous barnyard animals the imagery expands to include predatory animals of ferocious natures, though seen only from the aspect of their physical appearance. Such an animal is M. le Gestionnaire:

A contented animal, a bulbous animal;
the only living hippopotamus in captivity,
fresh from the Nile ... My hay-coloured head perhaps pleased him, as a hippopotamus. He would perhaps eat me. He grunted, exposing tobacco-yellow tusks, and his tiny eyes twittered (p. 105).

Characterized by the same tiny eyes but possessing much keener vision is the vulture, the first in a series of bird images which descend in size and ferocity. Upon his arrival in the Enormous Room, Cummings is approached

by a "vulture-like silhouette" (p. 62), later described as having

... a demoralized broom clenched in one claw or fist: it had lean legs cased in shabby trousers, muscular shoulders covered with a rough shirt open at the neck, knotted arms, and a coarse, insane face crammed beneath the visor of a cap. The face consisted of a rapid nose, drooping moustache, ferocious watery small eyes, a pugnacious chin, and sunken cheeks hideously smiling (p. 67).

The professeur de dance, a vain effeminate lad of eighteen who makes a brief appearance in the Enormous Room, is an "absurd peacock" (p. 124). Upon his removal, the Room is described as a "dung-heap minus a butterfly" (p. 125).

The third main pattern of animal imagery in the novel centers on the spider. Singled out for particular treatment are its movement, shape, and guile. The Directeur, for instance, is described in Cummings' last interview at La Ferté Macé as

...Apollyon Himself merely cuddled together, depressing his hairy body between its limbs as a spider sometimes does in the presence of danger (p. 299).

This image is foreshadowed earlier in the novel when the narrator is being escorted to the office of M. le Gestion-

naire:

I obligingly ascended [another flight of stairs]; thinking of the Surveillant as a spider, elegantly poised in the centre of his nefarious web, waiting for a fly to make too many struggles
 (p. 103).

The image here reflects the predatory nature of the Surveillant as Cummings thinks of him - the human spider and his fly.

If Bunyan seems to have impressed on Cummings the effectiveness of using animal imagery in developing character, he also appears to have provided Cummings with a method of establishing identity. As regards the two chief characters, Christian and Cummings, identity is established first in general terms and proceeds from there to the particular.

Following his escape from the Slough of Despond, Christian is no longer just "a man" or "he", but "Christian," no longer an indefinite quantity lacking depth, but a man with a name. So, by means of struggle and sorrow, the man frees himself from anonymity. Cummings' search for an identity is more complex than Christian's, and proceeds beyond mere naming. Like Christian though, Cummings is defined first by "I." The definition is enlarged to include an "ambulance driver," an "American,"

and finally he arrives at a name, "Cummings [the first and last time that my name was correctly pronounced by a Frenchman]" (p. 6).³¹ The name is then presented in full along with its spelling and genealogy in a humorous scene with M. le Ministre. Cummings proceeds to define himself in terms of past pursuits, mentioning that he had been both a student and a painter (p. 15), the latter being a reputation which he still enjoys. During his confinement in the Enormous Room the inmates refer to him as "l'américain" or "Johnny;" to the officials he is "KEW-MANGS" or "KEW-MANGZ", "le nouveau" or "l'autre américain." It is only when he is about to leave the Enormous Room that Cummings, the man with so many names, finally becomes an individual:

... 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 -

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 (p. 325).

In contrast to the development of the narrator in The Enormous Room, the development of the minor characters proceeds from individual to general. "B", for example, acts as a supplier of information when Cum-

³¹Cummings' brackets.

mings first arrives at La Ferte.³² "B" tells him that he is at Macé, not Marseilles, and further: "Cummings, I tell you this is the finest place on earth" (p. 64). As a supplier of information "B" is associated with the Interpreter in The Pilgrim's Progress. In his role of welcoming Cummings to the Enormous Room and introducing him to the inhabitants, "B" is also associated with Bunyan's Faithful.³³ Similarly, Count Bragard is allied with Bunyan's Formalism, Hypocrisy, and particularly Mr. Worldly Wiseman, who "look[s] like a gentleman" (Pilgrim's Progress, p. 21), but acts contrariwise.

Bunyan's technique of characterization in The Pilgrim's Progress depends on the writer's need to personify the many dimensions of human life in several characters: Faithful is Christian, as are Greed and Hopeful. Cummings' technique is here similar to Bunyan's. The qualities personified in Bunyan's secondary characters are combined in Cummings' portrayal of both the French government officials and the inhabitants of the Enormous Room.

It seems then - to sum up this discussion - that for at least two methods of characterization Cummings is indebted to Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress - the use of animal imagery and the search for identity. Yet while

³²Cf. Smith, p. 70.

³³Bunyan, p. 77.

Cummings has used Bunyan's methods, he has both modified and amplified them, thus achieving markedly different results.

III. A Comparison and Contrast: The Setting and The Concept of the Journey

"One might be rash enough to conclude that a man has to be at home in some kind of jail in order to become a poet." ³⁴

"Every artist's strictly illimitable country is himself." ³⁵

The world in which Cummings makes his journey in The Enormous Room, unlike Christian's world in The Pilgrim's Progress, is strictly circumscribed geographically. Cummings' entire novel takes place in a village outside Noyon called Ham, in Gré, in Paris, in a prison at Orne - one hundred miles west of Paris, and concludes in New York. But within these geographical limits Cummings creates a changing setting, and describes it - as Bunyan does in The Pilgrim's Progress - with minute precision. For instance, let us take a detail from The Enormous Room which at first seems insignificant. Upon arriving at Noyon, the narrator notices a building which resembles "a feudal dungeon" (p. 9).

³⁴ Thomas Mann, Tonio Kröger, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 155.

³⁵ E.E. Cummings, "Re Ezra Pound: II," A Miscellany Revised, p. 313.

Later that same day, Cummings is confined to a "prison" (p. 22) in the nearby town of Gré, where he studies the wall drawings of former French and German prisoners.

Later still, in the city of Pretend, which he later learns is Macé, Cummings remarks that the building in the distance is "either ... a church or a tomb" (p. 55).

Approaching the building, he realizes that it is neither, but a gendarmerie. Each time the narrator draws our attention to another aspect of his place of confinement, carefully introducing first the dungeon, then the prison, then the church or tomb. Cummings comments on each of these buildings and each becomes part of his world. If we group these descriptions together we see that they give us a picture of change.

Despite the narrator's confinement to the Enormous Room early in the novel, the landscape continues to change - not as a result of the movement from mountain to valley as in The Pilgrim's Progress, but as a result of his focus on the different individuals within the Room. These inhabitants, like Chaucer's pilgrims, are revealed through static portraits as well as through the kinds of stories which they tell about themselves. Unlike Chaucer though, Cummings dwells on the inner qualities of his characters rather than concentrating on their external appearance.

Entering the unfamiliar world of the Enormous Room, Cummings discovers his friend Brown among the inhabitants. From the familiar Cummings moves outward to make the acquaintance of the two Hollanders - Harree and John o' the Bathhouse, the two Belgians - Emile and Pompom, M. Auguste - a Russian, and Fritz - a Norwegian. Minutely and with infinite patience, Cummings describes each of the characters and allows them to present accounts of their lives. Gradually the Enormous Room comes to resemble an international portrait gallery of "authentic individuals." ³⁶ The same holds true for the Delectable Mountains portrayed in the latter half of the novel.

During his three-and-one-half-month residence in the Enormous Room, Cummings notices significant changes in the human landscape: four nouveaux arrive; Brown, Pete the Hollander, the Sheeneys, and Rockyfeller are transferred to the prison at Précigné; and perhaps most notable is the change which overcomes the narrator himself. He comes to focus solely upon the present and to take stock of what exists within himself. What he finds there is a timeless world whose spatial dimensions increase according to the influence of his fellow inmates.

Cummings creates the world of the Enormous Room

³⁶E.E. Cummings, i: six nonlectures (New York: Atheneum, 1966), p. 31.

with the utmost precision so that it might fulfil a specific function not only in this novel but also in his second novel, Eimi.³⁷ It is within the changing framework of the Enormous Room that the pattern of Cummings' experiences is set up and it is the very nature of this world that gives his experiences significance. The narrator's life is bound up in every way with this change; it furnishes the very substance of his experiences and guarantees their authenticity. Consisting of uninterrupted contact with people who are continually changing, Cummings' life from September 1917 until January 1918 is correctly conceived of as a journey toward spiritual knowledge of the world.³⁸

The starting-point of Cummings' journey is his conception of things as he sees them at Noyon. The hierarchies and values of life in Noyon foreshadow the values of Orne and divide Cummings' universe in two: socially, it is divided into those who "know" and those who "do not know," that is, the group to which the officials and gendarmes belong and the group to which Cummings and most of the volunteers and prisoners belong; morally, it is divided into feelings that are noble and those which are blameworthy; aesthetically, into the beautiful

³⁷Cf. Introduction to The Enormous Room, p. vii and Kenneth Burke, "A Decade of American Fiction," The Bookman, LXIX (August 1929), 565-6.

³⁸Cf. Smith, p. 68.

and the ugly.

Similarly, Christian's world is divided in two: in religious terms, it is divided into those who follow the tenets of Christianity and those who do not, that is, Christian, Christiana, and their children on the one hand, and Pliable, Ignorance, Atheist, and Mr. Worldly Wiseman on the other; morally, it is divided into noble and blameworthy feelings; ethically, into virtues and vices; intellectually, into falsehood and truth.

The concept of the divided world is buttressed in both The Pilgrim's Progress and The Enormous Room by confronting Christian and Cummings with at least two different paths of action at each significant point in their journeys. At the beginning of The Pilgrim's Progress, for example, one path leads through the Slough of Despond and forward, the other leads back to the City of Destruction. Christian chooses the former path; Pliable, the latter. Later in the same work, two paths lead around the Hill Difficulty; one leads over it. Christian chooses the direct and more difficult route; Formalism and Hypocrisy, the circumambulatory route. Which is not to say that Christian's journey is undeviatingly traced along the one true path. On the contrary, he is often led astray, once by Mr. Worldly Wiseman and again by Vain-confidence.

Like Christian, Cummings is confronted by two paths. He may either denounce Brown as a traitor and free himself from suspicion or else remain true to Brown and risk detention for complicity. At La Ferté he must choose whether to oppose the officials or to yield in subservience to them and facilitate his stay. Cummings' decisions, like Christian's, are made in favour of truth, virtue, and noble feelings.

From the time of Cummings' entrance into the Enormous Room we notice several interesting parallels between the setting of this novel and its source. The Interpreter in Bunyan's allegory, for example, leads Christian into a "private room" (The Pilgrim's Progress, p. 29) in his house where hangs the portrait of a grave person. Later in Book II Christiana is led into the same Significant³⁹ Rooms, which

...Christian, Christiana's husband, had seen sometime before. Here therefore they saw the man in the cage, the man and his dream, the man that cut his way through his enemies, and the picture of the biggest of them all, together with the rest of those things that were then so profitable to Christian (p. 208).

Bunyan's Significant Rooms and the pictures therein are reflected with modifications in Cummings' Enormous Room and his living portraits. One of the first rooms viewed

³⁹"Conveying particular meaning" according to Louis Martz's notes.

by Christiana and her company houses a man holding a muck-rake, whose glance is perpetually cast downward. Cummings' Surplice is strongly reminiscent of this figure. And yet Cummings has ironically portrayed Surplice as a Christ figure, even the "muck" takes on positive connotations. From this point they are conducted to "the very best room in the house (a very brave room it was)" (p. 209). No portrait is to be found here but on the wall is poised a huge spider. Christiana learns from this room that even the most venomous of creatures, if they have faith, may dwell in the finest rooms of the Heavenly Palace. Cummings' treatment of this particular scene is ironically inverted. The spider is personified by the Surveillant, who although faithless, remains "elegantly poised in the center of his nefarious web, waiting for a fly ..." (The Enormous Room, p. 103). Furthermore, "the very best room" in La Ferte is the office of M. le Gestionnaire. Before entering the room, the planon knocks twice, as had both Christian and Christiana before they had entered the House of the Interpreter.

In M. le Gestionnaire's office Cummings does not find enlightenment as had Christian and his wife in the "very best room" of the Interpreter's house. Instead, he finds a witless, insensate administrator, whose neg-

ative qualities are exaggerated for comic effect. Enlightenment is not to be found in this office but in what is undoubtedly the very worst room in the house, what Cummings fondly labels the Enormous Room.

What Cummings learns in the Enormous Room is carried with him when he leaves for New York. What Christian learns on the journey from the City of Destruction he carries with him into the Celestial City. Christian ends his quest in affirmation. Behind him stretches a road on which no step has been futile, which no longer seems to have meandered aimlessly for it has led him to a definite and desirable destination. For Bunyan the pilgrimage of the first section has ended.

Cummings' pilgrimage, on the other hand, ends in a qualified affirmation. Paradise is neither gained nor regained in this novel. The narrator's mood most nearly approximates optimism when he writes: "In the course of the next ten thousand years it may be possible to find Delectable Mountains without going to prison ..." (p. 307). For Cummings the journey has not ended; the experience in this novel is to be repeatedly related in his subsequent works.

The main narrative of The Enormous Room, like that of The Pilgrim's Progress and even of Hesse's Narcissus and Goldmund, is formed by the journey. Hesse's work offers a further parallel with Cummings' in that the journeys of the main characters in both novels begin and end at the same place. For Goldmund that place is Mariabronn, where he had formerly been a student. For Cummings the place is America, where he too had been a student.

The conclusion of the narrator's journey in The Enormous Room reflects Cummings' striking accord with the works of another of his contemporaries, D.H. Lawrence, many of whose novels have the elements of a quest. For instance, Cummings' attraction to the light of the city after the darkness of the Enormous Room recalls Paul Morel's similar attraction after his mother's death in Sons and Lovers:

Turning sharply, he walked towards the city's gold phosphorescence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly. 40

Another passage, noteworthy because of the protagonist's fascination with both light and the city after having

⁴⁰D.H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers (New York: The Viking Press, 1966) p. 420.

recently undergone a grueling experience, appears in D.H. Lawrence's The Rainbow, published seven years in advance of The Enormous Room:

Steadily the colour gathered, mysteriously, from nowhere, it took presence upon itself, there was a faint vast rainbow. The arc bended and strengthened itself till it arched indomitable, making great architecture of light and colour and the space of heaven, its pedestals luminous in the corruption of new houses on the low hill, its arch the top of heaven ... She [Ursula] saw in the rainbow the earth's new architecture, the old, brittle corruption of houses and factories swept away, the world built up in a living fabric of Truth, fitting to the over-arching heaven. ⁴¹

Whereas Lawrence's vision is more optimistic and far-reaching than Cummings', both their quests emphasize the journey more than the arrival. They offer a contrast with Bunyan's quest in which both the journey and the arrival are of equal importance. Cummings' journey without end finds a precedent in Montaigne's Essais, where he states that it is the journey and not the arrival that matters:

I do not portray being, I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute ... If my mind could gain a

⁴¹D.H. Lawrence, The Rainbow (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 495-[6].

firm footing, I would not make
essays, I would make decisions;
but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial.⁴²

Montaigne's statement here echoes Cummings' narrative technique in The Enormous Room.

⁴²"Of Repentance," Book III, The Complete Works of Montaigne, trans. Donald M. Frame (London: Hamish Hamilton, n.d.), pp. 1585-88.

IV. The Excremental Vision in The Enormous Room: A Review of Criticism and Concluding Statements

"Did you ever share an otherwise palatial dungheap with much too many other vividly stinking human beings?" ⁴³

"As for my feeble mind, that I will leave behind me, for that I shall have no need of that in the place whither I go. Nor is it worth bestowing upon the poorest pilgrim; wherefore when I am gone, I desire that you, Mr. Valiant, would bury it in a dunghill." ⁴⁴

To bring the comparison between The Pilgrim's Progress and The Enormous Room to an end we may perhaps ask if there are any general considerations which have been overlooked or insufficiently treated. There is certainly one and that is Cummings' fascination with excrement in the novel. This fascination was the focus of much criticism following the publication of the novel in 1922. Yet, despite the attention directed toward it, critical treatment of this particular feature has seldom been satisfactory. Numerous early critics, among them D.K. Lamb and an anonymous reviewer in the Boston

⁴³E.E. Cummings, "Exit the Boob," A Miscellany Revised, p. 287.

⁴⁴Bunyan, p. 325.

Transcript, ⁴⁵ have voiced their disapproval of Cummings' excessive concern with excrement. ⁴⁶ In another early but favourable review of The Enormous Room John Peale Bishop alludes to Havelock Ellis' essay on Zola where a defense can be found for Cummings' use of words and themes unpopular in print at the time. Some of Ellis' defenses in that essay can be as readily applied to Rabelais or Swift as they can to E.E. Cummings. One such statement concerns the content of a work of art:

The chief service which Zola has rendered to his fellow-artists and successors, the reason of the immense stimulus he supplies, seems to lie in the proofs he has brought of the latent artistic use of the rough, neglected details of life. The Rougon-Macquart series has been to his weaker bretheren like that great sheet knit at the four corners, let down from Heaven full of foul-footed beasts and creeping things and fowls of the air, and bearing in it the demonstration that to the artist as to the moralist nothing can be called common or unclean. It has henceforth become possible for other novelists to find inspiration where before they could never have turned, to touch life with a vigour and audacity of phrase which, without Zola's example, they would have trembled to use, while they still remain free to bring to their work the simplicity, precision, and inner experience which he never possessed. ⁴⁷

⁴⁵ 17 May, 1922.

⁴⁶ Rudolph von Abele draws attention to Cummings' satiric use of excrement in the poetry in "Only to Grow: Change in the Poetry of E.E. Cummings," PMLA, 70 (December 1955), 913-933.

In a correlative statement Ellis defends Zola's use of coarse language. Again the defense is applicable to

The Enormous Room:

Zola has used slang - the argot of the populace - copiously ... A considerable part of the power of *L'Assomoir* ... lies in the skill in which he uses the language of the people he is dealing with; the reader is bathed throughout in an atmosphere of picturesque, vigorous, often coarse argot. There is, no doubt, a lack of critical sobriety in the profusion and reiteration of vulgarisms, of coarse oaths, of the varied common synonyms for common things. But they achieve the end that Zola sought, and so justify themselves. ⁴⁸

Like Zola, Cummings uses the language of the people with whom he is dealing - the prisoners and the officials - and in the case of the prisoners the language is always picturesque and often vulgar. The comment that Cummings' style invites is not that the novelist is given to babbling and crudity but rather that he tries, gropingly at times, to find vigorous expressions to

⁴⁷ Havelock Ellis, "Zola," Affirmations (London: Constable & Company Ltd., 1926), p. 143.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

match the characters and the experiences of the Enormous Room.⁴⁹

Ellis concludes that "we look at his [Zola's] work, not as great art but as an important moment in the evolution of the novel" ⁵⁰ Such would seem to be the position of The Enormous Room in the development of the American novel.

Havelock Ellis' essay insofar as it concerns the use of rough details and coarse language is more potential than definitive and it is with an awareness of its limitations that Bishop cites it. Likewise, David E. Smith's 1962 article has great potential, particularly in the footnote where he points out the similarities between the anal character of Cummings' Apollyon and Luther's devil as the character of the latter is developed in Norman O. Brown's Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History. ⁵¹ In that work Norman O. Brown makes an interesting even irresistible connection between excrement and death. A re-examination of the excremental vision in The Enormous Room in terms

⁴⁹An exception is to be found in The Enormous Room, p. 279. The use of asterisks there indicates not timidity but an aversion on the part of the reading audience to the use of certain words in print.

⁵⁰Ellis, p. 144.

⁵¹Smith, p. 75.

of the relationship established by Brown tends to support, amplify, and deepen Cummings' vision. Explicating Freud's position in Civilization and Its Discontents,

Norman O. Brown writes:

In his [Freud's] view, sublimation is a defense of a higher form of life against residual animality. But the irony is that sublimation activates the morbid animality (animality), and the higher form of life, civilization, reveals the lower form of life, the Yahoo. To rise above the body is to equate the body with excrement.⁵²

And further Brown maintains that

... as long as humanity prefers a dead life to a living, so long is humanity committed to treating as excrement not only its own body but the surrounding world of objects, reducing all to dead matter and inorganic magnitudes. Our much prized "objectivity" toward our own bodies, other persons, and the universe, all our calculating "rationality," is, from the psychoanalytical point of view, an ambivalent mixture of love and hate, an attitude appropriate only toward excrement, and appropriate to excrement only in an animal that has lost his own body and life.⁵³

⁵²Brown, p. 295

⁵³Ibid.

In The Enormous Room Surplice is the character most closely associated with the dead life of the body. It is he who faithfully and lovingly rids the Room of excrement:

...every morning he takes the pail of solid excrement down, without anyone's suggesting that he take it; takes it as if it were his, empties it in the sewer just beyond the cour des femmes, or pours a little (just a little) very delicately on the garden where Monsieur le Directeur is growing a flower for his daughter -- he has, in fact, an unobstreperous affinity for excrement; he lives in it; he is shaggy and spotted and blotched with it; he sleeps in it; he puts it in his pipe and says it is delicious (p. 257).

Appropriately, Surplice is portrayed as a Christ-like figure: his intense devotion and his fascination with excrement combine to make him a natural scapegoat. Furthermore, his departure from the Enormous Room is described in imagery reminiscent of the Last Supper. As a Christ figure Surplice removes the dead waste from the midst of life and maintains the delicate balance between life and death in the Enormous Room.

As well as elucidating the character of Surplice in Cummings' novel, Norman O. Brown's theory also serves as a valuable means of penetrating to the core of Mr. Feeble-mind's burial in The Pilgrim's Progress. Summoned

to the Celestial City, Mr. Feeble-mind requests that Mr. Valiant bury the useless mind in a dunghill:

As for my feeble mind, that I will leave behind me, for that I shall have no need of that in the place whither I go. Nor is it worth bestowing upon the poorest pilgrim; wherefore when I am gone, I desire that you, Mr. Valiant, would bury it in a dunghill (p. 325).

This statement echoes Old Mr. Honest's remark in The Second Part of The Pilgrim's Progress that Christian carried a Slough of Despond in his mind:

Well, after he [Christian] had lain at the Slough of Despond a great while, as I have told you, one sunshine morning, I do not know how, he ventured, and so got over; but when he was over, he would scarce believe it. He had, I think, a Slough of Despond in his mind; a slough that he carried everywhere with him, or else he could never have been as he was (p. 262).

Not only has the body been equated with excrement, in Brown's terms, but so has the mind. The connection between the mind and the dead life of the body would be readily acceptable to Cummings. In fact, he has used it often in the 1926 collection of poems, is 5, particularly the piece entitled "POEM, OR BEAUTY HURTS MR. VINAL."

The Freudian reading of these particular passages in The Pilgrim's Progress may appear conjectural and exaggerated, but they establish an important link between the dead mind-body and excrement in the works of Bunyan and Cummings. Moreover, the Freudian interpretation is justified in terms set forth by Lionel Trilling in "Freud and Literature:"

The Freudian psychology is the only systematic account of the human mind which, in point of subtlety and complexity, of interest and tragic power, deserves to stand beside the chaotic mass of psychological insights which literature has accumulated through the centuries. ⁵⁴

In summary then, I find myself in agreement with David E. Smith, Kingsley Widmer, and John Peale Bishop that there is no one-to-one correspondence between Cummings' The Enormous Room and Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress. And whereas I do not insist on a Freudian reading of the excremental vision in the novel, although such a reading does reveal certain insights into both the novel and the allegory, I do insist on those links already developed in some detail: the use of the pilgrimage, the development of character in terms of animal imagery, the search for identity, and the duplication of landscapes.

⁵⁴Lionel Trilling, "Freud and Literature," The Liberal Imagination (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1953); p. 32.

CHARACTERIZATION IN THE ENORMOUS ROOM

I. Characterization and Comedy in the Novel: The Source of the Comedy and Revelation of Character Through Hands and Eyes

"Antique perspective presented us with geometrical concepts of objects - as they could be seen only by an ideal eye. Our perspective shows us objects as we see them with both eyes - gropingly. We no longer construct the visual world with an acute angle converging on the horizon. We open up this angle, pulling representation against us, upon us, towards us We take part in this world. That is why we are not afraid to use close-ups in films: to portray a man as he sometimes seems to us, out of natural proportions, suddenly fifty centimetres away from us; we are not afraid to use metaphors, that leap from the lines of a poem, or to allow the piercing sound of a trombone to swoop out of the orchestra, aggressively." 55

The characters in the *Enormous Room* act out plays with one another which are sometimes gentle and sometimes brutal, but most often humorous. This humour pervades the novel, illuminating all the characters and the narrator as well; yet it does not emanate directly from all of them. Only the narrator in the novel is sufficiently detached from the spectacle of his own life in prison to look at himself and the world around him with the perspective necessary for humour. And it is through

⁵⁵Rene Guilleré, quoted in Serge Eisenstein, "Synchronization of Senses," The Film Sense (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1968), p. 81.

what Cummings sees, hears, and reports, apparently without reservation, that the events and impressions are related to the reader. It is never easy for the reader to overlook the ironic atmosphere in which so many of the scenes of the novel are bathed because Cummings' humour qualifies and humanizes the relationships between the characters in the Enormous Room.

It is perhaps because his attitude is one of affection that the narrator sees so clearly, in actions that are slightly absurd and therefore infinitely moving, the childishness of Jean le Nègre:

There was another game - a pure child's game - which Jean played. It was the name game. He amused himself for hours together by lying on his paillasse, tilting his head back, rolling up his eyes, and crying in a high quavering voice - 'JAW-neeeeeee.' After a répétition or two of his own name in English, he would demand sharply 'Qui m'appelle? Mexique? Est-ce que tu m'appelle, Mexique?' and if Mexique happened to be asleep, Jean would rush over and cry in his ear shaking him thoroughly - 'Est-ce tu m'appelle, toi?' Or it might be Barbu, or Pete the Hollander, or B. or myself, of which he sternly asked the question - which was always followed by quantities of laughter on Jean's part. He was never perfectly happy unless exercising his inexhaustible imagination (pp. 279-80).

The same affectionate humour envelops Cummings when he notices The Wanderer's wife bathing their child in

the yard:

One fine day, perhaps the finest day, I looked from a window of The Enormous Room and saw (in the same spot that Lena had enjoyed her half-hour promenade during confinement in the cabinot, as related) the wife of the Wanderer, 'nee Feliska,' giving his baby a bath in a pail, while the Wanderer sat in the sun smoking. About the pail an absorbed group of putains stood. Several plantons (abandoning for one instant their plantonic demeanour) leaned upon their guns and watched. Some even smiled a little. And the mother, holding the brownish, naked, crowing child tenderly, was swimming it quietly to and fro, to the delight of Celina in particular. To Celina it waved its arms greetingly. She stooped and spoke to it. The mother smiled. The Wanderer, looking from time to time at his wife, smoked and pondered by himself in the sunlight (p. 226).

The scene in which Cummings is introduced to M. le Gestionnaire is likewise purely comic. The planton's behaviour preceding Cummings' interview with M. le Gestionnaire prepares us for a dreadful character. Instead, we are confronted by

... a very fat personage with a black skull-cap perched upon its head. Its face was possessed of an enormous nose, on which pince-nez precariously roosted; otherwise said face was large, whiskered, very German and had three chins. Extraordinary creature. Its belly, as it sat, was slightly dented by the table-top, on which table-top

rested several enormous tomes similar to those employed by the recording angel on the Day of Judgment, and ink-stand or two, innumerable pens and pencils, and some positively fatal-looking papers (p. 104).

The religious imagery, which is woven throughout the scene leading up to the introduction, is applied ironically: St. Peter becomes a bulbous hippopotamus-like official in a librarian's smock, who is puzzled to learn of Cummings' place of origin and has great difficulty in spelling the prisoner's name. Cummings' humour here as in the previous two examples centers on the incongruity between two aspects of a given situation, its aspect as felt subjectively, and as it appears objectively. The narrator himself associates his actions and words with his feelings. Seen from the outside, these actions appear to an observer slightly absurd and unreal. And it is the body which Cummings inhabits and through which he must approach others which imposes absurd limitations upon emotions: Jean's inexhaustible imagination operating in a prison room, the sentimental bathing scene with the putains and the plantons, the scene with M. le Gestionnaire and the planton - such is the essence of Cummings' humour.

Comedy of the same kind is manifested by the planton in the last scene. It is he who has prepared the prisoner for a merciless authoritarian. During the interview, however, M. le Gestionnaire reveals a frank admiration for the American prisoner and treats him genially. The planton is angered by this response and expresses his annoyance by rasping his boot on the threshold of the door while Cummings is being questioned. The translator, who had been standing inconspicuously in the corner during the first moments of the interview, is also impressed by Cummings' command of the language. In fact, the anglicized spelling of M. le Gestionnaire's speech combined with the sickly look of the translator probably indicate that Cummings spoke French as well as, if not better than, either of them.

The lives of both the plantons and M. le Gestionnaire are acted out on several levels. In reality, life acts through these characters and betrays them all too easily in the body which is visible to all except themselves. The face of M. le Gestionnaire, the would-be saint, draws the narrator's attention:

Such a round, fat, red, pleasant,
beer-drinking face as reminded me
only and immediately of huge

meerscham pipes, Deutsche Verein
mottos, sudsy seidels of Wurtz-
burger, and Jacob Wirth's (once
upon a time) brachwurst. Such
pin-like pink merry eyes as made
me think of Kris Kringle himself
(p. 105).

This discordance between the body and the avowed per-
sonality betrays the comic role which M. le Gestion-
naire is playing: the real person is revealed beneath
the doll-like surface. The unmasking is done again with
Count de Bragard. That character is described at the
outset as

... a perfect type: the apotheosis
of injured nobility, the humiliated
victim of perfectly unfortunate cir-
cumstances, the utterly respectable
gentleman who has seen better days.
There was about him, moreover, some-
thing irretrievably English, nay e-
ven pathetically Victorian - it was
as if a page of Dickens was shaking
my friend's hand (pp. 71-2).

As the novel progresses, however, we learn that the
Count is a hypocrite and a thief. It is the face, the
eyes particularly, that betray the actor in the in-
dividual: Bragard's "grey tired eyes" (p. 204), M. le
Gestionnaire's "frank and stupid eyes" (p. 105), and
the "razor-keen eyes" (p. 127) of the Surveillant.

Almost all Cummings' characters are betrayed either by their eyes or their hands: Bragard has "tired looking hands" (p. 205), Zulu "sensitive fingers" (p. 243), Mme. Demestre "slender golden hands" (p. 219), the Spy "treacherous hands" (p. 199), and the School-master a "weak bony hand" (p. 118).

Cummings' focus on hands is characteristic not only of The Enormous Room but also of the poetry from the early Tulips and Chimneys (1923) to the later Xaipe (1950). Cummings' keen eye for detail, manifest in his descriptions of hands, which not only possess a life of their own but also participate in the life of the body, is reminiscent of Rilke's descriptions of hands in his Sonnets to Orpheus, New Poems, and especially in "The Rodin-Book" where he comments on that sculptor's work:

The artist has the right to make one thing out of many and a world out of the smallest part of a thing. Rodin has made hands, independent, small hands which, without forming part of a body, are yet alive. Hands rising upright, angry and irritated, hands whose five bristling fingers seem to bark like the five throats of a Cerberus. Hands in motion, sleeping hands and hands in the act of awaking; criminal hands with~~ed~~^{ed} by heredity, hands that are tired and have lost all desire, lying like some sick beast crouched in a corner, knowing none

can help them. But hands are a complicated organism, a delta in which much life from distant sources flows together and is poured into the great stream of action. Hands have a history of their own, they have, indeed, their own civilization, their special beauty; we concede to them the right to have their own development, their own wishes, feelings, moods and favourite occupations. ⁵⁶

Both Cummings and Rilke focus their attention on the shape of hands, their gestures, and above all, on their contact. For both artists the contact resembles a spiritual penetration, the illumination of one person by another. But where Rilke's particular concern is the shape, warmth, and tenderness of hands, Cummings' is more extensive; it includes the movement of individual fingers and further attributes the characteristically human features to the sun, the moon, the wind, and the rain. ⁵⁷

While Cummings may be in Rilke's debt either consciously or unconsciously, he may also owe something to another of his contemporaries and for a time his compatriot, Gaston Lachaise. The two artists were well acquainted: Cummings wrote a review for The Dial in 1920 praising Lachaise; Lachaise sculptured a bust-portrait of Cummings four years later.

⁵⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Rodin-Book: Part One," Selected Works, trans. G. Craig Houston (Norfolk: New Directions, 1960), I, 110-11.

One of the most striking features of Lachaise's sculpture is the artistic completeness and wholeness of the actual fragments: notably the torso poses - in particular the "Torso With Arms Raised" and the "Torso of Elevation," in addition to the work consisting solely of a pair of bent knees (entitled "Knees"), and the "Hand of Richard Buhlig." It is this completeness of the fragment that links Cummings and Lachaise. The former is skilful in depicting character by means of a few gestures, the features of the hands, or the movements of the eyes; the latter, a dramatist in sculpture, evokes a sense of life in the whole through the parts. Praising the sculpture of Lachaise in a well-known article for The Dial, Cummings writes:

There is one thing which Lachaise would rather do than anything else, and that is to experience the big-nesses and whitenesses and silences of the polar regions. His lively interest in Esquimaux drawings and customs stems from this absolutely inherent desire - to negate the myriad with the single, to annihilate the complicatedness and prettinesses and trivialities of Southern civilizations with the enormous, the solitary, the fundamental. ⁵⁸

⁵⁷Cf. Tulips (1923), And (1925), is 2 (1926), and W [ViVa] (1931).

⁵⁸Quoted in A Miscellany Revised, pp. 15-16.

This statement applies rather well to Cummings' own method in The Enormous Room for he too is concerned with the "bignesses" and the "silences" of a barren region. In such an environment Cummings too concentrates on the "single," the "enormous, the solitary, the fundamental."

II. Game Playing and Its Function in The Enormous Room:
Count Bragard, Jean, Surplice and Their Roles

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts." 59

"If there is anything particularly terrifying about prisons, or at least imitations of prisons such as La Ferté, it is possibly the utter obviousness with which (quite unknown to themselves) the prisoners demonstrate willy-nilly certain fundamental psychological laws." 60

Having established the importance of roles in The Enormous Room, we now proceed to a closer examination of the roles assumed by some of the main characters. The Count de Bragard, more than any other person in the Enormous Room, is an artificial character. He is the antagonist of a drama of disguises, misunderstandings, and exposures. Bragard stands apart from the other occupants of the Room because of his personality, his occupation, and his background.

The Count's dress is more elaborate than that of the other characters because he is trying to build up

59 "As You Like It," II, viii. The Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakespeare, ed. Charles Knight (New York: F.P. Collier, n.d.); II, 220.

60 The Enormous Room, p. 264.

a fictitious character and at the same time to communicate something more than this character conveys. He makes a much more concentrated effort toward establishing friendships than do any of the others. His attempts both to conceal and to reveal what he is constantly contradict each other.

Despite Bragard's uniqueness, he does embody all the prejudices of one in his position. Supposedly an aristocrat, he has pride in his birth rite as well as an insolent scorn for the coarse low life characters with whom he is confined. He is set apart from other aristocrats because of his claim to be artistically gifted. His chief weapon of defense is his articulateness, which may take on a savage, insolent, or pathetic tone. His aristocratic title, his artistic inclinations, and his cosmopolitan background make him a solitary character in the Enormous Room, both contemptible and contemptuous.

Cummings sees this character at the outset as a caricature: "a perfect type," "the victim of "perfectly unfortunate circumstances," "utterly respectable," "irretrievably English," and possessing the "accents of indisputable culture" (pp. 71-2).

A little later Cummings makes an interesting com-

ment on Count Bragard:

I have already noted the fact that Count Bragard's fondness for this roly-poly individual, whose belly - as he lay upon his back of a morning in bed - rose up with the sheets, blankets and quilts as much as two feet above the level of his small stupid head studded with chins. I have said that this admiration on the part of the admirable Count and R.A. for a personage of the Spanish Whoremaster's profession somewhat interested me (p. 203).

And so the narrator's first impression of the Count is considerably altered: the Dickensian gentleman now seems to realize the advantages of cultivating a relationship with a whoremaster.

Acting as a contrast to the Cummings-Bragard relationship is the friendship of Cummings and Jean le Nègre. The first contact is made through Jean's spontaneous outburst:

Entered a beautiful pillar of black strutting muscle topped with a tremendous display of the whitest teeth on earth. The muscle bowed politely in our direction, the grin remarked musically; 'Bo'jour, tou' l' monde'; then came a cascade of laughter. Its effect on the spectators was instantaneous: they roared and danced with joy (p. 270).

Afterwards, Jean amuses himself with a game, one of many which Cummings reports. Standing by himself in the cour, Jean is intently studying a copy of the London Daily Mail upside-down:

'Est-ce vrai! V'la, le roi
d' Angleterre est malade.
Quelque chose! - Comment?
La reine aussi? Bon Dieu!
Qu'est-ce que c'est? - Mon
père est mort! Merde! - Eh,
b'en! La guerre est fini (sic).
Bon (p. 271).

Jean further occupies himself with practical jokes, songs, imaginary telephone conversations, rhyming games, and the name game- previously mentioned in conjunction with the humour of the novel. The name games and the rhyme games bring to mind some of Johan Huizinga's remarks on the nature of play in Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture. A few brief and general comments concerning Mr. Huizinga's theories would help establish a framework for discussing Jean's particular fascination with games. In his book Mr. Huizinga offers three characteristics of play: it is a leisure-time activity; it is marked by an element of make-believe; and it is conducted within spatial and temporal limitations. All three characteristics apply from Cummings' point of view to Jean's play situations

as well as to the other games carried on within the confines of the novel: the procuring of water, the attempts to communicate with the women, the many linguistic games, and the war game in the background. An important difference does exist, however, between Jean's games and those of the others. That difference may be explained in terms of one of Huizinga's statements:

When a certain form of religion accepts a sacred identity between two things of a different order, say a human being and an animal, this relationship is not adequately expressed by calling it a "symbolic correspondence" as we conceive this. The identity, the essential oneness of the two goes far deeper than the correspondence between a substance and its symbolic image. It is a mystic unity. The one has become the other. In his magic dance the savage is a kangaroo.⁶¹

This passage, slightly altered, strikes to the core of Jean's performance in the games. Jean's games are not ritualistic nor is his correspondence with an animal anything but allusive. Jean, however, does resemble the savage, the primitive mind with its total immersion in the present, its relative freedom from future desires and past memories. And whereas he does not identify with animals, he does assume the identity of other people to

⁶¹Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 25.

the point of actually becoming them - the Lord of the Admiralty, son of the Lord Mayor of London by the Queen, the conveyor of news, the game supervisor during dominoes, the fighter, and the martyr. Jean's brief but interesting performances on the stage of the Enormous Room are for the most part comic and yet we can never be quite sure what part Jean is playing in what drama or even what is the nature and extent of his disguise.

Count de Bragard's game is in keeping with this ambiguity. From the beginning this man lays claims to nobility and artistic talent. During the course of Cummings' and "B's" confinement Count Bragard's cordiality wanes. Cummings recognizes that the Count, who claims an acquaintance with Cézanne, is unable to provide a description of the artist. Furthermore, every conversation dealing with art culminates in the avowed impossibility of producing art in the intolerable environment of La Ferté.

Cummings is aware rather early in the game that Bragard is a fraud, consequently, when Bragard leaves La Ferté, Cummings and "B" refuse him the money which he requests. By refusing to play Cummings and "B" commit the unpardonable act in the world of games.

Surplice's section of the novel discloses another game in which all occupants of the Enormous Room participate, the game of scapegoating, which begins as soon as personalities become involved. Surplice is introduced as a totally ignorant yet exceedingly religious man:

... every Friday he will be found sitting on a little kind of stool by his paillasse, reading his prayer-book upside down; turning with enormous delicacy the thin difficult leaves, smiling to himself as he sees and does not read (p. 257).

Such a blatant demonstration of both his ignorance and religiousness makes Surplice an ideal scapegoat. Given the miserable environment of the Enormous Room and subjected to the often degrading treatment by the officials, the prisoners select one of their weaker members for cruel treatment and ridicule. In the Enormous Room Surplice is the victim:

In the case of Surplice, to be the butt of everyone's ridicule could not be called precisely suffering; inasmuch as Surplice, being unspeakably lonely, enjoyed any and all insults for the simple reason that they constituted or at least implied a recognition of his existence. To be made a fool of was, to this otherwise completely neglected individual, a mark of distinction; something to take pleasure

in; to be proud of. The inhabitants of The Enormous Room had given to Surplice a small but essential part in the drama of La Misère: he would play that part to the utmost of his ability; the cap-and-bells should not grace a head unworthy of their high significance (p. 262).

We then see Surplice, submissive and ignorant, being taunted by his fellow inmates. Here Surplice, or "Syph'lis" as the men call him, is experiencing genuine cruelty and yet the jeering and taunting is transmuted into positive feelings. Following the name-calling scene Surplice can be found "smiling and even chuckling ... very happy ... as only an actor is happy whose efforts have been greeted with universal applause.... (p. 264).

Surplice maintains his role through the Last Supper preceding his transfer to the concentration camp at Précigné - still subservient and slightly ridiculous. But it is the rule in Cummings' Enormous Room that the ridiculous and the absurd character towers above the people among whom he moves. Surplice earns his place as a Delectable Mountain.

Each of the Delectable Mountains is the central character in a series of plays for which his life in the Enormous Room provides the stage and on which other characters appear only in supporting roles.

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF BALANCE IN "THE ENORMOUS ROOM"

I. The Dramatic Balance in the Novel

"...I do not purpose to inflict upon the reader a diary of my alternative aliveness and non-existence at La Ferté ... 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 that actual Present-without future or past-whereof they alone are cognizant who, so to speak, have submitted to an amputation of the world." 62

One of the most impressive structural principles in The Enormous Room is Cummings' use of dramatic situations to produce and sustain a balanced atmosphere. At the opening of Chapter I we have several incidents which illustrate this balance. The episode of the lost hat is a tense scene in which Cummings underestimates the gravity of his situation. There the "tin-derby" responds to Cummings' overenthusiastic attempt to retrieve the driver's hat by drawing a revolver and aiming it at the unwary prisoner. Using mechanical imagery to explain

⁶²The Enormous Room, p. 114.

the effect of this action, Cummings states:

My mind felt as if it had been
thrown suddenly from fourth in-
to reverse. I pondered and said
nothing (p. 8).

On first reading the scene appears melodramatic but when reviewed in light of what we learn about the narrator it is most effective. This tense and threatening incident is immediately followed by the conversation in English between Cummings and the American F.I.A.T. driver. The humour of this situation inheres in the "tin-derby's" inability to understand English. The relaxed, at times jocular, tone underlies Cummings' meal at Noyon, his introduction to the marraine, and his interview with M. le Ministre. The atmosphere in all three of these scenes is more relaxed than it is in the earlier revolver scene. We are well aware though that the atmosphere of the interview with M. le Ministre would not be so relaxed were the Frenchman not so officious and sober and were Cummings himself not so nonchalant. Here as throughout the novel the disinterested pose of the narrator creates humour through its contrast with the serious attitudes of the officials and the gravity of the situations. The interview with M. le Ministre in Chapter I prepares us for the interviews with "the rooster" in Chapter III, M. le Gestionnaire in Chapter IV, and M. le Directeur in Chapter XIII.

The humour inherent in the second interview with the "rooster" consists of describing the official in animal-like terms and having him mispronounce Cummings's name. In the third interview the humour inheres in the incongruity between the official whom Cummings anticipates on the basis of the plantron's behaviour and the actual official revealed in the course of the interview. The most striking feature of the final interview and the one responsible for the humour is the Directeur's inability to cope with Cummings' evasiveness by hurling insults and accusations and by shouting.

It is noteworthy that each of the interviews is preceded and followed by scenes markedly different in tone from the interviews themselves. The interview with "the rooster" in Chapter III, for example, is preceded by the mystical passages dealing with the wooden man and the City of Pretend; it is followed by his confinement to the Enormous Room. In Chapter IV descriptions of the occupants of the Enormous Room precede the interview and Cummings' closer acquaintance with them follows it. The final interview is immediately preceded and followed by two scenes of calm: Cummings' union with the landscape and his farewell to the remaining prisoners. The arrangement of these interviews illustrates Cummings' use of contrast to balance the tone of The Enormous Room.

Another such arrangement occurs in Chapter III when Cummings views two children playing near his prison window at Gré:

As I lay on my back luxuriously
I saw through the bars of my twice
padlocked door a boy and a girl a-
bout then years old. I saw them
climb on the wall and play together,
obliviously and exquisitely, in the
darkening air. I watched them for
many minutes; till the last moment
of light failed; till they and the
wall itself dissolved in a common
mystery, leaving only the bored sil-
houette of the soldier moving imper-
ceptibly and wearily against a still
more gloomy piece of autumn sky (pp.
37-38).

Contrast is used in this passage to emphasize Cummings' confinement and isolation. While the children romp freely on the wall outside Cummings watches them from behind a doubly-padlocked door. As the light fades so do both the children and the wall, revealing a direct visual connection between soldier and prisoner. Accompanying the disappearance of the children are the changes in landscape and mood. Exuberance is replaced by boredom; child by soldier; youth by age. Shattering the silence and lethargy of the latter part of this scene is Cummings' clamour for water: "Quelque chose à boire, s'il vous plaît!" (p. 38). The silence in Cummings' cell at Gré contrasts vividly with the later uproars in the Enormous Room: the pandemonium resulting

from The Fighting Sheeney's would-be boxing match, Bill the Hollander's attack on The Young Pole, and Jean's fight with Sheeney.

A third example from The Enormous Room will conclude my illustrations of this aspect of style. The balance of the entire novel is displayed in the continual movement from confinement to freedom. Until the arrival of Cummings and the gendarmes in Paris, the action focuses on the prison cells. The first cell at Noyon is "a room, about sixteen feet short and four feet narrow, with a heap of straw in the further end" (p. 22).

From there he journeys with all his trappings to the prison at Gré: "All around, two-story () wooden barracks. Little crude staircases led up to doors heavily chained and immensely padlocked" (p. 35). During a brief rest at Gré Cummings is rudely awakened by six men who hover over him in circular formation. On the train to Paris he is accompanied by two gendarmes, one guarding either side of the compartment door. Even when both the gendarmes have fallen asleep at their posts, one of them maintains his hold on the door, lest their prisoner escape.

Dirty and weary, the three finally arrive in Paris:

A great shout came up from every
insane drowsy brain that had travel-
led with us - a fierce and beautiful

cry, which went the length of the train Paris where one forgets, Paris which is Pleasure, Paris in whom our souls live, Paris the beautiful, Paris enfin" (p. 42).

After the brief respite in Paris, Cummings is taken to Macé. Again he is confined to prison and again he finds reason to comment on the size of the padlocks. Entering the prison cell in the dark, the narrator is unable to determine either the size or the content of the room. Shortly, however,

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. From all directions, by at least thirty voices in eleven languages (I counted as I lay Dutch, Belgian, Spanish, Turkish, Arabian, Polish, Russian, Swedish, German, French - and English) at distances varying from seventy feet to a few inches, for twenty minutes I was ferociously bombarded (p. 60).

Although Cummings comes to appreciate the dimensions of inner space in this Enormous Room, he also becomes aware of a further confinement and isolation associated with disobeying the laws of the Room in particular and La Ferte in general. Cabinot, the label given to the punishment for disobedience, consists of confinement in a dark, damp stone closet-sized building. During his three-and-one-half-month residence in the Enormous

Room Cummings hears rumours of those who have suffered confinement and he actually witnesses Lena's sixteen-day cabinot.

Cummings' technique of expression during the period of his confinement in the Enormous Room is particularly well suited to his exploration of inner space and his acceptance of external limitations of the Room. He sums up his technique in a statement made in Chapter V:

... I do not purpose to inflict upon the reader a diary of my alternative aliveness and non-existence at La Ferte - not because such a diary would unutterably bore him, but because 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 that actual Present-without future and past - whereof they alone are cognizant who, so to speak, have submitted to an amputation of the world (p. 114).

Such is Cummings' technique: he allows the eye to wander until an object of interest demands its attention. He then circles the object, describes it and redescribes it; some few times he penetrates it. And so on to the next object, producing the effect of a collage whose framework is supplied by the Enormous Room itself.

Cummings' technique is akin to Jean-Luc Godard's single viewpoint scenes in which the camera makes the movie as in his latest film, Sympathy for the Devil. The technique in The Enormous Room also bears comparison with James Reaney's technique in his 1967 drama, Colours in the Dark. In the original production notes to that drama Reaney states:

Colours in the Dark might best be called a play box. Why?

I happen to have a play box and it's filled with not only toys and school relics, but also deedboxes, ancestral coffin plates, in short a whole life. When you sort through the play box you eventually see your whole life - as well as all of life - things like Sunday School albums which show Elijah being fed by ravens, St. Stephen being stoned. The theatrical experience in front of you now is designed to give you that mosaic -all-things-happening-at-the-same-time-galaxy-higgledy-piggledy feeling that rummaging through a play box can give you ...

For example, you can just sit back and watch the sequence of colours in the play: from a white section, to red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple sections, finally to black and then out to white again. Watch the colours and images the way you'd watch the peacock's feather. Myriads of characters and situations bubble up. A play box should contain lots of plays - and this one has a new play before you every two minutes. ⁶³

⁶³James Reaney, Colours in the Dark (Vancouver: Talonplays, 1969), p. [3]. Cf. Heinrich Böll, Absent Without Leave, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), p. 11: "I wish to present this work, not only as far as I am concerned but also in regard to all other persons appearing in it, less as a completed record than as one of those coloring books with which we are familiar from our happy childhood days ..."

Although Reaney's statements are strongly reminiscent of Cummings' in Chapter V of The Enormous Room, they differ in at least one important respect. Cummings' characters are chosen from the play box of the "actual Present" (The Enormous Room, p. 114). Reaney, on the other hand, chooses to reach back into the past and examine the toys which he finds there. In so doing, the playwright comes to understand not only the past but the patterns of life revealed in the present. Furthermore, where Reaney's "characters and situations bubble up," Cummings' not only "bubble up" but also seek a delicate balance on the stage of the Enormous Room.

When Cummings finally bids farewell to his fellow prisoners, he displays signs of disorientation and emotional instability. He has been born again and is suffering the accompanying agony. En route to Paris that agony is manifest in the reconstruction of the world fragment by fragment:

A wee, tiny, absurd whistle coming from nowhere, from outside of me. Two men opposite. Jolt. A few houses, a fence, a wall, a bit of neige float foolishly by and through a window (p. 237).

The reconstruction continues even after Cummings' arrival in Paris. Thoughts are still fragmentary; expression is limited to simple diction, often monosyl-

labic words, and the sentence structure remains simple. It is only after Cummings arrives in America that his thoughts become more cohesive, his expression more complex. The final paragraph of The Enormous Room is a celebration of life, a yeah-saying of the most ultimate kind:

The tall, impossibly tall, incomprably^a tall, city shouldering upward into hard sunlight leaned a little through the octaves of its parallel edges, leaningly strode upward into firm, hard, snowy sunlight; the noises of America nearingly throbbed with smokes and hurrying dots which are men and which are women and which are things new and curious and hard and strange and vibrant and immense, lifting with a great ondulous stride firmly into immortal sunlight (pp. 331-32).

And this final vision not only offsets the absurdities and horrors of the Enormous Room, but it also dramatizes the narrator's return to emotional stability.

II. The Emotional Balance in the Narrator: Anguish and Delight

"After all, men in La Misère as well as anywhere else rightly demand a certain amount of amusement; amusement is, indeed, peculiarly essential to suffering; in proportion as we are able to be⁶⁴ amused we are able to suffer ... "

Within the circle of life in the Enormous Room there is an infinitely varied world of emotions which are continually being created, destroyed, or modified by the narrator's relation with what he notices around him. The "tin-derby's" unexpected threat in the "revolver scene," for example, is sufficient to temporarily alter Cummings' high spirits. Count Bragard's glowing image is modified by the opinions held by the various occupants of the Enormous Room, particularly "B" who mistrusts him. And the favourable image of Pete the Hollander is also modified by his taunting of Demestre's wife. The narrator's mind constantly grapples with the collisions and contradictions which he observes around him. These collisions and contradictions delight him because their relation subtly undermines the well-ordered hierarchy at La Ferté.

⁶⁴The Enormous Room, p. 262.

Although Cummings lives through his imagination, his life is solidly anchored in the routine of the camp. Imagination and routine are intermingled by the narrator in an extraordinary set of portraits, which he describes in chapters five through eleven. And these portraits become richer and more extraordinary as a result of the reminiscient mode of the novel.

The narrator recalls the world of La Ferté Macé much as the prisoner must have experienced it, through the medium of two emotional states, which are interposed between the world and himself, isolating certain events and moments of his life. When these emotions become sufficiently intense, Cummings establishes new relationships with the world around him.

The first of these emotions is anguish. This anguish is born of the inhumane treatment in the prisons - the smell and the food - and at the end the loneliness following "B"'s transfer to Précigné. In an attempt to cope with it, Cummings adopts the pose of the tough guy.

S.I. Hayakawa in an early article and Roy Harvey Pearce in The Continuity of American Poetry have both commented on Cummings' tough-guy stance in the poetry. Although Professor Hayakawa's statement that Cummings explores "with unfeeling but lively curiosity a nether

world peopled by hideous automatons" ⁶⁵ is directed toward Cummings' poetry, the statement might well be re-directed toward The Enormous Room itself. Later in the same article Hayakawa points out that Cummings does return to his former childlike vision but proceeds "with elaborate precautions lest he be caught acting like a softie." ⁶⁶

Balancing the anguish underlying the "tough guy" pose in the novel is the narrator's delight in the Delectable Mountains, which sometimes culminates in moments of ecstasy. This delight is always accompanied by a particular intense sensation which occurs in the presence of either the spontaneous actions of one of these Mountains or else a quite natural phenomena: the sight of Paris, the snow seen through the bars at La Ferte, New York on the rearrival in America, and on the other hand, Demestre and the Imp living together in the Room and Jean's name games. The delight which Cummings experiences causes him to make some exclamation or gesture himself. In the Zulu, Cummings finds an outlet for his own delight. The figure makes such an impression upon his mind that it seems to call out to him a message of delight,

⁶⁵S.I. Hayakawa, "Is Indeed 5," Poetry, LI-LII (1938), p. 286.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 289.

words surge up within him in response and he writes down a description of the Zulu so that their image is translated into a conscious literary expression:

There are certain things in which one is unable to believe for the simple reason that he never ceases to feel them. Things of this sort - things which are always inside of us and in fact are us and which consequently will not be pushed off or away where we can begin thinking about them - are no longer things; they, and the us which they are, equals A Verb; an IS (P. 231).

By this act the narrator creates a new relationship with his own emotions and their cause; he also creates a new combination of words. The creation of these word combinations springs directly from his own sensibilities; it is an inner submission to an outer stimulation. Furthermore, it is accomplished by both anguish and delight and it lies on the road to accomplishment. Cummings has not only experienced an emotion but he has also expressed it.

This process had previously occurred when the narrator had returned to Paris as a prisoner on his way to La Ferté Macé:

....Paris where one forgets, Paris which is Pleasure, Paris in whom our souls live, Paris the beautiful, Paris enfin (p. 42).

The description continues:

I am in a new world - a world of chic femininity. My eyes devour the inimitable details of costume, the inexpressible nuances of pose, the indescribable démarche of the midinette. They hold themselves differently. They have even a little bold colour here and there on skirt or blouse or hat. They are not talking about la guerre. Incredible. They appear very beautiful, these Parisiennes (p. 44).

Cummings recognizes the very substance of Paris and realizes what makes Paris what it is, his own sheer joy in being alive. Beyond the disillusionment of Noyon, the narrator has returned to his European starting-point and this return is defined as a joyous contact with reality. But Cummings has to consciously recreate the magic in the light of reality. The vision of Paris proves that beyond the fluctuations of emotion and the maltreatment of both body and mind, there is a level on which human existence is delight, a harmony established between the individual and his world. Beauty is born of this harmony; it is neither in the individual, who is variable, nor in the objects themselves, but it comes when they are mutually present. In this harmony the world of Paris and certainly the

world of the Enormous Room later on flourishes.

Without this harmony the world cannot be set within the closed sphere of art.

The process of allowing expression to shape experience occurs again in a notable passage at the conclusion of the novel:

The tall, impossibly tall, incomparably tall, city shouldering upward into hard sunlight leaned a little through the octaves of its parallel edges, leaningly strode upward into firm, hard, snowy sunlight; the noises of America nearingly throbbed with smokes and hurrying dots which are men and which are women and which are things new and curious and hard and strange and vibrant and immense, lifting with a great ondulous stride firmly into immortal sunlight....
(pp. 331-32).

Here New York rises before Cummings' eyes in an aura of poetry, moving in a miraculously clear light, alive with noises. The city comes to life again in this way because, recalled by sensation, it is restored as a whole, with all the emotions which were once attached to it. And the emotion that dominates all the others is that of awe before the world as it is apprehended directly by all the senses. This wonder creates the inner joy that is inseparable from a sense of newness and mystery. New York thus recalled - its sights,

its sounds and its movement is an embodiment of Cummings' state of mind.

The narrator in The Enormous Room, not unlike a child, is deeply impressed by the mystery implicit in the existence of people and things. His world, created largely by the powers of the imagination, is merely his way of expressing that mystery. His "imaginary" world is an expression of the strong tie that binds him to life itself, of the consciousness of a mystery so close to him that it springs from the light and noise around him. In his ecstatic moments he feels himself not only a part of this movement and unity but also a part of the timeless world.⁶⁷

On the one hand, the narrator's delight extends time and space indefinitely, and comprises in all its diversity the myriad varied mural of daily life in the Enormous Room; on the other hand, the anguish in the novel condenses, unifies, and defines its own period of time; it merges a series of days into one, organizing the events remembered as they might be organized in a play.

⁶⁷A comprehensive treatment of time may be found in Kingsley Widmer's "Timeless Prose," TCL, IV (1958), pp. 3-8.

THE FUSION OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT IN THE ENORMOUS ROOM

"... nothing startles me beyond the Moment.
The setting Sun will always set me to
rights - or if a Sparrow come before my
Window I take part in its existence and
pick about the Gravel." ⁶⁸

"You are so young, so before all beginning,
and I want to beg you, as much as I can,
dear sir, to be patient toward all that is
unsolved in your heart and try to love the
questions themselves like locked rooms and
like books that are written in a foreign
tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which
cannot be given you because you would not
be able to live them. And the point is,
to live everything. Live the questions
now." ⁶⁹

"Mystery is within us and around us. Of
reality we can only get now and then the
merest glimpse. Our senses are too gross.
Between the invisible world and our own
there is doubtless an intimate concordance;
but it escapes us." ⁷⁰

Central to Cummings' art in both this novel and
the poetry is the complex "mysterious" relationship be-
tween the self and the external world. This relation-
ship gives rise to two fundamental questions: how can

⁶⁸John Keats in a letter of November 22, 1817 reprint-
ed in English Romantic Poetry and Prose, ed. Russell Noyes
(New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), p. 1211.

⁶⁹Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters To A Young Poet, trans.
M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc.,
1962), pp. 34-35.

an external and material object be transmuted into the interior and immaterial self and how can this transmutation be expressed in words.

To begin with, let us cite several examples of these transmutations as they occur in the novel. First, there is Cummings' light-hearted treatment of the prison diet at Noyon: "I contemplate the bowl, which contemplates me. A glaze of greenish grease seals the mystery of its contents" (P. 26). Still in the same prison Cummings again makes the connection between his interior and exterior environment: "I pass a lot of time cursing myself about the pencil, looking at my walls, my unique interior" (p. 27). Finally, on the road to Macé, Cummings is confronted by the wooden man hanging in a grove of trees by the roadside:

For perhaps a minute the almost obliterated face and mine eyed one another in the silence of intolerable autumn.

Who was this wooden man? Like a sharp, black, mechanical cry in the spongy organism of gloom stood the coarse and sudden sculpture of his torment; the big mouth of night carefully spurted the angular actual language of his martyred body. I had seen him before in the dream of some mediaeval saint with a thief sagging at either side, surrounded with crisp angels.

To-night he was alone; save for
 myself, and the moon's minute
 flower pushing between slabs of
 fractured cloud (pp. 53-4).

These three examples illustrate two points: the concordance between external world and interior self and the difficulty of expressing this concordance. The bowl of soup, the prison walls at Noyon, the wooden man en route to Mace - all three objects are outside, all exist as things. And yet as the artist looks at these objects he seems to feel himself joined to them by a sensation transmitted through an "aether", not altogether unlike the universal aether whose existence was posited to explain the transmission of light previous to the quantum theory. Despite this concordance, however, the sensation testifies more to the separateness of the object in its existence as object than it does to the object as reality. Cummings' awareness of this difficulty may help to explain his linguistic manoeuvrings to express a process which is essentially inexpressible.

But because Cummings does attempt to express the process, he is confronted with the problem of how to penetrate the object or how to draw it into the self when the only affinity which the self seems to have with the object is a sensation. And yet that sensation is sufficient

to prompt the self to either project into the object or to incorporate the object into the self.

June E. Downey in her empirical study of the creative imagination is also concerned with the "empathy" between subject and object:

From one point of view we subjectify the object; from another point of view we objectify the self. We assume attitudes and emotions in obedience to demands of the outer world, then refit the world with these patterns which have become intensified through intimate realization of their meaning. ⁷¹

Miss Downey here touches upon some of Cummings' primary concerns: the projection of a mood into the external environment and the rereading of that mood back into the self. She has also made explicit what Cummings has continually implied in his art, the fact that every perception is an interpretation and furthermore, a re-interpretation.

Miss Downey goes on to discuss the relationship between self and art in terms of Müller-Freienfel's three types of responses: those of the Ecstatic, the Participator, and the Spectator. The Ecstatic, she explains as the fusion of subject and object in a perfect

⁷¹June Downey, "A Few Words on Empathy," The Creative Imagination (London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1929), pp. 176-77.

unity. In this connection she cites the ecstatic experiences of George Eliot:

There are hours when I go out from myself and live in a plant, when I feel myself as the grass, as bird, as tree-top, cloud - hours when I run, fly, swim, when I unfold myself in the sun, when I sleep under leaves, when I float with the larks or creep with the lizards, when I shine in the stars and fire-flies, when, in short, I live in every object which affords an extension of my existence.⁷²

While Cummings does at times aspire to this state, more often than not he extends himself to human subjects rather than animate objects.⁷³ Cummings' response to the external world more closely approximates that of the Participator. This response involves the complete immersion in a role or a series of roles. For Cummings these roles vary from the tough guy to the advocate of ideal love. It is also worth recalling the roles played by Count Bragard, the Wanderer, and particularly Jean le Nègre, who serves as an excellent example of the Participator's response.

⁷²Quoted in Downey, p. 180.

⁷³For this latter response see Keats' letter of November 22, 1817 as quoted in Russell Noyes, p. 1211.

Some few times Cummings or his narrator find themselves in Müller-Freienfel's third category, that of the Spectator. The foremost example here would be the narrator in "anyone lived in a pretty how town," who retains his personality while remaining detached from the action of the poem. ⁷⁴

But let us return to Müller-Freienfel's first category and Cummings' unity with the outside world. The novelist's penetration of the object (and here object is defined as something or somebody other than the self) and the resulting transformation is effected in one of two ways. Either a conscious effort is made within the self to imitate the appearance or movement of the object as is the case in the poetry: "my own, my beautiful/ my blossoming)" ⁷⁵ is the narrator's invocation to his lady; the poet's father is described as "singing each morning out of each night." ⁷⁶ Or else an equivalent of the object is discovered or created within the self as is the case when the planting, growing, and withering away of a tree is likened to human birth, growth, and death. Discovering the likeness between an object and the self is an important idea in "The Secrets of the Zoo Ex-

⁷⁴Cf. "Voice" in Norman Friedman's The Art of E.E. Cummings, pp. 7-35.

⁷⁵"now all the fingers of this tree (darling) have" in Xaipe.

⁷⁶"my father moved through dooms of love" in 50 Poems.

posed." In a semi-humorous vein, Cummings writes in that piece:

These two aspects, "human" and "animal," interact; with the result that the zoo, in comprising a mechanism for the exhibition of beasts, birds and reptiles, becomes a compound instrument for the investigation of mysterious humanity.

But what, precisely, do we mean by "interact"? We mean that the zoo's permanent inhabitants, the so-called animals, are kinds of "aliveness" which we ourselves, the temporary inhabitants of the zoo, experience. To speak of "seeing the animals" is to treat this phenomenon with a shameful flippancy, with a clumsiness perfectly disgusting. Actually, such "creatures" as we "see" create in us a variety of emotions, ranging all the way from terror and pity to happiness and despair. Why? Not because the giraffe is effete, or because the elephant is enormous, but because we ourselves appear ridiculous and terrible in these amazing mirrors. ⁷⁷

It is important to point out that the twofold relationship between subject and object in Cummings' work is not static but changing and interchanging, that is, either the external object is imitated within the self or else peculiarly human qualities may be projected into the external world. This latter relationship is the basis of personification, simile, and metaphor, and these figures of speech abound in The Enormous Room. A notable combination of simile and personification occurs during the narrator's confinement at Noyon: "...the moon was like a mademoiselle, and I did not want to offend the

⁷⁷ A Miscellany Revised, p. 175.

moon. My friends: the silhouette and la lune, not counting Ca Pue, whom I regarded almost as a part of me" (p. 28).

When human qualities are projected into the external object we witness personification: the moon "battling with clouds " (p. 53) as seen en route to Macé, the "drooling greenish walls" (p. 157) of La Ferté Macé, the "great ponderous murdering clouds" (p. 170) of smoke emerging from the blazing cabinot, and the quivering creases of the Washing-Machine Man's trousers (p. 214) And what is more, once human qualities are projected into the external object, that object is in turn made to react upon the self: again en route to Macé the sunlight "smacks" the prisoner's eye and cuffs his "sleepy mind with colour" (p. 49). Shortly afterward in the same chapter the pinard reacts causing the prisoner to feel his "mind cuddled by a pleasant warmth" (p. 49).

Related to these figures of speech is the device of synaesthesia, which inheres in the transfer of sensations. This device, often used by Cummings in both the poetry and prose may well have been suggested by Rilke, although, as June Downey points out in her 1929 work, the device was in common literary use. Among its noted users were Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Blake, Keats, and

and Shelley.⁷⁸

Rilke, however, seems the most likely to have opened up this area for Cummings' exploration. We know, for example, that Cummings had been reading Rilke as early as 1918 and that Rilke's essay on "Primal Sound" appeared in 1919, at least one year after Cummings had been introduced to the works of the German poet. In that essay Rilke states that the artist should endeavour to apprehend every object not only through the sense of sight but through all five of the senses. Expressing an interest in Arabic poems, which, he maintains depend on an equal contribution from all the senses, Rilke states:

...it struck me for the first time,
that the modern European poet [and the American]⁷⁹ makes use of these contributors singly and in very varying degree, only one of them - sight overladen with the seen world - seeming to dominate him constantly; how slight, by contrast, is the contribution he receives from inattentive hearing, not to speak of the indifference of the other senses, which are active only on the periphery of consciousness and with many interruptions within the limited spheres of their practical activity.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Acquainted with the work of Miss Downey, Glenn O' Malley published a book in 1964 examining in detail Shelley's use of synaesthesia entitled Shelley and Synaesthesia. [Evanston]: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964

⁷⁹ Italics^{and brackets} mine.

⁸⁰ Selected Works, I, 54.

In The Enormous Room alone examples of Cummings' use of synaesthesia abound. Awaiting the train for Paris in Chapter III, Cummings sits near some Algerians: "Their enormous faces, wads of vital darkness, swooped with fatigue. Their vast gentle hands lay noisily about their knees" (p. 41). Upon entering Paris later in the same chapter, his "eyes devour" (p. 44) the colourful world and he acknowledges the "crisp persons" (p. 44) around him. As le Nouveau on his way to the bath at La Ferté, he notices one of the women's "crisp, vital head[s]" (p. 76) watching him. Again in Chapter VIII we find Mme. Demestre dressed in "crashing hues" (p. 219).

Cummings' frequent use of synaesthesia is a demonstration of his attempts to rework language to express illuminating and often mystical experiences. Cummings himself though, is among the first to admit the impossibility of succeeding at such an endeavour. In an attempt to describe Zulu Cummings voices his frustration:

He is, of all the indescribables whom I have known, definitely the most completely or entirely indescribable. Then (quoth my reader) you will not attempt to describe him, I trust. - Alas, in the medium which I am now using a certain amount or at least quality of description is disgustingly necessary. Were I free with a canvas and some colours ... but I am not free. And so I will buck the impossible to the best of my ability. Which, after all, is one way of wasting your time (p. 231).

The essence of the "description," well-known and often quoted by Cummings' critics, follows:

There are certain things in which one is unable to believe for the simple reason that he never ceases to feel them. Things of this sort - things which are always inside of us and in fact are us and which consequently will not be pushed off or away where we can begin thinking about them - are no longer things; they, and the us which they are, equals A Verb; an IS (p. 231).

In the case of Zulu it is Cummings' intention and desire to dissolve the boundaries between self and other as foreshadowed in the trek to Mace when the bird fairly swooped into the prisoner's face (p. 53). The attempt to dissolve these boundaries is repeated in Chapter XI when Cummings, in language resembling incantation, yearns for a self-transcendence and a union with Jean le Nègre:

-Boy, Kid, Nigger with the strutting muscles - take me up into your mind once or twice before I die (you know why: just because the eyes of me and you will be full of dirt some day). Quickly take me up into the bright child of your mind, before we both go suddenly all loose and silly (you know how it will feel). Take me up (carefully; as if I were a toy) and play carefully with me, once or twice, before I and you go suddenly all limp and foolish. Once or twice before you go into great Jack roses and ivory - (once or twice Boy, before we together

go wonderfully down into the Big Dirt
laughing, bumped with the last darkness)
(p. 293).

In his relationships with Jean and Zulu, Cummings comes closest to realizing the unity about which he writes. Not only is he able to project himself into these people, he is also able to simultaneously incorporate them into his self. And it is during this two-way process that the artist is most aware of himself and paradoxically nearest to self-transcendence.

THE UNIFIED VISION IN THE ENORMOUS ROOM

I. The Artist's Vision in Terms of Form and Content

"As for the Story Of The Great War Seen From The Windows Of Nowhere, please don't expect a speedy conclusion or rather completion of this narrative [The Enormous Room]; for this reason: that in consenting (it almost amounted to that) to "do the thing up" I did not forego my prerogative as artist, to wit - the making of every paragraph a thing which seemed good to me, in the same way that a "crazy-quilt" is made so that every inch of it seems good to me. And so that if you put your hand over one inch, the other inches lose in force. And so that in every inch there is a binding rhythm which integrates the whole thing and makes it a single moving ThingInItself. -Not that I am held up in my story, but simply that progress is slow. I am sure the result will say (eventually that is) that no other method was possible or to be considered. It is not a question of cold facts per se - that is merely a fabric: to put this fabric at the mercy of An Everlasting Rhythm is somethingelse." ⁸¹

E.E. Cummings maintains as the one essential condition of any work of art that the artist must keep alive within himself a sense of the mystery implicit in all

⁸¹E.E. Cummings in a letter to his mother of November 25, 1919 reprinted in Selected Letters of E.E. Cummings, ed. F.W. Dupee and George Stade (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), pp. 63-64.

life. The creative artist is by definition the man who has not allowed anything to intrude between himself and life. The artist simply observes and translates. And the authenticity of this translation is guaranteed only by the sincerity with which the artist has entered into contact with life and has felt its mystery. An artist grasps not only the particular aspects of a landscape, an emotion, or a human being, but also perceives in them something more universal than most others see. The creative process, as far as this artist is concerned, explains nothing.

A work of art derives its value from the fact that it persistently suggests the existence of a mysterious presence behind everything we perceive. This is especially true of The Enormous Room, where a mysterious presence lies behind each person. Cummings does not explain the nature of the mysterious presence behind them, for the very explanation, if such an explanation were possible, would destroy it.

The form as well as the content of a work of art points to the mysterious presence. For Cummings as for Walt Whitman before him the form of a work of art suggests that there exists a harmony between the life of the individual man and that of all men. Unlike Whitman though, Cummings does not go beyond this suggestion.

Like Whitman, however, a lyric vision pervades his work, orientates it, and unifies it. This lyrical aura, closely related to the mysterious presence, distinguishes The Enormous Room from the realistic novels as well as from the works of psychological analysis being written at the time.

Few details in Cummings' novel do not derive significance from their relationship to another aspect of the whole work. However precious Cummings' descriptions may appear to the reader, they are never gratuitous, never included merely for decorative effect. Nor are they composed to create an appearance of reality. The view from the cell window at the beginning of Chapter III bears in its wake the cycles of days and seasons, the Parisienne women's costumes and their posture, the various languages and individual idioms which the narrator notes on his way to Macé and particularly those found in the Enormous Room itself. The languages, the views from prison windows, the women - take as long a journey through the novel as does the prisoner himself. What do the languages foreshadow if not the final realization of the inadequacy of words to express deep and complex relationships? And who is Cummings if not a prisoner of words? Finally, what surrounds him but objects to prompt his expression: the view from the prison window, the women of

Paris, and later the women of La Ferté?

A multitude of these examples can be cited. But no study of Cummings' style can rise above the level of mere examination of details unless it is related to the vision which organizes the whole novel. For Cummings the writer as well as for Cummings the painter, style is a question both of technique and of vision. His own vision is characterized by an ability to unite the external and the internal world. It is no wonder, then, that in Cummings' novel it is often impossible to isolate the setting and characters; they are all interrelated, all merged.

However, a style of this sort does not necessarily make a novel, and there are moments when the interrelations between characters and environment makes the reader lose the general outline of the work from which the connections originate. But when the relationships are limited, for example, the equation between Section Sanitaire Vingt-et-Un and the Slough of Despond, between the Dellectable Mountains of The Pilgrim's Progress and the group of characters in the Enormous Room - then the novel, as Cummings had planned, tends toward allegory.

But the work is primarily a novel, despite those critics who maintain that the term "novel" in the 1932 Introduction was simply a convenient generic term and not

necessarily an expression of the author's original intention. The narrator's work becomes possible only when he grasps the irony and the comedy of his experience. He recognizes that both are essential to the expression of his imprisonments; from this point of view he starts to work. His own life, and that of those around him, appear to him in the form of a story which unfolds in the timeless world of the Enormous Room. The essential characteristic of the novel is that it tells the story of one or several lives unfolding in time, but the narrator is not only a novelist but also a poet, a painter, and a cameraman. Cummings' work meets the requirements for a novel because it unfolds in time; the narrator himself becomes a novelist because he wishes to reveal the mystery which lies behind human experience.

The narrator's difficulties are twofold: arising not only from his desire to find the meaning in his experiences but also in the desire to translate these experiences into a work of art. The two desires are finally integrally related for the experiences will impose their own form upon the work and determine its content. Cummings tells the story of his search through art and not through life. The search ends only with the realization of the enigmatic quality of experience and of an appreciation of the value of the search itself. The discoveries themselves are not remarkable any more than are the

author's observations on human beings or prison psychology, the latter being common knowledge. Much more interesting is Cummings' construction of his novel in relation to these observations and the link with the larger allegorical framework. In this respect it is not Cummings' thought that is extraordinary, but the insights that it allows into his novel.

II. The Artist's Unified Vision in Terms of Character and Situation

"It is all I can do to couch my thoughts in this airy medium." ⁸²

"With nothing can one approach a work of art so little as with critical words: they always come down to more or less happy misunderstandings. Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe: most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has entered, and more inexpressible than all else are works of art, mysterious existences, the life of which, while ours passes away, endures." ⁸³

"Our present dilemma is as old as the human race; it has presided over every step of man's progress. Society is constantly evolving, and men have always had to struggle to understand current realities by means of a language that is outdated. We are prisoners of language and of the frozen metaphors it sweeps along in its wake. It is inadequate language that gradually becomes contradictory; the realities never become so." ⁸⁴

⁸²"Of Practice," Book II, The Complete Works of Montaigne, p. 274.

⁸³Letters To A Young Poet, p. 17.

⁸⁴Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, "Peace or War," A Sense of Life (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, Inc., 1965), p. 130.

The stature and the mystery of Cummings' characters derive largely from the manner in which he presents them and fills them out in the course of the novel. Recalled from the narrator's memory of the Room at La Ferte Macé, most of the characters appear first of all as fragments. Then they advance into full view, like Count de Bragard as his disguise is gradually revealed. Sometimes the characters are only sketched, sometimes minutely described, like Jean le Nègre and the Wanderer. And each sketch or description has a certain meaning within the framework of the novel. So great is the force with which Cummings emphasizes his descriptions that he sometimes seems over-insistent to the reader. Zulu personifies the mystery of all individuals seen from the outside. Count de Bragard is frankly the pretender, the master actor.

The whole group of characters termed Delectable Mountains elude us just as they elude the narrator who tries to describe them. All characters appealing to Cummings himself, even if they are secondary, are introduced to us in this way: ephemeral from the very moment of their appearance, they remain elusive, as does their future. Like the bluebird of Maeterlinck, they "change colour" every time they are on the point of being captured. They appear in their own sections of the novel

and the narrator attempts to describe them, casting upon them the spotlight of his personal view. He sees them clearly from the inside so that their actions, their gestures, and their words are all filtered through him. But while Cummings does see clearly he does not see all; in addition to the spotlighted segments stretch vast areas of shadow. Each character has this dimension of the unknown into which he can escape.

When we consider the unknown areas in each character's life in this novel, we realize that Cummings' work here fulfils one of the essential functions of literature. For in these characters he reconstitutes one aspect of human life, the anguish caused by the impenetrability of others and renders it acceptable, a natural part of the human condition.

No character in the Enormous Room is isolated; each is bound to other characters who surround him, and who allow him to reflect certain aspects of his personality. But these groupings of characters are as numerous for each individual as the aspects of his own character, so that no one character is ever a type. A secondary character like the man in the Orange Cap, for example, takes his place with the Zulu in childish games; he is one with Cummings in his sincerity; through his isolation he joins Surplice; through his tendency toward in-

sanity he is one with Bathhouse John. Most characters are thus doubled, tripled, by a series of secondary men in Orange Caps. Cummings himself reminds us of Count de Bragard in his artistic interest; in temperment, personal habits, likes and dislikes he resembles Brown. Each character has infinite possibilities; he remains enigmatic and complex by all the ties which link him with other characters. Cummings' vision is determined here by his conviction that in every individual there exists a genuine "aliveness" which is greater than he, but of which he is a unique specimen.

The situations in which the characters find themselves are also reflected and reverberated through the novel, without ever being exactly duplicated: Cummings and Brown together at Ham, Cummings in jail at Noyon, at La Ferte, Cummings and Brown together in the Enormous Room; Cummings' interrogation by M. le Ministre at Noyon, by M. le Gestionnaire at Macé, and by M. le Directeur on leaving La Ferte. In the detail of situations as well as the whole, there are configurations which recall each other, but which are in no case superimposed.

The situations in the novel and the individuals in the Enormous Room project rays from all sides similar to the beams of a searchlight; the beams begin as mere

slits but broaden to enormous width. Cummings illuminates simultaneously the unique complexity of each human life and situation and the numerous links between individual lives and situations. So that while each of the main characters has his own section in the novel, his influence and his presence are felt throughout the other sections. Each Delectable Mountain and the situations in which he finds himself involved contribute toward the making of a more enormous room.

In writing The Enormous Room Cummings used almost all the themes that had occupied contemporary writers of war novels: an aversion for the military hierarchy, a contempt for patriotic fervor, the decay of personality directly attributable to the inhumanity of war, and the inadequacy of language to deal with the experiences of war. But more important than his affiliation with contemporaries is the fact that he developed a new form for the "war" novel. The form of The Enormous Room breaks the linear story development. Cummings no longer assumes, as realistic writers theoretically did, that his artistic creation is an imitation of reality. His theory claims for the novel the right to be instead like poetry or painting, and whether he knew it or not, like photography. The world of accepted reality in which time and place

are defined, disintegrates and Cummings seems content to present the destruction of commonplace reality without feeling the need to erect in the ruins his own realistic edifice.

CONCLUSION

We may conclude now by summarizing the findings of our inquiry for some of the question to which this thesis is directed:

The Enormous Room is an autobiographical novel organized around the journey in The Pilgrim's Progress. The links between the two works, however, do not end with the organization: both the novel and the allegory are based on prison experiences; both contain autobiographical and didactic elements. Furthermore, both novelist and allegorist use the journey as an image for the life of the spirit. Neither the path of Christian's journey nor that of Cummings' is the way of the world.

Cummings' world is divided in two: socially, it is divided into those who "know" and those who "do not know"; morally, it is divided into noble and blameworthy feelings; aesthetically, into the beautiful and the ugly. Similarly, Christian's world is divided in two: in religious terms, it is divided into those who follow the tenets of Christianity and those who do not; morally, it is divided into

feelings that are noble and those that are blameworthy; ethically, into virtues and vices; intellectually, into falsehood and truth. The concept of the divided world is buttressed in both works by confronting the main characters with at least two different paths of action at each significant point in their journeys. Cummings' decisions at the crossroads though, like Christian's, are made in favour of truth, virtue, and noble feelings.

While Cummings does carry more than one of his themes by accommodating The Pilgrim's Progress, he ironically inverts Bunyan's ideas for the same purpose. Cummings' new world, for example, is not outside time and space as is Bunyan's, but rather on this earth, projected forward in time. Again, the Puritan cleanliness ethic is inverted, placing cleanliness next to ungodliness in The Enormous Room.

Whereas this inversion has given rise to great dispute, the individual character studies in the novel remain indisputably one of the greatest achievements. In the novel. To a certain extent characterization in The Enormous Room depends upon animal imagery in The Pilgrim's Progress; but where Bunyan's imagery is concentrated, Cummings' is diffused; where Bunyan's animals evoke fear and horror, Cummings' are humorous or merely picturesque.

It is in the area of setting that Cummings and Bunyan are perhaps farthest apart. Bunyan's pilgrimage begins in the City of Destruction, the spiritual equivalent of hell-on-earth: it extends across the earth, finally terminating in the Celestial City. Cummings' journey in The Enormous Room, on the other hand, is strictly circumscribed geographically, the focal point being a city one hundred miles west of Paris called Macé. But within the geographical limits Cummings creates a changing setting through minutely precise descriptions of the characters in the Room at La Ferté. These characters are sometimes reminiscent of the portraits in the Significant Rooms in The Pilgrim's Progress.

The comparison and contrast between The Pilgrim's Progress and The Enormous Room concludes with an examination of the excremental vision in the latter work. Norman O. Brown's link between excrement and death in Life Against Death: A Psychoanalytical Meaning of History is re-applied to illustrate the final connection between Bunyan's allegory and Cummings' novel.

The topic of characterization examined in the first chapter appears for re-examination in Chapter II. There characterization is related to the humour in the novel and the role of games; both are then linked to the roles

assumed by three of the main characters: Count Bragard, Jean le Nègre, and Surplice.

In the third chapter the humorous situations of the novel, examined in Chapter II, are shown to be balanced by tense episodes: the "revolver scene" in Chapter I, for example, is followed by the humorous conversation between Cummings and the American F.I.A.T. driver in the presence of the "tin-derby."

As the dramatic situations in the novel are balanced so too are the emotions of the narrator, fluctuating between anguish at the inhumane treatment in the prison and delight in the Delectable Mountains and the sight of New York upon his return to America. The final paragraph of the novel where the reader sees New York through Cummings' eyes, is one of the best examples of an ecstatic moment in which the narrator feels himself not only an integral part of the movement of human life but also a part of the timeless world.

The sense of mystery and unity discussed in conjunction with the final paragraph of the novel is expanded in Chapter IV, "The Fusion of Subject and Object in The Enormous Room." There the "mysterious" relationship between the individual perceiver and the external perceived world is examined and an attempt is made to

answer two fundamental questions deriving from this relationship: how can an external and material object be transmuted into the interior and immaterial self and how can this transmutation be expressed in words.

Finally in Chapter V the partial visions of the first four chapters are related to the whole novel: the artist's vision is studied in terms of form and content, character and situation. We return to a genre study, claiming the term "novel" for Cummings' work and thematically linking it with the contemporary war novels. In form another claim is made for this novel - the claim to be like poetry, painting and photography. Henry James has fittingly commented on the changing art and his comment redirected to The Enormous Room reads:

Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints; and there is a presumption that those times when no one has anything particular to say about it, and has no reason to give for practice or preference, though they may be times of honour, are not times of development - are times, possibly even, of dulness. ⁸⁵

⁸⁵"The Art of Fiction," p. 267.

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