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"I am that I am": The Dadaist Anti-Fiction of E. E. Cummings

Rubén Abella

Over the last fifty years much critical attention has been paid to Cummings' poetic idiosyncrasies and their relation with the visual arts in general. However, very little has been said about his innovative fiction pieces and the debt they owe to Dadaism. Cummings' first literary success was *The Enormous Room* (1922), a lively prose account of his experience in a French prison camp during World War I. He and his friend William Slater Brown had joined the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps in France the day after the United States entered the war. Their disdain for the military bureaucracy and their cynicism about the war, expressed in outspoken letters home, aroused animosity among French officials and they were imprisoned. Michael Webster writes that the activities and frame of mind of Cummings' fellow prisoners, who are gathered in a large room, are quite similar with those of the Zurich Dadaists at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916:

Almost all of them are frustrated with the madness and killing of war and alienated from social authority, propriety, regimentation, bourgeois jingoism, and the hypocritical, pompous discourse of officialdom. They defy authority by singing nonsense songs, playing childish games, exalting the primal and the "primitive," and reviling the architects of the war in terms both nonsensical and natural. Some of them draw and some make abstract, biomorphic assemblages of colored planes out of whatever material is at hand. ("A Dada of One's Own" 127)

Webster goes further by stating that Cummings' concept of a non-linear, timeless actuality, as conveyed through the room's unending present, conforms with the way Dada sought to express direct "primitive" emotions in art. Also, Dada and other wartime forms of avant-garde art-making, he says, help us understand Cummings' "equivocal and paradoxical aesthetic theory," which, like *The Enormous Room*, is "both serious and playful, simultaneously for and against art, for and against representation, seeing art as both alive and a thing made, as manipulative puppetry and magical invention, as timebound form and timeless actual emotion" (129).

As Webster himself concedes, however, it is unlikely that Cummings had ever heard the term "Dadaism" in the fall of 1917, when he was incarcerated. As the movement was taking shape in Zurich in 1916, he was fin-

ishing his studies at Harvard and later living at home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In January 1917 he moved to New York, and in April, like many young American writers—Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and Dashiell Hammett among others—he volunteered as an ambulance driver, soon embarking for France. Due to an administrative mix-up, he was not assigned to an ambulance unit for five weeks, during which time—May 8 to June 12—he stayed in Paris. Through Richard S. Kennedy’s exhaustive biography of Cummings, *Dreams in the Mirror*, we know that he enjoyed the city’s cultural life immensely. He attended Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes*, where he “saw Stravinsky’s *Petrouchka* more than once,” as well as the premiere of Erik Satie’s *Parade* with Cubist sets and costumes by Picasso. When the audience booed Satie’s ballet, Cummings “got angry and shouted abuse at the crowd” (140). There is no evidence, however, that he met the Dadaists at that time or had any knowledge of their activities. Consequently, the correspondences detected by Webster between Dada and *The Enormous Room* can only be construed as coincidental or, rather, as a logical confluence of dispositions, since Cummings’ character was naturally akin to the Dada Spirit. He was playful, contradictory, restless, irreverent, and adamantly antagonistic. His 1915 Harvard graduation lecture, written at the age of twenty, not only reveals an early alertness to the new developments in the arts but, as Tashjian has indicated, “some proto-Dada attitudes as well” (*Skyscraper* 166). These attitudes include his multi-media interests, his artistic individualism, his appreciation of nonsense, his lack of concern for arbitrary definitions of art, and his embracing of experimentation. Also, it is important to note that the Dadaists’ ambitions were not unique in their generation. In his introduction to Hugo Ball’s *Flight Out of Time*, John Elderfield affirms pertinently: “[A] wave of irrational feeling and concern for wholeness had swept Europe in reaction to nineteenth-century scientism and materialism, and was intensified by World War I” (xxvi).

Formally, *The Enormous Room* is a spirited and (mostly) intelligible work, a far cry from the radical experiments of Dada fiction. It is, to be sure, zesty, confrontational, iconoclastic and rich in metaphors and superlatives, but also mostly respectful of the traditional notions of grammar, meaning, syntax and punctuation. The style is “free-ranging, partly colloquial, partly involved” (Cowley, *Flowering* 337), and, one cannot but admit, not Dadaist at all. In order to see the Dadaist side of Cummings, one must read instead two of his most audacious and least studied books: the untitled collection of short stories he published in 1929, conventionally known as [*No Title*], and his 1933 anti-novel *EIMI*.

Cummings did meet the Dadaists, although not in 1917 but later, during his extended stays in Paris in the 1920s. In the very fragmentary drafts of an essay he wrote in 1922 on Joyce’s *Ulysses*—kept with the rest of his

papers at the Houghton Library at Harvard University since 1966 and painstakingly unearthed and transcribed by Webster in 2009—Cummings speaks of “the famous Mr. Tzara” as “one of my ‘friends’ . . . who brightly replied to nobody’s question Have you read Ulysses?—‘What a large book!’ ” (“Handout” 3). Although the use of inverted commas on the word “friends” invites doubts as to the genuineness of the relationship, it is reasonable to surmise that the “nobody” who asks the question is Cummings himself and, thus, that he knew Tzara personally. Their opposing stands on *Ulysses*, argues Webster, illustrate their shared Dadaist disposition. By cynically rejecting the book, Tzara makes good on Dada’s commitment to resist “serious” literature. By defending it, Cummings celebrates not a literary masterpiece but “a bodily experience, a self-transforming event, something the dadaist Tzara might have found much to agree with” (“The Drafts” 11).

In the early 1920s Cummings also became friends with Louis Aragon—by then a passionate practitioner of Dada—whose poem “Le Front Rouge” he translated into English in 1933. Occasionally Cummings even took part in a Dada gesture. One evening of 1923, he and John Dos Passos left Paris to visit Malcolm Cowley in his Giverny studio. With Aragon, who was also living in Giverny at the time, they went to a restaurant and had a cheerful dinner “with several bottles of wine.” Back in the studio, Cowley made a speech “against book fetishism.” Wherever he lived—he said—books seemed to accumulate. There in France his American books could not be sold and nobody wanted them as presents. Yet, feeling “an unreasoning and almost Chinese respect for the printed word,” he could not bring himself to destroy them when he moved home. They all had that weakness, he warned his visitors, and should take violent steps to overcome it. “I went over to the shelves,” reminisces Cowley,

and pulled down an assortment of bad review books and French university texts that I wouldn’t need again. After tearing some of them apart I piled them all on the asbestos mat in front of the stove; then I put a match to the pile. It was a gesture in the Dada manner, but not a successful one, for the books merely smoldered. We talked about bad writers while the smoke grew thicker; then Cummings proved that he was a better Dadaist—at least in someone else’s studio—by walking over and urinating on the fire. (*Exile’s Return* 158-59)

Cummings’ contributions to the little magazines of the period show clear associations with the experimental “dynamics of Dada” (Tashjian 172). Many of the twenty pieces he published in *Broom* between 1922 and

1924 are Dadaist in their use of juxtaposition, satire, typographical complexity, irony or childlike primitivism. His poem “workingman with hand so hairy-sturdy,” which appeared in the 1922 issue of *Secession*, is at the same time an “elegiac chant” (Ruiz 108)—the drunken speaker longs for a purer past, free of the shackles of art, thought, and alcohol—and a mocking celebration of the death of Dada “as one of its many transmutations” (Tashjian 177):

what’s become of(if you please)
all the glory that or which was Greece
all the grandja
that was dada? (CP 231)

Kennedy has aptly summarized Cummings’ relation to Dadaism by stating that he embraced its principle “to destroy the accepted and the traditional in order to discover something new and surprising in artistic effect, or in order to seek some hidden truth that lies beyond the traditional” (*Dreams* 71). Indeed the destruction of all convention seems to be the primary—perhaps the only—goal of [*No Title*]. Norman Friedman maintains that in writing [*No Title*] Cummings “was not content to talk *about* the rejection of categories, but rather intended to make a book which would *be* a rejection of categories” (97). The result is an obscure and thoroughly irrational literary artifact whose meaning Friedman confesses himself unable to comprehend. “There are limits to the fun of pure nonsense,” he explains. “[I]f there is a point], I have completely failed to grasp it” (99).

It is easy to imagine that [*No Title*] is one of the works Kennedy has in mind, together with some of Cummings’ more “gimmicky” poems, when he accuses Cummings of having published “a great deal of chaff throughout his career” (“Major” 39). This view—that [*No Title*] is chaff—may be partly substantiated by the book’s preface, which contains a dramatized dialogue between “ALMOST Any Publisher” and “A certain Author” where the work is described by the former as “ABSOLUTELY CRAZY!” “I should call it hyperscientific,” retorts the author nonchalantly.

PUBLISHER: “HYPERscienTIFic”?

AUTHOR: Why not? The title is inframicroscopic—the frontispiece is extratelescopic—the pictures are superstereoscopic—the meaning post-ultraviolet—the format is preautoerogenous. (161 / 215)

.....

PUBLISHER: And if this BABYISH NONSENSE BORES ME STIFF?

AUTHOR: If this babyish nonsense bores you stiff, you have

“civilization.”

The dialogue concludes with the publisher swallowing his checkbook and saying, as he drops dead: “No thanks...” (162 / 216).

Friedman’s authoritative disapproval of [*No Title*], expressed as early as 1964, and the radical obscurity of the book help explain why it has received virtually no critical attention during the last five decades. Tashjian mentions it only once in his 1975 *Skyscraper Primitives*, as a reaffirmation, together with the play *Him*—to which, in contrast, he dedicates four pages—of Cummings’ early appreciation of nonsense (166). John T. Ordeman offers a brief, noncommittal record of the book’s publication details and a summary of the preface in his 2000 article “Cummings’s Titles” (163). The first serious analysis of [*No Title*], however, and the only one to date, is Ruiz’s 2011 “The Dadaist Prose of Williams and Cummings,” which affirms that the book is “without a doubt the most Dadaist of Cummings’ works, and perhaps for that reason the most forgotten” (107). Due to its irreverence and almost absolute opacity, [*No Title*] has been consistently ignored or regarded as a mere capriccio, a piece of helter-skelter experimentation. But taking into account Cummings’ artistic inclinations and literary stature, perhaps it is more sensible to see it as a serious writing effort and, more importantly for the purpose of this essay, as an exemplary piece of anti-fiction, that is to say, a Dadaist attack on the short story genre and its conventions.

[*No Title*] was originally published as “A Book Without a Title” in an anthology, *The New American Caravan*, in 1929. The anthology, which was subtitled “A Yearbook of American Literature,” was edited by Alfred Kreymborg, Lewis Mumford and Paul Rosenfeld, and contained stories, poems, plays and essays by twenty-nine writers including Erskine Caldwell, Stanley Kunitz, Robert McAlmon, Matthew Josephson, and Ivor Winters. Cummings’ contribution—eight Dadaist “short stories”—was published again the following year as a separate 31-page book that we now call [*No Title*] with drawings by Cummings that hold no relation with the text. In neither printing was the work given an actual title. The title page of the 1930 book simply reads:

BY

E. E. Cummings

with illustrations

by the author

Opposite the title page, instead of the customary illustration, are a blank

space and the caption “frontispiece.”

Reading [*No Title*] is an arduous endeavor. The stories, burlesque in tone, have no clear plot and contain numerous absurd statements that defy interpretation. The first story, for example, is essentially a journalistic piece informing us of a series of calamities, but its extravagant assertions and caricatural rendition of violence wipe out any trace of realistic description and turn the text into a parody of newspaper reporting on natural disasters, crimes, and tragedies, with a tongue-in-cheek, Schwitters-like vagary:

A dog, stepped on, bit in the neck a beautiful high-strung woman who had for some time suffered from insomnia, and who—far too enraged to realize, except in a very general way, the source of the pain—instantly struck a child of four, knocking its front teeth out. Another woman, profiting by the general excitement, fainted and with a hideous shriek fell through a plate glass window. On the outskirts of the throng, several octogenarians succumbed to heart trouble with grave internal complications. A motorcycle ran over an idiot. A stone-deaf night-watchman’s left eye was exterminated by the point of a missing spectator’s parasol. Falling seven stories from a nearby office building, James Anderson (colored) landed in the midst of the crowd absolutely unhurt, killing eleven persons including the ambassador to Uruguay. At this truly unfortunate occurrence, one of the most prominent businessmen of the city, Aloysius K. Vanderdecker, a member of the Harvard, Yale, and Racquet Clubs, swallowed a cigar and died instantly. (165 / 218)

The open syntax expands the sentences endlessly. There are constant changes of tone, subject, point of view and style. The bizarre nature of the text is especially conspicuous in the use of absurd numbers [for example, a Chinese laundryman whose business is at 686 868th St. (219) or a fire engine that reaches a speed of $(a+b)^{a+b}$ miles per hour (220)], offbeat names [Count Cazazza (224), Signor Alhambra, Captain Dimple (226), and Hon. Henry Chilblains F.O.B. Detroit (227)]; initials and abbreviations [Old Dr. F.’s (238); disinterested spectators R.F.D. (227)]; and this personal advertisement: “YOUNG g. look. S. Amer., sér. high éduc. g. danc” (237). Meaning and congruity are boastfully flaunted through whimsical images, absurd statements, illogical affirmations, and hyperbolic descriptions:

Taking a sea-lion out of a watermelon he first deposited it in the goldfish-bowl bottomside up, causing an explosion which changed the color of everyone’s eyebrows, and next, to the delight of all present, caused an angleworm to appear on the janitor’s instep, but guffaws fairly rang

out when seven six-hundred pound fairies began coming five by five slowly out of the graphophone horn, waving furious the Stars and Stripes and chewing colossal home-made whisperless mince-pies. Desperate as was the situation, Captain Dimple was not a man of anyone else's word, no. In a trice Edward had unfurled the tricolor and drawn his Spanish rapier clear to the nozzle, only to be seized by a stupendous octopus and disappear magnetically with a winsome splash. (171 / 226)

In analyzing [*No Title*], Ruiz states that the same can be said of it as William Carlos Williams said of *The Great American Novel*: "It was Joyce with a difference. The difference being greater opacity, less erudition, reduced power of perception" (167). It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the influence of the Irish writer on the work of Cummings. However, it seems inaccurate, not to say farfetched, to compare his probing prose experiments, significant as they are, with monumental, all-encompassing literary accomplishments such as *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*. In the first of the six nonlectures Cummings delivered at Harvard in the early 1950s, he simply described [*No Title*] as "an untitled volume of satire" (4). The work seems to offer no reason to question this succinct definition. [*No Title*] is a notable book in that, as John Rocco points out in *Another E. E. Cummings*—a collection of Cummings' avant-garde writings published in 1998—"it is an extensive provocation of the reader's sense of narrative," and, as a consequence, a challenge to the way we read (215-16).

The opening of chapter IV is an example. "Once upon a time, boys and girls, there were two congenital ministers to Belgium, one of whom was insane whereas the other was sixfingered" (175 / 230). After the classic fairy tale opening, Cummings recounts a series of unrelated occurrences—in fact, the ministers are not mentioned again after line four—thus disappointing the reader's narrative expectations. [*No Title*] is also an interesting exercise in intertextuality. Each drawing represents a story—"The Garden of Eden," "The Death of Abraham Lincoln," "The Swan and Leda," "The Dog in the Manger"—which, writes Rocco, "comments upon the way stories form and merge and disappear throughout the eight chapters." The stories, in their turn, are represented by "emblems, tableaux of famous and fabulous scenes from our collective memory of narrative" (216). In essence, however, [*No Title*] is a playful parody of short story writing, a Dadaist travesty aimed at deriding the conventions of the genre and having fun in the process.

The few scholars who have explored Cummings' relation to Dada agree that there are significant disparities between his writing and Dada's aesthetics. Tashjian, probably the staunchest proponent of the movement's influ-

ence on Cummings, points out that, “[d]espite an extensive exposure to Dada, Cummings did not engage in typographical experimentation simply for the sake of shock alone, as many Dadaists had originally done . . . Nor did he undergo the violently anarchic or destructive phase endemic to Dada” (165). Kennedy, who overtly considers [*No Title*] “a kind of bagatelle,” (*Dreams* 316) later admitted with reluctance that “there is occasional evidence that the Dada movement had made an impact on Cummings while he was in Paris in 1921-22” (*Revisited* 70). However, Kennedy seems happy to detach Cummings’ incoherent writings from Dada’s nihilism. “It is heartening,” he says, “to see Cummings’ taste for irrationality veer away from Dadaesque absurdities and turn to the tradition of nonsense, with its origins in folk literature” (*Revisited* 107). And while Milton Cohen concedes that Cummings may have flirted with Dadaism in the early stages of his career, both in his “machinerish” drawings of the mid-teens, reminiscent of Duchamp and Picabia, and in such non-sequitur poems as “Will i ever forget that precarious moment?” (CP 260), he also writes that Cummings “did not practice artistic destruction for its own sake, as the Dadaists had” (25). Cummings’ work cannot be said to participate in the nihilism and extreme radicalism of Dada. However, the annihilation of all convention seems to be the main objective of [*No Title*]. Unlike the Dadaists, says Tashjian, “Cummings did not engage in ritualistic destruction” (182). Yet [*No Title*] is a destructive artifact, a “bomb,” to use Max Ernst’s expression (Biggsby 4), planted in the foundations of an outmoded literary establishment, which, Ruiz rightly claims, causes the work to occupy “a problematic position in Cummings’ canon” (111).

[*No Title*] is Dadaist for a number of reasons. It has no plot or clear meaning. The events it describes are shocking because their eccentricity, hallucinatory nature, and hyperbolic violence bear no resemblance to actual life. Narrative time and logic are rendered irrelevant. Grammar and syntax yield to formal experimentation and anarchic spontaneity. “Every page and paragraph of this short work,” explains Ruiz, “strives to break our expectations and deconstruct the very process of reading” (111). Dada was intent on offending its audiences. “The plain reader be damned,” said *Transition*’s Dadaist “Proclamation” of the “Revolution of the Word” (qtd. in Cowley, *Exile’s Return* 277). Accordingly, [*No Title*] may be viewed as Cummings’ own version of Motherwell’s “cerebral revolver shot” (85), a Dadaist literary bomb aimed at irritating and trying the patience of even the most enthusiastic readers, some of whom, as Friedman says, may find themselves “on the side of Cummings’ harassed publisher whose anxiety makes him speak mostly in capitals: ‘And if this BABYISH NONSENSE BORES ME STIFF?’ ” (Friedman, *Growth* 102; *EIMI* 162 / 216).

Like Williams, Cummings is closer to Dada in his prose than in his po-

etry. He is one of the most innovative of modernist poets, but in some ways he is also oddly traditional. Though he discards most punctuation and capitalization, he is fond of the sonnet and other time-honored forms. He alters parts of speech and makes verbs into nouns and nouns into verbs, but he does so mainly to express feelings whose simplicity belies all this formal complication. In his prose, however, he totally lets go of tradition, which allows him to engage in a freer, more unself-conscious experimentation akin to that of Dada. Dada is, more than any other artistic movement of the time, the life juice that runs through the lines of Cummings' [*No Title*] and his anti-novel *EIMI*.

Aside from brief treatments by Kennedy and Friedman, *EIMI* did not receive any serious critical attention until 1998, when C. K. Sample, III submitted his Master of Arts thesis *Egotist Eimi: Cummings' Russian Experience* at Illinois State University.¹ Sample argues that when Covici-Friede first printed a subscription-based edition of the book in February of 1933 reviewers, aware as they were of the erroneous original response to Joyce's *Ulysses*, did not know exactly what to say about *EIMI* when faced with a new, disconcerting book critiquing an ideology exalted by other left-wing contemporary writers (15). The most negative review—and probably the most influential—was released in the April 1933 issue of *The American Spectator*, which had gone to press before there were even galley prints of the novel. The reviewer, who could not possibly have read the book, bluntly dismissed it as “THE WORST BOOK OF THE MONTH” (Norman 273). Soon this unfounded opinion became a trend among many reviewers who “balked at Cummings' 432 pages of innovative narrative” (Sample 17). By June of the same year *The American Spectator* printed a more favorable review by Ben Hecht that rather surprisingly stated: “every red-blooded American should really do his best to wade through the thing” (Dendinger 153). However, neither this partial retraction nor Ezra Pound's June 1934 review, where he openly expresses his disappointment with the unfair critical reception of *EIMI*, were able to counteract the disparaging reviews nor avoid the scholarly neglect the book was to receive during the next six decades.

EIMI recounts Cummings' five-week journey to Russia in 1931, during the rise of the Stalinist government. Cummings “had heard conflicting reports about the USSR” (Huber 1). On the one hand, the Soviet experiment in social planning thrilled European and American intellectuals, especially those who, like many of Cummings' New York friends, had sympathized with the socialist ideals during the 1920s. On the other hand, there were also disappointed reactions to the Soviet State. Morrie Werner, with whom Cummings had planned to visit Russia in 1929, returned from Moscow horrified by “the dismal and barbaric conditions that he had seen in the

Soviet Union” (Kennedy, *Dreams* 307). What Cummings found in the USSR “amounted to the direct antithesis of the values he held most dear: those of individuality and free artistic expression” (Huber 2). He discovered that the all-powerful communist government nullified the individual and enslaved artistic expression for the sake of propaganda. By the time he published *EIMI*, he had adopted a definitely anti-Soviet stance, envisioning the USSR as an enormous prison of a country, “where men are shadows and women are nonmen; the preindividual marxist unworld. This world is Hell” (Cummings, *EIMI* xv).

Like [*No Title*], *EIMI* is a difficult read. In it, as Madison Smartt Bell says in his preface to the 2007 Liveright edition—the first, it must be noted, since 1958—Cummings “gives us a language completely unfettered, romping through episodes of fair and faithful figuration, cubistic fracturing of the episode and scene, flights of pidgin Russian and utterly unorthodox French, phonetic renditions of dialect that would spin the head of Mark Twain—and more” (xiii). Grammar, syntax, punctuation and vocabulary are radically manipulated. Borrowing from the montage of the cinema and the formal experiments of the visual arts, Cummings’ “willfully eccentric” language creates his very own aesthetics of novelty and surprise in order to convey the fragmented impressions of the traveler caught against the background of a strange country (Blumenkranz). Reading *EIMI*, says Frank Bures, is “a long, slow slog (like taking a train through the Soviet Union!) that requires tiresome mental gymnastics to understand each sentence. Much of it is impenetrable. Other parts are incomprehensible. Some parts, I have to admit, I read really, really fast” (2).

According to Rajeev Kumar Kinra, *EIMI* is heavily indebted to Louis Aragon’s Dadaist novel *The Adventures of Telemachus*, which provided Cummings with a “playful” and “inebriated” example of the modern epic and a “precedent for the dismantling and eventual reshaping of epic conventions” (125). Certainly, *EIMI*’s epic-poetic tone seems to echo that of Aragon’s work. “The blend of doubt, faith, fracture, paradox, profundity, verbal disruption, satire, allusion, wit, punning and general nonsense are similar in both texts,” agrees Huber. Also, he asserts, in both of them meaning is subordinate to poetic effect, logic is subordinate to nonsense, and ideology—for all his abhorrence of the Soviet system, Cummings was not a politically inclined writer—is subordinate to experience (10).

There are, to be sure, some differences between them. *The Adventures of Telemachus* is a dark, nihilistic Dada fable upholding nothing but destruction and chaos, whereas, despite its outraged irreverence, *EIMI* is essentially a feisty celebration of the individual. Verbal experimentation, in the form of garbled syntax, modified punctuation and neologisms, seems to

serve no particular purpose in Aragon's work. Cummings, however, alters language deliberately in order to achieve specific effects. Take, for example, this short passage from *EIMI*:

Left. Left. Left! right! left! Tiddledy-AH-Dee : Die-dy ; Doe-dy ,
Dumm... Parade,rade,rade;parade,rade,rade. The uniformly moving
monotonously uniform comrades imply vision in which dreamless Vir-
gil unwishfully and wishfully my dreaming self swim, through dreamed
uniform wishless monotonously walkers &
"here" pointing , giggling "is the terror of Europe. Look at it"
"I am." (56)

The wide gaps between the initial repetitions of the word "Left" symbolize the absence of the corresponding "right" as well as the long length of the Russian soldiers' marching steps (Sample 40). The sequence "Parade, rade,rade;parade,rade,rade" is an evident onomatopoeia of the sound of the passing army and most likely also a pun on "raid." The rest of the paragraph, with its profusion of adverbs and its rolling prosody, emulates the mind-numbing, soul-killing effect of the Soviet regime. As Norman Friedman affirms in his afterword to the 2007 edition of *EIMI*, Cummings' experimental prose, which contains abbreviations, multiple typographical devices, compounds, grammatical-syntactical shifts and word coinages, aims to "embody his sense of timelessness in the midst of time, a vision which may properly be seen as a form of transcendentalism" (455).

Cummings and Aragon also differ in their political attitudes. Aragon's Dadaist acceptance of randomness and chaos as the governing principles of the universe eventually led him and other Dada members to believe in the redemptive power of the communist revolution. In contrast, Cummings' hope lies in individuality attained through art. In this sense, *EIMI*—which, explains Cummings in his "Sketch for a Preface" to the book's 1958 edition, "stands for the Greek word εἶμί," meaning "am" and suggestive of Exodus III, 14: "I am that I am" (xv)—can be viewed as "a monument" to the individual's ability to assert himself "over and against both the concept of a meaningless universe, and the oppressive political systems that attempt to manufacture meaning in the midst of this universe" (Huber 14), be they left or right-wing. In other words, in *EIMI* Cummings remains faithful to free individual expression and the self-sufficiency of art, the very principles of modernism that Aragon came to reject when he embraced communism. At the end of *The Adventures of Telemachus* there is destruction and nothingness. In *EIMI*, Cummings defies both existential angst and collective idealism by proclaiming the indestructibility of the individual and vocifer-

ously shouting: “I am.”

Yet these differences, distinct as they may be, are not significant enough to conceal how much *EIMI* owes to *The Adventures of Telemachus* and Dadaism. *EIMI*'s protagonist is, characteristically, a young male artist/poet immersed in a heavily distorted reality. There is no fictional plot as such, and the flow of the text is constantly disrupted by parenthetical insertions, lists of words, shocking juxtapositions and all sorts of verbal and typographical experiments. This is, for example, how Cummings, bearing gifts, describes his journey to, and arrival at, a socialist family's home in Moscow:

Battle into number 34 tram.

Un(having allowed others to cut the forward swath)torn,descend
(smothered in dismay—for we found no kopecks;then the outraged
tickettakeress bawled Comrades,pass your change:a Rouble has ar-
rived!)near oasis,trudge dimly to Kropotkin perioolok;dimly left, along
shady little streetless, past 3 smirking striplings;and without care enter a
positively black courtyard.

Now of these portals which might harbor a certain socialist family?
—Not here!(this unold nonman washing these 9/8faded thinglesses re-
coils:terrified, when I pronounce dimly the name—Not here!(that's all
she can say)

& carelessly beat retreat;overturning almost that “cultivated”looking
(that not young)nonman—who points,wordless,across the yard to a
cleaner than others(newer)portal

knock.

A child opens

“yah americanitz”

he semisomersaults with joy!(rushes ecstatically crying Come in)
down a short(The American is here!)hall. Returns,joyous;beckons

2 nonmen adorn a sunful porchless. 1(Hausfrauish,ample)=larger
version of Jill—1(tranquil,grandmotherly)=something from my past?
White ample sit-bulges in a spicandspan frock. Neatandclean grand-
mother smile-rocks in a black shawl. Both greet myself cordially. (208)

Like most Dadaist fiction, *EIMI* is an urban narrative, with most of the action taking place in Moscow, Kiev, Odessa and Istanbul. Its aesthetics is that of the modern city, an industrialized setting shaped by machines and crisscrossed by automobiles, trams, utility poles and locomotives. Like Dadaist fiction, also, *EIMI* flouts literary propriety and subverts the conventions of the novelistic genre through humor, playfulness, obscurity, in-

coherence and laughter. Perhaps as a way to acknowledge *EIMI*'s debt to Dada, Cummings makes a nod to the movement within the text. Early during his visit in Moscow, on Wednesday, May 13, he and his guide, Virgil—also referred to as “mentor” in a clear allusion to Telemachus’ tutor—visit a “pseudonightclub” wherein Cummings, prodded by beer, goes on a “tirade against collectivity” that attracts the attention of a Russian political policeman (*EIMI* xviii). A potentially dangerous argument ensues—the policeman is listening—with Cummings advocating the supreme distinctiveness of the artist while loudly praising the free expression of the individual above collectivism, and Virgil defending the USSR, questioning Cummings’ sanity and encouraging him to try to understand the communist system better before criticizing it. “Da [*yes* in Russian],” says Virgil at one point of the exchange, “(if I may interrupt)but what has this tirade to do with our present circumstances?” To which Cummings replies: “dada. Nothing—or the unthing which everyone(except impossibly the artist)must become merely by going to sleep” (48). The scene comes to a Dadaist end with Cummings bursting into laughter.

Cummings was not an “official” Dadaist. He didn’t experience New York proto-Dada first-hand. Neither did he take part in the movement’s foundation in Zurich nor in its subsequent flourishing and demise in Paris. Yet, he was fully cognizant of its principles, which, all in all, were naturally convergent with his own. More than any other artistic tendency of the time, Dadaism offered Cummings the congenial context and the formal means he needed to create his idiosyncratic, antagonistic poetry. Thanks to Dada, and, more specifically, to the near-infinite aesthetic trails it blazed for modern artists and writers, Cummings was able to compose two of the most disconcerting and thus far most neglected pieces of American anti-fiction.

Note

1. C. K. Sample’s thesis is available here: <https://sampletheweb.com/thesis/EgotistEIMI.pdf>. For earlier scholarly treatments of *EIMI*, see pp. 109-124 of Norman Friedman’s *Growth of a Writer* and pp. 327-335 of Richard S. Kennedy’s *Dreams in the Mirror*.

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