

2007

## A Forgotten La Ferté-Macé Letter: E.E. Cummings to Scofield Thayer

John M. Gill

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring\\_cummings](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring_cummings)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gill, John M. (2007) "A Forgotten La Ferté-Macé Letter: E.E. Cummings to Scofield Thayer," *Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*. Vol. 16: No. 1, Article 13.

Available at: [https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring\\_cummings/vol16/iss1/13](https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spring_cummings/vol16/iss1/13)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## A Forgotten La Ferté-Macé Letter: E.E. Cummings to Scofield Thayer

John M. Gill

---

### I

In a folder among the Scofield Thayer holdings at Yale's Beinecke Library, Michael Webster discovered in 2005 an unpublished and unnoticed letter to Thayer from E. E. Cummings. Written early in his incarceration at La Ferté-Macé in the autumn of 1917, this letter not only enhances the information and opinions in the other Cummings letters from this time, all to his family, but also substantially illuminates numerous aspects of *The Enormous Room*. This paper will discuss such matters as the differences between the reality of Cummings' incarceration and presentation of that reality in *The Enormous Room*, the censorship of his letters, the mutinies in the French army, and Cummings' attitudes towards art, war, and his detention at La Ferté.

Thayer, a wealthy Harvard friend, had presented Cummings with a thousand-dollar check in thanks and tribute for his poem "Epithalamion," written in honor of Thayer's June 1916 marriage to Elaine Orr, who is "La Fleur Seule" of the last paragraph of this letter. This welcome money allowed Cummings the freedom and leisure to write and paint in New York in the months before he joined the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service in April 1917 and left for France. On April 23, just before shipping out overseas, Cummings wrote Thayer in New York indicating that he was leaving some poems and paintings in Thayer's care (Sawyer-Lauçanno 105, 553), and Thayer wrote Cummings on September 28 concerning his attempts to get some of Cummings' poems published (Kennedy, *Dreams* 153, 499 n. 43). Written approximately a month later, Cummings' undated letter from La Ferté makes no mention of Thayer's September 28 letter—no doubt he had not yet received it.

Though Cummings did not date his letter to Thayer, internal evidence gives us an approximate date. He notes about himself and his "good and only friend in France"—unnamed in this letter but known to be William Slater Brown—that it was "a month ago just . . . [that] we were both arrested . . . ." Since the two were arrested and taken from their ambulance section on September 23 (Kennedy, *Dreams* 148), the letter must have been written around October 23. Moreover, Cummings writes later in the letter

that he and his friend had “recently passed a commission” at La Ferté. The commission, which met every three months to decide the fate of the detainees there, interviewed Cummings on October 17. Even though the narrator of *The Enormous Room* states that it “must have been late in November when la commission arrived” (215), the evidence of the Thayer letter corroborates that of Cummings’ father, who asserts that the commission interviewed Cummings on October 17, not in late November (Edward Cummings xxi).

For narrative and artistic purposes, Cummings in *The Enormous Room* changed this and other elements of his actual life in La Ferté. Realizing this fact, Richard Kennedy had the happy inspiration to call the narrator of the book “C” to distinguish him from his creator, E. E. Cummings (*Dreams* 217; Foreword xii), and this paper will do the same. In fact, this letter to Thayer offers further evidence that C is based on, but is not completely, E. E. Cummings.

Cummings’ observation later in this letter about correspondence at La Ferté helps to illustrate this distinction. He indicates that the detainees could write “a letter & a post-card a week here.” In *The Enormous Room* C records, “And I wonder to this day that the only letter of mine which ever reached America and my doting family should have been posted by [Count Bragard] . . . en ville” (152). Despite C’s assertion about “the only letter” being delivered, in actuality three of Cummings’ letters to his “doting family” written during his weeks at La Ferté were received by his family and have been published (Cummings, *Selected* 37-41). It is these letters as well as *The Enormous Room* itself which the Thayer letter vividly amplifies.

In the sentence in the letter about being allowed to write a letter and a postcard a week, Cummings adds that these are “all censored by the bureau of the depot, etc.” His awareness of the nature of this censorship is revealed at the start of the letter with its open reference to Jussy and the Chemin des Dames. He clearly realizes that the censorship at La Ferté differs radically from that enforced when he was still with his ambulance section, where he was compelled to disguise these place names through puns and translation.

Specifically, while still in the field before his arrest and detention, Cummings mentions in an August 2 letter to his mother being at a “Juicy place” and indicates that his unit “may follow the division of the French Army (to which we were attached at first) to the great ex-battlefield of the North, or the Road of Sweet Ladies.” He adds that he had been at “a place hardly german to my malcontent nature” as well as at “a place SO quiet

that Dickens' 'little Nell' might well be read as daily work" (*Selected* 32-33). With this simple but amazingly effective disguise the wily Cummings reveals to his family his section's locations, Jussy, Germaine and Nesle, as well as their possible future location at that "great ex-battlefield," the Chemin des Dames. Since his section was working closely at times with units of the French Army, we can determine from his masking these place names that they were a major focus of French censors determined to keep secret the location of front-line units. However, in his letter written at La Ferté to Thayer, Cummings reveals his understanding that the censors here would be looking to prevent the disclosure of different matters. Location, then, where Cummings' unit had been or where he was now, was no longer a secret. Indeed, the Thayer letter begins with an identification of location as "Dépot de Triage de la Ferté-Macé (Orne)."

The quite different censorship at La Ferté focused on matters both internal to the place itself and external with regard to the war. For example, C in *The Enormous Room* notes the scope of internal censorship: "all letters were read by the mail clerk to make sure that they said nothing disagreeable about the authorities or conditions of La Ferté . . ." (62). This focus of the censorship there is probably why Cummings suggests to Thayer later in his letter that there are both men and women incarcerated, but "to get together is impossible." "Impossible," however, is not quite accurate. In *The Enormous Room* C mentions one incident in which that "impossible" of the Thayer letter becomes stunningly actual: "a somewhat exciting incident," he writes, "which I must not describe but rather outline" (93). This is the episode in which four of the women manage to escape from their quarters, dash upstairs and break into the Enormous Room itself, the men's quarters, for obvious and quite anti-regulation reasons. This happened, C writes, "Only a few days after my arrival" (93). Though Cummings was writing Thayer a month after his coming to La Ferté, it is possible he is deferring to the censors in his letter in suggesting that intimacies among the detainees were "impossible," a view which the French censors would approve.

In all this Cummings is clearly wary of mentioning directly in the Thayer letter the one external matter about the war which had set France into an almost frantic hysteria. He makes a casual reference to Jussy, where he had been, and then adds, quite gratuitously, "pas loin du Chemin de Dames." *Pas loin* is a relative term which takes in much territory and many locations. Why then does he choose to mention only the Chemin des Dames? It reveals Cummings' knowledge of the major French military

secret of the Great War, the 1917 mutinies of the French Army. Fraternizing with the French *poilus* at the front, he and Brown had heard of the supremely guarded secret that after General Robert Nivelle's disastrous campaign at the Chemin des Dames in April 1917 many French Army units had mutinied. The battle was preceded by Nivelle's grandiose promises that this highly aggressive attack would soon be victorious and that the war itself would soon be over. On the contrary, the crushing slaughter of French forces at the Chemin des Dames resulted in debilitating and wide-spread army mutinies. Cummings' oblique reference to the Chemin des Dames in this letter indicates his awareness of the secret of the mutinies.

This reference to the Chemin des Dames not only reveals Cummings' knowledge of the mutinies but also shows his understanding of the lull which came in the aftermath of that disastrous engagement. Indicating that Jussy, where he was "under fire," was not far from the Chemin des Dames, Cummings adds in his letter, "mais chez nous c'était toujours tranquille" [but around us it was always calm]. When the Chemin des Dames engagement ended in a catastrophic defeat for the French, a horrifying slaughter of French soldiers, General Henri Philippe Pétain took over as Commander in Chief of the Army, replacing the disgraced General Nivelle. He immediately instituted reforms designed to quell the growing mutinies in the French Army. He insisted, among other things, that the government in Paris restrain subversive and defeatist elements in the population; this helps account for the doubling of the number of male detainees in the few weeks Cummings was at La Ferté. The mutineers agreed to defend the front lines but not to attack; Pétain in turn promised a cessation of such suicidal aggressive attacks against the Germans as that of the Chemin des Dames; he would await the arrival of fresh forces from America, which had now entered the war. Because the Germans had pulled back to the Hindenburg Line in the Noyon sector (where Cummings was stationed) and because Pétain did not pursue major offensive action against the Germans for many months, Cummings and his ambulance section could enjoy the "toujours tranquille" life mentioned in his letter to Thayer. On July 20 he had written his father that his ambulance section was "in repos" and "expecting daily to leave for another larger town, where it is said that 'we' will rest for perhaps a year, doing absolutely nothing . . ." (*Selected* 31).

With the mutinies clearly on his mind and quite justifiably wary of the censors, Cummings cites for Thayer the letters of Brown as the cause of their arrest, trial, and incarceration. Brown had, he says, taken "glad life's

arrears for writing letters to American friends and parents as letters mustn't be written." This also is the official French version of Cummings' and Brown's problem, as well as the version Cummings gives his mother (*Selected* 138). Neither he nor Brown could possibly directly mention the mutinies in their letters. The French authorities, stunned and frightened, could take no chances with the likes of these two, who knew of the events from their conversations with the *poilus* and who seemed on the verge of revealing the secret that there was little to stop the Germans from advancing on Paris itself. Consequently, Cummings' shifting the blame to Brown's letters here is a diversionary tactic designed to conceal his knowledge of the mutinies. Brown himself in a 1988 letter convincingly summarizes the situation: "it was not those dumb, jejune letters of mine that got us into trouble. It was the fact that C. and I knew all about the violent mutinies in the French Army a few months before Cummings and I reached the front. We learned all about them from the *poilus*. The French did everything, naturally, to suppress the news. We two were loaded with dynamite" ("William Slater Brown" 90).

The key to all this in the Thayer letter is Cummings' reference to the Chemin des Dames. This occurs at the end of the same sentence that begins with a reminder to Thayer that Cummings had written him when he was " 'under fire' (I think they call it) at Jussy . . ." Not only is his comment "I think they call it" ironic, but it also distances himself from the war, disparaging his participation. Significantly, he had used the phrase "under fire" in a letter to his mother over three months before on July 2 with no hesitation about its meaning such as "I think they call it." Clearly attempting to alleviate her fears, he writes, "No excitements whatever so far—I have been technically 'under fire' twice—very dull" (*Selected* 27). Cummings here demonstrates that he knows full well what the phrase means. He is being ironic in that letter when he adds "I think they call it" to "under fire."

Besides ironically distancing himself from the war with "I think they call it," Cummings continues his irony in the next paragraph of his Thayer letter by labeling war "intellectual"; he adds, "a millimeter turn of a round-screw, x jumps high in the midst of his merriment over y's uncouth hop." Thus Cummings without great detail sharply and succinctly narrates in a periphrastic way a scene of two people blown up into the air quite literally by a shell. The word "intellectual" for this horror satirizes the war in a swift way; it also emphasizes the growing technical and mechanical aspects, the killing science, of the Great War, since the turn of a screw can waste hu-

man beings in ghastly (“uncouth”) ways. “Intellectual” here is the opposite of feeling and satirizes utilitarian or “instrumental” reason in warfare. Cummings himself directly experienced the growing scientific advances of war. In a letter to his mother written in July while still with his ambulance section he notes that “klaxons shrieked all over the sector, meaning ‘Gas—attack’ ” (*Selected* 30). Cummings knew first hand how “intellectual” war is.

## II

In his letter Cummings asks, “Why am I happy at length?” Though incarcerated at La Ferté in the midst of war, his answer is that “mon ami et moi are cuddling from Χαος [Chaos] the amazement which Art hath so long starved for.” Art is, then, the preeminent reason for his happiness. This “cuddling” of Art, discussing it, practicing it even under their dismal detainee circumstances, means to Cummings and Brown that “For us, here, now, war has sucked itself off and gone home.” Since war was intellectual and ignored human feelings, Cummings, turning to feeling, to Art, chose to distance himself from it to and ignore it.

Further, this cause of Cummings’ happiness, Art, is enhanced because it is shared with his friend, and, consequently, “Our brains are burning, our souls in mesh.” In a letter to his mother written from La Ferté at about the same time as his Thayer letter, Cummings tells her that if she knew how he was living she would “not be surprised to know how happy I am” and mentions “days spent with an inimitable friend in soul-searching probings of aesthetics” (39). Cummings does not feel the need to elaborate on his point about “our souls in mesh” to Thayer here, but he does so some six weeks later on December 10, still in La Ferté, in a letter written to his father but apparently kept by the censors:

Our life here is A 1. Never have I so appreciated leisure. I continually write notes on painting, poetry, and sculpture, as well as music; and the Muse Herself has not been unkind. My days, spent in delightful discussions with my good friend, whose tastes so happily coincide with my own, remind me of the mental peregrinations of your favorite Socrates, insofar as they have already illumined many dark crannies in the greatest of all sciences—Art. (quoted in Kennedy, *Dreams* 155-56)

Clearly much of what Cummings writes his folks from La Ferté, like these sentiments, is designed to alleviate their parental concern. Beyond this, however, these passages in letters to his family illuminate the telling image of Cummings and Brown, brains burning and souls “in mesh,”

“cuddling” Art from Chaos.

Art, then, is the preeminent reason for Cummings’ expression of happiness in the Thayer letter. Both this letter and *The Enormous Room* agree with the sentiment expressed in a letter to his mother from La Ferté about the “unimaginable glee” at being free from the “nagging reach of our former owners” in the ambulance section (*Selected* 40). Indeed, using the same adjective, Cummings in the Thayer letter presents a secondary reason for his happiness: “happy as never before,” he writes, “far from the nagging crowd of Ambulance Américains existence.” While both Cummings in the Thayer letter and C in *The Enormous Room* cite freedom from the Americans in their ambulance section as a reason for happiness, they have quite different preeminent reasons. C insists, “I was happier in La Ferté Macé, with The Delectable Mountains about me, than the very keenest words can pretend to express” (229). In contrast to the letters, whenever art and aesthetics are mentioned in *The Enormous Room*, it is almost always in the context of Cummings’ admiration for illiterate prisoners like the Delectable Mountains. For example, Cummings notes that because they lack the “handicap” of education, most of the detainees in the Enormous Room (unlike the “Great American Public”) instinctively appreciate and respect advanced artistic experiment (224). However, for Cummings in the Thayer letter, the “amazement” of Art is mentioned only in connection with his friend Brown.

The notion that war has “sucked itself off and gone home” is also the attitude expressed in *The Enormous Room*. In neither the letter nor the book are there vigorous or passionate anti-war protests. Perhaps Cummings feels that concentrating on war’s suffering and horror is too tendentious and propagandistic; he thus avoids in his letter to Thayer as well as in *The Enormous Room* the “war is hell” theme. While the war is referred to often, there are no direct comments on its inhumanity. There are few anti-war statements in *The Enormous Room* beyond C’s agreeing with Mexique’s observation about the war, “I t’ink lotta bullshit” (132).<sup>1</sup>

Most often in the book C rails not at the war, its horrors and inhumanity, but at the French government, especially in its treatment of the detainees. This treatment is the topic that persistently engages his feelings; he regularly vilifies the French government. C speaks ironically, for example, of the “inexorable justice” of that government (216), fulminates against the treatment of Bill the Hollander, a deserter being returned to his native country for punishment, and utters the extreme insult: “in finding us unwor-

thy of helping to carry forward the banner of progress, alias the tricolour, the inimitable and excellent French government was conferring upon B and myself—albeit with other intent—the ultimate compliment” (122). In short, in *The Enormous Room* C rails against the French government far more than against the war.

Cummings himself, however, does not join in this condemnation of the French government in either the Thayer letter or in one to his mother also from La Ferté. In the mild single-sentence reference to that government in the Thayer letter he terms it “mighty” in the context of waiting to see what it will do to him and his friend. Writing to his mother at about the same time, he praises his fellow detainees over his former “nefarious rulers” in his ambulance section, “from whom French justice, thank God, has finally, after three months of slavery, completely delivered us . . .” (*Selected* 40). The contrast between the rather mild irony of Cummings in the letters and the bitterness of C in *The Enormous Room* on the subject of the French government is stark.

A brief biographical note will help clarify Cummings’ personal stance on the war and the French government. On April 1, a few days before America entered the Great War and he joined the ambulance service, Cummings, having made a number of facetious comments about the war spirit in a letter to his mother, adds, “I don’t know why I talk of this pseudo ‘war’ as I have no interest in it. . . . I read but one paragraph of [Woodrow] Wilson’s speech, being taken with a dangerous fit of laughter” (*Selected* 15). Later, however, when he was still in the field with his ambulance section (it was soon to be assimilated into the American Army), Cummings and Brown volunteered for the Escadrille Lafayette, a French unit of American airmen. On October 14, shortly before the Thayer letter, he mentions this to his mother, noting that he and Brown were sincere in their efforts to join French aviation (*Selected* 39). This attitude is echoed at the interrogation at Noyon from which C is sent to La Ferté; as narrated in *The Enormous Room*, C insists that both he and B (as Brown is called in the book) are willing to drop bombs on the Germans (13-14).

Finally, after his return home from his French incarceration, Cummings as a draftee at Fort Devens in New York volunteered to join the fighting in France. He was assigned to the 12th Infantry Division, but the Armistice ended the war before the Division shipped out for France (*Dreams* 186). His father insisted that he himself would have risked his life for France “as my son risked his, and would have risked it again had not the

departure of his regiment overseas been stopped by the armistice” (Edward Cummings xxv). Even though both times he volunteered to fight, Cummings may have been looking for a way out of the boredom of the ambulance corps and the pointless regimentation of Camp Devens, both before and after his incarceration at La Ferté, he was willing to be an active participant and, for whatever reasons, fight in The Great War. It was only during his incarceration period, the time of the Thayer letter, the period of *The Enormous Room*, that the war had “gone home” for him.

It is typical that Cummings insists in the Thayer letter on doing things his own way. He had made very clear to his father from the start—that is, on April 18 upon joining the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Section and just before he left for France—that he wanted his independence: “It will mean everything to me as an experience to do something I want to, in a wholly new environment, versus being forced to do something I don’t want to & unchanging scene” (*Dreams* 137). Even when he is thrust into La Ferté, he still vigorously insists on his independence. About the same time as his Thayer letter, he writes his mother, “My resolution is inéventable.<sup>2</sup> I see the thing thru, alone, without any monocled Richards [Norton], American ambassadors, or anything else. Nothing under H. can change my resolve, and everybody but me, i.e. Gods, men, women & children had best keep butted out!!!!” (*Selected* 40-41). More calmly, he similarly tells Thayer, “I have already warned my family to keep out, and now warn you (not that you’d or could do anything) . . . .” Then Cummings offers a fuller rationale to Thayer than he did to his family for this “keep out” warning: “I had rather see just what the mighty French Gov’t will do to us alone. They have nothing on me, of course.” He vigorously emphasizes the last point with that concluding “of course.” In his account to Thayer of the walk to La Ferté from Briouze with the gendarmes, Cummings specifically refers to his “un-incriminating” letters. Earlier in the letter, as we have seen, he suggested Brown’s letters as a reason for their arrest. Separating himself at least to some extent from Brown—“see what the French Gov’t will do to *us*” and followed immediately by “They have nothing on *me*” (italics added)—Cummings seems to feel at this early juncture in his detention that, whatever his friend’s fate, the French will set him free.

### III

The Thayer letter is significant not only for what it contains but also for what it omits. One indicative omission is any reference to C’s roadside cross experience so memorably presented in *The Enormous Room*. The text

describes how on the twelve-kilometer night “stroll” near the end of C’s journey to La Ferté (37), the walk from Briouze with two gendarmes guarding him, he paused before “a little wooden man hanging all by itself in a grove of low trees” (38). According to C in *The Enormous Room* there were two pauses on that night walk; one was this poignant and passionate moment before a crucifix, the other a scene of him on his hands and knees drinking at a brook beside the road. In the Thayer letter Cummings mentions only the one stop, where “I drank from a black unseen brook by the road-edge.” In a letter to his mother recounting his journey with the gendarmes from Noyon to La Ferté, he briefly sketches the walk from Briouze but does not mention either the brook or the roadside cross (*Selected* 37). Nor does Richard Kennedy note either in his account of Cummings’ experiences that night (*Dreams* 149), though later in his discussion of the events as narrated by C in the book he does describe it. Quoting the crucifix scene from *The Enormous Room*, Kennedy calls it “a passage full of cubistic obliquities” and suggests an identification of the suffering C with the Christ figure (219). It would seem likely, then, that with no evidence to the contrary, this telling experience was either invented for inclusion in the book or inserted from some other Cummings experience at some other place and time, such as seeing a wooden cross at the Musée de Cluny.

Cummings’ comments about sunsets in the Thayer letter offer yet another sharp contrast between himself and C in *The Enormous Room*. To Thayer he notes that sunsets “here gladden my heart.” On the other hand, C disdains the beauty and consolation of nature while at La Ferté with B; during the “amputation of the world,” the “timelessness” period, C sees only the “bleak lifeless abject landscape of scrubby woods” (51-52), the “black filthy world which we saw from our windows” (213), “the black evil rain” and “the falling grayness of the desolate autumn” (184). Indeed, sunsets, rarely mentioned, do not gladden C’s heart. The one significant reference to the sunset concerns Count Bragard, a painter, who praises a sunset as “glorious.” C agrees, but it is clear from the context that this agreement is mere politeness, as he had just noted “through the windows the dull bloating colours of sunset pouring faintly” (148).

There are contrasts also between the Thayer letter and those to Cummings’ mother. The Thayer letter highlights the concern and protection Cummings shows in his letters to his mother about La Ferté. Expressions in the Thayer letter like “the farting is glorious,” much less drawings like those here of a penis and pudenda, do not appear in the much more discreet

family letters. Likewise, the letter's graphic "fountain of painful excrement for some few days" is absent from his letters home. To his mother he reports only "my slight sickness a few days ago" in a letter written at about the same time as the Thayer letter (*Selected* 40). The vivid account of sickness in the Thayer letter is absent also from *The Enormous Room*, where such a description would violate the picture of good health and happiness C is striving for. The revelation in the Thayer letter of the intensity of his sickness with its sharp contrast to the skimpy notation in the letter to his mother and to C's narration is telling.

Also in the candid Thayer letter Cummings intensifies his description of the miserable conditions at La Ferté by noting as causes of his sickness "la soupe" and "le pain de guerre." This letter reflects, then, the horrid state of bread in France in 1917; there was a "stale bread" regulation issued early that year which restricted the sale of new bread. Also, different flour changed the color of bread. While the French civilians with other foods available could stop eating bread, the detainees whose main nourishment it was had little choice but to eat this "pain de guerre." There is nothing of this sort in the letters to his mother, for whom his protectiveness extends to even quite small matters. For example, he mentions "tabac Maryland" to her (*Selected* 40) but to Thayer it is "vile tabac (Maryland)." To his mother he also notes that his friend of "unparalleled goodness & greatness" takes care of him during his sickness and cooks eggs for him in their distressing situation (*Selected* 40). This homely touch is missing from the Thayer letter. However, the references to milk and eggs in both these letters reveal a more extensive diet and use of the canteen than is suggested in C's narration in *The Enormous Room*, which stresses the terrible conditions and disgust with the "swill that was our official nutriment" (198). This note is present often in the book. On his first morning in the room, describing the coffee, C decides it is so bad "it would be useless to vomit" (44). In his story of Judas attempting to demonstrate to a visiting inspector the foulness of the coffee, C tells how Judas induces the inspector to taste some. The inspector "turned perfectly green, and cried out 'Impossible!'" (109).

The disparagement of the gendarmes in the Thayer letter ("Of course, the gendarmes were what you'd expect") centers on their refusal to help him carry his heavy personal belongings, even though one does carry a light "sac" of his letters. The gendarmes are national police who, Cummings tells Thayer, escorted him from Briouze to La Ferté on the last night of his journey. This is but a segment of the long journey from Noyon

guarded by gendarmes that C recounts in *The Enormous Room*. The book's account is filled with a sarcasm and disparagement directed at the gendarmes that pales beside the mild irony toward them in the Thayer letter. It is surprising that Cummings mentions the gendarmes in the Thayer letter but not the *plantons*, the guards at La Ferté, since these were the same soldiers, the *poilus*, with whom he fraternized so comfortably at the front. Such men, *réformés*, wounded or incapacitated, are no longer fit for combat duty but serve on a rotating basis at La Ferté. The only permanent guard is the Black Holster, the "sergent de plantons" (179), the most hated *planton* of all. C insists "He should have been a gendarme" (145). The *plantons*, he writes, were "the next to the lowest species of human organism; the lowest, in my experienced estimation, being the gendarme proper" (111). In *The Enormous Room* few of the *plantons* are shown as having any humanity, the major exception being the Wooden Hand, who aids C and B as they are waiting for their interrogation before the commission. C writes that "he was that day, at least, an individual and not merely a *planton*" (216). While it would be natural to despise one's guards in prison, the fact remains these are the same kind of soldiers Cummings earlier fraternized with. His mention of the gendarmes to Thayer but not the *plantons*, especially since he writes at length of the men and women detainees held at La Ferté, is a puzzling omission.

Those detainees are discussed in the next to last paragraph of his letter to Thayer. He notes, "There are about une trentaine de [thirty or so of] the finest people imaginable here." The next sentence with its drawing of a penis indicates this "trentaine of the finest people" refers to the male detainees. Identifying the women with his second drawing, Cummings then indicates that there are also "amusing to state, 100 here." These figures correspond to those C presents in *The Enormous Room*. He calculates that there are thirty male detainees there when he first arrives at La Ferté (56, 66). The number of male detainees, aliens arrested for the most part for petty offenses by a panicked and frantic French Government, doubled to at least sixty before he left (192). This letter to Thayer was written early in his incarceration, so the "trentaine" designation would be appropriate. C one day looks down a hall and thinks he hears a hundred women there (75). This also corresponds to the number in the Thayer letter.

Cummings mentions to Thayer only one infraction, the getting together of women and men, that was punished by "a period of solitary confinement in the 'cabinot', a small, black, wet room . . . ." *The Enormous Room* sug-

gests a steady stream of offenders of an almost innumerable list of rules and regulations punished by *pain sec* [bread without soup] (which Cummings does not mention to Thayer) or *cabinot*; one such, for example, was “sending a letter to a girl”; that is, to one of the women inmates (113). Another was “to call a planton embusqué” [a shirker] (62). Indeed, Harree and Pompom, C writes, “spent nearly all their time in the cabinot” (61). The book also records that there was more than one *cabinot* and that there were separate *cabinots* for men and women: “at least three were situated on the ground floor; and these were used whenever possible in preference to the one or ones upstairs, for the reason that they were more damp and chill and dark and altogether more dismal and unhealthy” (113). This corresponds to the description in the Thayer letter. Two of the more memorable passages in *The Enormous Room* are the account of Lena, Lily, Renée and Celina (123-25) and of Jean le Nègre (208-12) being punished in the *cabinots*. Cummings’ suggestion to Thayer that the *cabinot* “reminds [me] of mediæval cuts [woodcuts] to torture books” is quite apt and telling.<sup>3</sup>

He also tells Thayer that “With some exceptions, toutes les femmes-la sont des putains [all the women here are prostitutes], sent here via Paris from the war-zone.” The exceptions include wives, such as that of the Wanderer, who volunteer to stay at La Ferté to be with their husbands. The Wanderer’s wife brings her four children with her including Chocolat, a girl of fourteen, another girl of three, and the Imp, a boy of six. The Spy, because he is the in-house informer, is allowed to have his thirteen-year-old daughter stay also. Since prostitution itself was not illegal in France at that time, it was the prostitutes who were caught in the forbidden war zones who were sent to La Ferté. C notes that “inasmuch as the armies of the Allies were continually retreating, the zone des armées . . . was always including new cities” (60). Cummings and Brown in their delightful free weeks between landing in France and having to join their comrades in the ambulance service made friends with two prostitutes in Paris, entertained them, and “paid attention to them as if they were American dates” (Kennedy, *Dreams* 142). Since Paris was not a war zone, these two Paris prostitutes were not in danger of being sent to La Ferté.

With his friend Thayer, Cummings can discuss these matters candidly, while he makes no mention of either *putains* or *cabinots* in his letters to his mother. He tells her only about a small fraction of the women at La Ferté: “the gentlemen . . . are aliens,” he writes, who are “led here, often with wife and children” (*Selected* 40). He does not even note that there are

women detainees at La Ferté. His approach here, as in other matters in letters to his mother, is to protect her, to calm her worries; he disguises and avoids matters at La Ferté which he is willing to confide to Thayer.

Having noted to Thayer that all of the women at La Ferté “with some exceptions” are prostitutes, Cummings adds that the men are “not, however, pimps but aliens.” Yet four of the more unsavory detainees in *The Enormous Room* are pimps: The Spanish Whoremaster, Rockyfeller, the Fighting Sheeney and the Trick Raincoat Sheeney. All appear quite late in C’s detention there; none is in the group of thirty detainees there when C arrives; that is, the “trentaine” which Cummings mentions in his letter to Thayer. These four were sent to La Ferté from la Santé, the notorious Paris prison, not for pimping but for being undesirable aliens.

Without elaboration, Cummings in the final paragraph of his letter to Thayer revels in the fact that he and his friend are the only Americans at La Ferté. Here he is moving beyond his disgust at the “nagging” Americans of his ambulance section reflected briefly earlier in this letter. The opening chapters of *The Enormous Room* abundantly reflect the same attitude; freedom from ambulance corps Americans like Mr. A is the initial reason for C’s happiness in the book. Likewise, in a letter to his mother about himself and Brown in Paris during the interlude before they are sent to the front, Cummings writes, “The Englishmen anyway are a bunch of bums, only worsed by the Americans—who are the most abhorrent human tripe ever spilled from the swill-can, tout et seul. . . . How we dread meeting them! How we flee them!” (*Selected* 25). Twice in his letter to Thayer Cummings denigrates Americans, but these remarks are milder than those in *The Enormous Room* or this letter to his mother.

Besides the typical injunction to write, the Thayer letter concludes with the request to “Give my love to La Fleur Seule”; that is, to Elaine Orr Thayer. The primary meaning of “seule” would be “only” if it were placed before the noun “fleur”; thus, Elaine would be the only flower, a lovely tribute to a friend’s wife. Yet there may be more involved. Since “seule” is placed after “fleur” here, it might be taken as “alone” or “lonely.” Did Cummings know that difficulties had arisen in the Thayer marriage, that they had separated, that in October 1917, about the time of this letter, she had moved alone to her own apartment? Perhaps not, of course. But in light of the fact that in the next few years Cummings and Elaine would, with Thayer’s acceptance, become lovers, have a baby, and marry, “La Fleur Seule” forms an intriguing biographical note ending Cummings’ letter to

his friend.

Written to Scofield Thayer in 1917 and first published almost 90 years later, this letter, an illuminating critical and biographical find, is a major addition to Cummings studies. The Thayer letter offers us a glimpse of how Cummings adjusted the tone and content of his letters to evade the censors in France and soothe his parents at home. Moreover, by highlighting differences between his actual experiences and the book *The Enormous Room* (most notably in the reasons he offers for why he is happy there), the letter also shows how Cummings shaped his narrative and reconsidered the meanings of his experiences in the Enormous Room.

—Palo Alto, CA

## Notes

1. While it is true that C makes few if any overt anti-war statements, the narrator does present at least three anecdotes illustrating the idiocy and criminal behavior of those conducting the war. These three are: 1. The “divine man” who has been sentenced as a “deserter” to 10 years (three years in solitary confinement and seven years of hard labor) because he overstayed his leave by one day (24-25). 2. One-Eyed Dah-veed relates the story told by a barber whose brother was a French aviator and saw from the air that the French were shelling their own troops instead of the Germans. The aviator immediately flew to headquarters and informed the general that he was firing on his own troops. The general simply responded: “On a commencé, il faut finir.” [We’ve begun; it’s necessary to finish] (131). 3. The Garde Champêtre tells C that many hesitated to advance when “we Belgians did not see any good reason for continuing the battle.” But advance they did, in spite of massive casualties, because the French stationed machine-gunners behind them to “keep us going forward” (136). Those who did turn and run were shot. In addition, C relates some of the horrors of venereal disease at the front (146-147). [Editor’s note]
2. The word “inéventable” does not appear in either of my French dictionaries. Perhaps Cummings meant to write “inévit-able” (“inevitable”) or “inébranlable” (“unshakeable” or “immoveable”). [Editor’s note]
3. In e-mail correspondence with Jack, he and I both agreed that the refer-

ence to “mediaeval cuts to torture books” was probably too obscure for the censor to understand. Or perhaps the censor grew tired towards the end of a rather long letter. [Editor’s note]

### Works Cited

- Cummings, Edward. Introduction to the First Edition (1922). *The Enormous Room*. By E. E. Cummings. Ed. George James Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1978. xxi-xxvi.
- Cummings, E. E. *The Enormous Room*. Ed. George James Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1978.
- . *Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings*. Ed. F. W. Dupee and George Stade. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969.
- Gill, Jack. “Items.” Email to the editor. 11 October 2005.
- Kennedy, Richard S. Foreword. E. E. Cummings, *The Enormous Room*, vii-xix.
- . *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E. E. Cummings*. New York: Liveright, 1980.
- Sawyer-Lauçanno, Christopher. *E. E. Cummings: A Biography*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2004.
- “William Slater Brown and The Enormous Room.” *Spring* ns 1.1 (1992): 87-91.