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# **The Enormous Room as Spiritual Autobiography: A Puritan Context for the Text**

W. Todd Martin

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E. E. Cummings' first book-length publication, a work entitled *The Enormous Room* (1922), remains relatively unknown despite the initial praise of some of the original reviewers. Recounting Cummings' experience during World War I, first as an ambulance driver and then as a prisoner in a detainment camp, the narrative was lauded by some as a significant contribution to the literature of the times. Others, however, criticized Cummings for his unconventional style and his use of taboo subject-matter.<sup>1</sup>

One of the hurdles for many of E. E. Cummings' early reviewers, according to Paul Headrick, was deciding whether to classify his "war novel" as fiction or as autobiography. Some critics emphasized Cummings' recounting of his experience in the French internment camp, treating the "novel" as a documentary, but they failed to consider the value of his fictional devices; they either praised or condemned the political stance of the work. Others recognized that this was not the typical journal or diary form that one might expect in a non-fiction work, nor was the style of the work like that of any other work of non-fiction (or fiction, for that matter). Yet, while these critics allowed for experimentation in the presentation of the subject-matter, they ignored the significance of the autobiographical grounding (Headrick 46-53). The members of each camp either criticized the work for its failure to conform to their expectations of the genre with which they identified it or ignored the context that the innovative devices were intended to illumine.

The critics simply were not equipped to deal with such a mix of genres. Such inconsistencies between artistic and critical apparatus are the result of what Hans Robert Jauss calls the "horizon of expectation." He suggests that critics are always one step behind shifts in artistic trends. Thus, until expectations shifted in the ranks of critics and reviewers, Cummings' "novel" could not be fully appreciated. Headrick points out that it was thirty years after the original publication of *The Enormous Room* before the first article "in an academic journal" appeared, and he attributes this to various developments in the recognition of Cummings as a poet (Headrick 54). Still, Headrick contends that even later critics have not fully come to terms with the dual nature of the work.

Headrick's article implies, then, that a critical work needs to be written in which both the fictional and non-fictional qualities of *The Enormous Room* are explored. One solution for rectifying the dichotomous nature of the text is provided by Gary Boire, who suggests that the work can be read as spiritual autobiography. While Headrick notes that Boire, himself, "de-emphasize[s] the non-fictional potential" of the work

(Headrick 68), the genre with which he identifies Cummings' book lends itself not only to its spiritual nature (on which Boire focuses) but also to the plasticity of truth.

Spiritual autobiography, originally a requirement by the Puritans for church membership, was also used as a means of attracting others to the truths of the Bible. Sacvan Bercovitch explains that spiritual autobiographies eventually became a "do-it-yourself guide for the reader" (24). They were used to demonstrate the various struggles that particular members of the church had experienced and their means of overcoming these obstacles, a useful tool for the instruction of new converts and old: "[The writers of spiritual autobiographies] hoped through the record of their own experience to offer experimental proof of some of the eternal truths of Christianity" (Watkins 2).<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Cummings writes *The Enormous Room* as a means to proselytize. Distinguishing between what he terms "mostpeople" and individuals, Cummings desires to transform his readers from pedantry to their "essential being." He wants them to deny the status quo and to live intensely. Thus, Cummings' depiction of his own experience during World War I—his confrontation with the dehumanizing effects of the institutions that drive a war machine and that turn a disinterested eye to the plight of any individual caught in its pathway—is an attempt to demonstrate in objective terms the means to achieve this higher state of being which, for him, could be equated with salvation.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Cummings' intentions have spiritual implications that, though secularized, are consistent with those of spiritual autobiography.

But to presume that *The Enormous Room* is intended as strict autobiography would be to miss the point. One must take into account that although the book is based on fact, Cummings' goal is less factual truth than it is essential truth. Cummings uses specific fictional techniques to embellish his experience, using these ornamentations to help illuminate his own feelings about a given situation and to lead the reader to draw similar conclusions. Some critics, for example, have commented on Cummings' desire to transcend time in *The Enormous Room*. In the opening chapters, the reader is presented with a specifically chronological account of Cummings' arrest and journey to La Ferté-Macé. In the middle of the text, however, he shifts from this chronological account to a "timelessness" which is incorporated once the protagonist is in prison. According to the narrator, the repetition of the daily routine creates a difficulty in presenting things in the traditional, chronological way without a certain fastidiousness. Thus, he shifts to a mode that provides portraits of individuals who reside with him in the Enormous Room. He gives an impressionistic account, which, however much based upon factual accounts, is more fully Cummings' own interpretation of the characters. This is how the narrator introduces the chapters on the character portraits:

... the diary or time method is a technique which cannot possibly do justice

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

These focal characters—particularly those identified as the Delectable Mountains—become representative; they become icons for ideas that Cummings holds up to the reader as significant. But to convey “this vital quality of being [the eternal now], Cummings has had to evolve a manner of writing which would communicate concrete sensations and perceptions in all the immediacy with which they are experienced” (Baum 106). Therefore, this technique allows (or at least is intended to allow) Cummings to create a state of consciousness in which the reader actually enters into a similar “timelessness” with the author. He helps the reader to experience some of the same feelings that he may have felt towards the individuals he portrays.

The interpretive nature of spiritual autobiography, though, tends toward a similar emphasis on essential rather than factual truth. Bercovitch claims that the development of the spiritual autobiographies of the Reformed church were derived from Catholic hagiography; however, rather than dealing with the “extraordinary and unique,” the biographies of the Reformed church “leap from the individual to the universal” (Bercovitch 8). He adds that “the Reformed alternative [to hagiography] was the *exemplum fidei*. Formulated by Luther in the course of his attack on the Catholic saints, it proposed a mode of *imitatio* that emphasized the spirit rather than the letter of the deed” (Bercovitch 9). Such an emphasis on the “spirit” of the events can be seen in Bercovitch’s discussion of Cotton Mather in which one sees the teleological view the Puritans had of the past. Likewise, the Puritan penchant for typology, specifically their identification with the Israelites upon their initial arrival in the New World, suggests that the interpretation of events is as significant, if not more so, than the events themselves.

Similarly, Cummings’ personal experience is enhanced not only by his choice of fictional devices, but also his structural choices for *The Enormous Room*. Like the Puritans who made sense of their own trials by drawing parallels with those of God’s chosen in the Old Testament, Cummings chooses a pattern for his book that reflects its spiritual nature; he draws on the development of the Christian life as portrayed in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. According to Boire, Cummings’ borrowing of the structure of this key Bunyan text demonstrates further the benefit of the malleability of the spiritual autobiography (331-332), for Cummings seems to use *The Pilgrim’s Progress* typologically to provide an added dimension to his own spiritual purpose, albeit not orthodox Christianity. The pattern that Cummings evokes by specific allusions to Bunyan’s text provides his work with coherence as he embellishes

certain facts to convey ideas to the reader. In essence, any writer of autobiography coherently shapes his life for the reader, and, in so doing, he cannot help but account for some meaning that he felt was inherent in his life experience.<sup>4</sup> For this purpose, Cummings invokes the pattern of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

In *The Rhetoric of Religion*, Kenneth Burke notes that many religious words have been borrowed from secular vocabulary, and the religious use has broadened the connotations of those once-secular words. Now, he suggests, there is a trend in which the secular world is borrowing back some of these words, along with their religious connotations (Burke 7). It seems possible that Cummings, in borrowing from Bunyan, is creating a similar transformation. Rather than words, he is borrowing Bunyan's structure. The earlier connotations of a unit of meaning remain, while the new context provides each unit with new connotations. In this way, Cummings can create his own meaning, whether one sees it as purely secular or as spiritual in a transcendental sense, depending upon the connotations one associates with Bunyan to add a degree of validity to his own journey.

However, it is not just the identification with Bunyan's spiritual masterpiece that adds validity to Cummings' agenda; after all, it must not be forgotten that the events described in the book did actually happen. Whatever Cummings has to say about the dehumanizing effects of institutions must be taken seriously, if for no other reason than he experienced them first hand. Cummings did serve in the Norton Harjes Ambulance Corps and his portrayal of Mr. A in the book closely resembles the comments Cummings makes in his letters home. In the opening paragraphs of *The Enormous Room*, the reader is introduced to Mr. A and the fact that he "didn't get on well" with C (the protagonist). The narrator later continues, "Mr. A. was but sustaining the tradition conceived originally by his predecessor, a Mr. P . . . who until his departure from Vingt-et-Un succeeded in making life absolutely miserable for B [C's friend] and myself" (3-4). These sentiments clearly echo comments made in a letter dated August 9, 1917:

Le présent chef de la section, avant, sous-chef, est un homme assez stupide, sans education, et qui se fâche toujours, comme son prédécesseur méchant, de mon ami et particulièrement de moi: "Autre cloche, même son."<sup>5</sup>  
(*Letters* 36)

[Translation: The current chief of the section, who was previously second in command, is a very stupid man who has no education and is always angry with my friend and especially with me, just as his malicious predecessor. "Another bell, same sound."]

Likewise, the circumstances of his arrest and the events leading to his arrival at La Ferté-Macé are briefly recounted in another letter to his mother:

At 11 A.M. Monsieur le Ministre de Sûreté plus 2 or 3 gendarmes convoyed my friend and me in separate voitures to his abode in N.[Noyon] Here we dined, each with his gendarme, still apart, and later were examined. Then removed to separate cells where we spent the night. My friend must have left the following day: I spend another night in my cell (sans sortir) . . . . At 10 A.M. I left in the company of 2 gendarmes for the station of N. A distance of almost ½ mile. Had some trouble with a gendarme, who told me if I didn't want to carry my bagge [sic] I could leave it . . . by the wayside—which I naturally refused to do. We finally compromised by my hiring a sweet kid to lug the bed-roll (which he did with greatest difficulty). Chemin-de-fer till 5 o'clock when landed at G. where supped on grease-meat-soup in a better cell, and slept on planks in blankets (other baggage forbidden) till 4 A.M., when another pair of gendarmes took me to the station of G. (I with baggage) where we boarded c. de f. for Paris, arriving at 6 A.M. Wait till 12 noon. In interval coffee & newspapers. At 1 train left for B, where we arrived at 9:30 P.M. . . . All this time, my friend was 1 day ahead of me. Arrived at B, we checked big duffle bag and roll in gare, and set off on foot for La Ferté-Macé . . . . Douze kilometers. Arrived midnight. Given straw pallet & slept on floor sans blankets. In morning found self in hugely long room with my long-lost friend and about 30 others as I guess—very cosmopolite group. (*Letters* 37)

In brief, these details provide the outline for much of the first part of the book: C's arrest, his time spent in two different holding cells, the difficulty with his bag and his hiring a boy to help, his layover in Paris, and his arrival at La Ferté-Macé. Subsequent letters include his attitudes toward some of the individuals in the detainment camp as well as commentary on his calm impertinence during his interview with the three officials investigating his internment, known in the book as the Three Wise Men (*Letters* 39-40). That his literary account is based on facts noted in the non-fictional format of his letters home suggests a personal testimony that substantiates Cummings' agenda. While he may embellish details, Cummings is not inventing the context.

The book's basis in fact helps to validate Cummings' view that individuals must somehow transcend societal pressures and expectations, but his insistence on the artistic conveyance of these events distances the author from his experience. Here Cummings' use of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* gains significance beyond the structural borrowings. Many Bunyan scholars, particularly Roger Sharrock, contend that *The Pilgrim's Progress* is based on Bunyan's personal religious experience and convictions. These critics draw parallels between this work and Bunyan's spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding*, in order to demonstrate this point. Jean-François Camé, for example, suggests that *Grace Abounding* is Bunyan's emotional response to his own prison experience and his discovery of his election while *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an

artistically structured account of some of the same feelings, although they are toned down and controlled for the purpose of the art (Camé 99-100). While Cummings does not have a formal, more strictly non-fictional account of his own experience such as Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, one could view *The Enormous Room* as his artistically structured version of the events surrounding his imprisonment, a portrayal with as much significance as a more factual rendering.

Compounding the tie to Bunyan, Cummings also seems to draw on the affinity he shares with Bunyan's social views, particularly the emphasis on personal salvation. Bunyan is known for his opposition to the dominant institution of his time, the Church of England. Going against the authority of the church, he held illegal church meetings, feeling the rights of the individual to have access to the Word were more significant than the punishments he had to endure. Cummings' own abhorrence of conformity is noted in an anti-fascist and anti-communist essay entitled "Exit the Boob." Here, Cummings states that the emphasis on solidarity, a view that expects everyone not only to be equal but also to be alike, dehumanizes. He is proud that "Individualism flourishes" in spite of communism and fascism, stating that "if individuals are organisms, multitudes are mechanisms" (288).

What one finds in *The Enormous Room*, then, are Cummings' personal convictions conveyed through fictional devices that are designed to manipulate the audience's response to his own experiences during the war. For example, to emphasize his negative view of institutions—in this case governments that demand loyalty—Cummings singles out the French government and its authorities because of his personal experiences. However, he chooses to identify the governmental representative, le Directeur of La Ferté-Macé, with Bunyan's Apollyon. And while Bunyan portrays Apollyon as representing a spiritual struggle for Christian who attempts to hold on to the new doctrine he has learned, he also identifies him with the ruling class. Apollyon is a ruler who first tries to persuade and then beat his subject into submission. Cummings builds his own government official on the latter premise. Le Directeur strives for submission to his will and the greater will of the French government. Ultimately, the main distinction between the two portrayals of a dominating ruler stems from the differing ideologies of the authors. As Samuel Pickering points out, "As Bunyan's Apollyon was the enemy of God, so le Directeur was the enemy of the god-like in man" (25). The deliberate act of repressing individuality is what Cummings fights furiously against in *The Enormous Room* and throughout his *oeuvre*, for in losing one's individual will, people lose that which makes them human.

Thus, the integration of Cummings' personal experiences and his artistic portrayal of them merge into a work that in many ways validates his attempt to "convert" his readers; he provides an account that is, if not strictly speaking, at least approaches spiritual autobiography. *The Enormous Room* becomes Cummings' effort to relate what he learned through his experience at La Ferté-Macé, much like *The Pilgrim's*

*Progress* reflects Bunyan's desire to instruct others based on his own struggle with faith. As Thomas Linehan explains:

[Cummings] wants to discomfort [his readers'] minds and unfurnish their souls. Since most people are really other people, dominated by second-hand opinions and thoughts, Cummings wants to transform his genteel, stunted, comfortable readers into genuine individuals who can experience life first-hand. (Linehan 57)

In other words, he wants to convert each of his readers into their "essential being." But, though spirituality as Cummings understands it is much different from that of Bunyan, Cummings uses Christian's journey as a model, translating it into his own terms. Bunyan's landscape reinforces the spiritual dimension Cummings discovers in exploring the divinity of the individual and its transcendent power. Still, to fully appreciate the significance of the agenda Cummings presents, it is vital to note that his perspective was molded in part by his own mistreatment during the war, a mistreatment for which he blames institutions that are more interested in their own goals than in the preservation of the individual.

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## Notes

- 1 For a compilation of reviews—both negative and positive—consult S. V. Baum, ed., *ESTT: eec: E. E. Cummings and the Critics* (Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1962) and Lloyd N. Dendinger, ed., *E. E. Cummings: The Critical Reception* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1981).
- 2 In her book, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression*, Patricia Caldwell provides a detailed discussion of the uniqueness of the American conversion narrative and how it influenced the creation of a new voice. She explores the reasons American Puritans seem stricter than their European counterparts.
- 3 In his article "Edward Cummings, the Father of the Poet," Richard S. Kennedy, Cummings' biographer, points out that

Edward Cummings [the father] is partly responsible for a worldview that continually emerges in E. E. Cummings' poems. It is a combination of humanism and natural religion that is distinctly Unitarian in coloration because the celebration of man and the appreciation of the natural world are the two most outstanding features of Unitarianism. (448)



4 James Olney also discusses the idea of creating order in one's life in writing autobiography. He, however, discusses it in terms of metaphor:

An autobiography, if one places it in relation to the life from which it comes, is more than a history of the past and more than a book currently circulating in the world; it is also, intentionally or not, a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary of composition. (35)

5 Curiously, Cummings wrote some of his letters home in French, but not others.

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