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Introduction to the Fourth Edition of *EIMI*

Norman Friedman

[The fourth edition of *EIMI*, edited by the late George James Firmage, is scheduled to be published by Liveright in the fall of 2007.]

I

Cummings' thirty-six-day journey to Russia and back during the spring of 1931 found the Soviet Union in its ninth year of existence and the Western world a year-and-a-half into the Great Depression. Both areas of the world were in upheaval: the West trying to patch up its failed economic system, the USSR engaging in a draconian effort to reconstruct the whole thing from the ground up. Lenin died in 1924, and a power struggle ensued, centering ultimately upon Stalin versus Trotsky, with Stalin emerging as the undisputed dictator in 1928. Agriculture was collectivized and industrialization speeded up, but—what was not fully grasped until later—at great cost in human liberties and lives.

During the first decade of Stalin's rule there was great concern among many artists and intellectuals of the West, distraught over the inequalities, poverty, and suffering endemic in capitalist society during the Depression, and impressed by the supposed idealism and egalitarianism professed by the Soviet state—who began to contrast the promise of socialism with the failure of our own culture and economy. These included in those days such writers and critics as Edmund Wilson, Sherwood Anderson, James T. Farrell, Malcolm Cowley, and Alfred Kazin. Even Hemingway and Fitzgerald, almost wholly devoted to other concerns, felt the pull of this struggle in *To Have and Have Not* (1934, 1937), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), and *The Last Tycoon* (1941). Some, such as Sidney Hook, John Dos Passos, and Theodore Dreiser, had preceded Cummings in actually visiting the Soviet Union to see for themselves. Others, such as Paul Robeson and Richard Wright, in fact joined the Communist Party—only to become painfully disillusioned later.

Cummings too was interested in the Soviet experiment in the twelve years or so before his actual visit to Russia. There are a half-dozen references in his *Selected Letters* to Russia and Communism between 1919 and 1923, and they are by and large positive—although it should be noted that this is the pre-Stalin period. The conclusion of a letter to his father in 1923 states, after some remarks about international affairs, "As usual, I admire Russia" (104). He writes from Paris to his mother in April of 1931, "have applied for a Russian visa which, if am the lil lawd fongleroi they wish—should arrive in 2 weeks: intend to reach Moscow on or before May day (international celebrations): receive Russian lessons daily..." (121). His actual visit occurred around the third year of Stalin's long and brutal reign.

A really curious thing, however, is the presence of the ghost of Jack London in the Russia of those days, that proponent of the vigorous life and the survival of the fittest, who, although he had died in 1916, was still enormously popular in the Soviet Union. He plays a significant role in *EIMI* by virtue of the fact that chief among Cummings' hosts during his stay in Russia were Joan London, Jack London's daughter, and her husband, Charles Malamuth, a Slavic languages professor from the University of California who was working as a journalist there. In his diaristic way, Cummings refers to her as "Lack Dungeon's daughter," whom he also terms Beatrice, alluding to Dante (a significant reference throughout *EIMI*), also Turckess or Harem, as her husband is called Turk or Assyrian.

In addition to making Cummings' stay in Moscow more comfortable, hosting and guiding him, the Malamuths provided an island of sanity for him in their prescient realization that the price of the Communist experiment was far greater than its rewards, and Cummings includes a number of conversations with them about that tragic disparity—a prescience not shared by Cummings' other guide in Moscow, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, a Harvard theatre professor and apologist for the regime, termed variously by Cummings as Virgil (via Dante), mentor, benefactor, and the like.

But it was not until the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 that many previously sympathetic artists and intellectuals of the West began to suspect that the ostensible dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia was in fact the dictatorship of Stalin, as cruel and barbarous a despot as any Tartar chieftain or Mongol potentate. By 1953, the year of Stalin's death, we find Cummings writing to his sister: "In 1931 I went to Russia, & what I found may be refound by anybody capable of reading a book called Eimi. Since (grâce à mass 'education'—the 'bread&circusses' of contemporary Caesarhood) almost nobody can read practically anything, let me add that I wouldn't like 'communism' if 'communism' were good" (223).

From the perspective of the beginning years of the twenty-first century we can see with greater clarity not only the terrible price of the Russian experiment but also the historical fact of its utter failure. We are now positioned, of course, to have witnessed the breakup of the once powerful Soviet state, which collapsed at the end of 1991, and to appreciate as never before the apparently undying desire for self-determination among ethnic peoples—and nationalities—sometimes with tragic results.

II

While *EIMI* is sometimes termed a "novel," often with the supposed consent of its author, it is in fact a travel-journal or travel-diary, where the life-experience of the writer is the primary organizing principle, however artistically elaborated. In a novel, on the other hand, the life-experience of the author, if such is being used for the

purpose, is artistically subordinate to the story, plot, or action being presented, hence the term “fiction” for such works.

And *EIMI* is indeed elaborated from Cummings’ on-the-spot jottings in his notebooks. It is loosely structured along the lines of *The Divine Comedy*, which, as we have mentioned above, he pointedly refers to a number of times throughout. He even fashions a frame of sorts by covering a period of thirty-six consecutive days, beginning and ending on a Sunday. Yet its actual overall structure remains that of a chronological account of his doings, encounters, thoughts, and feelings on a day-to-day basis—almost hourly—as he negotiates his way through the difficulties and pleasures of his visit. So too is his other great prose work, *The Enormous Room*, not a “novel,” although it also has an archetypal frame along the lines of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Weighing in at just short of 430 pages in 1933, it is Cummings’ longest published work, and in it he poured all of the art and vision he had achieved to date. Behind him were eight volumes already published: *The Enormous Room* (1922), *Tulips & Chimneys* (1923), *XLI Poems* (1925), *is 5* (1926), *HIM* (1927), *No Title* (1930), *CIOPW* (1931), and *W (ViVa [1931])*. And as with those earlier works, it is a stylistic *tour de force*, only more so. Although it is written mostly in prose, it is written in a *mélange* of styles and tones, also containing a number of lyrical passages, some of them spaced on the page as verse—albeit in Cummings’ distinctive kind of spacing. The prose itself is experimental, containing many abbreviations, typographical devices, compounds, grammatical-syntactical shifts, word coinages, and the like—ways of fracturing the meaning in a Cubist manner in aiming to embody his sense of timelessness in the midst of time, a vision which may properly be seen as a form of transcendentalism.

Published eleven years before *EIMI*, *The Enormous Room* itself already contained the beginnings of Cummings’ characteristic ways with prose in the service of his vision, his attempts to manifest “that precision which creates movement” (Foreword to *is 5*). So did some of the speeches in *HIM* or the Dadaist prose in *No Title*. More specifically, we could say that the style in *EIMI* answers to the need to record more accurately the disruptions he experienced in the disjointed and incongruous Alice-in-Wonderland world of the Soviet Union, so shiny in its professed idealism, so shabby in its manifestations.

Echoing some of the ideas, words, and phrases of his 1920 essay on the sculptor, Gaston Lachaise, Cummings peppers *EIMI* with repetitions of “is,” “am,” “the verb,” the “actual” versus the merely “real,” feeling versus thinking, “alive” versus “undead,” “give” versus “keep,” and art versus politics. Russia is the land of “un,” “a world of Was,” “the apotheosis of isn’t,” a “joyless experiment in force and fear.” The clothes are shapeless, the food is tasteless, the women are “nonmen,” even the

circus is dreary. He feels he is in a grey landscape of somnambulists. Thus he is even more ready than usual to greet the blossoming spring flowers, the rain descending softly, and the occasional apparition of an alive human being

Far from causing Cummings to develop his transcendental vision in reaction to his experiences in the descendental Soviet Union, as some have suggested, his encounter with the Russian subhuman superstate, to use his own lingo, served primarily to *confirm* his already established position, which he had put forth, not only in his Lachaise essay, but also in *The Enormous Room* of 1922 and *Tulips & Chimneys* of 1923. And it served to confirm that position by exposing him to a form of society diametrically opposed to it. He had had, of course, ample opportunity to criticize the society of his own United States before this time—its commercialism, materialism, phony patriotism, and so on—but here in Russia he saw all the faults of an industrial society magnified a hundredfold by virtue of the political dictatorship under which that unfortunate country was laboring. And in both cases the arrival of World War II provided some relief, however tragic and costly.

Let me quote three brief but revelatory passages to catch the true flavor of Cummings' basic theme. "Government's merely an exteriorization, isn't it? an outward symbol? a projection?" (114). "What a murderfully vast difference exists between 'standing up for an idea' (between combatting unvalues; for instance, American values) and inhabiting the 'practice' 'of' an 'idea', inhabiting so called socialist Russia!" (181). "Should unpoets [i.e., scientists] live their unlives, people would live lives, people would eat when hungry; people would unlearn how not to hunger without eating (that most redoubtable goal of progress life civilization whathave you etcetera)" (385). There is a Zen koan—"when I am hungry, I eat; when I am tired, I sleep"—whose meaning will become additionally relevant as we proceed.

III

The journey and the book begin reaching for their climax, with "prophecy" and "revelation," during the last two days of the return trip to Paris. These terms are taken from Cummings' own interpretation in his "Sketch for a Preface," where he says, under the heading of June 13, the penultimate day of his journey homeward, "I stroll out to see our locomotive, & address it in terms of *prophecy* (418). And *revelation* (419)" (xvi). The prophecy—a declaration of something to come—is Cummings' address at a station stop to the locomotive which is bringing him back: "metal-steed, very treacherously wherefrom descending the promiscuous urbans plundered rust through you I greet all it gods." Against whom he counterposes "a totally adventuring Is Who breathes, not hope and not despair, but timeless deep unspace—," who is Poietes (Greek for poet), "for guilt may not cancel instinct and logic defeat wish" (418). In other words, organic transcendentalism will not be defeated by materialism and industrialism.

There follows the revelation—an act of revealing divine truth—the concluding lines of the sixteenth poem of the *Tao Te Ching*, attributed to Lao Tzu, supposedly an older contemporary of Confucius (551—479 B.C.):

“he who knoweth the eternal is comprehensive;”
....
“comprehensive , therefore just;”
....
“just , therefore a king;”
....
“a king , therefore celestial;”
....
“celestial , therefore in Tao;”
....
“in Tao , therefore enduring;”
....
“without
hurt
he
suffereth
the
loss
o f
the
body”

(419)¹

The essence of Taoism lies in the principle of “nonaction,” which is not at all equivalent to “no-action.” Rather, it refers to a way of acting which is consonant with the organic order of Nature and the Given. “Transcendence” for Cummings, then, means being alive in the ongoing flux of the present, the “actual,” as we have seen, as opposed to settling for the static categories of habit in the merely “real” world, an issue characteristically expressed by him as “feeling” versus “thinking.” To realize that this vision is not simply an exotic piece of Orientalism, let us refer ourselves back to Wordsworth’s “wise passiveness” and Keats’s “negative capability.” Or we might recall Tolstoy’s portrayal of General Kutuzov in *War and Peace* as one who “had only the capacity for the calm contemplation of the course of events . . . instead of intellect grasping events and making plans.” Thus, sixty years ahead of his time, Cummings condemns the self-contradictory Soviet experiment: you cannot “perfect” human life by killing thousands of human beings.

IV

Upon its publication in 1933, nearly two years after the journey itself, *EIMI* was bound to kick up a storm among the reviewers and the reading public. Almost fifty reviews appeared during that same year, and they were, of course, quite mixed. Most obviously, the book ran counter to the mood of many at that time that socialism offered a viable alternative to the evident failure of capitalism. Cummings' clear anti-Soviet position worked against him. In addition, the sometimes difficult experimental style of the book provoked the scorn of the anti-modernists. But there were a few who understood what Cummings was doing and approved.

S. Foster Damon wrote in April of 1933: "The people he encounters form a whole gallery of brilliant portraits: . . . they are allowed their right to exist in the universe, silly or dirty or cruel though they may be" (143). In July Paul Rosenfeld said, "*EIMI* of all his works alone expresses a self-consciousness, a clear intellectual possession and absolute certainty of the divinity which all along has been at work in him" (157). Marianne Moore in August: "the typography . . . is not something superimposed on the meaning but the author's mental handwriting" (160). In December of the following year Ezra Pound wrote to instruct his British readers: to be a writer is "to take it in at the pores, and lay it out there pellucidly on the page in all its slavish unfinishedness, in all its Dostoevskian slobberyness, brought up to date. . . . Does any man wish to know about Russia? 'EIMI'?" (quoted in Norman 279).

The story of the book's career after the 1930s is, alas, spotty. Cummings himself returned to his poetry, publishing *No Thanks* in 1935—the title thumbing its nose at all the publishers who rejected it—and *Collected Poems* in 1938, which served at last to consolidate and extend his reputation as a poet. The only other prose works thereafter are *i: six nonlectures* (1953), *A Miscellany* (1958, 65), and *Fairy Tales* (1965). There were but a few serious studies of *EIMI* during these years and thereafter, including chapters in my *Growth of a Writer* and Richard S. Kennedy's two books on Cummings. Several dissertations, completed or underway, are promising, and it is hoped that a perspective of sixty years or more will stimulate, both regarding its politics and its experimental style, a broader and deeper interest in *EIMI*—a hope which this new edition will help fulfill.

V

EIMI was first published on March 28, 1933, by Covici, Friede, Inc. This edition was limited to 1381 copies, according to the number of orders received. A second printing was subsequently issued during that same year. Covici, Friede had also published *No Title* on 1930 and *CIOPW* in 1931. (Portions of *EIMI* had been previously published in *Hound & Horn* in 1932, which explains why Cummings could refer to it in his 1932 Introduction to the 1934 Modern Library edition of *The Enormous Room*.)

A second edition was issued sixteen years later by William Sloan Associates, Inc.,

in 1949, consisting of 1500 copies.

The Grove Press edition came out nine years later, in 1958, 3000 copies paperbound, plus 1000 clothbound. A specially bound edition was limited to 26 numbered copies signed by the author. Cummings' "Sketch for a Preface to the Fourth Edition of *EIMI*" is in error: the Grove Press edition is the *third* edition.

Thus the present edition is the fourth, after a gap of almost forty years, the largest interval so far. Firmage has re-set, corrected, and annotated the whole, so that the reading and scholarly public may more than ever before enjoy one of Cummings' most substantial accomplishments.

— *Flushing, NY*

Note

1 Cummings noted in a letter to James Sibley Watson that he took the translation of Lao Tzu from C. G. Jung's *Psychological Types* (1923). See *Selected Letters*, p. 229, and *Psychological Types*, p. 265.

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