

E. E. Cummings: Intourist in the Unworld

David Farley

A difficult author—Mallarmé, Henry James, or Hopkins—would be no hero in Russia today. Indeed it should be self-evident that “difficulty” (that is, highly individualised expression) must be regarded not only as anti-popular, but, since useless for the purposes of propaganda, a sort of affront like an idle man.

—Wyndham Lewis, *Letters* 235

Russia was by then so remote behind its Chinese wall of exclusiveness and secretiveness, it was like thinking of Paradise, or, as it may seem to others, of Hell.

—Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* 616

In a 1941 essay, “Augment of the Novel,” Ezra Pound described E.E. Cummings’ *EIMI* as “one of three books that any serious reader in 1960 will most certainly have to read if he wants to get any sort of idea of what happened in Europe between one of our large wars and another” (95).¹ The other two books were James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Wyndham Lewis’s *The Apes of God*. For Pound, these three “potwollopers,” as he referred to them, each described clearly and accurately a particular milieu: pre-war Dublin, Bloomsbury in the twenties, and Soviet Russia in 1930. Pound had grouped these works before, in essays and editorials throughout the thirties², but by the time of “Augment of the Novel” he had come to see *EIMI* as the most significant prose work of the interwar period, surpassing even *Ulysses* in its ability to describe the modern world. Pound saw *EIMI* as a work that registered the sensory data of everyday life with uncanny accuracy. In this essay, he also compares Cummings’ book to John Reed’s *Ten Days That Shook the World*, which he calls that “first grand rapportage” of the Russian Revolution. In his firsthand account of the tumultuous events in Petrograd, Reed, the American journalist for *The Masses* and *New Review*, performed an important task for those back in the United States for whom the Russian Revolution was a distant and portentous event. In Pound’s view, Reed established a useful rapport between America and Russia, making use of both eyewitness testimony and printed documents, while sketching the “accelerated grimace” of the nascent Soviet State. These two concepts of “rapport” (seeking mutual recognition) and “reporting” (getting the facts straight), both evoked in Pound’s use of the French “rapportage,” Pound saw operating in *EIMI* as well, a work that provides an account of the Soviet Union more than a decade after the events recorded by Reed (cf. Hartog 268). For Pound, who was attempting to define the appropriate function of the epic poem in the modern world, the diagnostic aspect of the novel was its most salient feature, building accurate judgments on empirical evidence. Thus, Pound’s assessment of *EIMI* as a key work of modernist prose emerges from his definition of the function of prose as “diagnostic” in a manner similar to journalism.³

Cummings' unconventional prose style, however, was harder to decipher than Reed's journalism, even for Pound, enamored as he was of the obscurity and experimental forms of modernist prose. Initially, Pound was unsure of Cummings' achievement. In a letter to Cummings on 6 April 1933 soon after he first read the book, we can see Pound sifting through his reactions to *EIMI*, dwelling especially on its obscurity:

I dunno whether I rank as them wot finds it painful to read. . . . and if I said anything about obscurity it wd. far ridere polli, in view of my recent pubctns. Also I don't think *EIMI* is obscure, or not very BUT, the longer a work is the more and longer shd. be the passages that are perfectly clear and simple to read.

matter of scale, matter of how long you can cause the reader to stay immobile or nearly so on a given number of pages. [. . .] a page two, or three, or two and one half centimetres narrower, at least a column of type that much narrower might solve all the difficulties.

(*Pound/Cummings* 24)

Pound's frustrations here lay in his impatience as a reader faced with an unconventional and difficult style; however, at the same time he takes pains to distinguish between the accidental obscurity of odd typography and the necessary obscurity required of rendering a new subject. Perhaps what frustrated Pound most was his inability to verify what was being described, never himself having traveled to Russia

And yet Cummings' style was no easier to decipher for those westerners who were more familiar with the Russian scene and who had suffered the slings and arrows of Soviet life firsthand. In his 1937 book *Assignment in Utopia*, Eugene Lyons, the former United Press correspondent who spent many years in Moscow in the twenties, recalls reading *EIMI* with a mixture of admiration and perplexity: "what I understood of that book, *EIMI*, was so good, so penetrating, that I still wish he hadn't written it in puzzlewords" (418).⁴ In the reactions to Cummings' work we frequently see readers, whether they are versed in the difficulty of modernist prose or skilled in the obscurity of daily life in Russia, trying to decide whether *EIMI* was most in need of interpretation or deciphering, whether the greatest challenge was comprehending the words on the page or what those words sought to represent.

This difficulty continues to be the main challenge when reading *EIMI*, even after the events that Cummings recorded were no longer current. In a 1966 article, "Cummings' Impressions of Communist Russia," Austin Patty sees *EIMI* primarily as a direct translation of Cummings' experiences: "When Cummings simply reported what he saw or heard in Russia, *EIMI* became more objective and hence more valuable as a criticism of that country. There is every reason to believe that *EIMI* was

written on the spot and that it received little revision prior to publication” (21). Repeating a common error among critics, Patty claims that *EIMI* is merely a transcription of the notebooks in which Cummings recorded these impressions, which would support his argument that Cummings valued personal experience and eyewitness testimony over aesthetic form. William Troy in “Cummings’ Non-land of Un-” has also perpetuated this belief, pointing to Cummings’ linguistic tricks as evidence that he is simply attempting to reproduce sensory experience:

Because conventional syntax is historical, that is, based on an arrangement of thoughts, feelings, and sensations already completed, Mr. Cummings annihilates conventional syntax and with it conventional punctuation as well. . . . Typography is also made to perform a dynamic function by approximating visually the actual thought, object, sensation, being rendered.
(72)

For Troy, Cummings’ “obscurity” and idiosyncratic typography serve to foreclose historical representation or aesthetic form. For both Patty and Troy, and to a lesser degree for Pound, the value of *EIMI* lay in the fact that it was a translation of direct perception and not in its ability to dwell on those perceptions or organize them into a form appropriate either for aesthetic pleasure or historical utility.

There are indeed difficulties when attempting to read *EIMI* as anything but a journal of Cummings’ trip, the main difficulty being that Cummings himself encouraged people to take the book not as a political exposé of a regime that he certainly found repulsive, but primarily as a record of his travel experiences. In an unpublished letter, Cummings records how he first mentioned the idea for the book to his publisher Pascal Covici of Covici Friede:

“I have a Russian diary.”

“Great. I know that everyone in the U. S. has been sold lock, stock and barrel on Karl Marx’s Paradise.”

“But this book is against Russia. I spent [five weeks] there and I loathed it.”

“So what. Did you write this book?”

“I sure did.”

“Then I want it.” (quoted in Kennedy, *Dreams* 327-28)

Cummings hesitates offering the book to Covici not solely out of indifference or lack of confidence, as his casual mention of his “Russia diary” might suggest, but also because he realizes that his negative account might alienate him from his readership. Cummings here deliberately elides the difference between “diary” and “book,” as he seems to let Covici persuade him to seek publication.

By insisting in this account that *EIMI* was merely a transcribed diary, Cummings

also maintained the view that his book was a transparent account of *what* he saw, *as* he saw it. As Norman Friedman points out: "Since the focus is not on *what* happens," since, in fact, so little happens, "but rather on how it appears to the traveler, the book gives the appearance of a lack of selectivity, of an impressionistic completeness and fullness" (*Growth* 122). Friedman cites Cummings' own description of the finished *EIMI*:

1—that *EIMI*'s source equals on-the-spot-scribbled hieroglyphics

2—that through my subsequent deciphering of said hieroglyphics, not one incident has been revalued; not one situation has been contracted or expanded; not one significance has been warped; not one item has been omitted or inserted.

"Pour l'artiste, voir c'est concevoir, et concevoir, c'est composer" (Paul Cézanne). (*Growth* 122-23)

However, according to Richard Kennedy, the translation from diary to book was a considerable undertaking, and *EIMI* is "a development and expansion, about ten times the length of the travel diary he kept during his trip to Russia" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 327). This expanded version retains the freshness and idiosyncrasy of a personal journal, a fact which, as we have seen, would for years mislead scholars into believing that *EIMI* was a mere transcription of a travel diary. Cummings does not fictionalize his travel experience, but in both his account of the book's publication and in his subsequent description of *EIMI*, he maintains the fiction that the book was written "on the spot." Despite his assuming the role of unwilling accomplice in the book's publication, and despite his protestations that *EIMI* is simply a transcription of his diary, *EIMI* is one of Cummings' fullest and most elaborate declarations of his identity as an artist and an important document that foregrounds the ways of seeing as much as what is seen.

In his statement to Covici, Cummings made no secret of his dislike for Russia, and *EIMI* is intended both as a denunciation of the Soviet system and as a critique of the way this system was being reported in the west by journalists and intellectuals alike. Cummings couches this denunciation in a style that is deliberately obscure. Cummings' style, in its radical alteration of language, makes it difficult to determine at times what he actually sees on his trip. By coding his experience in this way, by adhering to his role of a tourist, and by insisting that his account is simply a traveler's diary, Cummings deliberately and carefully avoids the engagement of a writer such as John Reed, who became swept up in the events that he reported. Reed's account was intended to persuade readers of the benefits of the Russian revolution by recreating the immediacy of the scene, whereas Cummings creates a traveling narrator who circulates within society, yet remains distinct, at times anxiously so, from what he is observing. It is this fact that allows us to read *EIMI* both as a work that recreates the immediacy of lived experience and as a work that takes as its subject not only sensory

data but the way that this data is mediated and transmitted.

Cummings traveled to Russia partly out of curiosity about the Soviet experiment, the relative merits of which were being hotly debated among writers and intellectuals in the west. It was seen either as a successful experiment in socialism, or condemned as a fruitless and failed experiment in utopianism. Cummings' friend John Dos Passos, for instance, had traveled to Russia in 1928 and wrote enthusiastically to Cummings about his trip, although his thoughts about communism remained ambiguous. Cummings heard a more critical view of the state of Soviet affairs and Russian life from his friend, Morris Werner, who wrote that the living conditions of the average Russian were poor and that society was in shambles (Kennedy, *Dreams* 307).⁵ Dissatisfied with these conflicting reports, Cummings wanted to see Russia for himself, although as Richard Kennedy points out, "devotee of individualism that [Cummings] was, he did not expect to be overwhelmed by the joys of collectivism" (Kennedy, *Revisited* 84). Cummings traveled not as an objective, unbiased observer but was rather under the burden of conflicting reports about the reality of Soviet life, and also with a certain pre-formed view in his mind about the ideological implications of a communist society, especially as it potentially affected the West in the aftermath of the Great War. His style reflects both the anxiety that he brings with him as well as the reality of Soviet life that he saw, and thus *EIMI* needs to be read as something more than a formless translation of perception. In traveling to Russia, Cummings was not merely seeking out novel experiences but rather was attempting to reconcile conflicting accounts of life in the Soviet Union.

That he chose a travel account in order to accomplish this and that he based his investigations on the primary materials of his traveler's diary suggests that Cummings' text needs to be read in a way in which the nature of his "on the spot" recordings are questioned and interpreted. In *The Mirror of Herodotus*, Francois Hartog examines the relationship between historiography and travel writing in Herodotus's *Histories* and demonstrates the manner in which evidence and interpretation are foreground in order to show the complexities of the traveling subject. Hartog argues that with the *Histories* "[i]t is more a matter of pondering what is visible and the conditions of visibility. What is it that is visible? Not *what* I have seen, but *what is it* that I have seen?" (Hartog 267). Firsthand accounts alone are seen to be as unreliable as historical documents and hearsay for the unwary. As Cummings ponders the "conditions of visibility" in Russia, he finds it necessary at times to assume various guises in order that his vision, always mediated, is never entirely obstructed by the boundaries of a rigid role, whether it be that of tourist, traveler, artist, or journalist. In translating *what* he sees and *how* he sees, Cummings employs a style that renders every event obscure in order to foreground the difficulties involved when pondering the "conditions of visibility." I want to examine certain moments in particular where Cummings focuses on conflicting interpretations of common sights.

In *EIMI*, Cummings relies on the specific requirements of the traveling subject, variously referred to as “Comrade K,” “K,” or “peesahel y hoodozhnik” (Russian for writer and artist) (228) and finds in the various roles and guises that he assumes or has thrust upon him—especially the roles of tourist and journalist—a strategy for maintaining his individuality during his time in Soviet Russia, for holding on to that world of “I feel” amidst the, for him, grim reality of everyday life in communist Russia. We can see Cummings probing the conditions of visibility most clearly when he visits two popular tourist spots in Moscow: St. Basil’s cathedral and Lenin’s Tomb. Both of these cultural monuments are for Cummings sites where conflicting historical and ideological accounts, voiced by his various guides, vie for his attention. We see the importance of the traveling subject as well in Cummings’ exit from Russia, as he successfully navigates the Soviet bureaucracy in order to escape what he finds ultimately to be an oppressive system.

EIMI begins with a sense of foreboding and an intense feeling of claustrophobia as we see Cummings on board a train headed for Moscow. The obscure style registers this claustrophobia and signals for the reader a break between the narrator’s consciousness and the foreignness and unfamiliarity of the external circumstances. To emphasize the closeness of the space in which he finds himself, *EIMI* begins abruptly with the word “SHUT,” suggesting that this claustrophobia will be more than a passing experience but a theme of the novel. The word “SHUT” that begins *EIMI* stands apart from the rest of the sentence and in fact announces what is essentially a theme for the book, that of the closeness of space and of the contraction of all dimension. This word is also a command given him by one of his cabin mates but one he at first does not understand since it is in a foreign language: “SHUT seems to be The Verb.” Thus the first word is both a description and an act of translation. This claustrophobia has an immediate source since Cummings is situated in one of the tiny sleeper compartments of the train, a compartment that he likens to a “deuxième coffin” (3); however, it also signals on a larger scale the anxiety that Cummings will feel throughout his trip regarding the numerous restrictions that are placed on him as he travels about: from the ubiquity of bureaucratic regulations to the pervasiveness of Soviet ideology.

Cummings describes his traveling companions in a similarly morbid fashion: referring to his cabin mate as “funeral director” because of the way that he dresses and to their bunk as a “coffin” (3). When he goes to eat, he finds four people already in the dining car, which is even more claustrophobic and reminiscent of death than his sleeping compartment:

and lunch was more Shut than a cemetery : 4 separate corpses collectively illatease:no ghost of conversation. Ponderous grub;because(last night, Shut in a breathless box with a grunting doll)I rushed sidewise into Germany(but that swirling tomb of horizontality was less Shut than the emptiest rightangledness which calls itself “essen”). (3)

The atmosphere of claustrophobia permeates the opening pages, as do the repeated allusions to death, for example the “swirling tomb of horizontality” that is the train car. As Cummings sleeps in his compartment in the wagon-lit, his body lies perpendicular to the direction in which the train is moving, so he rushes “sidewise” towards Russia, a position that itself belies purposive direction. His sleeping body offers a silent but willful resistance to such inevitable progress and directed travel.

Cummings arrives in Moscow confused and weary from his cramped journey, and his senses reach out for some signs of life: “Alive? arrive? Whenwhere?” The latter word in its conflation of time and space indicates his disorientation. He was supposed to have been met at the train station in Moscow by Vladimir Lidin, a Russian playwright whom he had been put in touch with back in Paris by Ilya Ehrenberg, the Russian novelist; but when Cummings disembarks, Lidin is nowhere to be found, and so he is forced to use his limited phrasebook Russian to find his way to the tourist agency in order to find lodgings. He goes to the state tourist agency, Intourist, the organization that regulates all foreign travel within the borders of the Soviet Union and whose very name represents a Cummingsesque distortion of language. The “without party” visa that Cummings obtained with the help of Dos Passos meant that he was free to travel on his own and not as part of a tour group. With the help of well-meaning locals whom he meets at the train station, Cummings finds his way to the Intourist office and to the nearby Metropole Hotel where he checks in. At this moment, Cummings recalls the application process for his visa in the Soviet consulate in Paris. Without any indication or break in the narrative, Cummings is suddenly back in the French capital, and sensory perception is crowded out by his own memories:

Let me earnestly warn you(says the sandyhaired spokesman for the Soviet Embassy in Paris)that such is the case. Visiting Russia as you intend would be futile from every point of view. The best way for you to go would be as the member of some organization—

but,so far as I know,I'm not a member of any organization.

In that case you should go as a tourist. And I'm speaking not only from the financial standpoint : do you realize that without some sort of guidance you will not see anything,let alone understand? (16-17)

What seems to be immediate sensory experience is, in fact, a memory. This moment is important for Cummings because it demonstrates that he sees his most difficult challenge when traveling through Russia not to be enduring the hardships of conveyance—the claustrophobia on the train, for instance, or the cultural and linguistic barriers that he manages to neutralize through humor—but rather the persistent mediation that he is subject to, whether from fellow travelers, tourist organizations, journalists, or state propaganda. His quest for an objective, unmediated experience of Russia is, he is aware, naïve, but by foregrounding as he does here this naiveté—which

induces the consular officer to talk to Cummings as if he were a child—Cummings reasserts the distinction that he had made regarding his book of poems *Viva*, between a prisoner who is “inhabited by formulae,” here the prescribed role of the tourist who travels with Intourist, and a child who “inhabit[s] forms,” in which s/he wanders loosely (cf. Kennedy, *Dreams* 319). The Paris desk clerk remarks that Cummings “will not see anything, let alone understand,” putting the emphasis on “understanding.” But perhaps the more serious implication of this remark is that without guidance Cummings “will not *see* anything.” Vision here is conditioned on being shown. The desk clerk implies that there is no unmediated knowledge, the refutation of which assumption was Cummings’ chief motivation for traveling to Russia to begin with. But there is also, the man suggests, no unmediated vision. Tourism here, from the point of view of the desk clerk, is not a recreational activity but a way to disseminate ideology that determines not only the path of the journey and the meaning of what is seen, but also what *can* be seen.

Cummings’ way of countering this prescription of vision is not, however, to avoid the beaten track of tourism, beyond the simple gesture of not associating himself with any tour groups or affiliating himself with any organizations. Instead, he makes the most of this role: he allows himself wander loosely as a tourist as he sees Moscow. He neither shuns the various guides in whose company he finds himself, nor relies too heavily on them. The sights he sees are, if nothing else, conventional and iconic. The only way that Cummings can travel as himself, as if in rebuttal to the desk clerk’s warning, is to forge an identity that remains fluid. In this role, Cummings has moments of what he feels to be unmediated vision, moments that manifest themselves against the backdrop of the conventional and over-determined tourist sites that he sees. And in his reaction to these over-determined sites we begin to see *EIMI* as a work that probes the conditions of visibility, a work that demonstrates the importance of weighing visual evidence.

The first tourist spot that Cummings sees is the most popular one that Moscow has to offer. St. Basil’s Cathedral, the sixteenth-century church built by Ivan the Terrible, stands at one end of Red Square, adjacent to the Kremlin, not far from the Hotel Metropole where Cummings was lodged. Cummings first walks by the building the day after his arrival in Moscow. His description of his approach to St. Basil’s and the subsequent stories that he hears about the cathedral demonstrate one of the most significant ways in which the narrative of *EIMI* attempts to balance eyewitness testimony and hearsay.

While out walking with a friend whom he had met at the Hotel Metropole, the two approach Red Square from the end opposite to St. Basil’s. Cummings describes his approach and the effect that it has on him, as the narrative directs our vision and attention accordingly. Cummings describes their route in detail, from the entrance to Red Square, to Lenin’s Mausoleum (which he later visits again), to the Kremlin itself,

of which the Mausoleum is a part. The Mausoleum, which he sees first, is a square and sturdy structure that leaves him cold:

L's M

a rigid pyramidal composition of blocks; an impurely mathematical game of edges : not quite cruelly a cubic cerebration—equally glamourless and emphatic, with childish. . . perhaps the architectural equivalent for “boo!—I scared you that time!” (25)

He likens the harsh and imposing mausoleum to a mathematical formula. He describes it as childish, but here without any connotation of playful innocence that contrasts with rigid formulas as described in his letter regarding *Viva*. As he comes upon St. Basil's, however, his senses are overwhelmed:

the lump ends at Something Fabulous

a frenzy of writhing hues—clusteringly not possible whirls together grinding into one savage squirtlike ecstasy : a crazed Thinglike dream solemnly shouting out of timespace, a gesture fatal, acrobatic (goring tomorrow's lunge with bright beyondness of yesterday—utterly a Self, catastrophic; distinct, unearthly and without fear. (25)

The cathedral stands in stark contrast to the angular buildings on the Kremlin grounds and to the rest of Soviet life. He mentions the structure in a letter to his then wife, Anne Barton: “Dear Anne: There is an Arabian Nights church here which you should see some day. The rest you'd hate. . .” (Kennedy, *Dreams* 310). Cummings refers to St. Basil's throughout *EIMI* as an “Arabian Nights” building. He does not describe the building in the letter to his wife; he simply says that she needs to see it for herself, probably recognizing the limits of language to describe adequately what he sees.

The contrast of the “Something Fabulous” cathedral and the blockish mausoleum Cummings found to be instructive. He had, for instance, similarly divided his 1922 book of poetry *Tulips & Chimneys* into the “lyrical renderings (tulips) in standard or free verse” and the “responses to the modern world (chimneys) in sordid urban scenes,” as Kennedy puts it (*Dreams* 238). Like *Tulips & Chimneys*, which was divided neatly into two sections, Red Square offers illuminative contrasts, only here they are irreconcilably opposed. The exterior of St. Basil's is of diverting shapes, odd orthographies of architecture that give no indication of what lies inside. Cummings reveled in this incongruity with Lenin's Tomb and appreciated the superfluity of meaning, the architectural arabesques that reminded him of the Arabian Nights, of other places and other times.

However, he finds that even this oasis that St. Basil's represents is subject to the

ideological struggles and propaganda that were for him such unpleasant aspects of Soviet life. As a tourist attraction and as a visible reminder of Russia's orthodox past, the cathedral is a site for contending accounts of history and ideology. The first account occurs on the Monday after his arrival, May 18th, when Cummings finally meets Vladimir Lidin, the Russian playwright and friend of Ilya Ehrenburg who was supposed to have met him at the train station upon his arrival. Lidin is sympathetic to western life and dressed in a slightly outdated Parisian style, "Latin Quarterishly," as Cummings refers to him, or simply "LQ" in his shorthand style (104). The two have dinner and then stroll through the city. Lidin tells Cummings a story about the construction of St. Basil's cathedral:

Ivan the Terrible , Emperor of Russia , commissioned a particularly famous Italian architect to build the most beautiful church in the world (LQ resumes) which when the architect had done , the emperor extinguished the architect's eyes, saying Lest you should create something yet more beautiful. (A beggar lurched at us : LQ sidestepped him gingerly ; frowned : spat. In a not more than whisper)and those were the days when art was highly valued. . . (104)

This story, while almost certainly merely anecdotal, is customarily related to tourists as evidence of the building's singular beauty. The clichéd nature of the story and the perfunctory, almost obligatory way in which Lidin, an artist himself, relates it are underscored by the intrusion of the beggar whom Lidin "gingerly sidesteps." The presence of the beggar hardly interrupts Lidin's telling of the story or his ability to draw from it a simple moral—"those were the days when art was highly valued." He manages to avoid the presence of suffering before him even while he extols the aesthetic discernment of the Tsar. Lidin's recounting of this story takes Cummings aback. It is for him another one of these illuminative contrasts by which he sees a fundamental discrepancy at the heart of Soviet life. The story is a proud reminder, in Lidin's view, of the days before Communism and a testament, he seems to be suggesting, to an anachronistic cruelty that fostered such beauty. Lidin, somewhat proudly, sees no contradiction in the proximity of such beauty and such cruelty.

As if to underscore further Lidin's blindness to the implications of this story, as the two walk on, Lidin buys some flowers from a street vendor. He asks "Isn't it Spring? Is there anything more beautiful—even a woman—than a flower?" (104). And Cummings, whose affection for both Spring and flowers outweighs even his affection for art, responds with words that contain a mild rebuke to Lidin: "(K) there is an I Feel ; an actual universe or alive of which our merely real world or thinking existence is at best a bad , at worst a murderous , mistranslation ; flowers give me this actual universe" (104-05). Seemingly acceding to Lidin's praise of beauty, Cummings' allusion to cruelty and his juxtaposition of murderousness and mistranslation, are a subtle reproach to the positive conclusion that Lidin draws from his story that "those

were the days when art was highly valued.” Such “real” value Cummings counterpoises against “actual” value, which is more than simply utilitarian and does not countenance cruelty. As difficult as it is for Cummings to reconcile the building that he sees with Lidin’s anecdote about it, the process becomes even more complicated when Cummings hears another story about St. Basil’s Cathedral.

Later that same evening, Cummings sees St. Basil’s Cathedral again, this time in the company of a Romanian friend who works at the Revolutionary Literature Bureau. As they stop for cigarettes on Red Square, Cummings’ thoughts return to St. Basil’s and to Lidin’s story of Ivan the Terrible and the coexistence of beauty and cruelty. He asks Otto, who has been discussing the virtues of “permanent revolution,” what he knows of the “church which makes perpetual revolution”—meaning here revolutions of form and style, “subsidiary, differently timed yet perfectly intermeshing, whirlings” (108). Otto informs Cummings that St. Basil’s is currently an antireligious museum and relates “an interesting story” about the building. Cummings pauses in anticipation that he will again hear the same story that he had heard from Lidin. Instead, Otto relates a different story with a different meaning:

during the struggle between reds and whites , the whites planted machineguns in that structure. Lenin promptly ordered his red gunners to clean out the enemy. Lunartcharsky thereupon resigned. Lenin sent for Lunartcharsky. Why have you resigned? Lenin asked. Because I cannot bear to fire on one of the greatest works of art in the world , Lunartcharsky answered. If , said Lenin , the revolution demands it, we will knock down a thousand cathedrals. Lenin was right , of course ; Lunartcharsky , realizing that , withdrew his resignation immediately. (108)

According to Otto, this anecdote demonstrates that “a great principle has triumphed.” Wanting to find some balance to the previous lesson offered by Lidin that “art was highly valued” when Ivan the Terrible was cruel, Cummings hesitatingly suggests that the moral is “the supremacy of life over art.” Otto responds, “The supremacy (he said, carefully and almost gently) of humanity over everything.” Cummings further avers, ironically, as the conversation tugs back and forth: “except (I, eyed , murmur) principles” (108). Otto ends the conversation by falling back on the formulaic principles that he associates with Lenin: “The principles which protect humanity are an integral part of humanity ‘n’est-ce pas?’ (away looking , coldly affirmed Otto)” (108). Otto is yet another person who is guided by formulas and who is unable to wander loosely in forms, and yet these two stories offer illustrative contrasts.

The story of Ivan the Terrible, on the one hand, who so admired the beauty of St. Basil’s that he cruelly struck out the eyes of the architects who designed it in order to maintain its uniqueness (in a kind of uncanny forecast of the fears of modern

mass production) and the story of Lenin, on the other hand, who was willing to destroy the building and all those in it in order to assert abstract principles of humanity, provide alternate and opposing parables, both grounded in history, of the tensions between art and life that were central as well to Cummings' views on the Soviet Union in 1931. Cummings does not argue against either of these views but rather allows them to exist in the text as alternate and contending stories. He saw these same tensions as central to his own work as he straddled the line between a detached aesthetic work and a denunciation of a political regime. This strategy of allowing opposing interpretations to exist within the text without explicitly endorsing one or the other makes the problem of authorial intent particularly acute. However, Cummings' physical presence in *EIMI* is key to his narrative. His decision expressly not to impose his own interpretation on events is not an attempt to remain detached and out of sight, but rather it is an acknowledgement of the difficulties that occur when assessing the significance of any event or any sight.

In addition to seeing St. Basil's and hearing the conflicting stories that surround it, Cummings also visits that other main tourist attraction, Lenin's Mausoleum, which he has already described from the outside as an imposing, blockish, utilitarian edifice. Adjacent to St. Basil's cathedral, it is housed on the Kremlin grounds and is, with the cathedral, one of the obligatory tourist spots in Moscow. It is almost two weeks into his trip that Cummings actually enters the Mausoleum to see the embalmed body of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the architect of Soviet life. This scene, located near the midpoint of the book, is often seen as central also to Cummings' vision of the Soviet Union; it is, in Kennedy's view, Cummings' descent into Hell, and his view of Lenin's body is his vision of Satan.⁶ However, it is not only Lenin's body that is important to this scene, but also the bodies in the crowd that go to see the former leader, and Cummings' own body, as he again feels claustrophobic, as once again immediate experience and history jostle for priority. This scene is important not primarily for the Satanic vision or the Dantesque overtones, although these parallels certainly do exist, but rather for the manner in which Cummings sees Lenin's body, the layers of disguise that he assumes in order to confront this vision, and the device by which he avoids the crowds.

The scene begins with Cummings among a throng of tourists, mainly Russian citizens ("tovarich"—240) who have come to wait in line to see Lenin's body. The line winds all the way to St. Basil's cathedral at the end of Red Square. As on the train that brought him to Russia in the opening pages of the book, Cummings here experiences claustrophobia. Space becomes constricted and panic sets in as the mass of people is reduced to indistinguishable parts: the prose takes on a disjunctive, peristaltic movement, as can be heard in the recording that exists of Cummings reading this section aloud.⁷

facefacefaceface
 hand-
 fin-
 claw
 foot-
 hoof
 (tovarich)
 es to number of numberlessness (240)

These faces and disjointed bodies proceed in a bleak dumb-show towards Lenin's grave and, as Cummings sees it, towards death, "toward the grave of Self" (241).

In order to gaze on Lenin's body without losing his own identity that he has been so diligently maintaining throughout his journey, and also simply to avoid waiting on line, Cummings assumes the identity of a reporter. He approaches the police officer at the head of the line, near the entrance to the Tomb:

"pahjahlstah"—voice?belonging to comrade K. Said to a most tough cop. Beside shufflebudging end of beginninglessness,before the Tomb of Tombs , standunstanding.

(Voice? continues)I , American correspondent . .

(the toughest cop : spun upon all of and over smallest me staring all 1 awful moment—salutes! And very gently shoves)let the skies snow dolphins—nothing shall confound us now! (into smilelessly the entering beginning of endlessness: (242)

The guard's reaction reflects the esteem in which western journalists were held, partly because it was hoped that they would carry the news of the success of socialism back to the west. By announcing himself as an American correspondent, Cummings temporarily disclaims his identity as an independent tourist traveling unaffiliated, in possession of a "without party" visa. He descends into this identity and then into Lenin's tomb.

Nonetheless, he likens entering the tomb to entering a city, and this city seems to be death, as space again contracts ("suffocatingly envelopes"—242), and the distinction between motion and stasis fades:

as when he enters a city(and solemnly his soul descends : every wish covers its beauty in tomorrow)so I descended and so I disguised myself ; so(towards death's deification moving)I did not move (242)

He finds himself for a moment alone in the room with Lenin's corpse, although what he sees is not what he expected to see: "Certainly it was not made of flesh," he

says, but rather it was a “waxwork” statue, a “trivial idol throned in stink,” that “equals just another little moral lesson” (243-44). For Cummings, Lenin’s body was more than just a symbol of death; it was a mockery of life. Its waxwork appearance from the embalming made it even more dead by halting the natural process of decay. In the presence of this “trivial idol,” all distinctions become erased: the distinctions between death and life, motion and stasis, ugliness and beauty, and even, most alarmingly for Cummings, that between himself and the crowd of people who stand in line to see this spectacle, as he descends to the “grave of Self.” Lenin’s body thus both functions for the state as the focus of Soviet ideology, and it acts as a symbol or spectacle of the death of the individual that Cummings so strenuously decried.

In addition to being a spectacle of Soviet ideology and representing the death of the self, Lenin’s body is also for Cummings a symbol of the stasis that he saw dominating Russian life and which came to preoccupy him most forcefully as he prepared to leave Russia. Throughout *EIMI*, the ability to move about, to circulate within Russian society, is for Cummings crucial to his ability to make sense of what he sees. While in Moscow, he witnessed both Russian citizens whose movements were highly regulated through internal visas and Westerners living in Moscow who moved around and yet remained unable to accurately describe what they saw. Cummings emerges from Lenin’s Tomb more convinced than ever of the futility of communism and the value and importance of movement as he continues to make plans for his departure from Russia.

Cummings’ exit from the “unworld,” however, is a long, complicated affair that again forces him to confront Soviet bureaucracy. Since he is leaving by a different route than he entered, he needs to make sure that he has all of the correct transit forms and has booked the proper passage. He had already begun the process of acquiring his visa before he visited Lenin’s Tomb. As with all tourists, when Cummings checks in at the hotel, he leaves his passport with the desk clerk. He is repeatedly concerned from that point on about getting it back and fears that, if he is unable to do so, he will be unable to leave the country. This fear becomes at times an obsession with Cummings, as we can see in the numerous references to passports throughout the book.

At one point, Cummings’ worries about getting his passport back become real. An American couple, Charles Malamuth, a professor of Slavic languages and his wife Joan London, the daughter of the writer Jack London, invite Cummings to live with them for the duration of his stay in Moscow, an offer he gratefully accepts. As they attempt to move Cummings into their lodgings, however, they run into difficulties with the desk clerk at the Metropole who is holding Cummings’ passport and will not return it because his Russian visa does not have the correct seal. Malamuth points out to the desk clerk that, since Cummings has a foreign passport, this should not matter. Malamuth indicates that this is obviously merely a bureaucratic mix-up and tells Cummings not to worry: “The meticulous comrade is probably somewhat afraid

of being shot for underzealousness or something—” (164). But Cummings becomes concerned and his concern grows into fear as he realizes that his exit depends on these documents and on the people who control them:

—now that I think of it : how come the Soviet Embassy in Paris delivered my visa just too late for May Day doings? And how come the socialist soviet republic granted a single month’s séjour instead of the promised double? And how come— (164)

More than simply a travel document, Cummings’ passport represents to him the only means by which he will be able to leave Moscow as his fear grows into paranoia.

This concern culminates in a scene in which Cummings fears not only the loss of mobility afforded by the travel document, but the loss of identity. When Cummings arrives at the visa office in the Intourist building, he finds that in addition to filling out the necessary forms he needs to have his photograph taken. The official who takes his picture develops the film by throwing it into a pail of solution. Cummings cannot resist the urge to gaze into the pail to see how his appearance has altered while he has been in the “unworld.” He wants to see himself through the eyes of the passport officials:

. . . that pail attracts fatally myself. Fatally moving , my(feeling that am doing a deed more than dangerous , am committing a perhaps crime)self approaches the fatally attracting pail : now, over fatally it(dangerously)stooping , peers. . . & , breathless , sees(recoiling!). . . horrific afloat images of meless, images in a dim liquid , images dreadfully themselves warping . . .
now the latest victim arises. Whom-negative now gently micro-pastes upon a board. Me(positive)micro- fishes gently from pail’s witchy broth.
& , studying carefully atrocity, asks solemnly
what are you?are you Swedish?
American(I claim ; tottering)
businessman?(ruthlessly he pursues)
“NYET!”
engineer?
(calm, now) “peesahotel ee hoodozhnik” (227-28)

Like Narcissus who gazed into the water and fell in love with his own image, Cummings here peers into this mirror-like surface, but unlike Narcissus he recoils from this image, which is shapeless and formless from the developing solution. On one level, this is simply a case of his being appalled by a bad passport photograph, a common enough complaint among tourists; but it is also a moment when Cummings sees his identity transformed and dissolving. He sees himself nameless, faceless, and micro-pasted on a board.

Cummings resists the mediation that he finds himself continually subject to and the perceived threat to his identity in the visa office by reclaiming an image of his own as he gets ready to depart from Russia. Despite his fears, the day after he visits Lenin's tomb, his exit visa finally comes through and, as a result, he will be able to leave Moscow according to his schedule. He does some last-minute shopping in the gift store and, among other items, buys a postcard of St. Basil's Cathedral: "& 2 comrades visit another counter, where comrade I buy some large pretty bad photographs (1 of Arabian Nights) and 12 faintly sentimental postcards and a very terrifying indeed map of the world in Russian" (248). The building that Ivan the Terrible had protected against ever being reproduced is here pictured on a postcard, mass produced for any and all to buy. Far from finding this offensive or crass, or from feeling that this image has been degraded through reproduction, Cummings buys the postcard to remind him of his time in Moscow, in an act that marks him again as a tourist. In *EIMI*, he describes St. Basil's, using language that tries to recreate his view of the building's swirling forms and at the same time records the contrasting stories that have accrued to the building as a cultural landmark; but what he chooses to take with him out of the country is the image alone on the postcard, a testimony to his own vision rather than the interpretations of his various guides. This purchase indicates that Cummings never took this role as a tourist wholly ironically, seeing in it a form in which he could wander loosely.

Cummings' journey out of Russia is one of anticipation and continued frustrations over the details of his passage; but as he leaves, the nuisances of mere bureaucracy are replaced by other inconveniences, obstructions, and even outright absurdities. Once on board the ship bound for Istanbul, the departure is delayed as the result of engine trouble: "a wouldbe circular portion of our noble engine's vitals was only yesterday discovered to be imperfect" (354). The boat—named after the German Socialist writer, Franz Mehring (1846-1919), who was associated with Rosa Luxemburg and who wrote a biography of Karl Marx—is moored in the harbor for what seems like an eternity to Cummings, who is eager to leave Russia. He feels "marooned upon a desert island" as he waits for the ship to set sail. His impatience makes him think again of Russia as hell, as both time and space contract: "The World of where we out of hell shall go if only something happens if / only this / agony will not become eternal" (356). The ship eventually sets out, much to Cummings' relief, but he wakes the next morning only to find that the ship is still back in the port in Odessa: "Not 1 one centimeter has Russia receded" (359). As it turns out, the captain had sailed out in a circle and returned to port in order to test the newly repaired engines.

This second sight of Odessa, which he had hoped to have put behind him, fills him with an uncanny dread as he feels he will never leave: "maybe we're kind of moving backward since we you know can't move sort of forward. Maybe there'll be Kiev and Moscow and N [the Polish city through which the train passed at the very beginning of the book] and the very Paris I left at the very moment I left" (362). This

futile movement made by the ship, the huge loop that goes nowhere, is for Cummings a further and final indication of the futility that he found in Soviet life, an existence fueled by propaganda but going nowhere.

The image of the Soviet State as a giant modern conveyance is one that Cummings had come across before. During his stay in Moscow, Cummings had been translating Louis Aragon's socialist poem "The Red Front," a poem he clearly objects to. At one point, we see Cummings in the act of translating, and he offers his running commentary on the poem:

(and now , comrades , we come to this paean's infantile climax : now the language , fairly wetting its drawers , begins achugging and apuffing—"all aboard!" the paeaner now ecstatically cries—"everybody jump on the red train!"(alias , N.B., the bandwagon)—"nobody will be left behind!"(and of course Prosperity is just around the Corner)—U-S-S-R , choo-choo-choo-choo (143)

The Soviet Union is here likened to a train whose progress into the future is assured. Aragon's poem, which Cummings' refers to later as that "hymn of hate" (175), ends with the sound of the letters U S S R mimicking the huffing and puffing of a steam engine, as word and thing merge:

It's the train of the red star
which burns the stations the signals the skies
SSSR October October it's the express
October across the universe SS
SR SSSR SSSR
SSSR SSSR (CP 897)

As if in contrast to this futuristic praise of machinery and image of inevitable progress, Cummings offers the image of the Franz Mering (*sic*), the ship named after the "greatest socialist whoever lived," with its broken engine looping back to where it started.

Eventually, the ship manages to leave the port, much to Cummings' relief, and they arrive the following day in Turkey where he will then take a train to Paris. Cummings celebrates both the train and his egress from Russia even as he mocks Aragon's poem and the ideology for which it is a vehicle. In Istanbul he gets his train ticket for the Orient Express with comparative ease. In his relief and his glee about finally exiting Russia, Cummings mocks the propagandistic tone of Aragon's poem: "You es es are are es vee pee pee dee kyou kyou ee dee ay men. . . A, train ; Is : We . We are a train are the express we are that Simplon Orient train from Stamboul to Pythian Transit" (411). The sounds that comprise "USSR" and that mimic the sound of the train also

playfully elide into R.S.V.P, P.D.Q, and Q.E.D., ending with “Amen.”

When the train stops briefly at a switching station in the Balkans, Cummings gets off and offers a prayer to aliveness, of which even the train itself is a part: “metal steed, very treacherously wherefrom descending the promiscuous urbans plundered rusthrough you I greet all itgods” (418). Clearly meant to be a counter-hymn to Aragon’s “hymn of hate,” Cummings here also foresees the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union, even as he recalls those moments of beauty that he saw, especially St. Basil’s:

I prophecy to faultless them a moving within feelfully Himself Artist, Whose will is dream, only Whose language is silence—heartily to most heartless them I say that their immaculate circles are mere warped reflections of one selfinventingly unmitigated Spiral (of selfdestroyingly how strict untranslatable swooping doomlessly selfcontradicting imperfection or To Be). (418)

Cummings counters the immaculate circles, which represent the enclosed space of Moscow, the circles of Hell in Dante’s *Inferno*, the circular, futile journey of the Franz Mering, against the “unmitigated Spirals,” which represent both the fluid forms of the self traveling in and out of Russia and the spiral-shaped onion domes of St. Basil’s cathedral. By seeing Russia for himself, Cummings has seen the “warped reflections” of what life could be like in Russia and at the same time the distorted image of his own self that is always in the process of becoming.

When Cummings had earlier waked to find that the Franz Mering had returned to the port in Odessa, he briefly felt that he was going back in time to his original point of departure in Paris, a feeling that filled him with an unnamable dread and a sense of frustration. But on board the train, as Cummings realizes that he is finally heading home, his experiences of the past several weeks come rushing back to him. His mind opens as these memories flow together in a joyous, exuberant vision:

Something Fabulous L’s M a filthy big baby stealthily WHAT’S—a tension?that pill!Bolshoy means : it’s the cap—And time moans in(that serious disease)of marble - or - something INTOURIST of wonderful one hoss ; for both of us haven’t the train’s. Deer in Sir Ladybug’s world of Was hammer and a sickle and sonofabitch—over nearly everything a mirror has been bandaged you smoke mystic Thelike change, that’s something in people are writing’s as funny. . . but life, life! Enlivened by si je me vous ne ça(lower of gent : Verb The be to seems (430)

His memories rush over recent events—from St. Basil’s (“Something Fabulous”), to Lenin’s Mausoleum, to Intourist, to the opening scene on board the train. His recollection stops just short of reiterating the first word of the book, “SHUT.”

As the train moves forward towards Paris, Cummings' mind returns to Moscow and his time there, but unlike the dread that he feels on board the Franz Mering when he also felt as if he were returning to Moscow, here he has a sense of relief and openness. The language is again difficult, with the words oddly spaced and weirdly punctuated, more so than usual, but it is not obscure in the way that other passages of the book are obscure. There is a sense of familiarity to all of the words that Cummings places before us, as if he were inventorying his memory or clicking rapidly through a slide show of places that we have come to know deeply through Cummings, having riddled out his originally obscure presentation of them.

EIMI ends with the word "OPEN," but more importantly it ends with a sense of movement. The words cascade off the page. There is no final vision of a terminal point or destination city, the way there is at the end of *The Enormous Room*, for instance, as Cummings, on being released from a French Detention camp, sees the New York harbor like Bunyan's Celestial City, but only the perpetual spiraling movement of Cummings' mind that ranges among his earliest memories, his recent trip, his immediate present, and the unknown future. This kind of fluid movement that, in his letter regarding *ViVa*, Cummings had associated with children who "inhabit forms," wandering loosely, is, for him, more valuable than the images of unidirectional travel and progress that constitute Aragon's poem or the pointless circles described by the Franz Mering and that represented to him the Russian revolution as a whole. The various roles in which Cummings traveled and the various ways of seeing that were associated with these roles all return to Cummings as we witness his journey taking form in his mind at the same time that it takes form on the page.

—Brooklyn, NY

Notes

- 1 Ezra Pound, "Augment of the Novel," *Contributions to Periodicals*, Volume 8. 95. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text
- 2 See Ezra Pound, "E.E. Cummings Alive," *Contributions to Periodicals* Volume 6: 1933-1935: pp. 225-26. This essay originally appeared in *The New English Weekly* 6:10 (20 December 1934), 210-11; Ezra Pound, *If This Be Treason* (Siena: Tip, 1948).
- 3 For more on Pound's use of the term "diagnosis" when describing the function of prose and the relationship of his critical methods to the methods and terminology of science, see Ian Bell, *Critic as Scientist*, especially pp. 5-16. See also Herbert Schneidau, *The Image and the Real*. Schneidau describes how Pound's promotion of imagism, which stressed precision and accuracy of perception, and his focus on the presentation of detail as a way of constructing a long poem, were influenced by the prose tradition of Henry James and, more particularly, Ford Madox Ford. See especially chapter 1, "Imagism as Discipline: Hueffer and the Prose

Tradition" (3-32).

4 For a further discussion of the role of western correspondents in Russia during this period see Whitman Bassow, *The Moscow Correspondents*.

5 According to Kennedy, "[v]ery few people had visited Russia and seen what was happening there, for the situation of being beleaguered by the Great Powers had created an isolationist paranoia on the part of the Soviet leaders. Access to or observation of Russia under the Reds was tightly restricted, and almost all the information given to the world came carefully filtered from headquarters in Moscow" (306).

6 Commenting on the theme of the voyage to the underworld, Kennedy suggests that Cummings' allusions to Dante's *Divine Comedy* are more of a casual frame of reference than a rigid structural device: "[a]lthough Cummings does not strive to duplicate the complexity of the allegorical points in Dante's poem, he picks up correspondences wherever he can in order to give shape and extra dimension to his book" (*Dreams* 329).

7 Available on side one of *E. E. Cummings Reads*.

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