

**"All These Fine People  
Were Arrested as Espions":  
Detainees in *The Enormous Room***

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[Note: for a list of the detainees, in the order they appear and with additional information, see the Appendix]

The multitude of detainees at La Ferté-Macé evoked an intriguing problem for E. E. Cummings in his writing of *The Enormous Room*: how to present all these detainees in an organized and comprehensible fashion. Cummings' narrative strategy brilliantly and artistically solved this dilemma. I will discuss this strategy by showing the three modes C, the narrator, a persona based on Cummings, adopts to introduce and describe the detainees. Since part of the difficulty is the immense growth of their number during C's few weeks at La Ferté, I will discuss the reason for this and some of its effects. I will conclude by noting a deviation from the reality of the detainees' lives; this deviation makes the book more intelligible.

The first carefully detailed scene of C's first morning at La Ferté is crucial. When he awakens in the room he will call Enormous, he is overwhelmed with confusion. His first few minutes are a bewildering kaleidoscope of characters, bewildering for C and for the reader. Herein lies E.E. Cummings' artistry. The reader is immediately drawn into the Enormous Room stunned by the same confusion that unnerves C. The first of the three modes that he uses to introduce the multitude of detainees stems from this confusion. Having been arrested and taken away by gendarmes from his Norton Harjes Ambulance Section, and having spent the previous three nights in gendarmeries, in Noyen and Grez, he goes to sleep thinking he is in another gendarmerie, this one in Marseilles. He is awakened, disoriented and jolted, by a youth in a Belgian uniform "with a red tassel bobbing in its eyes," clearly not a gendarme. C says, "I decided I had gone completely crazy." Gazing "blankly around," he has no idea where he is or who the "startling identities" around him might be. His hand is "Trembling with this chaos." On each mattress surrounding his on the floor he sees a "crude imitation of humanity." Suddenly a "vulturelike silhouette" dashes down the room leaving an "insane confusion." Amid the "crazy din," "a handsome

figure” tells him, “Your friend’s here, Johnny, and wants to see you” (44-45). In this dramatic fashion, C is beginning to introduce the first of the multitude of detainees.

His friend B (William Slater Brown), somehow there, begins to explain the situation and the men around them. “There are,” he says, “the finest people here.” C, completely befuddled, asks, “Please be frank . . . am I dreaming, or is this a bughouse?”

“This is Camp de Triage de La Ferté-Macé, Orne, France,” B explains, “and all these fine people were arrested as espions [spies].” “Do you mean to say we’re espions too?” “Of course,” B answers, “Thank God!”

Mentioning their experience with the detested Mr. A, the Chief of their Ambulance Section, B concludes, “Cummings, I tell you this is the finest place on earth.” Hearing all this, C exults: “I laughed for sheer joy” (46-47).

Before detailing C’s first mode of introducing the detainees, I will mention the angle of vision from which they are presented. That laugh here in the first moments of C’s first morning at La Ferté encapsulates an intrinsic theme of *The Enormous Room*. The paradox of C’s intense joy while detained is significant and revealing. C is abundantly alive, at least until B’s departure. He expresses his joy often. At the end of his first day, he says to B, “By God . . . this is the finest place I’ve ever been in my life.” He then reclines in an “ecstasy of happiness and weariness” (80). Throughout his time at La Ferté a variety of events gladdens him; he finds “pleasures in the kitchen” with Afrique and the Cook (105); Mexique’s story of the Mexican revolution is “utterly delightful” (132); he feels “immense astonishment and delight” at the amazing animal sounds the men make during Rockefeller’s night (143); after the water pail episode he is “shaking with laughter” (180). C wavers between “aliveness and non-existence,” as he terms it, but aliveness predominates (83). His evaluation shortly before he leaves is conclusive: “I was happier at La Ferté Macé, with the Delectable Mountains about me, than the very keenest words can pretend to express” (229).

C’s statement, “I laughed for sheer joy,” is echoed in the ebullience of his vivid descriptions of the detainees.

It is with gusto, then, that C, in the first of his three modes introducing the detainees, wisely selects just a few of the thirty in the room at the time so as not to inundate the reader at the start. He describes these first, and waits to reveal their names. It would have been simple immedi-

ately to name the three detainees (besides B) we have already seen, the youth with the red tassel, the “vulturelike silhouette,” and “the handsome figure.” However, in C’s first hours in the Enormous Room this would be neither lifelike nor effective.

A “terrific tumult,” C begins, “interrupted my mirth. . . . I turned in terror to see my paillasse [straw mattress] in the clutches of four men.” One is “a clean-shaved youngish man with lively eyes, alert and muscular . . . who had called me ‘Johnny’”; another is “an incoherent personage enveloped in a buffoonery of amazing rags and patches, with a shabby head on which excited wisps of dirty hair stood upright in excitement, and the tall ludicrous extraordinary almost noble figure of a dancing bear.” A third is “a six-foot combination of yellow hair, red hooligan face, and sky-blue trousers.” Finally there is “the undersized tasseled mucker in Belgian uniform, with a pimply rogue’s mug . . .” (47). Already we can note two characteristics of C’s telling descriptions that we will find often throughout—the concentration on the instantly seen, like heads and eyes and clothes, and the immediate judgments like “hooligan,” “mucker,” “rogue,” “noble.”

C’s descriptions are so apt that in the next paragraph he can identify each man with a two-word phrase, examples being, “Belgian uniform,” “hooligan visage,” “clean-shaven man,” and “incoherent bear.” Soon, he shortens these appellations, for most, to a single tag: “the tassel,” “the trousers,” “the bear.” The “child’s voice” of a “fluffy little gnome-shaped man” upbraids the mattress-tugging men. C tags him “the gnome” (47-48). He often uses such tags drawn from his descriptions instead of names.

One by one, C reveals the names of this initial group except for the man he here describes as “the bear”; refusing to name him now, C identifies him as a Delectable Mountain. Later we deduce he is Surplice.

Taking an exploratory stroll around the room, C meets one other inhabitant, that “apotheosis of injured nobility” in a swallowtail coat, Count Bragard (52). Thus, C has carefully introduced seven detainees besides B and himself. Visiting the cour during both the morning and afternoon promenades, he meets and names again most of these seven. This reiteration reinforces the names; the reader now knows an initial group of the detainees.

This has been C’s first mode of introducing the inhabitants of the Enormous Room. These form a small group. It is characteristic of C’s narrative strategy to introduce the detainees in graspable numbers. It is also one of his techniques to interject analysis and commentary between this

mode and the second, as well as between that and the third. In this way, each mode is isolated; readers can assimilate one small group before moving on to the next.

Consequently, after describing and naming the initial group, C interjects an account of his learning, as he says, “an astonishing lot” about the rules and routines of La Ferté (59). Then, at the evening promenade of the first day he begins his second mode of introducing, what he terms “portraits,” presenting five here. C’s portraits are set pieces of description and analysis.

He also begins here a key aspect of his depictions; he and B start to create nicknames for some of the detainees. For the initial group in the first morning C necessarily chooses men with previously given names. That is true here for some as in “His name was Jan” (71). But for others, he says, for example, “We called him Judas.” The “we” of the book most of the time refers to C and B. The portrait of Judas here exemplifies my earlier point about immediate judgments being made in descriptions: “On gazing for the first time directly at him I experienced a feeling of nausea” (72). This negative judgment and that of the “hooligan” of the initial group, Harree, will be intensified later in their comparison with Surplice as a Delectable Mountain. Again, with initial judgment of “Jovelike” and “Perhaps a god,” C vividly portrays one of the Delectable Mountains. His given name is Josef Demestre, but, C says, “We called him The Wanderer” (73-74).

C continues this second mode of introducing with another group of portraits, sixteen in all. In each of these portraits the man is described at some length and named. All these men seen so far, “with one or two exceptions,” are, he indicates, among the thirty detained at La Ferté when he arrives (107). He concludes his first day in the room suggesting that he has met “a number of extremely interesting individuals” (79). With the second day, he brings the “definite progression” of his account to a close: “a new period opens.” This is the period of “timelessness,” where, he says, “events can no longer succeed each other . . .” (82-83).

During this period, a flood of arrivals will pour in. Consequently, between the portraits and the third mode of introducing the detainees, C wisely interjects his chapter on Apollyon, the Director, with its memorable analysis of Fear, Women, and Sunday. With the flood impending, C advises the reader, “So let us tighten our belts . . . seize our staffs into our hands, and continue the ascent begun with the first pages of the story” (129).

As such, C's third mode of introducing involves arrivals into the room who more than double the initial thirty. They come in by ones and twos and in larger groups. C describes these as "les nouveaux whose arrivals and reactions constituted the actual or kinetic aspect of our otherwise merely real Nonexistence" (129). In the first of the larger groups, he tells us of the arrival of what he calls "four nouveaux of a decidedly interesting appearance" (138). These are described as they come in the room, and C also shows their immediate characteristic reactions. We see Zulu, a Delectable Mountain, for example, smoking calmly, expressionless—and "Unknowable" (139).

The last group to arrive, "gladdened—or at any rate galvanized" the room, C writes, "by the single biggest contribution in its history:the arrival simultaneously of six extraordinary persons . . ." (152). He lists all their names before describing each in order as "First," "Second," and so on. However, he uses "Fifth" twice so there are actually seven arrivals (155). This large number creates not only what he terms an "entertaining incident" but also consternation as the room is already packed with "some sixty or seventy paillasses" (152).

C suggests of this group that their "names alone should be of more than general interest" (152). The first man sits down immediately to read a journal with a large magnifying glass thus acquiring his name. The Trick Raincoat is a pimp, "the cut of whose belted raincoat gave away his profession" (153). The Messenger Boy, an "ancient youth," wears a Messenger's cap (153). Most of these arrivals are named by C and B, but The Hat, a man who clutched his derby to his head with both hands while protesting a haircut necessary for health reasons, was "christened" Le Chapeau by Zulu (153). The Alsatian is named after his area. The Whitebearded Raper is a "decrepit" old man who, C asserts, has been "arrested—incredibly enough—for 'rape'" (155). One of the more colorful aspects of *The Enormous Room* is the names. These cited here are characteristic examples of C and B's naming.

The most kinetic of all the arrivals is the glorious entrance of one of the Delectable Mountains, Jean Le Nègre. Life at La Ferté will never be the same.

A few of the arrivals of Les Nouveaux are unnoted. C just mentions these men as being in the room. There are also a number of unnamed men, like a man who asked about Shakespeare. Some of these may be du-

plicates. However, the number of named inhabitants of the room has climbed above sixty.

The women detainees may total even more. C estimates there may be as many as a hundred in the Women's Wing. Most of the women detainees are prostitutes, arrested not for that (prostitution was legal in France then) but for being in the Zone of the Armies where civilians were restricted. It should be noted that there are other women at La Ferté. These are mostly wives of men like the Wanderer who volunteered to be incarcerated with their mates. Some, again like the Wanderer's wife, brought their children, as did a few men such as The Spy who came with his daughter.

C's contact with the women is severely limited; he talks with only one, La Belge, a translator. He names only five of the prostitutes. One is Lulu, Jean's friend. C presents memorable graphic portraits of the other four: Celina Tek, Lily, Lena, and Renée. The women are a major aspect of C's account of life at La Ferté; their activities and antics provide fascination, tension, frustration, and amusement. They also stimulate a significant portion of C's bitterness about injustices at La Ferté especially against Apollyon.

I turn now to the reason C (and his reader) have had to contend with such an immense growing number of detainees. This lies in the military situation of France in wartime 1917. Extensive mutinies of French troops had caused a raging panic at the highest levels of the French Army and French Government. With decimated front lines exposed to the Germans, both went to extraordinary levels to suppress knowledge of the extent of the mutinies. It was an easy choice to pick up any alien who tangled with the police.

Are all these "fine people" including B and C arrested as espions as B announces? There is no reason to think so. This is but one of B's hyperbolic pronouncements which sways C. Clearly the two Americans were not arrested as spies. Slater Brown noted in a 1988 letter: "it was not those dumb, jejune letters of mine that got us into trouble. It was the fact that C. and I knew all about the violent mutinies in the French Army a few months before Cummings and I reached the front. We learned all about them from the poilus. The French did everything, naturally, to suppress the news. We two were loaded with dynamite" ("William Slater Brown" 90).

Arguing against B's notion that "all" were arrested as spies, I contend that none of them were. First of all, would the French send anyone seriously suspected of spying for the Germans to a place like La Ferté? My

word for La Ferté is *porous*. During the short time C is there at least three men escape: The Barber, The Young Russian and The Frog. It is easy to get out. It is amazing how many inmates can be outside the walls on various errands. The Machine-Fixer and Garibaldi help C to the train when he leaves; he even buys them a drink in a tavern opposite the *gare*. There are no guards with them. The guards are little answer to any serious escape attempt. They are not gendarmes; they are *réformé* soldiers, disabled; one has a wooden hand, another a “left leg made,” C believes, “of tin” (111). One, ordered to fire, cannot find his cartridges. In short, for the French in dire and immediate danger of losing the war to send suspected German spies to porous La Ferté would have been utter madness.

Further, C gives more mundane reasons than spying for the arrest of the detainees. Some were arrested for petty crimes; others because of their nationality; a few for more serious offenses in war time, like M. Auguste, a munitions worker who went on strike; Bill, a Dutch soldier who deserted; The Washing-Machine Man, who aided Dutch deserters. C says that Jean Le Nègre “was remanded to La Ferté for psychopathic observation and safe keeping on the technical charge of wearing an English officer’s uniform” (201). The Zulu does not know why he was arrested, but he arrives with a box containing cartridges and knives, “brought along as evidence” (175). Strangely enough, he is allowed to keep them in the Enormous Room. (So much for security at La Ferté!)

For whatever reasons the detainees, mostly aliens, are sent to La Ferté, C condemns the French Government. He does so again when the men begin to leave according to the judging Commission’s verdicts. La Ferté is a *Camp de Triage*, a stepping-stone to freedom, to the harsh prison Précigné, or to internal exile within France. C seems to have been the only detainee to be sentenced to internal exile. The decisions of the Commission for the other detainees launch further typically vitriolic denunciations. C claims that the ways of God and the French Government were “inscrutable”: justice would demand different fates for the Wanderer and the Fighting Sheeney. Instead, both go to Précigné (221). One of his more sarcastic tirades against the French Government was instigated by its sending Bill back to Holland as a deserter.

Finally, there is a deviation from the reality, from the historical record, of the detainees’ life at La Ferté. C dates the Commission as arriving “late in November.” Since it meets only every three months, he indicates that “B and I (by arriving when we did) had just escaped its clutches.”

C terms this “one of the luckiest things in my life” (215). After going through the Commission, C says, “For a week we waited” for the decisions (221). However Richard Kennedy writes in his *Dreams in the Mirror* that the Commission met with E. E. Cummings on October 17, not in late November, and the decision was sent to La Ferté not a week but over seven weeks later on December 8 (155). The date of the Commission’s October visit is corroborated by a letter from Cummings at La Ferté to his mother indicating that the Commission was arriving on October 15 (*Letters* 37).

Just before he leaves La Ferté, C suggests that he does not care if his reader believes his account is “real” or not (229). C uses his imagination to restructure his time line; he moves beyond reality, beyond what Cummings in a poem terms the “colossal hoax of clocks and calendars” (*CP* 659). Changing the Commission’s arrival from October to late November, adopting this fictional device, C completes his narrative strategy. Only after describing the thirty in the room his first day and following these with the later arrivals, does he present the Commission and describe the bulk of the departures including B’s and his own. All this has a natural narrative flow; it seems logical to place the Commission at the end, after the arrivals, not at the beginning. C’s narrative strategies, including this fictional element amid the realities of his account of the detainees’ life at La Ferté, have made the book more comprehensible. This deviation may not be historically “real” but it rings true. In one of his poems Cummings notes that “the departure of everything real is the / arrival of everything true” (*CP* 720). *The Enormous Room* is E. E. Cummings’ vision of the truth of the life of the multitude of detainees at La Ferté-Macé. It is a true and splendid book, characteristic of all of Cummings’ writing, individualistic, imaginative, unique.



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## APPENDIX: Characters

Key: 1)=country; 2)=arrested for; 3)=sentence

### The Men

#### I. First Morning; Initial Group

C (E. E. Cummings)	1) United States 2) knows of mutinies; 3) internal exile; freedom
Pompom	1) Holland; 3) Précigné
Fritz	1) Denmark; 3) freedom
John the Baigneur	1) Holland; 3) refuses to leave; still at La Ferté when C leaves
B (William Slater Brown)	1) United States; 2) knows of mutinies; 3) Précigné
Harree	1) Holland; 3) Précigné
Surplice (The Bear), AKA Chaude Pisse; the Pole; Syph’lis	1) Poland; 3) Précigné
M. Auguste	1) Belgium; 2) munitions worker on strike; 3) Précigné
Count F.A. de Bragard	1) England; 3) departs for ?

#### II. Portraits

##### A) Five Portraits

1. Jan 1) Denmark; 3) “left us” for ? (221)
2. The Silent Man 1) Austria; 2) nationality

- |                                  |                         |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 3. Judas                         | 3) still at La Ferté    |
| 4. M. Pet-air                    | 1) Belgium; 3) Précigné |
| 5. The Wanderer (Josef Demestre) | 3) Précigné             |

**B) A Group of Portraits**

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| 1. The Schoolmaster             | 1) Alsace-Lorraine; 2) subversive teaching?  |
| 2. Emile the Bum                | 1) Belgium; 2) argues against the price of potatoes?   |
| 3. The Orange Cap               | 1) Austria; 2) nationality   |
| 4. So-and-So, being a Turk      | 1) Turkey; 2) nationality  |
| 5. The Professor Of Dancing     | 1) France?; 2) a “mistake” (90); 3) left after a short while   |
| 6. Bear II                      | 2) an anarchist; 3) “lumbered off one day” (91)  |
| 7. The Young Russian            | 1) Russia; 3) escapes  |
| 8. The Barber                   | 3) escapes   |
| 9. Môme le Balayeur             |  |
| 10. Garibaldi                   | 1) born France of English mother, Italian father; speaks “Cockney Whit chapel English” (95);<br>2) theft; 3) still at La Ferté |
| 11. The Clever Man              | 1) Holland; 2) winning at cards at time of war?; 3) freedom  |
| 12. The Skipper                 | 1) Holland; 2) with sons throws gendarmes into canal; 3) freedom   |
| 13. The Machine-Fixer           | 1) Belgium; 2) socialist or anarchist; 3) still at La Ferté when C leaves, but later Précigné                                  |
| 14. Afrique                     | 3) still at La Ferté   |
| 15. Brown Bread                 | 1) Belgium; 3) C doesn’t care what happened to him   |
| 16. The Man Who Played Too Late | 2) with orchestra “did that very thing” in Paris (106)   |

### *III. Les Nouveaux*

Pete	1) Holland; 3) Précigné
Mexique (Philippe Burgos)	2) Mexico; 2) misses his ship; 3) still at La Ferté
One-Eyed David	
The Young (or Holland) Skipper	1) Holland; 3) still at La Ferté
The Young Skipper's Mater	1) Holland
Le Garde Champêtre	1) Belgium
Jo Jo the Lion Faced Boy	1) French; 2) "mistakenly arrested" (136); 3) back to Paris
The Frog, AKA Le Coiffeur	1) French?; 3) escapes
The Lobster	
<b>Group of Four:</b>	
1. Bill the Hollander, AKA America Lakes	1) Holland; 2) deserter; 3) returned to Dutch authorities
2. The Babysnatcher	1) Belgium
3. The Young Pole	1) Poland; 3) still at La Ferté
4. Zulu	1) Poland; 2) box of cartridges and knives; 3) still at La Ferté
The Cordonnier	3) still at La Ferté
The Spanish Whoremaster	1) Spain; 2) pimp from La Santé, Paris Prison
The Fighting Sheeney Rockyfeller	2) pimp from La Santé?; 3) Précigné 1) Romania; 2) pimp from La Santé? 3) Précigné
The Spy	1) England? (speaks Cockney English)
Muskowitz the Cock-eyed Millionaire	
The Belgian Song Writer	1) Belgium



## **The Women**

### **Prostitutes Arrested in the Zone of the Armies**

- |               |               |
|---------------|---------------|
| 1. Lulu       | 3) left for ? |
| 2. Celina Tek | 1) Belgium    |
| 3. Lena       | 1) Belgium    |
| 4. Lily       | 1) Germany    |
| 5. Renée      |               |

## **Other Women**

Wife (née Feliska) of The Wanderer

Wife of One Eyed David

La Belge 1) Belgium

A Russian Lady 1) Russia

## **Other Children**

Children of The Wanderer and his Wife:

a baby

a girl (three years old)

Chocolate (girl of fourteen)

The Imp (boy of six)

The Spy's daughter (thirteen)

a horrid boy "arrested with his parent" and who sold sabots to C (142)

a little and tough boy who enters with Jean le Nègre

## **Germans**

Richard (Ree-shar), "an ordinary prisoner like all of us" (60) but who had his own room

The Cook

Marguerite, laundress; one of the "femmes honnêtes" whose nationality "cost them their liberty" (60)