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**Review of David Farley's *Modernist Travel Writing: Intellectuals Abroad* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 2010)**

Jacques Demarcq

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Having been for the past four or five years attempting an unabridged French version of the untranslatable, if not unreadable, text called *EIMI*, I welcome any insight into this enormous book. In *Modernist Travel Writing*, David G. Farley brings together four essays: 1) about Ezra Pound on 1912 walking tour of the southwestern part of France where the troubadours lived six or seven centuries beforehand, and on the connections between this trip and his work, from *The Spirit of Romance* to *The Cantos*, through his travel notes published in 1992 by Richard Sieburth under the title, *A Walking Tour* (New Directions); 2) "E. E. Cummings Intourist in the Un-world," a first version of which appeared in *Spring 12*; 3) on the visit Wyndham Lewis made to Morocco in 1931 during the French protectorate and the satiric account he relates in *Filibusters in Barbary* (1932); and 4) concerning Rebecca West's sojourn in Yugoslavia starting in 1937 and the anti-Nazi text it inspired her to write at the beginning of WWII, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941).

For Farley, these works have in common that the desire to testify does not inhibit their authors from using innovative writing techniques. According to him, this complexity reflects the economic and political instability which characterized the period between the wars—not a bad call.

Pound is one of the initiators of this liberated writing. Farley pays perhaps too much attention to his ambiguous relationship with Cummings, whose *EIMI* he considers a masterpiece, if not literary, at least political. Pound comments upon *EIMI* on 20 December 1934, a year and a half after its publication, in *The New English Weekly*, a little magazine from London, known for its support of Social Credit, and then in a 1941 article, "Augment of the Novel" (in *New Directions* 6), and lastly during his chats on Mussolini's fascist radio station in May 1942.

Farley does not insist on Pound's links with Wyndham Lewis, co-editor of *Blast* (1914-1915) and a one-time admirer of Hitler. Rather, he highlights the reciprocal interest that Lewis and West had in each other, despite their contradictory political affinities. Regarding Pound, Lewis, and West, Farley contextualizes their travels and texts within their complete works.

But he gives Cummings a different treatment, having clearly neglected to read his poems. Hence the major flaws in his essay: on the one hand, an exaggerated insistence on the obscurity of style Farley perceives in *EIMI*—familiarity with the poems and their syntax would have enlightened him; on the other hand, Farley's inability to consider this travel journal in the context of the writer's evolution, what Norman Friedman called "growth." All too often critics treat Cummings as some kind of megalith erected once and for all; then they attack the granite with stylistic, philosophic or simply explanatory chisels, in order to detach a few significant but fragmentary shards. If an image can give us something that approaches Cummings' work, it is his own description of the passage of a group of birds, whose point of departure we know only partially and whose destination is unknown even to themselves, but who for the moment fly magnificently in an evolving landscape itself in the process of evolving (see CP 429, 434, and 448).

Motion is at the heart of Cummings' aesthetic and ethic. Farley perceives this: "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. . . . Cummings emerges from Lenin's Tomb more convinced than ever of the futility of communism and the value and importance of movement" (90). Of course, Farley sees in *EIMI* a reworking of *The Enormous Room*, and he is quite right to emphasize the author's attitude of detachment: "the Cummings of *EIMI*, while striving for a like detachment, often finds himself most lost precisely at those moments where he is most detached" (73); "engagement is for Cummings a fraught enterprise, and aloofness a tempting posture that he rarely resists" (87). Writing an introduction to the reprint of *The Enormous Room* in 1934, Cummings takes the opportunity to tout *EIMI*, published the preceding year, and remarks upon the similarities and differences of the two books: "*EIMI* is the individual again; a more complex individual, a more enormous room" ("Introduction" viii). This growth is due to his experience of life, particularly his love life, but also the books he wrote between *The Enormous Room* and *EIMI*, amongst them *is 5*, *Him*, and *ViVa*. Farley does not draw the proper conclusions from a remark he quotes by Francis Fergusson on the occasion of the re-publication of *EIMI* in 1950: "[Russia is] the end of all that Paris in the twenties, 'Paris in the spring,' meant to his generation of Americans in their perennially youthful quest for life and freedom" (Farley 65). Indeed, *EIMI* represents a turning point in Cummings'

work: both the end of a certain happy-go-lucky optimism and the beginning of a new responsiveness to a wider vision of human destiny and not just that of the individual—one that some commentators have interpreted as adopting transcendental ideas. But a man does not go through Stalin's *Inferno* without returning a different man: "to change" is a leitmotiv of this book, as prevalent as the frequent and not always ironic qualifiers "miraculous," "marvelous," "wonderful." Cummings did not write *EIMI* to bear witness, and even less for self-expression. His main purpose was to understand what he had experienced and who he was as an individual. This holds for all his books and explains the amplification of his rewriting, as the book grew to ten times the size of his notes taken during the trip. By studying a literary genre, Modernist Travel Writing, Farley has missed the main reason for *EIMI*'s existence. Unlike the works of Wyndham Lewis, Rebecca West or even Pound, *EIMI* surmounts literary history and earns a place in a personal perspective that is both modest and boundless: that of "I," which in this book—exceptionally in Cummings' work—takes a capital, and who transcends himself in order to escape the hell that is most people's lot. The hell in question, that of the Russians as well as that of the Americans Cummings met in Moscow and Odessa, has a history, specific dates, that justify the journal format. *EIMI*'s success is to escape time and to be more easily readable today than it was in the 1930s. Homer also took his distance, and Joyce was better able to depict Dublin from his exile. It is particularly difficult to comment on a story without summarizing its episodes. And yet *EIMI* is full of events and characters that don't seem linked or hierarchized by any narrative matrix. Farley is obliged to base his analysis on a few sequences: the train from Paris to Moscow (10-11 May), the woman dragging a milkcan (12 May), the dialogue at the Soviet Consulate in Paris (12 May), the legends surrounding Saint Basil's Cathedral (18 May), the visit to the Tomb of Lenin (30 May), the false boat departure from Odessa (8-9 June), and the Simplon Express (12 June).

Despite grappling with a text he finds obscure, Farley demonstrates clairvoyance in his analysis of various passages. He insists on the pertinence of Cummings' often-displayed "naïveté" and compares it to a letter Cummings sent to his typographer S. A. Jacobs upon his return from the USSR (80). In this letter (quoted by Kennedy in *Dreams in the Mirror* 319), prisoners "inhabited by formulæ" are compared to children who "inhabit forms," with the understanding that "A form is something to wander in, to loose oneself in—a new largeness, dimensionally differing from

the so-called real world" (Farley 73). Consulting the text of this letter in its entirety, one perceives also Cummings' often expressed sensibility for the marvelous, something Farley could have taken greater notice of. As for the "so-called real world" and those reasonable adults who are supposed to inhabit it, Cummings tries to maintain, if not a childish outlook, at least one which eschews prejudices and the arguments that nourish them. Farley is not insensitive to this attitude, but he over-privileges interpretations based on value judgments or moral choices that Cummings treats as spontaneous rather than thoughtful reactions. Commenting on a discussion about flowers between Lidin and Cummings, Farley perceives a distinction between the useful and the beautiful in Cummings' arbitrage between "real" and "actual," even though the Cummings quote he uses to make his point contrasts "I Feel" with "thinking:" "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" (qtd. in Farley 85). Not being an ideologue, Cummings refuses to think for others, and rather tries to take what he has heard or seen and reinterpret it immediately for his reader.

Literary criticism does not need to give the best possible reading. Masterpieces resist all interpretations. Insofar as an analysis interests us, it motivates us to take another whack at a text. Farley's long essay (40 pages) will certainly give lovers of Pound, Wyndham Lewis, or Rebecca West the desire to have a look at *EIMI*. Its true merit is that it never leaves us indifferent.

—Paris, France

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