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EIMI AND LOUIS ARAGON'S THE ADVENTURES OF TELEMACHUS

Rajeev Kumar Kinra

EIMI must be read, not as the preaching of an Apostle, but rather as a deification of the Poet. But what kind of poet? Epic, perhaps. Modern, without a doubt. To say this, however, begs the question: What, if anything, do we mean by "modern-epic-poet?" Though clearly of an unappreciated quality, *EIMI* does not approach the allusive density of, for example, Joyce's *Ulysses* or Pound's *Cantos*. Nor—and this is important—does it even attempt to do so. If anything, and many readers saw *EIMI* in this light, one might compare it to *Finnegan's Wake*. But, as Richard Kennedy cautions, "the likeness is in spirit, not in manner. The style is a unique Cummings creation, one he had been developing for some time in letters to literary intimates, and it bears more likeness to his own experimental verse than to Joyce's final opus" (330). By now it should be clear that Cummings aligned himself with that segment of the avant-garde which sought to incorporate Classic texts and "make them new," as per Pound's dictum. In terms of a direct stylistic link, though, I would like to propose a figure whose influence on and importance to Cummings has been, until now, at best glossed over, and at worst wholly ignored: Louis Aragon.

In a 1954 Letter to John Sweeney, Cummings wrote: "Louis Aragon(who wrote *Le Front Rouge*)was,in the goodolddays of Paris,a lively if very occasional pal of mine" (Dupee 226). Ironically enough, Aragon had become an ardent Communist by the time Cummings made his way to Russia. In "the goodolddays," however, Aragon was among a group of writers and artists living in Paris who traveled in the same social circles as Cummings:

He had been spending time with the Surrealist poet Louis Aragon...He had been seeing Mikhail Larionov, the painter who was the principle designer for Les Ballet Russes, and his wife, the painter Natalya Goncharova. He had met Ilya Ehrenburg, the Russian novelist, and he had been talking with some 'pro-communist Americans' in Paris. (Kennedy 308)

Aragon, however, stands out among this group for a number of reasons. To begin with, he provided Cummings with a letter of introduction to Aragon's sister-in-law in Moscow, "(Madame Potiphar)& presented my departing self with an extraordinary assortment of capitalist gifts which I duly delivered:receiving an extremely enlightening experience in exchange(*EIMI*, 61-72)" (Dupee 226). Such gifts, as I have suggested, formed a part of what Cummings saw as his Dantesque role as the bringer of news; it is significant, then, that as "the original if not only comrade Santa Claus" (63) Cummings brings, among other things, magazines. The scene, as depicted in *EIMI*, draws particular attention to Madame Potiphar's interruptive exclamations of glee with each new one—"Vogue! Vogue!" (64)—in the midst of what should ostensibly be a serious discussion of Louis Aragon's politics, whether or not he intends to return to Russia, and Cummings' own poetry. The scene also contains one of the book's more extensive satires of the type of conversations Cummings inevitably had with devoted communists he came across in Moscow. For example:

unhe (conversationing): Take any hundred individuals. Take them from their houses over there. Ask each one if he or she is contented, well off. Each and every one, without exception, will tell you—NO! the necessities of life, even, are wanting in my case...Then put the hundred all TOGETHER : say to the hundred comrades, we have this end in view, we need soandso; help us. Each will give ten roubles. That's the difference between the action of individuals and the action of a mass!

I: 'entendu.'

Unhe: It's like poker—a royal flush is not as strong as a common card. One plus one plus one don't make three; they make—

I: Something else.

Unhe: Much more.

Most (I lead) of the autos hereabouts are Fords.

Yes (trumping) Ford sends us the, what is it...—parts: and we have plants to assemble them...

Do many individuals own Fords? (mildly.)

Nono....the difficult thing (tireless unhe thingishly continues) is to understand, first, a mass: and next, a mass's dictatorship—

in other words, to realize that Stalin is expressing, not himself, but the mass.

You mean, I presume, that comrade Stalin is not imposing his power on others, but is expressing their power.

(Delighted) : Exactly! It is not something personal, it is something IMPERSONAL. (70-1)

Aragon pops up again in *EIMI* when the Revolutionary Literature Bureau asks Cummings to translate "The Red Front," perhaps Aragon's most famous poem. For his part, Cummings knew by the time he was in Soviet Russia that his "old acquaintance" (64) had become a "fanatical Communist" (Dupee 226). And, based on Cummings' experiences in Moscow, it should hardly be surprising that he was appalled by what he called Aragon's "hymn of hate" (175). For example, to lines such as "hail to the materialistic dialectic and its incarnation, the red army," and "abandon night pestilence and the family . . . you are holding in your hands a laughing child . . . a child such as has never been seen . . . he knows beforehand how to speak, all the songs of the new life," Cummings responds: "And let's hope he also knows that all the microtelescoped rhetorical optipessimism of any premeditatedly Un(or possible)world may not katalyze 1 spontaneously singular impossibility or(shall we say) workofart" (142-3). Even so, it is worth noting that Cummings thought highly enough of "The Red Front"—or at least felt enough obligation to his friend—to forward his "translatory labours" (143) to Ezra Pound. Furthermore, while the passage in *EIMI* which refers to the effort at translating Aragon's opus is predominantly derisive and mocking of his friend's revolutionary politics, one senses that the tone is more that of a wistful friend who has grown apart from a companion than that of an attack on Aragon's character. He seems almost to pity his friend's naivete, rather than writing him off as a maniac.

Aesthetically speaking, it is clear that though Cummings dutifully translated it, "The Red Front" did not have much influence on the composition of *EIMI*—except insofar as Cummings takes several opportunities to mock its politics and its materialist poetics. The same cannot be said, however, of Aragon's pseudo-novel, *The*

Adventures of Telemachus. Published in 1922, Aragon's *Télémaque* serves as a neat stylistic foil to Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's "The Waste Land" (both published the same year). More to the point, the *Télémaque* fits the late avant-garde tendency to swallow and spit out recycled versions of the classics in a distinctly "modern" idiom. Suffice it to say that if they are flip sides of the same avant-garde coin, Aragon plays "tails" to Joyce's and Eliot's "heads."

His scatological parody of Fénelon's seventeenth century *Aventures de Télémaque*—a "didactic prose epic" (Aragon 5)—seems a much more likely precursor of *EIMI* than many of the more canonized High Modernist epics. Cummings surely knew the work, and would have found its innovative, playful, and at times self-consciously childish style amusing; indeed, he took many opportunities in *EIMI* to pronounce his own childish creed. "I'm a child. I like shining things" (64), he tells Madame Potiphar. Or, later on: "'—but...you—' upwrithingly 'you're just like A Little Boy!' sheless sobbed... 'no. Not just like. I Am a little boy' " (212). And, while there seems to be considerable debate among scholars regarding whether Aragon's *Télémaque* is, strictly speaking, a dadaist or surrealist work, the question is not important where *EIMI* is concerned. What concerns me here is the way it provided Cummings with a "modern-epic" which was a playful, almost inebriated alternative to the more high profile examples of his time.

In their introduction to Aragon's *Télémaque*, Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert write:

In rewriting Homer and Virgil for pedagogical reasons, [Fénelon] had maintained the continuity of the classical tradition while deviating from it mainly in his handling of poetic prose and his not too veiled attack on that warrior king, Louis XIV...Aragon's version provides an aggressive mise en abyme of the manifold literary conventions of epic literature: heroic models, narrativity, description, and didacticism. (6)

In Aragon, then, we have a precedent for the dismantling and eventual reshaping of epic conventions which will be the predominant aesthetic device in *EIMI*. Fénelon's work was itself a "deviation" from the classical norm and served as a poetic as well as polemical

tract, which will of course be somewhat true in *EIMI*; although, strangely enough, Aragon makes little of didacticism—in 1922 at any rate—and even Cummings, though violently against the Soviet system, is more a free spirit than a political dogmatist. Aragon and Cummings both take this epic inspiration a step further, and finally produce what might be called a "counter-novel, of which Fénelon [or Dante] had provided no more than a cast of characters" (ibid 6-7). Once again, the refrain of "oblique treatment for a classical subject" rings in our ears: "by mastering and playing with the narrative devices of classical episodic fiction [Aragon] succeeded in freeing himself from the constraints of mimeticism in regard to fable, meaning, and language" (ibid 7). Keeping in mind his early literary influences—Pound's Imagism, Vorticism, Marinetti's "words in freedom" and "destruction of syntax," etc.—we see clearly that *EIMI* is Cummings' most comprehensive effort to retool an epic text in a particular, modern format, and wind up outside "the constraints of mimeticism in regard to fable, meaning, and language." This is not to say, however, that *EIMI* is entirely free of a kind of aesthetic "counter-mimesis," wherein what is at stake is the faithful rendering of a particular artist's impressionistic thoughts. He employs "what amounts to a notation technique which strives to keep as close as language will allow to the original experience" (Friedman 122). If experience is fragmented and unruly, he seems to imply, then language must be fragmented and unruly in order to render that experience truthfully. Cummings explains his technique thus:

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 Cezanne). (Friedman 122-3).

Even in this regard, however, Cummings presents us with a specifically modern, phenomenological poetics which explodes the notion of an objective artistic stance—"...pity poor realists!" (410), he exclaims.

It is in this sense that the playful aspects of *EIMI* seem to derive from a dadaist sensibility. Aragon's call to "smash everything!" is echoed, at least on a linguistic level, by *EIMI*'s persistent use of verbal negations: "unworld," "nonmale," "heroless hero," etc. There is, furthermore, a similarity to the way Aragon views the modern work's relation to an originary epic: "Aragon dramatizes an aporic paradox, whereas Fénelon pursues a repetitive path toward godliness. Moreover, Aragon exploits doubt and contradiction, alternating between intense enthusiasm and dadaist derision" (8). Here we have more evidence that we should refrain from reading *EIMI*'s passages of visionary beauty—for example, when he visits St. Basil's or St. Sophia's—as evidence of religious conversion. More likely, we should see such moments as Aragon-like "intense enthusiasm," serving as graphic aesthetic counterpoints to the overwhelming "dadaist derision" with which Cummings greets Soviet proletcult—. . . you and me and meyou and youme and comrade us which, then, is the new formula. Different from Christ's 'hit me again,' different from Mammon's 'yesun ifyuh wannuh make sumpn outuvit stepout soyd'" (111). Indeed, speaking of his "Dd system," Aragon's Mentor declaims: "The first D in my system was doubt, the second will be faith. I believe in me, in you, in self, in all the others" (63). It is the same belief in the self, the individual, rendered by a poetics of paradox which drives *EIMI*; " 'tell him I drink...to the individual.' A pause 'he says that's nonsense.' 'Tell him I love nonsense and I drink to nonsense....Tell him: a madman named noone says, that someone is and anyone isn't; and all the believing universe cannot transform anyone who isn't into someone who is'" (101).

As we know, Cummings eventually came to rue his friend Aragon's advocacy of communist ideals as precisely the sort of politically "sacrosanct ideas" (62) which Aragon himself had insisted should be shattered. One might even muse that Cummings would have found Aragon's admonition—"You think you can hide by putting your hands in front of your eyes. You have hopes of making everything simple, everything happy..." (61)—worth reiterating to his friend.

Even so, it should be emphasized that, in 1922, Aragon's

Télémaque advocated a program not only of individuality but an ontology sprung from a theory of language. He wrote: "The literal meaning of words can hardly provide anyone with what is conventionally called an ideal" (31). He therefore lays out from the start a methodology of "errors, equivocations, confusions" (31) which form the thrust behind his mock-epic. In this way, "He dissociates language from significance and discourages all naive and foolhardy attempts to express the truth, the ideal" (25). While Aragon might have seen this as no more than dadaist mistrust of objective truth, whether in art or anywhere else, Cummings surely saw this issue politically.

(fervently) K: An 'idea' was never 'put in practice'—never is, or will be.

T (leaning across how solidly between us situated daylabouring tovarich): Never?

K: Suppose it were even 'scientifically' established that the best 'idea,' when 'put in practice,' produced the worst results; that would be 1 face of the cube.

T: Right. But disagreeable...probably because I sincerely tried to believe in this religion of humanity.

K: What a murderfully vast difference exists between 'standing up for an idea' (between combatting unvalues; for instance, American unvalues) and inhabiting the 'practice' 'of' and 'idea', inhabiting so-called socialist Russia! (181)

Thus, just as *EIMI* displays Cummings' consistent abhorrence of the prostration of the individual in the name of the Soviet Ideal, so too will his predominant literary device consist of Aragon-like "verbal overflow or overkill, kindling the desire for and the voluptuousness of verbal indulgence" (Aragon 25). The fact that their politics had diverged by the time *EIMI* was written, however, should not lead us to think that their aesthetic values were necessarily incompatible; to be sure, in referring to Aragon, Cummings wonders how two kindred spirits can drift away from each other so quickly because of such arbitrary distinctions:

K: This comrade feels very humble; this comrade begins to realize that so-and-so enters the pigeonhole for the same 'rea-

son' that suchand-such doesn't. Take, for illustration, my good friend—who will soon be my good enemy—the talented author of that hymn of hate which I've been unbusy 'translating': well, whatever 'reason' for his conversion to communism is probably a fair lady, which is probably whatever unreason for my own nonconversion. Amen (181-2)

Though I have seen no biographical evidence which proves that Cummings had Aragon's *Télémaque* in mind when writing *EIMI*, there seems enough thematic similarity to justify the comparison. Plus, Cummings' reference to "the talented author" indicates that he knew Aragon's prior work(s). This is of great importance when considering the fact that Cummings has been sneered at for the "naive" gesture of advocating that institutional oppression of individuality be combatted by such a silly thing as "Love." For once again Aragon's mock-epic sheds light on, and lends credibility to, a more complex, favorable reading of *EIMI*. The "Due Apology" which opens the *Télémaque* could just as easily work for Cummings:

I have used the word 'love' as a cover for a multiplicity of elements by no means essential to love itself...Make no mistake: we venture to criticize life only in love's absence. As soon as the latter makes an entrance, the particulars of the problem change, and our acquiescence embraces everything. (31-2)

And, with a curious symmetry, Cummings ends on the same note:

(Who:
Loves;
Creates,
Imagines)
OPENS
(432)

New York City

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