

**A Memorial: Nancy T. Andrews,
Daughter of E. E. Cummings**

Michael Webster

Cummings' daughter, Nancy Thayer Andrews, died on August 11, 2006. At the time of her birth on December 20, 1919 and for a year and half afterwards, Nancy's mother Elaine Thayer was legally married to Scofield Thayer (1889-1982), Cummings' friend, mentor, and patron. Thayer's first commission was for Cummings to write "Epithalamion" (CP 3-7), a poem celebrating Thayer's marriage to Elaine in 1916. The course of Nancy's life was in many ways determined by the somewhat unusual circumstances of her birth and by the vicissitudes of her mother and father's romance, marriage, and divorce. Until Cummings married Elaine in March 1924, Nancy lived apart from her father at 3 Washington Square, New York and various residences in France. Scofield Thayer did not live with Elaine either, maintaining his residence at 80 Washington Square. Cummings and Elaine lived apart for a variety of reasons: she could afford much more luxurious digs than he could, and he did not want to live off her (and by extension, Thayer). Also, though he loved his daughter, Cummings was both not quite ready and not quite able to be a family man.

Before divorcing Elaine in 1921, Thayer assumed complete financial responsibility for Elaine and Nancy; after the divorce, he continued to provide for Nancy's care. Thayer prided himself on being a man of the world and above petty jealousy. On March 15, 1924, a few days before he married Elaine, Cummings wrote to his mother: "you may be sure that, as far as Thayer is concerned, there was never the slightest deceit involved, & we three (Elaine, Thayer, & myself) are now & always have been the best of friends" (qtd. in Kennedy 248). Thayer's growing awareness that he was gay probably also contributed to his lack of jealousy. Because of this extraordinary situation, because he desired to assert his financial and artistic independence, and because he disliked the haut-bourgeois lifestyle of Elaine and her friends, Cummings was often apart from Elaine and Nancy.

Nevertheless, Cummings was attached to his daughter, whom he called Mopsy. His biographer Richard S. Kennedy relates how Cummings enjoyed taking her to the circus, riding the merry-go-round with her, and inventing games and stories for her (246). After Cummings and Elaine were married on March 19, 1924, he would sometimes spend the night at 3

Washington Square; however, while they were in Europe, Cummings' meager finances prevented him from staying in fancy hotels with Elaine, her maid, and Mopsy. The question of how seriously Cummings took his responsibilities as a father is a vexed one. Kennedy, for example, states that even after his marriage, Cummings "assumed no family responsibilities." Yet in the very next sentence, Kennedy writes: "Adoption procedures went ahead: on April 24 [1924] Nancy Thayer legally became the daughter of Edward Estlin Cummings, although she did not use the Cummings name, nor was she told of the adoption" (250). In adopting Nancy, Cummings certainly intended to take at least legal responsibility for his daughter.

From the start, Cummings had not been in any position to assume fatherhood. After Nancy was born, and well into her second year, she was raised as if she were the daughter of Elaine and Scofield Thayer, with Cummings as a guest in her life at best. Years later, Nancy remembered her father telling her about a scene that probably took place at Elaine's apartment, before Cummings was married and legally recognized as "father":

Something my father told me later on, suggests why he might have needed very carefully to cover up a blow which really fell much earlier than it was seen to fall, and which he was perhaps totally unable to face. In his words to me: "One day when we were all together" (I think he meant with his friends present) "you suddenly asked Elaine 'where is my father?' She looked around the room while I held my breath, then said sweetly 'your father is a little bird!' Then she laughed, so gaily! and at that moment I was transfixed—I died utterly and forever, knowing it was irrevocable . . ." (qtd. in Kennedy 247).

A little over a month after Cummings legally adopted Nancy, Elaine wrote to him in New York, asking for a divorce, informing him that on board ship to France she had met and fallen in love with an Irish banker and politician named Frank MacDermot (Kennedy 254). On December 4, 1924, less than nine months after their marriage, Elaine and Estlin were divorced (264).

Kennedy attributes the breakup of the marriage to Cummings' inability to handle practical affairs and his distance from Elaine's posh lifestyle. Kennedy also shows that Elaine simply thought she had made a mistake and wanted to move on, and in choosing MacDermot she found someone who was the opposite of Cummings in many ways: a man with a solid income and a future in politics, someone at ease in the social and economic world of the bourgeoisie, someone who could take care of her (255-257).

Cummings reacted to Elaine's decision with a mixture of helplessness and dejection and thoughts of suicide. He vacillated between thinking that Elaine was good and right and superior, and thus should be given everything she asked for, and wanting to kill himself, and/or Elaine, and/or MacDermot (257-265).

Elaine and MacDermot did everything in their power to keep Nancy from her father and to erase his memory from her mind. They even asked Cummings "to legally cancel his adoption of Nancy" (Kennedy 277-78). Cummings refused, but his efforts to see Nancy were often stymied, and they were made even more difficult when the MacDermots moved to Ireland in 1927. In the end, Nancy Thayer "grew up not knowing that her mother had once been married to the American poet, E. E. Cummings, or that he and not Scofield Thayer was her real father" (280).

As a child, Nancy was raised mainly by "a succession of trained nurses" (Kennedy 413). When she was very young, she was schooled by a governess; later she "was enrolled in a series of boarding schools in France and England; in the fifth grade she discovered oil painting and Impressionism but was forbidden to continue 'because it was messy.'" After completing school, she went to Vienna "for musical studies" (Kennedy 414). Her parents moved from Ireland to France and then to England. In 1938, she was pushed into being "brought out" as a debutante in London society. About this experience, she wrote: "there is a very rich disgust in this / in going dancing nightly at eighteen" (*Charon's* 7). When war broke out in 1939, Elaine and Frank moved back to Ireland, while Nancy stayed behind to study for the Oxford University entrance examinations. After the German bombing began, England was deemed unsafe, so Nancy was flown to Dublin. Unable to return to England (the border was closed), she chose to "travel to the United States to stay with her aunt Alexis till the war was over" (Kennedy 415).

Perhaps because Scofield Thayer had suffered a severe psychological breakdown in 1926, Nancy was told a series of lies to keep her from contacting the man she thought was her father. At first she was told he was dead; then she was told he was divorced, and it would be unseemly for her to contact him. The night before she left for America, her mother warned her "not to look up Scofield Thayer and informed her that he had suffered a mental breakdown and was under private care" (Kennedy 415). While in New York, she was able to meet with Thayer's lawyer but was not allowed to see Thayer himself.

Because writer John Dos Passos was occasionally mentioned by her mother, Nancy remembered him as a figure in her early childhood; of Cummings, she had only “one dim recollection” (qtd. in Kennedy 247). Nancy read Cummings’ poems at school in Vienna before she ever knew that he had once been married to her mother. One day, however, Elaine let slip that she had once been married to Cummings; Nancy was intrigued, but Elaine “brushed aside” her “insistent questions” (Kennedy 415).

During the war, Nancy worked in New York and Washington, DC, first as a typist and later as a linguist for the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service. She also met and married Willard Roosevelt, a grandson of former President Theodore Roosevelt. While Willard was serving in the Navy, Nancy’s mother-in-law invited her to spend summers in New Hampshire, near Chocorua. Although Cummings had already heard from friends that Nancy was in the United States, his wife Marion persuaded him not to try and contact her “because she said it would upset him and ‘interfere with his work’.” However, with Nancy so close to Cummings’ summer place at Joy Farm, it was probably inevitable that they would meet. In the summer of 1945, they just missed one another when Nancy “left Chocorua for New York to have a baby” (Kennedy 416). After learning that he was a grandfather, Cummings began writing his short play *Santa Claus*, “with its sublimated wish for a negation of the 1924 divorce” (417). As readers of Cummings realize, the play ends when the Child reunites Santa Claus with the Woman they both love.

Of course, Cummings knew full well that, as Sofia Tolstaya says in *EIMI*, “You can . . . not turn the wheels of history backward” (238/231). Nevertheless, the following autumn, Cummings invited Nancy and her husband for tea at Joy Farm. Nancy remembered their first moments alone together as eerily disturbing. She told Kennedy that Cummings’ “voice seemed extraordinary, like a bell, like something coming from afar, almost echoing” (417). Though all of Cummings’ friends knew who her real father was, no one had ever told Nancy, and in this uneasy state of suspense, the father-stranger and his daughter-stranger continued to meet one another. Looking back on it, Nancy reflected that her absent stranger-father “seemed to haunt my imagination by directing me in a play everyone else understood but in which I had been given the wrong lines” (qtd. in Stehle). In 1948, in the rare moments when Nancy could get away from the demands of motherhood, she even agreed to have Cummings paint two portraits of her. A lonely 28-year-old housewife now with two children, Nancy began

to feel that she was “falling in love with this man” (qtd. in Kennedy 419). After the portrait sessions were finished, she decided not to visit Marion and Cummings at Patchin Place anymore.

Kennedy tells the story of what happened next, on what Nancy thought was to be her last visit:

As Nancy remembered the occasion, Marion was on hand as usual and Cummings’ talk ran in and around trivial subjects, until a knock came on the door and Marion had to go out. Since they were alone now for the first time out of the studio, Nancy could continue her probings about the early days at 3 Washington Square. In answer to questions, Cummings talked about her Aunt Alexis, who he had once thought was in love with him, and about her aunt Constance, whom he regarded as the finest of the three sisters, and went on to talk about Scofield. Since Nancy had never known Thayer as a father, it was an effort for her to use the word as she then asked Cummings a question about “my father.” There was a distinct halt in the conversation. Finally he said, “Did anyone ever tell you I was your father?” (419)

Surprised and bewildered, after a long pause she said, “You cannot mean it.” He responded that she did not need to choose between them, and then Marion returned to the room. Marion could see that something very unusual was happening, so Cummings “turned to her and said solemnly, ‘We know who we are’” (Kennedy 420).

Nancy had found a father at last, but had only begun to discover who he was. She naturally wanted more from him than he was willing or able to give. If she had never thought of him as a father, he had seldom if ever (despite his early love) acted as a father to her. If after the divorce Elaine and MacDermot had severely limited and later effectively ended Cummings’ access to his daughter, now Marion jealously guarded Cummings’ privacy and limited Nancy’s access to her father. Marion insisted that Nancy make appointments to visit, and when Nancy called on the phone, “Marion always answered and Estlin was not to be disturbed at his work” (Kennedy 421). Cummings, too, had trouble with this new relation in his life. When Nancy called him “father,” he responded: “My name is Estlin” (421). According to Kennedy, Cummings could not open up completely to his new daughter because he was too wounded by the break up of 1924 and his subsequent failure to keep Nancy. She persevered, however, going to one of Cummings’ poetry readings, to an exhibition of his art, and

sending him some of her poems. She also continued her occasional visits by appointment.

Though Cummings felt that that his life would be richer for the “human intercourse” and “spiritual give-and-take” that Nancy, “a child or a child-woman whom I adore” could provide, he also felt “that while a part of me forever is her tragic & immediate father, wholly I (shall be &) am (& have been always) somebody else whose fate is never of this world” (qtd. in Kennedy 425, 424). Their relationship continued in this vein, with Nancy giving her love, and Estlin responding with a mixture of love, confusion, and fear: love for his daughter, confusion as to how to respond to her wish for an authentic father-daughter relationship, and the twin fears of being caught in the role of “bon bourgeois” and of opening “the old scar” of the breakup with Elaine (Kennedy 426-428).

Nancy’s marriage to Willard Roosevelt foundered and they divorced in the early ’50s. In 1954, Nancy married Kevin Andrews (1924-1989), a classics graduate from Harvard, Greek archeologist, and travel writer. In 1955 Nancy, Kevin, and her first two children moved to Europe, eventually settling in Athens, living in “a house halfway up Mount Lycabettos with a direct view of the Acropolis out of their living room window” (Kennedy 473). In addition to her two children by Willard, Simon and Elizabeth, Nancy would have two children by Kevin, Ioanna and Alexis.

In the summer of 1968 Nancy and Kevin separated, and she and her children moved to London because, according to Kevin Andrews’ biographer, Roger Jinkinson, “she did not want to live under the Junta nor have her children brought up in a police state.” Kevin remained in what Nancy called “dictator-warped Greece” (*Charon’s xi*). In an e-mail to me, Jinkinson wrote: “All her life she tried to get back with Kevin and was the chief mourner at his funeral. Kevin was a very difficult man.”

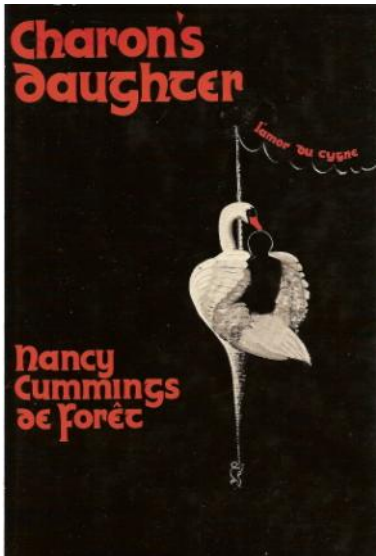
Nancy had been Nancy Thayer and Nancy Roosevelt, but for the rest of her life she kept the name Nancy T. Andrews, except for the moment in 1977, when, at age 57, she published *Charon’s Daughter* as “Nancy Cummings de Fôret.” This is a name for a lost or absent identity, combining her stable, given name with her lost name and placing them both in a “fôret” (forest), akin perhaps to menacing forest of fairy tales or Dante’s dark wood of error. This name could only be claimed in the world of symbols, not in the world of fact. She remained “Nancy T. Andrews” in her correspondence with Kennedy and in her capacity as custodian of her

father's copyrights.

The full title of her book is *Charon's Daughter: A Passion of Identity*. The book opens with 20 color reproductions of Nancy's paintings of archetypal dream-landscapes. After a title page, a page of introductory prose, a table of contents, and three more pages of introductory prose called "Legend: PrayerWheelMine," the poems begin. The first nine poems are grouped in a section called "Raison D'etre Charon." These nine poems were found among Elaine's effects when she died; the first eight are previously unpublished poems by E. E. Cummings; the ninth, titled "Elaine," is by an unknown author. Then follow some 80 poems by Nancy, 12 of them in French. Her poems appear in four sections titled "Three Kings," "K Nights of Charun Al-Rashid," "La Mort du Signe" [The Death of the Sign / Swan], and "Elemental Spring." Since the title "Three Kings" refers to the three wise men who attended the birth of Jesus, we can see that the sections concern a sacred birth, the story-telling nights of a sultan-death figure, the death of words/symbols, and the rebirth of spring.

Nancy's poems are arranged in roughly chronological order. Indeed, she says in the second introduction that her book is a kind of descent into her past, a "folktale, like a family pieced together from precious fragments recovered or missed" (xi). At the same time, hers is an archetypal descent, whose symbol system owes much to the psychology of Jung. She writes: "Of the father-figures I followed as a foundling, one was trained in the majesty of the Law as power [MacDermot]; another inhabited Merlin's tangled underground [Scofield Thayer]; one, certainly most generous with his own faith that illuminated meaning for me, was Carl Gustav Jung" (ix). Aside from their Jungian symbolism, the poems in the book are elliptical and allusive, filled, as Nancy told Kennedy, with "echoes" (509).

The Charon of the title, the ferryman of the dead in Greek mythology, refers to her absent father, E. E. Cummings. As she says in her first short introductory page, the "broken key . . . word" to the mysteries of the book is "Absence" (iv). In an unpublished transcript of a recorded talk from 1979, given on the occasion of a performance of Cummings' play *Santa Claus*, Nancy speaks of *Charon's Daughter* as her autobiography. She says that the "ferryman of my story represents not my father, but the absence of my father. Absence, even non-sense, of the sense that he was missing" (qtd. in Stehle). Her father is also referred to throughout the book as a "stranger" (*Charon's* xi). The "Passion of Identity" of the subtitle refers to her own identity as a kind of passion play, a descent and resurrection.



On the cover of *Charon's Daughter* appears a strange drawing of a swan with a tapered, vortex-like pole running vertically through its middle. The swan's beak is turned back towards the barely-outlined figure of a child who rides on the back of the swan, sheltered by the tips of its upcurved wings. This swan picture depicts a merry-go-round swan, for above is a bare line drawing of the edge of an awning with the words "l'amour du cygne" [the love of the swan] written on it. This emblematic motto is explained by the jacket copy on the back cover of the book, which reads: "after a day spent incog-

nito with her [Nancy] at the Montmartre fair, just before her parents' divorce and her fifth birthday, E. E. Cummings wrote in his notebook:

goodbye dear & next time when I feel a little better we'll ride the donkeys and next time the pigs maybe or you will a bicycle and i will ride a swan & next time when my heart is all mended again with snow repainted with bright new paint we'll ride you and I

She wanted to ride the swan."

Below the swan on the cover is a small rounded, also barely outlined, figure who holds the slim tapered end of the pole as if it were a string, and the swan a balloon. He, of course, is a swan-balloon-man, little, and (perhaps) lame. Towards the end of her second introduction to *Charon's Daughter*, Nancy says of her father "that without his fall I was nothing, for I knew not my dreams" (xiii).

Works Cited

- Cummings, E. E. *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*. Ed George J. Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1994.
- . *EIMI*. New York: Covici, Friede, 1933. Reprinted. New York: William Sloane, 1949. Reprinted with an introduction by EEC, New York: Grove Press, 1958.

- . *EIMI: A Journey Through Soviet Russia*. 1933. Ed. George James Firmage. New York: Liveright, 2007.
- Cummings de Fôret, Nancy [Nancy T. Andrews]. *Charon's Daughter: A Passion of Identity*. New York: Liveright, 1977.
- Jinkinson, Roger. "The Search for Kevin Andrews." Blog entry, January 2007. Accessed 14 October 2007. <<http://www.tales-from-a-greek-island.com/BLOGpage.cfm?blogno=9180373>>.
- . "Nancy Thayer and KA." E-mail to the author. 2 Jan. 2008.
- Kennedy, Richard S. *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E. E. Cummings*. New York: Liveright, 1980.
- Stehle, Bernard. "'Among these dismembered echoes': Remarks on Identity by Charon's Daughter, Nancy Cummings de Fôret (Nancy T. Andrews)." American Literature Association Conference, San Francisco, 2006.