

"The Lily Maid of Astolat": Elaine Orr's Presence in E. E. Cummings' Poems and John Dos Passos' Prose

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In his memoir, *The Best Times*, John Dos Passos recalls with special fondness a beautiful young woman who, at the cusp of the Teens and Twenties, was both muse and social nexus for a group of young writers and artists in New York City:

Cummings was the hub [of the *Harvard Monthly* crowd in New York]. Cummings and Elaine. His Elaine Orr had for a while been the wife of Scofield Thayer. . . . Elaine was living alone in a lovely apartment on Washington Square. She was the Blessed Damozel, the fair, the lovable, the lily maid of Astolat. To romantic youth, she seemed the poet's dream. Those of us who weren't in love with Cummings were in love with Elaine. . . .

[Cummings and I] would go home to work and then would meet in the late afternoon at Elaine's for tea. [Edward] Nagel would appear, or Slater Brown, or [Stewart] Mitchell and after an hour or so of talk—though she was silent as a mouse nobody ever dared show off too much at Elaine's—we would go out to our Italian speakeasy of the moment (82-83)¹

As his description suggests, Elaine Orr Thayer provided far more than just an informal gathering place for these young writers and artists. Her beauty and charm—which as "romantic youths" they were prone to idealize—exerted a considerable pull on their imaginations and, in the case of Dos Passos' friend, E. E. Cummings, on his emotional life for the next several years. More important, both writers expressed their experiences with Elaine in their writing, transforming a biographical detail into a subject for scholarly attention.

I. Elaine Orr: a brief overview

Elaine's early history was turbulent and hardly the stuff of knightly romance. The private and finishing schools she attended bespeak the privileged daughter of a wealthy industrialist in Troy, New York. But a powerful insecurity also emerges: she lost both her parents early and was, with her siblings, raised by an uncle. In 1916, at age 20 she made what seemed a good match, marrying the wealthy Scofield Thayer, who, three years later, would gain literary fame by buying (along with Sibley Watson) a middling political magazine, *The Dial*, and turning it into what his close friend E. E. Cummings called: "a first-rate magazine of the arts." Thayer, however, showed little interest in becoming a conventional husband: he maintained his bachelor apartment on one side of Washington Square, set up Elaine in an apartment on the other side of

the Square, and depended on (and reimbursed) his friends, chiefly Cummings, to keep her amused.

After Cummings returned to home from ambulances and prison in France, his friendship with Elaine erupted into a full-blown love affair, apparently with Thayer's tacit approval. In December 1919, Elaine had a child, Nancy. It was an open secret that Cummings was the father, though Thayer assumed paternity and financial responsibility. In these years, as Richard Kennedy describes in *Dreams in the Mirror*, Cummings was no more able than Thayer to provide Elaine emotional support and Nancy fatherly involvement. He continued to paint and write poetry in his studio, visiting Elaine regularly, but "he apparently took little interest in the baby" (201). In the spring of 1921, Cummings and Dos Passos left America together, Cummings settling in Paris for the next two and a half years and seeing Elaine and Nancy only when they visited. In the meantime, Elaine divorced Thayer, and in 1923 urged Cummings to return home. Obeying her summons, still in love with her, and now responding more like a father to Nancy, Cummings also followed her lead when she proposed marriage and legal adoption of his daughter. His passive acquiescence, however, did not change—indeed, could not change—his bohemian and dependent living habits (relying on parents and friendly patrons for support), for even after their marriage in March 1924, he continued to live in his studio. Once again, Elaine had married precipitously and unwisely—if financial security and a conventional, upper-class life were her goals. Within two months, she boarded a ship for Europe to help settle her sister's estate; had a shipboard romance with Frank MacDermot, a senior partner of an English firm of merchant bankers; and announced to Cummings she wanted a divorce. Devastated, Cummings reluctantly agreed, only to discover that the MacDermots intended neither to reveal his paternity to Nancy, nor to give him visiting rights.

Was Elaine a neurotic rich girl, trading on her beauty and charm and jumping from man to man until she found one who could fulfill her need for an upper-class life, or did her misjudgments of Thayer and Cummings leave an already insecure young woman emotionally abandoned and thus needing the security and stability MacDermot could provide her and her daughter? Passages from a letter she wrote to Cummings during the divorce bear on these questions:

Again, now, you try to be like a child & refuse to accept things as a man would. . . . [You have written] "you make life as hard & disagreeable for yourself as you possibly can, in order to enjoy your unhappiness and the nursing of other people." . . . You who live as an advanced poet. . . at other moments fall back into an inability to adjust yourself to a change in your private life. . . .

As to myself, I grant you that I may be neurotic.² But the difference is, between us, that I am not trying to make myself miserable, rather am I

attempting to be constructive & to make life more happy. Within the last few years, I have continued to gain strength of character. I am no longer a passive person to the point of misery. I know where I stand. And I know what I want. And most difficult of all, I know when I have made a mistake (9 Nov. 1924; quoted in Kennedy 256)

While the story could continue with Cummings meeting his daughter almost twenty years later, these facts suffice to provide the biographical complex of three figures: a beautiful, but emotionally unstable woman who attracts men effortlessly, but marries the wrong ones in these years; a childlike bohemian poet whose life she first captivates then devastates (it was years before Cummings recovered from the debacle); and another writer, close to both, but more an observer on the periphery.

II. Elaine Orr in Cummings' Poems

Space precludes a full accounting of Elaine's presence in Cummings' early poems, so I shall limit this survey to poems representing different stages of their relationship. Cummings' earliest published poems in *Tulips & Chimneys* address Elaine worshipfully: "Epithalamion" (1916), as the title indicates, formally celebrates Scofield Thayer's marriage to her (for which Thayer paid Cummings handsomely), while "Puella Mea" (1919) expresses Cummings' romantic involvement with her, as it bravely declares that the *speaker's* girl trounces all classical beauties:

keep your dead beautiful ladies.
Mine is a little lovelier
than any of your ladies were. (CP 20)

Several early love poems inspired by Elaine adopt the Romantic trope of intertwining love and death, as the speaker's heightened awareness of death intensifies the love he and his beloved share:

if i believe
in death be sure
of this
it is

because you have loved me, (CP 47)

O Distinct
Lady of my unkempt adoration
.....
swiftly take

my fragile certain song
that we may watch together

how behind the doomed
exact smile of life's
placid obscure palpable
carnival . . .

.....
perfectly
gesticulate the accurate

strenuous lips of incorruptible
Nothing under the ample
sun,under the insufficient
day under the noise of worms (CP 52)

Characteristically in these early poems, Elaine is the Lady on the pedestal, little—"I" Cummings the chivalric knight offering up his song of praise in perfect deference.

As Cummings' relationship with Elaine grew more physical and passionate, the poems correspondingly drop their mortuary romanticism for more sensual praise:

And the coolness of your smile is
stirringofbirds between my arms;but
i should rather than anything
have(almost when hugeness will shut
quietly)almost,
your kiss (CP 169)

Cummings celebrated their sexual intimacy in several explicit poems that differ sharply from the sordid "Sonnets-Realities" of his first three volumes. Where the poems depicting sex with prostitutes are riven by polarities of lust and disgust—studies in juxtaposed attitudes³—the poems describing sex with Elaine are unreservedly joyous declarations with no "morning after" repugnance. The most celebrated example of this group is the erotically charged "i like my body when it is with your" (CP 218). Less well known, the poem "i will be" (CP 195) playfully conceals references to Elaine and Estlin among Cummings' structural dislocations.

Through the unifying image of a city street, "i will be" describes several kinds of motion: the speaker anticipates moving within "the Street" of "her" body; imagines how her hands will "play on,mE"; suddenly sees swirling pigeons from his window; and again awaits his lover's arrival ("oh / ver /mYveRylitTle // street / where / you will come, // at twi li ght"); and finally beholds the crescent moon's rising.

Buried within all these anticipations of passion just around the corner, as it were, are autobiographical references to the lovers:

her:hands
will play on,mE as
dea d tunes OR s-cra p-y lea Ves flut te rin g

The capitalized “E OR” abbreviates Elaine Orr’s name, while the “E” alone (especially in the context of “mE”) also initials Cummings himself—a self-reflexive initial he also used in his painting, *Sound Number 5* from 1920.

At the same time, Cummings was not above poking fun at Elaine’s upper class origins. In “the season ’tis,my lovely lambs” (CP 265), which dates from 1919-20 by its references to the Red Scare and the Volstead Act, Cummings tosses in Elaine’s birthplace to show how widespread is the “age of dollars and no sense”: “as prove from Troy(N.Y.)to Cairo / (Egypt).” This poem appears early in *is 5* (1926). In part “Four” of this book, several love poems reflect the tortuous twists the Cummings-Orr romance took in 1924-25. The classic “since feeling is first” (CP 291) bravely declares that “kisses are a better fate / than wisdom,” but immediately acknowledges that the speaker’s “lady” is crying and tries to reassure her. The poem immediately preceding “since feeling is first”—“you are not going to,dear. . . .” (CP 290)—also alludes to trouble: “The big / fear Who held us deeply in His fist is // no longer.” A few poems further on, the situation turns grim. In “supposing i dreamed this” (CP 293), the speaker imagines himself a wind surrounding a house, the metaphor for his beloved. The wind can only “peer through windows,unobserved”; prowls “carefully around this house of you”; feel dark jealousy for the laughter within that “shut house(around and around / which a poor wind will roam.” The excluded lover’s self-pity continues as he becomes “Nobody” (CP 297) who “wears a yellow / flower in his buttonhole”; but by the end of the poem he *is* “a dead yellow small rose” buried beneath dirty collars at the bottom of a trunk. Finally, in “i am a beggar always” the speaker portrays himself as a blind man reduced to begging from his beloved:

(and who
does not ask for more than
just enough dreams to
live on)
after all,kid
you might as well
toss him a few thoughts

a little love preferably,
anything which you can't
pass off on other people:for
instance a
plugged promise— (CP 299)

What he finds “thrown away” in his hat is “himself”—direct and bitter allusions to Elaine’s broken marriage vows (a “plugged promise”) and her abandonment of Cummings.

The debacle with Elaine continued to haunt Cummings’ writing after *is 5*. In his 1927 play *HIM*, the character “Me” is based largely on Elaine, and her lover, Him, on Cummings himself. Even the name of Elaine’s new husband, Frank MacDermot, appears in the barker’s monologue as a Frank Buck character, who has captured “The Queen of Serpents.” While a full discussion of the play lies beyond the confines of this paper, the issue (both symbolic and real) that divides Him and Me and ultimately destroys their relationship is a baby, suggesting that Cummings now saw his inability to be a responsible father and provider for Nancy as the chief cause of Elaine’s abandoning him.⁴

Elaine fares little better in the satirical “poor But TerFLY.” Published in the 1931 *Viva* (CP 322), but probably written much earlier, the poem depicts her (much as Dos Passos would) as a fickle butterfly, fluttering from man to man. In lighting on MacDermot (“a grass wid / OW // er who smelt rath / er like her fath / er who smelt rath // er”), the butterfly becomes a “motH.” Snidely alluding to Elaine’s sexual problems (“after not coming once in seven years”) and the transience of her affections (“all / flesh is grass”), the poem’s fragmented double entendres reveal Cummings’ pain (“OW”), outrage (“Ire”), shock (“H . . . OW”), and bitterness.⁵ Unlike the subject of the song “Poor Butterfly” (the Japanese woman abandoned by her American lover), this butterfly is scarcely to be pitied.

From the incomparable beauty and idealized Lady, Elaine thus evolves in Cummings’ writing to the passionate lover, then abruptly descends to the betrayer, the fickle butterfly, at once indecisive (“Me”) and heartless, “the queen of the serpents.”

III. Elaine in Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer*

At the same time that Elaine Orr was divorcing his close friend, Estlin Cummings, John Dos Passos was writing a major novel set in New York, *Manhattan Transfer*. In contrast to its several male protagonists, only one woman stands out as a major character: Elaine (néé Ellen) Thatcher. An early reference to Elaine (who, like Gatsby of the same year, adopts the new name because she likes its sound) uses the same

allusion by which Dos Passos described Elaine Orr:

“But Ellen those dreadful kidnappers. . . .”

“I told you not to call me Ellen any more.”

“Well Elaine then, Elaine the lily maid of Astolat.” (54)

Note, too, the similarity of Thatcher to Thayer, Elaine Orr’s married name when Dos Passos first knew her.

Like her namesake, Elaine Thatcher is beautiful, captivating, and ambitious in wanting a materially comfortable life. To achieve it, she wants to become an actress. Unlike Elaine Orr, however, Thatcher realizes her ambition partially because her stronger determination stems from her unfulfilled dreams of wealth as a child. (Unlike Elaine Orr’s father, Ed Thatcher only talks of making big money. His wife, like Elaine Orr’s mother, dies young, forcing Elaine Thatcher to become self-reliant.) Just as Elaine Orr looked to Scofield Thayer to further her theatrical ambition (Kennedy 191), Elaine Thatcher depends heavily on *her* first husband, Jojo Oglethorpe, whom she marries at eighteen and whose stage connections free her from the chorus and get her a speaking part (134). And as many came to view Thayer as odd, so Oglethorpe is depicted as a dandy and a “strange fish” (134).⁶ He is also gay and has no interest in having a conventional relationship with Elaine; for her part, Elaine on her honeymoon feels nauseated by the prospect of sex: “if she touched him she would die” (117).

Both Elaines are head-turners. Elaine Orr reputedly attracted the stares of women as well as men. In *Manhattan Transfer*, a minor character, Phil Sandbourne, crossing the street, sees Elaine Thatcher sitting in a taxi—“two gray eyes flash green black into his. He swallowed his breath. The traffic roars dwindled into distance. She shant take her eyes away.”—and is hit by a truck. Elaine’s charismatic appeal and natural talent make her an immediate success on stage, and soon slimy Broadway producers are after her.⁷ Even the relatively detached Jimmy Herf feels her magnetic pull. When he first hears her voice, calling to her husband from her bedroom, “Through the leaden drowse that cramped him the girl’s voice set Jimmy tingling” (133). On meeting her at a café, sitting with both her husband and her lover, Jimmy “was about to get up, when something velvetsoft in her eyes stopped him. . . . Jimmy couldn’t keep his eyes off her.” Sensing his attraction, she invites him to stay, even as her lover has left and her husband prepares to leave.

Elaine Thatcher, in short, is a flirt and a *femme fatale*. Her moving from man to man drives some of her conquests nearly mad. George Baldwin, an attorney whose ambition to rise rivals Elaine’s, waves a gun in a dance club and threatens to shoot her when she refuses to be controlled by him. Little seems to touch her, however, and Dos Passos often uses mechanistic images to describe her feelings. With a wealthy

Broadway producer, “She sits up cold white out of reach like a lighthouse. Men’s hands crawl like bugs on the unbreakable glass. Men’s looks blunder and flutter against it helpless as moths” (182). In the same scene where Baldwin threatens her, she gives Jimmy Herf dancing instructions: “Her voice cut the quick coldly like a tiny flexible sharp metalsaw. . . . He was crumbling plaster with something that rattled achingly in his chest, she was an intricate machine of sawtooth steel whitebright bluebright copperbright in his arms” (228). Still later, “She stood with her arm in the arm of Harry Goldwiser’s dinner jacket . . . Elaine felt a stiff castiron figure in her metalgreen evening dress” (261).

While still married to Jojo, Elaine begins an affair with the alcoholic Stan Emery, whose chief appeal (besides being the son of the senior partner in a prominent law firm) appears to be his “lean and hard” young body. When she discovers she is pregnant after Stan has died in a fire, Elaine decides to have an abortion and divorce Jojo: “I have to make my own living” she explains to her abortionist (268). It is interesting that, in having Elaine abort her child, Dos Passos makes her even colder and more self-reliant than her model. As Elaine leaves the abortionist and flags a taxi (improbably for the Ritz), “[a]ll the feeling in her fades” and she is “a wooden Indian, painted with a hand raised at the streetcorner” (268). Inevitably, Elaine gravitates towards the novel’s other major character, Jimmy Herf, the only male who listens sympathetically to her without seeming to idolize her.

Obviously autobiographical in his restlessness and wanderlust, Herf also has something of Cummings in him in his rejection of a bourgeois life.⁸ Landing a job as cub reporter for the *New York Times*—a job many would kill for—Herf quickly grows disillusioned and talks of blowing up the Times Building. He confides to his friend, Ruth: “The trouble with me is I cant decide what I want most, so my motion is circular, helpless and confoundedly discouraging” (176). Like both Dos Passos and Cummings, he goes to Europe to see the war first-hand. There, during one of the novel’s abrupt ellipses, he meets Elaine again, as the two work in the Red Cross publicity department. They marry, have a child abroad, and the plot picks them up on their postwar return to the States.

Like Cummings, Jimmy Herf is a poor provider. His freelance articles are too politically radical for the large-circulation newspapers, and Elaine is forced to give up the stage for an editorial job (at which, characteristically, she succeeds). Also like Cummings, Herf attributes his impracticality to his childlike self —“the little Herf inside me”—and recalls that when Elaine was having her child and possibly in some danger, he was “wandering distractedly through the fair, going into the Flea Circus, riding on the merrygrounds . . .” (322). As the two now see less of each other with their incompatible schedules, they grow further apart: Elaine now pulls back from Jimmy’s kisses and suggests he get a separate apartment. When they talk soberly about their failing marriage, “[s]uddenly Jimmy wanted terribly to be asleep, not to

remember anything, to let his head sink into blackness as into his mother's lap when he was a kid" (346). Significantly, Elaine admits "I guess I don't love anybody for long unless they're dead."

That Elaine should leave the itinerant Jimmy for George Baldwin, the now wealthy lawyer, whose political future continues to rise as district attorney and possibly even as mayor, is perfectly plausible—as inevitable, in retrospect, as Elaine Orr leaving Cummings for the equally successful Frank MacDermot. Again, however, Dos Passos describes her, when she approaches George, feeling an

icy coldness stealing through her like novocaine. She had made up her mind. It seemed as if she had set the photograph of herself in her own place, forever frozen into a single gesture. An invisible silk band of bitterness was tightening round her throat, strangling. . . . Elaine felt herself . . . rigid as a porcelain figure under her clothes, everything about her seemed to be growing hard and enameled. . . . (375)

Her acceptance of George's proposal is bluntly anti-romantic: "I guess I can stand it if you can George" (375), but when he kisses her in the taxi, she feels "like someone drowning." Jimmy's response to being divorced is much like Cummings', once he got over shock and self-castigation:

Women are like rats, you know, they leave a sinking ship. She's going to marry this man Baldwin who's just been appointed District Attorney. They're said to be grooming him for mayor on a fusion reform ticket.... The delusion of power, that's what's biting him. Women fall for it like hell. (384)

In many ways, Dos Passos' characterization of Elaine Thatcher is more nuanced and interesting than her model, Elaine Orr. Unlike Orr, Thatcher is talented, assertive, and self-supporting: she succeeds on stage and in editing. But she, too, chooses her first and third husbands because they will either help her career or provide for her. As another actress cynically puts it to Jimmy Herf: "That girl'd marry a trolley-car if she thought she could gain anything by it" (156). But also like Orr, Elaine Thatcher is fickle, does not seem to know precisely what she wants, and thus makes poor choices for lovers and husbands. The men she loves—Stan and, for a time, Jimmy—are either alcoholic (Stan), or impractical (Jimmy), and thus provide her no financial and little emotional support. Two of the three men she marries (or will marry) can provide for her, but she does not love them. Dos Passos frequently describes her as cold, mechanical, and hard like porcelain or glass, but also conveys her anguish and unfulfilled longing: "in deep pitblackness inside something clangs like a fire engine" (182). Unlike her real-life counterpart, the fictional Elaine, ironically, finds no resolution in choosing to marry a man in whose embrace she feels she is drowning. And the author's attitude towards her seems finally ambivalent: contemptuous in Jimmy's

voice (a rat abandoning a sinking ship), yet sympathetic in seeing her also as “drowning”—an unsuccessful rat! Like Pygmalion, Dos Passos seems fascinated by his creation with her paradoxical allure, “porcelain” exterior, and unfulfilled longing.

The two writers’ relative distance from Elaine Orr helps account for the contrasting degrees of complexity in their artistic images of her. Cummings’ poems are emotional barometers of his current relationship with Elaine. For a poet who devoutly believed that “feeling is first,” detachment was impossible. His intense emotional and physical involvement with Elaine inspired—and could only inspire—powerfully subjective “close-up” images of her. Dos Passos, however, could observe Elaine Orr from more distance, which enabled him to construct a more complex, many-sided Elaine Thatcher. In the work of both writers, she emerges as a fascinating and mercurial figure, a *femme fatale* and a vulnerable girl, a dangerous and delicious attractor, both wounding and wounded.

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Notes

- 1 In 1922, as Townsend Ludington notes, Dos Passos even lived for a time in Orr’s apartment, presumably while she was in Europe (*Fourteenth Chronicle* 335-36). [Editor’s note: Dos Passos refers to D. G. Rossetti’s poem, “The Blessed Damozel” and to Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King, Lancelot and Elaine*, 1.1: “Elaine, the fair, Elaine the lovable, / Elaine, the lily maid of Astolat.”]
- 2 Elaine is responding to Cummings’ suggestion (attached in notes to one of Freud’s works he gave Elaine) that they are both neurotic (Kennedy 255). Interestingly, Kennedy largely supports Elaine’s analysis, noting how Cummings enjoyed playing the role of the helpless child whom others must care for and “was unable to take charge of anything” (257).
- 3 See my article, “Cummings and Freud” for a complete discussion of the opposing attitudes in Cummings’ sexual poems.
- 4 For a fuller biographical interpretation of *HIM*, see my “Cummings and Freud” and Kennedy’s *Dreams in the Mirror* 290-94.
- 5 Structurally, the clause, “who / after not coming once in seven years . . .” might apply equally to the butterfly’s Harvard lover, “Paul,” but the remainder of the clause points clearly to Elaine: “after not coming once in seven years explO / ded like a toy eloping to Ire(land . . .).”
- 6 Including Dos Passos: “Poor Scofield was too far gone in psychoanalysis to keep a wife. He was being psychd by the great Freud himself” (*The Best Times* 82).
- 7 Dos Passos may also have had Dreiser’s Carrie Meeber in mind in the way that Carrie’s looks and poignant stage gestures spoke powerfully to men in the audience. And like Carrie’s, Elaine’s career flourishes as others around her go down in flames.

8 Dos Passos also pays homage to the poet by alluding to (or being influenced by) at least two of Cummings' poems in the novel. As Elaine walks in Manhattan, she sees "a girl [riding] slowly through the traffic on a white horse" carrying an advertisement. Following a few other impressions come the words: "All in green on a white stallion rode the Lady of the Lost Battalion" (137). Compare the beginning of Cummings' poem:

All in green went my love riding
on a great horse of gold
into the silver dawn. (CP 15)

Again, as Elaine looks out of her apartment window, she sees "In the yard beyond a stumpy woman with black hair was hanging out clothes" (188-89), recalling the beginning of Cummings' poem:

a blue woman with sticking out breasts hanging
clothes. On the line [. . .] (CP 216)

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