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Richard S. Kennedy

THE ELUSIVE MARION MOREHOUSE

My book, *Dreams in the Mirror: A Biography of E. E. Cummings*, contains a fairly full portrait of Marion Morehouse and her life with Cummings over a 30-year period.¹ This treatment of her was not easy to put together because of a great many obstacles that were placed in my way as I tried to create the story of E. E. Cummings' life. The principal obstacle was Marion Morehouse herself, for she did not want a genuine literary biography of Cummings to be written, at least not until long after his death and until the erosion of time would have smoothed away some of the rough surfaces and obscured many of the details that might have caused posterity to be critical of him. When I first approached her by letter in 1963 and sent her a copy of my recently published biography of Thomas Wolfe, she was decisively dismissive, stating that it was far too soon after his death (1962) for biographical investigation. I think now that the fact that I was a professor of English teaching at Wichita State University in Kansas was at this point two strikes against me, for she was scornful of people west of the Appalachians and very snobbish in her view of nonprestigious academic institutions.

She became more cordial when I moved east to teach at Temple University in 1964—and actually gracious after I arranged a meeting for her with William Jackson, Director of the Houghton Library at Harvard, to purchase the Cummings papers for the library. Still she maintained her opposition to a biography, telling me to wait another five years. Before her death in 1969, I visited her four times, but whenever I would ask her a specific question about some feature of her life, she would raise a warning finger against my inquiry. However, she did allow me to do a study of Estlin's father, Edward Cummings, and supplied me with two boxes of his notes and sermons before the Cummings papers were shipped to the Houghton Library. It was not until after her death that I was able to begin my real biographical research.

As a result of her reticence about herself, my gathering of information about her had to start with the facts set down in her obituary, a course that gradually raised questions in my mind about the persona she had created for herself during her lifetime. For instance, I discovered that there was no record of her birth in South Bend, Indiana, on March 9, 1906, as her obituary stated. Nor was there any record for 1904 or 1905, which I checked in case she had chopped off a year or two, as people in the theater or the fashion industry are wont to do. In Edward Steichen's photograph of her, made for

Vogue magazine in 1925, she was supposedly only 19 years old; yet she looks much older. (For the photograph, see my book, *E. E. Cummings Revisited*, page 112.)

My inquiry about her school records also led nowhere. St. Anne's Academy in Hartford, Connecticut, where she supposedly was educated, never existed. Nor was there any record of her at St. Anne's School, a parochial school for French-speaking students in Hartford. Nor any record at Mount St. Joseph's Academy, to which Sister Maria Michaud of St. Anne's referred me. Other walls of mystery surrounded the facts about her early life. Marion's sister, Lillian Cox, who still lived in Hartford, did not reply to my letters. Nor was it possible to reach her by telephone, because she had an unlisted number. Her New York lawyer, Philip Rice, would not intercede for me, although he had given me her address. I began to wonder about what family secrets were being protected. Further, when I began my research at Houghton Library, I discovered that Marion had closed off research for 25 years to a portion of Cummings' "Personal Notes." This material included the journals and notebooks that Cummings had accumulated from the 1930s to the end of his life—the period in which Marion had lived with him.

It was not until 1978 when I interviewed Aline Macmahon, who had known Marion in the 1920s in New York, that I obtained any information about Marion's early life.² It seems she had come to New York from Hartford, perhaps with Lillian, when she was very young, hoping to get into the theater, and she lived at first by her wits and her beauty. For example, she and a friend (or perhaps Lillian) used to go to the west side piers when the big ocean liners were about to sail and crash the bon voyage parties—an extra young girl or two was always welcome. Because Marion was very tall, she had a hard time finding roles to play on the stage, although her height and beauty were very suitable for work she secured as a showgirl in the *Ziegfeld Follies*. Lillian, an attractive blonde, was also a showgirl for Ziegfeld.

A note in E. E. Cummings' journal mentioned that Marion's "real debut" in the theater was as "a snooty Claire [Standish] in *Ladies of the Evening* by Milton Herbert Gropper."³ She was not listed in the part when the play opened in December 1924, but because the play had a long run, she may have been a replacement. At some point, she was sent by the Neighborhood Playhouse Theater to an acting school that it had established in Pleasantville, New York, under the supervision of Richard Boleslavsky. It was here that she and Aline Macmahon become friends.⁴

By 1925, she had become a fashion model and was appearing in *Vogue*, photographed by Edward Steichen. She was, Steichen declared, "the greatest fashion model I ever shot."⁵ Not only was her high-waisted, long-legged figure ideal for modeling work, but her training in the theater helped her adapt to any role that her costume required.

She was still finding small dramatic parts in the early 1930s. She was the "Second Corinthian Woman" in *Lysistrata*, which opened in Philadelphia in 1930 and caused such a sensation that its opening in New York was delayed for several weeks. She was performing in a play (no record of the name) on June 23, 1932, when she and Cummings first met, introduced by Patti and James Light, who had directed Cummings' play, *Him*. After a late dinner at Felix's, one of Cummings' favorite restaurants, Marion did not hesitate to spend the night with this charming, somewhat bewildering poet.^{6,7} He sent her a love note and a huge bouquet of flowers the next day.

It was the beginning of a long, occasionally troubled, but solid relationship. Because Cummings was ten or twelve years older than she, twice divorced, somewhat embittered by the world he lived in, and always in precarious economic circumstances, it was not easy for Marion to stick with him. But the love she brought him in 1932 pulled him out of the deep discouragements that he had suffered from his earlier marriages and from the lack of recognition that he had endured in the literary world. In return, he loved her as much as his self-centered existence allowed. Things took a decided upturn for this couple in the spring of 1933 when Cummings was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and was able to take Marion to Europe for a year, where they lived in Paris, met many of Cummings' friends in the arts, and traveled to Italy and Tunisia. Marion had never had such an exciting and glamorous experience in her life.

Marion once mentioned to me that she and Estlin were married in 1933, but the Bureau of Vital Statistics in New York State shows no evidence of this, although I had the records searched from 1932 to 1934. Because a couple of Cummings' friends had offered the opinion that Marion and Estlin were never married, I finally came to the conclusion that they had a common-law marriage and that it began to be established in the summer of 1934 when Cummings brought her to Joy Farm and introduced her as his wife to all the residents of the Silver Lake area whom he had known since childhood.

As the years went by, they remained together, living in New York at the same address, but their marriage had its peculiarities. Their New York home, 4 Patchin Place, was actually two separate areas. Marion occupied a first-floor apartment—sitting room, bedroom, kitchen, and bath—while Estlin spent most of his time in a studio on the third floor, where he slept, painted, read, and pounded away with two fingers on his typewriter. He went to the bathroom down the hall, which was shared by a tenant of another room. When he went downstairs, he was visiting "chez Marion,"⁸ where he spent part of the day and evening with her, chatting, having tea or drinks, entertaining visitors, and occasionally sharing her bed. They left notes for each other when they went out.

But their love for each other was very deep. Over and over in his journals, Cummings kept comparing his experiences in his three marriages and always with the same theme: in his first, he idealized Elaine Thayer; in his second, he found sexual fulfillment with Anne Barton; but with Marion, he discovered genuine love and was loved in return. "What a wonderful girl M is!" he jotted in his notebook in June 1950. "'May I be worthy of her' is my prayer (feeling in the deep of my spirit Dante & his lady)."⁹ On January 13, 1954, "Marion is different from any girl I've ever loved in one (above all) respect—a spiritual generosity or upward sweetness; which is close to forgiveness—a noble psychic kindness to the man who tries but fails to please her."¹⁰ Even as the years went by, he was continually seeing her anew. One day in Fall, 1953, when he was at Lloyd Frankenberg's apartment, Marion returned from a matinee and Estlin reacted with surprise and gratitude to her sudden appearance: "looking up I saw someone *young, lovely & gifted with beauty*—as a deer in a glade, unconscious of anyone else, is beautiful."¹¹ As Marion's love for Estlin developed and strengthened, it is best expressed by what she told him in March 1945: "I want to please you" and "I'll give you everything always."¹²

In one of his journal notes, for Christmas 1948, Cummings quoted Browning's lines from "One Word More":

God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures
Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her.¹³

This alternation between a public face and a private face was not only true for Estlin but also for Marion—indeed their friends observed this was true of the two of them as a couple, for they sometimes allowed their true selves to emerge and at other times erected barriers beyond which even intimate friends could not pass. As an example of the former, Cecily Angleton recalled that when she, fresh out of Vassar, first met them she was "transported" by their presence. The atmosphere they created was "absolute magic." Estlin's conversation was brilliant; Marion was utterly gracious. Cecily arranged for them to spend the winter with her and her parents in Tucson, Arizona, for Marion was recently out of the hospital after a long and dangerous struggle with rheumatoid arthritis. During their stay in Arizona, they "wove a spell" with their charm, beauty, and wit. "It was the best talk I ever heard," Cecily remembered. This was a common impression felt by many of their friends.

Yet despite Cummings' personal magnetism and Marion's stunning beauty, others found them not easily approachable. Helen Stewart, long a young disciple of Cummings, said they were "touchy people." You did not

drop in on them. Even an old friend might find a chilly welcome. (This probably applies to Marion, who had mixed feelings about the young women who were devoted to Cummings.) They were "both very demanding people" in their expectations of friends. They were "not casual in their relations with others." You did not interrupt them to carry on a conversation "if they were on a long discourse of some sort." (This probably has reference to Estlin, who was given to long *ex cathedra* pronouncements in his later years.) Aline Macmahon thought that they lacked "tendresse."

In her manner, Marion often played a very "queenly" role. As Evelyn Segal remembered it, she "held court." In her social views, she posed as a "monarchist" and an "aristocrat" and often offered her opinions with *hauteur*. Like many people lacking in educational background, she enjoyed looking down on others—working-class people or people outside their social circles—in order to elevate herself. Yet she could be kind, helpful, sympathetic, even gracious to individuals who paid court to her. With close friends she was warm and lively and a welcoming hostess for tea at Patchin Place or for weekends at Joy Farm, their summer place in New Hampshire.

This existence of a private side often became the public side in Cummings' treatment of Marion. He liked to play the role of "little Estlin," the "nonhero," the *petit garçon* who totally depended on Marion, who in turn dominated and commanded. On social occasions with friends, he would often defer to her for her authoritative opinion. Indeed, at times her matter-of-fact views were more sound than his poetic flights or irrational fulminations, for she had more common sense than he did and often advised him wisely when he had abruptly turned down an offer or avoided making a decision.

The bonds of common-law marriage are looser than those of a legalized union. Cummings shied away from full admission of their marital situation. Once on November 16, 1950, when he was flying home from a poetry reading, he took out an insurance policy naming Marion as beneficiary. "Relation?" asked the insurance agent. "None," Cummings replied. Then taken aback by his own statement, he sheepishly added, "a friend."¹⁴ Even toward the end of his life, the harness of marriage seemed to chafe him. On July 3, 1962, in Silver Lake, two half-clad, sexually vibrant, young women "glazed" him in the aisle of the general store. At that moment, Marion walked in. "Admiring the beauties of nature?" she inquired. He recorded his response in his notebook: "next to being cuckolded [sic], I ponder, the worst thing, perhaps, is to be husbanded." "And I can't help admiring the expertness with which she plays her part . . . The merest tinge of irony was all she needed to bring me to heel. Marvelous."¹⁵

Marion felt likewise somewhat free in their semi-official relationship. Because she was so extraordinarily beautiful in face and svelte in body ("Marion had no corners," said Sophie Treadwell), she always attracted men

and enjoyed their homage. She felt justified in sharing her beauty and allowed herself occasionally to drift into love affairs. In the late 1930s, she had an extended affair of the heart with Paul Rotha, a British film-maker, during the period when he was working in New York. Cummings became aware of the situation and she broke it off. He was very hurt, but after he consulted with Fritz Wittels, his psychoanalyst, he and Marion became reconciled, and their love was stronger than ever. Later, when she was in England, she had a brief fling with A. J. (Freddy) Ayer, the logician, a professor of philosophy at Oxford and one of Cummings' friends who was intellectually and politically his complete opposite.

However, the fact that she always remained with Cummings was clear evidence of how devoted she was to him—for the two of them usually teetered on the edge of financial desperation.¹⁶ On the morning of January 4, 1938, for instance, they had less than a dollar between them and no prospect of any of the patronage hand-outs they frequently received from Estlin's wealthy friends, such as Sibley Watson or Stewart Mitchell. They could only look forward to a dinner invitation that awaited them that evening.¹⁷ One summer, when Helen Stewart's brother Dr. Walter Stewart and his wife sublet 4 Patchin Place for a few weeks while Estlin and Marion were up at Joy Farm, they were appalled at the state of the furnishings in Marion's apartment—the sagging couch, the chair with its legs tied together with string. Their servant, Lena, who came in to clean up, said, "Oh Helen, I have never seen such poverty." In his journal, Estlin mused, "With Marion there was no question of money"; she was "unworldly." After years together, and especially after her long period of hospitalization with arthritis, they felt that "money and society are trivial."¹⁸

Her devotion was often tested, however. In the last two decades of their life together, when Estlin suffered from osteo arthritis in his back and legs, he had to wear a metal-braced corset, which he called "The Iron Maiden," to support his back. His intermittent pains were such that he had to take Nembutal in order to sleep. His condition made him irritable, full of complaint, and generally hard to live with. At one point, Marion decided to separate from him and went to consult with Wittels, who apparently advised her to put up with her neurotic partner for her own good as well as his. She returned home and they were reconciled. The poor state of Estlin's health increased his jaundiced view of the world in general and of the United States in particular, so that his youthful individualism had now altered, making him into an antisocial being constantly critical of the political scene and the post-World-War-II changes in American society.

But Marion's greatest trials began when Cummings started to go through a late "mid-life crisis," in which he worried about his aging, his declining sexual powers, and his inability to make progress on a play he was writing.

He began to think he needed rejuvenation through a sexual escapade with a young girl. In his pocket notebook in February, 1950, he considered what he would do if Marion were to die, and he happened to leave it where she read his entry. She reacted with hurt and outrage, accusing him of wishing she were dead. Once again, she decided on separation and strode out of the apartment leaving him stewing with guilt. But she returned later and calmed down. Estlin was relieved but felt unjustly treated: "Damn this woman who has such power over me," he confided to his notebook, utterly oblivious to the injury that he had caused.¹⁹

As early as 1947, he was smitten by a young woman named "Jackie," whom his fellow poet, Theodore Spencer, had brought over for tea. Later, he was reading Browning's "The Statue and the Bust," which made him feel that he should take action and seek her out—to seize the moment or else suffer for his inaction as Browning's failed lovers did.²⁰ This inclination eventually led to a somewhat comic episode in April, 1948, on an evening when he and Marion attended a gallery opening and later had dinner and "quantities of Scotch" at the apartment of Dorothy Case, another of Cummings' long-time disciples. After Marion left to go home, Cummings' alcoholic state urged him into making advances to Dorothy and the two of them ended up in her bed. When he returned home, he found he had left "The Iron Maiden" behind. The next day he awoke with a villainous hangover, full of remorse, and told Marion all about it. Exasperated with him for making such a fool of himself with one of their best friends, she was nonetheless forgiving and even volunteered to telephone Dorothy about the overlooked "Maiden."²¹

Cummings' state was not much helped by the fact that over the next three years he began to experience sexual impotence from time to time. To make matters worse, when he and Marion consulted their family physician, Dr. Peters, about it, the doctor blithely suggested the King David treatment, namely, that a sixteen-year-old girl could probably fix him up.²² Although this was a joke and an assurance that there was nothing physically wrong with the patient, Cummings took it under serious consideration.

Two years later, when Cummings was giving the Norton nonlectures at Harvard, he and Marion had a group of students to tea one afternoon. On this occasion, a blonde Radcliffe student named Ann Grant gave him "a look." His response: "feel shock: as if by lightning . . . realize this is love's 'arrow'—am really wounded!"²³ He became obsessed with this young woman, although he never made any overtures to her at all. His journal is full of speculations and meditations about "la blonde," until she become a symbol of what he needed to restore his virility, to rekindle his creativity, and even to cure his bad back. But he remembered his consultations with Fritz Wittels, now dead, who had always counseled him to stay with Marion and warned him that at his age young women were a bad idea.

Long after they left Harvard, Cummings continued to mull over a "last opportunity" with one young woman after another, blonde or not, who happened to cross their path briefly, either in New York or New Hampshire. When he began to be afflicted by heart fibrillations, he interpreted them guiltily as punishment for his fantasies of infidelity to Marion. Nevertheless, his yearnings and notions about sex with a young girl did not cease. His notebooks are full of considerations about "la bl." She became such a *idée fixe* that he even discussed the problem with Marion, with his son-in-law Kevin Andrews, and with his old friend Hildegard Watson. Marion became tired of the whole matter and told him that he should "go uptown and find as many blondes as [he] wanted."²⁴



Marion Morehouse

George Hoyningen-Heune, Condé Nast Publications, circa 1934.
Reprinted by permission of the estate of Horst P. Horst.

Marion's love for Estlin was still able to weather this kind of childish fear of old age and mortality. In 1955 when Estlin underwent surgery for a rectal polyp at Rochester Memorial Hospital while she remained in New York, she told him, "It was very strange while you were away. I hope you'll let me die first."²⁵

But, of course, with his greater age and all his ailments, he did die before Marion, on September 3, 1962. Jere Knight told me that after his death, Marion would wake every morning weeping. Aline Macmahon reported to me that Marion did not stop weeping for weeks. Her love for this brilliant, very exasperating man, one of the unique artists of our century, continued to be quite present and real until her own death on May 18, 1969.

After my book *Dreams in the Mirror* was published in 1980, I received a letter from England one day from Paul Rotha. He told me of his love for Marion and how he had wanted to marry her but that she had refused his offer. She told him that she could not leave Cummings. Rotha informed me that he was dying of cancer, and he asked if he could have a copy of the photograph by George Hoyningen-Heune that had appeared in my book. I sent him the photo, and he replied in a letter of thanks:

Am better now but alas cannot walk far. However I keep as busy as possible. . . . Looking back on it all now, I think that Marion made a great personal sacrifice when she decided to remain with E E. You see, I admired her not only for her remarkable beauty but also for her intelligence. My only memento of her today is a pair of platinum cufflinks which she gave me just before we parted in March, 1938. I have worn them many times in sundry countries but no longer have any use for them. I shall, of course, keep them and have said what they were in my will. . . .

If ever you are in NYC and visit "21" (if it still exists), you will find Marion's and my initials carved on a wood tabletop which I think was in a downstairs bar. Another spot we visited a lot was Bleek's, the "Herald Tribune" bar in Times Square. But we met in so many places including the flat of a friend of hers in, I think, 53 East. We spent a number of nights there.²⁶

Some years later I reported this surprising correspondence to Jere Knight, for she and her husband Eric had introduced Rotha to the Cummingses. She scoffed at Rotha's story, telling me that he was already married at the time and was a notorious womanizer. Nevertheless, he wrote me as he did, and I was genuinely moved by his request. "Truth sits on the lips of dying men," as the saying goes. The impact of Marion's beauty upon men was, perhaps, more than another woman could understand.

—Merion, Pennsylvania

Notes

- ¹ New York: Liveright, 1980. The present article is in some ways a supplement to my book, for it draws upon Cummings' Notes in the Houghton Library that had been restricted from research until 1991. For permission to quote from the unpublished writings of E. E. Cummings in this article I am grateful to George Firmage, agent for the E. E. Cummings Trust, and to Leslie Morris, Curator of Manuscripts at the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Call numbers are given for quotations from the Cummings Collection at Houghton Library.
- ² Much of the material in this article is drawn from interviews I had with many of Cummings' friends in the 1970s.
- ³ bMS Am1892.7 (222), Summer 1946.
- ⁴ For further details about Marion's early life, see *Dreams in the Mirror*, p. 337.
- ⁵ *A Life in Photography*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963. Ch. 7, "Fashion Photography and Fabric Designs," plates 104 and 107.
- ⁶ bMS Am1892.7 (236), ca. Nov. 1, 1959.
- ⁷ bMS Am1892.7 (225), Oct. 1948.
- ⁸ bMS Am1892.7 (228).
- ⁹ bMS Am1892.7 (232).
- ¹⁰ bMS Am1892.7 (235).
- ¹¹ bMS Am1892.7 (221).
- ¹² bMS Am1892.7 (226).
- ¹³ bMS Am1892.7 (228).
- ¹⁴ bMS Am1892.7 (238).
- ¹⁵ They were able to have their summers at Joy Farm in New Hampshire only because Cummings' mother paid the taxes on the property. She also paid the rent at 4 Patchin Place most of the time, and she sent Cummings a monthly "allowance" from his father's estate.
- ¹⁶ bMS Am1892.7 (113).
- ¹⁷ bMS Am1892.7 (222), pp. 125–26.
- ¹⁸ bMS Am1892.7 (227).
- ¹⁹ bMS Am1892.7 (223), Jan. 1947.
- ²⁰ bMS Am1892.7 (225).
- ²¹ bMS Am1892.7 (229), Jan.–Feb. 1951.
- ²² bMS Am1892.7 (225), April 26, 1948.
- ²³ bMS Am1892.7 (231), Feb. 19, 1953.
- ²⁴ bMS Am1892.7 (232), April 6, 1954.
- ²⁵ bMS Am1892.7 (233), May 13, 1955.
- ²⁶ August 28, 1981.