

Cummings and Children: Whatever Happened to Diana Barton?

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Two or three years ago I made up my mind to write an article about Cummings and Elaine Orr's daughter Nancy T. Andrews. Then Michael Webster published such a well-documented piece in the 2006 *Spring* issue that I told myself: "Well, I'd better not." However, one day while I was assembling material for a paper on how to teach Cummings' poetry to younger students, I thought: "As a man, Cummings had trouble with his role of father and one might think that children were not his specialty. However, as an artist, he believed that art was best created from a child's viewpoint.¹ Unfortunately, neither the man nor the artist had a chance with Nancy but what about Diana Barton, that little girl with whom he shared some years of his life?"

To be honest, I tried to contact Nancy when I was doing my Ph.D. on Cummings. George Firmage—who was always extremely kind to me— informed me that she was a very active widow who lived on her own in the outskirts of London. She was a lively grandmother who travelled frequently to visit her large family who lived in Bahamas (her son Alexis), Greece (her daughter Ioanna), Brewster, MA (her daughter Elizabeth) and California (her son Simon, who died in a motorcycle accident in the early '60s). My attempts to conduct an interview with her were forestalled when Firmage, with whom Nancy usually had lunch, related that the statements she made for Richard Kennedy's *Dreams in the Mirror* would be the first and last time she would talk about her father.²

Little Diana Barton, born on June 20th 1921, was four and a half years old in 1925 when Cummings met her mother, the beautiful fashion model Anne Minnerly Barton, shortly after his divorce from Elaine Orr. Diana was the daughter of Anne and the famous cartoonist and illustrator Ralph Barton. Barton and Anne were married from 1917 to 1923. When they divorced, apparently due to Barton's "manifest infidelities" (Kellner 68) and his infatuation with actress Carlotta Monterrey, Anne was granted custody of Diana and received \$300 in alimony a month from Barton.

After a complex love affair, Cummings and Anne eventually married on May 1st, 1929. When Cummings was introduced to her by Edward Pierce

Nagle, he was fighting a battle for custody of his daughter Nancy. Cummings wrote in his notes “1st I thought [Anne] was a whore. I didn’t care that she was simply somebody to screw—my chief concern was with my wife and child” (Sawyer-Lauçanno 285). This sounds cruel considering that Diana was around but, at first, he was actually more interested in sex than in love. Anne was so strikingly attractive that she “made every male in a room aware of her as soon as she entered” (Kennedy, *Dreams* 287). Unlike the refined and reserved Elaine, Anne was vivacious. Although her relationship with Cummings was always a troublesome one, she was just what he needed after his painful divorce from his first wife. In Cummings’ words, Anne was his “first real introduction to sex” (Kennedy, *Dreams* 288). Opinions of her differed in Cummings’ circles. Malcolm Cowley gives a contradictory picture at the time their marriage was breaking up: “She was at a time a very entertaining, beautiful, a heavy drinker, and a perfect bitch” (Kennedy 1980, 325). Richard Kennedy defines Anne as “a good-time woman, lively, witty, and well-suited to the role of the New York flapper of the 1920s” (*Revisited* 70). Charles Norman writes that she was “a most beautiful and gallant lady” who “posed for him” and “used to bring him bouquets of flowers and paints to paint them” (170). Lincoln Kirstein described her as a “bloody horror” (qtd. in Sawyer-Lauçanno 350). When their marriage was almost over, Cummings decided she was “Unbeautiful” (Kennedy, *Dreams* 351). Worst of all, when he learned of her death he wrote a terribly sad poem entitled “annie died the other day,” recalling that Anne was sexually abused by her father when she was a little girl. The poem came out in his posthumous volume *73 Poems* and we do not know whether Cummings would have chosen himself to publish it. Pretty, flirty, promiscuous Anne, who liked wearing designer-labeled clothing, was a credit to the new freedom, sophistication and the small measure of independence that women started gaining in the 1920s.³ In my opinion, she was a woman psychologically damaged by a traumatic childhood and, above all, a mother so obsessed with her daughter’s well-being and herself that, even when she was happily living with Cummings in New York, she was seeing a wealthy older man named Douglas “who supported her with a promise to leave money to Diana in his will—provided Anne did not get married” (Kellner 142). Kellner also notes she married Barton “as much for security as for love” (64).

Anne had a large succession of lovers before and after getting married to Cummings. She had serious emotional problems, had gone through peri-

ods of excessive drinking, and suffered periods of depression during which she threatened to commit suicide. Her instability as a partner caused Cummings much anguish. As Kennedy points out, at that time, he thought that the best way to settle her down was to make her jealous with tall, blonde, aggressive Emily Vanderbilt, who was divorcing her husband William (*Dreams* 300-301). Both Cummings and Anne had to turn to psychoanalysis for help but, despite the agony, she always tried to provide Diana (and herself) with the life of a little princess.

Anne lived at 55 Charles St, a short walk from Patchin Place and soon moved to Cummings' apartment. Both in New York and in Joy Farm—Cummings' summer residence near Silver Lake in New Hampshire—Diana would meet John Dos Passos, Hart Crane, or Edmund Wilson as they were guests of her mother's husband. According to her father Ralph Barton, she was a surprisingly intelligent baby capable of saying hello when she was only three-months old: "I couldn't believe she was doing it consciously but she has repeated it after us so often now, and never in the wrong place that I have become, as has everyone else, convinced that she means to say it" (Kellner 79). Not many girls in her time had the possibility to travel to Europe on three occasions (one of them her mother's honeymoon) and to visit Rouen, Paris, Venice, Lausanne, Munich, Vienna, Budapest, Prague, and Berlin—as well as take monthly courses in a French convent and a Catholic boarding school in Switzerland. Most important of all, she, a lonely child, finally had a family.⁴ In September 1927, for the first time in her life "little Diana was able to have a real summer vacation and a more stable family situation with a real father-figure in the household" at Joy Farm (Kennedy, *Dreams* 297). In June 1930 Cummings even built a playhouse for her in the farm fields. Cummings' mother Rebecca, who had recently moved to New York after her husband's death, was also able to perform the role of grandmother for Diana, "who could now occupy the space in her heart left sorely vacant after the loss of Nancy" (Kennedy, *Dreams* 301), and placate the frequent troubles or quarrelling between her parents. The tranquility of the country seemed to have healing effects on the newly-formed family. "The time they spent there was close to a life of domestic bliss as Cummings would never achieve with Anne," Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno remarks (324). Anne was so enthusiastic about the farm as a summer place for her daughter that she tried to claim it for herself during the divorce proceedings from Cummings, as she was one of the joint owners. In Kennedy's words, Cummings was "so demoralized by the break-up

of his marriage” that if Morrie Werner had not recommended to him a lawyer to help, he would have let her take over the property (*Dreams* 325).

Was Cummings prepared to raise a girl who had frequently suffered from her mother’s changing personality and constant desperation for financial security? “Dear Comi”—the way Diana called her mother’s husband—thought of the girl as “spoiled” and even “piggish” (Sawyer-Lauçanno, 324). At the same time he disliked the way in which her hysterically gay mother dealt with her tantrums because Anne’s outbursts of anger were as childlike as her little daughter’s. Diana was described by her mother, who wanted to appear as a perfect parent, as “happy, jolly, very pretty and very intelligent” the first time they travelled to Paris and enrolled her in the French convent in 1927 (Kellner 136). No doubt, the French convent was really beneficial to her. Barton, who happened to meet the Cummingses in Paris, was delighted with the girl. He wrote in a letter to her mother that her French was good and she had even learned some manners (Anne, apparently, had taken few pains to bring her up properly). At lunch with the Polignacs, Diana had behaved beautifully in what Barton called “the strictest French formality” (Kellner 164). Unfortunately Cummings could not provide Anne with the luxurious life she wanted. The economic disaster of the 1929 crisis affected the nation and the Cummingses’ economy. With her sharp tongue, Anne accused him of New Englandism, mocked the Boston manners of his mother and sister Elizabeth, and criticized his manhood publically. They eventually divorced in 1931. In 1932 Anne married a surgeon named Joseph Girdansky with whom she had two sons. In fact, she was already bearing Girdansky’s child when she was still legally married to Cummings in the United States. As Richard Kennedy notes, “she wanted to marry Girdansky as soon as the child would be legitimately their own” (*Dreams* 325). From then on, little Diana faded away from the public scene and Cummings’ life.

It was Michael Webster who recommended that I read Bruce Kellner’s biography of Ralph Barton, which contains references to his daughter Diana. Usually presented as a mentally unstable person and a womanizer (it was Anne who told Diana her father had had casual affairs during their marriage), the successful cartoonist who illustrated Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, is shown as a man quite worried about his two daughters’ future. He had four failed marriages: Marie Jennings (his Kansas City sweetheart and the mother of his elder daughter, Natalie, born in 1911), actress Carlotta Monterrey, French composer Germaine Tailleferre, and the

future Mrs. E. E. Cummings. Barton had a deep interest in his daughter meeting his Kansas family and he even arranged two extra rooms in his Paris studio on Rue Nicolo for his daughter's visit in the late summer of 1929. At the house, Diana was introduced to the writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten and the best-selling novelist Louis Bromfield and his wife at dinner.

On May 19, 1931 before Barton turned forty, he killed himself.⁵ According to Edmund Wilson, he went to see Diana in her convent school in Lausanne and “egged his daughter on to be a nun, telling her he was going into a monastery himself” (Sawyer-Lauçanno, 345). His elder daughter Natalie had become a nun in a strict order in London when she was seventeen. Almost three months after his visit to Diana, he took his own life.⁶ Cummings was in Russia at the time. Anne did not want her daughter to know about her father's death but she learned about it through a newspaper article in Switzerland. In a letter to Cummings from Paris on May 31 preserved in the Houghton Library, Anne informs him of Barton's death, adding that Ralph's “silly brother” had also sent the little girl “a sobbing cable telling her.” Kellner says that afterward she did not admit to having known about the suicide, not even years later when her mother told her. Kellner adds that it was her sister Natalie, then Sister Marie Magdaleine, who mourned her father's death from her convent in London. He also points out that Carlotta Monterrey urged her not to talk to reporters or “to make a martyr of him” (5). When Anne learned of her ex-husband's suicide she ran back to the United States from Paris in order “to oversee the sale of his furnishings and personal effects” (Kennedy, *Dreams* 313) and to secure her daughter's inheritance because, as she wrote to Cummings from Paris to Russia on May 21, 1931, he had only “left the sum of \$35” (letter preserved in the Houghton Library). In the May 31 letter, Anne also remarks that she could no longer remain in the French capital as she could not “get anyone to perform an abortion.” The child in the womb may or may not have been Cummings'—in *EIMI*, he urges her not to have the abortion unless medically necessary (see Kennedy, *Dreams* 308-309, 313, and *EIMI*, 323, 312).

In my detective role, I e-mailed Professor Kellner in July 2009 and he replied immediately. I wanted to know if Diana Barton was still alive. He wrote that if she was still living she would be eighty-eight years old. He had not been in touch with her for at least a decade, when he was writing Barton's biography. In fact his letters to her after the publication of the book had not been answered. Kellner informed me that she lived with her

husband William Franz in a New Jersey town called Shrewsbury and both were avid gardeners. I then asked my friend Richard Kostelanetz to phone his friend in New Jersey. He checked the telephone directory and could not find anybody called Franz. Diana told Kellner that she had lovely memories of living with Anne and Cummings at Joy Farm and of her summer with Germaine Tailleferre and Ralph Barton in the South of France at Toulon in 1929 “where Barton owned a villa” (Kennedy, *Dreams* 305). Cummings, Anne, and Diana were requested to accompany Barton and his wife on the automobile trip. Diana commented to Kellner that everybody was quite civil.⁷ On the other hand, Sawyer-Lauçanno remarks that “the trip was not a particularly happy one” (323). Cummings and Anne had their disputes, but in comparison to their hosts, they seemed almost harmonious. Barton, Sawyer-Lauçanno adds, “enjoyed his time with Diana, ostentatiously lavishing attention on her” (323). Surely they behaved properly when they were in front of the little girl or perhaps, as Webster notes, she chose to forget the ugliness just as she blocked out her father’s suicide.⁸

As a personality, Kellner recalled Diana as a terribly shy, self-effacing woman who gradually, after several visits, warmed to him.⁹ Her husband was rather brisk. But eventually he grew less suspicious of him, and on his fourth or fifth visit he prepared an elaborate lunch for the three of them. Diana had a son and a daughter. The death of her daughter was a great blow to her. She held the rights to publication of her father’s work and granted Kellner permission to reproduce them in his book. The famous drawing of Ernest Hemingway as a bullfighter appeared as a tiny illustration for a *Vanity Fair* article about Hemingway. It has since then been greatly enlarged and reproduced on the cover of some academic journal. Kellner arranged for this, with Diana’s permission, and got her a hundred dollars. She had a portfolio of perhaps a hundred drawings. Kellner acted as an intermediary for the National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC to purchase four or five caricatures from her.¹⁰

Diana was born just in the middle of one of the most productive years in Ralph Barton’s career. When she and her mother lived with Cummings, the writer developed a brilliant period of completely new artistic creation. Cummings was presumably more sure of himself or felt closer to the artistic trends of the time. A change in style can be appreciated in Cummings’ paintings: nudes, portraits and landscapes replaced the abstract Noises and Sounds. Kennedy says that Anne’s “willingness [to pose] was partly responsible for th[is] change in style in Cummings’ painting which began in

the mid-1920s” (*Dreams* 287). *ViVa* (1931) is the book which recounts his courting of Anne and their marriage. The seventy poems of this volume are deeply marked by a group dealing with love and lovers in a particularly



intriguing way. In “i’d think ‘wonder’ ” the poet shows an overprotective attitude towards a woman who does not really need any protection. Sawyer-Lauçanno says that *CIOPW* could have been subtitled “The World of E. E. Cummings,” for the work he chose is representative of people and places that had special significance for him: Joy Farm, Paris, Southern France, Coney Island, the circus, burlesque theatres, Thayer, Watson, Jacobs, Sel-des, Joe Gould, Anne—and Diana peacefully sitting and looking at the pictures in a children’s book (328). The girl is holding a little dog, maybe Chew-Chew or Tippy, which her mother acquired in 1930. Her face reveals how comfortable she felt at that home. However, in Cummings’ self-portrait with Anne and Diana in a mirror, resembling Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, Diana is hiding her face behind her mother’s hip while Anne looks radiant. Cummings looks serious, observant, even separated from mother and daughter. Was Diana somehow an obstacle between the couple? Did



she sometimes require her mother's attention in such a way that Cummings felt ignored? Or did Cummings not paint her face simply because the little girl, like most children would do, was moving around, nervously tired of posing for her stepfather? Mirrors symbolize the fragmentation of the self and help create a sort of distortion of reality, a kind of nightmarish sensation. In the portrait, Cummings places his family and himself in two different spheres as if foretelling that their lives were going to be broken into pieces very soon. One might think that Cummings the father and Cummings the artist were positioned in different layers of reality once again. But is it not reasonable to assume that Cummings was inspired by *Las Meninas* just because he liked the idea of the mirror in the background reflecting who Velázquez was actually painting? Or, on the contrary, is Cummings standing in for Velázquez and little princess Margarita, the real protagonists of the painting? We can guess that Diana's life as Mrs. Girdansky's elder child must have been quite comfortable and that Diana had a happy existence as a suburban housewife full of extraordinary memories of unforgettable times. Above all, despite the constant uprooting, she had a relatively joyful childhood at a time in which social and economic structures were radically changing. Her stepfather E. E. Cummings, no doubt, contributed to it.

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Notes

1. In “Gaston Lachaise,” Cummings remarks, “The more genuine child art is, the more it is” (19).
2. Telephonic conversation held between George Firmage and myself on June 13th 2003. In Bernard F. Stehle’s draft transcript of Nancy’s recorded remarks, first played on November 7, 1979 at Temple University, Nancy says that the Charon of the title of her book of poems *Charon’s Daughter* represents not her father, but the absence of her father. Later, when she refers to her parents as a couple, she remarks that perhaps the only link she could feel between them was that each — overwhelmed by personal distress—“failed to listen to the immensity of the distance I could hear between them.”
3. In a letter written to Cummings from Paris on May 18, 1931 and preserved in the Houghton Library, she says that her friend Sophie Green had taken her to Elsa Schiaparelli’s boutique where she “bought two suits—one black and the other brick color—reduced from 6500 francs to 1000 a piece.”
4. I asked Elizabeth Aldred, Cummings’ granddaughter, if her mother Nancy had ever mentioned whether she would like to have a sister. She replied she had no recollection of it or of hearing her mother speak of Diana Barton and Anne. Email to the author, Sept 20, 2012.
5. Ralph Barton left a note which mentioned personal problems and many worries (Kennedy, *Dreams* 313). In his “Notes to *EIMI*,” Michael Webster points out that much of Barton’s suicide note is reproduced in John Updike’s essay on Barton, “A Case of Melancholy” (notes to pages 221/214).
6. The female protagonist of Linn Ullmann’s *Before You Sleep* (2001) speaks about her grandfather Rikard’s hobby of collecting newspaper articles related to America and sticking them in a notebook. One of the most curious news items that he compiled was that of Ralph Barton’s suicide. The suicide letter that he wrote is transcribed in the newspaper, and the protagonist’s grandfather also glued it in his notebook.
7. Emails to the author, July 14, 15, 2009. Sawyer-Lauçanno remarks that, contrary to Cummings’ expectations, he actually liked Ralph Barton: “Anne exaggerated;he’s not a villain;she made him one,it was all her fault.” Barton apparently took to Cummings as well. He appreciat-

- ed his work as a writer, and as a cartoonist, admiring Cummings' line drawings that had appeared in *Vanity Fair* and the *Dial* (323).
8. Webster, Michael, E-mail to the author, June 18, 2012.
 9. Her sister Natalie remembered her, though shy, as "quite a character" even when she was a one-year-old baby (Kellner 89).
 10. Emails to the author, July 15, 2009.

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