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A PAIR OF KRAZY KATS: CUMMINGS AND GEORGE HERRIMAN'S COMIC STRIP

Kenneth Klein, Music Director and Conductor of the New York Virtuosi Chamber Symphony, conducted a concert at the Sylvia and Danny Kaye Playhouse of Hunter College, entitled "Krazy Cats—the Roaring Twenties," on October 14, 1998. The program consisted of five pieces reflecting the theme of the title: "Ragtime" by Igor Stravinsky; "Kammermusik No. 3, op. 36, No. 2 (Cello Konzert)" by Paul Hindemith; "The Daniel Jazz" by Louise Gruenberg; "Krazy Kat" by John Alder Carpenter; and "La Boeuf sur le toit" by Darius Milhaud.

In addition, Mr. Klein invited Dr. David Forrest, M.D. and Norman Friedman to speak prior to the concert about Cummings' connection with George Herriman's cartoon creation, the strip entitled *Krazy Kat*, as being an interesting and appropriate tie-in. We called our joint presentation "Love Unlimited: Cummings and Krazy."

To our knowledge, there are two editions of Herriman's cartoons in book form, each preceded by Cummings' "Introduction": *Krazy Kat*, by George Herriman, NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1946; and *George Herriman's Krazy Kat: A Classic from the Golden Age of the Comics, With an Introduction by e.e. cummings* (accursed lowercase!), NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969. Barbara Gelman contributes a "Foreword." The former is unpaginated, while the latter has page numbers throughout and has been elaborately produced, researched, edited, captioned, designed, etc. Indeed, it groups the strips in some sort of sequence and gives the groups such titles as "THE FIRST BRICKS," "FLIGHTS OF FANCY," "THE ETERNAL TRIANGLE," etc.

Cummings' "Introduction" is reprinted in *A Miscellany Revised*, ed. George J. Firmage (NY: October House, 1965), 323-328, entitled "A Foreword to Krazy," originally published in *The Sewanee Review*, Spring 1946.

Also of great help is *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman*, by Patrick McDonnell, Karen O'Connell, and Georgia Riley de Havenon (NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), which contains the

essay by Gilbert & Seldes, an extended biography of Herriman by the editors, and 120 pages or so of cartoon strips.



Christane Corbat,
Renaissance Man or Leonardo de Shrinki,
5'9''h x 2'11''w x 4'4''d, mixed media, 1993

Photograph by Chee-Heng Yeong.

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FROM DAVID V FORREST, MD, Postcard

A PSYCHOLITERARY APPRECIATION OF GEORGE HERRIMAN'S KRAZY KAT AND ITS APPEAL TO E. E. CUMMINGS

David V. Forrest, M. D.

George Herriman's comic strip creation of Krazy Kat, which he drew from 1916 until his death in 1944, is an unequalled and unabashed meditation upon the centrality and primacy of love in the human condition, a favorite of Woodrow Wilson and William Randolph Hearst, and of E.E. Cummings, who in 1946 wrote a foreword to the collection of strips that appeared in book form at that time. In Cummings' matchless description, the protagonists are Ignatz, a "cynical brick-throwing mouse," Offisa Pupp, "a sentimental policeman-dog", and Krazy Kat, "a humbly poetic, gently clown-like, supremely innocent and illimitably affectionate creature ...who is never so happy as when egoist-mouse, thwarting, altruist dog, hits her in the head with a brick" (Herriman, 1969 ed. 10). In sum, Cummings puts it, "Dog hates mouse and worships 'cat,' mouse despises 'cat' and hates dog, 'cat' hates no one and loves mouse" (10). Cummings continues that no one should pity Krazy Kat, who takes unlimited joy from Ignatz's assaults, but rather pity the hero dog who never suspects that "this desecration becomes, through our transcending heroine, a consecration"(12), and Ignatz, "Poor villain! All his malevolence turns to benevolence at contact with Krazy's head. By profaning the temple of altruism, alias law and order, he worships (entirely against his will) at the shrine of love" (13).

Cummings says that Ignatz, from the viewpoint of the "two-fisted spineless progressive", "forcefully defies society's will by asserting his authentic own," and "becomes a demon of anarchy and a fiend of chaos" to Pupp's "cosmic angel"; while from the viewpoint of "a 100% hidebound reactionary," Ignatz "stands forth as a hero, pluckily struggling to keep the flag of free will flying," "a tiny but indomitable David" to Pupp's Goliath (10-11).

In a number of ways Cummings identifies with Ignatz. He too is a poetic *enfant terrible*, who enjoyed hurling bricks in his satiric

tone at politicians, scientists, philosophers, generals, and all who pursue group thinking at the expense of individualism. His poems worship love and beauty in women, so one is tempted to say he is like Offissa Pupp in worshipping Krazy, but his anti-authoritarianism is too great for that. Cummings' personal oedipal family situation, between a strong, admirable, protective father and an overindulgent mother, may have predisposed him to relate to Ignatz as spoiled yet punished child, to Krazy as a mother, and to Pupp as a father. Krazy's gender was always ambiguous, but Cummings insists on female. The collection of cartoons establishes Ignatz's child status and Krazy's and Pupp's parental status in several ways. First, of course, Ignatz is smaller. When he appeared in color, he was baby pink. Krazy in a motherly way admires Ignatz's playing on Pupp's stolen comb, and paternal Pupp spanks him for the theft (103). Hiding Ignatz held in a blanket like a baby, Krazy sings "Rokka buy baby" (160). Often Ignatz falls asleep next to Krazy. The brick is Ignatz's toy, plaything, and teddy bear (transitional object is the psychoanalytic term), forever being returned to connect with Krazy. It moves as a toy tank, with wings, and as a submarine (59).

Krazy occasionally seems more unintelligent than merely innocent; for example, in one cartoon, she cannot hang up the phone, much to Ignatz's frustration. It is fitting that forever loving Krazy therefore symbolically cannot or will not break off a connection; but she *literally* cannot figure out how to do it as "at last I have a telefoam at my mercy and I will talk among it for the first time in my life" (110). Probably Herriman identified with Krazy. One indication is Krazy's apparent death by drowning in the very last Sunday strip that was published on June 25, 1944, Herriman perhaps having anticipated his own death on April 25, 1944 (he died quietly in his sleep). After Offissa Pupp fails to rescue him in time, he carries Krazy lovingly out to his beloved desert (McDonnell 211).

Krazy Kat's language is one of the chief fascinations of the strip, and no doubt delighted Cummings, although he does not mention it explicitly. Of all the characters, only Krazy's speech is ethnically accented in a Germanic hodgepodge that resembles Yiddish and the contemporaneous cartoon *The Katzenjammer Kids*, but also other

eastern European influences and even black dialect. Examples: "I know my dollink loves me because my dollink is jelly [jealous] of me" (161); "Somethin' wrong here—somethin' topsa turva in congress—ujilly the jail sinn [scene] is in the werra lest pitcha [very last picture]" (83); "swee daddolime" [sweet Adaline] (161); "sounds like the envil choritz by Rigid Vogna in beer flet" [the anvil chorus by Richard Wagner in B flat] (163); "Ignatz mice said I could do it mo' better" (132). Cummings would have been fascinated because he, like Herriman (who was the son of a baker in New Orleans before he came to New York), delighted in the multicultural rhythms and cadences of that urban speech as he travelled forth from his homogeneous Boston Brahmin background. Herriman, however, had a head start in that he was part black Creole who may have passed for white; and Krazy, of course, is a black cat. Herriman was born in 1880, worked for New York newspapers, where he was dubbed "the Greek" and always wore a hat; but he loved Los Angeles best, where his family had lived when he was age 11-16, and returned there later, inspired visually by the Arizona desert, Monument Valley and Navajo settlements in the strips.

Cummings, who encountered Herriman in Gilbert Seldes' circle, once wrote "At least my theory of technique,if I have one,is very far from original;nor is it complicated. I can express it in fifteen words,by quoting The Eternal Question And Immortal Answer of burlesk,viz. 'Would you hit a woman with a child?--No, I'd hit her with a brick.' Like the burlesk comedian,I am abnormally fond of that precision which creates movement" (CP 221).

I would go so far as to venture that Cummings mock-can-onized Ignatz Mouse in his 1926 book of poems, *is 5*, the same book whose Foreword contained the above mention of a brick:

candles and
 Here Comes a glass box
 which the exhumed
 hand of Saint Ignatz miraculously
 inhabits. (people tumble
 down. people crumble to their

knees

begin crossing people)and (CP 280)

This excerpt is part of a poem lampooning a religious procession, perhaps in Italy, that Cummings found lacking, and which concludes "The/ Expectant stutter(upon artificial limbs,/ with faces like defunct geraniums)" (CP 280).

Another peculiarity is Herriman's use of quotation marks around the iconic main characters, for examples, "At last I'm free to toss this 'brick' at that 'kat' without that 'kop's' interference" (106); "eschew the bellicose 'brick'" (p. 136); "you fooled me 'kop'" (145); "'mousie' come along quietly" (144). This has the effect of continually placing their real identities up for grabs; of reminding us that they are stand-ins for ourselves, or for agencies of ourselves.

Krazy Kat ran from 1916 to 1944, a time when Freud's theories had an enormous impact on American thought. Could Herriman be far behind? The strip itself originated as a smaller strip tacked on beneath Herriman's earlier strip about a family that was forever concerned about the people living upstairs from them; in other words, Krazy Kat began on a subterranean, third level down, which I as a psychoanalyst find delightfully indicative of deeper subconscious roots, if not thoughts of lower social status. In a series of strips (149-151), Dr. Y. Zowl notes "all the folks in Coconino County going into a state of retrogression" (149), which he explains is "atavism--the cat and tree complex of your ancestors" (149). Ignatz has the urge to duck into a hole, Krazy to chase Ignatz, and Pupp to run Krazy up a tree, all this in contradistinction to "normalcy, sanity, civilization--intelligence--wisdom--" (151). Employing his "mind-o-scope" stethoscope (71), Offissa Pupp listens to the sleeping mind of Ignatz Mouse and, without even waking him to consciousness, jails him. When he listens to Krazy Kat's sleeping mind, he is astonished to hear the freudian dream condensation "Officer Mouse." Listening through Krazy's sombrero, he can't make out the "foreign language," and we see it's Ignatz under the hat thinking in mock Chinese characters. Finally he listens to the brick and, of course, jails Ignatz, who complains "somebody squealed" (71). "A mouse just thinking of a brick should be jailable," Officer Pupp explains (144). Although

the concept of taking responsibility for one's unconscious mind has existed in Western culture at least since Greek times with the dream of Ajax, Freud championed not only the discovery of that unconscious, but also its revision by bringing it into rational consciousness. In a related series of strips about telepathy (133), Pupp reads Mouse's plans in the cartoon balloon over his head and jails him on the basis of his intent alone; Mouse cannot read Kat's mind at all; Pupp reads Kat's dream of being hit by the brick and, grabbing Mouse by the tail, says, "See if you can read my mind--viper-" while visualizing him in jail; and Mouse is discouraged by reading Pupp's jail plans for him and drops his brick.

Herriman's strip is also modernist or postmodernist in its consideration of the frame; at times the consciousness of being a drawn creation is reflected in the characters drawing one other, the brick, or the jail (84), or censoring in black one another's speech balloons, the brick or the jail (124).

Music is a frequent preoccupation, especially of Krazy who serenades with a banjo and the usual mispronunciations in the open desert air. Krazy also plays horns (163) and an accordion (154) and Ignatz a drum (162) and a banjo (162). In a 1941 strip, near the end of the series, a crank gramophone entrances the three, Ignatz drops his brick, and they all dance together (167), music having soothed the savage breasts.

In a mystical cartoon that ends the collection (168), Krazy is walking through a portal in the surreal desert joyously singing "There is a heppy lend, fur, fur a-way!!" Beneath it, Herriman addresses us:

"You have written truth, you friends of the 'shadows', yet be not/ harsh with "Krazy." He is but a shadow of himself, caught in the web of this mortal skein./ We call him "cat",/ we call him "crazy"/ Yet he is neither./ At some time will he ride away/ to you, people of the twilight,/ his password will be the echoes of/ a vesper bell, his coach, a/ zephyr from the west/ Forgive him, for you will/ understand him no better than we who linger on this side of the pale." (168)

Herriman is telling us his characters are shadows, or alter egos, of us all. If we do not understand Krazy's suffering for love, and think it is just some misguided masochism, we should think again. Krazy also has a special transcendent status like a misunderstood martyr or messiah, who will come from that "heppy lend" to us at vespers, on the Western wind, which in Biblical lands brings the fertile rain of life and hope. Compare the anonymous chanty, "Western wind, when wilt thou blow/ The small rain down can rain/ Christ that my love were in my arms/ And I in my bed again."

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FRIEDMAN, KLEIN, and FORREST