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INTERDEPENDENCE VERSUS TRANSCENDENCE

Norman Friedman

Although Cummings was a fan of Krazy Kat, along with F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, H.L. Menken, and Gilbert Seldes, as early as the Twenties, his Introduction to the 1946 edition of Herriman's strips came just after the close of World War Two and before the McCarthy era of the 1950s. Thus, in his praise of individualism and love versus conformity and fear, he was nothing short of a prophet.

But from the wisdom of hindsight, it seems to me that his understanding of the triangle between Krazy Kat, Offissa Pupp, and Ignatz Mouse somewhat over-schematizes the dynamic of the relationships we actually see in the strips. Even though he sees that Mouse and Pup are having "fun . . . playing their brutal little game," and even though he correctly sees that Krazy is fulfilling his/her destiny through this game (Herriman deliberately left Krazy's gender ambiguous), he nevertheless goes on to say that democracy is a struggle between society (Pupp) and the individual (Mouse) over an ideal—illimitable love (Krazy)—and that the ideal fulfills itself only if and when society fails to suppress the individual. Aside from the fact that this interpretation doesn't explain why the individual wants to *hurt* the ideal, it also fails to account for at least two other pieces of negative evidence: that the three players sometimes deliberately exchange roles, and that on numerous occasions they actually engage in genuine dialogue rather than struggle and conflict—and that on at least one occasion all three transcend their struggle, and as a result all three disappear. And underlying all this is Herriman's choice of role-reversal as his basic plot device: after all, it's cats who normally chase mice.

Indeed, Herriman was so sure of what he was doing that he could on occasion actually reverse the role-reversal and have Krazy throw something, or have Mouse hit Pupp by mistake, and so on (McDonnell, *et al.*, 63-65). Or he had Krazy drink "Tiger Tea" and imagine s/he is a tiger, whereupon s/he hits Mouse with a tea jug (94). Or

they all become afflicted with "atavism"—as Owl explains, "A vagrant sensation—a ghost of habitude—an ancestral trait." So Krazy chases Mouse, Pupp feels the urge to chase Krazy, etc. (149-50).

But the real clincher is that episode where they disappear. We first see Mouse, who says, "A 'Mouse' without a 'Brick'—How Futile." And he disappears. Pupp is terrified and tells this to Krazy, who then disappears. Once again Pupp is terrified, and the next panel shows an empty night—stars, moon, desert. The final panel shows Mrs. Duck waddling by in broad daylight, and she's saying, "Another dull day." We can only infer that Pupp has also disappeared.

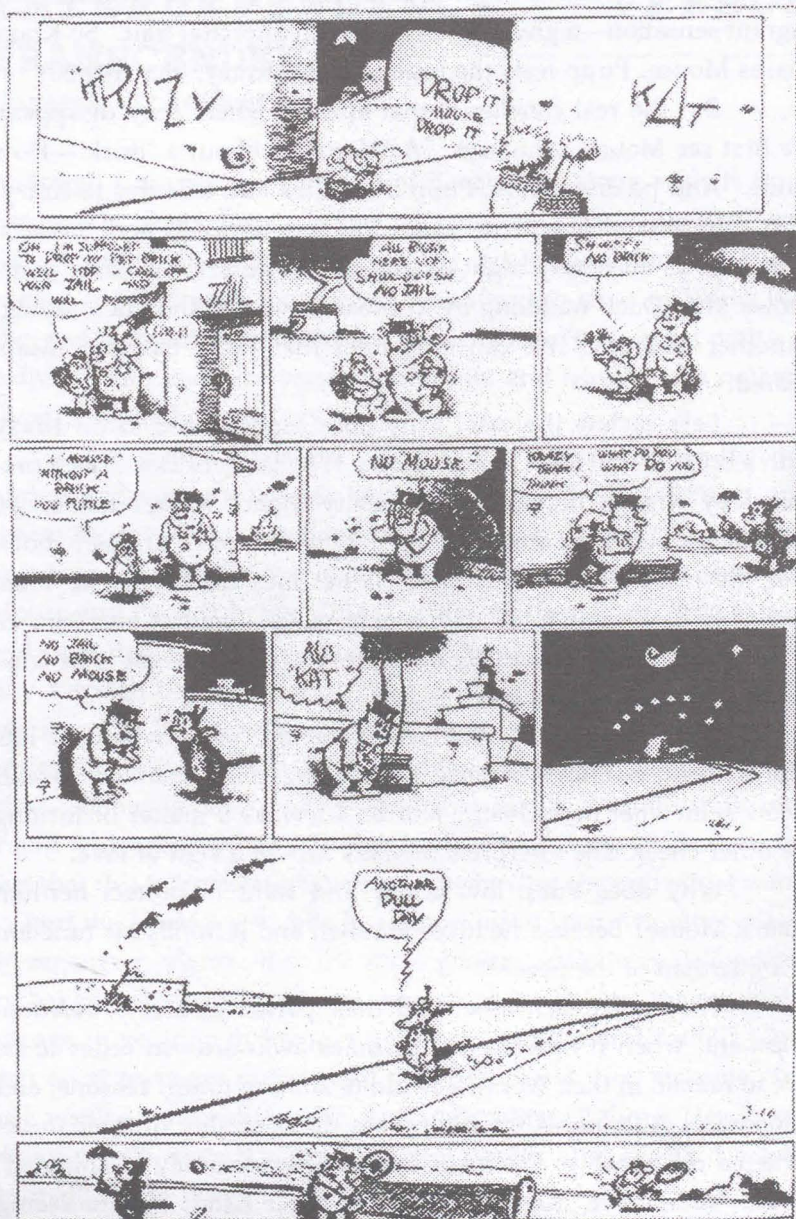
Let's review the case. Why does Mouse need to hit Krazy with a brick? For at least three reasons: 1) he loves bricks, 2) he's provoked by Krazy's nonrational mentality (hence his/her name, we might add), and 3) he enjoys trying to outwit Pupp. Curiously, however, he is continually frustrated: if he does hit Krazy, he must inevitably be disappointed that it only makes him/her love him all the more; and if Pupp actually does prevent him, he's got to be frustrated in not having his way.

Why does Krazy love Mouse all the more when he hits him/her with a brick? Because she's being paid attention to and seems somewhat masochistic. Nor do I feel it's a matter of turning the other cheek: she interprets Mouse's toss as a sign of love.

Why does Pupp love Krazy and want to protect her/him against Mouse? Because he loves him/her, and it fulfills his function as a guardian of the peace.

They *need* each other and their particular sort of *relationship*—and when it's reversed it becomes awkward—in order to be able to remain in their world, a world of shifting times, seasons, and landscapes. Although Cummings sees the centrality of their three-cornered relationship, he sees it as being paradoxically "dominated" by the "submissive" Kat. Here, on the other hand, we are seeing their *equality* relative to one another, their *interdependence*.

Krazy's not transcendent if her/his existence depends upon Mouse's existence and Mouse's existence depends upon the brick. Rather than hating each other, they need each other to form a whole;



their "contest" is in reality their *raison d'être*, the essential force that keeps them together and present in their world and without which they wouldn't exist. Indeed, on occasion Herriman has them comment self-referentially on the strip itself, as if to say the meaning of

all this is only to be found in itself rather than in any allegory. It's the strip itself he needs to produce: its theme is how many variations one can create on a single set of relationships in order to sustain interest. And it's more a matter of puzzling ambiguities than any fixed meaning. And it's a dull day when they disappear.

But one does not have to search far to find a probable reason why Cummings saw what he did in this comic strip. Kennedy relates in his biography how the poet felt caught in his own family romance, with a domineering father, a loving but submissive mother, and a son who grew up to refer to himself as "a small eye poet" (*Letters* 109). The meaning of this triangle is not that far from his own interpretation of Herriman's Comic Strip: guess which role is whose, relative to *Herriman's* triangle!

The crowning touch, you may have noticed, is that the above strip adds a panel below Mrs. Duck's comment, a panel which shows Mouse about to bean Krazy once again, thus reassuring us that we're back to normal.

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