"Damn everything but the circus!": The Ambiguous Place of Popular Culture in E. E. Cummings' *Him*

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At the age of six, Edward Estlin Cummings went to the circus for the first time. "Saw jaguars, hyena, bear, elephants, baby lion, and a father lion, baby monkeys climbing a tree," he wrote excitedly in his diary that night (Kennedy 28). This experience left an indelible mark on Cummings, beginning a lifelong passion for the big top, sideshows, and wide range of popular amusements. As biographer Richard S. Kennedy notes, the young Cummings relished family outings to the circus: "His father or his Uncle George took him to Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus (where he once rode an elephant), to Ringling Brothers, and on one glorious occasion to Barnum and Bailey where he saw sideshows for the first time—the freaks and sword-swallowers" (23). These moments inspired some of Cummings' earliest poems and sketches, which featured circus acts and popular figures like Buffalo Bill Cody. As he worked to develop his own aesthetics and artistic philosophy in the teens and twenties, Cummings balanced his passion for popular culture with a growing interest in Modernism. He read experimental prose and poetry, along with the Krazy Kat comic strip. He attended the Armory Show as well as vaudeville, minstrelsy, and sideshows. He listened to atonal music and ragtime. And he admired the Provincetown Players while frequenting burlesque and striptease acts. For Cummings, these amusements had a vitality that was often missing from high art—a vitality he wanted to capture in his own work.

In the early twentieth century, there was no better place to indulge in these passions than New York, and Cummings moved to Greenwich Village in 1917 to write, paint, and partake in city nightlife. For the next decade, his stylistic experimentation as a poet would link him with the modernist movement. He produced several controversial volumes of verse, *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), *XLI Poems* (1925), *&* [*AND*] (1925), and *is 5* (1926), as well as a prose narrative about being in a French detention center during World War I, *The Enormous Room* (1922). He also began exhibiting his paintings in 1919. Some of his art appeared in the *Dial* alongside the works of Picasso, Braque, and Lachaise, and his 1931 book *CIOPW* (an acronym for Charcoal, Ink, Oil, Pencil, and Watercolor) assembled black

and white reproductions of his visual art from the 1920s. Throughout these avant-garde works, Cummings often featured popular subjects, such as the circus and burlesque. In the poem "Buffalo Bill 's," for example, he depicts both the breathtaking speed of Buffalo Bill's famous pigeon-shooting actand the speaker's admiration for it by compressing two groups of words: "and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat" (CP 90).[1] The space between these clusters represents the momentary gap between watching Bill fire the gun and seeing the clay pigeons explode. Such techniques and subject matter reflect Cummings' attempts to capture the rhythms of modern life and popular culture in his art.

He would arguably achieve his greatest synthesis of popular and formal arts in *Him.* This play, Cummings' only major dramatic work, was published in 1927 and first performed by the Provincetown Players the following year.[2] It depicts the gradual disintegration of the romantic relationship between characters called Him (a struggling playwright) and Me (his lover). Him wants to create an original, dynamic work of art that contains lowbrow elements, but he cannot reconcile this goal with his identity as a highbrow artist who lives in the world of ideas, the imagination, and wordplay.[3] His conception of the artist as an isolated figure on a tightrope high above humanity is part of the problem. He hasn't found a way to integrate his artistic life with the real world around him—the world of popular culture, relationships, and parenthood. When Me proposes that he write something profitable, something that "people would like" (18), Him mocks the idea, but his alter-ego, O. Him (or Other Him), does exactly this. O. Him's unfinished play, which makes up Act II, incorporates a range of theatrical styles to satirize 1920s life, particularly the theater, psychoanalysis, the advertising industry, science, fascism, and America's ignorance about postwar Europe.[4]

The nine scenes of this play within the play parallel the nine months of Me's pregnancy, a fact she has kept hidden from Him. Although Me clings to the hope that Him will break free from the insular world of high art and love her and their child, she ultimately realizes that he loves only his idea of her (as opposed to her true self), and she ends their relationship. Him subsequently tries to forge a connection with the real world by traveling to Europe and participating in popular culture. In the penultimate scene, he attends a freak show , but his horror when Me appears as a mother-figure in place of the final freak and his inability to finish his play suggest that he cannot reconcile high and low, that he still prefers the illusions offered by

art over the social and emotional demands of everyday life.

Cummings' use of numerous theatrical forms here is a testament to the profound impact of popular culture on avant-garde artists like himself. He often found the most exhilarating examples of dramatic art in the circus, not contemporary theater, and his magazine articles from the 1920s celebrate this entertainment as high art.[5] Throughout these writings, he argues that the circus and freak shows capture a "supreme alive-ness which is known as 'beauty'" ("The Adult" 114). This quality comes from the dynamism and spontaneity of the performers as well as the multi-dimensional perspective offered by these shows. Specifically, Cummings considers the three ring circus "a gigantic spectacle; *which is surrounded by an audience*, —in contrast to our modern theatres, where an audience and a spectacle merely confront each other" ("The Adult" 112). Presenting audiences with a broader perspective on the performance makes this art form interactive and energetic, not static. It offers the possibility of experiencing the whole performance simultaneously in ways that Cummings might have equated with the cubist works of Picasso or the fragmented scenes of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land.*

His personal investment in these entertainments, however, has led most critics to overlook the ambivalence about popular culture in *Him.* Cummings certainly tried to infuse the energy and excitement of urban life and modern entertainment into *Him.* But this play is also about the problems of integrating formal and popular arts. Some of his concern stems from the tendency of sideshows to objectify and eroticize the people on display. At its worst, popular culture reduces people—such as women and African Americans—to caricatures. It reinforces explicit or tacit prejudices on the part of audiences, instead of offering images that might encourage people to question such biases. And as Him and Me's failed relationship suggests, its emphasis on the body creates real barriers between men and women that can prevent intimacy and mutual understanding. The shift in the play from circus imagery to that of the freak show (along with the ambivalent portrait of each) captures Cummings' concerns about the limitations of using popular modes in formal art. Ultimately, *Him* suggests that the artist needs to capture the vitality of popular culture in ways that demand critical thought and engagement. Art needs to invite intellectual assessment, or it risks encouraging audiences to accept spectacle as truth.

"The Greatest Show on Earth": Circuses, Art, and American Life

The dynamic movement of big top performances, which Cummings

admired so greatly, was emblematic of the circus's historical development in America as well. The circus expanded with the country, reflecting its cultural and ethnic diversity, its social hierarchies and prejudices, and its growing appetite for spectacle. Prior to the nineteenth century, circuses didn't travel much. Showmen built wooden arenas near major cities, in part to give horseback riders enough room to perform, and these permanent structures made the circus a predominately urban pastime. The introduction of canvas tents in 1825, however, transformed the scope of this entertainment. The circus became mobile and soon reached a national audience with the help of the steam-powered engine, one of the most important technological developments of the era (cf. Trachtenburg 57-59). Trains moved heavy equipment, animals, and hundreds of performers, stagehands, and managers with efficiency and speed. As a result, rural communities and small towns throughout the country had access to this art for the first time. "Circus Day," as it was often called in advertising and journalistic accounts, soon became a significant cultural event for Americans. When the circus came to town, shops and schools closed. Factories and farms stopped production. And people from surrounding communities travelled great distances to be part of the event.[6] The growing popularity of the circus affected its staging in the second half of the century as well. With an increase in the number of midsections in the tent, the original circular big top stretched like a rubber band, acquiring a rectangular shape with curved ends. An interior "Hippodrome" track also circled the periphery of the arena, and this addition enabled clowns, freaks, jugglers, charioteers, elephants, ostriches, monkeys, and other exotic animals to parade in front of seated viewers. This parade happened, of course, while trapeze artists, acrobats, and horseback riders performed at center stage.

By 1870, the tireless entrepreneur P. T. Barnum had turned his attention back to the circus that had given him his start, and his efforts further sensationalized this entertainment. Even though several successful circuses were traveling the country at the time, "no one," according to scholar Neil Harris, "had fully exploited the growing American taste for the spectacular and the exotic" until Barnum (238). The showman's adept marketing skills—along with the logistical and managerial efforts of his two partners Dan Castello and W. C. Coup—helped expand the appeal (and profitability) of the circus (cf. Harris 235 and Saxon 78-80). In 1872, "P. T. Barnum's Great Traveling Exposition and World's Fair," which was being advertised as "The Greatest Show on Earth" for the first time, began using two rings

to accommodate crowds. A few years later, when Barnum merged his organization with James A. Bailey and James L. Hutchinson, this circus added a third ring (cf. Saxon 287).

The multiple-ring system not only enhanced the spectacle, but it also kept people in their seats. In the single-ring layout, customers sitting far away from center stage had often rushed closer to get a better view. This unruly behavior disrupted some of the class and ethnic hierarchies that the circus (and by extension society) wanted to reinforce. Wealthy patrons sitting in reserved box seats near center stage had no desire to mingle with working-class customers, who were supposed to remain in the bleacher sections at either end of the big top. And recent immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans were relegated to the worst part of the arena—the "pit" between the Hippodrome and bleachers. The grandiose nature of the big top may have been emblematic of the country's growth as an industrialized nation, but these seating arrangements, which helped maintain social hierarchies, also reflected America's divisive economic and racial politics.

By the time Cummings attended his first circus in 1900, the three-ring extravaganza had become the defining feature of the big top, and he would later praise its characteristics—the perpetual motion of the performance, the actual risk to performers, and its ability to engage the audience—as a distinctly modern art. In his essay "The Adult, the Artist, and the Circus" (1925), he explains that "the bigness of the circus-show is intrinsic—like the bigness of an elephant or of a skyscraper—not superficial, as in the case of an enlarged snapshot. The nature of this bigness becomes apparent when we perceive that it is never, for so much as the fraction of an instant, motionless" (112). This "bigness" came not only from the literal size of the big top (the tent itself and its use of multiple stages with hundreds of performers and animals) but also from the ongoing activity of the show. For Cummings, this motion gave the circus the kind of grandeur and vividness that could be found in great art and modern American life. Like skyscrapers, subways, and picture palaces, the circus mirrored the frenetic pace and dazzling energy of urban living. As historian Janet M. Davis explains:

> The visually oriented three-ring circus flourished in tandem with multiple visual forms at the turn of the century: department stores filled with mirrors and reflective glassy surfaces, early motion picture actualities seen at saloons, railway stations, circuses, and

> world's fairs, and splashy new newspaper formats with big photo-filled sports pages; the three-ring circus was symbolic of an emergent "hieroglyphic civilization." (24)

The spectacle of the circus, in other words, fit into larger trends that celebrated visual culture (the hieroglyphic) in modern society, and as Davis's list implies, it was most intimately connected with large-scale image environments featuring movement—sporting events, films, and department stores. Cummings draws on this modern-day motion in *Him* to capture the vitality of the circus. His stage directions require over one-hundred actors for the play, and the artistic range of the nine, rapid-fire scenes in Act II, — which includes a musical revue in the tradition of minstrelsy, vaudeville skits, bawdy comedy sketches, absurdist drama, a parody of Eugene O'Neill's *Great God Brown,* and a burlesque in the style of Ziegfeld Follies—certainly emulates the variety of a circus show. Its diversity and scope bombard the audience with virtually every theatrical style, giving them the feeling that the play is never still for a moment.

Cummings also considered danger to be an essential component of the big top and of art more broadly. Any artist who exposes his own struggles and weaknesses (whether a circus performer or writer) makes himself vulnerable to criticism and condemnation. Not surprisingly, Cummings viewed the actual risks taken by acrobats and horseback riders as metaphors for the personal costs of creating art:

> Within "the big top," as nowhere else on earth, is to be found Actuality. Living players play with living. . . . At positively every performance Death Himself lurks, glides, struts, breathes, is. Lest any agony be missing, a mob of clowns tumbles loudly in and out of that inconceivably sheer fabric of doom, whose beauty seems endangered by the spectator's least heartbeat or whisper. As for the incredible and living designs, woven in this fabric by animal trainers, equestrians, acrobats—they are immune to forgetfulness in the same way that certain paintings, poems, and musical compositions are immune. ("The Adult" 113)

The artist (animal trainer, acrobat, poet) does not lose sight of what is at risk. He is not distracted by the frivolous and superficial (clowns); instead, he plays with living in every performance. Such a sentiment resonates with

Hemingway's passion for bullfighting and his notion of its artistry in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). For the protagonist Jake Barnes, a great bullfighter (artist) enters the terrain of the bull, risking himself completely for his craft. Cummings seems to have entered this terrain for *Him.* As Norman Friedman has argued, Cummings explored his own personal struggles in the play—namely the loss of his first wife, his daughter, Nancy, and his father. The play's reception was another sore point: "The play itself was roundly trounced by the reviewers, both as a theatrical event and as a book. He seems to have cumulatively suffered a mortal wound from which he never wholly recovered. Henceforth, he would have to protect himself around the area of his hurt" (159) For Friedman, this explains Cummings' inability to write another long work and his unwillingness to put more of himself into his fiction. Whether or not this is true, it does seem as if Cummings (as well as Hemingway) found a certain kinship with performers / artists who literally risked their lives for their art. At the outset of *Him,* the title character proclaims: "Damn everything but the circus! . . . The average 'painter' 'sculptor' 'poet' 'composer' 'playwright' is a person who cannot leap through a hoop from the back of a galloping horse, make people laugh with a clown's mouth, orchestrate twenty lions" (10). Here Cummings makes a case for art that speaks to the masses the way that acrobats and animal trainers could—through the authenticity and danger of their work. Horseback riders and acrobats can fall. Lions can turn on a trainer. Art not only needs to present something daring and new, inspiring audiences with its precision and beauty, it also must communicate emotional risk and its skillful avoidance.

Lastly, Cummings' admiration for the circus stemmed from the way it involved the audience in the performance. Cummings believed that the arena enabled audiences to "see around" and participate in the three-dimensionality of the show (cf. Cohen 117-149). Davis's study of the circus reminds us that "no one possessed exclusive ownership of the gaze because it was a site of multiple surveillance, a three-ring 'theater in the round' which enabled people to watch each other from many vantages" (28). The crowds became part of the performance, and "the spectacle of these crowds became especially exciting when people fought, became drunk, gambled, or panicked in the face of a storm or rampaging animal" (28). As he argued in "The Theatre: II," Cummings viewed this symbiotic relationship between performance and audience, actor and viewer, and stage and arena as a model for contemporary theater. Just as the circus

fed off the energy of the crowd as they laughed, applauded, stared at each other, felt anxious, moved around, and talked among themselves and to the performers, formal theater needed to achieve something similar. He tries to recreate this arena-like space in *Him* by eroding the distance between audience and performer. Most noticeably, he has the stage rotate ninety-degrees at significant points in the play to give the audience a three-dimensional perspective on both the action and the deteriorating relationship of Him and Me. Likewise, during the musical revue in Act II, Scene V, Cummings has someone in the third row of the audience interrupt the performance. Like the rotating stage, this moment literally draws attention to the artifice of the theater itself. Cummings makes this point explicit at the end of the play when Me explains to Him that the stage has an invisible wall and that real people are watching them: "They're pretending that this room and you and I are real" (139). Cummings uses these techniques both to give his play the kind of energy found in a circus performance and to make it an example of the possibilities for integrating popular forms and formal theater.

Cummings presents the "perfect acrobat" as an image for all of these qualities—motion, risk, and audience involvement. At the opening of the play, Him explains to Me: "But imagine a human being who balances three chairs, one on top of another, on a wire, eighty feet in the air with no net underneath, and then climbs into the top chair, sits down, and begins to swing. . . . Sometimes I look at it, with terror: it is such a perfect acrobat!" (10). This idealized figure risks his life to do / create something new, and the audience is drawn to him, presumably looking up in admiration and awe. The protagonist of *Him* values the perfect acrobat's craftsmanship, but it fills him with terror as well. Some of this fear comes from the gap between the artist's vision for a project (imagining its possibilities and promise) and the reality of his creation (recognizing its flaws and limitations). But it also comes from his conception of the artist as an isolated figure. Him's perfect acrobat (artist) doesn't have anyone to rely on; instead, he remains high above others, including his audience: "On air. Above the faces, lives, screams—suddenly. Easily: alone. . . . The chairs will fall by themselves down from the wire and be caught by anybody, by nobody; by somebody whom I don't see and who doesn't see me: perhaps by everybody" (11). The artist cannot see the faces of his audience to measure their reaction. He is not part of their lives, and this encapsulates one of the central messages of the play: an artist needs to engage with the real world in order to create something meaningful. Formal art cannot remain separate

from either life or popular culture.

Cummings further celebrates the orgiastic energy, movement, and physicality of such performers in his painting *Acrobats* (Figure 1), but he does so in a way that emphasizes the importance of community. Dozens of naked bodies twist, turn, swing, and reach out for each other in a chaotic swirl of activity. Like Cummings' praise for the circus, in which the audience "feels that there is a little too much going on at any given moment [. . . which] *is as it should be"* ("The Adult" 113), this painting depicts bodies that blend into each other. Some disappear into the background or sail off the edge of the canvas, but one upside-down woman at the center reaches out as if to draw the viewer directly into the experience. This literal gesture

Figure 1: *Acrobats.* Oil on canvas. From *CIOPW.* Copyright 1931, 1959 by E. E. Cummings

(like the head on the right side looking out) acknowledges the viewer's presence, while the composition places him / her in the middle of the melée. The bodies are not being framed by space but are seemingly captured at a random midpoint in the crowd, adding to the sense that they are around, above, below—much like the audience surrounding the stage at a circus. The element of community in this painting, however, is absent from Him's idealization of this performer, and as the play suggests, he will need to build such connections with others in order to create meaningful art.

As mentioned earlier, Cummings' praise for the circus in both his magazine writing and in *Him* is tempered by his criticism of the ways this entertainment emphasizes the sensational and superficial. Although his poetry tends to value the emotional over the intellectual (e.g., "since feeling is first / who pays any attention / to the syntax of things / will never wholly kiss you" [CP 291]), it ultimately demands both levels of engagement from readers / listeners, and this is where Cummings' art departs from the popular entertainment of the big top.[7] Cummings wanted to achieve the visceral impact of popular culture in his work *and* the intellectual engagement demanded by formal arts. Even though he presents the circus as a metaphor for meaningful art in *Him*, he also qualifies this message by linking this entertainment with the Miss Weirds—three characters who appear sporadically throughout the play as commentators. Essentially, the play is interrupted by absurd conversations among these withered females, and unlike the witches of *Macbeth* or the Fates of Greek mythology, the Weirds don't provide much insight into the drama as they knit, rock in chairs, and talk.[8] Instead, their conversations string together advertising slogans and gibberish that expose the superficiality of modern popular discourse and culture. Just as the women speak of a pet hippopotamus named "It's Toasted" (the slogan for Lucky Strike cigarettes) and parrot various advertisements including one for United Retail Candy Stores ("Happiness in every box" [93]), they also describe someone who gave six pet hippopotamuses to "a circus" (3). Cummings connects the two to suggest a parallel between popular entertainment and other aspects of consumer culture designed to manipulate people. Advertising slogans influence desire, and like the sales of cigarettes and candy, the success of the traveling circus depended on marketing (cf. Davis 45). While attending the freak show at the end of *Him*, for example, the Weirds accept the spiel of the Barker as truth, and this belief in advertising suggests that popular culture, when shaped by the demands of business, participates in a system that promotes consumer desire.

It encourages the superficial over the substantive, catchy phrases over meaningful discourse.

Such a contradictory message about popular culture might seem strange, but it is typical of Cummings' works more broadly. As Rushworth M. Kidder has argued, Cummings "thought in terms of 'opposites,' whether they 'occurred together' as in burlesque or not. No Hegelian, he did not always demand a resolution for his thesis and antithesis. He was often content simply to present binary structures, with some attention to various ideas he had learned from studying composition in the visual arts—the balancing of equivalents, the distribution of emphasis, the repetition of forms" (288). The same is true throughout *Him.* The Weirds' early reference to the circus is followed by the image of the "perfect acrobat," which complicates their claims. For Cummings, the acrobat's precision, skill, and risk-taking raise his craft to the level of art, but these qualities have the potential to get lost amidst the swirling spectacle of the big top and the consumer culture that promotes it. In other words, the danger for popular art is slipping too far into the realm of the unthinking, profit-hungry spectacle and failing to invite intellectual scrutiny *after* its initial emotional impact.

Freak Shows and the Body as Spectacle

Cummings makes the differences between the circus and freak shows an integral part of the broader themes and structure of *Him.* In stark contrast with the opening image of the perfect acrobat, Cummings concludes the play with a freak show, and this shift from big top to sideshow captures his critique of spectacle in American culture as well. Although human curiosities had been common attractions in taverns and public squares since the 1700s, these itinerant performers also began appearing in dime museums in the nineteenth century. Here audiences could gaze at freaks alongside dioramas, menageries, stuffed animals, jugglers, historical wax tableaux, cabinets filled with curious objects, and other oddities. Live performers soon became central to the dime museum's appeal, and this form of entertainment reached its apex with P. T. Barnum's American Museum in 1841. Located in the heart of New York City near the Astor Hotel and Delmonico's Restaurant, Barnum's dazzling establishment became a fashionable public attraction. Due to the prominence he gave freak performers and the unprecedented scope of his promotional efforts, he helped make the freak show a national pastime.[9]

Like other freak show entrepreneurs, Barnum used a variety of techniques, such as staging, costuming, and spiel, to transform the performer

into a freak. Typically, these displays relied on juxtaposition and context to exaggerate differences: placing dwarfs next to giants, fabricating marriages between fat ladies and skeleton men, dressing non-whites as exotic cannibals and wild men from Fiji, Africa, and South America, and asking audiences to guess about (and in some cases pay extra to "discover") the true sex of bearded ladies and hermaphrodites. Freaks also participated in stage performances, acting out poorly written parodies and giving renditions of popular plays. All of these characteristics, which Cummings drew on for his freak show in *Him*, ritualized the encounter with the freak and established what audiences expected to see.

In addition to dime museums, freaks played an integral role in the circus during its golden age (1870-1920), yet in this context they gradually became less enticing for the public. Instead of featuring one performer, these shows were known as "ten-in-ones" because patrons could see ten exhibits for the price of one—the format employed in *Him* (which places nine freaks on the stage at once). Freaks were also set apart from the featured acts of the big top (hence the term *sideshow*), and this distinction further changed the atmosphere surrounding these exhibits. Inside a museum, freaks had some respectability; they were integrated into a whole and displayed under the guise of learning and scientific study. But on the fairgrounds, the freak show gradually seemed dirtier and more difficult to justify. One even had to buy a separate ticket to see it. This shift in context contributed to its waning popularity, and by the late 1920s, the sideshow had become increasingly distasteful.[10]

As with Cummings' contradictory portrait of the circus, the penultimate scene of *Him* captures both the compelling and the reprehensible elements of the freak show. First Cummings celebrates the playfulness of this entertainment by employing numerous sideshow ploys and performers. In Barnumesque fashion, a barker describes each exhibit—the giant, midget, snake charmer, geek, human skeleton, fattest woman in the world, hermaphroditic missing link, tattooed man, and hootchy-cootchy dancer. He exaggerates the Nine Foot Giant's size by discussing his enormous clothes and gargantuan appetite and then juxtaposes him with the Eighteen Inch Lady, "his lidl frien Madame Petite" (126). Her story is clearly modeled on true-life pamphlets (short, fictionalized biographies designed to promote and authenticate exhibits), and it details her international travels—arrest for being a spy, subsequent kidnapping, and narrow escape across Siberia while being chased by wolves—among other things. In addition to these

characteristics, Cummings portrays his freaks selling items such as photographs and pamphlets and talking with the audience: The Giant *"converses, offers photographs of himself"* (127). The Queen of Serpents responds to one audience member's fear of snakes by saying, "Dat's because youse cawn't chawm dum dearie" (130); and before the King of Borneo eats a lightbulb, he "*winks solemnly to the spectators"* (131). This interactive component reflects the actual dynamic of these shows, which Cummings admired because they helped undermine the artificial distance between audience and performer.

He also admired the visceral response people experienced at freak shows. In "The Adult, the Artist and the Circus," he praises "the writer, who, in the course of his lifetime, succeeds in making a dozen persons react to his personality as genuinely or vividly as millions react, each and every year, to the magnetic personality of Zip, the What-Is-It!" (112). Eliciting a genuine response was essential to the appeal of freak shows, and Cummings' protagonist has had a similar response to this entertainment. At the beginning of the play, Him agrees to take Me to the circus as long as she will see the freaks. When she questions why anyone would be interested in "a lot of motheaten freaks," he recalls an early experience at a sideshow:

> "I seem to remember riding out of a circus once upon a time on somebody's shoulder; and hearing a throbbing noise, and then a coarse voice squirting a stream of bright words—and looking, and seeing a small tent with huge pictures of all sorts of queer things, and the barker spieling like a fiend, and people all about him gaping like fish. Whereupon, I began to tremble—" (14)

This childhood memory links freak shows with community (the comfort Him feels while riding on someone's shoulders), visual spectacle (loud noises and pictures of the strange and unusual), verbal sensationalism (the "bright words" of the barker's spiel), and the wonder of the audience. Even as he reflects on this moment, he struggles to explain it, and the dash suggests that he still responds to this art more on a visceral than an intellectual level. Like his admiration for the physicality of acrobats, Him believes people should respond to art with the same kind of awe they have for freaks.

Cummings balances his admiration for this art, however, with concerns about the social elitism, sexual objectification, and racism often reinforced by freak shows. The Weirds' haughty responses to the performance offer

one example. Miss Look Weird complains that the Human Needle was "starving himself to avoid honest labour!" (133), and Miss Listen Weird finds the Six Hundred Pounds of Passionate Pulchritude shameful. Their ridiculous commentary satirizes the value that many Americans placed on class and social propriety. Etiquette was not important merely for the upper classes. Manuals such as Emily Post's *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home* (1923) were still bestselling books among the middle classes hoping to rise in the social hierarchy, and just as Cummings presents Him as an everyman figure, he incorporates a freak show into the play because this entertainment had a history of appealing to all segments of American society. As scholar Rachel Adams notes, "In addition to working class audiences that formed their primary constituency, [freak shows] were attended by authors, artists, politicians, scientists, and philosophers" (4). For Cummings, the willingness among all audiences to be manipulated by humbug parallels a dangerous willingness in America to buy into socially-accepted behaviors and norms. They both promote image over authenticity. Only a character like Me, who possesses a confident sense of self, recognizes the tasteless fakery of freak shows, social propriety, and the theater itself.

Cummings also uses the onstage audience of *Him* to condemn the self / other dynamic essential to the popularity of freak shows. Part of the appeal of these shows stemmed from the way they reinforced the onlooker's sense of normalcy and belonging. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson has explained, "the freak soothes the onlookers' self-doubt by appearing as their antithesis. The American produces and acts, but the onstage freak is idle and passive. The American looks and names, but the freak is looked at and named. The American is mobile, entering and exiting the show at will and ranging around the social order, but the freak is fixed" (*Bodies* 65). Thus, the success of the freak show was contingent on its ability to maintain this relationship between viewer and freak. Cummings, however, collapses this distance between the two at the end of *Him*, and not surprisingly when Me and her child replace the final freak, Princess Anankay, the entire onstage audience reacts in horror. This response to someone who has just performed a natural creative act (giving birth) suggests the extent to which an investment in spectacle can lead people to prefer illusion to reality. At this moment, the Weirds exclaim that, "It's all done with mirrors!" (138) because the actual world threatens the comfort derived from this entertainment. They seek an outlet for escapism that reinforces their cultural and

social superiority, and they happily accept the messages that freakishness provides.

The exchange between Me and Anankay (whose name refers to the Greek goddess of necessity) points to the author's concern about the role of objectification in freak shows and popular entertainment more broadly. Him's passion for freak shows, which include performers like the eroticized (and exoticized) Anankay, has shaped his view of women, and Cummings makes sexual objectification one of the sources for his limitations as a lover and an artist. As his frequent sexual puns suggest, Him primarily appreciates Me for her physical beauty. Every time she tries to communicate her anguish about their relationship or her pregnancy, Him reverts to sexual wordplay and / or a narcissistic discussion of his art. He even seems oblivious to her concerns moments before the end of their relationship. Me says mostly to herself: "Where I am I think it must be getting dark. . . . The dark is so many corners— . . . so many dolls, who move— . . . by Themselves. . . . Darker. . . . We must go very carefully . . . gradually . . . until light" (83-4). Her feeling of being trapped by their relationship (the dark corners) and controlled by love (like one of the dolls) goes unnoticed by Him. Instead, her ideas are broken by his fixation on her body. He reduces her to a hand, wrist, arm, "the dangerous shoulders of Eve" (83), throat, head, breasts, and thighs, and he views these parts as "perpetually discovered yet undiscovered: sexual, sweet. Alive!" (84). He does not see her as a whole person but as a sexual object, and this explains part of his failure to build a lasting relationship with her.[11] In a sense, his sexual desire has turned her into a kind of freak, aligning her with Princess Anankay who comes from a land where women bathe in champagne three times a day and "doan wear nutn between dun knees un duh neck" (137).[12] Her act is about the erotic allure of seeing her near-naked body, and even the name of her dance (the Spasmwriggle) suggests that the pleasure of seeing her move will be akin to sex. When the Barker urges the men in the crowd to get closer to the stage, he adds: "duh Princess wears so lidl youse can stick her full uv looks like she wus uh pincushion" (137). This image of the pincushion, which suggests penetration and pain, also makes the violence of looking essential to her appeal. Ultimately for Cummings, the audience *needs* (as the name "Anankay" suggests) to see beyond the surface of etiquette, advertisements, and physical beauty in order to live life fully—to be part of a genuine community, to recognize cultural biases, to love, and to create art.

In a Cummings' painting completed in the same year, *New York, 1927* (Figure 2), sexual objectification seems to be the problem at the center of urban life as well. When discussing this work, Milton A. Cohen argues that Cummings "was searching for a new way of reconciling abstraction and representation" (55-6). Like the protagonist of *Him*, who tries to integrate high art with popular culture, Cummings attempts to bring together two artistic styles in this painting. He admired the work of Marcel Duchamp, Giacomo Balla, and other Futurists for their "worship of speed" (46), and as Rushworth M. Kidder has argued, Cummings' celebration of movement is evident throughout his art: "Many of his own drawings—of dancers caught in mid-step, of crowds glimpsed in a saloon, of strippers in wild undulations, of acrobats and clowns at the circus—capture actions which in the next second will change" ("Cubism" 265).[13] Everything about the city in Cummings' painting is in the process of happening. The background, which shows the influence of John Marin's art, swirls with buildings, bridges, a ship, and smokestacks—capturing the frenetic energy of Manhattan. As with *Acrobats,* these images are mostly abstracted and incomplete, spilling off the canvas or blending into the waters and rising smoke. Waves carry the ship as it curves toward the center of the painting. The bridge, which is also a direct allusion to Joseph Stella's Brooklyn Bridge paintings /drawings, bulges as it arches into the city. Cummings' painting was also undoubtedly influenced by Robert Delaunay's *La Ville de Paris* (1912), which depicts the three Graces surrounded by a cubistic Parisian cityscape. Smokestacks depict factories at work, and the partially open windows of the apartment building imply people at home. Nothing seems at rest in New York City—except for the woman at the center of the canvas. Her stillness is quite startling amidst the surrounding tumult. Her bobbed haircut and fashionable hat characterize her as a flapper, but unlike most flappers (who abandoned corsets, attended late-night parties, drank, danced the Charleston, and rejected conventional roles for women such as mother and wife), this girl stands apart from the vitality and flux of urban life. Her pose, with one hand behind her head and the other on her hip, is reminiscent of a model or performer, but her expression seems to be more of exhaustion than pleasure. The dark circles around both eyes and the shading underneath the left eye suggest fatigue—perhaps from city living and from being viewed as an object. The latter is reinforced by her staged pose and Cummings' placement of the inverted triangle of her pubic hair at the center of the canvas. She is an object for the male gaze, defined by her

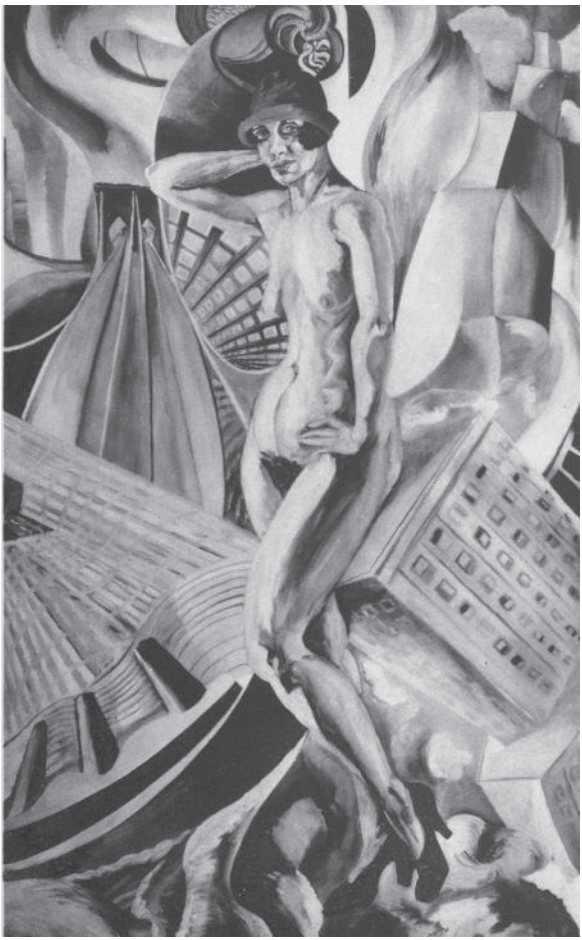

Figure 2: *New York, 1927*. Oil on canvas. From *CIOPW*. Copyright 1931, 1959 by E. E. Cummings.

nakedness and sexuality. Like Him's horrified reaction to Me and her child, this painting presents her as a static, sexual object—not a "natural" or classically beautiful type.

Him's difficulties with reconciling life and art, the popular and formal also stem from his failure to see beyond racial caricature. Cummings specifically includes two ethnic exhibits (the Missing Link and the King of Borneo) in the freak show of Act III to expose the dangerous way that popular culture objectified nonwhites and sanctioned commonly-held prejudices among white Americans. White angst about race / ethnicity intensified in the Teens and Twenties with the exodus of African Americans from the

South (over 1.3 million left the South between 1900 and the 1930s), the popularity of jazz and other black arts during the Harlem Renaissance, and the growing number of immigrants. Between 1880 and 1914, for example, over 23 million immigrants came to the United States, and by September of 1920 approximately five thousand new arrivals entered Ellis Island every day.[14] Freak shows worked to mitigate some of these anxieties by presenting degrading images of nonwhites on stage. In this tradition, Cummings' Ge Ge serves as a fairly typical Missing Link—a bridge between animal and human whose African origins ("discovered . . . in duh jungles uv Darkest Africuh" [134]) link blackness with primitivism and savagery. This kind of exhibit encouraged audiences to question the humanity of blacks. Cummings mocks the racist message of Ge Ge, however, through the "scientific" validity offered by the Barker. Ge Ge was supposedly studied "by evry intimut means known tuh duh corporeal un mentul sciences incloodin syntetic bloodtests telepathic waves cerebrul photogruphy postprandiul iodic injections testicullur hypnotism rhapsodic vaginul eelectrolysis decalcomaniuh un X ray" (135). The absurd juxtaposition of scientific tools, such as cerebral photography and X-rays, with telepathic waves and testicular hypnotism satirize the presumed civility of scientists and university professors. The King of Borneo (or the Human Ostrich) also appeals to the prejudices of the typical freak show viewer. According to the Barker, the King of Borneo ruled the most primitive of all semi-civilized communities (129) and could eat indigestible substances such as light bulbs. Despite his royalty, this ability to eat anything is clearly associated with the presumed cultural inferiority of Borneo. Such connections were typical among freak exhibits, which were designed to reinforce the cultural superiority of white onlookers.[15]

Interestingly, this ambivalent portrait of freak shows is mostly absent from Cummings' essay "The Adult, the Artist and the Circus," which seems to praise freak performers unreservedly:

> happy is that writer, who, in the course of his lifetime, succeeds in making a dozen persons react to his personality as genuinely or vividly as millions react, each and every year, to the magnetic personality of Zip, the What-Is-It! Nor can I refrain, at this point, saluting also the Giant, the Pygmy, the Pin-Head, the unutterably refined Human Skeleton and the other distinguished members of Zip's very select secret society. (112)

As mentioned before, Cummings values the visceral response of audiences to freak performers, but his reference to Zip typifies both the appeal of and problems with freak shows. Zip performed under a variety of stage names, but he began his career as P. T. Barnum's notorious "What Is It?" First presented in 1860, William Henry Johnson, a mentally retarded African American from New Jersey, was cast as a mysterious man-animal hybrid billed with the headline "What Is It?"[16] As Janet Davis points out, "Johnson always remained mute on stage, from his early days . . . until his final years at Coney Island, where he silently worked until his death in 1926 at eighty-four" (182). Cummings certainly admired the individuality of freaks and their provocative performances / bodies, but highlighting a silent / silenced performer like Zip undercuts this admiration. Zip's body always remained a site for interpretation, giving the audience the power to label and interpret his social meaning. His silence kept the racist construct of the show / performance intact, and this makes it difficult to assess Cummings' comments here. Is Zip's personality "magnetic" because the viewer could project a personality of his or her own making onto Zip's body (undeterred by his speech), or despite being mute did Zip, in fact, project a charismatic self? Or is Cummings merely being sarcastic? Despite this ambiguity, Cummings' explicit agenda in these magazine writings was both to celebrate popular culture as art and to defend against those who dismissed it as lowbrow and vulgar. In 1924, his friend Gilbert Seldes, the foremost authority on popular entertainment at the time, dedicated a book to this subject. In the preface to the 1957 edition of *The 7 Lively Arts*, he explained, "My theme was to be that entertainment of a high order existed in places not usually associated with Art, that the place where an object was to be seen or heard had no bearing on its merits" (3). Seldes' survey of popular entertainment, which included burlesque shows, jazz and ragtime music, comic strips, and films, celebrated these arts and felt that they were an important part of modern life. Cummings' passionate defense of popular entertainment takes on this rallying cry as well, but as the uncritical praise of Zip suggests, his support is overstated. *Him*, as we have seen, offers a more balanced portrait, and the use of nonwhite bodies in the play's sideshow ultimately functions to condemn the protagonist's passion for the entertainment of spectacle. Freak shows become another aspect of modern amusement culture that prevent mutual understanding. For the protagonist, it keeps him from loving Me and achieving his full potential as an artist—what Cummings called achieving "selftranscendence" (*six* 82)[16]

Conclusion: High, Low, and *Him*

Cummings introduced the theatrical experiment of *Him* with a warning that appeared in the original program for the 1928 Provincetown production:

> (WARNING: him isn't a comedy or a tragedy or a farce or a melodrama or a revue or an operetta or a moving picture or any other convenient excuse 'for going to the theater'—in fact, it's a PLAY, so let it PLAY; and because you are here, let it PLAY with you. Let it dart off and beckon to you from the distance, let it tiptoe back down on you from above, let it creep cautiously behind you and tap you on the back of the neck, let it go all around and over and under you and inside you and through you. Relax, and give this PLAY a chance to strut its stuff—relax, don't worry because it's not like—something else—relax, stop wondering what it's all 'about'—like many strange and familiar things. Don't try to despise it, let it try to despise you. Don't try to enjoy it, let it try to enjoy you. DON'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND IT, LET IT UNDERSTAND YOU.")[17]

On one level, this is an invitation to experience the play as one would a circus—on instinctual and visceral levels. Categories such as tragedy, farce, and melodrama establish an audience's expectations and influence their reactions before a production begins. The emphasis on "play" serves as both an image for the work itself, which plays with numerous theatrical styles and tones, and as a challenge to viewers / readers to be open-minded, to resist condemning something unfamiliar before giving it a chance. His description of the play as coming down on the audience from above, behind, "all around and over and under you and inside you and through you" is also reminiscent of the circular arena of the circus. He hopes the audience will experience the show on multiple levels. In his reviews for the *Dial* and other magazines, Cummings had been quite vocal about the failings of contemporary theater to engage viewers: "The play itself is required to give [the entire theatrical space] life. . . . Nothing is accessory: everything is a complement, a sequence, a development, a conclusion" ("The Theater: II" 147). He offers *Him*—with its vast range of styles and the way it rotates the stage and reaches into the space of the audience—as an alternative to the static quality of much contemporary theater. This play, in other words, was designed to have an emotional impact on the viewers

("Let it try to despise you. . . . Let it try to enjoy you."). Cummings recognizes that the greatest barrier to this might come from the audience itself, and this warning makes clear that one must suspend a rush to judge the more surprising, innovative, and disorienting aspects of this work in order to connect with its emotional content. At first glance, this text seems antithetical to his critique of the passive acceptance of surface / superficial images, but Cummings realized that audiences for the Provincetown Players would approach this play differently than they would a freak show, for example. They would be evaluating it in the context of a theater group famous for avant-garde productions and high art. Many would find his incorporation of popular culture objectionable, and even those who enjoyed mainstream entertainment outside of the formal theater probably compartmentalized high and low art. Cummings' warning, like the play itself, is an attempt to break down such distinctions.

On another level, this warning communicates Cummings' own anxieties about the fusion of popular and formal arts. He certainly understood the possible pitfalls of this experiment, and it couldn't have been too surprising that many theater critics—who also tended to ignore, scorn, and / or dismiss popular culture as frivolous—found *Him* objectionable. In response to the controversy surrounding the play, the Provincetown Playhouse published a pamphlet entitled *Him and the Critics,* which reprinted numerous articles about the work. The introduction, written by Seldes, accuses the critics of being more concerned with the warning and the lack of capitalization of Cummings' name than the actual content of the work. He also argues that most audiences at the time viewed high and low arts as antithetical to one another, which explains some of the negative reactions to the play. This perception of popular culture and formal arts prevented most people from recognizing the true innovation of the play—its exploration of serious and tragic issues through popular modes: "Perhaps the most astounding thing in the play is the fact that Cummings has expressed these tragic themes [of love and angst about artistic failure] in the techniques of the burlesque show and the circus" (3). Despite this spirited defense of the work, *Him*—as we have seen—walks a fine line between its appreciation for the vitality and appeal of art forms like the circus and its reservations about its use of spectacle and objectification. One might admire an acrobat's skill, but the eroticization of female trapeze artists undermines some of the integrity of the performance. It creates a context that diminishes her craft in order to titillate audiences. Likewise, the breakdown of theatrical

space in freak shows took a backseat to its racial and cultural messages. Cummings expresses these concerns most powerfully through the failure of Him and Me's relationship. Him's unquestioned investment in these popular arts contributes to his limited and sexist view of Me. The real emotional barriers between them come largely from his inability to recognize her emotional and intellectual needs. Although she claims many times to be unintelligent, there is no evidence for this in the play; in fact, many of her observations about Act II are quite astute. In the final moments of the play, Him is terrified by Me's presence on stage, exposing his failed recognition that the objectification of women found in the circus and freak shows have shaped his attitudes about women and that he has viewed her as a spectacle too.

The subject matter of Cummings' writings (such as love, passion, nature, and childhood innocence), his use of conventional forms like the sonnet, and the role of popular arts in *Him* suggest a desire on his part to reach a wide audience. But the lack of resolution in the play (Him's failure to reconcile high and low) and Cummings' inability to produce another long dramatic work suggest he couldn't find a lasting expression that brought together the formal and popular. Perhaps the relative obscurity of this play—the fact that it has largely been excluded from discussions of the development of American theater—points to the difficulty of this undertaking. We still tend to see mainstream popular culture, such as reality television, as far removed from a Pulitzer-prize winning novel. It is rare to find a single work of art that can speak to such different audiences, and Cummings' attempt to create a play that does so still challenges us to recognize the cultural power and beauty of popular arts.

—Long Island University

Notes

1. As Louis S. Warren describes in *Buffalo Bill's America*, "the initial racing and historical acts were followed by shooting demonstrations by Buffalo Bill, Doc Carver, and Adam Bogardus, a former market hunter from Illinois who had set many records for competitive pigeon shooting and who was also the developer of the clay pigeon" (223). Buffalo Bill's shooting competitions typically used clay pigeons.

2. For the rest of his life, Cummings struggled to write another play, but he

produced only fragments, notes, a ballet scenario based on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and a short morality play about Santa Claus in 1946. *Him*, however was a success among the bohemians. As Richard S. Kennedy notes, "the Village audiences—intellectuals, Bohemians, academics—liked the play, and some people returned more than once. It ran to full houses (200 people) for 27 performances, though it made no money for the Playhouse because production costs were so high. It provided a fine climax for the 1927-1928 season" (296).

3. Cummings modeled the main plot of *Him* on his relationship with Elaine Orr Thayer. Their marriage broke up in 1924 when she met Frank MacDermot (whose name appears in the barker's monologue in Act III) and asked for a divorce. The gun in the play seems to refer to Cummings' despair during and after the divorce, when he acquired a .38 caliber pistol and considered suicide. As a result of the divorce and his own ambivalence about taking on the role of father, Cummings lost contact with his daughter Nancy until 1946. Richard S Kennedy discusses the important biographical dimensions of the play in *Dreams in the Mirror* (255-259).

4. Mary C. English has argued that this satire places Cummings' play in the tradition of Greek drama, particularly the comedies of Aristophanes: "Although Cummings drew inspiration from a number of sources, his attitude toward comedy is strikingly Aristophanic: he sought to advise his audience on important issues plaguing American society, and artists in particular, while crafting a play that would entertain. . . . He forced his audience to confront aspects of American culture that were, at the very least, 'unsettling'" (81).

5. As he prepared to write *Him* (which he began writing in 1926), Cummings attended theatrical performances throughout the Village, and his friendship with John Dos Passos and John Howard Lawson, both of whom had recently produced expressionistic dramas that incorporated elements of popular culture, inspired Cummings to write *Him* in that tradition. Their approach to the theater may have also helped him wrestle with some of the difficulties of integrating popular art into dramaturgy.

6. In *The Circus Age*, Janet M. Davis argues that "no other amusement saturated consumers like the circus at the turn of the century. Neither vaudeville, movies, amusement parks, nor dance halls equaled the circus's immediate physical presence—that is to say, towns did not shut down in their midst. These popular forms were integrated into local economics and local systems of surveillance, while the railroad circus was an ephemeral

community ritual invading from without. . . . The traveling circus, in contrast, came to one's doorstep. Disconnected from daily life, the nomadic circus had a distance from community ties that enhanced its ability to serve as a national and even international popular form" (13).

7. Emily Essert has argued that Cummings' poetry resonates with readers at a "sub-rational level upon first reading [but] his poems then beg to be re-read in order to be understood, and it is mostly upon rereading that Cummings challenges the reader's intellect" (199). Robert E. Maurer suggests a similar reading of Cummings' play: "When Cummings wrote *Him* he wanted to arouse within the spectator that feeling of aliveness, an extra-literary quality, that is the peculiar attribute of the drama and that effectively produces its results before intellectual analysis begins" (137).

8. The Weirds investment in social hierarchies and etiquette (they have doubts about Him until he explains that he is "very noble," for example) is reminiscent of Cummings' upper class Cambridge ladies, who knit for social causes merely because it is fashionable to do so.

9. The shift in definition of "freak" from a vagary before 1800 to a monstrosity in 1840 suggests that something about these presentations changed significantly at this time, and this change can largely be attributed to Phineas Taylor Barnum's ownership and management of the American Museum. For more on the history of the freak show and dime museums, see Bogdan and Dennett.

10. For more on the decline of the freak show, see Bodgan, Thomson, and Fahy.

11. Marc Robinson views these images of body parts in relation to Me's demands on Him. She is asking for "a quality of engagement far stronger than he, in his autonomous creativity and cultural sightseeing, prefers. . . . Throughout *Him*, Cummings writes of faces, hands, whole bodies 'folding,' closing, and opening again, at the same time as the characters note how darkness falls, wraps around them, and enforces an intimacy they might not be capable of on their own. In that hushed dusk, the entire play contracts, and Him's claims for the supremacy of his imagination, and of the fictions it creates, collapses before Me's more palpable reality" (226).

12. Cummings also presents Madame Petite in similar ways. Early in the scene, the Barker explains that Madame Petite (the Eighteen Inch Lady) has been married seven times to "famous specimuns uv duh uppercrust" (128) like Tom Thumb, and this type of personal information was integral to the appeal of freak shows. The sexual lives of dwarfs, hermaphrodites, bearded

ladies, and Siamese twins tapped into the crowd's curiosity about the sexual practices of freaks. Barnum made Tom Thumb and Livinia Warren's marriage in 1863, for example, a sensational media event, and over 100,000 onlookers clamored to attend the marriage of Violet Hilton (who was conjoined with her sister Daisy) to James Moore at the Texas Centennial Exposition in 1936.

13. For more on the influence of art on Cummings' poetry, see Cohen (43-57) and Kidder, "Cummings and Cubism" and "Twin Obsessions." For some recent discussions on the visual dimensions of his poetry, see Grabher and Azma.

14. For more on the Great Migration of African Americans during the twentieth century, see Douglass and Gregory. For more on immigration, see Sollors and Higham.

15. The Midway Plaisance at the Chicago World's Columbian Fair in 1893, for example, displayed anthropological exhibits that allowed white spectators to see representations of people and customs from around the world. These displays began with the most "primitive" tribes and ended with the white middle-class family, a progression designed to present white, middle-class America as the pinnacle of social and cultural achievement. In some cases, these ethnological exhibits from World's Fairs subsequently became part of traveling sideshows. This was certainly the fate of the Bontoc Igorots, a Philippine tribe displayed at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. For more on this, see Rydell, chapter seven, and Vaughan.

16. Bogdan explains in *Freak Show* that African Americans with this condition were often "cast as 'missing links' or as atavistic specimens of an extinct race" (112). For more, see chapter 1 of Fahy, as well as James W. Cook's examination of the social and political significance of this exhibit.

17. He discusses Him and the three mysteries of love, art, and selftranscendence in nonlecture five (*six* 79-82). He also explains this issue in a 1961 letter to Norman Friedman: "Him's deepest wish is to compose a miraculously intense play-of-art—Me's underlying ambition is to be entirely loved by someone through whom she may safely have a child. He loves,not herself,but the loveliness of his mistress; she loves, not himself,but the possibility of making a husband out of a lover. For him,sexual ecstasy is a form of selftranscendence:for her,it's a means to an end (motherhood)" (Friedman, *Growth* 58).

18. This text is copied from the original program of the Provincetown Playhouse (Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University).

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