

"Krazies...of indescribable beauty": George Herriman's "Krazy Kat" and E. E. Cummings

Taimi Olsen

E. E. Cummings has left us with one of the largest collections of author materials in 282 boxes in the Houghton Library of Harvard, not to mention other library holdings.¹ George Herriman, cartoonist of Cummings' beloved "Krazy Kat" strip, left next to nothing. No record of the books he read, few letters, no personal diaries, just decades of cartoons, some newspaper articles and film reviews. One of his long-time champions—collector and scholar Bill Blackbeard—often laments this lack of biographical material. Although this lack may explain some of the critical silence on George Herriman, Blackbeard remarks, "It is a strange thing to say about a cartoonist so revered and widely known in his own time, but Herriman's intellectuality remains still unplumbed" ("Herriman" 55). In reality, this analysis is one brick of many that must be thrown before the target is hit. One piece of this brick is the devotion to the description and experience of ideal love by both Krazy and "i" the "non-hero," Cummings' poetic persona. How and why they share this focus is the topic of this paper, and an important factor in understanding both artists' production.

Who Herriman was, as well as what he intended with "Krazy Kat," are matters of speculation. Born August 22, 1880 in New Orleans, he is of Creole descent and listed as "colored" on his birth certificate according to biographers McDonnell, O'Connell and de Havenon (30). His heritage makes him the first African American cartoonist of note. His family moved to California when he was young, and when older, Herriman started work as an engraver in Los Angeles. At age 20, during his attempt to secure a career in New York City as a cartoonist, Herriman sold cartoons to Judge and the T. C. McClure Syndicate (33). Herriman's notoriety increased until he was able to return to Los Angeles and marry his sweetheart Mabel Bridge (they had two daughters Mabel and Bobbie). Back in New York, newspaper tycoon Randolph Hearst hired Herriman, and he worked for Hearst exclusively after 1910, drawing cartoons from his home in Hollywood or at Hal Roach Studio. Hearst would eventually give Herriman a lifetime contract for "Krazy Kat" (76). "Krazy Kat" ran from 1913 to 1944 when, upon Herriman's death, the strip was closed rather than be continued by another artist.

The cartoon had a devoted group of readers, mostly intellectuals; one, composer John Alden Carpenter, created a ballet based on Krazy that was performed in New York City's Town Hall Theater in 1922 (Blackbeard, "A Kat" 1). One might ask what besides Hearst's devotion to the strip contributed to the cartoon's success? Critics have likened Herriman's aesthetics to the surrealists, even positioning him as using surrealist techniques before the founding of the movement. His work is discussed as avant-garde and experimental, both visually and linguistically. His unique style comes in part from his favorite summer haunt. Herriman found inspiration for Krazy Kat during regular trips to Monument Valley and the nearby Kayenta Navajo trading post in Arizona, all of which become "Coconino" county in the comic strip. It was this influx of environmental and cultural diversity, as well as the artistic skill with which Herriman handled the art and language of his strip, which captivated readers.

With Herriman ensconced in Hollywood film studies or wandering the desert, and Cummings either sojourning in Paris or established in New York, the two artists apparently never met. What, then, is the primary connection between these two artists? Cummings, like his friends and colleagues, loved "Krazy Kat." In letters, he thanks friends Slater Brown and Edward Nagle effusively for sending "Krazies . . . of indescribable beauty" (*Letters* 92, 90). Cummings was a lifelong fan, from the mid-teens when he started reading Krazy Kat until Herriman's death and the subsequent 1946 publication of the first collection of "Krazy Kat," with Cummings' foreword. Yet his poetic references to Krazy are fleeting, doing little to explain the connections between him and Herriman. David Forest remarks that in the 1926 collection of poems, is 5, Cummings explains his poetic technique with a burlesque joke about a brick, and this reference, along with "candles and"—a poem about Saint Ignatz in the same volume—remind us of Ignatz's brick in the comic (54).

In "A Foreword to Krazy," Cummings summarizes the strip's plot as follows: "Dog hates mouse and worships 'cat,' mouse despises 'cat' and hates dog, 'cat' hates no one and loves mouse" ("Foreword" 323). Cummings loved the triangular plot of the strip and the endless variations on Ignatz's schemes to hit Krazy Kat with a brick, and Krazy's meditations on love and desire. In an illustrative cartoon (October 15, 1916), Krazy strums a harp, singing her/his wishes for love, envisioning bricks from Kelly's brickyard. Ignatz, meanwhile, buys an actual brick to give some relief to his ever-present irritation with the Kat and desire to do some physical

harm. Offissa Pupp stops Ignatz in the act of lobbing the brick. A vigilant enforcer of rules, Pupp leads Ignatz to jail in the last panel, as Kat sleeps, still dreaming of his desire. This plot is repeated over and over with endless variation during the strip's run.

Cummings' fascination with Krazy is the undercurrent of the multiple theories he posits about this triangle. First, Cummings states that while we can stereotype Mouse and Pupp, Kat is a much richer character in terms of his / her "poetic," "innocent," "clownlike," and graceful being. He dismisses Ignatz Mouse as a self-centered egoist and earmarks Offissa Pupp as an altruist and social conservative interested primarily in the rule of law. In their battle, says Cummings, Ignatz is either a "demon of anarchy" or a "hero," whereas the Pupp is either a "cosmic angel" or a bully, depending on one's political and social point of reference (323-24).

Cummings concludes that because Krazy Kat rejects social prescriptions and codes, the villain-hero dichotomy of Mouse and Pupp is meaningless. Not only does the Kat reject social prescriptions, society rejects the Kat's unusual individuality. Mouse and Pupp therefore cannot accurately place Kat in a social role, so they identify her as embodying either "saintliness" or "idiocy," as opposed to Cummings, who celebrates Krazy as an "ideal" (327). Weaving these theories (including his attempt to label the strip as an allegory for democracy, his least successful claim), Cummings delves into Kat's character, labeling her a true individual in her "illimitable" ability to love without concern for rational, causal conditions. She is simultaneously helpless and "invincible" because her capacity to love is melded with wisdom and joy. When describing Krazy, Cummings' language is effusive and sincere, echoing language heard throughout his poetry. He declares, "She is a living ideal. She is a spiritual force, inhabiting a merely real world" (327). For Cummings, the Kat is a "fundamentally complex being who ... is the only original and authentic revolutionary protagonist" (328). In 1924 in *The Seven Lively Arts*, Cummings' friend Gilbert Seldes wrote of how Herriman explains the self by placing Krazy in front of a blank background: "it's wot's behind me that I am...it's the idea behind me, 'Ignatz' and that's wot I am" (17). Cummings quotes the first part of Krazy's "immortal dictum" at least three times, in a 1925 article on the circus ("Adult" 111), in his 1933 account of a trip to Soviet Union, *EIMI* (49), and in a 1958 letter (*Letters* 257). By choosing this line, Cummings echoes Seldes, who remarked on this same line how "metaphysical" the cartoon was and how it was part of "our new mythology" (16, 22).

Both of these artists work on a strong expression of selfhood and individuality, to “aliveness” as Cummings calls it, and from Cummings’ comments, we can see how he admires the clarity of Krazy’s characterization, the complete focus on love and innocence that Krazy has. The Kat is “illimitable in love”—invincible not in terms of standing up to Ignatz Mouse and remaining “true” to love, but rather, she/he is without limitations of self and incapable of being limited—whether by self-doubt or anger or any other emotion or impulse with which most people respond to violence (“Foreword” 324-26). Out of this sense of limitless love, Krazy rescues the weak, saving “hedge pigs” and bringing charcoal “briquets” to an impoverished family of Chihuahuas. She/he even tries to “save” a reluctant pet canary, setting it loose in the woods until the bird is finally rescued by Offisa Pupp, who is much more aware of social and natural conditions and mores (May 21, 1916). Above all, Krazy “saves” her/his love from the harsh reality of rejection, cynicism, and anger. Krazy is so devoted to Ignatz, the object of his love, that his “sweetness” leads him/her to a “heppy land” (Nov. 26 1916).

Brimming over with feelings, Krazy is often portrayed on the sea. In this iconic setting, Krazy meditates, looking over the horizon as if longing for the Golden Isles, that happy land “fur fur away.” Malevolence follows him/her there, though, because the sea is also a place of dangerous weather and of piracy. In the Dec 3rd, 1916 cartoon, Ignatz captains a pirate ship in order to “heave a ‘brick’ over his bows,” after which he forces Krazy to walk the plank. [This cartoon appears on pages 228-231.] Yet this cartoon’s aggression is bracketed by Krazy’s meditations on love. Krazy sings on the open sea “with Ha-O-Hoh-love anywhere / love everywhere / as long as it’s love / wodda I care.” When the cartoon concludes with Ignatz fleeing from Krazy, Krazy is left looking over the sea in a melancholy loneliness: “For to-night I am a ‘widow’—in a kot-tudge by the sea—” The first song speaks of abandoning oneself to love; the second to true abandonment. The language in the second song is heavily accented, and carefully modulated. Herriman writes the word “tonight” as two words, “to-night,” so that we slowly enunciate it and eye the darkness of “night.” We consider what being a “widow” (his quotation marks) means to Krazy. We contemplate the odd spelling of “kot-tudge,” and rather than dismissing it as a quaint English-style cottage, we consider the syllabic invocation of the drudgery of Krazy’s solitary life. Of course, the sea’s presence alleviates Krazy’s abandonment; the sentence continues out to sea with a loose dash

rather than ending in a period, just as the sea itself beckons the Kat to venture out in future cartoons, to once again dream of love. As in many other Krazy comics, this one has a wonderful balance with the sea acting as a partner to Krazy's inner life, bracketing the comic action of Ignatz and his band of mice.

Many other scenic elements in "Krazy Kat" serve as iconic props for the love triangle plot. Like the sea, the moon frequents many comics, often opening the comic like a capital letter or closing it like a period. The moon also illuminates expressions of ideal love, as the sliver of new moon hangs hopefully in the air and the full moon shines on the Kat's dreams. It is the crescent moon on Oct 5, 1919 that lights Krazy's "daring deed" as he moves one "lonesome pine" ("alone in solitary bachelorhood and arborescent solitude") to a nearby mesa and another "pine, living solo." By this act, Krazy solves the problems of the "woil" so that "all will be well."² The sun, however, is "amazed" and Ignatz is disgusted by Krazy's idealistic sensitivity to natural balance. It's as if the mythic and magical stature of the moon is more appropriate for Krazy's seemingly erratic behaviors than the harsh light of daytime life.

Like Greek gods entering the human world, the natural elements occasionally intervene directly in the anthropomorphic world of Coconino. In the August 11, 1918 cartoon, Ignatz appeals to the "sweet moon" whose "chaste light" will let him do his violent brick hurling. In this strip, Herriman elaborates on the melodramatic emotions of the plot—with a "wicked, and truculent" brick, an evil mouse "contemplat[ing] massacre" of the "victim" the Kat, again self-described as a widow. Ignatz never gets a chance to throw his brick because of a series of natural phenomena. In panel 3, the clouds create darkness, which is maintained in succeeding panels by an eclipse of the moon, the moon quickly setting, a fog at sunrise, another cloud, another eclipse, and the setting sun. Ignatz, too irritated to wait any longer, leaves the brick where he found it. Although at the beginning Ignatz credits "fortune" for the brick, the natural world favors Krazy.

Herriman has several cartoon essays on the moon's significance; on April 18, 1920, he writes about the connections between love and the moon. Joe Stork remarks: "what would become of my business if there was no park benches," referring to moonlight trysts and the babies he subsequently delivers. Krazy, an easy target by moonlight for Ignatz's brick, simply redefines the brick as "I'il moon-bims." In the final panel we see Krazy with hands outstretched, praising the moon for its part in life:

“Owatta woil watta woil ‘moon’ this would be without you.”

The Kat is Cummings’ ideal precisely because she/he sees the true value of the moon—not (as Ignatz sees it) as merely a convenient source of light for whatever impure action happens in the world—but as an embodiment of purity which the world needs. In Cummings’ language, “for only Nobody knows / where truth grows why / birds fly and / especially who the moon is” (*CP* 369). We recall from other poems that “Nobody” is Cummings’ moniker for the individual, who, through living an original life, knows the true nature of the moon. In other poems, the poet describes and hopes to attain transcendent love, and he often calls on the moon to aid him. What the persona of Cummings’ poems has most in common with Krazy Kat is the expression of limitless understanding of love—a quality Cummings admires in Krazy’s purely loving self. Krazy has the transcendent love that the poet is striving for; Krazy simply struggles to give full expression to this love in a world that is much more cynical and much less trusting.

Consider Cummings’ use of natural icons in following poem, published in *W [ViVa]* in 1931:

here is the ocean,this is moonlight:say
that both precisely beyond either were—
so in darkness ourselves go,mind in mind

which is the least thrilling least of all(for love’s
secret supremely clothes herself with day)

i mean,should any curious dawn discuss
our mingling spirits,you would disappear
unreally;as this planet(understand)

forgets the entire and perpetual sea

—but if yourself consider wonderful
that your(how luminous)life toward twilight will
dissolve reintegrate beckon through me,
i think it is less wonderful than this

only by you my heart always moves (*CP* 380)

This is a complex poem, a syntactic jigsaw puzzle yet remarkably clear in its final meaning. The poet raises two possibilities for himself and his lover (indicated by the signal words “say” and “but”). He then concludes that these are “less wonderful” than the ultimate state of love, as he asserts that “my heart always moves” only through the involvement of the loved one. The possibility of living life fully, of “mingling spirits,” happens perpetually under one condition: only when the two lovers are interconnected.

The poem moves through several landscapes, starting with the ocean and moonlight. The poet posits the first possible scenario: if these elements—ocean and moonlight—do not connect, if they are “beyond either,” then the two lovers are in darkness and in a situation that they do not desire. Even though they are closely joined physically and mentally (the phrase “mind in mind” echoes the more typical phrase “hand in hand”), they are not in life, not fully living. The daytime, however, exposes them to harmful gossip—“should any curious dawn discuss”—and threatens to extinguish the poet’s loved one. The “as” in the next line expansively compares this dissolution of the couple to the entire planet forgetting the sea. An icon of love, the sea is “entire and perpetual” in its vastness and constant presence. It is the ultimate goal, metaphorically, of the poet, who does not dare risk its loss.

The last stanza offers another alternative situation, signaled by the starting comment “but if yourself consider wonderful.” This stanza is highly complex because the words can be rearranged in many syntactical units:

if you consider (your) self wonderful

if you consider that your life will dissolve...through me

if you consider how wonderful (it is) that your life will dissolve at
the end of the day (twilight)

The stanza conveys all of these meanings, asking the loved one to become involved in the process of considering possibilities, to think not about themselves as a couple but rather, about the “self” or the individual as being wonderful and to contemplate the transformations of self that may happen in the union of individuals.

What happens “toward twilight” is quite remarkable. The setting for the action is (again) changed: we have gone from night to day to twilight, where life is “luminous” like a moon. The three verbs in line 12—dissolve, reintegrate, and beckon—are captivating words promising new

possibilities for the self. The phrasing is unsettling, however, since the verbs are not followed by the right preposition. We expect to read that life will dissolve *in* me or dissolve me; life will reintegrate *with* me; life will beckon me or beckon *to* me, but just how will the self “dissolve reintegrate beckon *through* me”? (italics mine). Listed in quick succession, speeding along without commas, the implied threefold action of dissolve, reintegrate, and beckon moves rapidly yet in a logical manner. First something dissolves, but before it is completely broken apart, the pieces are recombined into the possibility of something else, and the new construction is what appeals to the poet, literally beckoning him but also passing through him as if he were translucent in the presence of “your(how luminous)life.”

We arrive at the ending couplet of this sonnet: “i think it is less wonderful than this / only by you my heart always moves.” The adverbial exception of “only” may describe “this only” or “only by you”; but nevertheless, the focus is “by you my heart always moves.” The lover relies on the presence of another being for his very life. However, the introductory phrase is another uneasy line in this poem. Why write that “it is less wonderful than” instead of “it is more wonderful that”? The lover is not easily “mingling” with the object of love, and the ending is uneasy even in its celebration of ideal love. Still, Cummings ends the poem on the verb, on the action, drawing our voice as we read the poem to the lyrical experience of “always moves.”

Certainly, if we placed the “Krazy Kat” comic of the “widow” by the sea alongside this E. E. Cummings poem, we will not “see” similarities. The few that there are, are superficial, such as how the two artists remold traditional forms (the structure of the comic strip and the sonnet), how they play with words on the page (Herriman with slang and dialect; Cummings with phrasing and invention), and how they treat the “background” elements as participants in the action—all of this happens in different ways, in different mediums. What we do find are mediations on love that center on a unique “i” who is struggling to locate and hold onto an ideal love that is essential for life. We can visualize Krazy looking at the “kurious dawn” (Herriman would write it with a “k”!). We can hear Cummings’ poetic persona sing along with Krazy about the loved one who “moves” the heart. Both cartoon character and poetic persona are contemplative selves. And both find sympathy in an iconic natural world whose shifting, contradictory meanings are somehow reassuring: the poetic “i” has not simply missed true meaning but is grappling with an ideal that even the natural

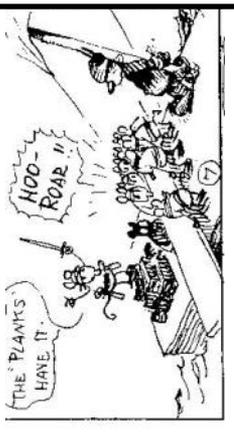
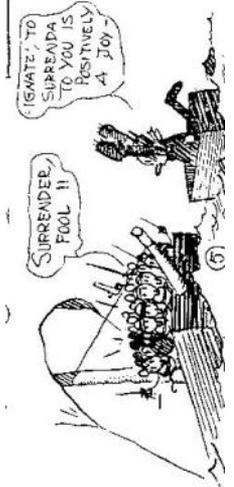
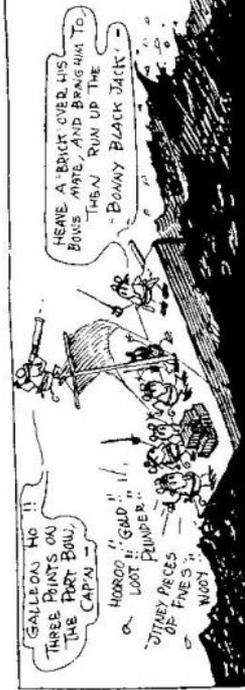
world cannot describe, only promise as a possibility. For Krazy, the ocean is always beside the “widow’s kot-tudge,” and the Kat only needs a box and a makeshift sail to dream upon the open sea.

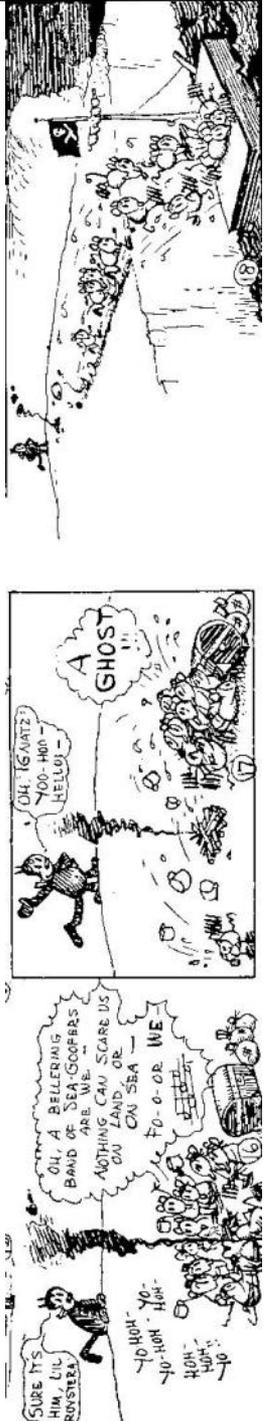
—*Tusculum College, Greeneville, TN*

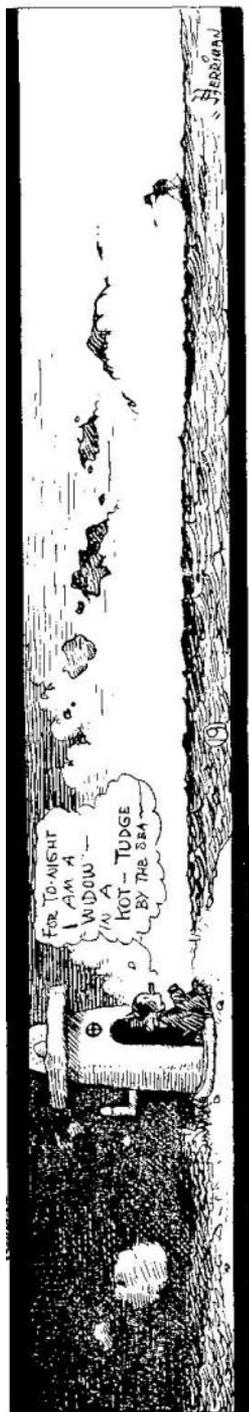
Notes

1. Wyatt Mason, in Harper’s Magazine, describes the holdings: “the principal papers...fill 282 boxes and occupy 105 linear feet of space—literally millions of pages of materials” (96).
2. A Yiddish online dictionary sponsored by Ectaco suggests that “woil” is a Yiddish adjective meaning “good, well, nice”; several dictionaries define “world” as the German-derivative “velt” not “woil.” It is an interesting use of the word by Kat but I have not yet confirmed this particular usage.

[**Editor’s Note:** The list of Works Cited begins on page 231.]







Works Cited

- Blackbeard, Bill. "A Kat of Many Kolors: Jazz Pantomime and The Funny Papers in 1922." *George Herriman's Krazy and Ignatz: A Katnip Kantata in the Key of K*, 1922. New York: Eclipse Books / Turtle Island Foundation, 1991: 1-3.
- . "George Herriman: 1880-1944." *George Herriman's Krazy and Ignatz: The Complete Kat Komiks*. vol. 1. 1916. Forestville, CA: Eclipse Books / Turtle Island Foundation, 1988: 54-58.
- Cummings, E. E. *Complete Poems 1904-1962*. Ed. George Firmage. New York: Liveright, 1994.
- . *Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings*. Ed. F.W. Dupee and George Stade. New York: HBJ, 1969.
- . "The Adult, the Artist, and the Circus." *Vanity Fair* (October, 1925). Rpt. in *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised*. Ed. George J. Firmage. New York: October House, 1965. 109-114.
- . *Eimi*. New York: Covici, Friede, 1933. Reprinted. New York: William Sloane, 1949. Reprinted with an introduction by EEC, New York: Grove Press, 1958.
- . "A Foreword to Krazy." *Krazy Kat*. George Herriman. New York: Henry Holt, 1946. Rpt. in *E. E. Cummings: A Miscellany Revised*. Ed. George J. Firmage. New York: October House, 1965. 323-328.
- Ectaco. *Yiddish-English Online Dictionary*. <http://www.ectaco.com/online/diction.php3?refid=717&lang=15> 2005. Accessed May 23, 2005.

-
- Forrest, David V. "Psycholiterary Appreciation of George Herriman's Krazy Kat and Its Appeal to E. E. Cummings." *Spring: The Journal of the E. E. Cummings Society*. New Series No. 8. October 1998: 52-57.
- Herriman, George. *George Herriman's Krazy and Ignatz: The Complete Kat Komiks*. vol.1. 1916. Forestville, CA: Eclipse Books / Turtle Island Foundation, 1988.
- . *George Herriman's Krazy and Ignatz: The Limbo of Useless Unconsciousness*." vol.3. 1918. Forestville, CA: Eclipse Books / Turtle Island Foundation, 1988.
- . *George Herriman's Krazy and Ignatz: Howling Among the Halls of Night*. vol. 4 1919. Forestville, CA: Eclipse Books / Turtle Island Foundation, 1989.
- . *George Herriman's Krazy and Ignatz: Pilgrims on the Road to Nowhere*. vol. 5. 1920. Forestville, CA: Eclipse Books / Turtle Island Foundation, 1990.
- Mason, Wyatt. "Make It Newish: E. E. Cummings, Plagiarism, and the Perils of Originality." Rev. of *E. E. Cummings: A Biography*, by Christopher Sawyer-Lauçanno. *Harper's Magazine* May 2005: 92-100, 102.
- McDonnell, Patrick, Karen O'Connell, George Riley de Havenon. *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986. 1999.
- Seldes, Gilbert. "The Krazy Kat That Walks by Himself." *The Seven Lively Arts*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924. 231-45. Rpt. in Patrick McDonnell, et al. *Krazy Kat: The Comic Art of George Herriman*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986. 15-22.