The Circus as a Topos of European Literature and Art

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Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the nomadic and immemorial arts of the tumblers, jugglers and other mountebanks, which had been thriving for centuries in the seasonal fairs, formed the basis for a new, developing institution which was to become an important popular focus of nineteenth century urban life, and, somewhat misappropriately, took in most European languages the prestigious Roman name of "circus" after having toyed with the still fancier Greek word "hippodrome." At a time of intensive industrial, political and cultural expansion which exalted individual heroism and the conquest of exotic frontiers, the circus provided a rich "icon" in which both the anxiety of change and otherness, and the exhilaration of novelty and liberty combined to form a sort of magnet for artistic, creative imagination. The dynamic which was created then still operates today, and, having merged with other similar traditions during the contemporary process of cultural globalization, has reached international dimensions. Circus has become nowadays a truly cross-cultural language of the creative imagination, accommodating various ideologies as well as socio-economic systems. It remains the object of a more or less tacit cult both in popular and elitist contexts. But it also continues to carry the stigma of its nomadic origins. Its haunting presence in nineteenth and twentieth centuries European art and literature cannot be however taken for granted, and poses a challenging question: why a way of life and its corresponding performing techniques which had been ignored as if they were "untouchable" for so long, almost suddenly became a major cultural focus even in the highest forms of artistic expression. This paper will attempt to address this question through examining some significant instances of "sublime" aesthetic experiences nested in the circus as a sacred space of ritualistic transformation.

Man and Beast: Mallarmé's Vision

As an illustrative example let us consider one of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Poëmes en prose*, "Un spectacle interrompu." Written during a performance the text recounts a minor accident which occurred during a performance of *La bête et le genie* attended by the poet. The place is a popular theater; the play is a "féerie" straddling two popular genres, the melodrama and the circus, since one of the actors is a real bear, i.e. a trained bear. The hero is a clown magnificently dressed in a silvery garb who at some point interacts with the bear. The tricks performed with the animal trigger loud outbursts of applause among the popular audience when suddenly a tense silence takes hold of the theater. The bear has grabbed the man. The potential accident which is always lurking behind a wild-animal-training act like a hidden agenda – the ancestral confrontation and its bloody consummation – brutally comes to the fore. Mallarmé recalls the sublime of the vision he then experienced, distancing himself from what he assumes to be the vulgar reactions of the crowd. The bear's attack, which will remain like suspended in the poet's visionary imagination, is however stopped when someone, a helper or the backstage trainer, throws a piece of meat from the stage wing in order to capture the attention of the animal and distract it from its potentially deadly attack. The strategy succeeds, but the

spectacle is interrupted and the curtain falls, safely separating the situation which went awry from the relieved audience which leaves the theater.

The interest of this short but dense text is manifold. The circus anecdote is construed as a cosmic vision, played in the mode of Mallarméan Ideal, so to speak. In almost evolutionary terms, he describes the bear as "un homme inférieur, trapu, bon, debout sur l'écartement de deux jambes de poils" forming a sublime couple with "son frère brilliant et surnaturel," son aïné subtil," both united by "un secret rapprochement." The man is not this mediocre clown in spangled silvery garb, but man the dreamer, the cultural hero, the metaphysical being obsessed by Ideal. The bear is not this dangerous predator which can be manipulated by conditioned training, but the mythical beast, so close to and so different from us at the same time, the bear who haunts our fairy tales, both ancient and modern, and our arctic nocturnal sky. On the one hand, "Martin," the furry character of countless medieval stories and Heinrich Heine's *Atta Troll* (1843); on the other hand, our pivotal constellation. All these allusions are clearly made in the text. The deadly hug is experienced "un des drames de l'histoire astrale, élisant pour s'y produire, ce modeste théâtre!" (277). Mallarmé asserts in the last sentence of the text that what he has "seen" in this spectacle and in its essential accident is a "true" vision.

This poem is symptomatic of the emergence of the circus as the locus of mythical, transcendental experiences. It complements the better known fascination of Mallarmé for the clown-acrobat (*le pître*) by providing clear evidence that the third archetypal hero of the circus, the wild-animal trainer, was also a focus of his aesthetic imagination.

From Théodore de Banville to Henry Miller

This fascination for the circus and its three archetypal heroes goes back much earlier in the century and continues today. Three quotations spanning one hundred years give a measure of the extent to which the celebration of the circus goes far beyond an interest for the unusual and picturesque but takes on a mystical dimension. In 1853, Théodore de Banville writes about a troupe of mountebanks: "Je n'oublierai jamaisces têtes embellies par la poésie et la douleur […]. Qu'est-c que le saltimbanque sinon un artiste independent et libre, qui fait des prodiges pour gagner son pain quotidian, qui chante au soleil et danse sous les étoiles sans l'espoir d'arriver à aucune académie?" (1-13). Almost half a century later the symbolist poet Gustave Kahn has the hero of his novel, *Le cirque solaire*, proclaim: "Cirque, cirque, tout est cirque, tout est rond. Oui mais tout événement peut se trouver en toute conjuncture sur ce rond microcosme du cirque" (66). Then a full century after De Banville, Jean Genet writes in *Le funambule*: "Cela m'amène à dire qu'il faut aimer le cirque et mépriser le monde. Une énorme bête remontée des époques diluviennes, se pose pesamment sur les villes: on entre et le monster 'etait plein de merveilles mécaniques et curelles: des écuyères, des augustes, des lions et leur dompteur, des trapézistes allemands, un cheval qui partle et qui compte, et toi. Vous êtes les résidus d'un âge fabuleux…. Vous n'êtes pas prêts pour notre monde et sa logique. Il vous faut donc accepter cette misère: vivre la nuit de l'illusion de vos tours mortels. Le jour vous restez craintifs à la porte du cirque – n'osant entrer dans

notre vie – trop fermement retenus par les pouvoirs due cirque qui sont les pouvoirs de la mort. Ne quittez jamais ce ventre énorme de toile" (201-02).

These three quotations as well as Mallarmé's text examined earlier, are very representative of the progressive elevation of the circus to the status of a transcendental object through the works of poets and painters from Romanticism to Surrealism and beyond, notably in the cinema from Charlie Chaplin to Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman. Within the French domain alone Théophile Gautier, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Laforgue, Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Prévert, and, among the painters, Seurat, Degas, Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Léger, Picasso, Chagall and many others convey the impression that the circus has progressively become a compulsory topos, even though they deal with its icons and symbols with an obvious predilection. Edmond de Goncourt (*Les frères Zemganno*, 1879) and Alain-Fournier (*Le grand Meaulnes*, 1913) orchestrate this topos in works which have reached the status of classics. Eventually, circus figures were also appropriated by philosophical poetry, for instance, in Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1892) and Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* (1923). Henry Miller's *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (1953), which will be considered in the last section of this paper, represents a point of convergence of all the dimensions of the circus topos.

A powerful discourse has thus emerged in European culture, establishing the circus as a unique source of values at the interface of the technique – perceived as an ascetic exercise leading to a profane sainthood – and a sort of metaphysics in which mystification, mystery and mysticism become one and the same thing (Ritter).

Structure of the Circus Topos

The close examination of the texts mentioned above as well as texts from other European literatures show that at least five aspects combine to form this major topos: (1) sociological uprooting; (2) poetics of the body; (3) idealization of risk; (4) cosmological representation of the sublime; (5) paradoxical status of the clown.

The first one seems to be determined by a particular modality of the production of social space, namely the nomadic mode of life and its existential implications. The romantic imagination and its twentieth century continuation in Surrealism and in Existentialism perceived the radical emancipation from the constraints of real estate, of land and building ownership and the stability of the social definition it confers, as a "blessed curse." It usually means also emancipation from family strictures ever haunted by the power of inheritance, for example, Hector Malot's *Sans famille* (1878) or Alain-Fournier's *Le grand Meaulnes*, appropriately translated into English as *The Wanderer*. Circuse carries its own space which takes over and cancels for a very brief, precarious time the civil space of legality. It sets up fences and controls thresholds, it transcends distances, differences and borders. Circus dominates space, seems to ignore its partitioning and alienating forces, and at the same time *The Circus Has No Home*, as claims for instance Rupert Croft-Cooke in the title of his passionate account of a British circus family, a situation which Yoram Carmelli has more recently documented in ethnographic terms.

This existential vision is largely a sociological phantasm, but it is necessary for construing archetypal circus heroes as embodiments of "pure" bodies, as "symbolic types" according to Handelman. It is because they are not defined by the civil coordinates of all those who are forming the social tissue of everyday life that they appear as pure beings of desire so close to the power of death that they acquire a sort of immunity from the trivial morality and legality of the common herd. They walk in the inebriating atmosphere of anomy, but a rigorous anomy which sanctions by instant death the mistakes which they seem to be tragically bound to make, rather than administering petty retaliations for the mediocre faults and sins of those who do not dare. They liberally reveal their flesh and show off their seductive resources and the power of their violence, but always in the constantly evoked presence of death. This, of course, is a matter of staging which is part of the trade, since the risks involved are relatively low if they are compared to other professional activities. However, they came to replace the Catholic saints (e.g. Chateaubriand's *Martyres*) in the esthetic imagination to the extent that those who died by accident during a performance were actually considered as "matyres" and that at least one "Martyrologue du cirque" was published in the first part of the 20th century (Thétard). The combined effects of spatial emancipation, and apparently deliberate exposure to death in the heroic mode, form the basis of the poetics of the glorious body and its reversed and necessary condition: the tortured body, on the one hand, which acquires its glorious metamorphosis through an ascetic training, or the ruined body, on the other hand, which disappears under the garb of the clown when time has taken its toll. Hence the fifth aspect, the paradoxical figure of the clown which fascinates poets and painters alike.

The Ascent of the Clown

The text which crystallizes, perhaps in the most efficient manner, the role of the clown in the circus topos is Henry Miller's *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (1948). It encapsulates in a mere sixty pages all the ingredients of the literary theme and cultural icon which developed during the preceding century: the deep and paradoxical sadness under the make-up; the despair of the artist who realizes that he is nothing but this mask which exhausts all his existential status; the metaphysical vacuity of an identity which does not exceed the stage name by which he is known and appreciated by the public; the tragic freedom of the circus anti-hero who is not only depossessed of space coordinates but also of sexual and social identity; the unspeakable suffering of the grotesque, childlike being who straddles boundaries, messes up good manners, fashion and proper language, and whose eternal lot seems to be the ultimate scapegoat or martyr. As Miller writes in the very first pages of the book: "Within the radius of the spotlight lay the world in which he was born anew each evening. It comprised only those objects, creatures and beings which move in the circle of enchantment. A table, a chair, a rug; a horse, a bell, a paper hoop; the eternal ladder, the moon nailed to the roof, the bladder of a goat. With these Auguste and his companious managed each night to reproduce the drama of initiation and martyrdom" (12). The text provides definitive formulation of all the essential features of the topos. For example: "To be a clown was to be fate's pawn. […] It was his special privilege to reenact the errors, the follies, the stupidities, all the

misunderstandings which plague the human kind. […] The master of ineptitude has all time as his domain. He surrenders only in the face of eternity" (80-82).

In the "epilogue" to the story, Miller recounts the circumstances in which it was written. This was initially a commission to accompany a series of forty illustrations by Fernand Léger on clowns and circuses. Once Miller had accepted the offer things did not go smoothly. He documents what could be best described as a confrontation with the topos, typically alluding to the necessity he felt to meet the challenge and to the inhibition caused by the intimidating achievements of those who had so successfully tried their hand at it before him. Besides a passing reference to his own passion for the circus – but is this not an obligatory element of the topos? – it is quite remarkable that no substantial mention is made of the circus itself. Miró, Chagall, Rouault provide the points of referential anchorage, so to speak, to the extent that the very objects he depicts in his story do not refer to implements he might have observed in a real circus but to pictorial items: the ladder is Miró's, as is the moon; the horse is Léger's; and so on. As to the kernel of the tale, it obviously draws from Mallarmé's famous poem "Le pître châtié" and its many derivations along the successive literary periods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like in Starobinski"s celebrated *Portrait de l'artiste en saltimbanque* (1970), Miller's moving and profound story implements the topos rather than documents the popular institution, i.e. the circus, to which it is assumed to refer.

Circus people have traditionally maintained their distance with respect to the literary discourse and artistic iconography of which their specialty was the focus, if only because most of them belonged to an oral, often illiterate culture. In the eyes of the poets they were sublime without knowing it, almost in spite of themselves. And the poets in turn were considered suspiciously by the circus folks because of their lack of appreciate of what really counts in the arts of the trade. However, it is interesting to note in conclusion that spectacles presented in contemporary circuses, mainly since the late 1970s, show evidence that, as a result of an intriguing phenomenon of cultural feedback, features of the topos which has been discussed in this paper are being assimilated by the circus institution. Staging, acting, and marketing more and more seem to seek inspiration in the cultural forms set by poets and painters over almost two centuries of creation, to the point that circus artists and journalists now contribute to the perpetuation of a topos whose emergence remains puzzling but whose power over modern Western symbolic imagination is undeniable.

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