

Cocteau *au cirque*: The Poetics of *Parade* and “Le
Numéro Barbette”

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In 1912, a twenty-three year old Jean Cocteau seized the opportunity given him and wrote the libretto for *Le Dieu bleu* (*The Blue God*)¹ a ballet performed by Serge de Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, with music by Reynaldo Hahn, and featuring the celebrated Nijinsky in the title role. The ballet was not at all a success, and was not missed when it disappeared from the repertory. The short life of *Le Dieu bleu* would be unremarkable, however, if not for its indirect link to an equally short-lived but decidedly original and landmark work by Cocteau. His biographer, Francis Steegmuller, recounts how Diaghilev, increasingly irritated with the young Cocteau after the failure of *Le Dieu bleu*, challenged the latter to surprise him. “Astound me,” Diaghilev is quoted as saying (Steegmuller 82). Five years later, the ephemeral *Parade*, a joint effort with libretto by Cocteau, music by Erik Satie, decor, costumes, and curtain by Pablo Picasso, and choreography by Léonide Massine, would become Cocteau’s first truly original work. However much the result of a collaboration, Serge Lifar claims that stylistically, “Everything that is now current in ballet was invented by Cocteau for *Parade*” (qtd. in Steegmuller 190). And Margaret Crosland finds that thematically, “The fairground and the acrobats which the young generation of French choreographers still use in so many of their ballets owe as much, if not more, to *Parade*, as they do to Picasso’s Blue Period and *Petruchka*” (50). Eighty-three years and several reconstructed performances later, *Parade*,

and Cocteau's contribution to its spectacle, can no longer be treated as involving no other "poetry than that of the event" (Gobin 162). On the contrary, Pierre Gobin contends, *Parade* is central to an understanding of the structures that would inform all Cocteau's subsequent work. It is the "clé symbolique de son univers" 'symbolic key of his universe' (Gobin 162). Using much the same terminology, Neal Oxenhandler calls it a "symbolic compression of much that was to come" (47).

Equally central is Cocteau's July 1926 *Nouvelle Revue Française* article on "Le Numéro Barbette" ("The Barbette Act"). While his 1962 (and last) play, *L'Impromptu du Palais Royal* (*The Palais Royal Impromptu*), acts out "his theories of theater" in the time of a performance, the essay on the travesty striptease trapezist Barbette, contends Lydia Crowson, offers a less refined yet as fully fleshed version of the same philosophy on theater. Crowson specifies that the relationship between the two works does not spring from similarity in theme or message, "but rather by a conception of the art of the stage, of what theater as spectacle means. Cocteau was never interested in a play *qua* text; instead, he strove to create a certain art-object / spectator relationship based on illusion and enchantment" ("Cocteau" 79). It was Barbette's spectacle of illusion that most impressed Cocteau, contends Crowson, not his skill as an acrobat ("Cocteau" 81). For Francis Steegmuller, Cocteau's *NRF* article outlines more than a philosophy on theater: it is no less than a "classic in the literature of aesthetics, on the nature of art" (368).

Although Pierre Gobin and Lydia Crowson disagree on the identity of the pivotal Coctelian text, *Parade* or "Le Numéro Barbette," they both focus not on, as Gobin says, the "soul" of Cocteau's *œuvre*, its themes or message, but on its "forms" (160). Cocteau, a twentieth-century Renaissance man, listed all his myriad literary and artistic activities not as belonging to their respective generic categories—poetry, novel, theater, criticism, graphic art, cinema—but to poetry: "poésie, poésie de roman, poésie de théâtre, poésie critique, poésie graphique, "poésie cinématographique" 'poetry, novel poetry, theatre poetry, criticism poetry, graphics poetry, film poetry' (*Journal* 237-38). His pairing of poetry with other genres

does not address individual actualizations of *poésie*, but rather those qualities—harmony, rhythm, and image—that distinguish poetry from any other literary genre. He demands, in essence, that his literary and artistic production not be subjected to the conventions of any particular genre other than those of poetry, which itself is a fundamentally mixed medium. The element that distinguishes poetry from any other literary genre is a consideration of its meaning only in relation to its aural and visual textures. As defined in the *New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*,

Prose is cast in sentences; poetry is cast in sentences cast into line. Prose syntax has the shape of meaning, but poetic syntax is stretched across the frame of meter or the poem's visual space, so that it has this shape as well as meaning. Whether the prosody of the poem is primarily aural or visual or mixed, it creates design. (233)

Cocteau's various "poetries," therefore, are productions in which patterns produced aurally and / or visually extend and intensify the meaning of each work.

Cocteau's view of all his activities as poetry also incorporates the notion of poetics as theory and aesthetics. In structuralism, such a poetics proposes the elaboration of an "underlying system" as opposed to an interpretation of a work's meaning. Jonathan Culler states in his *Structuralist Poetics* that structuralist practices, without being known as such, were an integral facet of literary study in the pre-Enlightenment tradition:

It used to be possible, in the days before the poem became pre-eminently the act of an individual and emotion recollected in tranquillity, to study its interaction with norms of rhetoric and genre, the relation of its formal features to those of the tradition, without feeling immediately compelled to produce an interpretation which would demonstrate their thematic relevance. One did not need to move from poem to world but could explore it within the institution of literature, relating it to a tradition and identifying formal continuities and discontinuities. (119)

Pierre Gobin and Lydia Crowson both wrote their articles in the seventies, and while their theoretical concerns reflect those of that particular period, it was structuralism that pulled Cocteau

studies away from the quest to unearth an overarching meaning in his *œuvre*, and rehabilitated Cocteau as a serious artist. At the time of a reprise of *Parade*, Cocteau himself is at pains to dissuade the critic from interpretation and to encourage him / her to explore its purely formal features:

M'interrogerez-vous sur *Parade*? Je suis tenté de répondre: ne cassez pas *Parade* pour voir ce qu'il y a dedans. Il n'y a rien. *Parade* ne cache rien. *Parade* n'a aucun sens. *Parade* est une parade. *Parade* est sans symbole. *Parade*, un point c'est tout. *Parade* n'est pas cubiste. *Parade* n'est pas futuriste. *Parade* n'est pas dadaïste. *Parade* n'est pas "un curieux ballet." *Parade* ne cligne pas de l'œil. *Parade* n'est pas malin. *Parade* n'est pas sublime. *Parade* est simple comme bonjour.

Parade est:

Bête comme chou. Franc comme l'or. Frais comme une rose. Libre comme l'air. ("La reprise de *Parade*" 138)

Will you ask me about *Parade*? I am tempted to answer: don't break *Parade* to see what is inside. There is nothing. *Parade* hides nothing. *Parade* has no meaning. *Parade* is a parade. *Parade* is without symbol. *Parade*, and that's that. *Parade* is not cubist. *Parade* is not futurist. *Parade* is not dadaist. *Parade* is not "an odd ballet." *Parade* doesn't wink. *Parade* is not clever. *Parade* is not sublime. *Parade* is simple as hello.

Parade is:

Silly as cabbage. Pure as gold. Fresh as a rose. Free as air.

However superficial in form, Cocteau's *Parade* and "Le Numéro Barbette" do have a great deal to do with "underlying systems." For Crowson, who isolates "Le Numéro Barbette" as central text to a Coctelian poetics, the structure informing Cocteau's work is the illusion machine, one that produces "not merely a shoddy make-believe, but a game so convincingly and skillfully formed as to be accepted" ("Cocteau" 85). The audience accepts as real the image of Barbette as a woman trapezist performing only to discover the deception that Barbette is a man performing a woman trapezist performing. For Gobin, *Parade* has semiotic value in that it is at one and the same time system in its virtual state and actualization of the system. It is pre-spectacle *parade* (system) as defined in the dictionary and by its historical role, and the sole spectacle offered by the performers of *Parade* (actualization of the system).

But the “underlying system” is perhaps neither in *Parade* nor in “Le Numéro Barbette” alone, but in both, as they 1) propose a poetics of Coctelian art as illusion, a deception dependant on aural and / or visual components, and 2) reference and actualize the semantic register of a particular signifying system: not the fairground *parade*, as contends Gobin and other critics, but the circus and circus culture.

Because *Parade* and “Le Numéro Barbette” have been isolated by many critics as crucial texts/events in the formation of a Coctelian aesthetics, our attention is drawn to their shared milieu of the circus (both the high-brow stationary circus and the low-brow fairground attraction), a tradition which recalls the nineteenth-century art and literature that embraced the circus acrobat/clown as symbol of the artist/writer’s position *vis-à-vis* society. While *Parade* criticism usually describes the work as a recreation of “actual acts performed in 1917 in Parisian music-halls and circuses such as the Cirque Medrano as well as contemporary American silent films,” and while it cites *Parade*’s creators’ desire to incorporate contemporary popular entertainments in an effort to ruffle elitist sensibilities and at the same time reinvigorate high art from below, it is not these “réaliste” elements, to use Cocteau’s idiosyncratic term, that endow *Parade* with its avant-garde status (Hargrove 86). While *Parade* and “Le Numéro Barbette” share a circus-related theme, the circus does not function merely as a metaphor. Each work in a different way appropriates and promotes rather the circus’s revolutionary orientation toward space, its creation of “real” time, and its undermining of social signifying systems, in particular those pertaining to race and gender.

Parade

Most criticism of *Parade* retraces ever so briefly the history of the *parade*. Cocteau and Company’s *Parade* is said to reproduce and parody circus and fair traditions dating back at least to the eighteenth century, where minor players in a traveling troupe performed at the entrance to their tent to entice customers to come and see the show on the other side of the curtain. In the nine-

teenth-century stationary circus, the *parade*, which took place within the circus ring both at the beginning and end of the circus spectacle, functioned less as advertising than as a reflection of the circus's ritualization of a practice that once had a very practical purpose; here the *parade* served as a complement to the program notes of an evening's performances. Deborah Rothschild in *Picasso's "Parade"* contends that the production's characters reflect the pathetic performers of the traveling fair, not the pampered stars of stationary circuses like the Nouveau Cirque and the Cirque d'Hiver (73). One of Cocteau's earliest notebook conceptualizations of the work supports Rothschild's identification of *Parade's* characters as lowly fairground "saltimbanques" 'acrobats' in that it carried a Larousse definition of "*parade*" on its cover: "a burlesque scene played outside a sideshow booth to entice spectators inside" (qtd. in Steegmuller 146). And since Picasso designed the production's curtain, it is his previous relation to ambulatory and ragged circus performers in his blue and rose period paintings that is cited as the context for the *parade*. Everything points to the fairground attraction as the work's context.

But the exclusion of the stationary circus in a consideration of the traditions informing *Parade* reduces its innovations solely to its scandalous avant-garde infusion of conservative narrative ballet with vulgar popular entertainments and the carnivalesque. Pierre Gobin dismisses the circus ring as a determinant even at the conceptual stage of *Parade's* spatial arrangement, even though a contemporary, Guillaume Apollinaire, whom Cocteau greatly admired, proposed the ideal stage for his *Mamelles de Tirésias* (*The Breasts of Tiresias*) in "Un théâtre rond à deux scènes, une au centre, l'autre formant comme un anneau autour des spectateurs" 'A round theater with two stages, one in the center, the other forming a sort of ring around the audience' (qtd. in Gobin 164. 17).² For Gobin, *Parade* has a direct referent, if not in the "real" *baraque foraine* 'fairground stall,' then in theater, for even if,

les novateurs envisagent des aménagements radicaux de l'espace scénique, comme la construction d'une galerie de jeu autour de l'arène où sont placés les spectateurs, et s'ils rêvent de "(marier) . . . comme dans la vie les sons les gestes les couleurs les cris les

bruits . . . ,” la tradition impose la matérialisation du “quatrième mur” puisque la parade se donnait *devant le rideau*. C’est le *quatrième mur qui établit la clôture et distingue la parade, amorce “publicitaire” de la représentation dont elle donne un échantillon et souligne les ressources (en tant que spectacle plutôt qu’en tant que production littéraire) de la représentation proprement dite: “le spectacle est à l’intérieur.”*

the innovators envisage radical dispositions of stage space, as in the construction of an acting gallery around the amphitheater where the audience is placed, and if they dream of “(blending) . . . as in life sounds gestures colors cries noises . . . ,” tradition dictates the materialization of the “fourth wall” since the parade was played *in front of the curtain*. It is the *fourth wall that establishes closure and distinguishes the parade, “publicity” enticement for the performance* of which it gives a sample and emphasizes the resources (as spectacle rather than as literary production) *of the actual performance: “the show is inside.”* (164)

But it is clear that *Parade’s* fourth wall as introduced by Picasso’s curtain did the opposite of offering closure, nor did it’s reception depend on the movement of the audience from an “outside” to an “inside” of a tent or the other side of the curtain. Indeed, Picasso’s curtain contains its own trompe l’œil framing curtains that, rather than distinguish clearly between an inside and an outside, create ambiguity such that “the curtains (depicted in Picasso’s curtain) appear to exist in both the front and rear of the stage, confusing the orientation and identity of the spectator in relation to the depicted figures (i.e. the spectator can be located behind the scenes or in the audience)” (Rothschild 209).

An important precursor to the spatial paradox of *Parade* and its curtain is Georges Seurat’s *Parade de cirque (Circus Parade)* (1888), in which “la profondeur spatiale est peu sensible, tout ce qui pouvait l’indiquer ayant été soigneusement éliminé” ‘spatial depth is hardly perceptible, all that could point to it having been carefully eliminated’ (Herbert 10). The lighting makes the depth even more difficult to decipher. Seurat’s painting depicts an evening scene at the facade of a “baraque” ‘stall’ in which shadows projected on the curtain come from within the tent (where the “real” performance takes place) *and* from outside (where the *parade’s* publicity performance occurs). Robert L. Herbert’s analy-

sis of the painting in conjunction with photographs, posters, postcards, and illustrations of the Cirque Corvi and of fairground *parades* led him to conclude regarding the painting's representational ambiguities that, "Nous voyons donc, à la fois les balustres et les ombres projetées sur la toile des jambes des musiciens" "We see, therefore, at the same time the railings and the shadows of the musicians' legs projected onto the curtain" (11). Seurat's influence on a group of Cubist painters—Herbert lists Gleizes, Metzinger, Léger, Gris, but we can safely include Picasso—can be isolated in this merging of perspectives (inside and outside views), as well as in the painting's "combinaison de vues frontale et de profil dans un même personnage (chez Seurat, le joueur de trombone et le jeune garçon), les contours plats de chaque personnage et la répétition de motifs géométriques" 'combination of front and side views in one figure (in Seurat's work, the trombone player and the young boy), the flat contours of each figure and the repetition of geometrical motifs,' elements the painting shares, as Herbert points out, with Egyptian art. The relevance of a pairing of Seurat's painting to *Parade's* conceptualization is further supported by Picasso's reference to it in early decor sketches in which he "had considered fretting the top of the proscenium with gas lamps" like those in *Parade de cirque* (Rothschild 204). But Picasso is not the sole creator of the ballet's confusion of two opposed spaces, nor is the pairing of opposites limited to the visual plane, but exists in the space of music as well, as Cocteau notes: "Peu à peu vint au monde une partition où Satie semble avoir découvert une dimension inconnue grâce à laquelle on écoute simultanément la parade et le spectacle intérieur" "Little by little a score was born in which Satie seems to have discovered an unknown dimension thanks to which you hear simultaneously the parade and the inner show" (Coq 460). The blurring of the space of the spectacle with that of the audience, of inside with outside, of a centered perspective with all other possible viewpoints, is at the very heart of *Parade's* conception.

Apollinaire wrote in the program notes to *Parade* that "cette alliance de la peinture et de la danse, de la plastique et de la mimique est le signe de l'avènement d'un art plus complet" "this

union of painting and dance, of plastic arts and mime, is the sign of the advent of a more complete art' (Apollinaire 146-47). This could serve as a definition of Cocteau's various *poésies*. And indeed, Eric Darragon finds this idea of a more complete art, one that unites both the real and the abstract, in Seurat's *Cirque* (*Circus*) (1891) and Cocteau and Company's *Parade*; they opened "l'expérience esthétique contemporaine à un élément de contradiction qui contient une puissance poétique" 'contemporary aesthetic experience to an element of contradiction that holds a poetic power' (55). This poetic power can be none other than the one described earlier, one that involves the interpenetration, yet fundamental indivisibility, of any two mediums operating together in the same time and / or space. For Apollinaire, never before had decor and costume worked to extend and intensify dance rather than just to represent it. He anticipated that this event would change "de fond en comble les arts et les mœurs" 'the arts and customs from top to bottom' (146). As noted earlier by Serge Lifar and Margaret Crosland, *Parade* certainly did change ballet, breaking neatly with nineteenth-century narrative.

Parade's rejection of narrative owes a great deal to Seurat's *Cirque*, which, with its shared thematic milieu in his *Parade de cirque*, must also be considered an influence on the evolution of *Parade*. Darragon isolates the revelatory element in the circus horse of *Parade's* curtain and in the circus clown act's "cheval clownesque" 'clown horse' which, if they do not directly refer to Seurat's *Cirque*, acknowledge their debt to Seurat in the way he paved the road to cubism (Darragon 55). Darragon finds the key element linking *Cirque* and *Parade* in the flaw that Seurat purposefully inscribed in the running motion of his circus horse, a flaw whose contradictions nevertheless promote the painting's "différents niveaux d'information et sa recomposition lumineuse et à un moment où se formule à nouveau l'ambition d'une émotion esthétique fondée sur l'alliance des différents arts" 'different levels of information and its luminous recomposition, and at a moment when the ambition for an aesthetic emotion founded on the alliance of various arts is formulated anew' (Darragon 55). As Darragon notes, the deliberate flaw is the result of, on the one

hand, representing the cantering horse from a three-quarter angle in order to best render the illusion of speed, while at the same time having both the anterior and posterior legs extended in an effort to harmonize its movement, not with the other figures and objects represented, but with the colors and shapes of the remaining features of the painting. Darragon adds, “les bandes curvilignes semblent conduire sa course gracieuse, presque joyeuse” ‘the curvilinear bands seem to conduct its graceful, almost joyous, running’ (53).

Seurat’s model for the horse’s pose did not come from Marey’s and Muybridge’s respective photographic work on animal locomotion, nor did the harmonious arrangement of shapes and colors come from academic traditions. In 1958, Robert L. Herbert substantiated his claim that an important influence on Seurat’s work, and on *Cirque* in particular, were the circus posters of Jules Chéret. Chéret posters covered the walls of Seurat’s studio, and *Cirque*’s stylistic and formal properties reflect the “caractère symbolique” ‘symbolic nature’ of his circus posters (Darragon 52). One finds this symbolic character in the emblematic status of certain key elements to suggest the circus: the “écuyère” ‘equestrienne,’ the white horse, the clown’s head or tumbling body, the curtain pulled to the side to reveal the activity within. We know that the *écuyère* and clown functioned principally as symbols since the cult of the *écuyère* had been significantly eclipsed by that of the lady trapezist in the 1870s, and once endowed with a speaking role the clown was no longer the bounding acrobat of the first three quarters of the century (Darragon 52). These same symbols reappear in Picasso’s curtain, and with some modification in the ballet: the Chinese conjuror is easily identifiable as the clown, the American girl from silent serial movies replaces the *écuyère*, and the *cheval clownesque* replaces the white horse. The circus poster code remains intact, however, modified only in an updating of its nineteenth-century characters.

For Darragon, Seurat’s *Parade de cirque* only serves as the thematic and structural link to the 1917 ballet *Parade*, citing rather his *Cirque* as the direct aesthetic and historical precursor. Catherine Strasser in *Seurat: Cirque pour un nouveau monde*

(*Seurat: Circus for a New World*) claims that it is the variety form of the circus spectacle itself that offered itself as a model for twentieth-century artists. The model is one in which the work, literary or plastic, “appelle à tous les sens” ‘appeals to all the senses,’ and has “la dimension d’un spectacle total” ‘the dimension of a complete entertainment’ (41). She cites indirectly *Cirque* and directly the circus spectacle as the source for the “rêve d’un spectacle total” (“the dream of a complete entertainment”) that became the *Parade* of Cocteau—who must be credited in no limited degree with giving shape to this idea—Picasso, Satie, and Massine. This total spectacle is enhanced first, by an absence of narration, which is intrinsic to the nature of circus acts, and second, by the advantages that circularity offered to Seurat and to the artists that followed him: “L’arène circulaire du cirque offre à Seurat un espace propre à rompre avec le schéma perspectif de la scène de théâtre. La composition ne se fonde plus sur une convergence du regard vers un point de fuite unique, chaque motif est traité selon un point de vue qui lui est propre” ‘The circular arena of the circus offers Seurat a space suited for breaking with the perspectival arrangement of the theater stage. The composition is no longer built on a convergence of the eye towards one sole vanishing point, each motif is treated according to its own particular point of view’ (27). The privileging of the circle is central to the early-twentieth-century artistic sensibility as demonstrated by Fernand Léger’s essay on the circus in *Fonctions de la peinture* (*Functions of Painting*): “Puisque la terre est ronde, comment voulez-vous jouer carré?” ‘Since the earth is round, why do you want to perform in a square?’ (152). “Allez au cirque,” Léger advises us, “Vous quittez vos rectangles, vos fenêtres géométriques, et vous allez au pays des cercles en action” ‘Go to the circus. You quit your rectangles, your geometrical windows, and you go to the country of circles in action.’ To embrace the circus ring is to break with enclosing angles, to “casser les limites, de s’agrandir, de pousser vers la liberté” ‘break barriers, to expand, to push towards liberty’ (153).

Catering to the Ballets Russes’ aesthetics of the exotic, Cocteau’s first ballet, *Le Dieu bleu*, was very traditional in conception. From the failure of *Le Dieu bleu*, Cocteau’s subsequent cre-

ative ventures will look to the circus and circus culture for inspiration. An earlier version of *Parade, David*—on which Cocteau, in 1914, anticipated collaborating with Igor Stravinsky—drew on the milieu of the fairground *parade*. A projected but never completed production a year later of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* set to the music of Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies* was to feature the Cirque Medrano's famed clown trio, Paul, François, and Albert Fratellini as Bottom, Flute, and Starveling (Steegmuller 132). The Fratellinis did appear, however, in the lead roles of *Le Boeuf sur le toit* (*The Ox on the Roof*) (1920). But the circus influence and his naive notion of the kind of "total" spectacle that it offers dates back to his childhood, when Cocteau's German nanny, Joséphine, would take him to the Nouveau Cirque. There he lost himself in the spectacle of the celebrated clown team, Footit and Chocolat, and the acrobats: "Les acrobates et les clowns dominaient mon spectacle" 'The acrobats and the clowns dominated my entertainment' (*Portraits* 758). As an adult Cocteau often went to the Cirque Medrano, where, according to Paul Morand, he "connait tout le monde, s'amuse comme un fou à la chasse au lièvre, aux équilibristes. Il dit: 'J'aime tellement mieux les clowns que les acteurs; ils sont tellement plus intelligents'" 'knows everyone, amuses himself like a madman hunting hare, (only he is hunting) acrobats.' He says: "I so much prefer clowns to actors; they are so much more intelligent"' (79-80).

In 1859, the Goncourt brothers expressed much the same preference for acrobats / clowns over actors, and their words could easily serve as the banner for an entire generation of *fin-de-siècle* circus patrons from the arts and literature:

Nous n'allons qu'à un théâtre. Tous les autres nous ennuiet et nous agacent. Il y a un certain rire de public à ce qui est vulgaire, bas et bête, qui nous dégoûte. Le théâtre où nous allons est le cirque. Là nous voyons des sauteurs et des sauteuses, des clowns et des franchiseuses de cercles de papier, qui font leur métier et leur devoir: le[s] seuls talents au monde qui soient incontestables, absolus comme des mathématiques ou plutôt comme un saut périlleux. Il n'y a pas là d'acteurs et d'actrices faisant semblant d'avoir du talent: ou ils tombent ou ils ne tombent pas. Leur talent est un fait.

We go to only one theater. All the others bore us and irritate us. There is a certain audience laughter at what is common, low, and stupid, that disgusts us. The theater where we go is the circus. There we see male and female tumblers, clowns, and women acrobats leaping through circles of paper, who do their craft and their duty: the only talents in the world that are incontestable, absolute like mathematics or rather like a[*n* aerial] somersault. There, there are no actors and actresses pretending to have talent. Either they fall or they don't fall. Their talent is a fact. (491)

The danger to which the skilled acrobat exposes him / herself reduces the miming performed by actors and actresses to empty pretensions. The death-defying number executed by an acrobat takes place in real time, and the powerful emotions aroused in the spectator come from the very real possibility that a trick will end in a mortal fall: "Nous les voyons, ces hommes et ces femmes risquant leurs os en l'air pour attraper quelques bravos, avec un remuement d'entrailles" 'We see them, those men and women risking their bones in the air to snatch some applause, with a stirring in the bowels' (Goncourt 491). Actors and actresses, however, merely simulate real time. The former experience is an event, the latter an imitation of an event.

For Cocteau, the same is true for children's theater. Like an acrobat's feat that provokes "un remuement d'entrailles" in the spectator, Cocteau recalls experiencing "les vertiges" ("dizziness") on seeing the elaborate productions of *La Biche au bois* (*The Doe in the Woods*) (based on a fairytale by Mme d'Aulnoy) and the stage adaptation of Jules Verne's *Le Tour du monde en 80 jours* (*Around the World in Eighty Days*): "Et jamais la plainte de Tristan mourant qui regarde la mer ne supplantera dans notre âme le: 'Vingt mille bank-notes pour vous, capitaine, si nous arrivons ce soir à Liverpool!' de Philéas Fogg et jamais les décors du Ballet russe ne nous laisseront le souvenir des neiges enchantées où le chef des Indiens décrochait la locomotive" 'And never will the lamentation of the dying Tristan watching the sea supplant in our soul the: "Twenty thousand bank-notes for you, captain, if you arrive this evening in Liverpool! of Phileas Fogg and never will the decors of the Ballet Russe leave us with the memory of the enchanted snows where Indians uncoupled the locomotive" (*Portraits-Souvenirs*

754). Never could traditional theater create the emotions aroused by the fantastic of children's theater. Never could a stage actor rival Footit the clown who "apportait sur la piste une atmosphère de nursery du diable" 'brought into the ring an atmosphere from the devil's nursery' (763). Nor would one ever witness Footit and Chocolat "enter the stage" like actors: "Ils vont entrer en piste. Car entrer en piste n'est pas entrer en scène. C'est confondre une statue et une médaille" 'They are going to enter into the ring. For entering into the ring is not entering on stage. That is to mistake a statue for a medal' (761). While Cocteau often sought in his theatrical and cinematic works to recreate in the spectator a child's amazement and fascination,³ it is perhaps more accurate to conclude that he strove to reproduce the powerful experience in real time elicited both by circus acrobats and clowns and the extravagant plots, scenery, props, and costumes of children's theater.

Cocteau was brought to task for subtitling *Parade* a "ballet-réaliste" ("realist ballet"); the ballet had nothing of the nineteenth-century novelistic spirit of documentation, nor did it reproduce gestures true to life as demanded by the bourgeois spectator at the theater. On the contrary, one of the effects sought by Cocteau and Company through Picasso's Manager costumes was to dehumanize them such that they "deviendraient en somme la fausse réalité scénique jusqu'à réduire les danseurs réels à des mesures de fantoches" 'would become in short false scenic reality to the point of reducing the real dancers to the size of puppets' (*Coq* 460). Steegmuller interprets "réaliste" as referring to contemporaneity; *Parade* put its own era on stage. But *Parade's* "realism" goes beyond the mere reproduction of everyday sights, sounds, and the atmosphere of "l'actualité" 'actuality.' In *Le Secret professionnel* (*The Professional Secret*), Cocteau excused himself for any misunderstanding regarding his use of the term, saying that he meant the "plus vrai que le vrai" 'realer than the real' (495). We know that Apollinaire in *Parade's* program notes amended Cocteau's term by calling the ballet "sur-réaliste" 'sur-realist.' But Cocteau's usual idiosyncratic use of certain terms may be appropriate in this instance in that extraordinary events that actually take place in real time (as in the aerialist's act) or that give the illusion of taking

place in a real time (as in children's theater) have that quality of being real, if not more than real. Getting caught up in an enchanting illusion engages the spectator more thoroughly than conventional theatrical devices. Cocteau and Company created the "real" time of the acrobat performing a trick and of children's theater, and radically reconfigured theatrical space, blurring the distinction between inside and outside, spectator and performer, decor and human being.

Le Numéro Barbette

The idea of the peripheral seems to express the general assessment of Cocteau's contribution to *Parade*; music historians talk of Satie's *Parade*, dance historians of Massine's *Parade*, and art historians like Deborah Rothschild of *Picasso's "Parade"* (Gobin 161). How much more peripheral, in terms of the body of Cocteau's work, must his spare review of "Le Numéro Barbette" seem to critics. And yet, as Lydia Crowson has shown, how central it is to an understanding of his oeuvre. For Crowson, Barbette as aerialist symbolizes two essential things: the acrobat as metaphor for the poet (a literary tradition that goes back to Théodore de Banville's *Odes funambulesques* and to which Cocteau contributes in comparing the "tightrope dancer's skilled, perilous performance" to the "painful creativity of the poet"), and the transvestite trapezist as great theatrical illusionist ("That Vander Clyde was a great acrobat would not have intrigued Cocteau, although he certainly would not have underestimated the skill involved. Rather, his ability to portray a female trapeze artist supplied the trick, the 'sleight of hand,' necessary to raise his performance to the status of genuine theater" [Stegmuller 365; Crowson, *Esshetic* 105]).⁴ For Mark Franko, too, "Barbette's performance is exemplary of Cocteau's poetic." But Cocteau's essay, states Franko, is primarily on transvestism and its valorization of sexual ambiguity. Barbette's number works to locate and maintain for as long as possible "an alternative sexual space in the shadow of conventional difference" in the moment of flight itself (598). Here, Barbette's gliding through the air functions as a metaphor for the leap "across the boundaries" separating male and female gender

into a space that is neither male nor female, but androgynous. Whether or not such an alternate space is androgynous, another kind of experience of gender does emerge, one wholly dependant on the way circus performers have always played with social conventions and exploited audience expectations. Franko's argument for the existence of a "tenuous nether space" made possible by the male / female polarity, however, is weakened by the way in which this alternate world of the circus puts into question race as well, and not only at the crucial moment of the aerial jump. For example, Peta Tait discusses the celebrated high-wire artist from the 1920s and 1930s, Con Colleano, who, although of Australian aboriginal origins, created a Spanish persona. Even if the new racial identities assumed by circus performers of color had to conform to conventions of the desirable exotic other (within the circus Colleano could be "Spanish," Spanish exoticism being acceptable, aboriginal undesirable), and even if the "circus performance of an exotic other grouped all people of colour together as interchangeable, negating rather than recognizing the distinctive racial and cultural identities of the performers," the fact remains that race became an unstable marker and, therefore, receptive to alternate social (re)constructions ("Danger" 46).⁵ Fernand Léger notes of Miss Athéna, the fortuneteller who is a member of the "gens du voyage" 'circus people,' she is "sans race ni pays" 'without race or country,' and she has "une figure indéchiffrable" 'an impenetrable face' (157). She is from nowhere, she could be from anywhere, she is mystery, she is freedom. This racial shifting, this inversion of signs, could happen only in the circus milieu. It is quite probable, therefore, that if Barbette's "sleight of hand" had played with race rather than gender, Cocteau would have been just as enthralled with the number. The essential component marking Cocteau's essay is circus culture itself, which is another universe entirely: it is, as Cocteau insisted, "piste" 'circus ring' not "scène" 'stage.' And it is a metaphor for life in the twentieth century: "Notre espace moderne ne cherche plus les limites, il s'impose au jour le jour un domaine d'action illimité" 'Our modern space no longer seeks limits, it imposes on itself from one day to the next an unlimited realm of action' (Léger 158).

The trapezist has represented to many artists and writers since the nineteenth century the ultimate symbol of liberty: "Occuper l'espace supérieur c'est avoir des ailes, une demi-mesure, une ambition de franchir l'espace d'un seul bond" "To occupy upper space is to have wings, a half measure, an ambition to go beyond space in a single leap" (Léger 154). For Cocteau, Barbette's flight makes one feel as if one sees it from afar, as if it takes place "dans les rues du rêve" 'in the streets of dreams' ("Barbette" 261). In Cocteau's world, the dreamworld has its own realism, which he calls a "réalité poétique" 'poetic reality' because of its manner of making a collage or visual poem of unassociated memories and images ("Essai" 72-73). In a later discussion of "Le Numéro Barbette," Cocteau claims that Barbette "singe la poésie" 'mimics poetry,' that his leaps are not at all dangerous, that the power of his routine lies in the travesty ("Essai" 209). No doubt, Cocteau admired and emulated the ability of a performer to deceive the spectator. Cocteau wrote a poem in 1920 about the illusionist act of "Miss Aérogynne, Femme Volante" ("Miss Aérogynne, Flying Woman"), praising the way the decor tricked the spectator into believing in her flight much in the same way the decor of *Le Tour du monde en 80 jours* suspended his disbelief as a child:

Pigeon vole! Aérogynne
 Elle ment avec son corps
 Mieux que l'esprit n' imagine
 Les mensonges du décor.

Aérogynne, pigeon vole!
 Rêve, allège le dormeur lourd;
 Eloa, dompteuse d'Eole,
 Dans un océan de velours.

Pigeon fly! Aérogynne
 She tells lies with her body
 Better than the mind imagines
 The illusions of the decor.
 Aérogynne, pigeon fly!
 Dream, Soothe the heavy sleeper;
 Eloa, tamer of Eole,
 In an ocean of velour. (*Vocabulaire* 190-91)

Cocteau uses much the same language to describe Barbette in a letter to Valentine Hugo in November of 1923, praising Barbette's act as a "theatrical masterpiece," and Barbette himself as an "angel, a flower, a bird" (Stegmuller 313). The difference, however, is that the original Miss Aérogyne, Marie Fourier, who toured the fairground and music-hall circuit in Paris during the last decade of the nineteenth century, like many of her imitators—Ethéra, Magneta, Miss Beauty "femme volante" 'flying woman,' Mlle Myrtha, "Aérolithe Reine des Airs" 'Aérolithe, Queen of the Skies,' and Erolyna—did the illusionist version of aerial acts performed in circuses and music-halls, whereas Barbette was the real thing (Deslandes 183, 209-11).⁶ Contrary to Miss Aérogyne's act,⁷ the fascination offered by Barbette came not only from the "frisson" 'shudder' of learning that the "woman" who had performed was a man ("acting"), but from his real acrobatic talents on the trapeze and the high-wire, and from the accompanying anxiety that the flying acrobat will fall.

While Cocteau incorporated Miss Aérogyne's flying illusion in *Roméo et Juliette* (1924) by recreating the black background of her number and having the speaker of the first act "fly" (Stegmuller 328), the trick was merely a momentary special effect, not the foundation of an entire piece. Crowson contends that what differentiated Barbette's number from "acting," an imitation into which category Miss Aérogyne's performance falls, is a "double order of illusion" (105). She pairs the aesthetics of "Le Numéro Barbette" with *L'Impromptu du Palais Royal* according to this "double step from commonplace reality"; like Vander Clyde who plays at being Barbette, the actors of Cocteau's last work play at being actors (106). In many respects the *Impromptu* has to do equally with *Parade's* reordering of theatrical space in that the line dividing spectators from actors disappears. For example, an actress, planted in the audience, interrupts the performance to correct the pronunciation of one of the actors on stage. The audience plant is a time-honored tradition dating back to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century shenanigans of the fairground nostrum seller / entertainer and the tooth-extractor; because the scripted dialogue between seller and spectator served to sell elix-

irs, it was imperative that the faux spectator's identity remain unknown. The nineteenth-century circus modified this practice, planting in the benches unruly and / or drunken spectators who cross over into the space of the ring and clumsily imitate performers, risking their necks with each error on the high-wire or trapeze. Of course, the heckler is an acrobatic clown, and his movements have been skillfully choreographed down to the last pratfall. The spectator's initial embarrassment at the transgressor's breaking of social rules of propriety leads to anxiety over the boor's reckless dance with fate, which itself leads to surprise and relief at the number's end with the discovery of the lout's true identity as an accomplished circus acrobat.

Barbette's act continues this playful tradition, but in the context of the nineteenth-century circus's toying with race and gender. Vander Clyde, from Round Rock, Texas, answered an advertisement in the San Antonio *Billboard* magazine advertising for a new member for the "Alfaretta Sisters, World-Famous Aerial Queens" (Stegmuller 525). Alfaretta asked him to perform as a girl.⁸ There was nothing unusual about such a request, since travesty has a long history in the circus. Male or female adolescents, at the age of indeterminate sexuality, easily played the opposite sex; in the early nineteenth century, Hippolyte Triat the *hercule* or strongman performed in travesty in his youth as Isela; the youngest of the Seven Craggs, "gentlemen acrobats," was a young girl (Thétard 2: 33; Le Roux 222, 224). Adult acrobats cross-dressed, as well. Olmar Kingsley was known as Miss Ella until he got married (Thétard 2: 62). Miss Lulu "female gymnast" had been in his youth the "boy-child" member of the Flying Farinis (Senelick 84). He never did admit that he was a travesty.⁹ In general, the true sexual identity of these performers was never revealed at any point during a number, and only unwillingly in real life. That Barbette did remove his wig and masculinize his movements at the end signals his incorporation of the plant's ability to surprise and embarrass. It also reflects Barbette's incorporation of the expectations linked to an entertainment form introduced in the 1890s: the striptease trapeze.¹⁰

In his essay, Cocteau claims that Barbette's genius is his ability to be a compilation of all women to the point that "il devient la femme-type au point d'éteindre les plus jolies personnes qui le précèdent et le suivent sur l'affiche" 'he becomes the model woman to the point of overshadowing the prettiest people who precede and follow him on the bill.' Lesley Ferris interprets this passage as evidence of Cocteau's misogyny, citing Cocteau's comment that, in watching Barbette's impersonation, he now understands why "les grands pays et les grandes civilisations ne confiaient pas seulement par décence les rôles de femmes à des hommes" 'great countries and great civilizations would entrust, not only out of propriety, women's roles to men' (260). But Cocteau's words in the preceding passage speak of the power of illusion that the theater alone makes possible.

Car ne l'oubliez pas, nous sommes dans cette lumière magique du théâtre, dans cette boîte à malice où le vrai n'a plus cours, où le naturel n'a plus aucune valeur, où les petites tailles s'allongent, les hautes statures rapetissent, où des tours de cartes et de passe-passe dont le public ne soupçonne pas la difficulté, parviennent seuls à tenir le coup. Ici Barbette sera *la femme* comme Guitry était *le général russe*.

For, don't forget, we are in this magical light of the theater, in this box of tricks where truth no longer has any currency, where the natural no longer has any value, where small people grow longer, very tall people shrink, where card and conjuring tricks, of which the audience has no idea of the difficulty, alone succeed in enduring. Here, Barbette will be *woman* as Guitry was *the Russian general*. ("Barbette" 259-60)

While his homosexuality most certainly colors a reading of the essay, more important is the emphasis on the art of the performer. One is reminded of Diderot's "Paradoxe sur le comédien" ("Paradox on the Actor") where he develops the thesis that nothing is more detrimental to an actor's art than personal experience, nothing more indispensable than emotional detachment. Anyone but an Englishman should play an Englishman; anyone but a mother should play a mother; anyone but a woman should play a woman, if they look to firsthand knowledge to give life and "vraisemblance"

'verisimilitude' to a role (Cocteau, "Barbette" 260). Cocteau cites as proof the shocking contrast between the offstage petty antics and the onstage genius of a Nijinsky and a Pavlova. What makes them superior to other artists is their ability to be so unlike themselves before an audience. Crowson's reference to a "double order of illusion" informing Cocteau's understanding of "les secrets de la scène" 'the secrets of the stage' echoes Diderot's reflection on the key to Clairon's artistry: "Dans ce moment elle est double: la petite Clairon et la grande Agrippine" 'In this moment she is double: the little Clairon and the great Agrippine' (1008). That Réjane was the sum total of "toutes les mères" 'all mothers' was due, not to her experience of being a mother, but to her supreme ability to forget that she was one (Cocteau "Hommage" 110).

While Diderot's focus is on the actor in the theater, Cocteau is nevertheless discussing an acrobat in a circus ring, an important facet of his "sleight of hand" springing from his talent on the trapeze and the danger he courts with each leap. As Pierre Bost comments on Barbette's act, "ce n'est pas seulement à cause de ce mystère étrange que crée son entrée, et du secret deviné qu'elle cache, mais c'est aussi parce que la meilleure partie de son numéro est composée d'exercice au trapèze volant" 'it is not only because of this strange mystery that his entrance creates, and of the presumed secret that it hides, but it is also because the best part of his act is composed of exercises on the flying trapeze' (125). In his essay, Cocteau focuses primarily on Barbette's creation of the illusion—the throwing of magic dust in spectators' eyes—to the point of making the audience believe he is a woman, even while executing tricks in which "il aura l'air peu féminin" 'he will not look very feminine' (261). But the trapeze act is part and parcel of the number, for it is against his aerial exertions that everything else has been a preparation. He notes that once Barbette has established his sexual identity, "il va pouvoir se permettre de ne plus penser qu'au travail d'équilibriste" 'he is going to be able to permit himself to no longer think of anything but his acrobatic work,' this part of his number being now enhanced by the sight of a "delicate" woman executing movements that could end in "her" death (260). Barbette knew precisely what attraction

the audience found in such a number. Jean Lorrain's contribution of a piece on the lady acrobat to *L'Echo de Paris* for his series on *Femmes de 1900* (*Women of 1900*) describes the typical emotions experienced by the spectator of an aerial routine and offers an explanation of what draws him / her to the circus, and to the lady acrobat's act in particular. Watching Miss Jessica perform on the high-wire fills him with apprehension *and* pleasure:

Ce qu'il y a de certain, c'est que nous savourons mortellement la souffrance et les appréhensions qui doivent torturer cette longue et jolie fille à la chevelure d'or, *this golden hair girl*. Ce sont toutes ces choses horribles, jointes à l'impression de sa faiblesse, de son sexe et de sa beauté, qui font la cuisine infâme de notre plaisir de spectateurs.

What is certain is that we relish mortally the suffering and the apprehensions which must torture this long and pretty girl with the golden hair, *this golden hair girl*. It is all these horrible things, combined with the impression of her weakness, of her sex, and of her beauty, which make the vile cuisine of our pleasure as spectators. (203)

In the course of Barbette's number "la cuisine infâme de notre plaisir de spectateurs" is eclipsed by the shocking reversal at its end. In *Le Mystère Laïc* (*The Secular Mystery Play*, 1928), however, Cocteau admits that in the review from 1926 he neglected to emphasize sufficiently "le côté fatal du numéro" 'the fatal side of the act' and the importance of "l'air d'un crime" 'the appearance of a crime' that colors Barbette's performance (46).¹¹ The violence of the spectators' reaction to the abrupt shift in semantic registers—from anguish and delight at a woman's perilous aerial feats to stupefaction and wonderment that the woman is a man—goes far beyond Crowson's "double order of illusion." To misuse Cocteau's words, Barbette's prestige is without a doubt that of another order entirely, and it is due very simply to circus pranks, to the way circus is "both 'within' and 'outside' culture," and not merely to theatrical impersonation (Bouissac 7).

In general, the majority of those nineteenth-century male circus performers who dressed in feminine costume and assumed effeminate gestures stirred up that "cuisine infâme," taking "ad-

vantage of the social belief in the inferiority of the female body's physical strength and movement" (Tait, "Danger" 44). They equally sought to capitalize on the cult of the lady acrobat. Patrons' sidestage worship of equestrienne performers differed little on the surface from that of ballerinas at the opera; equestriennes wore tutus and seemed to fly above the ground thanks to a pair of fragile gossamer wings attached to their backsides. And indeed, in the last quarter of the century equestriennes were increasingly former ballerinas recruited for work in the circus; they trained and performed on steady old horses that could execute routines blindfolded. The cult of the lady aerialist was of an entirely different nature; while to a certain extent her attraction involved her apparent "nudity" (the tights and leotard she wore were most often flesh colored and revealed, obviously, the contours of her body), there was even greater fascination with her sexual "ambiguity."¹² There was no such ambiguity regarding the ballerina: "In the nineteenth century the "danseuse" 'ballerina' was first and foremost a woman," states Lynn Garafola. So too the ballet's travesty dancer who was "always a woman, and a highly desirable one (a splendid figure was one of the role's prerequisites)" (Garafola 100-01). As for the male impersonators of early burlesque, limbs dressed in tights did not always work to reinforce one's perception of the performer as female if the female in question was strutting the stage and uttering bawdy lyrics like a man. Robert C. Allen notes that William Dean Howells's assessment of a burlesquer's "assumption of masculine airs and attitudes was such that she 'must have been at something of a loss to identify herself when impersonating a woman off the stage'" (134). At the circus one assumed a certain sex to meet the needs of a particular act, as well as to cater to the desires of the public. Even for lady acrobats, female gender had to be constructed during the course of an aerial act since the nature of the physical activity fell into the realm of the masculine. This could be done, however, only at the beginning and the end of a trick, for once in flight, her movements identified her as male (Tait, "Danger" 43). Not surprisingly, it was Barrette's ability to be completely "female" at the beginning and end of his number and thoroughly male at other moments, that

fascinated Cocteau. Of course, Cocteau had the advantage of seeing Barbette prepare for a performance in his dressing room, and it is this vantage that adds depth to the illusion whose creation he witnessed. Many male acrobats took advantage of the gender confusion facilitated by social notions about what the female body could or could not do by performing in drag. As a consequence, their greater upper-body strength made their accomplishments as lady acrobats seem all the more remarkable. But even more astounding to historians of the period is the way the feats of the travesties spurred lady aerialists to attain the same level of athletic skill and strength.

Because the trapezist in flight looks masculine to the spectator below, female gender for both travesty and female acrobats could only be encoded at the beginnings and ends of numbers (costumes, names of the performers, comportment). In particular, circus culture adopted certain poses and gestures to distinguish between the two "sexes." Peta Tait shows that the female flier puts "her hands up, her head back, one hip forward and her weight on one leg," and the male flier positions himself with "a hand or hands up, his shoulders back, his torso extended as he rotates his body towards the audience" (Tait, "Danger" 43). In addition to dressing in hyper-feminine costumes, and using female fliers' gestures both at the beginning and end of each feat, Barbette overdetermined his "femininity" by performing a striptease on the divan placed on the stage. Indeed, that the illusion was successful astounded Cocteau, who comments that Barbette's "bretelles de tulle ne cachent même pas l'absence des seins" 'tulle shoulder straps don't even hide the absence of breasts' (259). Franko contends that "Despite the visibly virile prowess exercised in the air, Barbette's performance when earthbound was sufficient to maintain the illusion of his feminine disguise" (596). It was not, however, any visible proofs of his virility that needed to be counteracted that made the impersonation subterfuge necessary, but the nature of the act and audience preconceptions about the gendered body. Indeed, Barbette strove to diminish the development of muscle mass.¹³ He also "studied, expurgated, refined" those gestures that one associates uniquely with each of the sexes:

“je sais quand je fais tel geste, s’il est masculin ou féminin” ‘I know when I do this or that movement, if it is masculine or feminine’ (Verne 223).¹⁴ But Barbette may not have had to work as hard at suppressing the appearance of muscles as he would have us believe. Male aerialists are even today slight in frame compared to the sturdier catchers of trapeze performances. Female aerialists often have as well developed a musculature as their male counterparts, and when wearing the same costumes, are most often virtually indistinguishable for the spectator on the ground. In instances where female members of a mixed-gender flying troupe wear uni-sex costumes, the only thing that will differentiate them from the men is their gestures, if any are offered. The key moment, therefore, is the gestural encoding, something that Barbette, in order to succeed in his trick, needed to execute to the point of ostentation. It is worth noting that Barbette’s removal of his wig at the end of his number was not sufficient to confirm his “true” sexuality: it required a “nouvel artifice” ‘new artifice’ (Cocteau “Hommage” 111). Male identity had to be created just as much as his female persona, and this to an excessive degree: “C’est pourquoi Barbette, sitôt sa perruque arrachée, *interprète un rôle d’homme*, roule des épaules, étale ses mains, gonfle ses muscles, exagère la démarche sportive d’un joueur de golf” ‘This is why Barbette, once he has removed his wig, *plays a man’s role*, rolls his shoulders, displays his hands, puffs up his muscles, exaggerates the athletic gait of a golf player’ (Cocteau, “Barbette” 262).

Given the degree of gender play in the development of many circus acts and its implicit commentary on the social construction of gender, what Jean Baudrillard notes regarding the construction of general sexual identity in *De la séduction (On Seduction)*—“Pour qu’il y ait sexe, il faut que les signes redoublent l’être biologique” ‘In order for there to be sex, the signs must reduplicate the biological being’—is perhaps defined better by his description of transvestite sexuality:

Ici, les signes s’en séparent, il n’y a donc plus de sexe à proprement parler, et ce dont les travestis sont amoureux, c’est de ce jeu de signes, ce qui les passionne, c’est de *séduire les signes eux-mêmes*. Tout chez eux est maquillage, théâtre, séduction.

Here, signs get separated, there is therefore no longer any sex strictly speaking, and what transvestites love is the play of signs, what interests them keenly is to *seduce the signs themselves*. Everything with them is make-up, theater, seduction. (25)

Signs of the same sexual identity do not necessarily need to corroborate one's biological sex in the construction of heterosexuality. No one would say that Jayne Mansfield, Dolly Parton, and Marilyn Monroe merely communicate normal levels of feminine sexuality. Nor would one say that Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne, and Sylvester Stallone exude normal levels of male sexuality. While all of these celebrities are already in a sense pre-packaged products composed entirely of signs, this does not negate the existence in real life of many men and women who similarly overrepresent their biological sexual identity through an unnecessarily ostentatious display of signs. Indeed, there are many communities in which exaggeration in dress, make-up, and manners is the norm for both sexes; all here is theater, too. That transvestites cross over and exploit signs associated exclusively with the opposite sex rather than their own changes nothing, especially when the travesty is successful.

Baudrillard also sees the transvestite as carrying out "une parodie de sexe dans la sursignification du sexe" 'a parody of sex in the oversignification of sex' (26). In many instances, the travesty derides women, the ultimate example being Barcelonan transvestites who "gardent leur moustache et exhibent leur poitrine velue" 'keep their mustaches and display their hairy chests' (27). Senelick echoes Baudrillard in the contempt he assumes the male circus aerialist feels for lady acrobats. Paraphrasing from Hugues Le Roux's *Les jeux du cirque et la vie foraine (Acrobats and Mountebanks, 1889)*, he states:

Those eminent gymnasts, the Hanlons and the Voltas, testified in the 1880s that an admiration for the muscular masculine form and professional reliance on one another's strength and skill made most acrobats and trapezists scornful of women: they sought their sentimental attachments in their own company. For them, a female impersonator was preferable to a female as member of their band. (84)

It is perhaps erroneous to conclude from their statements that all female impersonator aerialists are 1) homosexual, and / or 2) misogynist, especially since the Hanlon-Volta troupe never performed in drag, thereby weakening the effort to present them as an as yet unresearched norm in circus culture. The Hanlon-Voltas (Le Roux only quotes the two Volta brothers, William and Tom, not the two Hanlons) may have themselves been homosexual and misogynist, and Le Roux most certainly skirts the issue of homosexuality by calling the love that some male aerialists have for one another “chaste,” linking such a love to that of the Greek man for the adolescent gymnast (it would have been clear to Le Roux’s sophisticated readers that that sort of love was far from chaste) (201). Nevertheless, Le Roux shies from calling all such love homosexual, first, by discussing the acrobatic couple in terms of the circus code, the “male” catcher, and the “female” leaper, whose “sex” is determined by either greater physical strength or greater suppleness and grace, respectively. The “female” leaper does not refer to the travesty aerialist but to the dynamics of the aerial couple.¹⁵

Secondly, Le Roux quotes William Volta who admires the “beauté insexuelle” ‘sexless beauty’ of his brother, a term which echoes Cocteau’s reference to “le sexe surnaturel de la beauté” ‘the supernatural sex of beauty’ in his discussion of Barbette (Le Roux 200; “Barbette” 261). Théophile Gautier used similar terminology to describe the “sexless beauty” of the ballerina Eugénie Fiocre in the role of Cupid in *Néméa*, expressing a Romantic ideal of transcendent statuesque beauty echoed in the cross-dressing main character of his *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. Like Barbette who “plaît à ceux qui voient en lui la femme, à ceux qui devinent en lui l’homme, et à d’autres dont l’âme est émue par le sexe surnaturel de la beauté” ‘pleases those who see the woman in him, those who detect the man in him, and others whose soul is moved by the supernatural sex of beauty’ (Cocteau “Barbette” 261), Gautier’s title character is Mademoiselle de Maupin for d’Albert, Théodore for Rosette, and a third, indeterminate sex for him / herself:

En vérité, ni l'un ni l'autre de ces deux sexes n'est le mien; je n'ai ni la soumission imbécile, ni la timidité, ni les petitesse de la femme; je n'ai pas les vices des hommes, leur dégoûtante crapule et leurs penchants brutaux:—je suis d'un troisième sexe à part qui n'a pas encore de nom: au-dessus ou au-dessous, plus défectueux ou supérieur: j'ai le corps et l'âme d'une femme, l'esprit et la force d'un homme, et j'ai trop ou pas assez de l'un et de l'autre pour me pouvoir accoupler avec l'un d'eux.

Actually, neither one nor the other of these two sexes is mine; I am neither the imbecilic submission nor the timidity, nor the pettiness of women; I am not men's vices, their disgusting dissoluteness, and their coarse propensities:—I am of a separate third sex that hasn't yet a name: above or below, more imperfect or superior: I have the body and the soul of a woman, the mind and the strength of a man, and I have too much or not enough of one or the other for me to be able to mate with either of them. (352)

The couple formed by acrobats like William and Tom Volta is self-sufficient just like *Mademoiselle de Maupin* / Théodore and like the ballet's travesty duet because they embrace "an ideal attainable only in the realms of art and the imagination—not the real world of stockbrokers and municipal councillors" (Garafola 104). The Decadent hermaphrodite, of which *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is a precursor, is a symbol of art transcending carnal and bourgeois reality. Le Roux's description of the "love" shared by the male acrobatic couple does not gloss over the Voltas' homosexuality through a bow to propriety (novelists of the likes of J. K. Huysmans and Jean Lorrain hardly heeded what was deemed proper), nor through willful blindness to "reality," but rather expresses the fin-de-siècle artist / hero's cultivation of asexuality and self-sufficiency.¹⁶ That the circus acrobat was offered to the public as "virginale et chaste (chaste comme ils le sont forcément tous et toutes dans le métier)" 'virginal and chaste (chaste as they necessarily all are, men and women, in the profession)', as well as part of a closed society devoted solely to its art, made him/her the perfect expression of the decadent aesthetic (Lorrain 203).¹⁷

Legrand-Chabrier states that Barbette at the height of his career does not have "le caractère souverain des grandes cocottes" 'the haughty disposition of great prostitutes.' "Il est," he informs

us, “de la famille des gens de cirque” ‘He is of the family of circus people.’ Circus people are from an alternate world, goes the popular myth, and its culture fires the imagination of its patrons. Many are the circus historians who express disappointment as witnesses to, for example, a wedding between circus performers where each member is dressed, not in their colorful costumes, but in ordinary bourgeois clothing. Barbette provoked the same sort of disillusionment: “j’étonne toujours—et décois peut-être—les gens du monde qui m’invitent parce que je ne continue ni ne prolonge à la ville mon personnage de plateau et de piste . . . ‘I always surprise—and perhaps disappoint—society people who invite me out because I neither continue nor prolong in town my stage or circus ring character.’ But for Cocteau, Barbette never lost his inscrutability: “Même lorsqu’on le connaît, il ne peut perdre son mystère. Il demeure un modèle de plâtre, un mannequin de cire, le buste vivant qui chantait sur un socle drapé de velours chez Robert Houdin” ‘Even when you know him, he cannot lose his mystery. He remains a plaster model, a wax dummy, the living bust that sang on a velvet draped pedestal at Robert Houdin’s [illusionist theater]’ (“Barbette” 261). While Cocteau may have glossed over Barbette’s acrobatic skill in “Le Numéro Barbette,” the nature of his praise signals an understanding of what makes the acrobat a singular human being so unlike ordinary people: the aerialist’s “survival demonstrates biological superiority,” announces him / herself as “‘another sort’ of being” (Bouissac 45). It is as a being-more-than-human, and not as a representative of a third or non-sex, that Barbette fits into the pattern established by the fin-de-siècle heroic androgyne.

Naomi Ritter identifies Barbette’s ability to be male at one moment and female at the next a sign of androgyny, of “male-femininity,” of a “split sexuality,” of a “man-woman” (180). Franko also speaks of an androgyny that must exist however momentarily in the transition from one sex to another. He locates another androgynous moment in the aerial leap that functions as a metaphor for the crossing of gender boundaries. But this moment is invisible, he states, it “does not actually ‘take place’” (598-99). After 1932, Cocteau, too, will refer to Barbette as the “an-

drogyne,” but in the 1926 essay when Cocteau was still wholly under the magic spell of Barbette’s number, Barbette is never in between; he is either man *or* woman, Jeekyll *or* Hyde (*Essai* 209). Des Esseintes in J. K. Huysmans’s *A Rebours* (*Against the Grain*) isolates a moment similar to the one hypothesized by Mark Franko in his description of the American trapezist Miss Urania. Des Esseintes observes “un artificiel changement de sexe se produire en elle” ‘an artificial sex change take place in her’ in which “après avoir tout d’abord été femme, puis, après avoir hésité, après avoir avoisiné l’androgynie, elle semblait se résoudre, se préciser, devenir complètement un homme” ‘after having at first been a woman, then, after having hesitated, after having bordered on the androgynie, she seemed gradually to be transformed, to take clearer shape, to become completely a man’ (210-11). Here, as in Cocteau’s essay, a true androgynous moment is anticipated but never captured. It may even not exist. A. J. L. Busst states that the figure of the androgynie is a literary and artistic myth, and if it flourished during the nineteenth century, it was because of the Romantic hero’s desire to transcend nineteenth-century materialism in all its myriad manifestations: political, economic, social, sexual (85).

Cocteau claims to have discovered through watching Barbette’s performance “les secrets de la scène” ‘the secrets of the stage’ (260). What he had discovered, however, were “les secrets de la piste” ‘the secrets of the circus ring.’ “The circus,” Paul Bouissac informs us, “freely manipulates a cultural system to such an extent that it leaves the audience contemplating a demonstration of humanity freed from the constraints of the culture within which the performance takes place” (8). Bouissac likens the semantic patterns and rules to which the circus’s transgressive act conforms to poetry (23).¹⁸ Indeed, these structures, he insists, impede any attempt to narrate what happens during an aerial act: “a narrator is never more at ease in describing a circus performance than when an accident occurs, i.e., when the characteristic structure of an acrobatic act breaks down and becomes a ‘story’ ” (43). In the short passage in *Le Mystère laïc* devoted to Barbette, Cocteau talks of a young singer in a café-concert who did an impersonation of

a famous singer. Although Cocteau had never heard the original upon which the imitation was based, he comments coyly, “je trouvais l’imitation ressemblante” ‘I found the imitation a good likeness.’ Afterwards follows one of Cocteau’s celebrated aphorisms: “La poésie imite une réalité dont notre monde ne possède que l’intuition” ‘Poetry imitates a reality of which our world possesses only the intuition (*Essai* 47). We must reinterpret the former statement in the light of the latter, for Cocteau does not praise the “likeness” of the imitation so much as the singer’s ability to be double—to be both himself and another—in short, to erase the boundaries separating identities, just as *Parade* conflated physical spaces and Barbette’s gender. The circus space is like that of dreams in that it permits the irresolution and co-existence of the sort of contradictions cited by Apollinaire in the program notes for *Parade*, and produced by Barbette in his number. This he learned from the circus. *Parade* and “Le Numéro Barbette” are indeed pivotal texts in the formulation of Cocteau’s very twentieth-century “poétique” ‘poetics.’

Notes

1. All translations are my own.
2. Similarly, Fernand Léger in *Fonctions de la peinture (Functions of Painting)* poses the question, “Puisque la terre est ronde, comment voulez-vous jouer carré?” ‘Since the earth is round, why do you want to perform in a square?’ (152).
3. Cocteau recounts how, “Un soir, au Châtelet, passant dans le couloir après *Parade* (la salle continuait à se battre), j’entendis un monsieur qui disait à un autre: ‘Si j’avais su que c’était si c . . . , j’aurais emmené les enfants.’” ‘One evening, at the Châtelet [theater], as I was going into the lobby after *Parade* [the house continued to clap], I heard a man say to another: “If I had known that it was so stu . . . I would have brought the children.”’ His response to that criticism was, “Brave homme! Voilà le plus bel éloge” ‘Good man! There’s the greatest compliment’ (“Reprise” 138).
4. The metaphor of the poet as acrobat can often be banal, if not downright ridiculous. Judith Erêbe says that Barbette is “Digne d’être

salué par Jean Cocteau” ‘worthy of being honored by Cocteau,’ for Cocteau himself is an “équilibriste à la fine pointe des idées et qui se sert du trapèze des mots, dangereusement et avec tant de grâce efficace” ‘acrobat at the very forefront of ideas and who uses the trapeze of words, dangerously and with so much effective grace’ (57).

5. The journalist and novelist Maurice Verne had access to the backstage of circuses and music halls, and hence to many performers’ secrets, and yet he accepts without hesitation Colleano’s designation as “Spanish”: “Et que nous voilà loin du premier ‘fil-de-ferriste’ du monde, l’Espagnol Con Colleano, dont la farouche beauté virile enthousiasme depuis dix ans les publics américains! *The unrivaled, unsurpassed great con Colleano*” ‘And here we are far from the top “tightrope walker” of the world, the Spaniard Con Colleano, whose untamed virile beauty has enraptured American audiences for ten years! *The unrivaled, unsurpassed great con Colleano*’ (221-22). It is unlikely that Verne would have talked of Colleano’s “farouche beauté virile” had he known that Colleano was an Australian aborigine.

6. I have been unable to determine if the woman whom Cocteau saw at the Foire du Trône was the same Marie Fourier.

7. Miss Aérogène “was strapped by a rhinestone-studded belt and braces (which left her legs free to kick and her arms and hands free to send kisses) to a peg or knob that moved along invisible rails; when she reached the end of the track, there was the sound of a clutch changing gear, and she turned upside down and ‘flew’ back in the direction from which she had come. Dazzling lights directed at the spectators’ faces kept them from seeing anything except the glittering ‘flyer’” (Stegmuller 327).

8. Maurice Verne ostensibly interviewed Barbette in his dressing room, but his version of the tale differs greatly from the one offered by Barbette when interviewed by Francis Stegmuller in 1966:

Barbette débuta avec une vieille et pesante gymnaste. Elle lui apprit les règles de l’art. Il partit pour les engagements comme élève. Le mari de la dame achevait le trio des aériens.

—Il serait plus gracieux que vous deveniez une demoiselle, avait décrété l’homme.

Le truc est courant. On voit des sœurs au trapèze dont l’une est le frère adolescent. Des familles de volants usent du travesti. Question d’équilibre harmonieux.

Barbette made his debut with an old and heavy gymnast. She taught him the rules of the art. He left for engagements as an apprentice. The lady's husband completed the trio of aerialists.

—It would be more graceful if you became a young lady, decreed the mannish woman.

The gimmick is in general use. You see sisters on the trapeze of which one is the teenage brother. Families of flyers use travesty. Matter of harmonious balance. (Verne 223-24)

According to Barbette, he became the other partner in a duo, not a trio:

The other sister had died, and this one—in private life she was the wife of a blackface comedian billed as “Happy Doc Holland, the Destroyer of Gloom”—needed a new partner for a double trapeze and singing ring act. In the circus there's a long tradition of boys dressing as girls, and especially in a wire act women's clothes make everything more impressive—the plunging and gyrating are more dramatic in a woman—and Alfaretta asked me if I'd mind dressing as a girl. I didn't; and that's how it began. (Steegmuller 525)

While the two versions may indicate that the interviewer was ill-informed or that the interviewee was purposely misleading, the reference in both texts to the circus tradition of the travesty also suggests by association the circulation of circus myths about performers, probably originating from circus publicity desks, but willingly disseminated by circus aficionados.

9. According to Laurence Senelick's sources, Miss Lulu's identity was eventually revealed publically after a medical examination resulting from an injury (84).

10. In the late 1880s, with the decline of the permanent circus in Paris, the lady aerialist act was incorporated into the nascent striptease format which has since become synonymous with the burlesque. Barbette's 1920s act adopted the conventions belonging to the trapeze striptease traditions: he entered the stage in sumptuous gowns, and peeled his clothing off in “une petite scène scabreuse” ‘a little indecent scene’ performed on a divan (instead of on the trapeze) before moving on to the aerial number. At the end of the number, rather than take off what remained of his lady aerialist's costume, he removed his wig and assumed masculine gestures to reveal he was a man, toying with audience expectations of the norms of the burlesque genre.

11. In the same passage, Cocteau also talks of having returned to see Barbette in performance and expresses some disappointment, attributing the letdown to age which is making Barbette “compter moins sur un prestige naturel et à dépenser plus de science” ‘count less on a natural prestige and use more skill’ (Barbette was only 24 years old!) (704). The likelihood of Barbette showing signs of advancing years is slim. What is evident is that Cocteau, no longer completely overwhelmed by the enchantment of Barbette’s illusionist trick, now notices Barbette’s acrobatic abilities. It is interesting to note that ten years later when publicizing a benefit for Barbette, Cocteau’s memory disserves him such that he returns to his earliest impressions and strips Barbette of any acrobatic accomplishments whatsoever:

N’allez pas croire qu’il triomphait comme acrobate et que la foule supportait son travesti à cause de son trapèze et de son fil de fer. J’ai vu des familles d’acrobates le regarder de la coulisse la bouche grande ouverte et ne rien comprendre à ses innombrables rappels. N’importe quel gamin de New York aurait pu exécuter ses exercices. Son prestige était d’un autre ordre.

Don’t go thinking that he triumphed as an acrobat and that the crowd tolerated his female impersonation because of his trapeze and his highwire. I have seen acrobatic families watch him from backstage, their mouths wide open, understanding nothing of his countless encores. Any kid from New York could have executed his exercises. His prestige was of another order. (“Hommage” 110).

In his *Essai de critique indirecte (Essay in Indirect Criticism)*, he once again negates Barbette’s skill as an acrobat and emphasizes the success of the impersonation: “Aussi, reste-il lettre morte pour le personnel du cirque. Il le scandalise. Quoi? Ma femme peut . . . Mon fils peut . . . Ma fille peut . . . Alors?” ‘Moreover, he is useless to the circus personnel. He shocks them. What? My wife can . . . My son can . . . My daughter can . . . So?’ (*Des Beaux-Arts considérés comme un assassinat* 208).

12. Aerial acrobatics began to eclipse equestrian acts with the introduction of the flying trapèze in 1859 by Léotard.

13.

—Si je répétais, j’aurais vite une musculature d’homme, et n’oubliez pas qu’il faut que je reste nu et femme sous la seule perruque au cours de mon numéro pendant que je me livre à la gymnastique . . . j’aurais l’air, alors, d’un acrobate habillé en femme déshabillée; je suis voué à ce dilemme: ou bien j’améliorai

mon numéro techniquement, je ferai de nouvelles prouesses qui nécessiteront une marche à l'athlétisme herculéen, et je vous promets que j'en ai souvent envie ou bien je perdrai la ligne féminine.

If I rehearsed, I would quickly have a man's musculature, and don't forget that I have to remain naked and a woman under the one wig during the course of my act while I'm doing gymnastics . . . I would look, then, like an acrobat dressed as an undressed woman; I am devoted to this dilemma: either I will improve my act technically, I will do new feats which will necessitate a march to herculean athleticism, and I promise you that I often feel like it, or I will lose my feminine line. (Legrand-Chabrier)

14. Unfamiliar with the circus' inscription and manipulation of the signs of gender, Crowson expresses surprise at Barbette's success at passing himself off as a lady acrobat: "With each motion, his body or his costume should have betrayed him since nothing he did on stage was passive. Obviously, then, he had to learn to suppress all types of movement natural to a man, he had to scrutinize each step of his routine and eliminate everything masculine. Such an attempt would be difficult enough in non-demanding activities like walking, for example, but in strenuous acrobatics even reflex actions would have to be controlled to an almost unattainable extent. Moreover, his brief costume made the task all the more difficult" ("Cocteau" 80-81).

15. Senelick and Le Roux offer Edmond de Goncourt's brothers, Gianni and Nello Zenganno, in *Les Frères Zenganno* (*The Zenganno Brothers*) as an example of the self-sufficiency of this couple. Nello, while a model of physical beauty unparalleled by women, is asexual, not homosexual. Goncourt used Gianni and Nello as figures for himself and his brother Jules, who had died in 1870 (the novel was published in 1879). While the relationship of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt was peculiarly incestuous, it is unlikely that their relations with each other included incest. Jules, in particular, was actively heterosexual, but participated in the brand of misogyny that literary men and artists espoused in the last half of the nineteenth century in France.

16. Many critics address the "latent homosexuality" of writers like the Goncourt brothers and Alfred Jarry; others speak of their asexuality.

17. Judith Erêbe asks, "Mais cette beauté fut cherchée par les plus grands et qu'est-elle, sinon la synthèse, la somme de toutes les autres et n'arrive-t-elle pas à l'intellectualité pure?" "But this beauty was sought by the greatest and what is it, if not the synthesis, the sum of all the

others, and does it not lead to pure intellectuality?' (56). She ends her essay with the statement that Barbette "réalise la parfaite beauté de l'être entièrement inutilisable pour toute fin autre que spirituelle" 'creates the kind of perfect human beauty entirely unusable for any end other than spiritual' (57). Her version of Barbette echoes the *fin-de-siècle* aesthete's noblest ambitions.

18. Cocteau's much earlier equation of circus acrobatics to poetry makes him a prescient semiotician.

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