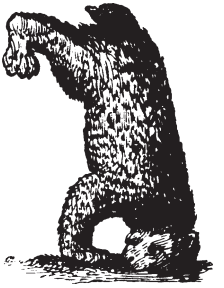
William Stringfellow's Circus



"The Idea of Society as a Circus" (1966)
& several circus-related excerpts
from his other writings

Scripture Détourné Series: Pamphlet No. 2

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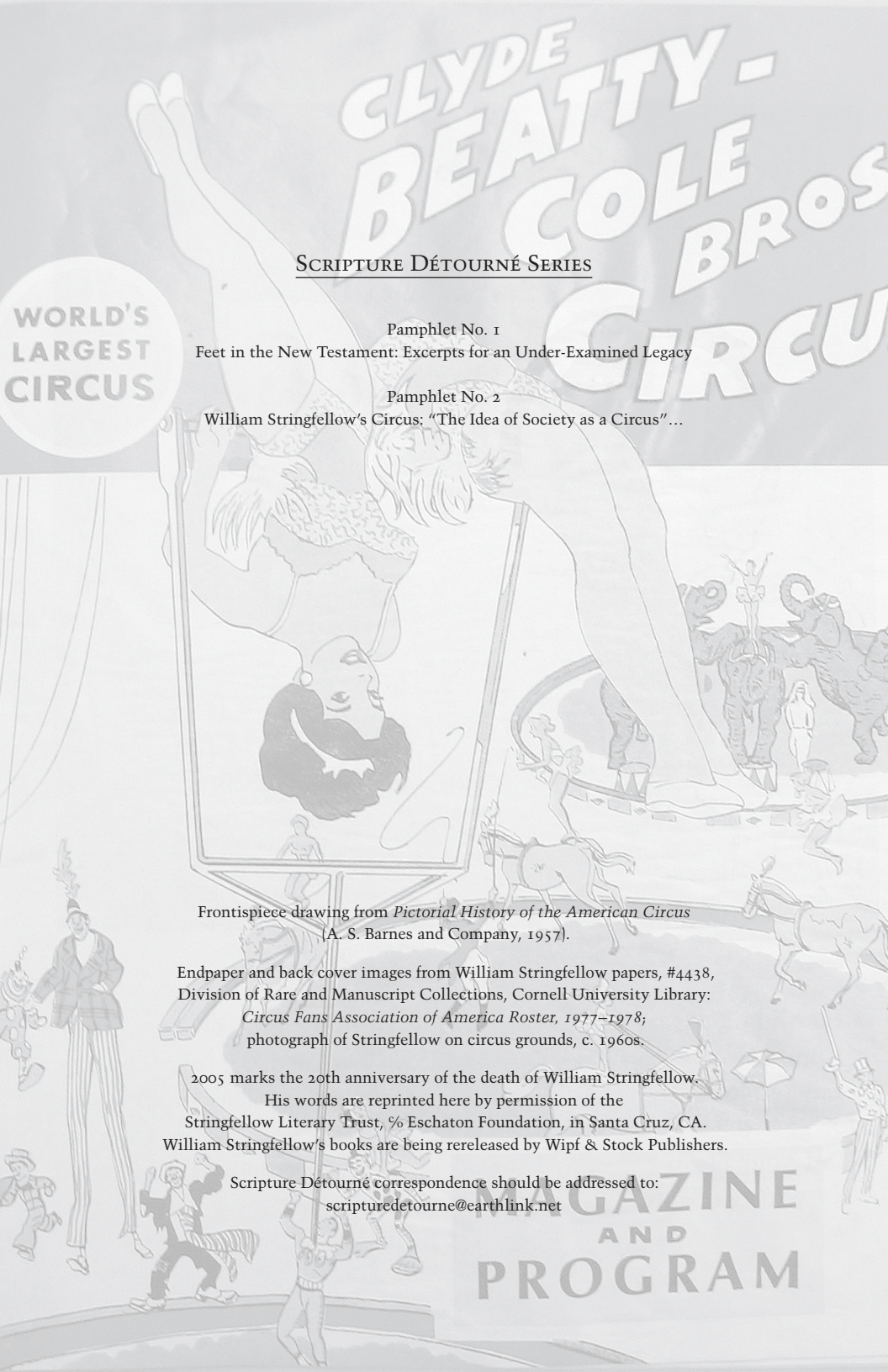
William Stringfellow's Circus: "The Idea of Society as a Circus"…



Frontispiece drawing from *Pictorial History of the American Circus* (A. S. Barnes and Company, 1957).

Endpaper and back cover images from William Stringfellow papers, #4438, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library: *Circus Fans Association of America Roster, 1977–1978*; photograph of Stringfellow on circus grounds, c. 1960s.

2005 marks the 20th anniversary of the death of William Stringfellow. His words are reprinted here by permission of the Stringfellow Literary Trust, % Eschaton Foundation, in Santa Cruz, CA. William Stringfellow's books are being rereleased by Wipf & Stock Publishers.

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Contents

A circus came to Ahmednagar [India] and its prize wrestler, Ramamurty, came to Meherabad for [Meher] Baba's darshan. Afterward, Baba consented to let the mandali go and see the circus, but Adi Sr. was not able to arrange a bus. Baba later remarked, "It is for the best. This whole worldly existence is like a circus. If anyone wants to see it in its true form, he would not bother to see this so-called circus. He would find the world a circus!"

—As recounted by Bhau Kalchuri in *Lord Meher* (vol. 3, p. 809)

> For we are all wanderers in the
> earth, and pilgrims. We have no
> permanent habitat here. The migration
> of people for foraging & exploiting can
> become, with grace, in (the latter days)
> a traveling circus. Our tabernacle must
> in its nature be a temporary tabernacle.
>
> —Robert Lax, "Mogador's Book"
> (*Circus Days and Nights*)

Biblically speaking…conformity to the world is synonymous with the idolatry of death and those who surrender to the world are, as Saint Paul admonishes, in bondage to death.

—William Stringfellow, "The Idea of Society as a Circus"

Editor's Note

It's no doubt true, as Gary Commins has remarked, that William Stringfellow romanticized the circus to some extent.[1] Yet romanticization is perhaps not the only or best categorization, since for Stringfellow everything in Creation is basically just as fallen as everything else—a vantage point which at the very least distinguishes his

1. "Stringfellow romanticized the circus, ignoring its negative sides—the abuse of 'freaks,' the mistreatment of animals, the shadow side of clowning—with a charity he never allowed the church" ("Harlem and Eschaton: Stringfellow's Theological Homes," in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life: Essays on William Stringfellow*, p. 146). In reply to a January 20, 1966 letter charging Stringfellow of insensitivity to cruelty toward animals, based on his use of the word "dominion" (written by Violet E. Oates after reading Stringfellow's circus essay published in *The Scotsman* five days earlier), Stringfellow posted from Australia, on March 14, 1966: "I appreciated your letter, sympathize with your concern but conclude you neither comprehended my article or understand the Biblical idea of man's dominion" (William Stringfellow papers, #4438, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library). It seems, then, that biblical symbolism confidently takes precedence over certain empirical concerns in Stringfellow's reading of the circus as parable, even as one must assume that biblical symbolism should not, of course, be used to sanction any mistreatment of animals. The exploitation of "freaks" is in fact addressed within "The Idea of Society as a Circus," albeit in a similarly "realist" fashion. Stringfellow apparently never did address "the shadow side of clowning," however.

experience of faith from any superficially moralistic pietism (which is not to say from genuine piety). So, yes, Stringfellow cut the circus some slack; but then the circus, in contradistinction from the self-image of many churches, does not boast to unequivocally prescribe God's will on earth.[2] Rather than finding in the circus a romanticized humanity, it seems Stringfellow saw in the circus a prefiguration of a redeemed humanity, or even a redeemed Creation *in toto*. And although anything to do with redemption can easily be romanticized, the distinction between romanticization and redemption remains.

"The Idea of Society as a Circus" is not listed in Paul D. West's published bibliography of Stringfellow's writings,[3] but according to the dated manuscript, held among Stringfellow's papers at Cornell, it was written in 1966. A slightly variant version, compared with the

2. As Stringfellow repeatedly counselled, paralleling Karl Barth: God does not in fact need the churches, but rather the churches need God (see p. 9 of this pamphlet). Related rejoinders surface throughout Stringfellow's writings in different contexts, from his first book onward. Karl Barth had noted in his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, "…God does not need us. Indeed, if He were not God, He would be ashamed of us. We, at any rate, cannot be ashamed of Him" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 35). (Barth is cited here not to argue Protestant theology against Catholic or Eastern Orthodox theology—nor to imply that Christianity of whatever denomination is the only path to God—but is cited in light of his personal connection to Stringfellow, and to highlight the tensions and ambiguities often existing between individual and collective/institutional levels of worship—ambiguities in fact present within *any* faith tradition.)

3. "Bibliography: The Works of William Stringfellow," in *A Keeper of the Word*, pp. 416–426.

manuscript text, was published in *The Scotsman* of January 15, 1966, under the title "The Circus and Society" ("Week-end Magazine" insert section, p. 1). Some passages of the essay appear to be toned-down a tad in the *Scotsman* version (several such differences are noted via footnotes in the text presented here), although it's unclear if this editing was done by Stringfellow for the paper, by editors at *The Scotsman*, or subsequent to its publication. (Editing of the manuscript for this pamphlet has been limited to the spelling of proper names, typos within the manuscript—duplicate or missing common words, or otherwise obvious letter substitutions—and adjusting some occasionally cumbersome punctuation.) At one point a special circus issue of the magazine *Motive* was proposed, which was to include Stringfellow's circus essay, but the issue apparently never materialized.

A quick overview of Stringfellow's correspondence from the period reveals that his vision of expanding the essay into a full-length book met with various complications, likely due to a combination of his oscillating illnesses and what had become more pressing writing projects (notably his first of two books on Bishop Pike[4] and his Daniel Berrigan book,[5] both co-written with Anthony Towne). Nonetheless, he had planned in earnest for the circus book from the mid- to late-

4. *The Bishop Pike Affair: Scandals of Conscience and Heresy, Relevance and Solemnity in the Contemporary Church* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1967).

5. *Suspect Tenderness: The Ethics of the Berrigan Witness* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971).

1960s onward, if not earlier,[6] visiting the World Circus Museum in Wisconsin to scout-out relevant biblically themed circus publicity and posters, otherwise aiming to locate photographs and even planning to commission his own photographers, requesting transcripts from television circus documentaries, and—most importantly—traveling with circuses himself, in 1965 and 1966 especially.[7] In the early 1970s William B. Eerdmans, the prospective publisher for a time, was awaiting a final manuscript after having sent Stringfellow an advance and a publishing contract. Already in the late 1960s, Stringfellow in various letters referred to the book manuscript as finished, half-typed, or—and most probably?—half-finished (as also mentioned in *A Second Birthday*, p. 168). Among Stringfellow's papers, a two-page outline of the envisioned book includes brief notes for four 25–30 page sections, building off of the essay version. A significant portion of "The Idea of Society as a Circus" did reappear years later, slightly reworked, within the "Sojourn with the Circus" section of *A Simplicity of Faith* (p. 15 of this pamphlet).

6. As a teenager in Northampton, Massachusetts, Stringfellow had requested a copy of the November 1944 *Report of the Municipal Board of Inquiry on the Circus Disaster*, investigating the Hartford, Connecticut circus fire, within a month of its publication.

7. The brief bio-blurb closing the typed manuscript version of the circus essay, as well as the January 1966 *Scotsman* version of the text, states: "…Last summer [Stringfellow] traveled with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus in the United States," which would posit "last summer" as the summer of 1965. It's clear from *A Second Birthday* (1970) and *A Simplicity of Faith* (1982) that Stringfellow also traveled with the circus in the summer of 1966 with Anthony Towne.

We should end this note by excerpting from Jim Wallis' remembrance of Stringfellow, as it brings to light just how devoted Stringfellow was to the circus:

> Bill loved the circus. He subscribed to all the circus magazines and once admitted that he determined his speaking schedule, in part, by the routes of the circus. "How often do you go?" I once asked. "Not often," he replied, "about twenty times a year."
>
> The circus, said Bill, was "very theological." Of all the books he was planning to write before he died, it was his book on the circus that I would have most wanted to read. Once he actually traveled with the Cole Brothers Clyde Beatty Circus for a whole season as its "resident theologian." During a long illness, he constructed an elaborate and intricate scale model of the circus, which took up a large portion of his study. Years later, the cat got into it and tore it up. "Will it ever be restored?" I asked. "Yes," he replied, "at the Eschaton." . . .
>
> His memorial service began with spirituals and ended with circus music. Bill's old and well-used New Testament was brought forward and placed on the altar with these words: "No one in our time was a more perspicacious student of the Word of God in Scripture than Bill. This is his Bible, most unsanctimoniously weathered, rumpled, and underlined, and cryptically annotated. We offer it among the gifts of bread and wine as truly a medium of grace and life to the world. But now who will open it for us as he did?" . . .
>
> A few days after Bill died, I was sitting in his study and spotted a magazine ad recently cut out and placed by the telephone. It read, "NEED ACROBATIC PEOPLE FOR RIDING ACT—For 1985 Season—Good Opportunity—Send Resume and Photos to Circus Vargas, North Hollywood, California." It seems Bill was contemplating a second vocation.[8]

8. Excerpted from Wallis' "Keeper of the Word," in *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer*, pp. 94, 96–97.

And God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark."

—Genesis 9:8–10

The Idea of Society as a Circus[1]

It is only since putting away childish things that it has come to mind that the circus is among the few literalistic images remaining of the eschatological event and, hence, affords a peculiar insight into the idea of society.[2]

There is a sense, theologically, in which all things whatsoever are witness to the eschaton, as Saint Paul so often mentioned. Falsehood as well as truth, weakness as much as strength, travail not just peace, trivial happenings and momentous events—all betell God's ubiquitous work in reconciling the world. Yet, in the

1. William Stringfellow papers, #4438, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. 8-page ms. dated 1966.

2. The text published in *The Scotsman* uses a different opening paragraph, absent Stringfellow's explicit allusion to Paul's "childish things" of 1 Corinthians 13:11 ("When I was a child, I spoke as a child, and thought as a child, and reasoned as a child; now that I am a man, I am through with childish things"):

> The circus has a fascination beyond the immediate understanding of the child's eye, and one which offers us a peculiar insight into the idea of society. For all its antiquity, the circus is an unsophisticated thing, and yet despite this it is one of the few survivals into modern society which can be seen as a vivid allegory of the Biblical notion of God's destination for his creatures.

United States, anyway, not much endures in modern society which can be affirmed as a vivid portrait of the eschaton except the circus, and now that is threatened with extinction.

Perhaps the same could be affirmed of certain other arts—opera, for example; the ballet, probably; poetry, sometimes; painting, photography and sculpture, occasionally; the musical theatre, once in a while; athletics, maybe. Still, whatever can be said of these, the circus is especially to be recognized as a parable of the Kingdom and, thus, as a parody of the world as it is—the circus bears a remarkable relationship to the idea of society—because the circus is a congregation of all of these other arts and activities. The circus is the ridiculous conjunction of all of these and other arts in which, while each is practiced in its own way, the juxtaposition of each with the rest constitutes a new creation.

It is hardly an original thought that I harbor in regarding the circus in this way. Ingmar Berman, the Swedish moviemaker, has often disclosed his theological fascination with the circus. Rouault had his "circus" period in painting and is said to have regarded his portraitures of clowns as images of Christ. The American poet, Anthony Towne, after having been much preoccupied by death, writes recently about the resurrection by using circus figures. Fellini, the Italian producer, has entertained similar themes, notably in *La Strada*. It was he who said, while in the city, that "New York is a cross between a cemetery and a circus." His characterization seems quite precise, and I

only grieved when I heard him make it that he had not been a candidate for Mayor.

Beyond all that, one does recall that Christians, like circus folk, typically live as sojourners, with few possessions, and in tents, in this world.[3]

THE CIRCUS AS PARABLE

In America, during the earlier part of this century, the circus had a "golden age." It was the era of P. T. Barnum and the Ringling Brothers and Adam Forepaugh and the Gollmar Brothers, to name only a few of the entrepreneurs who assembled fantastic aggregations of performers, animals and oddities and became both famous in every household and immensely wealthy. Their era ended in their own deaths and then the Depression caused their circuses to fall into the hands of bankers. Next, emerging technology made so obsolete the methods of work and transportation these circuses had relied upon that recovery has never really been achieved from the Depression, despite some revival during the Second World War and a much more modest revitalization of the American circus in the present day.

Anyway, during the "golden age" the circus was quite lucidly and literally an image of the eschaton in its magnitude and diversity and scope. In those days there were few permanent zoological collections and the circus menagerie represented the only way for people to see rare birds, exotic animals, and wild beasts. When, indeed, the Ringling Brothers advertised

3. The text published in *The Scotsman* reads: "Beyond all that, one does recall that Christians as Christians, like circus folk…"

that their "mammoth millionaire menagerie" was the "greatest gathering since the deluge" it was not a much exaggerated boast. Nowadays even cities of modest size maintain excellent public zoos and so this attraction is lost to the circus and most circuses which survive carry only those animals essential to the performance.

A similar thing can be said of the "side shows" traditionally associated with the circus in the United States. A separate feature from the main circus performance, the side show was an origination of Barnum. It assembled and exhibited human "oddities" and "curiosities"—giants, midgets and the extraordinarily obese; Siamese twins, albinos and bearded ladies; those who made themselves unusual like the sword swallowers, fire eaters or tattooed persons; an assortment of fakers, magicians and hoaxes (like the "headless" woman); along with the diseased (a leper would be billed as "the leopard girl"), the demented (in circus jargon, "a pinhead"), and the deformed (a person born without arms but with hands at his shoulder sockets resembling flippers would become, in the side show, "the seal boy"). If such public displays, particularly of those who were victims of illness or accident of birth, seem macabre, let it be said the side show was generally considered in the golden age of the circus as an educational exhibit (in fact it was the place where the automobile and the cinematograph, forerunner of the motion picture projector, were first widely seen by the American public). If the side show seems morbid still because "freaks" were exploited by soliciting the public to stare at them, then let it also be remembered

that, in those days, there were few available medical remedies for those born deformed or later misshapen by injury or illness and there was virtually no other means of livelihood open to them. One contemporary side show operator of my acquaintance complains bitterly that his business has been ruined by medical science. "There just aren't any real freaks any more," he moans, "the doctors heal them." Thus the side show in its traditional sense has now virtually disappeared (one doubts that the public fascination with the hideous has diminished, however), but as long as it continued it symbolized, exactly because it was macabre, the circus as an eschatological company—for in the eschaton all sorts and conditions of men will gaze upon one another.[4]

It is, of course, in the performance itself that the circus is most plainly a parable of the eschaton. It is there too in which the modern American circus remains a facsimile of the circus in its great era. It is in the performance that men confront the beasts of the earth and reassert their dominion over the other creatures, in which the animals become servants of men, and, in many ways, imitate humanity. So a bear drives a motorcycle, an elephant walks on his hind legs, a lion—at the command of a man—lies down in peace beside a tiger, a dog dances, a horse kneels,[5] a seal applauds, an ape rides a bicycle, a leopard is trained to defy his instincts and leap through fire; so man's dominion

4. The text published in *The Scotsman* here reads: "…for in the eschaton all sorts and conditions of men will behold one another as they actually are."

5. The text in *The Scotsman* has the horse dancing rather than kneeling, no dog is mentioned, and "a giraffe is harness-broken."

over creation is symbolically restored. The symbol has more grandeur than in the mastery of men over animals as such, when one recollects that, Biblically, the beast generally is an image of the principalities and powers of the world and therefore, in Biblical stories, like that of Noah or Daniel, or most lucidly in the Book of Revelation, the beasts represent nations and ideologies and institutions (just as in the present day the lion is symbolic of Great Britain, or the bear of Soviet Russia, or the eagle of the United States). It is man's restored dominion over all creatures—the animals themselves and the nations as well—that is vividly portrayed in the performance.

There is man, too, in the circus represented as free to do anything, so much the lord of the whole of creation is he. So he walks a wire fifty feet above the ground, he stands upside down on his forefinger, he swings through the air hanging only by his heels from a trapeze bar, he juggles a dozen incongruous objects simultaneously, he somersaults in mid-air, he hangs by his teeth, one man upholds twelve in a human pyramid, he is shot from a cannon. The circus performer is the image of the eschatological man emancipated from frailty, taunting death, exhilarant and militant.

The circus performance takes place only in the midst of a fierce and constant struggle of the people of the circus, especially its workingmen, against the hazards of accident, storm, fire, or other disaster, and circus history is replete with episodes of the extraordinary courage and resilience of circus folk in the face of adversity. There have been blowdowns (when hurri-

cane or tornado collapse the tents), hailstorms and fires that have destroyed canvas and other equipment, train wrecks, show lots which were muddy quagmires, fires which have destroyed not only equipment and animals but the lives of spectators and circus folk. There have even been shipwrecks, on occasion, in transporting a circus from one country to another. It adds to the theological mystique of the circus as a community when the chances of calamity are so great.

THE CIRCUS AS PARODY

That the circus is an eschatological parable makes it, like all such parables, a parody of conventional society and of the world as it is. That is, I think, particularly focused in the circus performance, where again and again in a multitude of ways the risk of death is openly confronted and, thereby, the presence of the power of death in this world is exposed and, as the ringmaster proclaims, defied. Clyde Beatty, at the height of his career, actually performed forty lions and tigers in one arena at the same time. Not even Daniel was exposed to such jeopardy. The Wallendas, not content with walking the high wire one at a time, have crossed it in a pyramid of seven people. Zerbini does put his hand in a lion's mouth (he complains that lions have acute halitosis). John O'Brien managed sixty-one horses in—as the press agents described it—"one bewildering act." Ernest Clark was the first man to accomplish a triple somersault in midair, while Mlle. La Belle Roche did a double somersault at great speed and height in an automobile in the times when autos were still novelties.

Meanwhile, amidst such feats, the clown makes the parody more pointed and more poignant in costume and pantomime, commenting, by his presence and his performance, upon the incongruities and absurdities and paradoxes inherent in what common people take so seriously, that is, themselves and their business profits and their success and their adjustment, and, in the end, just their conformity to the world. Biblically speaking, that conformity to the world is synonymous with the idolatry of death and those who surrender to the world are, as Saint Paul admonishes, in bondage to death.

So the circus, in its ridicule of death in the world in these and other ways, unwittingly, I suppose, shows men that the only enemy in life is death and that this enemy in truth confronts every man whatever his situation or work all the time. If men elsewhere, in the other arts and occupations, do not realize that then they are—as Saint Paul also said—idiots.[6] The great service for the world which the circus accomplishes, more so, I regret to say, than most churches, is to openly, dramatically, humanly portray that.[7]

The circus is both eschatological parable and social parody: the circus in its very existence represents a transcendence of the power of death in this world which at once heralds the Kingdom and exposes this world as it truly is.

6. This sentence is comparatively toned-down within *The Scotsman* text: "If men elsewhere, in the other arts and occupations, do not realize that then they are deluded."

7. *The Scotsman* text softens "most churches" into "many churches"; the passage in 1982's *A Simplicity…* simply states "the churches."

from A Private and Public Faith[1]

…Let it be remembered, too, that God does not need the churches. The concern for the purity, fidelity, and unity of the churches as the Church originates in the need of the churches of God, not the other way around. God makes His own witness in the world, and makes that witness even in the very weakness of the churches which are affronts to His name. This was shown to me when I was living in East Harlem. A law student came one day to me to ask if he could assist in any way in my law practice in that neighborhood. He was no Christian, nor even much religious. One of his parents was a non-religious Jew, the other a non-religious Protestant—or so he described them. In the months that followed, he and I talked a good deal—about law and the city and politics and clowns and poetry and death and other such important things. I do not recollect that we ever talked about God plainly and openly, although, in a sense, we really talked only of God. And the Church was never mentioned in our conversations, although he knew that I am a member of the Church. Then one Saturday evening—it was the eve of Pentecost, though

1. *A Private and Public Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 34–35.

I do not know if he knew that—he called me and asked if he could go with me to church the next morning. We went to an early celebration of the Holy Communion at the congregation of which I was then a member. Now it was the custom in this parish to hear a homily from the minister presiding at the Eucharist. There was one that day. I remember that it was gruesome, and though the word "Pentecost" was mentioned now and then during the sermon, the sermon was not about Pentecost: the remarks that were made were not about the Word of God at all.…

from A Second Birthday[1]

An Ecumenical Sacrament

I had all the time there is; the time had come for the Eucharist. The first hospital night had passed without pain, though I had not taken medication which had been supplied. I slept soundly, though I had not used the sleeping tablets that were prescribed, having a prejudice against their use, which I attribute to my Yankee inheritance. Anthony had arrived in the city that evening and had come to Columbia-Presbyterian to see that I was settled. He had come bearing various messages and several gifts.

The featured present was a circus poster, which he hung in the room so that it would be a constant vision no matter how I might be positioned. He knew this would comfort and delight me, since I am a more than avid fan of the circus, regarding it as the auspices of the most sophisticated and versatile performing arts and counting the survival of the circus in America as a reliable gauge of the survival of civility itself. I am, of course, referring to the circus—not to Disney productions, not to Ed Sullivan's facsimiles, not to the Broadway pretenses with which John Ringling

1. *A Second Birthday* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 167–171.

North, as if renouncing his birthright, had adulterated the arena performances of "The Greatest Show on Earth"—where it retains integrity both as art and enterprise. In the summer of 1966, Anthony and I had spent nearly three months traveling with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus, the largest remaining tented show, in order to gather material and gain firsthand background for a book I purpose to write about the idea of society as a circus and, hence, the circus as an eschatological scene. Roughly half of that book had been written when I became enough impaired by the disease that it had to be put aside until a more opportune time. It was a gift which suited the circumstances entirely.

As if to multiply my pleasure, I opened one of the messages that Anthony brought to find a note from Corita Kent—who had become celebrated as Sister Corita of the Order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary for her serigraphs and whom I had asked to do the jacket for my circus book—together with one of her posters announcing an edition of her work under the legend (a citation from e. e. cummings) "damn everything but the circus."

During the next morning I had received telephone calls from Giselle Klopstock and the Rev. Melvin Schoonover. Giselle had indicated that she or Robert would visit sometime that day. Mel and I had been friends and colleagues since 1956 in East Harlem. He had been administrator of the East Harlem Protestant Parish, but had resigned from the group ministry, not long after I had done the same, and subsequently became minister of the Chambers Memorial Baptist

Church in the same neighborhood. I had been his best man in his wedding and his daughter, Polly, was one of my godchildren, whom I regularly took to the circus, of course. Mel has been unable to walk since his birth and functions with impressive agility and virtual independence from his wheel chair. He knows more of illness and pain and, therefore, more about health and wholeness, than any other person within my experience. Though he is consistently cool about his own condition, I detected, in our conversation on the phone, that he was anxious about my condition, and I had sought to change the subject by asking his suggestions for a Christmas present for Polly.

Thomas Pike, a priest from the city, deeply involved through the Episcopal Peace Fellowship in the anti-war protests (recently he was arrested, with others, for praying on Pentagon premises), had also been in touch with me at the hospital, particularly to ask if I wished to receive the Holy Communion. Tom said he would be there to assist Bishop Wetmore.

Early in the afternoon, Anthony returned to the hospital and he and I talked about the circus, as if to anticipate the Eucharist.

Soon Dan Berrigan joined us, then Mel Schoonover, Robert Klopstock, Tom Pike. By the arrival of the bishop, Ann Thompson and Merritt Hedgeman had also appeared. Ann Thompson is an earnest and gifted Christian whom Anthony and I had come to know when we shared a household in the city. She had been our housekeeper, and she had brought some order to our home, but, more than that, she is a radiant person, and she

had brought some light there too. We had kept in touch with her after immigrating to the Island. Anthony had written to her about my situation. Together with his wife, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, an illustrious pioneer among black women in America, Merritt Hedgeman had been stanch counsel for years in the vicissitudes that I, as a white man, had to confront on the scene of the black revolt.

Those who had not met before were introduced by Anthony and, as that happened, it seemed to me that my biography was being recited, so truly did this congregation conjoin to represent many persons and many things that I had known and for which I cared. More important, it was a good congregation in which there were old and young, rich and poor, white and black; in which Anglicans, Baptists, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Methodists, and lapsed churchmen were present: in which some had education, but some not, some had known imprisonments, but some had not, some were of the establishment, but some not.

Bishop Wetmore declared the sacrament of Holy Communion is ecumenical and that everyone would be welcome to receive the bread and the wine. He asked Father Berrigan to read the Epistle. And so, together, thanksgiving for life was made to God.

Afterward, as people dispersed, Anthony escorted the bishop to the elevator. When he came back to the room, and after we were alone, he said that as they walked down the hail, Bishop Wetmore had remarked, with evident excitement: "What an extraordinary congregation that was! I wish they were all like that!"

from A Simplicity of Faith[1]

Sojourn with the Circus

The requiem had been a festival, the wake a feast. The gift of the life of Anthony Towne to others had been gladly acknowledged, the resurrection had been celebrated. That night, following the requiem, while the creatures and I were quiet and alone, my memories concerning Anthony were flush and lucid.

One of the bonds between us was that we shared, each in his own style, a sense of absurdity—an instinct for paradox—a conviction that truth is never bland but lurks in contradiction—a persuasion that a Hebraic or biblical mentality is more fully and maturely human than the logic of the Greek mind. The gospel version of the event of Jesus Christ (as distinguished from secular versions of Jesus Christ including those propagated under church or churchy auspices) verifies the significance of this incongruous tension between the Word of God and the common existence of the world (read 2 Corinthians 11, 12). The assurance of faith, in biblical terms, is that we live in that awesome incongruity until it is reconciled as the Kingdom of God.

In other words, eschatology impinges incessantly

1. *A Simplicity of Faith: My Experience in Mourning* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1982), pp. 86–91.

upon ethics. A biblical person is one who lives within the dialectic of eschatology and ethics, realizing that God's judgment has as much to do with the humor of the Word as it does with wrath.

Anthony understood this, on his own authority, and that is why he abided my attraction to the circus. My most vivid memory, that night after the requiem, was of the year when Anthony and I spent most of the summer weeks traveling with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus through New England and part of New York State.

It was 1966, and there were already signals that trouble with my health was impending. That may have had something to do with our decision to spend the summer the way we did. In any case, we outfitted a station wagon so that it could be used for sleeping, and joined the circus company enroute, booked in a new city each day, traveling late each night in the circus convoy to the next day's stand. As Anthony had foreseen, the experience did not satiate my fascination with the circus as a society, but only whetted it.

It is only since putting aside childish things that it has come to my mind so forcefully—and so gladly—that the circus is among the few coherent images of the eschatological realm to which people still have ready access, and that the circus thereby affords some elementary insights into the idea of society as a consummate event.

This principality, this art, this veritable liturgy, this common enterprise of multifarious creatures called the circus, enacts a hope, in an immediate and historic

sense, and simultaneously embodies an ecumenical foresight of radical and wondrous splendor, encompassing, as it does both empirically and symbolically, the scope and diversity of Creation.

I suppose some — ecclesiastics or academics or technocrats or magistrates or potentates — may deem the association of the circus and the Kingdom scandalous or facetious or bizarre, and scoff quickly at the thought that the circus is relevant to the ethics of society. Meanwhile, some of the friends of the circus whom we met that summer may consider it curious that during intervals when Anthony and I have been their guests and, on occasion, confidants, that I have had theological second thoughts about them and about what the corporate existence of the circus tells and anticipates in an ultimate sense. To either I only respond that the connection seems to me to be at once suggested when one recalls that biblical people, like circus folk, live typically as sojourners, interrupting time, with few possessions, and in tents, in this world. The Church would likely be more faithful if the Church were similarly nomadic.

In America, during the earliest part of this century, the circus enjoyed a "golden age." It was the era of P. T. Barnum, Adam Fourpaugh, and the Ringling Brothers, to name but a few of the showmen who assembled extraordinary aggregations of performers, animals and oddities. It was then that the circus was most lucidly an image of the Kingdom in its magnitude, versatility and logistics. There were, for example, few permanent zoological collections in those days, and the circus me-

nagerie was the opportunity for people to see rare birds and reptiles, exotic animals and mammals, wild beasts and other marvelous creatures. Indeed, when the Ringling Brothers advertised their "mammoth millionaire menagerie" as the "greatest gathering since the deluge" it was not a much exaggerated boast. It was similar with the "side shows" or "museums" traditionally associated with the American circus. A separate feature from the main circus performance, the side show originated with Barnum. It assembled and exhibited human "oddities" and "curiosities"—giants, midgets, and the exceptionally obese; Siamese twins, albinos, and bearded ladies; those who had rendered themselves unusual like fire eaters, sword swallowers, or tattooed people. If the side show seems macabre because "freaks" were sometimes exploited, it must also be mentioned that in those days little medical help and few other means of livelihood were available to such persons and that the premise of these exhibits was educational. In any case, so long as they continued they symbolized the circus as an eschatological company in which all sorts and conditions of life are congregated.

It is in the performance that the circus is most obviously a parable of the eschaton. It is there that human beings confront the beasts of the earth and reclaim their lost dominion over other creatures. The symbol is magnified, of course, when one recollects that, biblically, the beasts generally designate the principalities: the nations, dominions, thrones, authorities, institutions, and regimes (see Daniel 6).

There, too, in the circus, humans are represented

as freed from consignment to death. There one person walks a wire fifty feet above the ground, another stands upside down on a forefinger, another juggles a dozen incongruous objects simultaneously, another hangs in the air by the heels, one upholds twelve in a human pyramid, another is shot from a cannon. The circus performer is the image of the eschatological person—emancipated from frailty and inhibition, exhilarant, militant, transcendent over death—neither confined nor conformed by the fear of death anymore.

The eschatological parable is, at the same time, a parody of conventional society in the world as it is. In a multitude of ways in circus life the risk of death is bluntly confronted and the power of death exposed and, as the ringmaster heralds, defied. Clyde Beatty, at the height of his career, actually had *forty* tigers and lions performing in one arena. The Wallendas, not content to walk the high wire one by one, have crossed it in a pyramid of seven people. John O'Brien managed sixty-one horses in the same ring, in what a press agent called "one bewildering act." Mlle. La Belle Roche accomplished a double somersault at great speed and height in an automobile at a time when autos were still novelties.

Moreover, the circus performance happens in the midst of a fierce and constant struggle of the people of the circus, especially the roustabouts, against the hazards of storm, fire, accident, or other disaster, and it emphasizes the theological mystique of the circus as a community in which calamity seems to be always impending. After all, the Apocalypse coincides with

the Eschaton.

Meanwhile, the clown makes the parody more poignant and pointed in costume and pantomime; commenting, by presence and performance, on the absurdities inherent in what ordinary people take so seriously — themselves, their profits and losses, their successes and failures, their adjustments and compromises — their conformity to the world.

So the circus, in its open ridicule of death in these and other ways — unwittingly, I suppose — shows the rest of us that the only enemy in life is death, and that this enemy confronts everyone, whatever the circumstances, all the time. If people of other arts and occupations do not discern that, they are, as Saint Paul said, idiots (cf. Romans 1:20–25; Ephesians 4:17–18). The service the circus does — more so, I regret to say, than the churches do — is to openly, dramatically, and humanly portray that death in the midst of life. The circus is eschatological parable and social parody: it signals a transcendence of the power of death, which exposes this world as it truly is while it pioneers the Kingdom.

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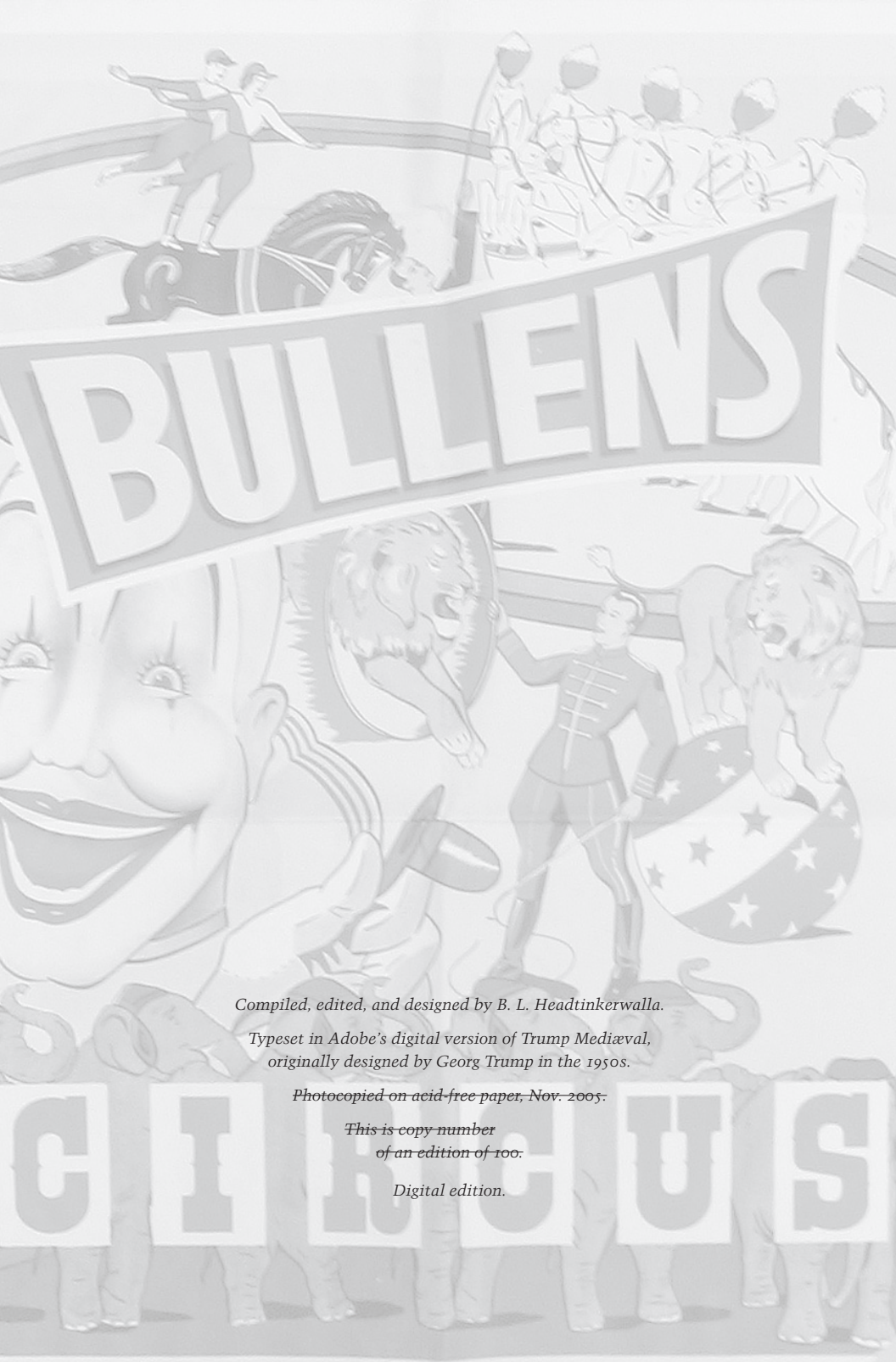

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