PARODY AND SOCIAL SATIRE IN THE FICTION OF DONALD BARTHELME

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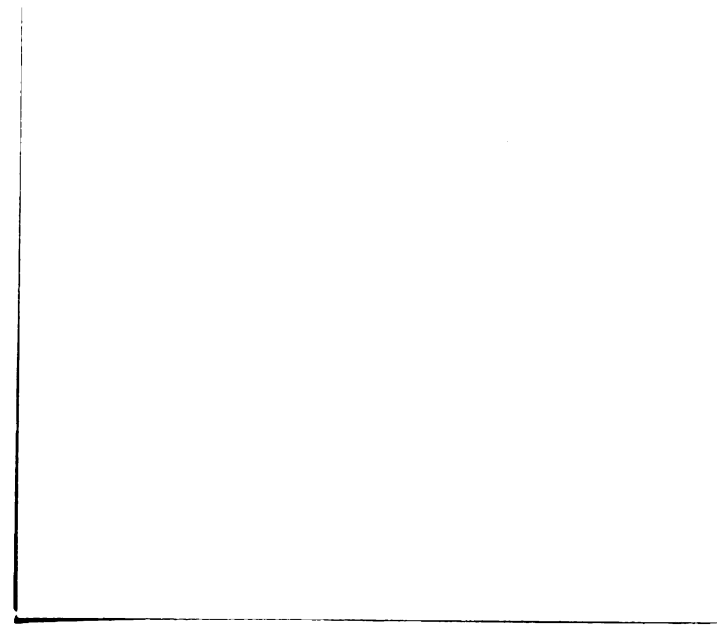

ABSTRACT

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By

Thomas L. Costello

Donald Barthelme is one of a group of American writers during the 1960's whose fiction inspired new life in a form which seemed, in the period following World War II, to be dying. Many critics argue that the recent revival of the novel is the result of daring and innovative formal experimentation which released the novel from stale forms and conventions, and which allowed writers to expand the range of fictional options. I contend, however, that experimental formal self-consciousness is a direct response to certain characteristics of American culture during the 1960's, and that the best writers of recent years are social satirists whose work adheres closely to the social realities of the times.

The dissertation begins with a review of the literary-critical atmosphere of the post-World War II period in an attempt to explain why so little hope was seen for the novel. An examination of the criticism of Irving Howe, Herbert Gold, Alfred Kazin, Lionel Trilling, and others reveals a common complaint: many novels published between 1945 and 1960 moved too far from social reality. As Philip Roth said: there

was a "voluntary withdrawal of interest by writers of fiction from some of the grander social and political phenomena of our times." And one of the main reasons for this withdrawal of interest was that writers found it difficult to understand post-war society. It was an amorphous society for which the traditional explanations no longer seemed adequate, and it left many writers either confused, stupified, or both. They tended, therefore, to ignore it, and to withdraw into private and subjective worlds--with the result that the novel lost its social moorings.

Beginning with the early sixties, however, a new social fact began to emerge which helped to rekindle the writer's interest in society: the fact was that society had become self-conscious. The middle-class had learned the habit of analysis--analysis of self, culture, ideas, the arts. Obscure avant-garde theorists became part of the public domain, and suddenly existential and Marxist ideas about alienation and identity crisis were favorite topics of journalism, popular entertainment, and daily conversation. And with this emergence of the self-conscious society came the emergence of the formally self-conscious novel. It is my contention that the resurgence of the novel in the sixties is directly related to the writers' return to and renewed interest in the social realities of their time and culture.

Donald Barthelme's interest in society begins with language, and his parodies of various rhetorics which corrupt language and of rhetorics which give pseudo-explanations

result in novelistic introversion as well as satiric commentary. Over the past fifteen years, Barthelme has continually refined his ironic, satiric, and parodic methods, and this refinement accompanies a gradual modification of attitude toward the world, his craft, and himself.

In his earliest work, the short stories collected in Come Back, Dr. Caligari, Barthelme's irony is directed at modish middle-class attitudes of angst and world-weariness. While Caligari was funny, refreshing, and highly original for its time, Barthelme's second book, the novella Snow White, is a more complex and satisfying work because of its consciousness of itself and of its own limitations. Snow White employs an absolute and relentless irony which destroys American culture; but the book is also a self-parody which turns back and destroys itself.

The stories in Barthelme's four collections since Snow White do not abandon irony but the effects created by these works cannot be explained by irony alone. There is a peculiar poignancy to many of these stories, and finally, in The Dead Father, Barthelme moves even further away from the purely satiric-parodic method. In this novel his cold and destructive methods are balanced by a kind of nostalgia, poetry, and sadness.

Barthelme's implicit theme is that the world is no longer a serious literary subject: the world consists of dreck, blague, impedimenta, sludge, game-playing. Barthelme does not attempt any reconciliation with the world, nor is he

able to transform it into a better one. What he does, rather, is to create perfect models of the world's imperfections. Although his satires and parodies make for great comic revelry, in his best stories there is an unstated sense of loss, of caring, in conflict with irony--and this conflict results in a curious tension and ambivalence.

Lionel Trilling feared in 1948 that one day the world would be so unattractive that artists would no longer be able to view it with ambivalence--something which, Trilling said, could result in the novel's demise. In the years immediately following World War II many writers were in fact so disenchanted with the world that their novels lost touch with external reality, and the critics announced the death of the form. Their prognosis was premature. Barthelme is as critical of the world as artists of any period have been, but he can still view it with ambivalence; and rather than turning away from it and retreating into private consciousness or myth he turns <u>toward</u> the world. In absorbing into his work the social realities of the times, he breathed new life into the novel.

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INTRODUCTION

As we enter the last quarter of the twentieth century it seems clear that the art of fiction has survived the death-of-the-novel predictions which were initiated as long ago as the 1920's by Ortega y Gasset, and which during the years after World War II became something of a critical commonplace. Most theorists now, in fact, argue a totally opposite view, which is that although the age of the novel is clearly over, the range of fictional options has increased enormously in the last decade. Some critics blame the death-scare on our obsessive tendency to use organic metaphors of "birth," "growth," and "death." Philip Stevick observes that even late eighteenth century readers were told that the novel was dying, which means that if it "has been dying for two centuries then there is something wrong not with the novel but with the metaphor."[1] Charles Newman argues persuasively that the real problem with the novel is economic, that the genre is undermined by a hopelessly anachronistic technology: "...the cost of producing and marketing what we make has simply exceeded the industry's profit margin, and this particular disease has been masked long enough by theories of dying forms and metaphors of terminal illness."[2]

Donald Barthelme, the subject of this study, is one of a number of American writers whose work, during the 1960's,

exposed the shortsightedness of the novel's doomsayers. John Barth, William Gass, Thomas Pynchon, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Stanley Elkin, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Brautigan, and Barthelme--all of them helped to contribute to the most astonishing release of creative energy since the twenties. But before commenting further on fiction's revival, I want to review the literary-critical atmosphere of the post-World War II period in an effort to explain why so many serious critics saw so little hope for the novel. For even if it is agreed that the novel seems to have survived, the reasons it was, for a time, thought to be dying are important: at issue is the very quality and character of modern life. "If the novel is dead or dying, it is not alone in its mortality," wrote Lionel Trilling in 1948. "The novel is a kind of summary or paradigm of our cultural life, which is perhaps why we speak sooner of its death than of the death of any other form of thought."[3] Thus, the question of whether or not the novel can live becomes, more specifically, a question of whether or not modern life is sufficiently "alive" to permit a life for the novel.

The question of whether modern culture is "alive" is not, however, new. Certainly that question was at the heart of the whole modern movement in literature, and in certain works such as The Waste Land it was thought that the question was answered with almost too much finality. Why, then, should a problem which actually nourished numerous novels suddenly, during the period following the war, be considered a threat to the novel's existence?

In 1959, Irving Howe pointed out the not-so-frequently noticed fact "that long after the modern novelist had come to suspect and even assault traditional values there was still available to him...until about the second world war--a cluster of stable assumptions as to the nature of society.... Beset though they might be by moral uncertainties the modern novelists could yet work through to a relative assurance in their treatment of the social world."[4] Likewise, Gerald Graff argues that "it is one of the strengths of modernist fiction that it was able to incorporate within its structures much of the bourgeois realism which it was undermining."[5]

Post-World War II writers, however, confronted a bourgeois society which had lost much of its distinctness and self-definition; they confronted, as Howe said, "the despairing contentment, the prosperous malaise...which by its nature is vague and without shape."[6] It was a society too soft and sluggish and amorphous to provide that dialectical setting against which individual character is formed.

The response of novelists during the 1940's and 1950's to this dilemma took several directions, consistent in one important respect: as a group they moved away from social realism to an unprecedented degree, effecting, as Graff says, "that total subjectification and privitization of human experience" which many modernist theorists had called for, but which most modern artists practiced while keeping one foot moored in social reality.[7] In other words, the more difficult it became for writers to define individual character in relation to recognizable patterns in society, the greater was the

tendency for the novel to be taken over by a solipsistic consciousness. This is no small departure for a form which was contrived for the purpose of dealing with questions of society. "The novel at its best," Herbert Gold writes, "is a large perspective on life in society," and even a stream-of-conscious work like Ulysses, far from being "onanistic...is a lyric reverie in the light of the wide world of society."[8]

In retrospect we can see that this strategy of the post-World War II writer to abandon social realism and to make the novel a private affair had unsatisfactory results. Most of the complaints lodged against many of the novels published between 1945 and 1960 have a common focus, best clarified in Robert Alter's remark that the fictional imagination, when it is permitted to break all ties with social reality, tends to "go slack."[9] Thus, Alfred Kazin, writing in 1959, complains that these novels give us "an imaginative universe limited to the self and its detractors...in which society is merely a backdrop to the aloneness of the hero."[10] He is severe with Mailer and Salinger, whose work is reduced to the "mystery of personality" rather than "the drama of our social existence."[11] Philip Roth, in his famous "Writing American Fiction" essay of 1961, points to the "voluntary withdrawal of interest by the writer of fiction from some of the grander social and political phenomena of our times."[12] He too laments Mailer's "self-indulgence"[13] and Salinger's "otherworldliness and mysticism."[14] Bernard Malamud, Roth claims, "has not shown specific interest ...in the Jew we think of as characteristic of our times; rather his people live in a timeless depression and a placeless

Lower East Side."[15] And then there is Bellow's Henderson, whose regeneration, Roth says, "takes place in a world wholly imagined...hollow and unconvincing."[16] Irving Howe observes that a whole group of post-war novelists found themselves responding to immediate American experience by choosing distant subjects and locales in order to enact the theme of personal identity and freedom:

> But the theme of personal identity, if it is to take on fictional substance, needs some kind of placement, a setting in the world of practical affairs. And it is here that the "post-modern" novelists run into serious troubles: the connection between subject and setting cannot always be made, and the "individual" of their novels, because he lacks social significance and is sometimes a creature of literary or even ideological fiat, tends to be not very individualized...the assertiveness of idea and vanity of style which creep into such books are the result, I think, of willing a subject onto a novel rather than allowing it to grow out of a sure sense of a particular moment and place.[17]

This problem of "willing a subject onto a novel" is one which numerous critics have observed. Confronted with a vague and passive mass society, many writers resorted to the depiction of the grotesque and abnormal to achieve dramatic effect. John Aldridge points out that the war itself relieved many novelists of the necessity to invent objects and situations to satisfy their emotional and dramatic needs.[18] Kazin argues that the writing of the Beats expresses not anger so much as the need for some "cause to be angry about."[19] This criticism especially fits Mailer, a writer almost all critics find gifted but one who vastly oversimplifies history to suit his personal needs. Mailer's crude schematization which sets the hipster against the square, the existentialist against the plastics,

is remote from the actual society he seeks to understand, and illustrates, as Graff says, "the difficulty a writer encounters when he attempts to make a wholly private typology take the place of a plausible system of concepts."[20] And Kazin makes a similar indictment of the whole generation of 1940's and 1950's writers, specifying a lack of "social intelligence" on the part of novelists who have "strained" too hard:

> What is it but the uncertainty of these writers about their connection with that part of reality which other novelists include in their work simply because they were always aware of it--not because they have strained to know it? What many writers feel today is that reality is not much more than what they say it is. This is a happy discovery only for genius... the novel as a form will always demand a common sense respect for life and interest in society.[21]

This lack of interest in society which Kazin and others observed was largely a result of almost unprecedented confusion on the social scene which, Philip Roth said, left writers feeling "stupified."[22] Gradually, however, in the late fifties and early sixties, new social patterns began to emerge which provided new possibilities for fiction. As early as 1948, Lionel Trilling had predicted that "the novel of the next decades will deal in a very explicit way with ideas," and he cites "an obvious social fact" to support his claim. The social fact is that we live in a society where "everyone...even the simplest person is involved with ideas."

> Every person we meet in the course of our daily life, no matter how unlettered he may be, is groping toward a sense of life and his position in it... The increase of conscious formulation, the increase of a certain kind of consciousness by formulation, makes a fact of modern life which is never sufficiently estimated.[23]

Yet even Trilling could not have anticipated the extent to which his prediction would be validated. During the fifties and sixties a huge segment of the middle-class was becoming educated, and in colleges the departments of sociology, psychology, and anthropology were flourishing. More than ever before in history, the layman was being taught to analyze: himself, his culture, ideas, the arts. Obscure avant-garde theorists suddenly became part of the public domain, and what many of the theorists were talking about were problems of alienation, identity, the Death of God, and the Existential Dilemma of living in a Pluralistic and Relativistic Universe. Students walked around campus carrying paperback copies of Pappenheim's The Alienation of Modern Man, Erich Fromm's The Art of Loving, and anything by Camus. In short, a clear, hard social fact finally emerged in the postmodern era: society became self-conscious. In the fifties, people may have been lonely, but in the sixties people discovered that they were part of a social and cultural problem. To suggest that alienation became modish is not, however, to argue its inauthenticity. In addition to reading about identity and cultural crisis, the American public of the sixties lived through several actual calamities: three assassinations, and an immensely unpopular war. Aided by mass media, the nation arrived at a point where we were going through so many daily crises that the term "crisis" itself became meaningless.

The tendency of middle-class culture to absorb ideas which had previously been the domain of the avant-garde was also an indication of the waning of the avant-garde impulse.

Some theorists began to speculate that in America an avant-garde was no longer necessary, that an avant-garde is useful only to the extent that its ideas are resisted by established society. Far from resistance, the avant-garde of the sixties encountered instead a public only too eager to adopt its ideas, manners, and methods. Artists were expected to be "controversial," to be eccentrically colorful; they were expected to shock, making shock impossible, and while this state of affairs may sound enviable to artists being persecuted in other countries, the American public's attitude actually amounted to the severest form of condecension. In effect, this attitude means: what difference can you make? what harm can you do? Such an attitude had the effect of forcing artists to increasingly radical means in their efforts to keep society off-balance so as to prove that, yes, they do make a difference.

With the emergence of the self-conscious society came the emergence of the self-conscious novel. The self-conscious novel is neither a wholly new nor strictly American phenomenon, but it certainly constituted the most important artistic activity of the 1960's. It may be useful to distinguish between to varieties of the self-conscious novel: those which take self-conscious society as their subject-matter but which are written and structured along conventional lines; and those which treat that same subject-matter in a formally self-conscious way. This is not a hard and fast distinction, but it is interesting that writers who are sometimes at antithetical poles (for example, Barth and Bellow) in the debate between traditional and innovative approaches nevertheless have similar

views, even similar definitions, of the plight of modern man.

Many of these writers--Thomas Pynchon, Stanley Elkin, Joseph Heller, John Hawkes, Bruce Jay Friedman, John Barth, and even Barthelme--have been called Black Humorists. Most critics who have written about this group agree with Burton Feldman that their novels "are inconceivable without the hoary themes behind them of absurdity, alienation, nihilism and the exhaustion of an age"--all of the themes, that is, which now sit packaged like items on a supermarket shelf. Max F. Schulz observes that a pervasive tactic of Black Humorists is "to parody the intellectual systems and constructs by which we organize...experience into bearable knowledge," not because all such intellectual pursuit is pointless, but because the language of such serious endeavor is itself available in the market place.[24] Even writers who are not usually identified as either Black Humorist or experimentalist took to satirizing a society which had become smugly self-satisfied with its newfound knowledge. Gerald Graff argues that the central thrust of Bellow's Herzog and Mr. Sammler's Planet is an attack against what Herzog calls "the delusion of total explanations."[25] Ideas, explanation, intellectual systems--these became significant facts of the social realities of the times, and the best writers treated these facts with a variety of approaches.

The formally self-conscious experimental writers--Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Nabokov, Gass, Brautigan--have done much to open new possibilities for fiction and, as with the self-conscious tendencies in film, painting, and the theater, reflected, as Robert Alter says, "a heightened new stage of

modern culture's general commitment to knowing all that can be known about its own components and dynamics."[26] More specifically, Philip Stevick lists three forces which coincided to produce the new movement in fiction: the fatigue of conventional forms, the influence of several individual figures, and the academic training of most of its practitioners.[27] Charles Newman points out that ever since Joyce, fiction has come increasingly to rely upon its own linguistic awareness of itself to provide its momentum; he adds that at the very moment we are beginning to understand this, "the impulse seems to be waning, and the age of involution already past. Barthelme is, after all, the most imitated writer in the country today."[28]

If it is true that the self-conscious novel is already on the wane, then it has no doubt achieved its purpose, and continued experimentation in that direction would simply yield diminishing returns. In fact, it is possible that the value of the self-conscious movement was not so much in the works of art it produced as in the questions it raised about the relation between art and reality. It is clear that for some writers the self-conscious approach was as much a strategy for avoiding reality as for confronting it. Even before the movement became popular in the sixties critic John Aldridge was complaining in 1951 of writers like Truman Capote, John Horne Burns, and Frederick Buechner who, lacking "a discoverable subject-matter...must continually seek a substitute in sheer technical display."[29] And Robert Alter is no doubt correct in observing that much self-conscious fiction is guilty of indiscriminate invention--inventiveness not held in check

by any commonly perceived reality.[30] Some of John Barth's stories in Lost in the Funhouse are about novelists writing stories about novelists.... Tommaso Landolfi's acclaimed story "Golgo's Wife" is about a woman who is a balloon but human in every detail; she even has a baby. In "The Magic Poker," Robert Coover's narrator "invents" an island and discovers that it is "real." The main problem of these stories and others like them is that when everything is fictional there may be, in Alter's words, "no longer any quixotic tension between what is fiction and what is real."[31]

In recent years there has been considerable discussion concerning ways the self-conscious novel is actually "about itself" or "about language." Gerald Graff is right, I think, in arguing that this sort of interpretation is founded in an erroneous extension of the myth perpetuated by much modernist and new critical theory concerning the autonomy and self-containment of the art object.[32] One of the problems in some post-World War II fiction is that in being too solipsistic or too preoccupied with technique or invention, a novel may fail precisely by achieving autonomy and pure self-reflexivity. In other words, it may fail because it has no reference to any recognizable reality. But an art-work can be self-reflexive and still make a comment about external reality. The novel, Trilling says, "is the form which provides the perfect criticism of ideas by attaching them to their appropriate actuality. No less than in its infancy, and now perhaps with a greater urgency and relevance, the novel passionately concerns itself with reality."[33] One reality of the 1960's was the

new self-conscious society, and the self-conscious novel is as much about that society as it is about itself.

In general, the writers of the sixties, whether they chose traditional or experimental techniques, opted in varying degrees for an unserious approach--unserious toward their material and toward themselves as artists. They treated everything with a comedy so consistent that the effect was a complete leveling of values. Society's most cherished notions were shown to have no more substance or durability than the latest fashion. The tremendous release of the comic spirit in the sixties took place precisely because things seemed so hopeless, and for certain writers the unserious approach had extremely serious implications: for them, the world was no longer a serious literary subject.

Over twenty-five years ago, Trilling expressed a tentative and fearful prediction which applies well to some of the writers of the fifties and sixties.

> Of all the practioners of literature, novelists as a class have made the most aggressive assault upon the world, the most personal demand upon it... but great as the mental force has been, they have been touched with something like stupidity, resembling the holy stupidity which Pascal recommends: its effects appear in their ability to maintain ambivalence toward their society.... The novelist expresses this in his co-existent love and hatred of the life he observes.... If the novel cannot indeed survive without ambivalence, does what the world presents us with any longer permit ambivalence?[34]

The eighteenth and nineteenth century novelists achieved the ambivalence Trilling discusses because, whatever personal disagreements they may have had with their culture's values, they nevertheless worked and struggled within the framework

of that culture's basic moral assumptions. Modernist writers, breaking with traditional bourgeois values, saw that the world could be viewed from relative and multiple perspectives, but still they used those traditional values as a frame of reference, a point of divergence, so that even a nihilistic work could be held in check and controlled by the measure of the work's rejection. Then came some of the forties and fifties writers whose rejection of and withdrawal from their culture's past and present--which is to say their total lack of ambivalence toward their culture--suggested that Trilling's fears were being fulfilled. It was certainly this bland crop of novels which helped to intensify the death-of-the-novel scare. Finally, in the 1960's, the self-conscious novelists arrived, and suddenly that art-form seemed alive and healthier than it had been in decades. It is my contention that this resurgence of the novel had to do more than anything with these writers' return to and renewed interest in the social realities of their time and culture.

In this regard, the fictions of Donald Barthelme are a strange case in point, because they constitute one of the most radical responses to the cultural materials confronting today's writers. One of his most persistent themes seems to be the one which Trilling feared would vanquish the novel: that the world no longer permits ambivalence. In Barthelme's fictions the world is clearly contemptible; it is an insufficient literary subject, and given such a subject--his fiction implies--an artist is forced (and is free) to concern

himself with technique and with the stylizing of his own personal attitude. His obligations to the world are none.

Barthelme is a writer well-known for his technical and experimental innovation, but what is not so frequently noticed is that his fiction, to use Trilling's phrase, "concerns itself with reality," is steeped in the social realities of the age. These social realities can be reduced here to a few simple facts: society has lost its traditional centers of authority, the family and the church. Society has lost a sense of tradition, myth, and ceremony. Though these losses are, as we shall see, grounds for celebration by many artists, Barthelme views them as indicative of the triviality of contemporary life. With the past exerting no perceptible pull, modern man lives in, wallows in, often glorifies, the confusion, uncertainty and freedom of the present. Without the power of tradition, the church, or even the family to give substance and discipline to life, men try to make style the highest priority, try desperately to believe that style <u>is</u> substance and meaning. The development, refinement, and imitation of style is pursued with ferocity: style of speech, of opinion, of manner, of dress. Social class distinctions formerly based on economics or ethnic origin are replaced by distinctions of style.

Barthelme's attitude toward these social realities is typically one of severe ironic detachment, and the subject of this study is the way he uses irony as a means of social criticism as well as a tool for creating new fictional constructs. Critics such as Wayne Booth and D. C. Muecke have

recently written extensive studies the conclusions of which confirm what most readers of modern and contemporary literature have sensed intuitively: that not only has irony become the most pervasive of literary tactics, but that the nature and degree of the irony employed is quite different from that irony which artists of all ages have used. There can be no denying, Booth says, "that in modern times more authors have established themselves in our consciousness through ironic voices than through metaphoric richness."[35] For Booth, the main difference between the way writers of the past and recent writers use irony is in the concept of stability and instability. The stable irony of traditional writers offers us "an unequivocal invitation to reconstruct, and the reconstructions have not themselves been later undermined."[36] Thus, after the destructive irony of "A Modest Proposal," we can reconstruct Swift's position and point of view. In the unstable irony of much contemporary literature, Booth says, "the truth asserted or implied is that no stable reconstruction can be made out of the ruins revealed through the irony."

> The author--insofar as we can discover him, and he is often very remote indeed--refuses to declare himself, however subtly, <u>for</u> any stable proposition, even the opposite of whatever proposition his irony vigorously denies. The only sure affirmation is that negation that begins all ironic play: "This affirmation must be rejected," leaving the possibility, and in infinite ironies the clear implication, that since the universe (or at least the universe of discourse) is inherently absurd, all statements are subject to ironic undermining. No statement can really "mean what it says."[37]

Thus, although Barthelme's irony depicts man as impoverished

by the loss of the traditional centers of authority mentioned above, one cannot conclude from his treatment that Barthelme therefore "stands for" tradition, the family, or the church. One cannot rely on the dictionary definition of irony and conclude that his position is the exact opposite of the literal meaning of the words. Rather, his irony is absolute: the immediate object of irony is undermined, and then its opposite is undermined as well--and in much of his work the very idea of undermining is undermined. Here is a typical passage from Snow White:

> "Ugh! I wish I were somewhere else! On the beach at St. Tropez, for example, surrounded by brown boys without a penny. Here everyone has a penny. Here everyone worships the almight penny. Well at least with pennies one knows what they add up to, under the decimal system. No ambiguity there, at least. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Thy daughters are burning with torpor and a sense of immense wasted potential, like one of these pipes you see in the oil fields, burning off the natural gas that it isn't economically rational to ship somewhere!"[38]

To argue that Barthelme's irony is directed at American waste, wealth, and extravagance, the implication being that he advocates a return to the primitive, is a serious misreading. Clearly, Snow White's sentiment is also being treated ironically; the switch from dollars to pennies undermines the content of her statement. But what is being satirized in the allusion to Eliot's The Waste Land? Is the present being satirized by showing the inappropriateness of the allusion in this context? Partly, but that interpretation would suggest that Barthelme "believes" in the tradition for which Eliot stood, or at least that he longs for the past. The parody of Eliot prevents such a reading. Then is Eliot

himself the target of Barthelme's irony? Partly again, but that interpretation implies the superiority of the present, as well as the superiority of Barthelme's own "art" over Eliot's. The excessiveness of the style is self-parodic. Max Schulz, in his essay on Black Humor, notes that while the conventional use of parody is to invoke the weight of tradition, for the black humorist such assent to traditional intellectual structurings has become impossible. "Hence, in his act of representation of this or that value system, he casts doubt on its objectivity and absoluteness, even as he pays tribute to its ordered beauty."[39] Thus, though Barthelme's irony is directed at the present and the past, at Eliot as well as at himself, and while he cannot assent to Eliot's intellectual structuring, he can admire it for aesthetic reasons. The past is always lurking behind the lines of Barthelme's fictions, and it is used typically in the way that Schulz describes. The present may be empty and chaotic, and while we may measure and compare the emptiness and chaos against the ordered beauty of the past, we can neither return to the past, nor can we view the intellectual structurings of previous artists as absolutes.

Barthelme's art, then, particularly the early work, is a purely ironic response to the social realities of our culture. But the development of Barthelme's fiction over the past fifteen years can be best discussed in terms of the increasing refinement and modification of his ironic, satiric, and parodic methods; and while this development is largely technical, it naturally implies a gradual modification of attitude as

well, a modification of attitude toward the world, toward his craft, and toward himself.

Generally, Barthelme's work reveals a gradual shift from the purely negative and destructive toward the ambiguously positive and creative. Whereas the early work simply destroys everything with reckless abandon, much of the later work is both more selective and more temperate. Whereas the early work takes a playfully or maliciously ironic stance, the later work combines irony with a number of other approaches which issue in delicate and elusive tones and meanings. Come Back, Dr. Caligari is the work of a young writer who luxuriates in his ironic freedom. Here is Barthelme l'enfant terrible, intruding into his stories at the last moment to kill off a character or to twist the ending according to his preconceived plan; compiling catalogs of supremely pointless almanac information; exposing as clichés our culture's gravest concerns; turning the rhetoric about marriage, old age, and race relations into comic poetic victories.

What makes Snow White a more complex and satisfying work is its consciousness of itself, its consciousness of its own limitations. Caligari destroys and leaves it at that; Snow White destroys, but is also about destruction. Caligari destroys the world and is pleased with itself; Snow White destroys the world and at the same time destroys itself. The main difference between the two books is the way style is used. Caligari parodies various styles of speech and rhetorics in order to satirize the world; Snow White is written in a self-parodic style which satirizes itself as well as the

world. The central idea in Snow White is retraction. Barthelme's irony retracts--that is, destroys--everything. It retracts the past and the present; it retracts traditional and avant-garde approaches to art; it retracts the fairy tale world and the world which replaced it. It retracts by reducing everything to mere language, to style--and finally it retracts retraction itself. Barthelme knows that style is not enough to achieve the satiric destruction he has been pretending to achieve. There is no substance to his satire. He knows that he himself has nothing to offer but style. Wayne Booth labels Barthelme's brand of irony as the "snotty sublime"--"What fun we can have if we recognize that all values except our own superior ironic insight can be ridiculed"--adding that such irony is often redeemed only by cleverness. "Donald Barthelme, though he often rises above this objection, to me often falls beneath it."[40] Although there is no question but that many of Barthelme's stories are merely clever, his best work implies that his own ironic insight is no more or less superior than any other value.

Barthelme's increasing awareness of the moral implicatons of irony can be seen clearly in "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," a story he wrote several years after Snow White. In this piece Barthelme uses Kierkegaard's The Concept of Irony to explore the moral questions raised by ironic detachment and indirectly to explore his own literary practices. The story is itself highly ironic, but serious to the extent that he is measuring his work against the standards of a man of Kierkegaard's stature.

Kierkegaard's basic criticism of irony rests upon this assumption: that, yes, the world is imperfect; yes, all intelligent men wish the world were better than it is. But the only moral way for a man to deal with this situation is to attempt to reconcile his vision with actuality. Irony, Kierkegaard says, is destructive. The ironist, rather than attempting the vastly difficult task of reconciliation, takes the easy way out. Irony is irresponsible, a means of achieving freedom by avoiding commitment. Irony destroys by depriving an object of its reality. "Now consider," says Barthelme, quoting Kierkegaard,

> an irony directed not against a given object but against the whole of existence. An irony directed against the whole of existence produces, according to Kierkegaard, estrangement and poetry. The ironist, serially successful in disposing of various objects of his irony, becomes drunk with freedom. He becomes lighter and lighter. Irony becomes an infinite absolute negation. Quote irony no longer directs itself against this or that particular phenomenon, against a particular thing unquote. Quote the whole of existence has become alien to the ironic subject unquote page 276. For Kierkegaard, the actuality of irony is poetry.[41]

Kierkegaard detests this transformation. The world, however imperfect, is preferable to the perfection of poetry. Poetry, precisely because it is perfect, precisely because of the distance between it and the world, is a victory over the world which results in animosity toward the world. What is wanted, Kierkegaard says, is not a victory over the world but a reconciliation with the world; and the true reconciliation is religion.

Barthelme's response to Kierkegaard is to turn irony upon him. The style throughout the story is playful: the "quotes,"

the reference to page numbers in Kierkegaard's text, the asides ("That's beautiful"). He refuses to discuss the question of religion because of a "deep bias" against it. Finally, regarding Kierkegaard's condemnation of Schlegel's Lucinde, Barthelme says that Kierkegaard has been "unfair to Schlegel." He could, he says, cite reasons: Kierkegaard fastened upon Lucinde's prescriptive aspects and neglected its "objecthood." But he says these reasons are not interesting.

> What is interesting is my making the statement that I think Kierkegaard is unfair to Schlegel... Because that is not what I think at all. We have to do here with my own irony. Because of course Kierkegaard was "fair" to Schlegel. In making a statement to the contrary I am attempting... to annihilate Kierkegaard in order to deal with his disapproval.
>
> Q. Of Schlegel?
>
> A. Of me.[42]

Barthelme's irony throughout the story is the unstable irony discussed by Booth, which is in fact the irony of infinite absolute negation that Kierkegaard condemns. Thus, the difficulties of interpreting the story are the sames ones we encountered in the Snow White passage: when everything is undermined, we are left with no stable ground to stand on; the story does not allow us to "reconstruct" Barthelme's point of view. But "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" does treat the problem of ironic detachment within a form which does justice to its complexity. It reveals the essential dual and contradictory position of the ironist as one who is both absolutely free and absolutely enslaved. And it shows that there is a thin line indeed between the ironist's giddy

exhilaration, on one hand, and his despair and self-loathing, on the other. At the story's conclusion the inquisitor, aware that the ironist "has given away his gaiety, and now has nothing," relates the touching incident involving Pasteur, to which the ironist responds "(bitterly): Yes, that makes up for everything, that you know that story..." Confronted with genuine emotion, irony is a useless and unenviable freedom. Or, as Kierkegaard wrote: "Irony is free, to be sure, free from all the cares of actuality, but free from its joys as well, free from its blessings. For it has nothing higher than itself, it may receive no blessing, for it is ever the lesser that is blessed of a greater. This is the freedom for which irony longs."[43]

Essentially, then, Barthelme's irony functions just as Kierkegaard explains. It is a negative, subjective freedom, and it destroys by depriving the object of its reality. A detailed explanation of how he transforms the imperfect (dreck, trivia) into the perfect (poetry) will come later, but here I want to make one important point. All of the ironies and counter-ironies, particularly in the early work, reduce to this central irony: Barthelme's art is simply a purer version of what it condemns. On the one hand, his irony criticizes and destroys a world whose exclusive pursuit is style. On the other hand, in his own art nothing matters but how purely these styles are captured. His irony destroys a world too devoted to triviality; yet his own art is but a higher, more refined indulgence in the trivial. He mocks a world obsessed with self; his own art, however, has but

one character: the writer. Finally, nothing matters but Barthelme.

To say that Barthelme's art is a purer version of what it condemns means two things. First, it means that his style is more disciplined, complex, and consistent than that which his art destroys. Second, it means that his art is also purer in that it knows what it is not. His own pursuit after style is at the same time an admission (and sometimes a lament) that his work lacks substance. He is the central character in all of his work, but he constantly resorts to self-mockery, which borders on self-contempt and self-hatred. In other words, the element of self-irony is as pervasive as that irony directed toward the world. Ultimately, these ironies cancel each other, and in this sense Snow White is self-destructive. Thus, though irony may achieve, as Kierkegaard said, a victory over the world, in Snow White this victory is at best temporary, at the least phyrric.

Although Snow White may have nothing to offer but style, style is something. Style achieves that "objecthood" which Kierkegaard neglected, and in Snow White style is used to create a design, a new fictional reality, which reflects and comments upon the real world. The style often takes the form of parody, and what Max Schulz says about Black Humorist parody is also true of Barthelme's: parody "does not figure in its traditional form as device...for realizing answers.... Rather it offers one more way of formulating unanswerable questions...of giving form and perspective to the diversity

of experience, of controlling and arranging it with sufficient artistry to embody a coherence that has internal logic if little necessary relationship to the outer coincidence of facts."[44] The strength of Barthelme's fiction since Snow White, however, is that it often achieves a more intricate design and a more varied reflection of reality. As a work of severe ironic detachment, Snow White's purity and consistency of purpose is dazzling. But this characteristic also defines the book's limitation: there is an unrelenting sameness about it. Many of the stories in his four collections since Snow White, as well as in The Dead Father, do not abandon irony, but the effects created by these works cannot be explained by irony alone; the effects in fact are difficult to explain. Sometimes a story will seem ironic but gradually, often suddenly, the ironic voice will evaporate or will blend with other voices, making interpretation difficult and response guarded. Sometimes these effects are created by unusual combinations of words and images; sometimes by blending irony and sincerity; sometimes by Barthelme's attraction toward a strong subject, as in "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel." Finally, in The Dead Father, Barthelme moves even further away from the purely ironic-satiric mode. In this novel, as in many of the later stories, his cold and destructive methods are balanced by a kind of nostalgia, poetry, and sadness. Whereas any sentence of Snow White is representative of the whole novel, the various scenes, voices, and images of The Dead Father create a whole larger than any of its parts.

If the result is not necessarily as satisfying as Snow White, still The Dead Father is a more ambitious novel.

Although, again, the instability of the irony precludes any attempt at reconstruction, it is clear that Barthelme has arrived at a point where he is able, at times, to view the world with attitudes and feelings other than pure irony. In the numerous stories discussed in Chapter 3 in which Barthelme treats the relationship between the artist and society, he offers us numerous perspectives from which to view the current function of art and the increasingly popular notion that the avant-garde is dead or useless. What is interesting about these stories--and for that matter about Barthelme's work as a whole--is that, while they resist meanings and while they parody the idea that man can make any true statements about the world, nevertheless they are rich with meaning. For Barthelme, it is not that the world is meaningless, but that it has meanings which exceed and defy our futile and comic attempts at explanation. Barthelme's parodic attention to the nuances of language is largely an attempt to expose this fact, and to rescue words from the myriad forms of phony certitude. Such an effort is hardly meaningless, and it goes a long way toward absolving Barthelme's writing of being purely negative. "Life itself can and should be enhanced by looking to our language," Wayne Booth said. "For me, one good reading of one good passage is worth as much as anything there is..."[45] And his remark that the logical extreme of infinite irony would be complete silence is

instructive: what is most important, he says, is that "novelists, dramatists, and poets inevitably draw back from complete silence and in fact write works that embody their intentions and therefore have 'meanings' of a kind--works of resignation, of lament, of complaint, of dark laughter at the chaos, of defiance, of pathos. And in doing so they usually provide--sometimes it seems almost with a sense of shame--some handle or other for interpreting their works at whatever level of instability or negation they have elected."[46]

Barthelme's continuous refinement of his ironic method constitutes his continuing refinement of attitude toward the social realities of our times. He does not attempt the kind of reconciliation with the world which Kierkegaard demanded, but his attention to the moral uses of irony shows that he still possesses that ambivalence toward the world which such critics as Trilling and Booth found necessary for the novel's survival.

Chapter 1

Come Back, Dr. Caligari: A New Kind of Fiction

> In this kind of world...absurd if you will, possibilities nevertheless proliferate and escalate all around us and there are opportunities for beginning again.
>
> How can you be alienated without first having been connected?
>
> "A Shower of Gold"

When *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* was published in 1964 it was greeted with mostly favorable reviews, with the notable exception of R. V. Cassill in *The New York Times Book Review*. The specifics of Cassill's review are not so interesting as the response it drew from journalist Seymour Krim:

> To the Editors of *The New York Times Book Review*:
> R. V. Cassill's review of *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (April 12, 1964) gives barely the slightest whiff of how fresh Donald Barthelme's work is, how much talk it has stirred up, how it has fictionally goosed the *New Yorker* and jimmied open the imaginations of other more pedestrian writers.... Mr. Cassill...certainly was not the prompt critical outrider that a talent as unexpected and outrageously contemporary as Barthelme's deserves...[1]

Part of the reason for Krim's enthusiasm is that Barthelme's talent was unexpected. For twenty years critics had been waiting for that fresh impulse to come after the war, as it did after the first war, and when it did not come the *literati* began gradually to write fiction off as an exhausted art-form. That this defense of Barthelme should come from Krim is particularly interesting, since Krim is a would-be novelist who

spent most of the 1960's practicing the New Journalism and writing essays arguing that "the only practical justification for 'fictionalizing' today is if it says something that can't possibly be said journalistically."[2] The assumption that lay beneath the New Journalism movement was that fiction writers, having grown bored with mere reality, had turned the novel into a stuffy, self-serving medium. Whereas the great novelists of the past had gone out into the streets and packed their books with the people and events of the real world, recent novelists had turned increasingly to the fanciful and fabulistic in their desperate search for a "new" fiction. Although this search resulted in a new fiction of sorts it also resulted in an art-form with only a remote connection to the real world and to man's daily concerns. The New Journalists argued that they now did the job which the novelists of the past used to perform, using the techniques of conventional fiction upon the raw materials of real life to inform and to entertain a public eager for information and entertainment. So argued Tom Wolfe, for instance, in numerous articles about the New Journalism.

Earl Shorris in a 1972 overview of Barthelme's work, replied directly to Wolfe: "Donald Barthelme has accomplished what the New Journalists are not competent to do. In a single story he is able to include more of a taste of the times than there is in the collected works of Wolfe, Breslin, Talese and Co."[3] Here, however, I am concerned not so much with the debate itself as with the fact that Barthelme's work

should even be mentioned with reference to journalism. For the reference is not ill-considered: as was stated in the Introduction, much of the success of Barthelme's work resides in his understanding of and interest in the social realities of our culture, something which had been either ignored or poorly understood by a whole generation of post-war writers. More specifically, Come Back, Dr. Caligari is the work of an acute social satirist.

But what was so strange about Barthelme's fictions in the early sixties was this: on the one hand they seemed to be about the real world we all experience; on the other hand, they seemed to consist of the purely fanciful and invented. While the New Journalists were beginning to use the techniques of conventional literary realism upon the raw material of everyday life, Barthelme went a step further: he used the same material, but he broke completely with conventional literary techniques.

The raw material of Come Back, Dr. Caligari is the modish attitudes prevalent among a huge segment of the American middle-class in the early sixties. In general these attitudes might be described as those of world-weariness and pessimism, and the rhetoric was derived from existential philosophy: alienation, boredom, ennui, absurdity. I observed in the Introduction that one of the main differences between the fifties and sixties was middle-class discovery of alienation. This was a discovery which, as Gerald Graff says, had its positive and negative aspects. It was a

liberating advance in the sense that one's problems could be traced to actual deficiencies in the social process--thus helping to ease one's personal guilt.

> But the new self-consciousness about one's alienation, "growing up absurd," and so forth, could also take unattractive forms, forms which invested alienation with an element of self-dramatization or even self-congratulation. The honest pathos of the genuine sufferer might give way to the strident theatrics of the professional victim. In the fifties, though sociological writers might describe disaffiliated youths of the period as the Lonely Crowd, the actual members of this group had no awareness of figuring in a significant social tendency, and certainly saw no charm in the fact.... In the sixties bourgeois alienation ceased being a mere predicament, prosaically coped with as best one could, and became a historically conscious style...[4]

Bartheme's treatment of this style creates a dual effect. On the one hand, his stories evoke a strong sense of the emptiness of modern life. We sense that "identity crisis" was not only a much-abused term, but for many people an accurate description of what they were experiencing. We see that the clichéd insistence on openness and honesty about one's problems and feelings had its roots in a basic human need. We sense that although "individuality" became a tiresome word during the period, its use paralleled a desperate effort to be different, to "do one's own thing."

Barthelme's stories capture these characteristics of the period, but his parodies make for much revelry. He catches the inherent irony in the way the rhetoric of alienation was used: people loved this language, and they employed it cheerfully. They used it to communicate their own

illness--not in order to cure but to prolong it. In Come Back, Dr. Caligari, Barthelme's absolute irony, his stylist's fascination with the rhetoric of the disease, prevent us from caring about the people who suffer from it. He is, as Kierkegaard said, drunk with freedom. Almost every page is full of exhuberance and nowhere moreso than in "A Shower of Gold," one of Barthelme's most anthologized stories, which makes a direct attack against the popularization and vulgarization of ideas which had once belonged exclusively to the avant-garde. The story is more of a theoretical than a literary tour de force, for unlike his character who claims not to know the language of existentialism, Barthelme knows it only too well and shows it off far beyond the demands of his central idea. He has done so, one thinks, for the sheer pleasure of it. "Mr. Peterson, are you absurd?" asks Miss Arbor, interviewing the young painter for the television show called Who Am I? "...do you encounter your existence as gratuitous? Do you feel de trop? Is there nausea?... People today, we feel, are hidden away inside themselves, alienated, desperate, living in anguish, despair, and bad faith. Why have we been thrown here, and abandoned?...Who Am I? approaches these problems in a root radical way." When Peterson says he's not sure if he believes in absurdity, a shocked Miss Arbor responds: "Oh, Mr. Peterson, don't say that! You'll be... " "Punished?" Peterson suggests.

Sure enough, Peterson is punished for his "skepticism." First, the President visits Peterson in his loft and smashes

his latest work with a ten-pound sledge--the idea being that the President, as a "friend of the arts," believes in absurdity himself. Then Peterson goes to the barber, a man named Kitchen who is also a lay-analyst and has published four books entitled The Decision to Be. They discuss the President. "As far as his relationship with you personally," Kitchen says, "it's essentially a kind of I-thou relationship, if you know what I mean." Kitchen quotes Nietzsche for a bit, then concludes: You've got to "break out of the hell of solipcism. How about a little more off the sides?" "Everybody knows the language but me," Peterson says irritably.

After he is punished by the cat-piano man and by the girls from California (one of whom quotes Pascal: "The natural misfortune of our miserable and feeble condition is so wretched that when we consider it closely nothing can console us"), Peterson calls Miss Arbor and begs to be released from his agreement. His request is of course denied, and the story ends with Peterson's magnificient televised rebellion against the bourgeoisie's easy co-optation of absurdist values. First, he describes three truly absurd things which happened to him yesterday. Then, while the emcee and cameraman threaten and try in vain to shut him up, Peterson concludes with a semi-parodic invocation of the Renaissance ideal of man.

> "In this kind of world," Peterson said, "absurd if you will, possibilities nevertheless proliferate and escalate all around us and there are opportunities for beginning again.... Don't be

> reconclied. Turn off your television sets... indulge in mindless optimism. Visit girls at dusk.... My mother was a royal virgin...and my father was a shower of gold. My childhood was rich in experiences which developed my character. As a young man I was noble in reason, infinite in faculty, in form express and admirable, and in apprehension... " Peterson went on and on and although he was, in a sense, lying, in a sense he was not.[5]

The last line of the story is true. Peterson is in a sense lying and in a sense he is not. Existence may be absurd but it is not only absurd. In another context, one of the dwarves in Snow White says: "Normal life.... It is unbearable, this consensus, this damned felicity." What is unbearable for Peterson, and for Barthelme too, is the opposite consensus: this damned despair, or at least this damned rhetoric of despair. This is not to suggest that Barthelme "identifies" with Peterson; there are moments in the story when Peterson's "art" is as much a subject for parody as is middle-class absurdity. But Peterson does come closer to being a norm, a voice we can trust, than we usually get from Barthelme. At the end of the story, Peterson has attained, as Gerald Graff says, "the role of anti-existential hero"[6]--possibly the prototype for the new heroes (or are they anti anti-heroes?) created by Stanley Elkin, Philip Roth, and Saul Bellow.

"Marie, Marie, Hold on Tight" has no hero but it too is anti-existential, with Barthelme again satirizing bourgeois avant-garde pretensions. The vehicle is again situational and highly comic: three men demonstrating in front of a church against the human condition, picketing with signs bearing slogans: "Man Dies!" "The Body is Disgust!" "Cogito Ergo

Nothing!" "Abandon Love!" The details of what happened at the demonstration are being told to Marie (who painted the signs) by one of the pickets, whose observations and manner continually betray his naive and philistine nature. This irony is part of a larger one, which is that there is no connection whatever between the pickets' absurdist rhetoric and the actual events of the story.

The narrator begins on a sort of self-congratulatory note, feeling rather proud that they had braved a rainstorm during their demonstration. Bystanders in the vicinity of the church showed much interest, he said, and one man even shouted encouragement: "That's the way!" But others made taunting remarks--"Cogito Ergo your ass!" To those who called them communists, the pickets disseminated mimeographed leaflets which cited their distinguished army records, announced that they were law-abiding Americans who support the constitution and pay taxes. In short, they are honest, hard-working bourgeoisie whose only gripe is existential.

> "We are simply opposed to the ruthless way in which the human condition has been imposed on organisms which have done nothing to deserve it and are unable to escape it. Why does it have to be that way?" The leaflet goes on to discuss, in simple language, the various unfortunate aspects of the human condition, including death, unseemly and degrading bodily functions, limitations on human understanding, and the chimera of love.[7]

At one point a high official emerges from the church and asks the men if they have ever heard of Kierkegaard. "'This demonstration displays a Kierkegaardian spirit which I understand,' he said, and then requested that we transfer our operations

to some other place."

Finally, the demonstrators are approached by a group of youths wearing hood jackets, T-shirts, tight pants. The narrator's explanation of their background is perfect caseworker textbookese: "They were obviously delinquents from bad environments and broken homes where they had received no love." The simple explanation is that these youths have literally "abandoned love" as the sign's slogan demands. The youths call the demonstrators "flits," and ask questions such as "What is this shit?" "What do you mean you don't believe in God?" Unable to speak their street talk, Henry Mackie answers in the only language he knows: belief is not the issue, he says; it is rather "a question of man helpless in the grip of a definition of himself that he had not drawn, that could not be altered by human action, and that was in fundamental conflict with every notion of what should obtain." A fight erupts during which Henry Mackie is repeatedly kicked in the head. But the next evening, the narrator concludes, Mackie delivered his scheduled lecture entitled "What is to be Done?" at Playmor Lanes. He delivered it "with good diction and enunciation and in a strong voice. He was very eloquent. And eloquence, as Henry Mackie says, is really all any of us can hope for."

Barthelme's technique is to turn all of this absurdist rhetoric back on itself. The narrator carries signs declaring the futility of life and he claims that eloquence is all we can hope for, but it is clear throughout that he loves life,

and that he is trying to impress Marie. "(Marie, you would have been proud of us)", "(it probably didn't register on your TV screen, Marie, but I was there, I saw it--it was beautiful." "The rain had stopped and the flowers smelled marvelously fine..." The picketers profess an understanding of Kierkegaard, but when a man tries to pull their signs down they express surprise because the man was "very well-dressed." Such naivete is consonant with their belief that Henry Mackie is eloquent when in fact he is a victim of the most banal absurdist rhetoric.

"A Shower of Gold" and "Marie, Marie, Hold on Tight" are the two stories in this collection which deal most directly with the comedy of bourgeois flirtation with avant-garde ideas, but several of the other stories play with variations on the theme of identity crisis, the attempt to find meaning in life, and the comically desperate attempt to make oneself and one's life "interesting." Central to these and to most of the stories in the book is the problem of boredom.

In "Me and Miss Mandible" the main idea is the large gap between what life promises and what it gives--a universal theme but also one with some uniquely American implications. Here Barthelme uses a technique which he will use many times in his fiction--that of altering some aspect of our world, thus allowing us to see the whole from a new perspective. Through some "misconception" which he has never understood a thirty-five year old man suddenly finds himself enrolled in a sixth grade class, the class consisting of thirty-five

eleven year olds and Miss Mandible, the teacher. The form of the story, the man's journal beginning on the first day of school and ending four months later when he is dismissed, is functional in a semi-parodic way: we can watch him "grow." At first he is more curious than anything--curious as to what sort of error caused him to be there, curious about his alternating allegiance between Miss Mandible, who is sexually attracted to him, and Sue Anne Brownly, "between eleven and eleven and a half (she refuses to tell her exact age,)" who is infatuated with him.

We learn that he has had a ruined marriage; his career as an insurance adjustor ended when he obtained (justifiably, he believed) a $165,000 settlement for an injured woman; there had been an interlude in the army. "Small wonder," he writes, "that re-education seemed my only hope."

Removed from the "unexamined life" of desperate, money-making Americans, the narrator-pupil begins "to understand how I went wrong, how we all went wrong." He peeks one day into Miss Mandible's teacher's manual and reads:

> Many pupils enjoy working fractions when they understand what they are doing. They have confidence in their ability to take the right steps and to obtain correct answers. However, to give the subject full social significance, it is necessary that many realistic situations requiring the processes be found. Many interesting and life-like problems involving the use of fractions should be solved...[8]

"<u>They have confidence in their ability to take the right steps and to obtain the correct answers</u>." But what happens, the story asks--at least by implication--when you take the right

steps, obtain the correct answers, and you are fired from your job and your wife deserts you? "Who points out that arrangements sometimes slip, that errors are made, that signs are missed?" No one does. Elementary school teaches that authority equals life and that signs are promises. Thus, in his first life the narrator believed the company motto, "Here to Help in Time of Need." By acting in accordance with this sign, he was fired. Because he had obtained a wife with wife-signs--"beauty, charm, softness, cookery"--he thought he had found love. The great "discovery" of the narrator's reschooling is that "signs are signs, and that some of them are lies." As a theoretical insight this one might not sound like much, but the narrator is not presented as a small-minded man. Barthelme's partly parodic point is that most human beings fail or suffer setbacks and disillusionments in their lives precisely because this discovery is so difficult to come by.

The teacher's manual said: "Many interesting and life-like problems involving the use of fractions should be solved." But the narrator realizes that "everything that is either interesting or life-like in the classroom" stems from interpersonal relations--which means sex. In a famous chapter of John Barth's The End of the Road, Jacob Horner enters the classroom on the first day of school and makes the discovery that "girls study grammar and boys engineering all at the behest of Absolute Genital." He continues:

> Who would not delight in telling some extra-galactic tourist, "On our planet, sir, males and females copulate. Moreover, they enjoy

> copulating. But for various reasons they cannot do this whenever, wherever and with whomever they choose. Hence all this running around that you observe. Hence the world."[9]

Jacob teaches at Wicomico State Teacher's College, but Barthelme's point is that the sex factor is no less pervasive in the sixth grade, where the "atmosphere is charged with abortive sexuality." The students are not taught, do not understand, and cannot handle their sexuality. This is not to say that the story is a plea that students should be taught to handle their sexuality. Barthelme is simply satirizing an educational rhetoric which pretends to explain student behavior while omitting the most important factor. One boy draws a dirty picture in the cloak room which sets the room buzzing with excitement. Other boys read Road and Track as a defense against "being driven frantic." Sue Anne Brownly reads Movie-TV Secrets, "studying their history as a guide to what she may expect when she is suddenly freed from this drab, flat classroom." The narrator shuffles through seventeen of Sue Anne's magazines, "noting the broad editorial perspectives"--and here Barthelme compiles a catalog which is so true it hardly achieves the level of parody.

"Debbie's Kids Are Crying"

"Eddie Asks Debbie: Will you...?"

"The Nightmares Liz Has About Eddie!"

"The Things Debbie Can Tell About Eddie"

"The Private Life of Eddie and Liz"

"Debbie Gets Her Man Back?"

"A New Life for Liz"

"Love Is A Tricky Affair"

"Eddie's Taylor-Made Love Nest"

"Isn't It Time to Stop Kicking Debbie Around?"

"Debbie's Dilemma"[10]

Finally Sue Anne catches the narrator with Miss Mandible in the cloakroom and she runs off weeping, "certain now which of us was Debbie, which Eddie, which Liz." She had mis-read the signs.

The questions of what and how things went wrong, all of the mysteries that perplexed us as adults, do have their origin in school, and Barthelme, through the narrator, is "one by one numbering them, exposing their roots." On another level the story is a parodic exposé of the naivete of the public school rhetoric that "confidence" and the knowledge of what is "right" and "proper" will lead to self-knowledge, social and professional success, and, all in all, an "interesting" life.

"Florence Green is 81" is also about identity crisis, and it deals more specifically with the desperate attempt to be interesting and interested. "I want to go to some other country." "I want to go somewhere where everything is different," Florence Green announces at dinner--a request we will hear echoed in Snow White's desire to hear some words that "are not the words I always hear." Baskerville is there, at the dinner party, courting old Florence Green, because he needs her contribution to help defray printing costs of The Journal of Tension Reduction, of which he is editor.

In order to win her favor he must above all be interesting, more interesting, if possible, than the rest of the guests. The story is written is a furiously self-conscious stream-of-consciousness style, which is a parody of the stream-of-consciousness style ("I am free-associating, brilliantly, brilliantly"). Parallels are set-up: Baskerville must keep Florence Green interested; he must also keep the reader interested. He quotes from his journal: "One source of concern in the classic encounter between patient and psychoanalyst is the patient's fear of boring the doctor."

For fear of being boring, Baskerville uses three basic strategies: he adopts an ingratiating tone; he disseminates paragraphs of trivial, almanac type information ("Lentils vegetate in the depths of the fourth principal river of the world, the Ob, in Siberia, 3200 miles."); and he delivers remarks:

> "It is closing time in the garden of the West Cyril Connolly." This remark pleased her, it was a pleasing remark, on the strength of this remark Baskerville was invited again, and on the second occasion he made a second remark, which was "Before the flowers of friendship faded friendship faded Gertrude Stein."[11]

Baskerville is a satire of several well-known social types: the dinner guest who tries too hard; the would-be writer with no talent; the would-be analyst with deep psychological problems. In a more general sense, Barthelme is satirizing all men, since most men are not interesting and do not find life sufficiently interesting. Thus, the story as a whole identifies and satirizes what has become one of modern man's

chief values: interestingness. The implication is that he has nothing else.

"Hiding Man" also strikes an attitude toward popular interest in identity, alienation, and alleviation of boredom. The hiding man is I. A. L. Burligame. He hides behind his initials, behind masks, in dark movie theaters. What is he hiding from? The story is never explicit, but we can deduce that Burligame is in fact hiding from nothing, or merely from himself, and that his whole life is an elaborate game, designed to satisfy his need for the mystery and drama which ordinary life fails to provide.

The games he plays are built around the conventions of horror films, of which Burligame is a devotee and addict. All of his frames of reference are horror films, all of life is looked at through the translucent frame of some horror film image. "Is not this real life, risk and danger, as in Voodoo Woman, as in Creature from the Black Lagoon?" His most consistent habit of thought is that nothing is as it seems; everything is potentially "menacing as in Dragstrip Riot, as in Terror from the Year 5000." Thus, when he walks into a movie theater expecting to find the place empty and sees instead a heavy Negro, well-dressed, in dark glasses, the situation is ripe for Burligame's imagination. At once he decides that if the Negro is hostile, he will flee through the door marked EXIT. But for Burligame a simple EXIT is not a simple EXIT; there is no bulb behind the sign, no certainty that it leads anywhere. The boy he had seen with a kite in the lobby

suggests for him frightening possibilities. "What was the kite for?"

The Negro is someone like himself--also a hiding man, and the rest of the story is a kind of ritualistic enactment of the horror film genre, in which each man attempts to discover who the other man really is, what he is hiding from, while at the same time each tries to conceal his true identity. The irony throughout is that the only "true" identity either of them has is that gleaned from horror films.

The story is rich in its parody of all sorts of specialized languages: film, sociology, psychology, religion, philosophy--since the two movie buffs are educated and can borrow from all the disciplines in order to give weight and complexity to their games. In response to the Negro's "apparently" simple observation that "It's better when the place is full," Burligame considers a number of possible responses, then says: "People don't always tell the truth." He considers the possibility that the Negro is "simply what he pretends to be: a well-dressed Negro in dark glasses," but Burligame dismisses this since "All life is rooted in contradiction." Each man agrees openly that "I could be anybody," and Burligame responds: "Thus, we are problematic for each other." Burligame notices that the Negro is "too knowledgeable in the sociology of concealment," and that perhaps he lies to suggest the "mutability of time."

Finally, each man reveals what he claims is his true identity, his true story. The Negro says his real name is

Adrian Hipkiss and that among other things he mailed a letter in 1944 in which "I didn't say what I meant." His whole life has been one mask after another. Now, his "identity is gone, blown away, who am I, who knows?" His story, Burligame knows, is patently contrived. Then it is Burligame's turn. He hides from the priests, particularly from a Father Blau, who wanted Burligame to go out for basketball ("I was the tallest boy in the eighthgrade at Our Lady of Sorrows"). When he refused, Father Blau got his revenge in the confessional, insisted on knowing everything, including impure thoughts, self-abuse, and compulsive over-consumption of Baby Ruths, Mars Bars, and Butterfingers. Burligame was "in fine totally alienated." The story's concluding twist follows along the lines of the horror film conventions, as Hipkiss "strips away his skin," claims he has been sent to get Burligame, who is of course prepared for such a crisis with a deadly device borrowed from his favorite genre.

Relying heavily upon the trivia of the pop arts and upon the rhetoric of sociology, "Hiding Man" is a satiric comment on boredom and on the attempt to create artificial mystery and drama by avoiding real life, real drama and mystery. In another sense, though, the game played by Burligame is similar to that played by Barthelme, who turns life into elaborate games and intricate designs.

Barthelme is at his best when he creates recognizable social types, as he does in "Margins." This story satirizes bourgeois interest in race relations, specifically the liberal

white's curiosity and beliefs about "Negroes." Edward, the white man, is certainly a "fool," as he himself admits and as Carl, the black man, agrees. But in 1964, when this story was written, many white people held lazy assumptions about blacks, particularly the condescending assumption that blacks want to be like whites. Barthelme simply exaggerates things a bit. Edward's interest in the implications of handwriting and "margins" makes him even more of a buffoon, while Carl is made out to be a super-funky literary black, a master of put-ons. He stands on the street corner, waiting for hand-outs, wearing a sign of sandwich boards proclaiming that all of the clichés of black history have happened to him personally.

> I Was Put in Jail in Selby County Alabama For Five Years For Stealing A Dollar and A Half Which I Did Not Do. While I Was In Jail My Brother Was Killed & My Mother Ran Away When I Was Little. In Jail I Began Preaching & I Preach to People Wherever I Can Bearing Witness of Eschatological Love. I Have Filled Out Papers for Jobs But Nobody Will Give Me a Job Because I Have Been In Jail & The Whole Scene is Very Dreary, Pepsi Cola. I Need Your Offerings to Get Food. Patent Applied For & Deliver Us From Evil.[12]

"It's not true, is it?" Edward asks seriously. And Carl's response is a comically incongruous use of literary jargon: "It's true...with a kind of merde-y inner truth which shines forth as the objective correlative of what actually did happen, back home."

True or not, Edward does not really care about the substance of Carl's sign; he is concerned with how it is written, the width of the margins, the pointed "m" and "n." His

questions are those on all white minds: "Are you a drug addict?" "Are you a Muslim?" "Where do you steal your books from, mostly?" When he is unable to obtain a superior feeling over Carl, Edward gets critical, self-defensive. He tells Carl: "People like people who look neat...you look kind of crummy, if you don't mind me saying so.... Do you think I'm a pretty color?" Edward begins to grow "despondant" over the fact that Carl is "well-spoken"--a fact which Carl attributes to his reading. Barthelme's choice of John Hawkes--an experimentalist worlds from black concerns--for Carl's reading material is fine satire.

Edward's irritation increases because more than anything he wants to <u>teach</u> the black man something. "Get a haircut, Carl.... Get a new suit...you could be upwardly mobile, you know, if you just put your back into it." To Carl's statement that it is "cold here on 14th street," Edward comically declares that Carl's coldness "arises from your marginal status as a despised person in our society." Unable to teach him anything but still wanting to be helpful, Edward agrees to hold Carl's sandwich boards while Carl goes into a store "to take a leak." "'Boy, these things are kind of heavy, aren't they?' 'They cut you a bit.' said Carl with a malicious smile." Then the final paragraph: "When Carl returned the two men slapped each other sharply in the face with the back of the hand, that beautiful part of the hand where the knuckles grow." This ending is surprising, almost shocking, even on later readings. Barthelme allows the characters to

come to blows, not because that would probably happen in the world of literary realism, but because pasting each other is on their minds. Carl has only contempt for Edward; Edward fears Carl, does not understand him, and hates the fact that he cannot make him submissive. Almost the entire story is pure dialog except for the last paragraph, where Barthelme is saying, in effect: this is how these two, and in a larger sense, the black and white races, really feel about each other.

"Margins" is a playful piece which allows Barthelme to deflate numerous clichéd assumptions and to exploit his fondness for bookish dialogue--in an unlikely character. He uses this same approach in "The Joker's Greatest Triumph," the first of a number of stories which dip into American folklore for subject-matter. His intention in these related pieces is similar: to show how the world has changed in the time since the heroes of pop culture roamed the earth. Reading these stories is like checking in on these legendary heroes after a long absence, to see how they are doing. Naturally, they are not doing too well. They have been smitten with identity crises, with "problems"--qualities deadly to the heroic life. Their concerns are at once too pedestrian and too sophisticated. In "The Joker's Greatest Triumph," Batman and Robin seem unaware that things have changed but several changes are noticeable at once: first, they have become boozers. Fredric goes over to Bruce Wayne's house, just as he used to, every Tuesday night; most of their talk is

about what they are drinking.

> "Tell me, Bruce, what is it you're drinking there?" Fredric asked.
> "I'm sorry Fredric it's tomato juice. Can I get you a glass?"
> "Does it have anything in it or is it just plain tomato juice?"
> "It's tomato juice with a little vodka."
> "Yes, I wouldn't mind a glass," Fredric said. "Not too heavy on the vodka please."[13]

Moments later Bruce returns from the kitchen and announces that he must "have left the vodka in the Batmobile," which, we later discover, is equipped with "a little bar, with ice, glasses, water, soda, quinine, lemons, etc..."--though Bruce does not drink "while I'm working." After Batman has been knocked unconscious by the Joker, Fredric's first words are, "Don't you think we ought to give him a little brandy or something?" A button is pressed and out comes "a bottle of B & B and the appropriate number of glasses."

The second change has to do with their comic pedestrian dialogue. Fredric asks Commissioner Gordon the best way to get to the airport.

> "Well, if I were you I'd go out 34th street until you hit War Memorial, then take a right on Memorial Drive until it connects with Gotham Parkway! After you're on the Parkway it's clear sailing!" he indicated.
> "Wait a minute!" Batman said. "Wouldn't it be quicker to get on the Dugan Expressway where it comes in there at 11th street and then take the North Loop out to the Richardson Freeway? Don't you think that would save time?"
> "Well, I come to work that way!" the Commissioner said. "But they're putting in another two lanes on the North Loop, so that you have to detour down Strand, then cut over to 99th to get back on the Expressway! Takes you about two miles out of your way!" he said.[14]

The third change is the one discussed in the previous

stories: Batman, Robin and Fredric have become complex bourgeois. Robin is studying and having trouble with his French at Andover; Batman hums "a tune which Fredric recognizes as the "Warsaw Concerto," and later he hums the flip-side "Cornish Rhapsody." Having beenunmasked by the Joker, Batman later worries about his "identity."

> "Yes Batman," Robin said seriously, "I think he learned your real identity!"
> "Great Scott!" Batman said. "If he reveals it to the whole world it means the end of my career as a crime fighter! Well, it's a problem."[15]

Finally, like everyone else in the post-Freudian world, the boys are articulate about motivation and behavior. "What makes the Joker tick I wonder?" Fredric asks. "I mean what are his real motivations?" And then follows Bruce's parodic catalog of The Joker's contradictory nature--a paraphrase of "what Mark Schorer said about Sinclair Lewis."

What makes the story effective is that alongside all of these changes Barthelme has left just enough of the old identities intact. He has preserved the exclamatory style, adding scores of exclamation marks to heighten the parody. He has preserved the use of idioms used literally:

> "Batman! I thought that clue I sent you would leave you completely at sea!"
> "No, Joker! I'm afraid this leaves your plans up in the air!"
> "But not for long Batman! I'm going to bring you down to earth!"[16]

And on the walls of Bruce's study hang many trophies of "past exploits" to remind us of the Batman and Robin of old.

Batman and Robin are presented as being oblivious to their new consciousness but Barthelme often uses the opposite

approach: although his characters are placed in the present, the past looms over everything--sometimes as a source of pain, but usually of cheap nostalgia, a continual memory of "better days." A more thorough examination of just how Barthelme uses the past will be reserved for a discussion of Snow White, but the past also figures strongly in several stories in this collection--all of which are either directly or indirectly about marriage.

Barthelme's treatment of marriage may be considered under the larger umbrella of his treatment of American institutions. The question posed is: how are certain institutions holding up in the modern world? Relying heavily on the past for structural and thematic parallels, Barthelme will, in later books, put to test the church, the law, the arts, popular myths, education, language, the self, and marriage. In Caligari, he is most obsessed with marriage.

His treatment of married life cannot be separated from his treatment of the other problems I have been discussing--identity, alienation, boredom--since these problems are in a large part responsible for the disintegration of marriages. In "To London and Rome" Barthelme creates two characters who, except for their names and their money, have no identity whatever. Peter and Alison are mere puppets, shells of human beings, without a trace of inner life. Their external life consists only of buying things and going places--activities designed to ward off boredom. "Peter Alison said, what do you want to do now? Oh I don't know I said. Well we

can't simply sit around the apartment Alison said so we went to the races at Aqueduct where I bought a race horse..." Peter also buys a sewing machine, a purple Rolls Royce, a $1,600 garden hose, a house for the horse, a jockey, a gardener, a mistress (for $5,500), a $1.5 million hospital (when the horse gets sick), and a Viscount Jet to fly to London and Rome. These items are paid for with checks on the First City Bank, the Capital National Bank, the State Bank and Trust, the Municipal National Bank, the Central National Bank, and the Manufacturers Trust Bank.

> Where have you been? Alison said, I've been waiting lunch for hours. I bought a new suit I said, how do you like it? Very nice Alison said, but hurry I've got to go shopping after lunch. Shopping! I said, I'll go with you![17]

Other than the comic catalog of purchases and banks the story is interesting chiefly for its device of marginal notations. We recall that in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, a poem rich in levels of symbolism, Coleridge used this device to help explain some of the poetic complexities, and to provide bridges between stanzas; thus, in that poem it is a highly functional literary technique. In "To London and Rome" the device is parodically redundant but still functional in a satiric way. The story's style is so simple and straightforward, so lacking in depth, and structured on such a single plane that explanation is unnecessary. Therefore, the only function of the marginal notations is to provide bridges between purchases, when nothing is happening. "THERE WAS A BRIEF PAUSE,""THERE WAS A LONG PAUSE,""THERE WAS A TREMENDOUS

PAUSE, A PROLONGED SILENCE." The pauses and silences are more significant than the "action," since Peter and Alison's whole marriage is an attempt to avoid them.

"To London and Rome" is one of numerous stories in which Barthelme uses ironically a literary device from another period or work and is able to make a comment on his own impoverished material. But working with impoverished material has its risks, and if his technique is not strong enough the results are often less successful. "Will You Tell Me" is written in a style similar to that of "To London and Rome" but the numerous characters are uninteresting and Barthelme fails to do anything sufficiently interesting with them. The characters grow up, get married, have affairs. There is a lot of smiling. They go to Madrid and Denmark and to the Virgin Islands. There is some complex bourgeois talk: "Do you want to talk about phenomenalogical reduction now? or do you want a muffin?" There is a suicide.

"The Piano Player" succumbs to some of the same weaknesses but on the whole it is more successful. The couple is married and bored but the wife at least has the virtue of honesty. She cannot remember the names of her children who, she says, are ugly. We know they are ugly because the first sentence describes in detail one of the ugliest children ever seen. But Brian, the husband, refuses to admit it: "Nonsense... they're wonderful children. Wonderful and beautiful. Other people's children are ugly, not our children." His wife is bored, tired and overworked. She wears shoulderpads and has

been caulking the medicine chest. Brian tries to cheer her up: "Get up, dearly beloved. Stand up and sing. Sing Parsifal." But she will not sing. Instead, she delivers a tirade. She wants out of this life. She wants a Triumph and she wants to go to Wellfleet to talk to Edmund Wilson ("Bunny"). "I thought you were going to be somebody," she shrieks at her husband. "I thought you were going to be distinguished, like Bunny."

The story ends with one of those surprise-shock-endings characteristic of several stories in this book. Brian is murdered by his wife's piano. Conceptually, the ending works because Barthelme prepared for it. Brian's wife is a much stronger person than he is. She has more energy, more nerve, she is less deceived, and she has a talent: she plays the piano. Brian, on the other hand, is a loser. He has no character, he has bad taste (he built a steel house which is rusting), and he is jealous of her piano. Her piano is a threat to him. He is, in short, so weak, so insubstantial, that he can be destroyed by what the piano represents: his wife's talent, his competition, his enemy. As in "Margins," the ending is a display of Barthelme's authority over his material, a performance in which at least part of the message is that fiction can break through the constraints of conventional literary realism.

There is the same message in another story about marriage--"For I'm the Boy Whose Only Joy is Loving You"--a bitter but effective piece whose bright happy title (song lyric borrowed

from "better days") makes the story even darker. The single scene is simple and rich with possibilities: three men in a car returning from the airport where one of them has just put his former wife on a plane. The three men are ostensibly friends, but each of them is inwardly seething with maliciousness because his life is so empty. Bloomsbury had apparently asked Huber and Whittle to accompany him on the send-off in order to preclude privacy and weeping, but on the return trip he grows more and more irritable at the fact that his friends "are not what he wishes them to be," though he is aware that he is possibly "not what they wished him to be." His friends, meanwhile, grow increasingly irritable because Bloomsbury refuses to tell them "<u>everything</u>" concerning his divorce; they want the "emotion--<u>give us the feeling</u>." And here Barthelme compiles one of his parodic catalogs, this one an itemized parody of the friends' vulgar curiosity, but also a parody of the substance of married life.

> It would be interesting I think as well as instructive Whittle said casually, to know for instance at what point the situation of living together became untenable, whether she wept when you told her, whether you wept when she told you...if there were mental cruelties, cruelties of what order and on whose part, whether she had a lover or did not have a lover, whether you did or did not, whether you kept the television or she kept the television...what food remains in the pantry at this time...was it a fun divorce or not a fun divorce...whether you asked her for a "date" after the granting of the decree or did not ask...whether the date if there was such a date was a fun thing or not a fun thing--in short we'd like to get the feel of the event he said.18

When Bloomsbury refuses to satisfy their curiosity they remind him that they "are no doubt all you have left in the

world," a proposition Bloomsbury finds "disagreeable." And then the story's shock ending: the "friends of the family" beat Bloomsbury in the face, "first with the brandy bottles, then with the tire iron, until at length the hidden feeling emerged, in the form of salt from his eyes and black blood from his ears, and from his mouth, all sorts of words."

The story never offers any specific reason why the marriage failed--not that one is ever needed--but its omission here is purposeful: these men are characterized as so vacant that not even friendship, let alone marriage, is possible. Emotionally, they are dead.

> Emotion! Whittle exclaimed, when was the last time we ever had any? The war I expect Hubert replied, all those chaps going West. I'll give you a hundred dollars Whittle said, for the feeling.[19]

This is a parody of emotional deadness, of course, and Barthelme suggests, in the "Pelly" passages, that the only time most men feel any intensity of emotion today is during brief sexual affairs--the point being that affairs are easy compared to marriage and friendship. In his love affair, Bloomsbury is, like most men, merely trying to recapture some emotion, what in another context he calls those "Golden days... in the sunshine of our happy youth."

It is not necessary or even satisfactory to read the violent ending as a literal murder. As in "Margins," "The Piano Player," and even, to an extent, in "Hiding Man," the ending is a literary murder--another brash, authorial intrusion in which Barthelme is saying, in effect: since Bloomsbury would not give them any emotional satisfaction, they

beat it out of him. They needed emotion.

"The Big Broadcast of 1938" almost seems a companion piece to "For I'm the Boy Whose Only Joy is Loving You." Here is Bloomsbury, alive and well; he has "acquired in exchange for an old house that had been theirs, his and hers, a radio or more properly radio station." He plays "The Star Spangled Banner" hundreds of times a day, a piece he likes "immoderately, because of its finality." He selects a word from the English language, such as "nevertheless," and repeats it in a monotonous voice for as much as a quarter of an hour. And he broadcasts announcements "addressed not to the mass of men but of course to her," his former wife. From his announcements to her one gets the impression, for awhile, that he desperately wants her back, but in the end, when she returns and offers herself to him, he rejects her. "Martha...old skin, why can't you let the old days die."

The only other stories in this first book are "Up Aloft in the Air" and "The Vienese Opera Ball." The first is a boring story about boring people who try desperately to make life interesting by dancing on airport runways and by hopping from one to another of Ohio's four major cities, looking for fun. The other story creates a cocktail party atmosphere: "Carola was thrilled by all of the interesting conversation," but the parody of interesting conversation is dull, as are the mounds of almanac type information. In these two stories one already sees a problem which Barthelme would try to overcome in the next decade: having succeeded in wrenching

fiction out of its predictable molds, he must resist becoming predictable himself.

On the whole, however, Barthelme's fiction improves after Caligari. While one of the strengths of this book is Barthelme's sure sense of irony, it also exhibits an authorial arrogance and swagger which is not held in check by the sort of self-irony that subtly controls his best work. This arrogance is particularly evident in those stories where Barthelme simply steps in and twists an ending to meet the demands of his preconceived design. The trick is a somewhat crude assertion of his authority, a display of dictatorial control which elevates himself as the work's only hero, and of his own attitude as the only significance. In his best work he will remain just as much the dictator, but in a more subtle and complex way: he will become a vulnerable dictator, a man who continues to wreak havoc all around him, but whose attitude includes the knowledge that he has nothing to put in its place. The writer of Caligari is far more pleased with himself than the writer Barthelme will become. The writer of the later work knows that his freedom is a mixed blessing.

A parallel change that will take place after Caligari is a severe refinement of style. Caligari provides us with a good but inconsistent taste of that style. Almost every story contains passages of highly stylized parodies of various rhetorics and jargons, but they are just that--passages--they stand out, or seem inserted, within a story which is

otherwise told in a straightforward, often colorless prose. Thus, "A Shower of Gold," while it offers an impressive display of absurdist rhetoric, nevertheless uses the story itself as a kind of envelope for that rhetoric--as if the story has something else to offer in addition. Beginning with Snow White, Barthelme develops an organic style in which every word is stylistically functional. It is in that work and in his succeeding books that one of Barthelme's central themes emerges: style is all he has to offer.

Chapter 2

Snow White:

The Irony of Infinite Absolute Negativity

> Whereas once we were simple bourgeois who knew what to do, now we are complex bourgeois who are at a loss. We do not like this complexity. We circle it wearily, prodding it from time to time with a shopkeeper's forefinger: What is it? Is it, perhaps, bad for business?
>
> Snow White

The above lines, spoken by the collective "dwarves" in Snow White, constitute a miniature summary and satire of the self-conscious society which is one of Barthelme's primary subjects in this most self-conscious of novels. The lines take us at once from the world of Grimm to the world of Barthelme, from a time when there were "giants on the earth" to a time when "the seven of them only add up to about two real men." For self-consciousness is the central fact of the unheroic life, and Barthelme's method of exploiting this fact is simply to retain the form of the original fairy-tale while substituting this alien content.

Snow White does not have a plot in any realistic sense but there is a story of sorts, a vehicle which serves as a framework for Barthelme's satiric commentary. The Snow White we remember now lives with her seven suitors "in a mocksome travesty of approved behavior," and far from the innocent, untroubled girl Grimm created, today's Snow White is the

personified spirit of Alienation herself. She has thus become a "problem" for her seven men, as well as for Paul, the would-be prince. These characters' various attempts to analyze Snow White, themselves, and life itself provide the story's basic movement and the novel's satiric thrust.

Above all, Snow White is worried about her "role" in life, and about finding "meaningful" goals. Whereas formerly she had been happy reading the mail and writing letters, now she reads Liberation, writes existential poems, and delivers enigmatic statements: "Let a hundred flowers bloom." Whereas she used to wear "tight-fitting, how-the-west-was-won trousers" now she has taken to wearing "heavy blue bulky shapeless People's Volunteer trousers." The new Snow White fears mirrors, apples, poisoned combs and is under the care of a psychiatrist, who tells her that she is "uninteresting"--that harshest of critiques. There are reasons for her condition, of course, and some of them are to be found in the list of subjects she took in college.

> She studied Modern Woman, Her Privileges and Responsibilities: the nature and nurture of women and what they stand for, in evolution and in history, including householding, upbringing, peacekeeping, healing and devotion, and how these contribute to the rehumanizing of today's world. Then she studied Classical Guitar I, utilizing the methods and techniques of Sor, Tarrega, Segovia, etc. Then she studied English Romantic Poets II: Shelley, Byron, Keats. Then she studied Theoretical Foundations of Psychology: mind, consciousness, unconscious mind, personality, the self, interpersonal relations, psychosexual norms, social games, groups, adjustment, conflict, authority, individuation...[1]

The style here, the random accumulation of subjects, is fine satiric comment on the eclecticism of the contemporary

university, and explains the habit of analysis and the growth of self-consciousness which best characterizes modern man. At one point her suitors discuss "The Psychology of Snow White"--

> What does she hope for? "Some day my prince will come." By this she means that she lives her own being as incomplete, pending the arrival of someone who will "complete" her. That is, she lives her own being as "not-with"...the "not-with" is experienced as stronger, more real, at this particular instant in time, than the "being with." This incompleteness is an ache capable of subduing all other data presented by consciousness.[2]

Such language, if read with an ironic turn of mind, would seem almost parodic even in the context of a psychology text. Voiced by a layman, however, we see it instantly for the jargon it is, a jargon which complicates rather than clarifies, and which the characters use for its own sake rather than because they have any genuine interest in or understanding of the problem.

Much of Snow White's identity-crisis stems from her disenchantment with the role of "horsewife." Even while her suitors elevate her for her feminine qualities, they treat her as a second-class citizen; hence, the legitimate complaints and clichés of the feminist movement. Barthelme compiles a mock-bibliography on the subject.

> THE HORSEWIFE IN HISTORY
>
> FAMOUS HORSEWIVES
>
> THE HORSEWIFE: A SPIRITUAL PORTRAIT
>
> THE HORSEWIFE: A CRITICAL STUDY
>
> FIRST MOP, 4000 BC

VIEWS OF ST. AUGUSTINE

OXFORD COMPANION TO THE AMERICAN HORSEWIFE

ACCEPT ROLE, PSYCHOLOGIST URGES

THE PLASTIC BAG[3]

While on the one hand Snow White takes a more than casual interest in the liberation of women, on the other hand she has been conditioned to take a more than casual interest in and concern for cleaning. Thus, through rhetorically she resists the role which the Psychologist Urges, she nevertheless pays elaborate and painstaking attention to her chores, "paying particular attention to the gas orifices," using a bit of ammonia "to help cut the grease," and "using steel wool on the tough spots."

Snow White's main problem, however, is that she can find no heroes in the world, and regarding this problem too her behavior is characterized as contradictory: on one hand there is her liberated rhetoric; on the other, she resorts to the seductive ploy of hanging her hair out the window. She refuses Hogo's feverish love because he does not have "the purple blood of exalted station" which Paul does--though she admits that Paul is "pure frog." And she has not given up the most romantic of notions--that a prince is somewhere off in the wings.

> "Which prince?" Snow White wondered brushing her teeth. "Which prince will come? Will it be Prince Audrey? Prince Igor? Prince Alphonso? Prince Malcolm? Prince Donalbain? Prince Fernando? Prince Siegfried? Prince Phillip? Prince Albert? Prince Paul? Prince...[4]

Most of the book's parody of various rhetorics is found

in the suitors' efforts to analyze Snow White and their general predicament. Barthelme has made certain that the seven men are virtually indistinguishable from one another. They are all "talk," as it were, and their talk is all the same, consisting of the jargon of the specialized disciplines, clichés, and the "sludge" of qualifications. Only Bill, the leader who no longer leads, is different, and that is only because he represents an even more extreme state of hyperconsciousness and self-doubt. At the outset, Bill is "tired" of Snow White and cannot bear to be touched by anyone. His comrades, the collective narrators, analyze his condition.

> We speculate that he doesn't want to be involved in human situations any more. A withdrawal. Withdrawal is one of the four modes of dealing with anxiety. We speculate that his reluctance to be touched springs from that. Dan does not go along with the anxiety theory. Dan does not believe in anxiety. Dan speculates that Bill's reluctance to be touched is a physical manifestation of a metaphysical condition that is not anxiety. But he is the only one who supports that. The rest of us support anxiety.[5]

The language highlights the felt disparity between analytic language and reality. What do their words mean? What are they talking about? The word "speculate" is repeated five times in this short chapter, in addition to phrases like "Dan does not believe," "She must have noticed," "We are sure," "We are certain." The concluding line undercuts all of this speculation and pretense of certainty. "But to what does she attribute the 'not-liking' itself? We don't know." They don't know. The language of explanation has explained nothing.

All of Barthelme's parodies of the way these men talk suggest that analytic language is too often a means of avoiding reality, of circumventing problems, rather than getting to the heart of them. Bill's friends blame their problems on the failure of leadership--always an easy out. They complain about "all that potential being pissed away"; why isn't Bill out "realizing his potential," why isn't he out "maximizing his possibilities." Bill describes his own former desire for greatness in a hilarious monologue whose very triteness reveals why greatness will forever elude him.

> "Yes," Bill said, "I wanted to be great, once. But the moon for that was not in my sky, then. I had hoped to make a powerful statement. But there was no wind, no weeping. I had hoped to make a powerful statement coupled with a moving plea. But there was no weeping, except perhaps, concealed weeping.... I had hoped to make a significant contribution.... I had hoped to bring about a heightened awareness.... I wanted to provide a definitive account.... I wanted to achieve a breakthrough.... I wanted to effect a rapprochment, I wanted to reconcile irreconciliable forces..."[6]

Later, rather than responding directly to Snow White's hair invitation, Bill, as well as the others, analyze the "multiple meanings" of this "complex and difficult question." In order to improve their sexual habits with Snow White the men buy a new shower curtain, and when this maneuver fails to produce results they call in a professor of esthetics to help them determine the quality of the curtain. The whole chapter is a satire on Americans' habit of seeking out authorities and specialists to solve their problems, as well as a commentary on the near-fact that there exist specialists for

for virtually everything--"shower curtain critics recruited from the curtaining journals, if there are such journals, and I do not doubt it." Paul, the prince-figure, is discouraged from stick-dancing by a stick-dancing critic.

All problems are "papered over" by evasive language and pseudo-logic, or by indulgence in the trivial. When Snow White complains: "Oh I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!" the men get rid of a rude visitor, who had suggested "fish slime." "But the problem remained." When Edward delivers a sermon on the mistreatment of the American horsewife, Dan argues that "rightly understood, the problem of Snow White has to do at its center with nothing else but red towels. Seen in this way it becomes a non-problem." Clem resents being treated like a "rube" but prefers to think instead about fried calimaretti. Paul believes he has a "right" to effect a liason with some beauty, but "this duck-with-blue-cheese sandwich that I am eating is mighty absorbing, too." The men want, above all, to preserve equanimity, or at least what little remains since Snow White has become a problem. To this end, they usually avoid saying anything with even a hint of controversy. The novel is a catalog of safe, pointless observations.

> "It was a brisk day, more brisk than some of the others we've had."[7]
>
> "It had been extremely tasty, that trout."[8]
>
> "I smoked an Old Gold cigarette, the same one I had been smoking before. There was still some

> of it left because I had put it down without finishing it."[9]
>
> "Then Bill said something: 'Torch in the face.' Other people said other things."[10]
>
> "'After I read the book, I'--'Don't say that Edward,' Kevin said. 'Don't say anything you'll regret later.'"[11]

Paul, the prince-figure, is no more decisive or capable of action than the common suitors, despite the blueness of his blood, and despite his assertion that "I am princely." He is afflicted with a debilitating self-consciousness; he poses before a fence, hoping to be discovered so that he will not have to go to a monastery. The hair hanging from Snow White's window merely makes him nervous; he sets up an elaborate sensing mechanism in the yard outside her window and becomes "a voyeur." Only loathsome Hogo and malicious Jane are free of self-consciousness and identity-crisis (though even Hogo can quote Stendahl). The "dwarves," unable to satisfy Snow White, call Hogo in for advice. The world is "full of cunts," he tells them. "The loss of any particular one is not to be taken seriously...bear in mind multiplicity and forget about uniqueness." Jane, deserted by Hogo and "alone with my malice at last," writes a letter "irritating in the extreme" and seeks new forms of malice. But even hers is a "cultivated malice, not the pale natural malice we knew when the world was young."

Nine-tenths of the novel consists of what Snow White calls non-events, but the book ends with a series of decisive events. The seven suitors, in order to restore all that lost

equanimity, take Bill to trial, where he is found guilty of "vatricide" and failure. He is hanged, and Hogo takes his place. Jane prepares a poisoned vodka gibson for Snow White which Paul intercepts at the last moment: he dies in an unheroic, convulsive "death agony." Snow White undergoes a "revirginization" and "apotheosis."

The collective abstract characters represent that extreme condition of a society which, in Eliot's phrase, "knows too much and is assured of too little." What the characters "know" is the language of literature, sociology, psychology and advertising--which is to say that they know the language of writers who have tried to explain the world and human behavior. This knowledge accounts for the self-consciously literary style of the novel--a style whose incongruity is heightened by being contained within a fairy-tale form, and it informs one of Barthelme's central intentions, which is to satirize society by parodying the language of the "explainers." The trouble with the various technical jargons is, as Gerald Graff observes, "the way they can delude one into supposing that all of the mysteries of human nature are at once explained by the simple act of affixing labels on them."[12] When these jargons are removed from their intellectual context and voiced by the man-on-the-street, as they so often are today, the disparity between analytic language and reality becomes all the more pronounced. Since the layman's grasp of the concepts behind the jargon is shaky, he tends to use it with a highly tentative authority, and in order to capture

this characteristic Barthelme adopts in Snow White what might be called the style of continual qualification: most explanations are followed by a series of words or phrases such as "probably," "to a certain extent," "if you follow me," "as is likely," etc. At one point in the book Bill echoes a thought which describes Barthelme's own posture: "Now I limit myself to listening to what people say, and thinking what pamby it is, what they say. My nourishment is refined by the ongoing circus of the mind in action."

Snow White is thus written is a self-parodic style wherein increased complication in vocabulary leads to increased confusion and self-estrangement, and all explanations are cancelled by endless qualifications. What Bill calls "pamby" is what Barthelme calls dreck. This dreck is the entire substance of Snow White, and it is discussed in one of the novel's key chapters.

> "You know, Klipschorn was right I think when he spoke of the 'blanketing' effect of ordinary language, referring, as I recall, to the part that sort of, you know, 'fills in' between the other parts. That part, the 'filling' you might say, of which the expression 'you might say' is a good example, is to me the most interesting part, and of course it might also be called the 'stuffing' I suppose, and there is probably also, in addition, some other word that would do as well, to describe it, or maybe a number of them. But the quality this 'stuffing' has, that the other parts of verbality do not have, is two parted, perhaps: (1) an 'endless' quality and (2) a 'sludge' quality. Of course that is possibly two qualities but I prefer to think of them as different aspects of a single quality, if you can think of it that way. The 'endless'aspect of 'stuffing' is that it goes on and on, in many different forms, and in fact our exchanges are in large measure composed of it, in larger measure even, perhaps, than they are composed of that which is not 'stuffing.' The 'sludge'

quality is the heaviness that this 'stuff' has..."[13] Dan's speech is both an explanation of the dreck of language and it is a parodic example of it. The sludge or stuffing of qualification which he describes occurs in abundance on every page of the book. It constitutes the characters' main verbal habit and it suggests that they do not quite understand what they are talking about; the concepts which they are attempting to verbalize are over their heads. But Dan himself in this speech is over his head intellectually, and he must resort to the very stuffing which he is trying to explain: "I suppose," "perhaps," "probably also," "or maybe," "possibly," etc. The chapter goes on to discuss the relationship between trash and language; it postulates that at some point in the future trash will reach 100 percent, at which point "the question turns from a question of disposing of this trash to a question of appreciating its qualities..."

The parodic assumption of Snow White, and the reason for its severely attenuated picture of humanity, is that the world, including language, is already 100 percent trash. Barthelme has taken the "most interesting part" and made it the whole. "It's that we want to be on the leading edge of the trash phenomenon, the everted sphere of the future, and that's why we pay particular attention, too, to those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon." Snow White assumes that "those aspects" of language have become the only aspects, and that it is necessary, therefore, to "appreciate" their qualities. Of course,

appreciating the qualities of trash, whether language or material, has become something of a convention of 20th century art, beginning with the so-called Ash Can painters at the turn of the century, on up through the junk sculptors of today. In literature Ionesco, Eliot, Beckett, Raymond Queneau, Nathalie Sarraute and other writers had great sport with inane cocktail party type dialogue. Stephen Spender spoke for the "pylon poets" and wrote about "the concrete that trails black wires." But many writers tended either to romanticize the ugly, or to assume that somewhere there is something that is not ugly. The idea was that all of life--the beautiful as well as the ugly, high life as well as low life--was a proper subject for art; a subject did not have to be inherently "poetic" to warrant literary treatment.

With Barthelme (and with other postmodernists) the choice between the poetic and the unpoetic is gone. Now there is only the question of either total immersion into the unpoetic or a retreat into the privacy of one's own poetic world. To follow the latter course would mean a voluntary withdrawal from the social life of the times, the same sort of withdrawal which we observed of numerous 1940's and 1950's writers. To follow the former course means immersing oneself as deeply as possible into the dreck of contemporary society <u>while retaining an ability to see out of it</u>. This is a difficult and complex process which requires some explanation.

We recall that Seymour Krim and Earl Shorris praised Barthelme for his contemporaneity and for his ability to

catch a taste of the times. Catching a taste of the times, in the best sense of that phrase, is not simply a matter of writing about the latest happening, which is what most journalists new and old do, and what many novelists do too in their fervent striving after contemporaneity. Reading through Updike's Couples may stir up nostalgic memories of the era of the Bay of Pigs and Kennedy's assassination but what we are left with is contemporary history, not a contemporary vision. Mailer's recent books, relying on the stuff of current events, are often interesting, but much of the interest resides in the events themselves, simply because they are happening to us today. Even The Naked and the Dead achieves much of its power from the sheer power of the war itself.

Barthelme achieves his contemporaneity not simply from the power of current events but from a strong sense of the past--which is the way the best artists of all times have achieved it. Reading through Barthelme's fictions is in a sense like touring the ruins of contemporary America, but they are not presented as ruins, per se: we know they are ruins only because Barthelme, through various formal and stylistic devices, makes the more stable past a felt thing. Barthelme's constant subject is confusion, and his fictions do not describe this confusion; rather it grows out of a sense of some unstated loss.

He immerses himself in the dreck of the present, but he retains an ability to see out of it by using the past as a mirror against which the present is measured and structured.

The historical aspect of Barthelme's writing cannot be emphasized enough. All of his best stories rely heavily on tradition in one way or another, either through direct literary allusion, or stylistic allusion, or structural and thematic parallels. That he uses the past as the basis for parody and satire does not lessen the seriousness of this use. Leslie Fiedler points out that American writers' use of the literary past has always been essentially comic and burlesque. "Mock-epic is of course their form and satire their mode; but the device they make most use of is the travesty-allusion: the simultaneous evocation and parody of great verses out of the past."[14] Even a writer as solemn about the need for tradition as Eliot was usually whimsical in his poetic treatment of the past, Fiedler says. The reader coming across the Goldsmith allusion in The Waste Land "finally is unsure what is being mocked: Goldsmith, our relationship to him, us, or the poet himself?"[15] The term travesty-allusion accurately describes one of Barthelme's persistent habits, too. In Snow White, for instance, there is this allusion to Henry James: "The recipes came from our father. 'Try to be a man about whom nothing is known,' our father said." Gerald Graff argues that what Barthelme is doing here is inverting "the assumptions about character, psychology and the authority of the artist.... In place of James' earnest dedication to his craft, Barthelme assumes an irreverent stance."[16] This is true, but the excessiveness of the style, the later juxtaposition of canned goods with human moral choice, suggests parody of

the irreverent stance too. As Fiedler said of Eliot, it is difficult to tell what is being mocked. The main point, though, is that the present is modified and given historical context, and the importance which the present assumes merely by virtue of its being the present is diminished.

This is just a single instance of what the whole of Snow White attempts to do. It is a commonplace that Americans live with less sense of history than any other culture, and for that reason they tend to inflate the importance, value, and uniqueness of the present. Snow White deflates the present and suggests that human beings without a sense of history and tradition are shadows of human beings. Everything in the novel serves as a reminder of what man no longer is, and the fairy-tale form is not to be taken lightly. Although the world which Grimm described never really existed it nevertheless contained imaginative validity for its time, a time not when men were free of the follies and vices which are a part of being human but when men were surer of who they were and what they were doing because the past, in the form of history, family, the church, was still alive to help guide them. The past for today's world, and in Snow White, is simply a source of cheap nostalgia, or what D. S. Carne-Ross calls the supermarket past, wherein we purchase trinkets, momentoes, antiques. These "things," wrenched from the past, become meaningless, become more of the garbage of our age.[17] Snow White is saturated with the things, fashions, fads, gimmicks, and notions of our age--amplifiers, motorcycles, baby

food, drugs--and Barthelme's technique is to trivialize all of this "impedimenta" by reducing it to mere language, to clichés. Without these things contemporary man has nothing. He is left alone with himself, his identity crises, his alienation, his "problems."

One way to describe the way the past functions in Snow White is this: the characters are drowned in the confusion and impedimenta of the present because the past, except in the form of cheap nostalgia, is not alive for them; it exerts no pressure, no pull; it has been forgotten. But Barthelme has not forgotten it. He sees the confusion of the present from a historical perspective. In the Introduction, it was observed that one difference between modernism and postmodernism is that writers of the former period were able to incorporate within their artistic structures the very middle-class values which they were undermining; by the same token, they were able to incorporate within their structures certain humanistic values if only to show that such values had been lost. Their work, in other words, could be built upon a dialectic between the solid past and the fluid, changing present. But postmodern writers confront a present from which the old values have already been thoroughly eroded. They confront a present, in other words, for which the past itself has been fluid and changing; there is no difference between past and present. And dialectic is lost. Given this state of affairs the retention of any sense of the past at all requires a special exertion of the imagination. It is this exertion

which Barthelme is willing and able to make, and it is this exertion which may provide a criterion for distinguishing that postmodern literature which transcends the confusion of its cultural setting from that which does no more than reflect it.

D. S. Carne-Ross, in an eloquent essay on the teaching of literature, wrote:

> Why is literature still "needed?" Because... literature and the other arts are the purest witness to what has been lost. They reveal as nothing else can something that once was presence and now is absence. And could through no forseeable future be present again. They bear witness to earth at a time when there is nothing but world, and to man when the talk runs only of Homo 1970.... But for them, we would not even know that we are living without what men have always had. They alone remember and remind us; everything else encourages us to forget and to be content. The arts teach us to be discontent with this "world we live in".... They remind us that we have no Gods, no sanctities of place, no valid ceremonies to mark the seasons of the year and the stations of our lives, and scarcely any more the innocent realm of natural creatures and forms.[18]

Carne-Ross is most assuredly not suggesting that the arts ask us to return to the way things were--just as Fiedler, in "The Unbroken Tradition," says of Eliot and Pound that they had no desire to go back to the traditions which they espoused. Eliot knows, Fiedler says, "that Americans must begin by recognizing their exclusion from the organic cultural community once the common heritage of all Europe."[19] Likewise Snow White shows no longing for the world of Grimm's Snow White. It is simply, in Carne-Ross's words, a witness to what has been lost. What has been lost is, from Barthelme's postmodern perspective, even greater than what had been lost for Eliot and Pound. They world in which they lived may have

lost touch with the old values, but at least whose values were remembered. Barthelme lives in a world which has lost even that memory. Snow White's poem parodically suggests that bearing witness to this loss may be literature's only theme and function today: "'The theme is loss, we take it.' 'What,' she said, 'else?'"

Snow White is a witness to what is lost and its theme is a parodic presentation of that loss. Its form might be described as a palinode, that form of retraction mentioned in the novel. "Perhaps it is wrong to have a favorite among the forms," Paul reflects, "but retraction has a special allure for me. I would retract everything if I could so that the whole written world would be..." The method by which Snow White retracts may best be understood by reference to the Kierkegaard story, in which Barthelme examines the moral implications of destructive irony. Barthelme's ironic use of the fairy-tale in effect destroys it. Grimm's story, however "true" it may once have been, is no longer alive to today's world, and Barthelme's irony, by "depriving it of its reality," kills it off once and for all. Along the way, his irony also retracts, by means of the travesty-allusion, writers like Eliot, Henry James and Malcolm Lowry. Then there is his ironic treatment of contemporary rhetoric. Figuratively speaking Snow White retracts "the whole written world," and, by association, the worlds which those words described. It will be recalled that Kierkegaard worried about what irony had to put in the place of what it had destroyed, and here we

arrive at the heart of the problem. Because he cannot offer an alternative world, Barthelme is ironic even toward the idea of retraction, which is to say that he retracts retraction. In this sense the novel is critical of itself and is ultimately self-destructive.

The arts reveal, as Carne-Ross said, "something that was once presence and is now absence."[20] Snow White is a brutal, relentless illustration of that principle. All of the values which were a living presence for the world of which Grimm wrote are shown, in Barthelme's Snow White, to be absolutely absent; it "reminds us" of what has been lost. It reminds us of what has been lost, not by sentimental longing for the past, but by exposing the fact that we live with nothing today: "100% trash." This is Barthelme's donée, that the world is 100% trash, and the novel therefore asks to be evaluated in terms of its trashiness--the extent to which it adheres to, and yet resists becoming, trash. But Barthelme treats this practice with as much irony as he treats everything else. Anti-art, too, has become a convention, a convention even respected by the middle-class: the characters in Snow White, for instance, regard Paul's latest painting, "a dirty great banality in white, off-white, and poor-white":

> "Interesting," we said. "It's poor," Snow White said. "Poor, poor." "Yes," Paul said, "one of my poorer things I think." "Not so poor as yesterday's, poorer on the other hand than some," she said. "Yes," Paul said, "it has some of the qualities of poorness." "Especially poor in the lower left-hand corner," she said. "Yes," Paul said, "I would go so far as to hurl it into the marketplace." "They getting poorer," she said.

> "Poorer and poorer," Paul said with satisfaction,
> "descending to unexplored depths of poorness
> where no human intelligence has ever been."
> "Sublimely poor," she murmured.[21]

Barthelme is himself attempting to "descend to unexplored depths of poorness where no human intelligence has ever been," but Snow White is also a parody, a retraction, of this practice. "Is there too much blague in the narration? ( ) Not enough blague? ( )." In an age when the avant-garde impulse is as exhausted as conservatism and tradition, the techniques and materials of anti-art no longer constitute a significant rebellion.

This point is important to remember in trying to understand Barthelme's aesthetics. It is a mistake simply to categorize Snow White as a New Novel or an anti-novel, as some critics have done, without the qualifying observation that his book is also a parody of the New and the "anti." Snow White takes itself no more seriously as anti-art than it takes itself as art. For example, the most important characteristic of the New Novel aesthetic, as described by Robbe-Grillet and others, is its rejection of "depth." "New fiction," Philip Stevick writes, "presents its textures as devoid as possible of aesthetic and philosophical depth.... There is no clearer break than this between modernist (and late Victorian) fiction and new fiction--the implicit intention to let the surface be the meaning, let the possibility of a symbolistic level of reference be consistently undercut..."[22] Wylie Sypher writes that "Like the recent scientist, the contemporary novelist or painter detects that the ordinary,

the commonplace, the superficial, the quotidian is the very mystery inaccessable to reason and explanation and method.... If the significance is on the surface, the need for depth and explanation has gone..."[23] This general characteristic of contemporary art has resulted in a critical aesthetic, such as Susan Sontag's, which denounces the interpretation of works of art on the grounds that "to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world--in order to set up a shadow world of meanings."[24] Gerald Graff is correct in observing that suddenly it appears that the term "meaning" itself, like "truth" and "reality," can no longer be written unless apologized for by inverted commas.[25]

There is no question that Snow White is void of the aesthetic and philosophic depth which characterized modern art, that it resists the sort of meaning-mongering which modern art lent itself to, and that, as Stevick says of new fiction generally, it "tends to mock, subvert, and preempt any traditional attempts at critical interpretation of itself."[26] But to suggest that Snow White is in any sense a program for new fiction aesthetics, or that it even suggests a belief in anti-depth and anti-meaning is to miss the fact that the novel is as much a parody of these "new" aesthetics as it is of modernist aesthetics. We are told explicitly to avoid "reading between the lines (for there is nothing there, in those white spaces)." But the style here undercuts the thrust of the assertion, is a parody of the assertion. Likewise, on the following page:

> "What is that apelike hand I see reaching into my mailbox?" "That's nothing. Think nothing of it. It's nothing. It's just one of my familiars mother. Don't think about it. It's just an ape that's all. Just an ordinary ape. Don't give it another thought. That's all there is to it." "I think you dismiss these things too easily Jane. I'm sure it means more than that. It's unusual. It means something." "No mother. It doesn't mean more than that. Than I have said it means." "I'm sure it means more than that Jane." "No mother it does not mean more than that. Don't go reading into things mother. Leave things alone. It means what it means. Content yourself with that mother." "I'm certain it means more than that." "No mother."[27]

To argue that Jane's position places Barthelme in Sontag's "against interpretation" camp would be just as foolish as arguing that the mother's insistence on meaning places Barthelme in the "for interpretation" camp. The style parodies both positions, just as the questionnaire parodies conventional and avant-garde approaches at once: "Are the seven men, in your view, adequately characterized as individuals?" "Has the work, for your, a metaphysical dimension?" Snow White's hair is a parody of conventional symbolism--"here is the hair, with its multiple meanings"--but the book also parodies the avant-garde, sophisticated notion that symbolizing is de trop. There are several bold-faced passages in the novel which obviously mock the solemnity and heaviness of modernist art and criticism.

> THE SECOND GENERATION OF ENGLISH ROMANTIC POETS INHERITED THE PROBLEMS OF THE FIRST, BUT COMPLICATED BY THE EVILS OF INDUSTRIALISM AND POLITICAL REPRESSION. ULTIMATELY THEY FOUND AN ANSWER NOT IN SOCIETY BUT IN VARIOUS FORMS OF INDEPENDENCE FROM SOCIETY:
>
> HEROISM
> ART
> SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE[28]

These passage are balanced, however, by passages which mock avant-garde pointlessness and triviality.

EBONY
EQUANIMITY
ASTONISHMENT
TRIUMPH
VAT
DAX
BLAGUE[29]

Virtually everything about the aesthetics of Snow White can be regarded as, on the one hand, a conscious break with conventional theories about art and, on the other hand, a parody of the methods used by the avant-garde. Consider, for instance, the now-popular rhetoric concerning the inauthenticity of narration--summarized here by Lionel Trilling.

> A chief part of the inauthenticity of narration would seem to be its assumption that life is susceptible of comprehension and thus of management. It is the nature of narration to explain: it cannot help telling how things are and even why they are that way. "In the beginning..." But a beginning implies an end, with something in the middle to connect them. The beginning is not merely the first of a series; it is the event that originates those that follow. And the end is not merely the ultimate event, the cessation of happening; it is a significance or at least the promise, dark or bright, of a significance.[30]

Snow White is neither a story nor an anti-story so much as it is a parody of both. It follows the pattern of the original fairy-tale in a highly parodic way, with all of the characters trying and failing to fulfill their heroic destinies. There is a "beginning," which is a parody of beginnings, with its mock description and mock exposition. There is a "middle," with its pseudo-complications leading up to the mock trial, and there is a questionnaire in the center.

There is an "end" in which Bill is hanged and Snow White is revirginated.

But what prevents this parody of conventional story from becoming an authentic anti-story is that it exceeds the anti-story. Not only is there no real beginning, middle, and end, but almost any page of the book can be re-positioned without consequence. The point of view changes randomly in mid-paragraph. The material switches from one subject to another at the author's whim. The pages are cluttered with bits and pieces of monumental irrelevance. If narration assumes, as Trilling says, that life is susceptible of comprehension, then Snow White parodies that assumption, yet also parodies the assumption that life is not susceptible of comprehension.

Trilling says that endings imply "significance," and it is this quality which most separates the structure of conventional fiction from that of new fiction. The conventional story arrives at a kind of plateau of understanding toward which the rest of the story has worked. The tradition of epiphany fiction, Philip Stevick writes, "values the private and the domestic over the public and the external...it demonstrates a belief that intuitive self-knowledge can cut through accumulations of social ritual and self-deception, a belief so firm that it permits the intuitive act to serve as a dramatic end point and structural principle...."[31] Snow White departs completely from the epiphanic form, and its pseudo-complications and pseudo-climax suggest a parody of that form. But the excessiveness of Barthelme's random, inconclusive

structures suggests that he is also parodying the ideas of anti-significance and anti-epiphany. For example, the chapter concerning recycling the trash of civilization treats a theoretically serious subject, especially since it describes the materials of Barthelme's own art. His style does deflate the significance of this idea: "It's that we want to be on the leading edge of the trash phenomenon, the everted sphere of the future..." He deflates the significance of this idea because, as mentioned earlier, the materials of anti-art have become conventional. And yet, closer scrutiny tells us that Barthelme does not take even his own deflation seriously. The concluding line of the chapter, in its sublime inconsequentiality, is a parody even of the anti-significant style: "Would you like a cold Coke from the Coke machine now, before you go?"

Barthelme's most distinctive stylistic and comic technique, related to his use of continual qualification, is to deflate anti-epiphanic syntax by exceeding it. Take a sentence like, "We are going to go whole hog on this program, to a certain extent." If he had just written "We are going to go whole hog on this program" and stopped there, the line's very triteness would deflate and belie the sincerity and persuasiveness of the statement. We would recognize the style as parody, and recognize a disparity between the words and the intention. The line would be clearly anti-climatic. But to add the phrase, "to a certain extent" deflates the anti-climax itself. The excessiveness of the style shows that the

anti-quality of the syntax is itself being parodied--shows that parody is being parodied.

> The height of his ambition was to tumble the odd chambermaid now and then, whereas I have loftier ambitions, only I don't know what they are, exactly.[32]

> If the graves fall open in mid-passage and swathed forms fall out, it will be his fault, probably.[33]

> Paul savored the sweetness of human communication, through the window.[34]

Barthelme's refusal to treat avant-garde aesthetics of insignificance and anti-meaning with any more seriousness than he treats modernist aesthetics of Significance and Meaning can be illustrated with one final example--his use of simile. Stevick says that the "as if" clause, as a syntactic strategy, does not exist in new fiction because it implies that "the empirical reality being described is rather bizarre, sufficiently unfamiliar so that some conjectural cause must be supplied to account whimsically for its being so bizarre. The writer of new fiction does not know why empirical reality is as bizarre as it is."[35] Barthelme's similes, though in one sense they parody the Eliotic, literary, high-seriousness of evenings "spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table," in another sense parody the rejection of the "as if" attitude which Stevick describes. Snow White's imagination stirs "like the long-sleeping stock certificate suddenly alive in its green safety-deposit box because of renewed investor interest..." Or: a direct travesty allusion to Eliot: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Thy daughters are burning

with torpor and a sense of immense wasted potential, like one of those pipes you see in the oil fields, burning off the natural gas that it isn't economically rational to ship somewhere!" Barthelme's similes parody the idea that empirical reality is unknowable; they are so ridiculous that the become a parody of the idea that serious similes are no longer possible.

Snow White's refusal to become a platform for avant-garde aesthetics is part of Barthelme's larger refusal to become a spokesman for New Sensibility. Earlier I discussed his own satire of the bourgeois rhetoric of explanation. But the revolt against explanation and meaning also became somewhat of a pop movement during the mid-1960's. This sensibility elevated feeling over thought, the visionary over the rational, energy over form. It was a sensibility of radical liberation and Ecstasy, and it manifested itself in such phenomena as Happenings, rock music, drugs, the Living Theater, in the music and writings of John Cage, and in such writers as Ken Kesey, Richard Fariña, Herman Hesse, and Norman Mailer. This sensibility even developed a critical following, with Susan Sontag, Richard Poirier, and Richard Gilman as some of the key spokesmen.

Barthelme satirizes this sensibility, partly because it was "new," partly because it was recognizable, but primarily because it constitutes the dreck of contemporary society as much as does the bourgeois rhetoric of alienation and despair. It is a sensibility which sees itself as different, exciting,

and important. It sees itself as avant-garde with a duty to shock; it takes a pose of artistic defiance, its assumption being that there still exists an enemy "out there" capable of being shocked. Sontag describes "the exemplary modern artist" as a "broker in madness," a "free lance explorer of spiritual dangers."[36] Such a characterization of the modern artist is, as Gerald Graff observes, totally out of touch with the reality of modern America.

> Bold transgressions of conventions and standards lose their meaning in a situation in which conventions and standards are routinely disregarded to the point where no one is sure whether they exist at all. In an age obsessed on every level with breakthrough experimentation, and the almost daily invention of new environments and new identities, the conception of art as a risky form of spiritual improvisation earns little distinction.[37]

The techniques, then, which the avant-garde used to mock bourgeois society Barthelme assimilates in Snow White, but he turns those techniques not only upon bourgeois society but upon the avant-garde itself, as well as upon himself. He knows what too many self-styled avant-garde types do not know, which is that his own "transgressions" of conventions and standards take place within a social context which anticipates, even rewards them. At the least, no one cares.

So Snow White destroys--retracts--the avant-garde as it destroys everything else: the past and the present, the fairy-tale and today's world. And finally, because it parodies retraction, it retracts retraction too. Snow White has nothing to offer but style.

But style is what earns Snow White its distinction.

Style is what Barthelme uses to create a new actuality. The sludge of continual qualification, the stale rhetorics, the safe observations, the anti-climatic assertions, the pretentious foreigh phrases, the worn-out symbolism and predictable plot structures of conventional fiction--Barthelme's style puts all of this dreck to work alongside some of the elegant language of such writers as Henry James, T. S. Eliot, the romantic prose of a long-forgotten past, and even the pompously serious critical remarks of an age for which literature was the highest form of truth. What he makes out of these diverse elements is something new, an intricate, fragile, almost-beautiful design.

But Barthelme would not have been able to make this design were it not for his understanding of the social realities of our times, and if one is going to praise the novel, it is a mistake to praise it only for its craftsmanship and inventiveness. Stevick, for instance, in writing about Borges, Barthelme, Coover and others, says that it is possible to read these writers "with a constant delight in the craft displayed, with a constant sense of recognition, a feeling that the fiction is, in some oddly tangential way, powerfully pertinent to one's inner life, yet never once saying, yes, that is the way things look and feel...that is the way we live now."[38] In these writers, Stevick says, "there is a progressive lack of interest not only in institutions, but in the very 'solidity of specification' that the novel seems to need to survive."[39] If Stevick were only saying that in these writers we witness

a departure from the mimetic and realistic impulse he would be right, though the observation would hardly be worth making. But what he is trying to say is that the "craft" of these fictions is unrelated to "the way we live now." Such a statement is simply untrue. How is sheer craft pertinent to one's inner life? Stevick attempts to account for this problem with the vague phrase "in some tangential way." In fact, however, the "way" these writers' fictions achieve pertinence is that their craftsmanship, their inventiveness, grows out of a sure sense of and interest in the institutions and specific elements of society. Craftsmanship, if it is to have an effect on our inner life, does not take place in a vacuum. Stevick's basic error is in assuming that the more inventive, the more fabulistic the work, the more removed it is from social reality. A. N. Kaul, in his essay on Cooper, Melville, Hawthorne, and Twain, claims that these writers "were all in their different ways preoccupied with certain aspects of social life as it was shaping itself in the America of their times."[40] Kaul admits that in comparison with the social solidity observable in the novels of Dickens and Balzac, Hawthorne's and Melville's approach to society would indeed seem "attenuated and tangential." But, he argues, "the sort of social realism which we associate with European fiction constitutes one way of approaching reality but there is no reason to assume it is the only way."[41]

The way a writer approaches reality depends upon the nature of that reality. The realities of the 1960's in

America were a self-conscious middle-class society eager to adopt the manners and methods of the avant-garde and, at the same time, a self-conscious avant-garde deluding itself into believing that it still served a useful purpose. The self-conscious techniques, craftsmanship and inventiveness of Snow White are a direct response to and a commentary upon these social realities.

Chapter 3

The Later Stories:

The Plight of the Avant-Garde

> In the summer of the show, grave robbers appeared in the show. Famous graves were robbed, before your eyes. Winding sheets were unwound and things best forgotten were remembered. Sad themes were played by the band, bereft of its mind by the death of tradition. In the soft evening of the show, a troupe of agoutis performed tax evasion atop tall, swaying yellow poles. Before your eyes.
>
> "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace"

Whereas Snow White's irony was primarily negative and destructive--a clearing of the ground--Barthelme's work since then has combined irony with a number of other elements, the primary effect of which is not so much the destruction of the world as the creation of new fictional realities.

Snow White is a book about language. It is not, as some have said, exclusively about language, for, as noted earlier, one's attitude toward the way language is used and abused is itself an attitude toward life, toward culture. But Barthelme's fiction since Snow White puts language to more varied and complex uses, and although irony and satire are usually there, these are not always the dominant characteristics. The dominant characteristic of his recent work is precisely its elusiveness. Irony and satire often describe its effects, but so do any number of qualities: the fantastic, sincere, sad, journalistic, whimsical, moralistic, nostalgic. The

elusiveness resides in the tone. In Snow White's purity of purpose, the satiric tone never falters; in the later work, the subtle and varied tones resulting from strange combinations of elements function to create fictional constructs which allow us to view reality from different, multiple, often bizarre perspectives. Sometimes this view is itself satiric but often it is a view entertained only for the sake of its strangeness or newness.

This development in Barthelme's work has taken place at the same time that he has moved a step closer to the experiential. This fact partially accounts for the peculiar poignancy of much of the later work. There is a melancholy, a humaneness, a sadness in many of these stories. One feels Barthelme's presence and personal voice more immediately, the effect of which is that the cool ironic surface often betrays feelings of regret and moodiness. Morris Dickstein went so far as to call City Life an "impassioned" book, and he argues that Barthelme "needs a great subject, an immediate subject, to draw him at least half-way out of his irony and aesthetic detachment."[1] Actually, Barthelme's fiction since Snow White is still ironic by more than half, and "impassioned" is too strong a term to describe Barthelme's treatment of any subject. But Dickstein is correct in observing that a great or immediate subject affects Barthelme's treatment. It affects it in that he allows a greater degree of actual experience to penetrate his smooth literary surfaces. Because many of his recent stories seem closer to experience, the irony sometimes

results in genuine pain--an effect never created by the purely literary irony of Snow White, and of the stories in Caligari.

The difference between Barthelme's previous work and some of the stories discussed in this chapter is precisely that in these later stories he treats a number of subjects which touch him personally. The subject is itself important, is treated with a certain respect, and it therefore provides greater resistance to irony. Often the ironist himself becomes emotionally vulnerable, something which adds a new dimension to many of these stories.

The reason "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" is such a strong story is that Kierkegaard is a strong subject. Barthelme tries to treat him ironically, but Kierkegaard cannot be destroyed--and we recall that at the conclusion of that piece the narrator-ironist is defeated: he has lost his gaiety, his cool ironic detachment, and "now he has nothing." The beauty of the story resides in the tension between the ironist and his object, and in the fact that the ironist respects his adversary. The story is a good example of what Barthelme can do when he is emotionally and intellectually engaged by a subject other than his own style. His own style is, of course, still a crucial part of the subject of that story, but it is a subject which must struggle to survive.

Barthelme often treats such major topics and ideas as the disintegration of American culture, alienation, and the

death of the past. But, as we have seen, bent on pure destruction, in the early work Barthelme treats these concepts as clichés. In Snow White's purity of purpose, everything is reduced to clichés, and it is this quality which gives that novel its distinctive effect. Yet the slightly tainted purpose of many of his recent stories creates more subtle effects. Often, the tone is so delicate that one is uncertain whether it is ironic or not, or whether it is both simultaneously. Moods and emotional effects are established not through characters so much as through unusual and provocative combinations of images, as in the passage quoted as this chapter's epigraph. Against plausible backgrounds, implausible, comic, surreal actions occur. Our response is guarded, tentative. Unlike Snow White, which we can sense at once is satiric from the outset, many of the later stories do not reveal their intent until the end; we must put together all of the pieces of the puzzle and examine the whole picture. Even then, the finished picture often seems, in an intriguing way, clear yet out-of-focus. What is clear is that the elusive methods of these later stories are indicative of Barthelme's growing concern for and command of his craft. He is still the social satirist he was in Caligari and Snow White, but he has combined the satirist's instinct to destroy with the artist's need to create.

Most of these later stories have a common subject--one with which Barthelme has been preoccupied in recent years.

Generally speaking, the subject is the relation between the artist and society, or if not the artist, then the Exceptional Man: the saint, the genius, the hero, anybody who might represent the avant-garde. In these stories Barthelme creates intricate fictional constructs which reflect, satirize, contradict, lament, and in general allow us to view from various angles the predicament of art and the avant-garde in a culture which has apparently robbed these creative forces of their traditional functions.

It is often argued today that the avant-garde in America is confronted with a public whose easy assimilation of, appetite for, and/or invulnerability to The New has made it impossible for the artist to perform his traditional functions. It has become impossible for art to fulfill its entertainment function, simply because the public's demand for new forms of sensory and intellectual disorientation has exceeded art's ability to create them. On the moral side, it has become impossible for art to instruct, simply because the contemporary public is morally indifferent and incapable of moral indignation. In an age when society no longer believes in itself, avant-gardism is simply a posture; it no longer has a radical function to perform.

In his article "The Age of the Avant-Garde"[2] Kramer contends that contrary to the romantic notions engendered by popular history, the avant-garde belongs ineluctably to the world of the middle-class, and is barely conceivable apart from it. Specifically, Kramer argues that the

avant-garde owes its very existence to the bourgeoisie's loyalty to its own liberalism,

> to its commitment to the principle of freedom and dissent, to its refusal to tyrannize or terrorize its own opposition. However distasteful it may have found the expression of that dissent, however alarmed it became in the face of the cultural forces arrayed against it, however panic-stricken it occasionally was in responding to them, bourgeois society remained more or less loyal to its liberalism. And to that liberalism, which the avant-garde so often mocked and despised, the avant-garde owed its very existence. Only where bourgeois liberalism was itself destroyed--not infrequently with a little help from the avant-garde--did the avant-garde suffer a brutal and enforced demise.[3]

Poggioli, in The Theory of the Avant-Garde,[4] tries to show that the contemporary relation between the artist and society is unique in the history of culture. He argues that although great flowerings of art and bold innovative experimentation have occurred within authoritarian societies, their artists enjoyed a privileged condition which has ceased to exist since the cultural revolution of romanticism. This privileged condition is the absence of any doubt on the artist's part of his public and his mission. By definition, art produced under such conditions is not avant-garde. Poggioli says that if one offers up the Russian literature of the 19th century as an example of avant-gardism flourishing under authoritarian rule, his answer is that, first, that literature was the least romantic of the century and therefore the least avant-garde; and second, that the authoritarianism of Tsarism was "only relative" compared to the absolute authoritarianism which followed it in the 20th century and which erased all traces of

an avant-garde movement in Russia. "The avant-garde can exist only in the type of society that is liberal-democratic from a political point of view," he says.[5] And although Poggioli does not agree with those who claim that avant-gardism is dead or dying today, he admits that there may be periods when artists feel that their efforts are futile--when society's belief in itself and its own values has so deteriorated that it hardly presents the artist with anything substantial to be alienated from. This is the situation which Kramer believes now exists. The bourgeoisie today, he says, dispossessed of all its traditions, disposed of even the idea of tradition, "lies supine and demoralized, awaiting the next scheduled rape of its sensibilities with that mixture of dread and curiosity and bemused resignation befitting an organism no longer in control of its own habitat."[6]

The middle-class today, however, is not simply a passive body. In many respects it is itself actively anti-bourgeois. It is fascinated with and involved in the sort of experimental counter-cultural tendencies it once despised and feared. It adopts "opposition" tastes, manners, dress and ideas with ease and in wholesale dimensions. And it creates its own art: photography, film-making, ceramics, and pottery have become as central to middle-class life as home-making and money-making. In such a society the term avant-garde ceases to denote a critical perspective so much as a characterization of a whole searching society.

Avant-gardism, in other words, becomes simply a style. It is partly this state of affairs which has turned so many artists to parody. Irony, for many, becomes the only possible attitude. This attitude, as we observed in "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," creates both a liberating and paralyzing situation.

Artists have always felt intensely their relationship with the past, and this characteristic still separates the avant-garde from society at large. But depending on the individual temperaments and on the age in which they live, some artists see the past as a source of value and strength, something to preserve, while others see it as an oppressive weight, something to destroy and escape from. In either case artists, until recently, were able to measure the present and to measure radical change itself against a background of relatively stable values, institutions, and traditions. Until recently artists were able, in other words, to see radical disruption and disorientation dialectically. What happens, however, when the values and traditions of a long-ago past have been so thoroughly eroded that they are no longer remembered? Postmodernism is the condition in which the distinction between past and present has dissolved, and it is precisely this state of affairs which has so helped to trivialize the function of the avant-garde.

But the avant-garde over the past 50 years or so has been instrumental in creating the very climate and predicament in which it now finds itself. For was it not the

avant-garde which helped to divest the bourgeoisie of the very traditions which are now so depleted? Not simply by revolt and schism but by continual revision of the past. Hilton Kramer's analysis is instructive. Like society as a whole, the avant-garde, he says, has always been divided into radical and conservative factions. At one extreme, there is the intransigent radicalism which theoretically at least cancels all debts to the past. This is the faction (Dada, for instance) which receives the greater share of publicity and the more immediate response. Indeed, it is the révoltés who, for the popular mind, constitute the entire avant-garde. But in fact the avant-garde has always had a more moderate faction which champions harmony and tradition, and it is actually this group, Kramer argues (Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, Picasso), which provided us with the most solid and enduring achievements of the modern era.

Ironically, however, this impulse to act as the creative conscience of tradition resulted ultimately in the destruction of tradition. The intent of the moderate, revisionist faction was to rescue tradition from its "official" bourgeois guardians who were determined to resist reconsideration and revaluation at any cost. But as Kramer says,

> That this effort to place tradition under the pressure of a constant revaluation had an unexpected effect, that it resulted, in the end, in the virtual dissolution of any really viable concept of tradition, is, of course, at the heart of the situation in which we find ourselves today. Without the bulwark of a fixed tradition, the avant-garde finds itself deprived of its historic antagonist. Much to its own embarrassment, it

> finds that it has itself become tradition. With its victory over the authority of the past complete, its own raison d'etre has disappeared and it has in fact ceased to exist except as an imaginary enterprise engaged in combat against imaginary adversaries.[7]

The genesis of this unexpected effect may be found in T. S. Eliot's classic statement on the relation between the present and the past, and the relation between the contemporary writer and the past. Eliot argued, on the one hand, for that historical sense which involves a perception "not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence." Yet his admission that when a new work of art is created something "happens simultaneously to all the work of art which preceded it" had implications from which he himself later recoiled. For what "happens" is that the past is not simply modified by the introduction of the new; the past is finally modified to a point where it becomes unrecognizable. The avant-garde, in its attempt to wrest tradition from the official custodians of bourgeois culture--for whom tradition was fixed and static--created a fluid and actually subjective tradition. Eliot's tradition, Kramer says, "is a little like Tolstoy's God: it is the name of his desire... his general theory of culture...in practice, could only be a highly solipistic conception of tradition."[8]

The social fact which Barthelme and other postmodernists confront, then, is a society whose sense of past has been so diluted that it exerts no influence. There is only the present. Now the division in the avant-garde ranks

mentioned above still exists today; that is, the *révoltés* vs. the revisionists. For the *révoltés* this social fact of the dilution of the past is grounds for celebration. This "healthy-minded" strain of postmodernism is found in writers like Ken Kesey, Herman Hesse, Richard Farina, John Cage, in a great deal of contemporary poetry, and in such thinkers as Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, Leslie Feidler, Charles Reich, and Susan Sontag. They see the present as a vital and dynamic era, well-suited to their quest for radical liberation, expansion of consciousness, the release of primal energies, the greening of America. To describe these writers as healthy-minded and optimistic is not to say that they are without conflict; as a matter of fact, they still see themselves in conflict with certain traditions and institutions which they believe are not yet dead and buried. In Kesey's *Cuckoo's Nest* the conflict is between the healthy, liberated spirit of McMurphy and the unhealthy, repressive spirit of Big Nurse. Mailer is more complex but his conception of the conflict is similar: the past, for him, as he wrote in *Advertisements for Myself*, is a burden which prevents man from encountering new experiences openly. *Why Are We In Viet Nam* is structured upon such a conception: man, in order to achieve sexual and psychic health, must free himself from the oppressive influences of the past, which "strangle our potentiality for responding to new possibilities which might be exciting to our individual growth."[9]

The more moderate and traditional strain of post-modernism--Barthelme, Barth, Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Borges, Nabokov--tends to be far more pessimistic and often nihilistic. The present for these writers is grounds not for celebration but for cynicism. Many of them use the techniques of self-parody and structural involution in order to create a solipsistic world where human consciousness cannot transcend its own confusion. And in Barthelme's fictions, the loss of distinction between past and present is not only an underlying assumption; many of his stories are directly about this loss. That is, they are about a society which has been so dispossessed of its past that its thoughts and actions occur in a kind of vacuum without reference to any of the values and traditions by which society was once defined. Lacking such definition, this new society has obtained a freedom which is meaningless since it encounters no resistance either from within or from without. It is, in other words, a trivial freedom, identical to the trivial freedom which the artist himself has today: freedom to invent, to experiment, to play, to rage or whatever he wishes.

"The Genius" (Sadness) is one of the best examples of Barthelme's efforts to fashion a story out of these attitudes and ideas. The story is about both the mystery of genius and the status of avant-garde thought in a society where such thought has become institutionally funded. The story is satiric, but not just satiric; rather, the twenty-eight sections present a comic picture of a man who does

not quite know what to do or to make of himself: a man who enjoys his immense popularity but despairs over his recognition that society's easy accomodation of his "genius" is at least as debilitating as the old philistine resistance ever was.

> He has urged that America be divided into four smaller countries. America, he says, is too big. "America does not look where it puts its foot," he says. This comment, which, coming from anyone else, would have engendered widespread indignation, is greeted with amused chuckles. The Chamber of Commerce sends him four cases of Teacher's Highland Cream.[10]

The government awards the genius "a few new medals--medals he has not previously been awarded." The genius receives flattering letters from the University of Minnesota, asking for his papers, for which a new wing of the library will be built. When he fails to win the Nobel Prize, the National Foundation, "to console him...gives him a new house." His more meaningless and harmless suggestions are met with excessive and unwarranted enthusiasm:

> The genius proposes a world inventory of genius, in order to harness and coordinate the efforts of genius everywhere to create a better life for all men.
> Letters are sent out...
> The response is staggering!
> Telegrams pour in...
> Geniuses of every stripe offer their cooperation.
> The Times prints an editorial praising the idea...
> Three thousand geniuses in one room!
> The genius falls into ill humor. He refuses to speak to anyone for eight days.

The only resistance he encounters is from students who are capable of offering up only the clichés of Marxism.

> The students tell the genius that the concept "genius" is not, currently, a popular one. Group effort, they say, is more socially productive than the isolated efforts of any one man, however gifted. Genius, by its very nature, sets itself over against the needs of the many. In answering its own imperatives, genius tends, even embraces, totalitarian forms of social organization. Tyranny of the gifted over the group, while bringing some advances in the short run, inevitably produces a set of conditions which--[12]

In response, the genius merely "smokes thoughtfully." He signs autographs for little boys with a smile. In answer to a question he admits that America is "most hospitable to genius," but he knows his function is ornamental. Thus he suffers from "moments of self-doubt." He falls into hysteria and ill-humor. He is paranoid. "He is a drunk."

The triviality with which Barthelme saturates the story comes directly from the America which we all recognize. It includes the "problem" of acquiring a new driver's license, the fear of flying in a "flimsy" aircraft, the magazine advertisements: "Why don't you become a professional Interior Decorator"; the green Sears Roebuck Toolbox in which the genius carries his most important papers. In one sense this passage is a comic admission that even the genius has trivial thoughts. In a larger sense, however, the trivia provides the whole cultural context in which the genius finds himself. Lacking a significant cultural adversary, the genius has no significant function or identity. His genius is either wasted on such practical and humiliating projects as the "sewer system of cities," or even worse, it is turned inward: he wastes energy

attempting to define the sources of his genius. He philophizes about his "work"; he fantasizes. One of the best touches in the story occurs when, after reading Theodore Dreiser's The Genius, the genius "gets up and looks at himself in the mirror." In a society which does not take him seriously, or which takes him seriously for the wrong reasons, he no longer knows how to take himself: "Am I really a --" "What does it mean to be a --" "Can one refuse to be a --"

It would be a mistake, however, to read "The Genius" as Barthelme's diagnosis or criticism of the function of the avant-garde in contemporary American society. The story offers ways of looking at the situation. Each section describes one of the genius' experiences, ideas, or problems, but Barthelme does not destroy him the way he destroys the characters in Snow White; rather, Barthelme uses him in a playfully satiric way to create a comic story which reflects and illuminates a complicated cultural phenomenon.

A few years prior to "The Genius" Barthelme wrote a story called "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" (Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts). Its form and style is almost identical to that of "The Genius." Its subject is also similar: the problem of the public man's relation to himself and to the public. On the whole, "Robert Kennedy" is a better story because Barthelme is more engaged by the real life enigmatic figure of Robert Kennedy. What fascinates Barthelme are Kennedy's fervent efforts to find

something which he can adhere to, believe in, act on. Kennedy's lack of a sense of self accounts for the extraordinary contradictions in his character: his spoiled rich boy's inflated sense of self-confidence, next to his touching and unexpected vulnerability; his extreme sensitivity (and insensitivity) toward both the tragic and the trivial; his role of leadership, and his child-like naiveté and curiosity about everything. Barthelme is fascinated with Kennedy's intensity, with his air of pent-up, volatile energy, particularly because Kennedy is so uncertain about how to put that energy to use.

Kennedy represents an extreme instance of the predicament and condition of the public man--a man whose private self has been buried by a purely public self. He is defined by the mood of the crowds, the need to create impressions, the response of subordinates. The public views him as a complex and mysterious person: "a lot of people who think they know him well don't really know him at all." But Barthelme, though his treatment is partly sympathetic, views him as a man who simply does not know himself; Kennedy has no "self" to know: "He is neither abrupt with nor excessively kind to associates. Or he both abrupt and kind." "His reactions are impossible to catalog."

All of Kennedy's thoughts, remarks, and speeches are philistine, and much of the story consists of Barthelme's satiric presentation of those who surround him: the "philosophical" and sentimental response of the secretaries; the

bartender who tells Kennedy to return to the "guest" side of the bar; the P.R. man's air of self-importance in trying to "set up a sitting" for Kennedy with the artist; the crowd at the art gallery which dissolves in laughter at a Kennedy witticism, and who "repeat the remark to one another, laughing"; the administrative assistant recalling with awe the time Kennedy walked in and disposed of a "really crucial" matter "with a quick phone call. A quick phone call!"

The rest of the story depicts many of Kennedy's familiar traits: he reads while maintaining "a rapid drumming of his fingertips on the desktop." He walks "with that familiar slight dip of the shoulders." He dresses neatly "in a manner which does not call attention to itself." He is compassionate and considerate, sending tulips to bedridden employees, and worrying about unhappy children; he also strikes fear in his staff. Most of Kennedy's thoughts are trivial--"Which of you has the shirts?"--until, in the next-to-last section, Barthelme ironically allows Kennedy this existential rumination:

> "For Poulet, it is not enough to speak of seizing the moment. It is rather a question of, and I quote, 'recognizing in the instant which lives and dies, which surges out of nothingness and which ends in dream, an intensity and depth of significance which ordinarily attaches only to the whole of existence.'
>
> "What Poulet is describing is neither an ethic nor a prescription but rather what he has discovered in the work of Marivaux. Poulet has taken up the Marivaudian canon and squeezed it with both hands to discover the essence of what may be called the Marivaudian being, what Poulet in fact calls the Marivaudian being.

> "The Marivaudian being is, according to Poulet, a pastless futureless man, born anew at every instant. The instants are points which organize themselves into a line, but what is important is the instant, not the line. The Marivaudian being has in a sense no history. Nothing follows from what has gone before. He is constantly surprised. He cannot predict his own reaction to events. He is constantly being overtaken by events. A condition of breathlessness and dazzlement surrounds him. In consequence he exists in a certain freshness which seems, if I may say so, very desirable. This freshness Poulet, quoting Marivaux, describes very well."[13]

What Barthelme is doing here is allowing Kennedy to describe himself (or, more accurately, his lack of self). The style makes clear that for Barthelme the idea expressed is nonsense. The comic repetition of the phrase "Marivaudian being" drains it of meaning, as does the fact that the quotation is so far removed from its source: Kennedy quoting Poulet quoting Marivaux. For Barthelme, there is no Marivaudian "being."

Despite the irony, Barthelme's treatment is not negative. He allows Kennedy's compassion, vulnerability, and loneliness to penetrate the flat presentation, and the result is an intriguing portrait. When the story was first published in the New American Review in April, 1968, the NAR editors commented that the story "reverses the much noted trend from fiction to journalism by raising the materials of reportage to a more subtle level of imagination."[14] This is an interesting comment, more interesting, in fact, if one uses it to describe a dominant characteristic of Barthelme's work rather than the technique of this one story.

William Gass, in his review of Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts, dismissed the Kennedy story for descending to the level of journalism, and he praised such stories as "The Indian Uprising" and "The Balloon" for the way Barthelme transformed the materials of dreck into poetry.[15] But Gass was too quick in his judgment. The Kennedy story also transforms dreck into poetry, and Gass overlooked the important function of the materials of reportage in all of Barthelme's work. One of the main strengths of his work is the way it is rooted in the social realities of the age. Barthelme is an acute observer, with an eye for the small detail which best represents the general pattern. He is more than a reporter, of course, but he is a reporter. The dusk jacket on Guilty Pleasures states that it is Barthelme's "first book of non-fiction," but in fact the pieces in that book are neither more nor less "fictional" than Barthelme's work has ever been. Like "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," some of the pieces in Guilty Pleasures seem, in a superficial way, more closely to resemble journalism.

As NAR observes, Barthelme raises the materials of reportage to a more subtle level of the imagination. No strictly journalistic treatment would have had Kennedy quoting Poulet. And the final section of the story, in which the author steps in and "saves" Kennedy from drowning, takes us far from the world of journalistic truth deep into an imaginative terrain where reality and fantasy are blurred, where meaning is always obscure. Yet the event is described

with the precision of good reporting. "I throw a line, the coils leaping out over the water. He has missed it. No, it appears he has it. His right arm (sword arm) grasps the line.... I am on the bank, the rope around my waist braced against a rock." Why the narrator envisions saving Kennedy is not clear; perhaps Barthelme is speculating on how Kennedy would respond. If so, Kennedy's simple, "Thank you" seems just the right response: correct, slightly embarrassed, in control.

"Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" is a strong story because Barthelme is engaged by a subject which he treats with a careful blend of realistic description and fanciful invention. Kennedy is not destroyed by Barthelme's irony; rather he is preserved in a tight portrait which captures the reasons why Kennedy was loved and hated, why he was strong and weak, and why he still incites both admiration and contempt. The story was published only three months before Kennedy's death, and there have since been thousands of words written about him attempting to capture what Barthelme's story achieves in a few pages.

Because of something that has happened to the world, because of innumerable changes which have taken place in the world, men, myths, ideas, and forms which once had a clear meaning and function are today confused, useless, hopelessly anachronistic. That assumption underlies the preceding stories and much of Barthelme's fiction of the past ten years. In "The Phantom of the Opera's Friend"

(City Life) Barthelme pays a visit to this former hero to see how he is faring (just as he had paid a previous visit to Batman and Robin). But whereas Batman and Robin seemed unaware of the changes that had taken place, The Phantom of the Opera is overwhelmed with a world which is too much for him; he has been the Phantom of the Opera for forty years. In the beginning he had been smitten with the violent emotions of jealousy and revenge, but these are replaced today by a deep, all-pervading melancholy. He has grown indecisive, uncertain "whether to risk life aboveground or to remain forever in hiding, in the cellars of the Opera." All of his remarks smack of alienation and self-consciousness: "Our behavior is mocked by the behavior of dogs." "All men that are ruined are ruined on the side of their natural propensities." "One hundred million cells in the brain! All intent on being the phantom of the Opera."

The most inventive strategy of the story is Barthelme's creation of the Phantom's "friend." The Phantom's remembrance of the rich past, his inability to live in the present, is in sharp contrast with his friend's easy comfort with the paraphanalia of modern life. He tries to tell the phantom that "normal existence is still possible for him... a home, even marriage and children are not out of the question." When the Phantom falls into one of his deep despairs, the friend grows irritated: "Why must I have him for a friend. I wanted a friend with whom one could be seen abroad. With whom one could exchange weekends on our

respective estates." Finally, though the phantom considers for a moment attempting normal life, he cannot bring himself to do so. Like Snow White, Batman and Robin, and King Kong ("The Party"), the phantom is too fragile a creature to survive in a world cut off from myth, the past, and the values which supported heroism.

How would a saint fare in such a world, assuming there were saints around and that one of them paid an extended visit to a representative American city, population 100,000, circa 1970? That is the question Barthelme poses in "The Temptation of St. Anthony" (Sadness).

> Yes, the saint was underrated quite a bit, then, mostly by people who didn't like things that were ineffable. I think that's quite understandable--that kind of thing can be extremely irritating, to some people. After all, everything is hard enough without having to deal with something that is not tangible and clear. The higher orders of abstraction are just a nuisance, to some people....And some were actually angry at the idea of sainthood--not at the saint himself, whom everyone likes, more or less, except for a few, but about the idea he represented, especially since it was not in a book or somewhere, but actually present, in the community.[16]

As even this passage reveals, the story is narrated by a man whom the media and the world of advertising would consider perfectly normal, a man who conceives of himself as a bit more liberal and tolerant than his neighbors. As a whole, the community's response to the saint consists of slight irritation and prurient curiosity. They wish he would "go out and get a job." Some people said the saint "thought he was better than other people." One man tries

to lure the saint into a business deal, promising "to throw the account your way." Everyone wonders excessively about the saint's sex life. Considering the astonishing fact of saintliness and the idea of the ineffable, their response is wholly trivial. Cut off from any of the values which in the past nourished the idea of saintliness, they are incapable of an appropriate response. Like the Phantom, the Saint is too fragile to survive in such a world, and at the end he moves out to the desert.

A brief but exquisite story which treats the same subject is "On Angels" (City Life). Its blunt beginning says volumes about "what has happened" to the world: Not if God were dead, but "The death of God left the angels in a strange position." It is one thing to use the Godless universe as a backdrop as writers have been doing since Nietzsche, but it is quite another thing to refer to God's death casually in a sentence where it is not even the most important element. The most important element here is the "strange position" the angels now find themselves in. That this anti-climatic, even trivial, academic problem should be the main subject of inquiry makes even more dramatic the casualness with which God's death has been accepted.

So Barthelme, in a professorial manner perfectly suited for the occasion, proceeds to examine the angels' former function, which was rooted in their clear sense of identity, and their current search for a new function and a new identity now that God is gone. He comically quotes learned,

scholarly works, such as Gustav Davidson's "useful Dictionary of Angels" and Joseph Lyon's The Psychology of Angels. However, what these scholars had to say about angels "no longer obtains." What obtains now is that in their new, confused condition, angels resemble men, and of course Barthelme's story is not about angels at all; it is about man, about man's brilliant, foolish, comic, and continual efforts to define and to justify his own existence. And while the tone is satiric, the intent is not negative or destructive; rather the story is an imaginative exercise, in which Barthelme makes a little game out of one of man's endless and most ambitious enterprises.

While "On Angels" is a strictly intellectual piece, a number of stories treats the subjects of loss and confusion, of the relation between the artist and society, with satire as well as with nostalgia and sentiment. "At the Tolstoy Museum" (City Life) is an interesting blend of the satiric and the serious, and, with a variety of devices, the story strikes at least three attitudes: it satirizes a greedy public which bastardizes art and lionizes literary giants; it satirizes Tolstoy's assumption of "moral authority" (and by implication the modernists' grand conception of the value and function of art); and it suggests envy for what he (and the modernists) were able to achieve.

As the title suggests, Tolstoy has become a museum-piece, a capitalistic commodity to feed the art-hungry, emotion-hungry masses. Size and quantity are everything:

"The holdings of the Tolstoy museum consist principally of some thirty thousand pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy." The museum itself is immense, consisting of "many stones" and three levels of "increasing size." In the basement are "huge crates" of new Tolstoy pictures. Inside the museum are "tiny pictures of Turgenev, Nebrasov, and Fet...alongside extremely large pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy." There are "741 Sunday visitors" who regard "the 640,086 pages (Jubilee Edition) of the author's published work." Barthelme has used ten photographs and engravings to illustrate the story, and these too satirize size. One picture is almost a full-page photo of Tolstoy's head, made to look all the larger because below this picture is a tiny picture of a full-sized boy. Another picture is entitled "Tolstoy's Coat," in which the coat is ten times larger than the people observing it. In the museum's plaza is a picture of Tolstoy's "monumental head."

The public's response to Tolstoy's "moral authority" consists of various forms of bourgeois self-indulgence. The visitors complain that the pictures are "placed too high on the wall." They eat sandwiches and listen to lectures "by eloquent speakers, who were probably right." They know selected details from Tolstoy's biography:

> Tolstoy means "fat" in Russian. His grandfather sent his linen to Holland to be washed. His mother did not know any bad words. As a youth he shaved off his eyebrows, hoping they would grow back bushier. He first contracted gonorrhea in 1847. He was once bitten on the face by a bear. He became a vegetarian in 1885.

> To make himself interesting, he occasionally bowed backward.[17]

But most of all the visitors weep. "Even the bare title of a Tolstoy work, with its burden of love, can induce weeping." People stand before various articles, weeping. Guards carry buckets of clean, white handkerchiefs, because, "more than any other museum, the Tolstoy museum induces weeping." And yet, at the story's end, the narrator is still not satisfied. All of this quantity--of building, of man, of weeping--and he is not satisfied. He is still waiting for "something vivifying" to happen to him.

On the one hand, then, "At the Tolstoy Museum" satirizes the sentimental, indulgent public. On the other hand, and equally important, Barthelme's story makes a satiric comment on the profound difference between his own and Tolstoy's art--which is a difference not simply of quality but of intention. Tolstoy used the novel to achieve those very intense emotional effects which Barthelme's irony prohibits. Tolstoy's art could induce the same weeping which Barthelme satirizes and which he refuses to indulge. There is a touch of envy and nostalgia in the story, but the satire is hardly negative; though Barthelme may not be able to do what Tolstoy did, his story stands as a reminder of an idea which emerges again and again in his work: that there are, as he says in "Daumier," "always openings, if you can find them, there is always something to do."

This spirit is struck again in "The Flight of Pigeons

from the Palace" (Sadness). The ostensible assumption of the story is that there is nothing art can do today to satisfy or to shock the satiated public. In effect, the story says there is nothing in the past, present, or future of the world, no human effort, no natural phenomenon, no concept or miracle that can satisfy the public's appetite for long. In a satiric effort to support this notion, Barthelme creates a "show" which includes an abandoned pallazzo requiring years of refurbishing; an "amazing numbered man," a "Sulking Lady."

> The lineup for opening night included"
> A startlingly handsome man
> A Grand Cham
> A tulip craze
> The Prime Rate
> Edgar Allen Poe
> A colored light[18]

Despite these and numerous other acts, "there was faint applause," and the story concludes:

> It is difficult to keep the public interested.
> The Public demands new wonders piled on new wonders.
> Often we don't know where our next marvel is coming from.
> The supply of strange ideas is not endless.
> The development of new wonders is not like the production of canned goods. Some things appear to be wonders in the beginning, but when you become familiar with them, are not wonderful at all. Sometimes a seventy-five foot highly paid cacodemon will raise only the tiniest frisson. Some of us have even thought of folding the show--closing it down. That thought has been gliding through the hallways and rehearsal rooms of the show. The new volcano we have just placed under contract seems very promising...[19]

A few years ago Robert Coover wrote a story called "The Hat Act," in which a magician's increasingly

astonishing "hat act" is greeted by applause, then by inordinately high expectations, then — after such expectations are satisfied — hissing and booing. Both Barthelme and Coover are trying to provide conceptual equivalents to the "marvels" which the public demands, and Barthelme's use of engravings in "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" is partly a parody of the attempt to satisfy this demand. The artist today knows that the public would be bored by a real volcano or by a real anything. In this sense the story, as in "At the Tolstoy Museum," is a parody of what today's artists will no longer even try to do.

But though "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" may not keep the public interested for long, the real irony of the story is, again, that Barthelme does in fact create a kind of marvel--and the marvel is not simply in the parody:

> In the summer of the show, grave robbers appeared in the show. Famous graves were robbed, before your eyes. Winding sheets were unwound and things best forgotten were remembered. Sad themes were played by the band, bereft of its mind by the death of tradition. In the soft evening of the show, a troupe of agoutis performed tax evation atop tall, swaying yellow poles. Before your eyes.[20]

The reason these lines are moving is difficult to define, but the effects do not result purely from irony or parody. It is the elusive tone which gives us pause: is the show comic or fantastic? Or, if fantastic, comically so? Our response is tentative, but the writing, the unusual combinations of words and images, is powerfully suggestive. Likewise, some of the engravings are unquestionably humorous, but there is something sad about the Sulking Lady, who shows

us only her back. "That was the way she felt.... She had felt that way since she was four years old." The engraving called "My Father Concerned about his Liver" is both funny and sad. As was said earlier, it is often impossible to know, for sure, in these later stories what is irony and what is not. The line "It is difficult to keep the public interested," as well as the whole concluding section, is ironic, given the extraordinary "show" put on in the public's behalf. But the conclusion is also a poignant statement of fact: it is difficult to keep the public interested; the supply of strange ideas is not endless. Barthelme's achievement is that in "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" he was able to hold our interest, temporarily at least, with one more strange idea.

"The Balloon" (Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts) is a similar kind of achievement. Its subject is again the relation between the artist and society, and in particular the triangular relationship of the artist, his public, and the objet d'art. In addition, the story tests the relevance of an established literary convention--that of the work of art as love-gift.

The narrator-artist has created an immense balloon, forty-five blocks long, six crosstown blocks wide; the purpose of his narration is to describe the effects of the balloon on various members of the public and on his mistress. The artist is extremely sensitive about their various responses, and his tone--flat and professorial--seems at first

comically inappropriate to the immensity of his creation. Barthelme's point is that for the public the balloon is just another marvel, and his description of their collective attitude toward it is fine social satire.

> There were reactions. Some people found the balloon "interesting." As a response this seemed inadequate to the immensity of the balloon, the suddenness of its appearance over the city; on the other hand, in the absence of hysteria or other societally-induced anxiety, it must be judged a calm, "mature" one. There was a certain amount of initial argumentation about the "meaning" of the balloon; this subsided, because we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest safest phenomena.[21]

This is playfully malicious irony. The simple sentence "There were reactions" perfectly catches the spirit of the whole piece: not "There were strong reactions," not even "Everybody reacted." Likewise, the second sentence: "Some people found the balloon 'interesting.'" That is all. The response is, of course, too calm, too "mature." And the lack of concern for "meaning" is not the sort of philosophical or aesthetic corrective for which many artists stand today; rather, this is a fear of meaning. It is easier to trivialize the balloon, to hang "green and blue paper lanterns" from the underside, or to leave it to children.

The public's trivialization of the balloon is basically what the rest of the story is about. The official bureaucratic attitude is predictably one of tolerance. City officials would have preferred, naturally, if the balloon had a more practical function--if, say, the words "18% more effective" were written somewhere on its surface, but they

still adhere to remnants of the old liberalism, enough so that they will not publically demand the balloon's destruction or removal. The citizens themselves simply become accustomed to the balloon's presence, and they use it in a vulgar way. Some men see it as an "imposture," something in the way. Others see it as a kind of reward; still others use it as the basis for their fantasies. Everyone uses it for social reasons, in the same way that people read and discuss best sellers or meet at the theater. "People began, in a curious way, to locate themselves in relation to aspects of the balloon: I'll meet you at that place where it dips down..." And the scholars respond as scholars are expected to respond: "Critical opinion was divided."

As for the artist himself, he too acts out a role which is a parody of the artist's role. He "cannot reveal" the point at which the balloon began. He objects to the notion that his balloon is simply a "situation," i.e., simply a formula, much in the way Eliot objected to the notion that The Waste Land spoke for the despair of a generation. The artist seems not to mind that children enjoy his creation, but he cautions: "...the purpose of the balloon was not to amuse children." He could have satisfied city officials by offering some slogan-meaning for the balloon, but "I could not bear to do so." It is not until the very end, however, that we are given an explanation for the artist's typically touchy attitude toward his work, and here the story achieves its best, its most consciously literary moment.

> I met you under the balloon, on the occasion of your return from Norway; you asked if it was mine; I said it was. The balloon, I said, is a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure, having to do with the unease I felt at your absence, and with sexual deprivation, but now that your visit to Bergen has been terminated, it is no longer necessary or appropriate. Removal of the balloon was easy; trailer trucks carried away the depleted fabric, which is now being stored in West Virginia, awaiting some other time of unhappiness, sometime, perhaps, when we are angry with one another.[22]

The balloon, then, turns out to be a love-gift, and the story itself a parody of the artist-lover's "all-for-you" plaint. The way in which Barthelme has updated this literary convention underlines what was said earlier about the marginal role to which art today has been relegated. The artist/lover has, in the first place, given her this gift, not because of some high and noble emotion like romantic love, but because of his "unease" and his "sexual deprivation." And she herself is not ineffably flattered as her Elizabethan counterpart would have been. She simply "asked if it was mine." She has, undoubtedly, received numerous other love-gifts; she is tired of them. The balloon, for her, is just another marvel. Yet the story must not be oversimplified; it would be wrong to suggest that "The Balloon" can be reduced to a statement or criticism about the marginal role of art. Rather the story simply accepts this state of affairs, builds upon it, and uses it to create new possibilities for fiction.

The contemporary artist cannot, like Tolstoy, presume "moral authority" and induce widespread weeping; he cannot create a "show" with erupting volcanos, as did the artist

in "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace"; nor can he create enormous balloons. The public, being imperturbable, has a capacity to accomodate anything, and today's art, Barthelme implies, must reflect this fact. Nevertheless, there are artists, or would-be artists, who still seem unaware of this situation, who still view their relationship with the public in terms which, for Barthelme, have no connection with the realities of the age. A number of his stories are built upon this idea.

In "The Angry Young Man" (Guilty Pleasures) he sets out to capture and to expose whatever pretensions to anger a writer today may claim. Anger, we learn, has become so totally assimilated and institutionalized that the expression "an'gry young man" has achieved the humiliating respectability of inclusion in the Random House Dictionary of the English Language:

> 1. (often cap.) one of a group of British writers since the late 1950's whose works reflect strong dissatisfaction with, frustration by, and rebellion against tradition and society.
> 2. any author writing in this manner. 3. any frustrated, rebellious person.[23]

The angry young man is then defined by his clothing: "Brown corduroy pants, a black turtleneck sweater, work shoes, coonskin cap, glass of porter in his right hand. Or, dark blue suit, black shoes, white shirt, maroon tie--this worn when receiving the Order of the British Empire or other honors." The angry young man is also defined by the predictability of his revolutionary ideals--at which point Barthelme

simply includes a hefty chunk of Fidel Castro's revolutionary jargon. Finally, the angry young man can be defined according to the "characteristics of the Angry Young Book":

> The angry young book should be a good true book of a familiar and reliable pattern. It should concern itself with human emotions of standard issue plus at least one (1) nonstandard emotion for seasoning and piquancy. It should extend to a good number of pages and said pages should hold a full body of printing both recto and verso, the lines so arranged as to come out even at the right-hand margin, save at the termination of paragraphs and the like. It should have a good true spine to which the pages are attached by sewing and a strong glue, and no page should fly out of the whole save by prior arrangement, as when the author is especially angry. The same should reflect strong dissatisfaction with, frustration by, and rebellion against tradition and society. The book should, ideally, burn the hands--a third-degree burn.[24]

In a world where angry artists have become as institutionalized as bankers, they will of course hold an Annual Meeting, at which "voices are raised in anger." At such a meeting it is likely that self-conscious, theoretical questions about the nature of anger will be raised, such as: "(1) Is fresh ever-renewed anger possible? (2) How long (expressed in decades) can anger be maintained without modulating into, say, pique? (3) Was it originally pique, made to seem anger by skilled dramaturgy?"

Barthelme's story mocks whatever claims to seriousness, meaning, and significance the angry artist has for the world of today. During the mid and late 1950's, when the group of British authors for whom the label was contrived were writing, society still provided some token resistance to

artistic outrage. But now, confronting a public bereft of any felt social or historical context, the angry young man is free to vent all the anger he can muster. This freedom is something of a curse, part of the very dilemma the avant-garde finds itself in today. And the story succeeds in delineating one of the main differences between the fifties and the sixties. The fifties was still a period of a pre-self-consciousness. Authentic anger still seemed possible. The question Barthelme half-jokingly asks, "Is there any point in being an angry old man?," says as much about the growth of self-consciousness and the aging of a society as it does about the growth and old-age of an artist.

"A Film" (Sadness) satirizes the current excesses and high seriousness surrounding that genre. The director illustrates a host of artistic pretensions, and the story exposes him for what he is--a self-indulgent bourgeois concerned primarily with his own image and career. "Things have never been better," he begins, "except that the child, one of the stars of our film, has just been stolen by vandals, and this will slow down the progress of the film somewhat, if not bring it to a halt." But the director is a clever man! He decides that this incident should be made part of the story line. The film is entitled "Flying to America," and its theme is nothing less than The American Experience. "Self-improvement is a large theme in Flying to America. Nowhere is self-realization more a possibility than in America."

The narrator-director hires Ezra to help him direct the film. Ezra is virtually a card-carrying member of the avant-garde:

> "And is it not the case," Ezra said, when we first met, "that I have been associated with the production of nineteen major motion pictures of such savage originality, scalding verité, and honey-warm sexual indecency that the very theaters chained their doors rather than permit exhibition of these major motion pictures on their ammonia-scented gum-daubed premises? And is it not the case..."[25]

For the most part the director is pleased with Ezra, and with the various "sequences" of the film. He is particularly pleased with the sequence on the moon rocks, which were "the greatest thing we had ever seen in our entire lives!" But he is also saddened by what his film will not contain. "I wanted to film everything," he says, "but there are things we are not getting. The wild ass is in danger in Ethopia--we've got nothing on that. We've got nothing on intellectual elitism funded out of public money, an important subject." Though he laments these and other omissions, the director concludes in a burst of self-satisfaction when he realizes that the vandals will be caught. "Truth! That is another thing they said our film wouldn't contain. I had simply forgotten about it, in contemplating the series of triumphs that is my private life."

The film which this director has put together seems like something which has literally been "put together." The various sequences, though unrelated to each other, are supposed to be related to the film's central theme of the American experience. Of course we have seen numerous movies

edited according to this cut and paste method, and Barthelme is more or less parodying this technique. But the construction of the story is itself of the cut and paste variety. "A Film," as it appears in Sadness, is actually the product of pieces of previously "whole" stories. Barthelme wrote a story called "A Film" for the New Yorker several years ago; it was less than half the length of the current story; while none of it has been omitted, it has been broken up and spliced together with inserts from a story called "Flying to America," which was also published separately in the New Yorker; the section on the moon rocks was previously unpublished. Thus, the final version of "A Film" is itself a patch and paste job, and an example of how Barthelme's art takes the shape of what it mocks. Barthelme had parodied this approach in a much earlier story called "See the Moon" (Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts), which also pokes fun at using the materials of dreck. The narrator of the story points to the wall of his room on which are pinned such souvenirs as a red hat, a book of ant farm instructions, a traffic ticket. He says:

> It's my hope that these...souvenirs...will someday merge, blur--cohere is the word, maybe--into something meaningful. A grand word, meaningful. What do I look for? A work of art, I'll not accept anything less. Yes I know it's shatteringly ingenuous but I wanted to be a painter. They get away with murder in my view....They can pick up a Baby Ruth wrapper on the street, glue it to the canvas (in the right place, of course, there's that), and lo! people crowd about and cry, "A real Baby Ruth wrapper, by God, what could be realer than that!"[26]

Several reviewers of Barthelme's work have cited this passage to support their contention that it is a statement of his own creative technique. But the passage really suggests the way in which Barthelme manages to use, and yet to outdistance, the dreck of much contemporary art--as discussed in Snow White.

Hilton Kramer said of previous avant-garde movements that the révolté strain achieved a more immediate response and popularity than the moderate strain, and the same is true today. The writers of celebration and liberation have had an astonishing influence on much of the cultural and artistic activity in this country since the mid-sixties. But perhaps the more moderate and traditional faction will turn out to have the most enduring influence after all, and thereby establish that critical and historical perspective which the more popular strain is not providing. This need becomes increasingly important as traditional values recede further and further from memory. Barthelme most assuredly does not "stand for" or affirm any particular tradition as Eliot did; but he does possess what Eliot called the historical sense, and he uses it to expose the mere presentness of contemporary American society.

One of the central facts of this mere presentness is an obsession with self. Postmodern man's almost exclusive interest in and indulgence of the self, his reduction of everything to the self has, ironically, helped to trivialize the self. In the self's inability to attach itself to any

tradition, institution, or myth, it loses stature. We are a society whose largest purpose is self-fulfillment. In attempting to thrust the self into a position of absolute importance we have diminished its importance. The révolté strain of postmodernism would undoubtedly disagree with such a diagnosis, since celebration of self and self-liberation are its persistent themes. The title of Richard Poirier's book, The Performing Self, not to mention its content, is indicative of this group's general position. Poirier, for instance, confesses to a highly qualified admiration for the writing of Jorge Luis Borges:

> ...Borges is for my taste too little concerned with the glory of the human presence within the wastes of time, with human agencies of invention, and he is too exclusively amused by the careers of competing systems, the failed potencies of techniques and structures. We remember the point of his texts, especially since it is so often the same point, but he gives us few people to remember or care about. Our greatest invention so far remains ourselves, what we call human beings, and enough inventing of that phenomenon still goes on to make the destiny of persons altogether more compelling in literature than the destiny of systems or of literary modes.[27]

For writers like Barthelme, Borges, and a number of other postmodernists in possession of a historical sense, Poirier's "glory of the human presence," and the compelling "destiny of persons" strikes of naive anachronism. Poirier attributes his criticism of Borges to "taste," but read closely we see that it amounts to a fundamental disagreement with Borges' vision of man and the world.

Though he does not say so, what Poirier is finally objecting to is the dehumanization of art which Ortega y

Gasset long ago cited as the central tendancy of the avant-garde art of his time. As dehumanization increases so does concern for the mechanical, the scientific. Barthelme's "The Glass Mountain" (City Life), for instance, is a story written in 100 numbered sentences. To object, as some reviewers have, to the mechanical quality of the story is not simply to quarrel with its technique; it is to quarrel with its subject-matter as well, since what Barthelme is doing is showing how the literary convention of the quest, once so fertile and dynamic, must be severely attenuated for adaptation to today's world. The convention was developed over the centuries as a vehicle for exploring and defining man's courageous striving after beauty and truth. But in an age when beauty, truth and courage have long since been forgotten in favor of self-fulfillment, the convention of the quest survives as a form without any adequate content. Barthelme's parodic use of the convention thus places contemporary society within a perspective, and his mechanical emphasis on technique parallels this society's elevation of the technical over the substantial. But the story offers a judgment of technique. Poggioli claims that what triumphs in avant-garde art is not so much technique but "technicism"--in which technique invades spiritual realms where technique has no raison d'etre. Technicism is a revolt against "the reduction of nonmaterial values to the brute categories of the mechanical and the technical."[28] As in Barthelme's other stories, of course, the element of self-parody in "The Glass Mountain"

cancels out any suggestion that the story is a statement of belief.

Barthelme's main approach is to combine the invasion of the scientific and mechanical into all areas of modern life with man's habits of self-obsession. In "Game" (Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts), the two characters are the product of a country which reduces humanity to military/mechanical dimensions. These two characters have only a flicker of human spirit left. Stationed in an underground missle installation "in Utah, Montana, or Idaho," the two men have been there 133 days, "owing to an oversight," with no knowledge of how long they have to stay. "I suspect the only way they can persuade sun-loving creatures into their pale green sweating reinforced concrete walls is to say that the system is twelve hours on, twelve hours off," the narrator reflects. But his natural desires have so eroded that now he longs only to get his hands on Shotwell's ball and jacks, and to keep from being shot. Barthelme's style captures perfectly the rigid, mechanical quality of his mind:

> Each of us wears a .45 and each of us is supposed to shoot the other if the other is behaving strangely. How strangely is strangely? I do not know. In addition to the .45 I have a .38 which Shotwell does not know about concealed in my attaché case, and Shotwell has a 125 calibre Beretta which I do not know about strapped to his right calf. Sometimes instead of watching the console I pointedly watch Shotwell's .45, but this is simply a ruse, simply a maneuver, in reality I am watching his hand when it dangles in the vicinity of his right calf. Similarly Shotwell pretends to watch my .45 but he is really watching my hand resting idly atop my attaché case, my hand resting idly atop

my attache case.[29]

In "Report" (Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts), technique has achieved awesome triumphs. The narrator, whose group is against the war, visits the engineers in Cleveland. "I was supposed to persuade them not to do what they are going to do." At the meeting he observes hundreds of bone fractures. He speaks with the Chief Engineer, who tells him of a "few new marvels" they have invented, such as computer-controlled wish evaporation, which is "going to be crucial in meeting the rising expectations of the world's peoples..."

> "I intuit your hatred and jealousy of our things," he said. "The ineffectual always hate our thing and speak of it as anti-human, which is not at all a meaningful way to speak of our thing. Nothing mechanical is alien to me," he said...[30]

The engineer concludes by insisting that although they could employ all of their sophisticated technology, their moral sense, which is on punched cards, is the most technically advanced moral sense the world has ever known.

In "Paraguay" (City Life), Barthelme creates a country where the technical controls every aspect of human and natural life. The government of Paraguay controls its inhabitants' activity by controlling the temperature. "For instance, males move twice as fast at 60 degrees as they do at 35 degrees." Sexual intercourse occurs only between 66 and 69 degrees. Silence is sold in paper sacks. Creative misunderstanding is crucial. Everyone has the same fingerprints. Certain "technical refinements" have been made in Paraguay's sexual life, "intended to complicate and enrich"

this activity. Finally, Paraguay has solved the "problem of art."

> New artists have been obtained. These do not object to, and indeed argue enthusiastically for, the rationalization process. Production is up. Quality control devices have been installed at those points where the interests of artists and audience intersect. Shipping and distribution have been improved out of all recognition.... The rationalized art is dispatched from central art dumps to regional art dumps, and from there into the lifestreams of cities. Each citizen is given as much art as his system can tolerate. Marketing considerations have not been allowed to dictate product mix; rather, each artist is encouraged to maintain, in his software, highly personal, even idiosyncratic, standards (the so-called "hand of the artist" concept). Rationalization produces simpler circuits and, therefore, a saving in hardware. Each artist's product is translated into a statement in symbolic logic. The statement is translated back into the design of a simpler circuit. Foamed by a number of techniques, the art is then run through heavy steel rollers. Flip-flop switches control its further development. Sheet art is generally dried in smoke and is dark brown in color. Bulk art is air-dried, and changes color in particular historical epochs.[31]

One of the common elements in these three stories--"Game," "Report," and "Paraguay"--is the absence of any sense of past; where technique flourishes, the past vanishes. Earlier I suggested that Barthelme's main subject is confusion, that he allows confusion to grow out of some unstated sense of loss. Technique creates this loss, and accounts for Barthelme's dominant image of modern man, who, having lost all touch with the past, tradition, religion, the family, becomes obsessed with "self," his petty "problems," his self-fulfillment. The result is the therapeutic society.

One of Barthelme's most direct attempts to characterize this society is the story "Daumier" (Sadness). The point to

be made about the self, Daumier says, "is that it is insatiable." And so the story is about Daumier's elaborate attempts to construct a surrogate self, one designed for satiability, one who "knows his limits," "doesn't overstep," in whom desire "has been reduced to a minimum." So he constructs such a surrogate--based on a character out of Dumas--whose life is so full, so exciting, that he hardly desires anything. Later, of course, Daumier must construct a second surrogate; one is not enough.

The problem of the insatiability of the self is not strictly a modern problem. In a more stable age, however, the self's desires could be curbed externally, by certain traditions, institutions, rigid social mores and the like. The timeless theme of the individual vs. society takes its cue from these circumstances. Today, however, with virtually all external restrictions gone, the self is free to indulge itself to its heart's content--but its heart is never content. The dilemma of the self today is the infinite possibilities confronting it. The self can taste anything it desires, and still it will not be satisfied for long. Barthelme's catalog of the materials which Daumier consults is hilarious.

> My plan for self-transplants was not formulated without the benefit of some amount of research. I turned over the literature, which is immense, the following volumes sticking in the mind as having been particularly valuable: The Self: An Introduction by Meyers, Self-Abuse by Samuels, The Armed Self by Crawlie, Burt's The Concept of Self, Self-Congratulations by McFee, Fingarette's Self-Deception, Self-Defense for Women and Young

> Girls by Birch, Winterman's Self-Doubt, Self-Loathing in Vermin by Skinner, LeBatt's Selfishness, Gordon's Self-Love, The Many-Colored Self by Winsor and Newton, Paramananda's Self-Mastery, The Misplaced Self by Richards, Nastiness by Bertini, The Self Prepares by Teller, Flaxman's The Self as Pretext, Hickel's Self-Propelled Vehicles, Sorensen's Self Slaughter, Self and Society in Ming Thought by DeBary, The Sordid Self by Clute, and Techniques of Self-Validation by Wright. These works underscored what I already knew, that the self is a dirty great villain, an interrupter of sleep, a deviler of awakeness, an intersubjective atrocity, a mouth, a maw.[32]

The postmodern self's insatiable thirst for novelty--particularly in art and sex--is, we have seen, one of Barthelme's common subjects. With this search for novelty, man disowns the old, the past, and yet makes unreasonable demands on the new. "I must have the new, though there be none left in the world," Daumier quotes La Fontaine. The line describes exactly the dilemma of the postmodern self, particularly in America. In "Perpetua" (Sadness), a story about a girl who divorces her husband, Perpetua meets Andre:

> Americans were very strange, Andre said. They did not have a stable pattern of family life, as the French did. This was attributable to the greater liberty--perhaps license was not too strong a term--permitted to American women by their husbands and lovers. American women did not know where their own best interests lay, Andre said. The intoxication of modern life, which was in part a result of the falling away of former standards of conduct...[33]

In "Perpetua," however, the subject is treated a bit glibly. In "Daumier," Barthelme writes a passage which is poignant in its chillingly accurate description of the postmodern temper.

> Your attachments are measured. Not that you are indifferent by nature--you want nothing so much as

> a deep-going, fundamental involvement--but this does not seem to happen. Your attachments are measured; each seems to last exactly two years. Why is that? On the last lap of a particular liason, you feel that it is time to go, as if you were a guest at a dinner party and the host's offer of another brandy had a peculiar falseness to it. Full of good will, you attempt to pretend that you do not feel this way, you attempt to keep the level of cheerfulness and hope approximately where it has always been, to keep alive a sense of "future." But no one is fooled. Optimistic plans are made, but within each plan is another plan, allowing for the possible absence of one of the planners. You eye the bed, the record-player, the pictures, already making lists of who will take what. What does this say about you--that you move from person to person, a tourist of the emotions? Is this the meaning of failure?[34]

"Tourist of the emotions"--in love, in art, in friendship--this is one of the chief characteristics of modern man. Yet the irony with which Barthelme customarily treats this dismal characteristic is curiously softened here, as it is in the story's conclusion: "The self cannot be escaped, but it can be, with ingenuity and hard work, distracted. There are always openings if you can find them, there is always something to do." This spirit of careful optimism is typical of Barthelme's unwillingness to be drawn into easy formulas of despair and endgames. We observed this quality as early as "A Shower of Gold" (Caligari), in which Peterson concludes in a defiant revolt against the clichés of alienation. In "At the Tolstoy Museum," "Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," and "The Balloon," Barthelme takes as his subject the Dilemma of Art today and then proceeds to turn that subject back upon itself by making something new and different--similar to the way Borges did in "Pierre Menard" and other stories. In "A City of Churches" (Sadness), Klee concludes: "I am sorry

about the lost aircraft, but not overmuch. The war is temporary. But drawings and chocolate go on forever."

This same spirit is displayed in "The Party," another story from Sadness, whose compressed blend of realistic description and fanciful invention is typical of Barthelme's best work. The opening line, "I went to a party and corrected a pronounciation," establishes the sense of slight dissonance and illogic--the sense that something is not quite right--which is sustained throughout the story. The setting is a dreary cocktail party, dreary, that is, but for one factor: the presence of King Kong, who had entered through a window in an effort "to make himself interesting."

> Yes, it was King Kong back in action, and all of the guests uttered loud exclamations of fatigue and disgust, examining the situation in the light of their own needs and emotions, hoping that the ape was real or paper-mache according to their own temperaments, or wondering whether other excitements were possible out in the crisp, white night.[35]

Barthelme's technique of bringing King Kong into the story is itself an acknowledgement that we, the readers, are as weary of reading about cocktail parties as we are of attending them. The technique is disarming; it takes us off our guard. We expect an unrealistic tale, a clever diversion, perhaps. But the story turns out to have a painful realism for which we are totally unprepared.

The party is a kind of retreat, an attempt on the part of a group of civilized, academic types to escape from the savage world outside and from whatever personal problems they try to leave at home. The party is a place where

hopefully one will meet new people, because "When one has spoken a lot one has already used up all of the ideas one has. You must change the people you are speaking to so that you may appear, to yourself, to be alive." The party is a place where you may test "the effect on the members of the audience of your ruffled blouse, your long, magenta skirt."

The party is a place where taste is of the highest importance; hence, "I corrected a pronounciation..." "I praised a Bonnard." To show excitement over the mere presence of Kong would be...provincial--particularly since Kong himself has become so civilized and camp (he is now "an adjunct professor of art history at Rutgers, co-author of a text on tomb sculpture"). Word games are played; Kafka is discussed; khaki-colored punch is served. The escapist quality of the whole party is reflected in the television commercial playing in the background: "A number of young people, standing in a meadow, singing, holding hands. Can the life of the time be caught in an advertisement? Is that how it is, really, in the meadows of the world?"

Despite all of these effort to escape reality, reality intrudes. From outside on the street are heard the intermittent and increasingly frenzied sounds of "drums, whistles, howls, rattles, alphorns. Is it some kind of revolution in taste?" Inside, a child swallows twenty aspirin: "Is six too young for a suicide attempt?" And: "The people here don't look new; they look like emerald mine owners, in fact, or proprietors of some other sector of the economy that

something bad has just happened to." The hostess tells the guests that, shortly, the party "would improve," but the narrator wants only to go home. His "date" still possesses that "zest" which he lost long ago; he is no longer even sure he likes her; he has even lost the zest to leave her. The story concludes:

> Dear Francesca, tell me, is this a successful party, in your view? Is this the best we can do? I know that you have always wanted to meet Kong; now that you have met him and he has said whatever he has said to you (I saw you smiling), can we go home? I mean you to your home, me to my home, all these others to their own homes, cells, cages? I am feeling a little ragged. What made us think that we could escape things like bankruptcy, alcoholism, being disappointed, having children? Say "No," refuse me once and for all, let me try something else. Of course we did everything right insofar as we were able to imagine what "right" was. Is it really important to know that this movie is fine, and that one terrible, and to talk intelligently about the difference? Wonderful elegance! No good at all![36]

Once again, because of the references to "Kong," it is tempting to read this provocative paragraph as playful. But if Barthelme had wanted only to be playful he could certainly have written it in a more parodic style. The style here is frank, not only allowing a serious reading, but demanding it. And while it may seem a gloomy conclusion, the fact that Barthelme allows the narrator to arrive at an understanding of his situation, and to question the priorities of his friends' values, is quite optimistic. In any case, the tone and attitude here show how far Barthelme can sometimes move from the purely parodic approach of Snow White.

"The Sandman" (Sadness), too, allows some genuine

sadness to filter through the irony and once again displays an optimistic spirit. The story, which again treats middle-class obsession with self and with postmodern man's habits of analysis, takes the form of a letter written by an unnamed man to his girlfriend's psychiatrist. And while a good deal of the humor is in the fact that the letter-writer, though naive, "knows the language," as Peterson had said, he is treated sympathetically and most of the irony is directed at the analyst. The story implies that the analyst's diagnosis of Susan is at best arbitrary ("or...or...or...or..."), at worst motivated by the doctor's own professional and psychological needs and fears. Throughout most of the story the man attempts to refute the doctor's diagnosis of Susan: Susan had been thinking of giving up analysis in order to buy a piano; the doctor thinks this would be a mistake, an escape. The lover-narrator quotes from (and footnotes) learned articles in an effort to dispute the doctor's diagnosis of Susan's voyeurism, her depression, her love of failure, her chasmus hystericus. All of this is amusing, but the end of the letter is touching:

> Let me tell you a story.
> One night we were at her place, about three a.m., and this man called, another lover, quite well-known musician who is very good, very fast--a good man. He asked Susan, "Is he there?" meaning me, and she said "Yes," and he said, "What are you doing?" and she said "What do you think?" and he said "When will you be finished?" and she said, "Never." Are you, Doctor, in a position to appreciate the beauty of this reply, in this context?
> What I am saying is that Susan is wonderful. As is. There are not so many things around to which that word can be accurately applied. Therefore I must view

> your efforts to improve her with, let us say, a certain amount of ambivalence. If this makes me a negative factor in the analysis, so be it. I will be a negative factor until the cows come home, and cheerfully. I can't help it, Doctor, I am voting for the piano.[37]

There is a curious emotional release here, issuing from the character's naive and poignant expression of resistance to the clichés of analysis. When we contrast this character with those in Snow White, who surrender to clichés at every turn, we can see why there is a human element here, and in many of Barthelme's recent stories, which survives irony.

Irony is still Barthelme's main strategy but his recent work puts irony to more positive uses than did his early writing. In addition, he has learned that irony is sometimes more effective, and results in more intricate fictional constructs, when it is combined with other approaches. Perhaps, too, Barthelme has learned that pure irony is effective only in very short pieces; one of the problems with Snow White is its unrelenting sameness. And this may explain why, in The Dead Father, Barthelme moves even further away from the purely ironic mode of the early work.

Chapter 4

The Dead Father:

Irony and Sentiment

> You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him. The enormities go with the job, but close study will allow you to perform the job less well than it has previously been done, thus moving toward a golden age of decency, quiet, and calmed fevers.
>
> The Dead Father

The Dead Father, Barthelme's last book to date and his first novel since Snow White, is an ambitious elaboration upon the ideas and techniques of his later stories. It is at once more traditional and experimental than anything he has previously written: its form, that of the quest, is once again borrowed from another literary epoch, but whereas in Snow White and stories like "The Glass Mountain" Barthelme's intent was purely satiric, in The Dead Father he achieves a wide and subtle range of effects. Alongside the satire there are passages of beautiful and evocative poetry, moments of stern moral judgment, and scenes of genuine sentiment and sadness.

The novel is ambitious both in its choice of subject and in its treatment. It is, first of all, heavily symbolic. The Dead Father of the title symbolizes virtually everything of value which once inhabited the world: he is God; he is the "Holy Father"; he stands for Tradition, the Past, Order.

Perhaps he even stands for the Novel. But above all he stands simply for fatherhood. He is everything which we remember nostalgically and everything which we would find a substitute for; at the same time, he represents everything which modern man seeks to escape from, everything we have succeeded in annihilating.

In Totem and Taboo, Freud described the totem feast as the killing and eating of the father by a band of brothers--a criminal act which marks the beginnings of social organization, moral restriction, and religion:

> ...we need only assume that the group of brothers banded together were dominated by the same contradictory feelings toward the father which we can demonstrate as the content of ambivalence of the father complex in all our children and in neurotics. They hated the father who stood so powerfully in the way of their sexual demands and their desire for power, but they also loved and admired him.[1]
>
> ...psychoanalytic investigation of the individual teaches with especial emphasis that god is in every case modelled after the father and that our personal relation to god is dependent upon our relation to our physical father, fluctuating and changing with him, and that god at bottom is nothing but an exalted father...[2]
>
> A process like the removal of the primal father by the band of brothers must have left ineradicable traces in the history of mankind...[3]

Barthelme's story is both an elaboration and an updating of this and other primal myths. In The Dead Father, a band of brothers drags the father, by means of a steel cable, to a mysterious place to kill him, thus re-enacting the ancient ritual. But in this story there is one crucial difference at the outset, a difference which is Barthelme's donée: the father is already a dead father, in a sense. The mission of

the band of brothers is to drag the carcass to its burial ground, there to dispose of it once and for all.

The Dead Father is dead in the same sense in which Snow White, Batman and Robin, and the Phantom of the Opera are dead. The values which brought these figures into the world and which nurtured belief in them (and allowed them to believe in themselves) have so thoroughly eroded or disappeared that these heroes exist today merely as remnants of their former selves. But the Father is (was) a far more powerful figure than were those fragile fairy-tale creatures. In history and in the imagination he has assumed universal stature and God-like proportions. He does not die easily and is not killed easily. We want to be rid of him but we also want to hold on to what is left of him; he is "like a bubble we do not want to burst." Likewise, although his stature is severely diminished, he still tries to believe in himself, he "still has hope." He is, as the Prologue announces, "Dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead."

The novel is structured around dual oppositions: the traditional views of the Dead Father are opposed by the experimental views of his son Thomas and those of the other young people; and the traditional elements of the novel are opposed and undermined by a variety of anti-novel devices. The Prologue, employing a language both grand and trivial, establishes the main idea: the Dead Father lies half-buried, resembling an immense fallen soldier carved out of stone. He is dead. But he is remembered. "No one can remember when

he was not here in our city positioned like a sleeper in a troubled sleep." And in memory he has not only assumed awesome proportions, he has achieved a kind of life--in the sense that he still controls "what Thomas is thinking, what Thomas always thought, what Thomas will ever think, with exceptions." The heroic descriptions of the Dead Father establish the power he has retained on the imagination, but they are balanced by a flip, banal style which undercuts the former style and creates a disproportion: thus, "The brow is noble, good Christ what else?" The jawline is "Imposing, rugged, all that." Above all, the Prologue establishes the metaphoric mode of the whole story. The Dead Father is the stuff of "legend" and "sagas." The citizens "sit with tears in our eyes wanting the Dead Father to be dead..." But they also have the "good sense" not to attempt obliterating the memory of him--something which would only increase their feelings of guilt.

The novel proper begins conventionally: "Eleven o'clock in the morning." There is a pause in the action, in the "grand expedition," as the Dead Father calls it, in his dignity and naiveté. The talk of the characters indicates the changing roles, the transition from old to new. In former times, young people--those between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five--were required to wear bell-tipped, multi-colored caps in order to advertise their youngness, foolishness, and general subservience to the elders. The Dead Father invokes "the law" in his support of this tradition, which has only

lately been cast aside by Thomas and the other young people. And he also invokes his "Ukases"--a term used frequently in the novel to mean orders or commandments. But to the young people both the law and the Dead Father's Ukases--things which in former times had the stature of absolutes--are merely outworn "notions." In opposition to the Dead Father's invocation of the law, Thomas invokes "love." The law, he says, did not "make you loved." "Loved!" the Dead Father replies. "Not a matter of love. A matter of Organization." The Dead Father views the law, his Ukases, as a means of preserving social organization, as well as a means of preserving his own authority. Thomas invokes the subjectivity of love as an equalizer, as a means of leveling social distinctions. Thus, the group "disposed themselves around the cloth" in this fashion:

Julie

Thomas D. F.

Frawns

so that the Dead Father is placed on the same level not only with Thomas and Julie, but with the prawns. Gone are the days when fathers occupied the head-of-the-table.

Nevertheless, the Dead Father is contented, momentarily, apparently reconciled to this relatively minor encroachment of the new upon the old. But he has not reconciled himself to relativity itself--and this characteristic is one of the main differences between the Dead Father and the others:

> Soon we will be there, said the Dead Father.
> Fourteen or fifteen days, I reckon, Thomas

> said. Is there any doubt? There is always doubt. When we are there, and when I wrap myself in its warm yellowness, then I will be young again, said the Dead Father. I shall once again be wiry.[4]

The Dead Father's capacity for hope and belief is something Thomas hates and envies. Whenever the Dead Father expresses hope, Thomas almost instinctively reacts sexually with either Julie or Emma, because sex is all he has to fall back on. "Why do I feel so bad? he asked, looking around him in every direction, as if in search for an answer.... I could use a suck of the breast." Thomas' deliberate sexual exhibitions always incite the Dead Father's rage, for if the Dead Father has not reconciled himself to hopelessness, neither has he reconciled himself to being a sexually excluded "old fart." Insulted, he "slips his cable" and storms off into the grove of music and musicians, there to find a kind of sexual release in violence.

Technically, the first chapter imitates the techniques of the conventional story: setting, characters, dialogue, initiation of conflict. There is a beginning, a sense of movement, even an anti-climax. Particularly by the end of the chapter, however, it is clear that the traditional elements of fiction are being undermined by something new and untraditional. In response to the Dead Father's violence in the grove of music, Julie says: "Impressive...had they not been pure cardboard." What is interesting about that remark is that it comes from within the story. Barthelme's description of the Dead Father's battle with the musicians is

presented like a magic act or a puppet show. The musicians are only replicas of musicians, and this fact alone undermines the scene from the standpoint of conventional realism. But we do not expect another character to be privy to this kind of information or insight. Later in the novel, when the Dead Father storms off into the woods to slay the animals, realism is again undermined; we are told that his weapon is brought to him "by a metaphorically present gillie."

The rest of the novel describes the efforts of Thomas, Julie, Emma, and the "band of brothers" to drag the Dead Father to his final resting place. For Thomas, Julie, and Emma this effort implies a number of things: ridding themselves of something nagging at their conscience; ridding themselves of the reminder of old age and death. For Thomas, particularly, it means that he will now become the Father and assume the power which he has always wanted, though of course he is incapable of assuming this role. The feelings of Thomas, Julie, and Emma are ambivalent, however. They cannot rid themselves of their admiration for the Dead Father, and they still find themselves defending and protecting him from others. During the course of the journey the Dead Father gradually surrenders to Thomas the trappings of authority--buckle, sword, passport, keys--but even at the end he possesses a reserve of inner strength and natural authority which demands respect. As Julie had said earlier: "I have the greatest possible respect for him and what he represents." Thomas, by contrast, is a weak person; he represents the

weakness of the New--and authority symbols cannot help him. That Thomas is vaguely aware of this fact accounts for his dizziness, his sensation of sliding, and his depressions.

The Dead Father represents everything that is dead or dying: a grandeur, a largness, a capacity for high love and immense hate, for rage and evil and hope. In his dying, therefore, tragic potential also dies. Barthelme's description of his immense carcass is also a description of a shrunken world whose atmosphere is too thin to keep alive one who would breathe life so deeply. The difference between the Dead Father and Thomas is in one sense the difference between content and form, or between substance and style.

> My criticism was that you never understood the larger picture, said the Dead Father. Young men never understand the larger picture.
>
> I don't suggest I understand it now. I do understand the frame. The limits.
>
> Of course the frame is easier to understand.
>
> Older people tend to overlook the frame, even when they are looking right at it, said Thomas. They don't like to think about it.[5]

The fact that the Dead Father probably never understood the larger picture himself is beside the point. What is important is that the larger picture is what he sought to understand and to believe in; the larger picture is life's possibilities: the frame, its limitations. Thomas is correct in saying that older people do not see the frame, but he is merely correct. This form-content idea is repeated in Chapter 18, when Thomas takes away the Dead Father's passport:

> You are killing me.
>
> We? Not we. Not in any sense we. Processes are killing you, not we. Inexorable processes.
>
> Inexorable inapplicable in my case, said the

> Dead Father. Hopefully.
> "Hopefully" cannot be used in that way, grammatically, said Thomas.
> You are safe, dear old man, you are safe, temporarily, in the mansuetude of our care, Julie said.
> The what?
> The mansuetude that is to say mild gentleness of our care.
> I am surrounded by creepy murderous pedants! the Dead Father shouted. Unbearable![6]

In his mere correctness, Thomas reduces the issue from the substantial to the formal, from the grand to the trivial. The Dead Father is being murdered by pedants. Later, the argument between the Dead Father and Thomas regarding the Last Will and Testament underscores this difference between the two. It is not the Dead Father who wants to put his house in order; Thomas, again, is the one preoccupied with this "prudent step." He wants "to have everything tidy," he worries that the Dead Father may leave his affairs "in rotten mishmashy, cluttersome, disarray..." The Dead Father is still impassioned about life, not about order after his death. "Tidy... what a way of putting it," he tells Thomas. And, in rage: "Prudent is shit!" Dylan Thomas would have approved of the Dead Father's rage against the dying of the night.

Although, when the Dead Father finally dies Thomas will, in a literal sense, become the Father, in a larger sense he will always stay the son because modern culture no longer believes in or feels the things for which the Father stood. In place of the Dead Father's absolute belief, his "I will not be reconciled" attitude, and his hope for immortality, Thomas is a "relativist," a "student of decay," whose only absolute

is his conviction that everything is temporary. "I cannot abandon what I know," he tells Julie. "One doesn't find an absolute everyday." Both the Dead Father and Thomas are continually preoccupied with sex, but whereas for Thomas sex is as mechanical as breathing, the Dead Father is a genuinely lustful, dirty old man. Come to bed with me, he tells Emma, "and I will whisper secrets in your ear. Powerful secrets." But Emma's interest is in "buying the furniture, picking out the towels. The stainless steel." That the Golden Fleece turns out to be nothing more than Julie's private parts, of which the Dead Father is permitted only a touch, "outside the skirt," is an irony directed not at him but at Julie and Thomas; by trickery, they got him to submit to this journey. "I wasn't really fooled, said the Dead Father. Not for a moment. I knew all along..." But though in a sense he was cruelly fooled, he still has enough character at the end to express admiration for Julie's sexuality: "It is lovely, said the Dead Father. I am covered with admiration."

In place of the Dead Father's passion and rage, Thomas suffers from ennui--he "falls to the ground in a swoon." He stutters when he talks about himself. It is clear that his preoccupation with external forms is a means of offsetting the formlessness of his beliefs, feelings, and sense of purpose. In the beginning of Chapter 13, Barthelme describes Thomas' condition in a paragraph quite unlike anything he has ever written before.

> The mountain. The cathedral. The stone steps. Music. Looking down. The windows, apertures.

> Rows of seated people. The alters, lights, singing. Egg-shaped apertures like seats opening onto the void. The drop. The clouds. Slipping in the seat. Thomas slipping in the seat. Toward the void. Brace foot against the edge. Lean back hooking shoulder around opening. Out strolling on the grounds. Flowers blue with a border of white. The Dead Father strolling. Julie strolling. Others strolling. Edmund strolling. The music, a Kyrie. The edge. The fall. Stone steps. Mandrills staring. Photographers and cooks. Thomas sitting in the sloping seat. Slipping toward the edge. Braces foot against the outer wall, which trembles. Hooks shoulder around inner wall and grasps with left hand. Out strolling. Julie speaking to the Dead Father. The Dead Father smiling. People sitting on stone benches. Processional. Under a canopy. Golden censures swinging left right left right. Tall old man in golden mitre. Acolytes. Rings with amethysts. The edge. Looking over the edge. Sheer walls. Clouds. Thomas slipping in the seat. Braces foot against outer wall. A quilt or blanket slipping toward the edge. Shoulder hooked around inner wall. The wall trembling. The alcove shaped like an egg. Quilt slipping toward the edge. Singing... [7]

For Barthelme, this passage is unusually sensual--the colors, the music, the censers, the dream sensation of continually slipping--and, like a good poem, its meanings are both suggestive and symbolic. The cathedral, built high on the mountain and close to heaven, still contains the traditional religious trappings, but like the Dead Father it too is dying. The church, once a source of strength and a bastion against the void, is for Thomas only a reminder of what he does not believe. Rather than having a calming or steadying effect upon him, as it does upon the Dead Father, the church only makes Thomas more uneasy, more uncertain of his footing. It is therefore consistent with his character and the age he represents that, in order to ward off these feelings, Thomas

turns and puts his arms around Julie. Sex provides the only (momentary) relief from nothingness and total aloneness.

In its largest sense, the novel is saying that the Dead Father will be replaced by nothing. Fatherhood is dead. If the Father is one who is big and strong, courageous, protective of and responsible for his children, an all-knowing, arbitrary ruler, then Fatherhood is dead. It is not a question of whether the Dead Father succeeded in his role; what matters is that he tried to fill it, knowing that success was impossible. "I never wanted it, it was thrust upon me," the Dead Father says of fatherhood. He would have preferred "remaining in my study comparing editions of Klinger." Likewise, in his final hours, he movingly admits that there were holes in the absolute wisdom he often professed to have:

> There were things I never knew what made the pavement gray and what made the giant monuments move back and forth on the far horizen ceaselessly night and day on the far horizen and what made the leaves fibrillate on the trees and what comity meant and what made the heart stop and how unicorns got trapped in tapestries, these things I never learned.[8]

Though he may not have wanted to be a Father, and although the role itself contains a good deal of the sham, nevertheless the Dead Father tried to fulfill the role. It was entrusted to him by culture and he did it. "Did I do it well?" he asks Julie. "Marvelously." But society today no more believes in Fatherhood than it believes in God. So the Father is dead, and the sons, like Thomas, do not know what role to play. "What will you do with yourselves when it is all over?" the Dead Father asks Thomas and Julie as the

expedition approaches its destination.

> Julie looked at Thomas.
> What will we do with ourselves when it is all over?
> Thomas shook his head.
> I'd rather not answer that question if you don't mind.
> Why not?
> I haven't an answer.
> I know that, the Dead Father said.[9]

Alongside this thematic conflict between old and new values, the formal elements of the novel engage in a similar contest between traditional and experimental. Unlike the conventional sections of The Dead Father, in which a story is told, in which there is progress, and in which the characters develop, there are four extended conversations between Julie and Emma which tell no story and go nowhere. For example:

> Whose little girl are you?
> I get by, I get by.
> Time to go.
> Hoping this will reach you at a favorable moment.
> Bad things can happen to people.
> Is that a threat?
> Dragged him all this distance without any rottytoottoot.
> Is that a threat?
> Take it any way you like it.
> Other fish to fry.
> We guarantee every effort will be made.[10]

There is no reference to their words outside the language itself. Julie and Emma have no subject because they have no history, no sense of past. They express opinions ("That's your opinion") but in fact they have no opinions; hence, the numerous contradictions and statements such as, "I didn't really mean that really." They have no opinions because they have no sense of self. It makes no difference which one of

them is speaking because they talk identically and because they are not even listening to one another. Their closest literary precedents are the Thames Daughters of The Waste Land, who can "connect nothing with nothing." But next to Julie and Emma the Thames Daughters, in their honesty, possess a certain moral stature. The absolute meaninglessness of Julie and Emma's talk provides a strong ironic contrast to the meaning and plight of the Dead Father and to the tradition of the quest. What the girls represent is what is killing him. Though the girls' dialogue is perhaps given too much space, Barthelme's ear for exquisite banality and the context of these passages prevents them from becoming merely sludge. They serve as an effective counterpart in the novel's overall design.

"A Manual for Sons" is the other main digression in a novel which is in a large sense about digressions ("What has this to do with fatherhood? asked the Dead Father. I talk about what I want to talk about, said Julie, this is a digression"). The Manual is given to Thomas and Julie by a stranger and after they have read it they drop it into the fire. It is a funny piece, probably a takeoff on Lord Chesterfield's cynical Letters to my Son, and it is filled with passages of wonderful jokes, generalizations, "truths," and advice. Much of it is only playful; but as in the rest of the novel, moments of exquisite sadness and poignancy, which catch the reader off-guard, somehow surface amid the games and flights of fancy. Thus, though we are told that fathers are mad, that they

are teachers of the true and not-true, and that they sleep with hired women because they fear women who are free, we are also told that "some fathers never sleep at all, but are endlessly awake, staring at their futures, which are behind them." Most fathers, the Manual says, can control their desire to sleep with their beautiful daughters, "But the important thing about daughter-fathers is that, as fathers, they don't count...to themselves." They tend, therefore, to take a milder attitude toward their daughters than they take toward their sons. The key idea in fatherhood is "responsibility," and it is due to this enormous burden that fathers are ambitious, frustrated, and bitter. At this point, Barthelme gropes to describe a typical son's dominant emotion toward his father in the most touching sentence in the Manual.

> He is mad about being small when you were big, but no, that's not it, he is mad about being helpless when you were powerful, but no, not that either, he is mad about being contingent when you were necessary, not quite it, he is insane because when he loved you, you didn't notice.[11]

The Manual gives additional advice on how to find a lost father ("Do you really want to find this father?"), and on how to rescue a father from danger--and feel, "for a moment, that you are the father and he is not." The Manual warns that upon the death of father you must deal with a memory often more potent than his living presence. Patricide is a bad idea too because such an act would simply prove that the father's every accusation against you was correct. "It is

all right to feel this hot emotion but not to act upon it."

Your true task, as a son, the Manual concludes,

> is to reproduce every one of the enormities touched upon in this manual but in attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him. The enormities go with the job, but close study will allow you to perform the job less well than it has previously been done, thus moving toward a golden age of decency, quiet, and calmed fevers. Your contribution will not be a small one, but "small" is one of the concepts you should shoot for.... Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least "turned down" in this generation--by the combined efforts of all of us together.[12]

The conclusion of the Manual is not ironic advice so much as it is a satiric comment on a situation which already exists. Today's fathers are in fact "paler, weaker" versions of their grandfathers--just as Thomas is a paler, weaker version of the Dead Father. Thomas' comment that it would "depend on the experience of the individual making the judgment" as to whether or not the Manual was harsh or not harsh enough is something the Dead Father would never have said. "I hate relativists," Julie replies, and we are meant to share her contempt. The Dead Father, both the one in the novel and the idea he represents, was stronger, more interesting, more sympathetic than the sons who replaced them. In his madness, his ambitiousness, in his delivery of truths and not-truths, in his terrible voice, even in his inability to show love, there was something heroic and tragic. He tried to fill an impossible role. There is nothing heroic or tragic about the "attenuated" version of the Dead Father who has taken his place. The Thomas who swoons, stutters, and who believes

only in temporaneity and relativity is a pathetic figure who reflects only too clearly what we have become and, by contrast with the Dead Father, what we have lost. The notion of actually conquering fatherhood is fancifully described by Barthelme in the section of the novel about the Wends.

> We Wends are the father of ourselves...that which all men have wished to be from the very beginning, we are.... Wends have no wives, they have only mothers. Each Wend impregnates his own mother and thus fathers himself. We are all married to our mothers, in proper legal fashion.[13]

Modern man has not "conquered" fatherhood, but The Dead Father works on the assumption that fatherhood is being "turned down," gradually, as we free ourselves from its demands and responsibilities. There is something to be said for this freedom--just as there is something to be said for being liberated from the constraints of Tradition, the Church, God, the Novel, any authority or convention. But one must be strong enough and self-disciplined enough to know how to use such freedom. For most of us, it means confusion, and the loss of a fundamental sense of self and purpose.

In his review of The Dead Father in The Atlantic, Richard Todd wrote: "Sentiment earns a larger place for itself in this novel than in anything Barthelme has written before.... We are sorry to see the Dead Father go, when the bulldozers appear. He reminds us of whatever it is that we imagine to have existed in a more coherent world."[14] Todd might have added that this "sentiment" is achieved despite the fact that the Dead Father is hardly a realistic character, and despite the fact that the idea represented by the Dead

Father is as much an object of irony as of sympathy and nostalgia. It is in Barthelme's ambivalence, in the blending of contradictory attitudes, that the novel achieves the elusive tone which characterizes much of his later work. We laugh at the Dead Father; we feel sorry for him; sometimes we are uncertain how to respond.

One might think that The Dead Father's subtlety of tone and intricate design might make it Barthelme's best achievement, but in fact the novel is a falling off. The problem with it is in the prose itself: except for many isolated passages, the writing lacks the wit and freshness which sustained Snow White's far less ambitious design. This weakness is partly the result of Barthelme's inability to tell a conventional story. Snow White's very lack of narrative is its strength: the form of that novel allowed Barthelme to indulge in a new subject every paragraph. To an extent Barthelme tries to do the same thing in The Dead Father, except that the narrative form forces him to describe the ongoing action. Barthelme's prose is unsuited for this purpose, with the result that much of the description is flat. Then, too, Snow White seemed to speak more directly to the pressures and realities of its time. The Dead Father addresses itself to a broad modern phenomenon, but Snow White was a more immediate response to 1960's America. There is a strain to The Dead Father--the allegory, the heavy symbolism, the careful design--which suggests an effort to make the subject important, whereas the intentional frivolousness of

Snow White announces the triviality of his subject. Thus, where Snow White moves along purely on the momentum of its own style, The Dead Father carries along with it some content which literally makes it a weightier work--one which requires the kind of "interpretation" and "reading between the lines" which Snow White satirized.

But it was obviously Barthelme's intention to do something different, to attempt a novel which achieves a wider range of effects than that achieved by his earlier work. And if The Dead Father does not seem as satisfying as his earlier work it would have been even less satisfying had he decided to sit still with success, with a formula which is now widely imitated. Barthelme's instincts probably tell him what imitators never know, which is that the style he used ten years ago is not quite right for today's realtites.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Over fifty years ago Ortega observed of modern art that it expresses a real loathing of living forms and beings and a disgust with history, society, and the state. Artists of all periods have had difficulty reconciling their visions with reality, but it seems that in the modern era this difficulty reached unprecendented proportions. The disappearance of God forced man to create his own system of values; the discrepancy between the way the world is and the way it ought to be became increasingly intolerable, and reconciliation became almost impossible. We recall that for Kierkegaard religion was the true reconciliation with actuality but for most modern artists this solution has long since evaporated.

The notion that art transforms the imperfect into the perfect is a critical commonplace, but its applicability to Barthelme lies in the degree of the world's imperfection. His implicit is that the world is no longer a serious literary subject: the world consists of blague, dreck, impedimenta, garbage, game-playing. Barthelme does not attempt any reconciliation with the world; nor is he able to transform it into a better one, a "new actuality." What he does, rather, is to create perfect models of the world's imperfections--or, more accurately, models <u>more purely imperfect</u>. The

irony which destroys the world and which results in estrangement does not reconstruct the world; instead, the irony creates a purer version of what it has destroyed. This purer version is the "poetry" which Kierkegaard lamented; it is the work's "objecthood."

Barthelme's irony makes for much revelry. At the same time, it often results in animosity, and in his best work feelings of sadness, regret, even sympathy, filter through the show of ironic superiority. There is an unstated sense of loss, of caring, in conflict with his irony--and this conflict results in a curious tension and ambivalence.

Irony--its function, its moral implications--is the central issue in Barthelme's fictions. How right and useful is destructive irony? How much pleasure does an artist get from a freedom which leads to such animosity? "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" is a statement of what art can no longer do today--and in a less direct way all of Barthelme's work can be considered a presentation of this thesis. But even Kierkegaard admits that there may be periods when an artist may have no choice but to be ironic. And Bonamy Dobree notes that during the great comic periods in history "we find that values are changing with alarming speed. The times are those of rapid social readjustment and general instability, when policy is insecure, religion doubted and being revised, and morality in a state of chaos."[1] Likewise, G. D. Kermidjian observes of parody that it becomes a "major mode of expression for a civilization in a state of transition and flux."[2]

It is necessary, then, to see both the sixties' writers in general and Barthelme in particular within a broad historical context.

Barthelme's brand of irony and game-playing is similar to the comic attitude found in all literary periods. Louis Kronenberger notes that comedy, in its philosophical sense, as "an attitude toward life, rather than as a mere technical aspect of the theater," is the same comic spirit which animates such diverse writers as Aristophanes and Jane Austin.[3] Comedy, he writes, is much more reasonably associated with pessimism than with optimism; it is concerned with human imperfection, with people's failure to measure up either to the world's or to their own conception of excellence. "At its most severe, comedy is not just skeptical but cynical... comedy at its greatest is criticism."[4]

Some theorists argue that the difference between the comedy of the sixties and that of previous eras rests in the inability of recent satirists to suggest any moral alternative to what is criticized--which is exactly the problem formulated by Kierkegaard. Some commentators find in this distinction the difference between parody and satire, with the implication that the parodist is a mere mimic with no position of his own, whereas the satirist only destroys in order to save. Denis Donogue derides parody as the "readiest form of disengagement," and calls it the "genre of hoax."[5] Burton Feldman writes: "As its reliance on parody shows, Black Humor does not unmask the illness hidden under our bland

surface; it merely mimics the violence in front of the scene."[6] He argues that Black Humor "foments no revolution" because it "springs from affluence, not deprivation."[7]

There is surely some truth to these remarks about parody but the condemnatory tone neglects the question of whether alternatives are possible. Regarding Feldman's point about affluence, we might note with Henri Bergson that in all ages the comic "comes into being just when society and the individual, freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art."[8] What better words could describe the intellectual pretensions of middle-class America during the 1960's? With half of Ireland starving, Swift had an unshakable moral position for the basis of his satire, whereas the American writer of the sixties confronted a society which was feeding itself to death while at the same time talking about the "problems" of identity crisis, Apocalypse, and the Void.

Nevertheless, though the parodist or Black Humorist may "foment no revolution," this is not to say that he has no moral position, "only to suggest," as Max Shulz says, "that this position is implicit."[9] The morally explicit and prescriptive satires of previous eras did not improve the world noticeably, and contemporary writers have abandoned such modes. But as Kermidjian points out, parody has an "ethical implication" in its mission "as a necessary corrective of excesses and abuses,"[10] and too many critics fail to take this implication seriously enough, arguing instead that

parody and black humor are mere "play." There is no question but that the play element is central to Barthelme, but it is play with serious implications, and it is play which may even be useful in an extra-literary sense. The social atmosphere of the times is polluted with so much jargon and the schlock of mass media that the comic and destructive irony of a writer like Barthelme may serve as a powerful anti-pollutant.

The distinction, therefore, which some theorists make between parody and satire, though it may have some technical validity, does not seem substantially important if we allow that satire's moral position may be implicit as well as explicit, and particularly if one accepts the broad implications of parody discussed by Kermidjian--that it reveals not only the "flaws, mistakes, conceits, idiocies and absurdities of individual authors and philosophical systems, but "in its widest application the mode of being of entire societies and cultures."[11] So defined, parody is satiric in intent, and Barthelme's irony is satiric in just such a way. Even if one insists on the narrower definition of parody--as an imitation of art rather than life--Barthelme's parodies must be seen as satires by virtue of the fact that the American middle-class of the sixties had come to see itself in terms of textbook and avant-garde rhetoric--regarding itself, as Bergson said, as "works of art." Though Barthelme's art may begin as a parody of various bookish jargons, it ends up satirizing a society which has adopted that very language in everyday discourse. This phenomenon accounts for Barthelme's

self-conscious and pseudo-literary style.

There is, however, one other distinction between the satires of previous periods and contemporary satire, which has to do with the ironist's attitude toward himself. The ruthless ironist despises himself for the way he is just as much as he despises the world for the way it is. So that in addition to animosity the failure at reconciliation produces guilt and, as mentioned before, regret and sadness. Kronenberger claims that "there is always a strain of melancholy" at the heart of the highest and most cynical comedies.[12] The irony of a Barthelme story may not always evoke melancholy, exactly, but there is, particularly in the later stories, often an emotional residue. The conclusion of the Kierkegaard story suggests that when an ironist is confronted with genuine emotion his irony is useless--and at such moments an ironist "has nothing." Yet, when one is confronted with a world which has lost touch with its emotions, a world in which there is little genuine anything, then the very absence of such moments is itself a cause of irony.

The ironist is primarily concerned with his own attitude toward the world rather than with the world itself; it might even seem of a radical ironist like Barthelme that his attitude toward the world has replaced the world as his subject-matter. But in a very real sense this is a contradiction in terms, since that subject-matter is itself an attitude toward the world, is taken as a response to the world. To read any of Barthelme's stories is to recognize at once that here are

the social realities of the 1960's and 1970's, and that the stories are shaped by these realities. Unlike some of the writers of the forties and fifties who either out of disgust or incomprehensibility abandoned the social realities of their times and withdrew into private, solipsistic worlds, Barthelme is a very public writer, as are the other Black Humorists. The whole character of comedy is, as Kronenberger says, "social rather than individual,"[13] and, as the Introduction explained, certain social patterns began to emerge around 1960 to give some clarity to what had been merely confusing for the two preceding decades. Though Barthelme uses every conceivable device in order to have his way with his subject-matter, when he has finished we still recognize the world and usually recognize it all the better. Sometimes he fails by having his way too easily, but when he succeeds it is due to the tension created by a complex personal attitude imposed upon a world which, however devastated, resists sufficiently and remains recognizable through the devastation.

In the Introduction it was also suggested that the single character of Barthelme's fictions is Barthelme himself. I further contended that Barthelme's art is simply a purer version of what it condemns. The character of Donald Barthelme is a pure and composite picture of postmodern man. He is, first of all, thoroughly a creature of the city, as attracted by city life as he is repulsed by it: the city is the only place that matters; the city is the modern world. And not just any city. Barthelme is thoroughly New York City. Its

addresses and landmarks provide the setting for almost all of his stories. More important, his sensibility is that of New York City--the sensibility best captured by the New Yorker, where almost all of his stories originally appeared. Above all, this sensibility can be defined by its meticulously appropriate sense of style: witty, refined, wry, clever, sophisticated, self-conscious, fashion-conscious, cool, modest, playful, etc. The Barthelme character is also self-indulgent, a player of games, a lover of trivia; he is detached and uncommitted, he has a campy nostalgia, he is very literary.

But although these characteristics help to define him, Barthelme's sensibility has more breadth and depth than does the New Yorker, at the same time that his style is far more stylized than that magazine. The New Yorker style pokes gentle fun at and diminishes its content; the Barthelme style implies total absence of content. The New Yorker is pleasantly satiric; Barthelme is devastating and malicious. The New Yorker manner is often self-effacing and mildly self-deprecating; Barthelme's manner turns at times to self-hatred and self-contempt. The New Yorker is politically liberal; Barthelme is radical. Like the New Yorker, Barthelme is attracted by the fashions, fads, and impedimenta of everyday life, but his attraction is strongly undercut by repulsion and by a far deeper understanding of history. These distinctions are important, because too many reviewers of his work have suggested that there is little difference between Barthelme and the

magazine in which his work usually appears.

The composite Barthelme character is an extremely pure and consistent version of postmodern man--the man his fictions consistently annihilate. Above all, this man is, as has been observed, concerned with style. Barthelme's primary artistic achievement is that he has managed to find a style so distinctive that it requires but a few sentences from any story to identify them as his. In another sense it could be argued that he has no style of his own, that his style consists of all the various styles of our culture. It so, his achievement lies in the purity with which he is able to capture them. Lionel Trilling, we will recall, worried in 1948 that the novel might die for lack of a subject, as artists grew increasingly impatient with the ways of the world. Barthelme is assuredly one of the most impatient and relentless writers of our time, but the world is still his subject, and his style grows right out of it. Few writers in any period develop a voice as original as his, and while it is still too early to determine how durable his work will be, there is no question but that Barthelme is one of the most imitated and influential of American writers today.

FOOTNOTES

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