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THE SHORT WORKS OF DONALD BARTHELME

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## THE SHORT WORKS OF DONALD BARTHELME

### CHAPTER I

#### INTRODUCTION

When in 1967 John Barth announced that certain forms of literature were "exhausted," he not only seemed to dispense with an outmoded tradition, but also riveted attention to what might replace it.<sup>1</sup> Heralded by Jerome Klinkowitz as the watershed to an American renaissance in fiction, the 1967-68 publishing season highlighted the "disruptive" literature of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Ronald Sukenick, Jerzy Kosinski, and Donald Barthelme.<sup>2</sup> During the next decade, critics anxious to track the new directions in literature acknowledged Donald Barthelme as a forerunner of this maverick breed, whose writing techniques were all quite different from traditional fiction, but also quite various among themselves. However, critics, either unable or unwilling to discuss variety in technique, attempted to embrace all the disruptive writers under general labels. Despite their diverse structures, Barthelme's works were often glossed collectively as "experimental" fiction or as offshoots of an emerging subgenre: metafiction, parafiction,

or surfiction.<sup>3</sup> Proponents of these subgeneric theories admirably worked to bring the innovative literature of Barthelme et al. within the perspective of an audience conditioned to reading fiction with plot, theme, and character. Nevertheless, their hypotheses, taken without the previous decade's literary backdrop, somewhat distort the evolution of fiction as a whole and, more particularly, the processes of construction among Barthelme's short works--non-fiction parodies, inventive fictions, and intermedia compositions.

The advent of "new fiction," heralded by its critical enthusiasts upon the so-called death of the novel, gives the impression that the shift from "literature of exhaustion" to "literary disruptions" occurred abruptly. But a transition, first in theme and then through form, had been "in the works" for some time. For more than a decade, writers had lamented the absurdity of the human condition in morose comedies, pitting their characters against chaos or some terrifying mechanism of order (Yossarian against the Hellerish universe of Catch-22; McMurphy combatting hostile systems of insanity in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest). As the protagonist was consumed, alienated, or controlled through the pessimistic play of such fiction, critical attention often focused on the stories' absurdist themes--what the stories were about--rather than on form and structure. The absurdist content, moreover, seemed paradoxically contained by at least a semblance of plot, a form earmarked for exhaustion. As

almost every critic of contemporary literature reminds us, however, the hard-edged line between fact and fiction which served the nineteenth-century novelist has blurred and faded and the acceptance of absurdity as a universal condition renders order an illusion and authority a lie. In support of the familiar complaint that an absurdist vision discredits the novel's imposed perspectives arose more purposeful arguments that fiction should recreate, if not reflect, new ways of looking at the world, as drama, poetry, and painting had responded earlier in the century.

Attending more specifically to major influences shaping the fictionist's concerns, Sharon Spencer and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh note particularly the impact of twentieth-century advancements in science and technology on point of view and on structures of time and space in literature.<sup>4</sup> Modern theories of relativity conceive of space "not as one-sided or linear--as in the Renaissance idea of perspective--but as many sided and virtually inexhaustible in its potentiality for relationships, none of which are mutually exclusive."<sup>5</sup> Space is thus comprehensive of all possible points of reference, even as they move and change through time. Similarly, time cannot be conceived as a linear frame of reference for the history of mankind, or even for the chronological development of an individual's life, as in the Bildungsroman. It includes as well multiple, simultaneous perspectives from which time is subjectively conceived by individuals

through the distortions of memory, dream, and imagination. In addition, the information overload produced by diverse communication systems renders the "facts" of contemporary life unintelligible from any one viewpoint. Complicated by mechanical distortions--instant replays, slow-motion takes, the sort of time lag experienced between filming a man on the moon and viewing that film on earth--what "facts" are communicated seem not just unmanageable but unreal. Without the touchstones of linear time and knowable space, the "facts" of contemporary life are ambiguous and cannot be distinguished from fiction with any degree of certainty.

This contemporary view of the world does pose a dilemma for the fictionist accustomed to delivering truth through the closed effects of plot and resolution. Instead of giving in to the confusion, however, Barthelme turns the "inexhaustible" nature of the world to the advantage of his audience and his art. For Barthelme, all the illusions, the indeterminacy, the simultaneity of reality inspire visions of possibility for imaginative literature, and as a selected reading of his past two decades' work will show, imaginative possibilities are not only reflected through theme, but also recreated in the structures of Barthelme's inventive fictions.

In his first collection, Come Back, Dr. Caligari (1964), liberating play is expressed chiefly through theme as at least one character refuses just to accept absurdity, but instead assents to its randomness by incorporating it with

imaginative play. Creating one liberating fiction after another for himself, Peterson in "A Shower of Gold" spouts with glee, "How can you be alienated without first having been connected?"<sup>6</sup> In some of Barthelme's works, characters are often ushered through the fictions without identifying histories, but like Peterson, they sustain themselves by pitting their imaginations against what is trying to consume or take over. The threat may be the trash phenomenon, consumer products, the government, the church; it may be the plight of the artist, like the writer in "The Dolt," trying to create in a world which has no beginnings, middles, or ends. Many of Barthelme's "stories" written in the 1960's are thus non-fiction parodies about things which have become "'firmly entrenched--gone beyond reasonable bounds."<sup>7</sup> As Barthelme uses the term, parody is a way to retaliate playfully in the face of hopeless absurdity, to expose a "brain-damaged" society for its irrational concerns--exotic biological warfare (a "pufferfish toxin that precipitates an identity crisis"; a "deadly testicle-destroying telegram"<sup>8</sup>) or faulty consumer products (defective contact lenses produce the misty light in Candace's eyes<sup>9</sup>). But for Barthelme, parody is also a way to expose the inadequacies of the fictionist's entrenched forms and methods.

By 1970, Barthelme was not only writing parodies about the sources and reasons for a generic change in fiction, but also inventing new structures appropriately suggestive of

contemporary notions of non-linear time and multiple perspectives of space. Unlike the parodies, Barthelme's inventive fictions are, therefore, not about the world; they are of the world. Character, plot, and point of view are fragmented to suggest multiple possibilities for their reconstruction. Without the stable perspective of a central narrator or the linear development of plot through cause, effect, and resolution, the reader becomes a gameful participant in the creative process of constructing and reconstructing the fiction. Sentences are usually there, but sometimes they dissipate into "word rain" or flash their parts in fragments:

chaos is tasty AND USEFUL TOO

colored clothes paper handkerchiefs super cartoons  
 bit of fresh the Pope's mule inmission do such  
 poor work together in various Poujadist mani-  
 festations deep-toned blacks waivers play to the  
 gas Zentralbibliothek Zurick her bare ass with a  
 Teddy bear blatty string kept in a state of sus-  
 pended tension by a weight cut from the backs of  
 alligators

you can do it too it's as easy as it looks  
 ("Alice," UP, p. 122)

The rush of words in the center of the quotation seems as disconcerting as the randomness that inspires it; yet Barthelme engages his reader's assent to such play with encouraging words in the stable parts of the text, the sentences that "frame" the clustered fragments. Voices of characters are similarly disconcerting. They are often spoken in a composite American dialect that echoes the jargon of

psychoanalytic journals, the banal exchanges of city dwellers, the "hype" of radio and television advertising, the ballyhoo of redneck bigotry. Moreover, Barthelme's intermedia compositions extend the perimeters of play by complementing the aural exchanges of text with visual suggestions in plates. Cut-up pictures and perspective drawings, usually reassembled in collage formats, play particularly upon the interrelationship of linear and spatial structures commanded by new ways of looking at the world. Despite the apparent randomness of their fragments, Barthelme's collage fictions nevertheless offer seemingly "inexhaustible" possibilities for satisfying an audience's need to confer meaning and order to its world and its art, however tenuous such significance might be.

The key to finding the sense in the non-sense of Barthelme's literature is first to dispel unnecessary confusion about how his works should be read. Like the "facts" which inspire them, the boundaries of Barthelme's short works to an extent blur and their planes impinge upon one another. As mentioned earlier, one source of ambiguity about the generic status of his compositions is the collective reading of Barthelme's parodies, collage fictions, and intermedia works under the umbrella of subgeneric labels. Another source of ambiguity is that the compositions are not published as neat little collections of "types," as they are gathered here. City Life (1970), Sadness (1972), and Guilty Pleasures (1974), for instance, intermix all three types of

short works, but only Guilty Pleasures offers any authorial suggestions of how the collected works have been grouped:

The first third, roughly, are parodies...A number of the pieces are political satire directed against a particular Administration...The other pieces have to do with having one's coat pulled, frequently by five people in six directions. Some are brokeback fables and some are bastard reportage and some are pretexts for the pleasure of cutting up and pasting together pictures, a secret vice gone public. Guilty pleasures are the best /author's prefatory introduction7.

Finally, the generic status of a few compositions is ambiguous because by structure they could conceivably be placed in all three categories. "Eugénie Grandet," for example, is a parody of Balzac's nineteenth-century novel, as well as a parody of epistolary and book digest forms; yet it is constructed without plot or character development in a collage format, and its "illustrations," essential to the mockery, extend the perimeters of play to command scrutiny of the work as an intermedia composition. Despite such ambiguities, though, a discriminative and selected reading of Barthelme's short works is not only pleasureable, but also instructive.

It would seem most useful to read Barthelme's literature as both comment on and instance of the generic evolution in fiction during the past two decades. Reading the non-fiction parodies first enables us to recognize and reject outmoded conventions cast off by writers during the 1960's. Since the parodies depend upon the familiarity of their content for success, they clearly move the reader through generic

transition from the "literature of exhaustion" to "literary disruptions." With a knowledge of the social and artistic backdrop that prompted fictionists to explore new literary structures, the reader is then prepared to see how linear plot is displaced by a spatially designed text, how character is displaced by a grammatical presence without a history, and how narrative viewpoint is fragmented through the prismatic structures of a collage format. Finally, an understanding of the inventive structures of Barthelme's texts becomes the foundation for discovering how aural and visual associations play across the spaces of the intermedia compositions, arranged in increasing complexity of their designs. Guided by this systematic approach, as well as by authorial comments in books, essays, interviews, and sound recordings, Barthelme's audience may easily adapt to its new role as reader/critic, whether it is playing within the shifting perimeters of Barthelme's works or the broader scope of contemporary fiction.

## Notes to Chapter One

<sup>1</sup>John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," The Atlantic, 220, No. 2 (August 1967), 29-34.

<sup>2</sup>Jerome Klinkowitz, "Not by Theme Alone," Novel: A Forum on Fiction, 6, No. 3 (Spring 1973), 268. This reception of innovative literature appeared again in Jerome Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>See Robert Scholes, "Metafiction," Iowa Review, 1 (Fall 1970), 100-115; James Rother, "ParaFiction: The Adjacent Universe of Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon and Nabokov," Boundary 2, 5 (Fall 1976), 21-43; Jerome Klinkowitz, "Literary Disruptions; or, What's Become of American Fiction?" in Raymond Federman, ed., Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), pp. 166-171.

<sup>4</sup>See especially Sharon Spencer, Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel (New York: New York University Press, 1971), pp. xiii-xxiv; Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), pp. 3-32.

<sup>5</sup>Spencer, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>6</sup>Donald Barthelme, "A Shower of Gold," Come Back, Dr. Caligari (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), p. 183. Future references to this collection will be given throughout the text by abbreviation (CB) and by page number.

<sup>7</sup>John F. Baker, "PW Interviews: Donald Barthelme," Publishers Weekly, 206 (11 November 1974), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup>Donald Barthelme, "The Report," Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), pp. 55, 56. Future references to this collection will be given throughout the text by abbreviation (UP) and by page number.

<sup>9</sup>Donald Barthelme, "Down the Line with the Annual," Guilty Pleasures (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), p. 4. Future references to this collection will be given throughout the text by abbreviation (GP) and by page number.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PARODIES: FICTIONAL FORMS IN TRANSITION

One always apologizes for writing parodies; it is a disreputable activity, ranking only a little higher on the scale of literary activity than plagiarism.

#### Guilty Pleasures

The apology which prefaces Guilty Pleasures (1974) is in part a symptom of Donald Barthelme's ostensible reluctance to give his parodies status as art. Supported by similar disclaimers, the apology indicates Barthelme's preference, particularly since 1970, to subordinate the parodies to his more inventive compositions, works which are notable for their unique structures, rather than for their distortions of literary forms or absurdist themes. Coming from a writer whose reputation as a talented fictionist owes much to his delight in this "disreputable activity," such disclaimers seem inconsistent with the published evidence of his work. Barthelme's production of parodies has been almost continuous with the development of his career as writer and editor, and the various standard parodies perpetuated by frequent contributions to the New Yorker exemplify his best efforts. Yet Barthelme denies in a 1971 interview that these parodies

are "wellsprings" of his art.<sup>1</sup> As if to underscore this denial, the parodies in Guilty Pleasures are promoted as "non-fiction," a distinction unfamiliar to his earlier collections. Though bibliographers may lament such animadversions, Barthelme's distinction is nevertheless appropriate, for his parodies are not "fiction" in either the traditional or the contemporary sense of the term. Unlike most short fiction, they do not defer to the conventions of tale or romance, nor do they transport us to the yet uncharted planes of surfiction, parafiction, or metafiction.

What makes Barthelme's distinction necessary is not so much the questionable artistry of the parodies, but rather significant differences in the processes of construction among his parodies, his collage fictions, and his intermedia compositions. Robert Scholes' simplified scheme of fictional types in "Metafiction" (1970) clarifies the placement of parody, while it supports Barthelme's disclaimer that writing parodies is a spurious, even if pleasureable, activity. Scholes does not include parody within any of the four types of fictional creation--fiction of ideas (myth), fiction of forms (romance), fiction of existence (novel), and fiction of essence (allegory). Parody is instead a "surgical response" to fictional forms so exhaustively imitated that they are no longer vehicles of "pure expression," or truth.

The history of the form he works in lies between every writer and the pure ideas of fiction. It is his legacy, his opportunity and his problem.

The fiction of forms at one level simply accepts the legacy and repeats the forms bequeathed it, satisfying an audience that wants this familiarity. But the movement of time carries such derivative forms farther and farther from the ideas of fiction until they atrophy and decay.<sup>2</sup>

As opportunity falters in exhaustion and his audience nods and yawns, the abiding heir to this tradition may seek to re-invest his legacy with "elaboration, by developing and extending the implications of the forms"; recognizing the limits of the imitated and elaborated form, however, the more astute heir may renounce his depleted legacy with the miscreant stroke of parody.<sup>3</sup>

Renouncing his depleted legacy, Barthelme wrote most of his parodies during a period of generic shift. The 1960's witnessed, or at least acknowledged, the exhaustion of traditional forms of fiction, with John Barth administering the last rites in 1967 in his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion." By the middle of the decade, the elaboration of theme, plot, character, and symbol had evolved chiefly through the works of Barth and Pynchon to an arch, "baroque" technique,<sup>4</sup> defined by Borges as "that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) its possibilities and borders upon its own caricature."<sup>5</sup> Other writers--Burroughs in particular--had taken the "surgical response" of parody to its extreme with nihilistic "cut-ups." In Barthelme's evaluation, such terrorist writers manufactured a "Hostile Object" which threatened the reader with self-destructive forms and "a whole

crew of fictional murder-rapist-addict-criminal-saints." The tenor of Burroughs' form, Barthelme claimed, was like a radio band pitched "to receive all the asylums of the world. A high noise-to-signal ratio, randomness, and shouts of pain /mingled/ to produce an unbearable tension."<sup>6</sup> Both responses to the decay of fictional forms, elaboration and cut-up, were consequently funereal. Yet between 1967 and 1970, American fiction surged into new directions, and this renewal was to an extent generated by Barthelme's parodies. Unlike his "regressive" colleagues,<sup>7</sup> Barthelme responded to the dead-wood of legacy by dispensing with exhausted forms through the re-creative power of play. To Barthelme, "play is one of the great possibilities of art,"<sup>8</sup> and it inspires his parodies and inventive fictions alike. In the parodies, however, it overturns the reader's expectations for the artist and his work and prepares the audience for the structures and ideas of inventive fiction.

Barthelme's parodies are therefore appropriately excluded from the annals of "fiction," though their importance to the evolution of the genre is unquestionable. As transitional pieces, they signal a shift from the static forms of tradition to the dynamic structures of a new fiction. The method of the parodies written before 1970 is essentially "self-reflexive"; that is, the process of construction questions the validity of traditional forms by flaunting the conventions of its own artifice. Barthelme's parodies thus reflect the disruptive

period of the 1960's when the fictionist was abdicating his role as seer, giving up his search for absolute orders, and renouncing the closed effects of plot and resolution. Their purpose, unlike that of "fiction," is not to posit a real-seeming world--whether that world is perceived as inherently ordered or chaotic; it is instead to move the reader from dull acceptance of conventional worlds to an assent into imaginatively invented worlds.

1. The "Grand Parody" of Fiction: Playing  
the Game in Reverse

Barthelme began experimenting with parody long before his fiction gained him notoriety as the most imitated writer in America. As a novice writer for the Lamar High School literary magazine, Barthelme showed a penchant for the creative misuse of language and literary form. Like most would-be writers, he began to explore his craft by emulating his predecessors. The looking glass which Barthelme held up to his models, however, reflected an inverted image, delightfully comic in its distortions. "Rover Boys' Retrogression," for instance, is the "antithesis" of Pilgrim's Progress in both theme and form.<sup>9</sup> The mock pilgrimage in Barthelme's version of Bunyan's allegory follows the misadventures of Half-Asleep and Not-Quite-Awake through the hills and valleys of adolescence to the boys' ultimate goal--expulsion from the Houston Independent School District at the banks of the River of Respect Due. The content of this 1949 lampoon is decidedly amateurish; yet

even as a novice, Barthelme showed an incisive grasp of the structure and purpose of parodic form. In the preface to his mock allegory, Barthelme includes the definition to which he commits his text: "...a parody, to be completely effective as a parody, must be a complete reversal of attitude, set in the form of the work being parodied."<sup>10</sup> Though the narrow scope of the definition binds the accompanying text to a standard type of parody--parody of a specific work, its conventions, or the affectations of its author--it is nevertheless keyed to a serious game of reversed intentions popular with Barthelme and other innovative fictionists little more than a decade later.

By the middle of the 1960's, Barthelme was constructing parodies with more than just an altruistic appreciation for the form. The scope of his definition had broadened to allow him to shadow-box with a "whole class of things."<sup>11</sup> In a somewhat cavalier introduction to Guilty Pleasures, Barthelme writes that for a parody to be effective, "A minimum demand is that what is parodied be widely successful--a tulip craze of some sort" (author's prefatory comment). In the 1960's, his fancy ranged the gamut of popular social themes--the absurdity of existence, the uncertainty of self, the fear of science, the fear of one's fellow man--and struck repeatedly, of course, on the popular literary theme of the times--the outmoded conventions perpetuated by the Novelist. These concerns, in fact, were seldom removed from one another,

for, to apply Scholes' observation, they were both the writer's opportunity and his problem. The fictionist's dilemma, as the innovative writer viewed it, lay in the expectations of his audience, conditioned by those abiding heirs of the fictionist's legacy. Laboring in the shadow of the authoritative Novelist, the writer was expected to perform an implied role as familiarly conventional as theme, plot, and character. He was expected to order and interpret the world selectively from a universalizing point of view; he was expected to communicate the multiple and illusory "facts" of the world through the closed effects of plot and resolution; and, paradoxically, he was expected to use those "facts" to authenticate his vision. But given the randomness and uncertainty of those "facts," the fictionist found that he was hard pressed to invent a principle of coherence which could even momentarily stabilize his illusion.

The fourteen pieces in Barthelme's first collection, Come Back, Dr. Caligari (1964), play upon the relentless absurdity of contemporary life that the artist must somehow match or contain. "Florence Green is 81" and "A Shower of Gold," the first and last stories of the collection, are respectively about the plights of a fictionist and sculptor trying to create in a world where, as Philip Roth laments, "the actuality is continually outdoing our [w]riters' talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist."<sup>12</sup> Both compositions parody the problem

of the fictionist in the 1960's, but the last story illustrates how the artist might turn his plight to opportunity through the liberating play of the imagination.

In "A Shower of Gold," Peterson is the prototypical starving artist, out of favor with the public because his "romantic impulse" will not allow him to prostitute his work on a commodity market where art is pitted against Chris-Crafts. Though his enterprising art dealer advises Peterson to saw one of his works in half ("Two little ones would move much, much faster than a single huge big one." [CB, p. 175]), the impoverished sculptor refuses to capitulate. The crux of Peterson's problem is that he has never really believed in absurdity. He admits as much when he is interviewed as a contestant for the existentialist television game show Who Am I? The point of Who Am I?, explains the interviewer, is

"to discover what people really are. 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? That's the question we try to answer, Mr. Peterson" (CB, p. 174).

Though Peterson shows "bad faith" by confessing that he is not sure he believes in absurdity, he nevertheless risks ignominy by accepting the two-hundred-dollar fee that will allow him to eat.

By the time that Peterson goes on Who Am I?, he is convinced that absurdity is indeed the human condition. God may be dead, yet absurdity's retributive force seems to punish

all who, like himself, express "bad faith." His artist's loft is invaded by the President and his Secret Service entourage; with hostile abandon, the President smashes Peterson's latest work and then compliments his diseased liver (a symptom that absurdity is working its vengeance); entering next in cat-in-the-hat fashion is the "cat-piano player," a diabolical stranger who plays hideous music by mashing the paws or pulling the tails of cats--Peterson's punishment for failing to feed a stray kitten. On the show Peterson witnesses further punishment. The format of Who Am I? is a parodic hybrid of three popular television game shows, The Price Is Right, What's My Line? and To Tell the Truth. For a price, contestants are challenged by emcee Bill Lemmon (Bill Cullen?) to reveal identities that lie hidden behind masks which they wear for the world. Yet the humor of the original shows is darkened by the aggressive, existential line of questioning that reduces the contestants to shriven selves. They suffer nausea; they feel de trop. As the interviewer has warned Peterson, "'We don't play around'" (CB, p. 174).

But aggression and hostility, Barthelme believes, are only one mode of response to the fictionist's legacy of dead-wood and an absurdist world. Play is another. In "A Shower of Gold," Barthelme parodies the manufacturers of the "Hostile Object" who "respond to the world by adding to it constructs which are hostile to life."<sup>13</sup> Among these hostile constructs is the crew of fictional terrorists: the President destroys

art with a six-pound sledge; the cat-piano player wields a switchblade and butcher knife; Peterson's barber Kitchen cleans the jaw swiftly with a razor that rockets like a switchblade from ear to ear. The creators of Who Am I? add to the list of terrorist constructs a menacing lie detector board, which threatens its subjects with accusing lights and bells until contestants confess truths that shatter their self images. But through Peterson, Barthelme embodies the alternative response, the artist who acknowledges absurdity but sees it as his opportunity, rather than his problem.

Taking his turn with the monitors, Peterson begins to play his own game of Who Am I?, making up answers even before the emcee can ask questions and ignoring threats on the cue cards.

"In this kind of a world," Peterson said, "absurd if you will, possibilities nevertheless proliferate and escalate all around us and there are opportunities for beginning again. I am a minor artist and my dealer won't even display my work if he can help it but minor is as minor does and lightning may strike even yet. Don't be reconciled. Turn off your television sets," Peterson said, "cash in your life insurance, indulge in mindless optimism. Visit girls at dusk. Play the guitar. How can you be alienated without first having been connected?" (CB, p. 183).

Reversing the method of Who Am I?, Peterson illustrates the possibility of play by inventing a new beginning for himself, an absurd but delightfully imaginative re-creation.

"My mother was a royal virgin," Peterson said, "and my father a shower of gold. My childhood was

pastoral and energetic and 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 (CB, p. 183).

As Peterson, a character, re-creates himself, he initiates one of the techniques of self-reflexive parody. He plays against the rules of Who Am I? by reversing the usual question-and-answer format, by "lying" about his identity, and by adding, rather than stripping away, one mask after another; furthermore, by inventing multiple possibilities for his life as a character, he plays against the audience's expectations that his life, like that of many others, can be diminished to a fixed, predictable, perhaps worthless existence.

With parodies like "A Shower of Gold," Barthelme thus began to reverse the tactics of the traditional fictionist in order to counter the expectations of a passively conditioned audience. Broadening the scope of parody, he used its self-reflexive features not only as a means of mocking absurdist themes, but also as a possibility for "beginning again." The techniques, Barthelme observes, are skillfully executed by Kenneth Koch, another practitioner of play. "He too dispenses with character, action, plot and fact, dispenses with them by permitting them to proliferate all over the landscape and by resolutely short-circuiting the expected order of things."<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Barthelme's method of his self-reflexive parodies is essentially a game played in reverse of the "ordi-

nary rules," a sort of inverse form of mimesis: instead of representing out of chaos an ideal order, it confuses at every point what the reader (Player 2) expects of the writer (Player 1) and of literary convention. Applied to fiction's ordinary rules, the game in reverse is the construction of a mock narrative enacted by a masque of faceless caricatures.

Rule 1. Unobstructed routes are not permitted. As Player 1 lures his opponent from Start to Finish, the paths of plot must be blocked at every turn with lists, questionnaires, blank pages, aimless digressions, sloughs of clichés, or narratives stalled by anti-climax.

Rule 2. Members of the masque must disguise their humanity in two-dimensional roles, since Player 2 will want to covet any character with a credible identity.

Rule 3. "Throwing Doubles." Player 1 may dissemble himself, his characters, his audience, his publisher; he may hold mirrors to fictions and mirrors to mirrors.

Rule 4. End of Play. If at any time, Player 1 does not successfully place in check his opponent's expectations, he forfeits the game.

The object of this game played in reverse is that fiction "unmask its own fictionality."<sup>15</sup> Heroic pilgrimage is therefore reduced to aimless "yo-yoing"; realism of character is undermined by comic-strip names; and preoccupation with order and symbol becomes an obsessive pursuit of meaning in repetition.

Despite the caprice of its method, this self-reflexive parody serves a purpose both unique and serious: it is the one literary mode which "fuses creation with critique."<sup>16</sup> Critics, in fact, abound in Barthelme's parodies. Characters criticize each other, criticize their creator, criticize the tales in which they find themselves. The narrators of "The Balloon" and "This Newspaper Here" are threatened and misunderstood; the writers in "The Dolt" and "Florence Green is 81" are accused of lacking talent; the narrator of "See the Moon" confesses to his reader, "I know you think I'm wasting my time. You've made that perfectly clear....My methods may seem a touch irregular" (UP, p. 155). Impelled by this activity, the reader becomes a critic. He criticizes the character who criticizes the author--that is, the author who is really just a character written into the parody by an author who criticizes himself. Caught, however unwillingly, in these regressions of doubling plots and roles, the reader is finally jarred from his fatuous acceptance of things as they are or things as they appear. Yet even as he questions the status of fiction, his role as a critic, like all other roles within or outside the parody, is only tenuous. The legitimacy of his findings is never affirmed, the ironies never stable, for reconstructing the ironies of a self-reflexive parody is often more problematic than reconstructing those of a standard parody such as Barthelme's "Rover Boys' Retrogression."

Though the self-reflexive parody is, like standard parody, played against something exterior to its text, that "something" may not be stably located in the particular work of a specific author. For instance, though "Eugénie Grandet" is played against the plot, characters, manners, and values of Balzac's bourgeoisie novel, it is also played against epistolary and book digest forms. The parody opens with a matter-of-fact plot summary, ostensibly from The Thesaurus of Book Digests, and includes among its fragments two "letters"--one (like the parody proper), only a remnant of the original, a mockery in grandiose phrases; the other, a "Dear Cousin" note to a jilted but wiser Eugénie. The various techniques which inspire reconstruction are also problematic (two photographs affirming the characters' two-dimensional "realness"; a paragraph of "butter" in eight rigid columns). Typically, the referents against which the self-reflexive parody is played are no more than hypothetical models; the self-reflexive parody may therefore be an imitation not of one, but of many texts. Despite the plurality of possible referents, play between the parody and its mock counterpart is initially, at least, easy to sustain. The models--the exhausted forms of the novel and the quotidian practice of its writers--are familiar enough to keep the reader engaged in making the necessary leaps from the expected narrative to its parallel in the mock narrative.

The game of reconstructing self-reflexive parody may therefore be controlled by alternately establishing and frus-

trating the reader's expectations. In Barthelme's parodies, though, the game becomes more complex with each roll of "doubles." Characters are often paralleled not only with their counterparts in familiar fiction, but also with the author and his audience. By narrating his parody through an author manqué, Barthelme projects the plight of the artist in a culture which "tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist." Usually ignored, maligned, or misunderstood by his audience, the author is also plagued with a dullard's imagination. The audience is then projected as the disabled author's critics. In various parodies, these critics are the author's spouse, his child, a detective, an anthropologist, and the New York City populace. Throwing the doubles once more, Barthelme may also parallel plot, or its lack thereof, by writing fictions which contain fictions. This doubling of plot further confuses expected correspondences by offering parallels to texts both within and outside the parody.

The task of reconstructing self-reflexive parody is therefore more complex than reconstructing standard types of parody, and it is perhaps this complexity which blurs for most readers the distinction between Barthelme's fiction and his "non-fiction." Since a self-reflexive parody actually uses and misuses the conventions that it attacks, its ironies are revealed as they are directed against a whole field of both real and fictional works and writers. Confronted by

the multiple repetitions of roles dissembled and events already enacted, the reader cannot poise himself juridicially above the artifice, secure that he has finally and correctly rejected one set of orders or meanings for an alternative set intended by the writer. His reconstruction and evaluation must instead be continuous. Referring to the inexhaustible task of reconstructing such a parody, Joseph Dane muses over this inherent role of the reader in self-reflexive literature:

I cannot forget, then, that I am pretending to be a reader or a critic holding a book; I am thus neither a true reader nor a true critic, but a caricature of both...Author, text, reader, critic and even publisher become involved in one grand parody of the entire phenomenon of production and reception of particular signa--that phenomenon we agree (in contexts such as these) to understand as "literature."<sup>17</sup>

As Barthelme constructs this "grand parody" of fiction, his purpose is clearly twofold: 1) to alter the audience's habitual way of perceiving itself in relation to the fictionist and his work; and 2) to expose the familiar devices that tryannize the fictionist and establish his audience's expectations.

## 2. The Author and His Audience: Forms of Self Parody

The fictionist is the principal mover behind evolutionary shifts in genre. During such changes, however, his position is unstable and even arbitrary; in Barthelme's words, it is similar to "having one's coat pulled, frequently by five people

in six different directions" (GP, author's prefatory comment). On the other hand, the fictionist is expected by his readers to satisfy the familiar rules of the game. But at the same time, he is threatened at every turn by the limits of his medium or by failure of his imagination; like Barth in Lost in the Funhouse, he is haunted by the spectre of the "ditto necessary story,"<sup>18</sup> and he struggles to exorcise the ghost of fiction past. In Barthelme's parodies, the rites of exorcism often assume courtroom melodramatics, as the surrogates of author and audience variously accuse, defend, judge, punish, or persecute each other. Typically, Barthelme's narrator is a harlequin, dissembling one likeness after another under his Merlin's hat. At times the surrogate/author doubles as his prosecutor and conspires with his critics against himself; at other times, he sides with the defendant, pats his hand, and says, "There, there"; still other times he doubles as his own defense and seeks release from his dullard's role through wish fulfillment.

In "Florence Green is 81" (1963), one of the early parodies, the surrogate/author's wish is temporarily granted as Barthelme's schizophrenic persona is split from the beginning into two opposing perspectives of the writer: one, the narrator who works to establish himself as an authoritative and interesting writer; and the other, Baskerville, a doltish sophomore at the Famous Writers School. The narrator describes himself as a brilliant young man, a weightlifter and poet, who

edits with his left hand "a small magazine, very scholarly, very brilliant, called The Journal of Tension Reduction" (CB, p. 4). He occasionally repeats the description, as if to reassure both himself and his reader that it is true. In addition, by making Baskerville a pharmakos, the victim of irony in his composition, the narrator attempts to release himself from what the lesser writer represents, the threatening limits of his medium and his imagination. Throughout his composition, a work which seems to be a spontaneously written commentary, the narrator interjects disparaging remarks about the aspiring writer Baskerville. Baskerville is slow; he does not worry enough about his life to be a writer; "Baskerville was stoned by the massed faculty of the Famous Writers School upon presentation of his first lesson: he was accused of formalism" (CB, p. 7). Perhaps because he seems to be writing spontaneously, however, the narrator gradually loses control of the persona he has struggled so hard to establish. The self-parody is pronounced as the two masks come together, as the identities of the authoritative writer and of the unimagi-native Baskerville blur. Speaking of one of Florence Green's guests, the narrator cues the reader to the split persona when he attempts to clarify another mistaken identity:

Her name is not really Kathleen, it is Joan Graham, when we were introduced she said, "Oh are you a native of Dallas Mr. Baskerville?" No Joan baby I am a native of Bengazi sent here by the UN to screw your beautiful ass right down into the ground, that is not what I said but what I should have said, it would have been brilliant. When she asked

him what he did Baskerville identified himself as  
 an American weightlifter and poet (that is to say:  
a man stronger and more eloquent than other men).  
 (CB, p. 8).

The narrator, then, is Baskerville in the role to which he aspires, but which he probably will not attain, the role of a writer "stronger and more eloquent than other men." Though the narrator works to sustain the illusion expected by his readers, he blunders into revealing what he fears most about himself--that he is the dull, foolish, and unimaginative Baskerville.

Barthelme's self-parody in "Florence Green is 81" emerges from the confrontation of a mock persona with the persona of a writer struggling to fulfill his conventionally implied role. While the ambiguous blurring of identities underscores the instability of the fictionist's position, the form of the parody is sustained by pitting the expected role of the writer against his mock counterpart. Similarly, in "The Dolt" (1967), Barthelme again burlesques the aspiring writer. But in the later parody the conventionally implied role is not presented within the composition as an alter-ego, as it is in "Florence Green is 81." Though a second persona does appear in "The Dolt," it enters with sympathetic identification, rather than resistance, for its exaggerated counterpart. Instead of opposing an alter-ego within the composition, the mock persona in the later parody plays against the strength of readers' conditioned expectations for the writer's familiarly self-conscious role.

In "The Dolt," the aspiring writer Edgar prepares to take the National Writers' Examination, "black with fear" that he will fail it for the third time. Studying the "rules," a book of questions similar to the actual questions on the examination, Edgar hopes this time to earn a certificate which will merit publication of his work in prestigious journals and win him a bit of faith from his less than enthusiastic wife Barbara. Trying as much to allay his fears as to reassure his wife, Edgar ironically boasts that while the written test is, to be sure, a source of worry, he can pass the oral part of the examination with ease. He then attempts to bait his wife for encouragement by showing his skill at playing the game in reverse, by giving Barbara a list of answers and challenging her to give him the right questions. But memorizing questions and answers for an oral examination seems to Barbara a tedious and pointless exercise, and the questions for which he is prepared are as little a measure of his writing talent as drawing the picture on a matchbook cover is a measure of artistic talent. Barbara, who is "sexually attractive" but "also deeply mean," wounds Edgar by responding with the correct question.

The thrust of Barthelme's self-parody appears in the second half of "The Dolt," when Barthelme assumes the persona of the paranoid writer and constructs a fiction within the parody. The story within the parody is what Edgar has prepared for the written portion of his examination. Barbara's interest is piqued. Though the story has no title, its be-

ginning shows promise: a good plot, moved by heroism in battle, framed by the proverbial lovers' triangle, and complicated by innocence wronged, by the vengeful manipulations of a jealous husband against chaste lovers. A grand hierarchy of values--chastity, fidelity, heroism--is threatened with ruin by the green-eyed monster. But Edgar's reading is brief, little more than an outline of the potential story. In addition, the writing is marred by convoluted sentences, shifts in verb tense, an archaic style, and a peculiar mixture of historical "facts" with fiction. Edgar's doom is sealed, however, when he must confess that his story has no middle and only an oblique dénouement.

The crux of the writer's problem, as it is presented in Barthelme's self-parody, is that nothing in Edgar's life supports any system of value represented in the writing models he has studied. Barbara, a former hooker, hardly symbolizes chastity. Her suggestion for a middle to his story is a modern anecdote about an illicit love affair and a woman who spontaneously aborts in Chicago. Edgar's silent, staring daughter Rose is a "perfect love"; but swathed in a terry robe, she projects the image of a tiny fighter, and her mien seems somehow incongruous with her name. Edgar's imagination shrinks entirely, though, when into the room slinks his eight-foot "son manqué" (a startling parody of the eight-foot priest/soldier/lover in Edgar's story). The son manqué is bedecked with a "serape woven out of two hundred transistor

radios, all turned on and tuned to different stations. Just by looking at him you could hear Portland and Nogales, Mexico" (UP, p. 69). As Edgar withdraws in despair, a first-person, very transparent persona springs from the parody to echo and lament the aspiring writer's dilemma:

/Edgar/ couldn't think of anything. Thinking of anything was beyond him. I sympathize. I myself have these problems. Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin (UP, p. 69).

In "The Dolt," as in "Florence Green is 81," Barthelme thus parodies the fictionist's conventionally implied role by exaggerating the fears of his aspiring writer. But he intrudes in the later parody with a persona sympathetic to the dilemma of a writer trying to create traditional fiction out of absurdity. Unlike the narrator in "Florence Green is 81," the persona in "The Dolt" abdicates his role as seer and does not even attempt to sustain within his composition the illusion expected by his audience.

Threatened by a world of contradiction, by the limits of his medium, and by a failure of the imagination, the paranoiac writer struggles to free himself from the expectations of his audience. Sometimes, like Peterson, he succeeds. In "This Newspaper Here" and "The Balloon" Barthelme allows the fictionist a strategic position. Shifting the focus of irony from the artist to his audience, Barthelme begins to place the role of the latter in jeopardy. These parodies, similar

to "A Shower of Gold," are about the artist trying to create in popular culture; they represent the writer or artist renouncing his conventional role and creating unfamiliar objects composed of nonrepresentational structures--a newspaper, for instance, with pages printed in "compositors play," in "alien languages and invisible inks," or in "solid bright aching orange" (UP, p. 28). Though such compositions suggest possibilities for freeing the artist's imagination from the familiar and expected, they nevertheless remain within the tradition of self-reflexive literature, rather than venture into the worlds of parafiction, metafiction, or surfiction, since they are about, not an instance of the process of constructing inventive fiction. "This Newspaper Here" represents the writer in a challenging game of competition with journalists who seem to control the market on reality's illusions. Unlike other newspapers, the narrator's work is a creative publication, "a tissue of hints whispers glimpses uncertainties," "sprinkled with rare lies and photographs incorrectly captioned" (UP, pp. 30, 26). (The publication is strikingly descriptive of Barthelme's intermedia compositions). Similarly, the subject of "The Balloon" is a grotesquely inflated metaphor for an artist's nonrepresentational creation. The narrator engineers the placement of his balloon over New York City, where it is allowed to expand and change shape long after he has released it. In both parodies, the narrators use contradiction, multiplicity, and randomness as the occasion for

liberating play of the imagination. But while the artists do enjoy a more strategic position in relation to their audiences than in works such as "The Dolt," their role is still unstable, since in the parodies they are usually ignored, misunderstood, resented, or maligned.

In these parodies, then, Barthelme turns his irony on the contemporary artist's prototypical audience in order to release readers, as well as writers, from their habitual roles. Accustomed to deferring to the authority of an omniscient and omnipotent observer, readers of contemporary fiction often respond with suspicion and fear when they are expected by the artist to change the rules of the game and play a participatory role in the creative process. The narrators of "This Newspaper Here" and "The Balloon" are represented, therefore, as disrupting conventional expectations and provoking their audiences into a variety of responses to their creations. As a result of his work, the eccentric old man in "This Newspaper Here" is terrorized by a little girl who stabs him with knitting needles and investigated by a pistol-whipping detective who threatens, "'we don't understand what it is you're after'" (UP, p. 29). Despite his efforts, the narrator discovers that it is not always possible to alter an audience's habitual way of perceiving things. Offering his rare publication to a professor of ethnology, the old newspaperman points to "page 2 the amusing story of the plain girl fair where the plain girls come to vend their wares but he said 'on my page 2 this news-

paper here talk about the EEC'" (UP, p. 27). The professor's unimaginative response grounds him in the mundane; the narrator, on the other hand, "reads" the publication differently, creating for his own pleasure from the text a reality in the mind that has no counterpart in observable "facts." Hurrying to the fair described in his newspaper, the narrator selects a choice companion for an evening of lobster and dancing and then whisks her into the hay. There, he recalls with pleasure, "I tickled the naked soles of feet with a piece of it and admired her gestures of marvellous gaucherie. In my mind" (UP, p. 28). Yet while part of the artist's delight is in what Pynchon calls "'an adventure of the mind,'" <sup>19</sup> another part is in challenging the audience to participate in the process of constructing an imaginative fiction.

Similar to the way in which the fictionist's personae are alternately depicted as hostile and sympathetic in "Florence Green is 81" and in "The Dolt," the audiences in these two parodies vary from the suspicious malevolence of the detective in "This Newspaper Here" to the naive curiosity of New Yorkers in "The Balloon." In the latter parody, the artist more successfully provokes his audience into relinquishing its familiarly passive role. Puzzled by the "apparent purposelessness" of the shapeshifting balloon, Barthelme's New Yorkers stroll the landscape of its upper surfaces, bounce on it, write messages, or hang "green and blue paper lanterns from the warm gray underside" (UP, p. 17); others try to label it:

"monstrous pourings"

"harp"

XXXXXXX"certain contrasts with darker portions"

"inner joy"

"large, square corners"

"conservative eclecticism that has so far governed  
modern balloon design"

::::::::::"abnormal vigor"

"warm, soft, lazy passages"

"Has unity been sacrificed for a sprawling quality?"

"Quelle catastrophe!"

"munching" (UP, p. 20)

But the balloon, which continues to expand and change shape long after the artist has created it, also continues to defy all efforts to formulate its meaning with empty phrases. As the narrator/artist points out, "we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena" (UP, p. 16). Instead, the balloon seems remarkable for the multiple random and contradictory perspectives from which it can be simultaneously appreciated. Its appeal, the New Yorkers suggest, is that it is not "limited or defined"; for the citizens, the balloon is a source of imaginative release from "rigidly patterned" lives and from the city's labyrinth, a "grid of precise, rectangular pathways" (UP, p. 21).

Though parodies such as "This Newspaper Here" and "The Balloon" exaggerate the effects of the writer or artist re-

nouncing his conventional role, the compositions are perhaps as revelatory of Barthelme's attitudes toward his work as are the inventive fictions. The labyrinthine prison of New York seems a contemporary American version of Joyce's Dublin, and the artist's creation, like that of Joyce and Yeats, appears to be the only means of escape. Unlike the modernist artists, however, Barthelme does not retreat in exile to a refuge among darkened battlements, nor is his art the aesthetically refined and impersonal work of his predecessors. Rather than soar above the maze on Icarian wings, Barthelme's artist in "The Balloon," for instance, releases his creation just above the city and then remains with his audience in the labyrinth to share in their responses as they attempt to reconstruct the object. Moreover, instead of rising beyond the city, the balloon maintains contact with buildings, "exerting an ever-so-slight pressure against the side of a building, so that balloon and building seemed a unity" (UP, p. 17). Blurring the distinguishing lines between the real and the imagined, the balloon extends and continuously modifies the landscape with its protean surfaces. "Each intersection was crucial, meeting of balloon and building, meeting of balloon and man, meeting of balloon and balloon" (UP, p. 21). Most importantly, though, while the balloon remains within the bounds of the city, it nevertheless invites the liberating play of the imagination. The metaphor for Barthelme's art, therefore, is appropriately an exaggerated emblem of a child's fantasy for

flight projected onto a toy loosely tethered to earth. Yet the purpose of the balloon is "not to amuse children" (UP, p. 17); neither is it intended to encourage the city-lifers to escape or transcend the labyrinth. What the contemporary artist's creation offers, finally, is a way of living with both the reality and the illusion, even as they impinge upon one another. Although the parodies exaggerate the difficulties of an artist and his audience constructing art in a contemporary world, their engaging humor works to move readers away from the "literature of exhaustion" and into a fiction more complementary to the discontinuous structures of contemporary life than the closed, static, linear patterns of narrative convention. The parodies allow readers a comfortably detached position from which to see themselves, the artist, and his work humorously distorted as that relationship undergoes changes during periods of generic shift.

### 3. The Forms of Fiction: Disrupting

#### Plot and Character

By focusing his irony on the writer's conventionally implied role and by exaggerating his reader's conditioned expectations, Barthelme thus achieves at least one end of parody's "defamiliarizing" function: to alter the audience's habitual way of perceiving itself in relation to the fictionist and his work. The other end, to expose the familiar devices that tyrannize the fictionist and establish his audience's expectations, Barthelme accomplishes in parodies, which disrupt the

expected order of narrative form and reduce archetypal figures to caricature. Opposing chronological sequence, Barthelme throws the game in reverse and ends the narrative of "The Dolt" with "...to begin, to begin, to begin" (UP, p. 69). Conversely, he frustrates the comforting perspective of false beginnings by allowing his artist in "The Balloon" to obscure the point of entry to his creation. But Barthelme's most radical parody of narrative form is the distorted construction of "The Glass Mountain." Here, Barthelme sustains the form of the parody by inspiring his audience to make intended leaps from a hypothetical narrative to its parallel in the mock narrative.

The framework of "The Glass Mountain"--one hundred consecutively numbered sentences--transforms the linear sequence of conventional fiction into a plodding, yet playful, narrative. The one hundred sentences belabor the progress of a narrator as he scales a glass mountain with the aid of a "plumber's friend." Though his resourceful use of the "plumber's friend" has a quixotic appeal, the narrator lacks the stature of an aegis-wielding hero. His ascension, like the fictionist's development of plot, should be climactic, but the significance of his feat is levelled as his attention, and his reader's, is repeatedly riveted to the sights and sounds below. At the base of the mountain, a crowd of thrillseekers shouts obscenities and cheers him on to failure.

24. "Dumb motherfucker."
25. I was new in the neighborhood.
26. In the streets were many people with disturbed eyes.

27. Look for yourself.
28. In the streets were hundreds of young people shooting up in doorways, behind parked cars.
29. Older people walked dogs.
30. The sidewalks were full of dogshit in brilliant colors: ocher, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, ivory black, rose madder.
31. And someone had been apprehended cutting down trees, a row of elms broken-backed among the VWs and Valiants.
32. Done with a power saw, beyond a doubt.
33. I was new in the neighborhood yet I had accumulated acquaintances.<sup>20</sup>

The significance of the feat is further undermined by the disappointing reward which he ultimately receives for his efforts. Despite the crowd and an uncompromising eagle, the narrator finally reaches the top of the glass mountain. But there, at the metaphorical climax of the quest, he discovers that the "beautiful enchanted symbol" which he has sought for its "layers of meaning" is nothing more than a beautiful princess (GL, pp. 64-65). Like Barthelme's Snow White, who discovers that her suitor Paul is not a prince but "pure frog,"<sup>21</sup> the narrator is disgusted with his prize and casts the beautiful princess over the edge to share a fate with the fallen knights and steeds at the bottom of the mountain.

The mock-narrative of "The Glass Mountain" is a successful parody of the contrived progression of plot because its anti-climactic development, seemingly inept hero (he ultimately succeeds), and vacant symbols all counter what the reader is conditioned to expect from tales of romance. Since the story begins at a critical state of an attempted heroic feat, its sequence, the reader expects, will be shaped by the

series of difficulties the hero must overcome, and it will logically conclude when the feat has been accomplished. In addition, the reader expects from the first sentence ("I was trying to climb the glass mountain." /CL, p. 597) that narrative action will be fraught with symbolic detail. After all, the hero is not attempting to climb just any mountain, but a fantastic glass mountain which promises a heavenly treasure of manifold significance at its summit.

- 48. At the top of the mountain there is a castle of pure gold, and in a room in the castle tower sits...
- 49. My acquaintances were shouting at me.
- 50. "Ten bucks you bust your ass in the next four minutes!"
- 51. ...a beautiful enchanted symbol (CL, p. 61).

But the progression and outcome of the quest are not what the narrator has been led to expect either. Though in sentence 80 he reviews by rote the "conventional means of attaining the castle," the step-by-step sequence leads him only to the deflating conclusion of his ascent, where his hopes plummet, like the princess and the plot (CL, p. 63). Both he and the reader discover that beyond promising a princess, the conventional formula for romance can no longer be sustained.

"The Glass Mountain" best illustrates how Barthelme parodies the linear development of plot, but just as he undermines narrative sequence, he alters the conventional use of character. A consequence of his "displacing the value of linear structure," explains Neil Schmitz, is that "Barthelme

necessarily dislocates the centrality of characterization."<sup>22</sup> In this process of disrupting narrative form, the faithfully developed character with a history is superseded by faceless masses or by figures who cast off one false mask after another. The compositions in Come Back, Dr. Caligari feature sketchy caricatures of people disconnected, bored, identified only by the unimaginative roles which they create for themselves. Typically, the women (of whom Miss Mandible is a prototype) are voracious, the children squat, ugly, and mean, and the men impotent to correct or even calculate the enormity of error in their lives. Furthermore, that their identities can never be fixed or individuated is a source of paranoiac fear for such characters as Burligame in "Hiding Man." Moving from seat to seat in a movie theatre, Burligame tries to calculate how to play his own role and considers with suspicion the role projected through the mysterious intrusion of another player into his life:

...perhaps antagonist is purely, simply what he pretends to be: well-dressed Negro with dark glasses in closed theater. But where then is the wienie? What happens to the twist? All life is rooted in contradiction, movement in direction of self, two spaces, diagonally, argues hidden threat, there must be room for irony (CB, p. 27).

Barthelme further exaggerates the ambiguous relationship of Burligame and his opponent, Bane-Hipkiss, by displacing the action of plot--like the "action" of a chess game--with a literal movement of the two figures upon a grid of coordinates

laid out in the horizontal and vertical rows of theater seats. The effect of reducing the conventional facsimiles of human beings to parodic caricature (emphasized by the comic-strip names) and of substituting an elaborate game for the machinations of plot is to frustrate what the reader familiarly expects from fiction and to make his perspective on the stylized experience in the work as ambiguous and uncertain as that of the characters.

But perhaps the parodies which most effectively level the climactic contours of plot, particularly as those contours are shaped by a central character in the throes of moral or social dilemma, are Barthelme's caricaturistic portrait studies. The earliest of these portrait studies, "Amanda Feverish" (1952), is a heavy-handed parody published under the pseudonym "Bardley" during Barthelme's apprenticeship to a college newspaper. Though the parody lacks the subtle delivery of some of the later varieties--"Eugénie Grandet" (1968), "Alice" (1968), "The Teachings of Don B.: A Yankee Way of Knowledge" (1973)--the very obtrusiveness of its method facilitates understanding how the less conventional parodies burlesque the function of character to define plot through motive and dramatic action. Subtitled "a deeply disturbing novel of the South," "Amanda Feverish" undercuts its model by dispensing with the expected drama in four truncated chapters and by diminishing its stereotypical cast to caricaturistic portraits, worn and tainted miniatures in stilted poses. Like a two-

dimensional paper cut-out, awkwardly superimposed on a painted scene, Amanda, the intoxicated heroine with an unslakeable thirst for "Old Illusion," appears in the first chapter, plucking the wings from a dragonfly as she chants a litany of liquors:

"Cognac," she said, discarding another shimmering, pollen-laden wing. "Canada Club." A second wing fluttered to the ground. "Old Taylor, Old Grandad, Old Shot & Shell. Old Fuss & Feathers. Old Smuggler, Old Crow, Old Forester, Old Illusion."<sup>23</sup>

The formulaic outlines of Amanda's character are so rigidly defined that in each scene she sits in an inflexible posture, "dimpling prettily, mechanically, at no one in particular,"<sup>24</sup> and in the third chapter must be picked up, carried to a scene change, and there rearranged by the faithful servant Josh. Amanda's only self-initiated action, in fact, is to fulfill the purpose of the parody and bring an end to the novel, first by shooting the degenerate writer, Erskine Scaldwell, who threatens to perpetuate the tradition of his predecessors, and then by shooting herself as well--better "'death with honor than life in the clink!'"<sup>25</sup>

Except for the "due cause" suggested in this farcical death scene, the episodes in the four-chapter parody are not linked by a causally connected series of motives and events, arising from the complicated interaction of the characters. Like Amanda, the other, equally flat characters--St. Clair Pitkin, a star-crossed Southern patriarch, and Mr. Ennui, a

"handsome if decadent French poet"--are ushered in, posed in the gestures of mannequins, and then hastened to untimely deaths.<sup>26</sup> After a brief but impassioned speech on the glory and tragedy of being caught in Illusion, St. Clair Pitkin reels to his death, grasping for his morphine; Ennui unexpectedly collapses after imbibing peach brandy contaminated with insecticide. The only character who remains at the end of the parodic novel is the servant Josh. Unlike the hero, heroine, and villain, Josh is not the familiar stereotype; instead of the expected black butler, Josh is a "displaced Sioux," an incongruous character, who has survived the ravages of war, depression, and prosperity and, as liaison for Bardley, will survive the decadence of the novel. Barthelme does not know quite what to do with Josh beyond using him to draw the parodic novel to an anti-climactic end: "Somewhere on the old plantation, a dog howled, and the soft patter of tears was heard, from faithful old Josh, peeling onions in the kitchen."<sup>27</sup> But Josh typifies the sort of incongruous and imaginatively created character who, like the son manqué, enters Barthelme's later works at carefully timed moments to assume a counterpoise to the more familiar figures of fiction.

The incongruous character who frustrates readers' expectations for realistically drawn figures in fiction is taken to its extreme in "The Teachings of Don B.: A Yankee Way of Knowledge," a portrait of the artist as a displaced Texan writing in New York. In this composition, Barthelme combines

the techniques of self-parody and the split persona in a framework that substitutes the flat, linear form of a scientist's daily journal for the climactic contours of plot. Explaining in his introduction that he and Don B. were introduced "by a mutual acquaintance," the naive narrator Xavier, an impressionable young anthropologist from the West, delivers a six-day record of his meetings with the erudite but aloof philosopher Don B. The objective for the narrator's study is to become a "man of knowledge" by learning from Don B. "the secrets of certain hallucinogenic substances peculiar to Yankee culture" and peculiar to the character of Don B. (GP, p. 53). Taking a perverse delight in frustrating Xavier's efforts, Don B. exaggerates the over-simplification of such studies by resisting the narrator's scrutiny through a series of "put-ons," by alternately obscuring the obvious with an aura of mystery and then by reversing the ruse to diminish to the mundane the narrator's distorted observations. The hallucinogenic substance which Don B. finally shares with Xavier, for instance, is playfully obscured through the mystery of ritual. First chanting a partly inaudible litany in which only the words "town," "pony," and "feather" are understood by the narrator, Don B. then whittles chips from a small, round, yellow object, mixes two clear liquids (four ounces of one, one-half ounce of the other), adds several, square, colorless objects, and then rubs one of the yellow chips around the rim of each glass. Barthelme's last "twist"

to the parody, however, is to shift the focus for his charade from the narrator to the reader. When the narrator abruptly ends the parody by going to lunch with his hallucination, "a colossal Publisher" who gives him an "advance in the low fifties," the reader suddenly senses that it is he, rather than a character in the fiction, who has been duped (GP, p. 62). The absence of a resolute plot is unsettling, but the abrupt dislocation of a central character shatters the composite image which the reader has meticulously formed for that character from the "facts" of the narrative. As a consequence of the narrator's sudden dislocation, the reader must radically alter his perspective on the text. The effect of staging this shift at the end of the parody is to undercut the entire illusion that the reader has assumed from the fiction up to that point.

Barthelme's parody "Eugénie Grandet" disrupts narrative form and reduces facsimiles of human beings to caricature, but it achieves its effect through techniques more subtly executed than those practiced in the amateur efforts of "Amanda Feverish" or in the extended self-parody of "The Teachings of Don B." In "Eugénie Grandet," a collage of narrative parts works against both the pretentious plot summaries of book digests and the dated conventions of the nineteenth-century novelist. Serving as a preface to his parody, a concise summary of Balzac's work establishes the causally connected framework for the novel. Barthelme's version of "Eugénie Grandet,"

however, is a disconnected patchwork of fragments, which plays against the microcosmic unity of the novel. While the reader can fill in gaps in chronology among the disconnected fragments by referring to the plot synopsis at the beginning of the parody, the characters themselves never imply the passing of time, since they do not mature beyond the limited impressions that they initially project. Instead, the original characters are glimpsed only through the inarticulate dialogue of a contemporary idiom, and their worldly motives are diminished by trivial concerns. Eugénie wants butter for her beloved Charles' éclair; but her father refuses. Eugénie's building resentment for her father--evoked in part through a paragraph in which "butter" is stamped out eighty-seven times into rigid columns--compels her to kill her father by giving her entire allowance to the church. "Old Grandet clutches his chest, and capitulates. Eight hundred thousand a year! He gasps. A death by gasping" (GP, p. 30). The potential for climactic action is levelled by the inconsequence of Eugénie's concerns and motives and by her disproportionate anger, reduced by the butter episode to the equivalent of a childish tantrum. In addition, other fragments, the awkward contour drawing of a child's hand, a digression on a portrait artist who paints all his subjects with crossed eyes, a list of what Charles sells in the Indies, similarly stall the development of plot and character with anticlimax. Without contours swelling to the complications of plot and character, the novel collapses into parody.

Of the various portraits in caricature, though, "Alice" is the least conventional and, in fact, hovers at the limning edge between the formal parodies and the inventive fictions. Its ambiguous generic status helps to illustrate the subtle change from Barthelme's use of parody as a narrative form for satire to his use of parody as one feature of nonrepresentational narrative structures. Like the other caricaturistic portraits, "Alice" makes no pretense to verisimilitude of character or event; its figures, too, strike a counterpoise to the familiarly developed characters of fiction. Barthelme's method in "Alice," however, is to counter the expected representation of character and plot, not with mock personae moving monotonously against a backdrop of painted props, but rather with a technique of textual construction that denies the reader a consistent and stable point of view and substitutes circular patterns of sentence structure for the linear models of accepted style. Using a process of construction similar to that of "Sentence" and "Bone Bubbles," Barthelme opens the composition with a whirling rush of words to establish the disoriented perspective of the narrator, who is twirling madly on a piano stool as he considers the possible repercussions of an illicit romance with Alice:

twirling around on my piano stool my head begins  
to swim my head begins to swim twirling around on  
my piano stool twirling around on my piano stool  
a dizzy spell eventuates twirling around on my  
piano stool I begin to feel dizzy twirling around  
on my piano stool... (UP, p. 119).

Confused and indecisive, the narrator cannot resolve the conflict of his desires and fears; he is at once pulled by his lust for Alice ("I want to fornicate with Alice," he frequently repeats) and by all the possible complications of having an affair with a married woman:

we discuss discuss and discuss important considerations swarm and dither

for example in what house can I fornicate with Alice? in my house with Hans pounding on the bedroom door in her house with Buck shedding his sheepskin coat in the kitchen in some temporary rented house what joy

can Alice fornicate without her Malachi record playing? will Buck miss the Malachi record which Alice will have taken to the rented house? will Buck kneel before the rows and rows of records in his own house running a finger along the spines looking for the Malachi record? poignant poignant... (UP, p. 121).

As the repetition of phrases here and in the opening indicates, the narrator considers the conflict of his desires and fears from numerous perspectives in an effort to resolve the pressing complications of the affair. Vacillating in a pattern of approach-avoidance, however, the narrator experiences attacks of vertigo, and the text which corresponds to these attacks disintegrates into paragraphs of word debris--thoughts that he cannot order into intelligible sentences.

Nowhere in the composition does Barthelme allow the reader a consistent perspective from which to formulate stable identities for the narrator or for Alice. All views ultimately are poses, attitudes, or gestures, each one retracting the one

that preceded. Although the narrator occasionally recalls his duty to guide the reader through the text, he is so pre-occupied with his own turmoil that he usually dismisses the task with hasty instructions to the audience: "...see cruel deprivements SECTION SEVEN moral ambiguities SECTION NINETEEN Alice's thighs are like SECTION TWENTY-ONE" (UP, p. 120). Finally, abdicating his role entirely, he gives the reader a multiple-choice list of eleven "possible attitudes found in books" and implies that the reader might choose from the list a nutshell description for him. Yet even these choices are retracted, when in the next and last paragraph, the narrator contradicts the list as well:

...11) what shall I do? I do not know where I am  
 but I do know where I am I am on West Eleventh  
 Street shot with lust I speak to Alice on the  
 street... (UP, p. 127).

Despite the reassuring stance with which the narrator ends the composition, though, the reader cannot accept even this pose as trustworthy, since the narrator has already confided that he maintains for the world "an air of serenity which is spurious" and since the last paragraph returns again to the source of his conflict before once more disintegrating into an unintelligible rush of words.

Considered with the other caricaturistic portraits, "Alice" illustrates how Barthelme's techniques for the self-reflexive parodies undergo some subtle changes as he turns

his attention, particularly in the 1970's, from distorting literary forms and absurdist themes to exploring new possibilities for artistic creativity in fiction. In "Alice" the parodic effects achieved in other compositions by anticlimactic, linear form emerge instead from spatially structured narrative designs; the litany, which mocks the dross of language, evolves into paragraphs of automatism; and caricature of stereotypes evaporates into the faceless, unidentifiable voices of the text. Words, then, supersede character to assume prominence in the text, so that the text is structured not through a stable narrative viewpoint, but through possible association to be found in the medium, to be found in the relationship of words to one another, rather than to something outside or beyond the composition. Still fulfilling the primary purpose of the self-reflexive parodies, these techniques exaggerate the artifice of literary convention. But at the same time, they allow Barthelme to adapt to narrative a collage method, which by literally offering multiplicity, opens the genre to new possibilities for constructing fiction.

The parodies written in the 1960's culminate a history of self-conscious fiction that ironically begins with Cervantes. This literature, Robert Alter explains, serves as a prelude to works by experimental contemporary writers whose fictional worlds are "represented as sheer hypothesis, to be dismantled and reassembled in new ways, the element of instability dominating all."<sup>28</sup> However, an audience passively conditioned to

accept the Novelist's stable worlds does not easily assent to the activity of reconstructing dynamic, hypothetical worlds. In order to alter the reader's conditioned expectations for the closed, static, linear patterns of literary convention and prepare him for the open, dynamic structures of inventive fiction, Barthelme reverses or diminishes the task of the writer's quotidian practice. By disrupting narrative form, by mocking the familiarly implied roles of the writer and his audience, by caricaturing fiction's cast of rationally formulated individuals, and by denying the reader the comforting perspective of a stable narrative viewpoint, Barthelme thus accomplishes parody's "defamiliarizing" function to expose for the reader the contrivances of a highly artificial craft. Suspended through a structural paradox between both types of fiction, the parodies serve to move the reader from convention to invention, from the familiar to the unexpected. Like other self-conscious literature, the parodies are "repeatedly concerned with both the instructiveness and the deceptiveness of similitudes, with the ambiguity of identity and fictional character, and, above all, with the relation of the author to his work."<sup>29</sup> The tension created through the play of these antitheses renders the parody and its model structurally and thematically unstable. By adapting the self-reflexive possibilities of parody to his concerns for fiction, Barthelme discredits the illusion of the Novelist's real-seeming artifice and the fatuous acceptance of that artifice as a veritable mirror of reality.

## Notes to Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup>Jerome Klinkowitz, "Donald Barthelme," in Joe David Bellamy, The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Scholes, "Metafiction," Iowa Review, 1 (Fall 1970), 102.

<sup>3</sup>Scholes, 102-103.

<sup>4</sup>Jerome Klinkowitz, Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980). See especially pp. 4-15.

<sup>5</sup>John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," The Atlantic, 220, No. 2 (August 1967), reprinted in Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), p. 30.

<sup>6</sup>Donald Barthelme, "After Joyce," Location, 1 (Summer 1964), 15.

<sup>7</sup>David Paul Press, "New Forms of Short Fiction in America," Diss. University of Oklahoma 1978, p. 14. In a summary discussion of new directions in literary criticism, Press uses Jerome Klinkowitz's overview of fiction since 1960 to place contemporary writers into three categories: regressive, progressive, and revolutionary. By virtue of his inventive fictional structures, Barthelme is typed "revolutionary."

<sup>8</sup>Barthelme, "After Joyce," 16.

<sup>9</sup>Donald Barthelme, "Rover Boys' Retrogression," Sequoyah 1948-1949, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup>Barthelme, "Rover Boys' Retrogression," p. 4.

<sup>11</sup>Donald Barthelme IV, Pacifica Tape Library, BC2720.01-04, 1976.

<sup>12</sup>Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," Commentary, 31 (March 1961), 224.

- <sup>13</sup>Barthelme, "After Joyce," 15-16.
- <sup>14</sup>Barthelme, "After Joyce," 16.
- <sup>15</sup>Raymond Federman, "Surfiction--Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction," in Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), p. 8.
- <sup>16</sup>Robert Alter, Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 25.
- <sup>17</sup>Joseph A. Dane, "Parody and Satire: A Theoretical Model," Genre, 13, No. 2 (Summer 1980), 157.
- <sup>18</sup>John Barth, "Title," Lost in the Funhouse (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1968), p. 113.
- <sup>19</sup>Pynchon is quoted in Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), p. 17.
- <sup>20</sup>Donald Barthelme, "The Glass Mountain," City Life (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 60. Future references to this collection will be given throughout the text by abbreviation (CL) and by page number.
- <sup>21</sup>Donald Barthelme, Snow White (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 169. First published by Atheneum, 1967. Future references to this work follow the Bantam Books edition and will be given by abbreviation (SW) and by page number throughout the text.
- <sup>22</sup>Neil Schmitz, "Donald Barthelme and the Emergence of Modern Satire," Minnesota Review, 1 (Fall 1971), 111.
- <sup>23</sup>Donald Barthelme, "Amanda Feverish," Cougar, 10 October 1952, p. 2.
- <sup>24</sup>Barthelme, "Amanda Feverish," 10 October 1952, p. 2.
- <sup>25</sup>Barthelme, "Amanda Feverish," Cougar, 31 October 1952, p. 2.
- <sup>26</sup>Barthelme, "Amanda Feverish," Cougar, 17 October 1952, p. 2.
- <sup>27</sup>Barthelme, "Amanda Feverish," 31 October 1952, p. 2.
- <sup>28</sup>Alter, p. 22.
- <sup>29</sup>Alter, p. 21.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE INVENTIVE FICTIONS: STRUCTURAL ALTERNATIVES FOR NARRATIVE ART

By diminishing the reader's conditioned expectations, by playing the fictionist's game in reverse, Barthelme's formal parodies clearly illustrate what is not viable as contemporary narrative art. However, as a study of "Alice" reveals, their function as parody can become obscured when they attempt to proffer alternative possibilities for the fictionist. Barthelme's parodies are therefore limited as transitional pieces; they can initiate but cannot complete shifts in genre. Apparently recognizing this limitation, Barthelme began in the 1960's to experiment with alternative narrative structures. Even as he continued to produce the parodies with their familiar distortions of theme, plot, and character, he was simultaneously considering how to compose a nonrepresentational text or "literary object" appropriately suggestive of the multiplicity and uncertainty of contemporary experience. Adapting the parodic element of play to these compositions, Barthelme evolved a process of constructing inventive texts which varies significantly from that of constructing formal

parody and which demands that the reader become a participant in the writer's game. Unlike his parodies, which depend upon the reader's familiarity with conventional narrative forms and techniques, the inventive fictions are composed with collage designs of interrelated structures that suggest multiple possibilities for the reader to reconstruct the works without looking to nineteenth-century models of the short story and the novel. In the inventive fictions, the reader may expect no *donnée*, no subject or content beyond what is contained in the text itself, no authorial responsibility to verisimilitude of character and event, no thematic orders or sequentially constructed plots. In these compositions, Barthelme explores a variety of alternatives for freeing the artist's imagination from the familiar and expected through aural and visual effects of his medium--through the "pleasure of the text," to use Roland Barthes' phrase.

Barthelme's inventive texts offer structural alternatives to the conventional trinity of theme, plot, and character. For theme, Barthelme substitutes a far-ranging notion of artistic "intention"; for linear plot, the spatially oriented format of collage; and for character, a textual voice that often speaks directly from a medium of "word-beings"<sup>1</sup> and word-objects. Instead of theme, Barthelme posits the writer's "intention" as the primary source of inspiration behind the textual construction. As Barthelme uses the term in "After Joyce," though, "intention" is not a preconceived meaning,

idea, or statement, but the fictionist's notion of the kind of object he hopes to create and his chosen mode of creating it. For the contemporary fictionist, both the intended object and its process of construction have special qualifications. If the intended object is to escape the failures of the "literature of exhaustion," it may not presume to make meaningful statements about the world, but will speak instead in contradictions and paradoxes. The writer's intention, then, is to create a nonrepresentational text or "literary object," appropriately suggestive of the multiplicity and uncertainty of contemporary experiences. The writer's intention, moreover, determines the task of the reader. Since the intended object is replete with possibility and thus raises questions about itself and about the process of its invention, the reader is set the task of reconstructing the object so that all its contradictions and paradoxes may be, if not resolved, at least considered simultaneously. The controlling principle of the text--the writer's intention--is therefore a structural function of the medium rather than an epistemological statement by the fictionist.

The intention of the writer would be defeated, however, if he imposed upon his fiction a rigidly constructed order. Instead of linear plot, Barthelme adapts for the exterior format of his fiction the prismatic design of collage. Since the essential characteristics of collage are simultaneity, paradox, and multiplicity, the collage format is more appropriate than

plot for a nonrepresentational text. Using a technique variously known as "cut and paste" in pictorial art or "jump-cut" in film, Barthelme eliminates transitional connectives and rends narrative line into a cluster of seemingly dissociated fragments. Each fragment is usually a partial view of a "situation," a general area of vague familiarity where indistinct personages are sometimes glimpsed, sometimes only heard. One partial view may repeat, vary, retract, or question another partial view so that, once again, the reader must reconstruct the composition considering all possibilities, contradictions, and paradoxes simultaneously. By substituting the collage format for plot, Barthelme frees narrative art from the closed, static linear patterns of convention and opens the genre to possibilities offered by open, mobile, spatially oriented structures.

Finally, to complement the exterior design of his fiction, Barthelme creates an interior webwork of similarly repeated and displaced structures. He initiates this change by substituting for character a textual voice dissociated from any representational personage; consequently, the partial views of the fiction are not allowed to cohere through the unifying perspective of a centrally located character. Since the bulk of Barthelme's fictions are delivered through the voice of "I," the most comprehensive effect on this change is the permutation of the first-person narrator. The structure of the first-person narrator is indeterminate and unstable, for within the collage

format, he is dislocated in time and space by the fragmented design of the composition and may be found in more than one narrative zone at once. Ultimately, character may become a pretext for surface word play. Out of this permutation of character evolve two new fictional structures: the "word-being," an illusory grammatical presence, and the word-object, a word or phrase with an incongruous range of possible meanings. Both structures are appropriate for the interior webwork of a nonrepresentational text, since both deny words their expected function as signifiers for beings and objects in a world somewhere beyond the fiction.

In his inventive fictions, Barthelme goes beyond both the "literature of exhaustion" and its parodic counterpart to explore structural alternatives to the narrative conventions of theme, plot, and character. Although the fiction has no underlying thematic order, its nonrepresentational text is nevertheless shaped by Barthelme's intention to create a literary object which turns the inexhaustible possibilities of its surroundings to the advantage of art. To fulfill this intention, Barthelme substitutes the spatial format of collage for linear plot as the exterior design of his fiction. Within this discontinuous framework, character then dissipates into a textual voice of word-beings and the landscape of the fiction into a catalogue of word-objects. Both structures, shaped by artistic intention, suggest multiple possibilities for reconstructing the fiction's interior fragments and thus deliver narrative and its language from the strictures of habitual use.

1. Artistic Intention: Structural Possibility  
in a "World Made New"

In "After Joyce," Barthelme explains that "what makes the literary object a work of art is the intention of the artist."<sup>2</sup> If one equates "intention" with "meaning," then what Barthelme intends for the inventive fictions is never clear, never explicitly stated or revealed, as it must be in the parodies. However, since Barthelme's primary concern in the inventive fictions is the creative process and the reader's participatory role in that process, it is more likely that "intention" here has to do with the kind of object that the writer hopes to create and how he intends to create it. What Barthelme intends to achieve in his fiction may be gleaned from several sources. The most direct sources are a variety of interviews and sound recordings conducted intermittently between 1969 and 1976. Although a number of Barthelme's responses in the published interviews are too general or too flip to be useful to a serious audience,<sup>3</sup> his comments about his work in a four-part recorded interview/reading illuminate many of the complexities of the intended literary object and the process of creating it. Another substantial but less direct source of his intention is Barthelme's evaluation of twentieth-century fictional trends in "After Joyce," an essay published in 1964. "After Joyce" reveals not only why Barthelme feels that the new directions for fiction are necessary, but also which of those directions he prefers for his own art.

But the most reliable and certainly the most satisfying source of Barthelme's creative purpose in his inventive fictions is within the compositions themselves. While the first three sources suggest the kinds of narrative structures that Barthelme wants to create and why he wants to create them, it is through the last source, through reconstructing the interior webwork of the collage texts, that the reader will ultimately glimpse the inexhaustible nature of the literary object and its limitless process of invention.

Barthelme's notion of how artistic intention shapes the construction of the literary object may be gleaned from these various sources to form a useful description of both the object and its method of construction. First, Barthelme conceives of the literary object as enjoying in the world a placement which is fundamentally different from that of conventional fiction. Unlike its progenitor, Barthelme's fiction is created on the premise that "art is not about something but is something."<sup>4</sup> "Paraguay" is not about a political subdivision of South America, but is an uncharted landscape of the mind; "The Agreement" is not about the dissolution of a marriage, but is a document that concentrates the psychic losses of divorce. Rather than make authoritative statements about the world, the literary object speaks instead in contradictions and paradoxes like the world. Barthelme's intention in creating such an indefinite object is apparently to use the ambiguity of experience as the occasion for possibility in art. Looking

back to Joyce's accomplishment in Finnegans Wake, Barthes proposes that an artist can "gain access to a range of meanings previously inaccessible to his art" when he creates a literary object that the reader must reconstitute for himself, an object which provokes him to ask, "What is it?", rather than, "What is it about?".<sup>5</sup> The literary object raises questions about itself because it does not conform to the reader's expectations for fiction: linear plot is fragmented into a spatial design of multi-narrative possibilities; content is delivered through a surface play of words; character is merely a voice through which the wordplay is sounded. Most importantly, though, the text lacks an imposed perspective through which the multi-narrative views may finally be unified. The literary object, therefore, seems an extension of a world conceived of as having inexhaustible potential for multiple, simultaneous relationships. It is a part rather than a mirror of the world, and through its movement it shares the world's illusory structures. The theoretical advantage of confronting such an object, Barthes explains, "is that in asking it questions you are asking questions of the world directly."<sup>6</sup>

In addition to conceiving of the literary object as a complement to the inexhaustible nature of the world, Barthes intends the literary object to be a complement as well to other art forms. That he is creating an "object" does not necessarily mean that his work is static, rigid, or immobile.

Like a piece of contemporary sculpture, it may achieve movement through line; as in a pictorial collage, tension may sustain spatial design among simultaneously active patterns. But in order to compete with other media for an audience's attention, the tempo of his prose must be able to keep pace with that of the other art forms, particularly with the tempo of film.<sup>7</sup> Barthelme's primary method of constructing the inventive fictions, therefore, is to adapt to narrative the technique of collage from the pictorial and plastic arts and the technique of montage from film. With rapid juxtapositions of language fragments, Barthelme composes his text, eliminating transitional connectives in the way that the "jump-cut" eliminates temporal and spatial transition in film. The tempo of the prose is thus quickened by rending narrative into an assemblage of only partial views of itself. The imagination of the viewer is then put into play to complete the composition, just as it is when he tries to assimilate the truncated and spliced images of film. Once the fictionist has met the pace and has successfully captured the attention of his audience, however, Barthelme feels that the writer, perhaps even more than the filmmaker, has a distinct advantage over his colleagues in the pictorial and plastic arts. "Painting is normally an object on a wall, and you go up to it and look at it and you don't look at it for very long; whereas we, if we are successful, get somebody and hold on to him for a certain length of time."<sup>8</sup> What invites the reader to linger and to

contemplate the literary object is the unique pleasure of being a part of reconstructing the wordplay in the text.

Barthelme's intention, therefore, directs the task of the reader as well as it shapes the structure of his fiction. Just as he intends the nature and purpose of his fiction to be fundamentally different from that of conventional fiction, Barthelme intends the reader's placement in relation to the fiction to be fundamentally different from that of, say, Tolstoy's reader. Rather than assume a passive role outside of the fiction and listen to "an authoritative account of the world delivered by an expert," the reader must work to reconstruct the object "by his active participation, by approaching the object, tapping it, shaking it, holding it to his ear to hear the roaring within."<sup>9</sup> He cannot "read" the fiction as he is accustomed to reading conventional novels and short stories because what Barthelme intends for his fiction is different in both kind and construction from the work of his predecessors. Sentences do not align themselves in regimented narrative sequence; plot does not direct a causal order of events; "I" does not speak for a stable, unifying perspective. What the reader discovers is that the literary object resembles instead a "found object" in the plastic arts:<sup>10</sup> both objects provoke questions about their status in the world; both are constructed through creative play with the materials of their respective media; both are assembled according to the spatially oriented principle of collage. Just as the

sculptor might bring dissimilar objects together in an unexpected context to create a provocative new object, Barthelme wrenches verbal fragments from banal usage and juxtaposes them in his fiction to create a surprisingly renewed and richly suggestive language. In order to pursue the "range of meanings" generated by this misuse of language, though, the reader must adapt his approach to the fiction to fit the new demands of the literary object.

Essential to Barthelme's artistic intention, therefore, is that his audience become directly involved in the creative process. "The reader's participation is very great, which is the thing I want and invite."<sup>11</sup> The fragmented design of his collage narratives is delineated only by a skeletal framework, while possibilities for fleshing out the skeleton are left to the inspiration of the individual reader and his "willingness to follow language wherever it leads."<sup>12</sup> This inclination to the suggestiveness of language seems, finally, to be at the heart of Barthelme's creative purpose. Apparently, what Barthelme intends once he has captured the attention of his audience is to engage the reader in a word game to quicken his sense of the potential effects of language. The point of such a word game, writes Michel Sanouillet, is that

"of exhausting the sense of words, of playing with them to the point of violating their most secret attributes, and so totally divorcing a word from the expressive content we habitually recognize in it. Once empty and available, the words would deliver themselves, be it by the suddenly visible strangeness of their internal structure or by their

baroque association with other words, of a treasury of unexpected images and ideas."<sup>13</sup>

To this end, the prosaic wordplay of Barthelme's fiction approaches the richness concentrated in the language of poetry. But Barthelme intends for his reader to share in the creative process and allows him the freedom to pursue all possibilities evoked by the aural and visual suggestiveness of words unexpectedly combined on the fictive landscape of a "world made new."<sup>14</sup> The landscape of Barthelme's fiction, then, becomes the site of exploration and discovery, a source of possibility for art and the renewal of language.

From essays, interviews, and sound recordings, Barthelme's reader may learn that the kind of object Barthelme intends to create and the process of its creation are fundamentally different from those of conventional fiction. He may also learn that the complex structures of the inventive fictions make unexpected demands upon his willingness to explore a treasury of possibility stored in the language of the text. But he cannot fully appreciate the inexhaustible nature of the literary object and its limitless process of invention until he participates in reconstructing the fiction's exterior collage designs and its interior webwork of interrelated verbal structures.

## 2. The Collage Format: Possibility in Exterior Narrative Structures

Collage, Barthelme's primary method of construction in the inventive fictions, substitutes for plot to provide the

overall design of a composition. Collage is a technique which has been used with some variation in theory and practice by cubist painters, dada and surrealist artists, and more recently by post-absurdist writers. For the cubist painter, collage elements were employed for their plasticity as "a counterpoint to the painted lines and forms in a whole oriented toward formal values";<sup>15</sup> for the dada and surrealist artists, the point of collage, as Max Ernst expressed it, was "'the fortuitous meeting of two distant realities on an inappropriate plane'"<sup>16</sup> for the purpose of creating a strange, new reality that could both liberate the imagination of the artist and provoke mental activity in his audience; for Barthelme, collage is a means of freeing narrative art from the closed, static, linear patterns of convention and opening the genre to possibilities offered by open, mobile, spatially oriented structures. Barthelme's process for constructing the inventive fictions combines the theory and practice for the use of collage in other arts. Like the cubist, he employs collage elements in resistance to the formal values dictated by his predecessors. In addition, while he is working in a two-dimensional medium, the literary object which Barthelme creates by adapting collage to narrative has the plasticity achieved by the cubists in painting. With the surrealists, though, Barthelme shares the celebration of the play of thought inspired by his creation. By literally offering multiplicity, the narrative structures in the inventive fictions require the reader to impose on the composition some selective order or association of his own.

Collage has been used by artists in a variety of media as a means of confronting ambiguity with ambiguity and erasing the distinctions between art and life perpetuated by the formal values of realism. The essential characteristics of all collage are simultaneity, paradox, and multiplicity. Fragments or parts, logically connected if placed in a familiarly realistic or representational context, are juxtaposed in the collage in incongruous relationships that defy any one unifying order or perspective. As Sharon Spencer notes, when this collage format is applied to narrative art, the juxtaposition displaces "overt transitions as well as the suggestion of causality" and "renders possible the free creation of all sort of relationships among the items juxtaposed."<sup>17</sup> A literary composition, therefore, can no longer follow the linear contours of plot--rising action, climax, dénouement--nor can there be a centralizing viewpoint which cues and guides the reader toward the revelation of some order or meaning underlying the writer's choice of words and events. Moreover, words supersede character to assume prominence in the text, so that the text is structured--like the complex abstraction of color, line, and texture in nonrepresentational painting--through possible associations to be found in the medium. In Barthelme's inventive fictions, a rhetorical strategy may be at the center of the composition, or the fiction may be a tissue of the unfamiliar associations of dream content. Despite their spatial orientation, though, the parts of the

composition cohere through the tension created by the incongruous relationships of words and situations simultaneously held in the mind of the reader.

Barthelme's adaptation of this collage technique to narrative evolved chiefly through a variety of inventive fictions composed during the 1960's and 1970's. The extent to which Barthelme uses collage in these compositions ranges from the minimal effects of patching together a series of absurd statements in a Beckettian narrative ("The Piano Player") to the dramatic examples of the intermedia compositions ("Brain Damage," "At the Tolstoy Museum"), disturbing juxtapositions of old engravings wrenched from original contexts and pasted together with titles and texts. The degree of abstraction in the overall design of these fictions varies as well. The fiction may be populated with vaguely recognizable caricatures moving in and out of simultaneous narratives ("To London and Rome," "Views of My Father Weeping"), or it may be a collection of word sounds which resonate in all directions throughout the composition ("Sentence," "Bone Bubbles"). Despite this variation, at least one pattern of change may be detected in Barthelme's method of constructing verbal collages during this time period: plot, even in fragmented form, gradually loses prominence in the structural design of the composition, and by the early 1970's, it has dissipated into a context of "situation"--what his New Yorker editor refers to as a "general area of meaning" or vague familiarity that tenuously holds the disparate structures of the fiction together.<sup>18</sup>

When Barthelme first substitutes the collage format for plot to provide the overall design to the composition, he displaces linear narrative by rending the plot into two simultaneous story lines ("To London and Rome"). Multiple possibilities for restructuring the fiction do arise from this rending technique, but the possibilities, though now spatially oriented, are still bound primarily to plot structure. By the end of the 1960's, however, Barthelme had discovered how to play upon other resources unique to his medium to create a number of structural possibilities within a composition. In "Views of My Father Weeping," for instance, a prismatic plot structure is only one feature of the collage design. While a plot is fragmented through multiple displacements, similar and equally important displacements occur in other literary structures as well. These simultaneous displacements are accomplished through abrupt shifts in tone, verb tense, speech patterns, and perspective. Finally, in most of the short fictions published in the 1970's, virtually all semblance of plot and temporal progression disappears as a feature of the collage format. This last change evolves as Barthelme borrows from yet another art form to create multiple, simultaneous views of personages glimpsed as they are trapped in unreasonable situations. As if working with a camera, Barthelme shoots the situation from multiple vantage points. The shutter clicks intermittently, and an assemblage takes shape from the isolated poses that make up the portfolio of word-pictures.

The cinematic effect of the latter's design, similar to that of the illusory figures of op art, is like a still life set in motion. Just when the reader thinks that he has distinguished the lines of perspective and located himself in relation to the object before him, those lines blur, and when they are brought back into focus, they have somehow changed. These cinematic assemblages, which constitute many of the selections in Amateurs (1976) and Great Days (1979), evolve from sometimes labored efforts in the 1960's to strip narrative of convention without relegating it to the ranks of anti-art.

The earliest, most heavy-handed of the verbal collages is the narrative of "To London and Rome," a composition which appears in Come Back, Dr. Caligari (1964). In "To London and Rome," Barthelme achieves simultaneity by leveling the contours of plot and displacing the story into two simultaneous narratives. The story proper occupies slightly more than three-fourths of the space blocked out for the text on the page, while in a narrow left-hand column are juxtaposed all the pauses, intervals, and silences which might delay the action of the plot. The story proper actually progresses in the typical mock fashion of Barthelme's parodies. To relieve their boredom, the main characters, Alison and Peter, have attended a horse race and then subsequently purchased a horse named Dan, a three-story home in which to house Dan (or house in which to home the horse), and a concert grand piano "to

make the house more comfortable" (CB, pp. 162-163). These arbitrary purchases are used not only to create a story line but also to burlesque the characters whose lives are intricately linked by their purchases. After buying the piano, Alison and Peter realize that they must have a piano teacher and a piano tuner. But their piano teacher confesses that he is really a jockey, while the tuner confesses that he is simply incompetent. Peter then hires the piano teacher to train Dan and hires the tuner to plant the trees which Peter is about to acquire through yet another purchase. The only conflict of the story occurs when Dan becomes ill, and Peter rather helplessly purchases Kaopectate. The intensity of the moment is quickly relieved, however, as Dan is rushed to the hospital to have his stomach pumped. While the action of the story proper is thus moved along as quickly as Peter can write checks, the simultaneous narrative in the left-hand margin is virtually immobilized.

The pauses, silences, and intervals in the left-hand margin offer a static and somewhat disconnected counter narrative to mock the contrived plot in the primary narrative. Similar in technique to the parodies, these paradoxically non-verbal instances mime and exaggerate the flat tones and surfaces of the story proper, as well as the unrelieved tedium and aimless movement of the characters' lives. Form and content reflect one another, focusing attention on lines and surfaces, rather than on some pre-existent meaning or order. More

significant than the obvious parodic element, though, is the way in which the simultaneous narrative disrupts the reader's habit of proceeding from left to right across the page and demands its own process of reconstruction. The reader must continually choose between the two narratives and/or mentally patch them together. This process is particularly frustrating because the two narratives are both part of and comment upon one another, and the cross-referencing between the two assumes horizontal, vertical, and diagonal patterns. The following excerpt occurs shortly after Alison and Peter have bought the concert grand piano.

A SILENCE  
 FREIGHTED  
 WITH SEXUAL  
 SIGNIFICANCE  
 ENSUED. THEN  
 WE WENT TO  
 BED FIRST HOW-  
 EVER ORDERING  
 A PIANO  
 TEACHER AND A  
 PIANO TUNER  
 FOR THE EARLY  
 MORNING

Well I said looking around the new house, we'd better call a piano teacher because I understand that without use pianos tend to fall out of tune.

Not only pianos Alison said giving me an exciting look.

The next day Mr. Washington from the Central National called to report an overdraft of several hundred thousand dollars for which I apologized. Who was that on the telephone? Alison asked. Mr. Washington from the bank I replied. Oh Alison said, what do you want for breakfast? What have you got? I asked. Nothing Alison said, we'll have to go out for breakfast.

(CB, pp. 163-164)

If the reader disregards the narrative on the left and follows the story proper, he misses not only the "sex scene" but also the phone call ordering the piano teacher and tuner. (Alison and Peter miss out as well). After a brief continua-

tion of the narratives--a series of silences on the left, a discussion of breakfast and maple trees on the right--Alison and Peter are baffled to find two strange men in their living room. Though Alison and Peter momentarily grasp the situation, the reader must backtrack, take a diagonal leap to the narrative in the left-hand margin, and mentally collate his findings in order to verify the purpose and the identities of the mysterious intruders. This movement in several directions at once characterizes the entire composition of "To London and Rome": though the story proper proceeds in a conventional, linear pattern, the reader must leap and skip around the page to assimilate the fragments of the left-hand margin within the framework of the story proper.

In one of his first efforts to create a verbal collage, then, Barthelme demands that his reader be a player in his game. Here, the effect of disrupting linear form is not just to mock the convention of plot, but also to create rapidly changing perspectives which the reader must attempt to assimilate for himself. Even though the first-person narrator has not been effaced, as he will be in later compositions, he nevertheless denies the reader a stable, centralizing viewpoint, since his voice is refracted through the simultaneous narratives and may be found in several places at once. Therefore, the reader must proceed zigzag fashion through the text, and without the guidance of a dependable narrator, he must reconstruct the fiction for himself. But in reconstructing the

fiction, the reader cannot simply patch the simultaneous narratives together into one linearly developed plot, since the cross references create multiple possibilities for superimposing the alternative stories. The technique of this sort of verbal collage is undeniably heavy-handed, yet it does illustrate how the characteristic collage elements of simultaneity, paradox, and multiplicity may be adapted to narrative and how a literary text may be constructed on a spatial rather than on a linear principle of organization. The major drawback to the collage format of "To London and Rome" is that it still relies on plot structure as its primary feature.

During the 1960's, Barthelme continued to capitalize on the open, mobile structures of collage, but in the later fiction his method of adapting collage techniques to his compositions is more subtly executed than in "To London and Rome." While the two narratives of "To London and Rome," like the torn papers of the cubists' papiers collés, are obtrusively juxtaposed, the multi-narrative structures of most of Barthelme's later works are created by playing upon possibilities unique to the writer's medium. Using the collage method, the painter can create spatial ambiguity through the "play of two-dimensional surfaces against three-dimensional depths" resulting from the juxtaposition of materials with a variety of colors, textures and perspectives.<sup>19</sup> But the writer, as Barthelme discovered, can expand the possibilities of collage and achieve both spatial and temporal ambiguity by

manipulating unexpected shifts in verb tense, tone, speech patterns and point of view in addition to repeating a simple story line with multiple variations. As Barthelme begins to play upon the resources of his medium, fragmented plot loses prominence in the text and becomes only one of several structural features of the collage composition.

In "Views of My Father Weeping," the first composition in the City Life collection, illusory structures of time and space emerge from multiple displacements within the fiction. Instead of dissecting the plot to create two simultaneous narratives, Barthelme constructs the fiction through a first-person narrator who recapitulates one story--an aristocrat running over his father--from an infinite number of viewpoints (the story ends, "Etc."). This temporal displacement of story is further complicated by interspersing the vignettes (delivered in the past tense) with multiple views of the dead father, who paradoxically seems to exist in a discontinuous present. As the reader attempts to reconstruct the fiction with its contradictory poses, he discovers that the abrupt shifts in tense and perspective create not only temporal but spatial ambiguity as well. One reason for the spatial ambiguity is that despite all reports to the contrary, the father does not seem to be dead at all, and his corporeal image pops up mischievously among the variant plots. In reconstructing the fiction, the reader must somehow reconcile the father's omnipresence with the simultaneous contradictions of the story. These contradictions in story lead

to a second reason for spatial ambiguity. Since no one of the variant plots reveals the "truth" surrounding the events of the father's death, the reader is obliged to accept all views simultaneously. The last version of the story is offered by Lars Bang, the infamous coachman who was driving the carriage that ran over the narrator's father. After clearing himself of any wrongdoing and implicating the father as a drunkard and a malcontent, Lars assures the narrator that his version is the true one.

"...And so, you are now in possession of all the facts. I trust you are satisfied, and will drink another bottle of this quite fair claret you have brought us, and be on your way." Before I had time to frame a reply, the dark-haired girl spoke. "Bang is an absolute bloody liar," she said.

.

Etc.

(CL, p. 16)

The reader, therefore, cannot discount anything that he has read but must accept the "truth" of the situation to be the sum of all possible viewpoints. Since he cannot align these viewpoints in chronological order, he must shape a mental collage in which the multiple vignettes are held in simultaneous juxtaposition not only with each other but with the disconcerting views of the father as well.

In an effort to resolve the temporal and spatial ambiguity created in "Views" by a maze of plots, the walls of which are hung with multiple views of the father, Barthelme's

reader looks to the narrator to distinguish the fiction's real entrance and exit from its false ones. In the narrator, however, the reader finds no stable perspective, for it is as if he has seized Proteus as his guide. Behind the displacement of story with story and father image with father image, the reader thus discovers yet another source of displacement. This one arises from the narrator's need to detach himself from his feelings of grief and guilt for the father's loss. The displacement occurs in two ways, both of which offer multiple vantage points from which to view the narrator. First, the narrator projects himself into the past in the role of detective, so that he may reconstruct the circumstances of his father's death with scientific objectivity. In an effort to sustain this displacement, he spins off the variant fictions in which he may successfully perform his filial duty without experiencing sorrow or remorse. The second displacement, however, occurs against his will when he is abruptly thrust into a present-tense fiction, staged on an interior plane of feeling. Here, his performance is tentative and uncertain. In a weak attempt to keep his emotions at bay, he rationalizes that the figure before him is someone else's father. But as his attention focuses on the man's weeping, the narrator's own feelings threaten to surface.

It is someone's father. That much is clear. He is fatherly. The gray in the head. The puff in the face. The droop in the shoulders. The flab on the gut. Tears falling. Tears falling. Tears falling. Tears falling. More tears. It seems that he intends to go further along this salty

path. The facts suggest that this is his program, weeping. He has something in mind, more weeping. O lud lud! But why remain? Why watch it? Why tarry? Why not fly? Why subject myself?....  
(CL, p. 7)

Though the narrator wishes to evade the feelings which the father image evokes, he cannot escape except to displace himself in yet another fictitious role. Assuming a radically different approach, he tries to project himself into the role of the outraged son seeking reprisal for his father's honor. With the abrupt shift in roles is a corresponding shift in tone and style to the hyperbole of revenge tragedy.

Why! . . . there's my father! . . . sitting in the bed there! . . . and he's weeping! . . . as though his heart would burst! . . . Father! . . . how is this? . . . who has wounded you? . . . name the man! . . . why I'll . . . I'll . . . here, Father, take this handkerchief! . . . and this handkerchief! . . . and this handkerchief! . . . I'll run for a towel . . . for a doctor . . . for a priest . . . for a good fairy . . . is there . . . can you . . . can I . . . a cup of hot tea? . . . bowl of steaming soup? . . . shot of Calvados? . . . a joint? . . . a red jacket? . . . a blue jacket? . . . Father, please! . . . look at me, Father . . . who has insulted you? . . . are you, then, compromised? . . . ruined? . . . a slander is going around? . . . an obloquy? . . . a traducement? . . . 'sdeath! . . . I won't permit it! . . . I won't abide it! . . . I'll . . . move every mountain . . . climb . . . every river . . . etc. (CL, p. 10).

As the last word suggests, this view, like all views of the narrator, will be repeatedly displaced, just as the multiple plots and views of the father are repetitively displaced. The consequence of these displacements is that the reader cannot depend upon the narrative viewpoints, any more than

he can depend upon a stable plot structure. If the displaced parts of the verbal collage--stories recapitulated ad infinitum, views of the father, views of the narrator--are to be shaped into a multi-narrative scheme, then the reader must impose on the composition some selective order or association of his own.

In "Views of My Father Weeping," much more than in "To London and Rome," therefore, the spatial arrangement of the collage format is constructed through multiple displacements of several literary structures. While the narrative collage of "To London and Rome" is composed by the somewhat labored technique of rending a story in two, the open, mobile structures of the later fiction are created by capitalizing on numerous possibilities within the medium, by manipulating abrupt shifts in tone, verb tense, speech patterns, and point of view upon a gridwork of plot variants. Within the overall design of Barthelme's works in the late 1960's, then, plot might persist, but in fragmented form and as only one of several possibilities for restructuring the fiction. By the early 1970's, though, the persistence of fragmented plot in the collage composition begins to lessen, and the fiction coheres instead through the presence of "situation," a general area of vague familiarity where indistinct personages are sometimes glimpsed, sometimes only heard. Often, Barthelme composes this sort of collage by using a cinematic technique that allows him to shoot a situation intermittently from

several vantage points. Without relinquishing the collage format, he assumes a camera-eye view, snaps frame after frame of the disparate parts of a situation, and then shapes an assemblage of word-pictures, more accurately referred to as a montage.<sup>20</sup> Barthelme's audience has to learn to read this sort of composition in the same way that audiences had to learn to assimilate the fragments of a film, "to follow a narrative line through a sequence of truncated images--torsos cut off at the waists, disembodied hands and heads, fragments of rooms and landscapes."<sup>21</sup> Like the viewer of a film, the reader sees only "partialized space with parts of the object severed from the whole by the frame of the camera," and he must provide the associational structures that will hold the disparate fragments together.<sup>22</sup>

Among the assemblages which illustrate this cinematic technique are a number of selections in Amateurs and Great Days, notably "Our Work and Why We Do It" and "The Wound" in the earlier collection and "Cortés and Montezuma" in the later collection. Each of these fictions is a verbal collage constructed by rapidly assembling word-pictures--clusters of images with both visual and aural impact--into fragmented scenes. These scenes are then incongruously juxtaposed to suggest a "situation" which the reader must reconstruct. The resulting assemblage is in content similar to the Tralfamadorian texts described in Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five.

"...each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message--describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfama-

dorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time."<sup>23</sup>

This simultaneity of vision described in the Tralfamadorian text is the effect which Barthelme achieves in his recent collage composition.

In "Our Work and Why We Do It," the collective scenes create the following situation: in a printing office, dedicated typographers fret over the ink color, typeface, and dot structure of their various creations (matchbook covers, the currency of Colombia, Alice Cooper T-shirts, the fingerprints of criminals), while the owners, William and Rowena, "scandalize the proofreaders" by fiddling around in a nearby bed. Despite the seeming incongruity of the situation, at least one area of association may be found repetitively in the motifs of the collective scenes. The promiscuity of the owners has a counterpart in the narrator's love for his work. He admits that he cannot keep his hands off the exquisite typefaces,

Annonce Grotesque  
 Compacta  
 Cooper Black  
 Helvetica Light  
 Melior  
 Microgramma Bold  
 Profil  
 Ringlet,<sup>24</sup>

paraded down the page like exotic beauties for the reader to admire.

Each scene contributing to this situation, moreover, is drawn through a combination of visual images with gratuitous fragments of language that reflect the narrator's passion for the look and sound of words. One scene, for instance, is inspired by the reminiscences of an aging, senior printer. As he reflects on the toils and troubles of being a printer in "the old days," the fiction becomes superimposed by quick "takes" of a scene familiar to hundreds of Western movies.

"Yes, those were weary days," the old printer said with a sigh. "Follow copy even if it flies out the window, we used to say, and oft--"

Just then the Wells Fargo man came in, holding a .38 loosely in his left hand as the manual instructs

It was pointed at the floor, as if he wished to  
But then our treasurer, Old Claiborne McManus  
The knobs of the safe  
Sweet were the visions inside.

He handed over the bundle of Alice Cooper T-shirts we had just printed up, and the Wells Fargo man grabbed them with his free hand, gray with experience, and saluted loosely with his elbow, and hurried the precious product out to the glittering fans (A, pp. 3-4).

The scene then makes an abrupt shift to the narrator's reflections on what he had observed just that morning and then moves without pause into the sound images which complete this collage fragment.

And coming to work today I saw a brown Mercedes with a weeping woman inside, her head was in her hands, a pretty blond back-of-the-neck, the man driving the Mercedes was paying no attention, and

But today we are running the Moxxon Travel  
 Guide in six colors  
 The problems of makeready, registration,  
 showthrough, and feed  
 Will the grippers grip the sheet correctly?  
 And I saw the figure 5 writ in gold  
 "Down time" was a big factor in the recent  
 negotiations, just as "wash-up time" is expected  
 to complicate the negotiations to come. Percy  
 handed the two-pound can of yellow ink to William.  
 (A, p. 4)

"William," the last word of this fragment, provides the edge  
 at which this scene will blend with the next scene fragment.  
 The next scene begins, "William was sitting naked in the bed  
 wearing the black hat," and the reader prepares to move through  
 another visual/aural motif of the "situation."

The collage format of "Our Work and Why We Do It," like  
 that of the other verbal collages in Amateurs and Great Days,  
 is assembled not by aligning the scenes in a temporal pro-  
 gression of plot, or even in a series of plot displacements,  
 but by juxtaposing the fragments in a tenuous spatial arrange-  
 ment, so that the content of one scene vaguely suggests the  
 content of the others. Taken together, the scenes hint the  
 familiarity of a situation, yet a situation highly charged  
 with imaginative content. Other recent collage compositions  
 are constructed in a similar manner. "The Wound," for example,  
 is a bizarre offering of frames from a home movie, which  
 features an atypical family--a torero with a gored foot and  
 a lust for his mother's hair, a mistress who cannot keep her  
 blouse on, the torero's Lysol-packing mother, and a host of  
 parasitic "imbéciles," "idiotas," and "bobos." As one scene

of the fiction fades into another, the mistress and the torero's mother take turns filming the scene changes with an 8-mm. camera. In one segment, the mother, playing with the zoom lens, films the gaping wound in the torero's foot. The reader, however, has already viewed a variation on this scene in an earlier segment of the fiction, when the goring of the foot has been televised "first at normal speed, then in exquisite slow motion" (A, p. 14). The collage format thus coheres through the repetitive motif of the scene fragments. The same sort of repetition provides the vague familiarity among the scenes of "Cortés and Montezuma," a comparatively more abstract fiction.<sup>25</sup> Each scene features a slightly different arrangement of the main personages in iconographic association with one or more repeated emblems--a green fly, a golden-wired whisk, or a hurled stone. As in the other collage compositions, every scene fragment is then completed and superimposed at the edges with the next fragment. Here the blending of the fragments occurs whenever the personages are viewed "walking, down by the docks." In these collage compositions, therefore, plot is superseded almost entirely by the presence of a situation. The fragments of the work cohere through what Roland Barthes refers to as "a fugal continuity, in the course of which identifiable fragments ceaselessly reappear"<sup>26</sup> but in different combinations. This repetition provides the familiarity to be gained by the reader as he reconstructs the words and personages in their various arrangements within each scene.

As a sampling of the inventive fictions shows, Barthelme's method of substituting a collage format for the conventional, linear patterns of plot evolves through efforts spanning almost two decades. His early attempts to achieve the open, mobile structures of collage are somewhat limited, however, since in working chiefly with displaced stories, Barthelme is still too attentive to plot. By the late 1960's, though, fragmented plot is only one of the structural possibilities within the overall design of a composition, and equal attention is given to structural variation of tone, verb tense, speech patterns, and perspective. Finally, by the early 1970's, the persistence of plot, even in fragmented form, dissipates, and the fiction coheres instead through the presence of a "situation," usually constructed by juxtaposing multiple shots of personages as they appear in varying scene changes. Despite the resulting temporal and spatial ambiguity, the collage presents its overall situation with an illusion of familiarity, if not order. This familiarity is gleaned by the reader as he reconstructs the visual and aural associations, varied and repeated in each scene fragment. In these later compositions, then, Barthelme relies chiefly on the visual and aural associations of words, rather than on the temporal progression of plot, to unify his fiction.

### 3. Word-Beings and Word-Objects: Renewal of Language Through Interior Narrative Structures

With the substitution of collage for plot to provide the exterior design of his fiction, Barthelme makes corresponding

changes in the interior structures of his compositions as well. One of the initial changes necessitated by breaking up narrative form is in the function and structure of the fictional character. Since the spatially oriented design of collage precludes temporal progression of plot, it simultaneously denies the function of a central character to unify the events of that plot. Even if the fiction is delivered by a first-person narrator (as Barthelme's works usually are), the structure of the narrator is unstable since he is dislocated in time and space by the fragmented design of the composition and may be found in more than one narrative zone at once. Within the collage format, then, the structure of the fictional character is at the very least fragmented and in some cases entirely effaced. This effacement precipitates the advent of two new fictional structures, both of which deny words their expected function as signifiers for beings and objects in a world of reference somewhere beyond the fiction. The first structure is what Jean Ricardou calls the "grammatical person"<sup>27</sup> or what Raymond Federman calls a "word-being," an impersonal "I" whose illusory identity is determined only by "the instance of speech which contains it, and by that alone."<sup>28</sup> Within the text, therefore, the "I" is never known as a representational being with an age, a history, a face, an occupation, but is glimpsed only as a verbal presence whose identity may be infinitely varied through the combinatorial possibilities of the medium. In a similar manner,

Barthelme uses the second structure, the word-object, to explore the nonrepresentational properties of words typically used to designate specific objects or ideas. Like the verbal presence "I," a word may be repeated in a text with such a variety of association that each time the word appears, its meaning must be reconstructed to fit the cluster of words that contain it. The incongruous range of meaning suggested by the repeated word seems to be a property of the word itself, rather than of any one object for which the word may be a sign. When these interior structures are used within a collage format, the fiction coheres not through the totalizing perspective of a central narrator, nor through an imposed sequence of events with reference to a world outside the fiction, but through the tension created by the illusory, associational play of words within the text.

The play of words within Barthelme's collage formats originates in the permutation of his first-person narrators. Just as the fiction's exterior is a prismatic design of "floating narratives," that is, a collection of alternative and contradictory stories or parts of stories, the narrator who is presenting the fiction is usually a fragmented being or "floating narrator," a character whose identity undergoes permutations each time the narrative is retold or varied.<sup>29</sup> As Raymond Federman points out, this new fictitious personage,

made of fragments, dissociated fragments of himself...will be irrational, irresponsible, irrepresive, amoral, and unconcerned with the real

world, but entirely committed to the fiction in which he finds himself, aware, in fact, only of his role as a fictitious being.<sup>30</sup>

His unstable presence in (or absence from) the fiction will deny the reader the unifying perspective of a fixed, identifiable "I" who can deliver to the detached observer a well ordered microcosm. Instead, as the ambiguous "I" becomes increasingly abstract and evolves into a gratuitous word-being or grammatical person, the reader finds himself an involuntary participant in the process of inventing the text, its personages and its objects.

This sort of permutation of character occurs with varying degrees of abstraction in "Views of My Father Weeping." As we have already seen, though the characters are not entirely effaced, the identities of the narrator and his father can never be fixed since multiple views of each are repetitively displaced in ambiguous temporal and spatial zones. For the most part, however, the fragmentation of the first-person narrator is not too disruptive. Despite the narrator's multiple roles--objective reporter, persistent detective, filial avenger--the reader can make the leap from one identity of "I" to the next with relative ease. The various personae are so familiar to conventional fiction that the reader spontaneously fills in the images with what he has learned to expect of those roles from other narratives. But when the father/son images occasionally become superimposed, a grammatical word-being emerges, and the identity of "I" is in-

vented by its user (writer, reader, character) at that particular instant. This permutation of the first-person narrator happens each time the narrator fails to evade his feelings by projecting himself into a variety of roles in a distant past. The father then appears to the narrator as a strange composite of youth and old age. He fits the general concept of "father"--graying hair, puffy face, pouchy stomach--but his behavior is infantile. Alternate views depict him as writing on the wall with his crayons, jamming his thumb into pink cupcakes, or clumsily thrusting an oversized hand into a doll's house and knocking over the miniature furnishings. Unlike the familiar roles of the narrator, the incongruous image of the childish old man has no substantial counterpart beyond the fiction at hand, neither in the real world nor in the invented world of conventional fiction; the image may be observed, however, as a projection at that moment of the son's composite feelings of guilt, sorrow, resentment, hostility, and love for the father. The son, like many sons in literature, wants simultaneously to repeat the father and to displace him, and the "I" becomes a mobile structure through this desire: "in the other," Jacques Ehrmann explains, "'I' sees the same as himself... and someone else besides him."<sup>31</sup> The identity of "I," already confused by the narrator's multiple roles, now appears ambiguously blurred with the third-person referent, and the superimposed images of the narrator and his father present a strange and incongruous creature, a word-being whom

the reader has never encountered. "I," therefore, invents itself, and since this process of invention involves the participation of the author, the reader, and the first-person narrator, the word-being may be occupied by any one of or all these participants at once.

In "Views of My Father Weeping," the pronominal play which renders "I" a vacancy available for anyone's use occurs only when the father/son images are superimposed and the first- and third-person referents are blurred. At other times, the identity of "I," though fragmented, is determined by the role which the narrator momentarily assumes and which the reader spontaneously reconstructs from his familiarity with that role in conventional fiction. However, in some of Barthelme's works, the pronominal play is a comprehensive feature of the fiction's interior structure. In "The Captured Woman" and "What To Do Next," for instance, the first-person narrators are not just fragmented but are entirely effaced; "I," consequently, is an illusory, grammatical structure invented only through its various relationships with other letters or words in the text. In "The Captured Woman," Barthelme confuses the identity of "I" throughout the composition by substituting capital letters for names, so that each of the voices in the text--not just that of the first-person narrator--is located by a single unit of speech. The primary effect of effacing the first-person narrator with capital letters is that point of view is ambiguous and the reader's distance

from the narrative uncertain, since in this context, "I" is not necessarily a first-person narrator but, like the other capital letters, seems to speak as only one part of a polyphonic narrative voice. In the following fragment, "I" is assimilated into a list of strategies for capturing the contemporary woman.

It is true that Q. will never get one. His way of proceeding is far too clumsy. He might as well be creeping about carrying a burlap sack.

P. uses tranquillizing darts delivered by a device which resembles the Sunday New York Times.

D. uses chess but of course this limits his field of operations somewhat.

S. uses a spell inherited from his great-grandmother.

F. uses his illness.

T. uses a lasso. He can make a twenty-foot loop and keep it spinning while he jumps in and out of it in his handmade hundred-and-fifty-dollar boots--a mesmerizing procedure.

C. has been accused of jacklighting, against the law in this state in regard to deer. The law says nothing about women.

X. uses the Dionysiac frenzy.

L. is the master. He has four now, I believe.

I use Jack Daniel's (A, pp. 93-94).

The subject-verb agreement and the lack of a period in the last sentence distinguish the "I" as a grammatical being slightly different from its comrades; however, its alignment with the other letters and the parallel structure of its "use" tend to resonate "I" through a collective narrative voice.

As the host of grammatical beings behind this fugal narrative voice suggests, character in the conventional sense is almost entirely absent from the collage text of "The Captured Woman." While conventional personae are glimpsed in

the multiple roles that the fragmented "I" in "Views of My Father Weeping" assumes, the "I" in "The Captured Woman" has only a tenuous role apart from that of the other speakers. As a result of this effacement, "The Captured Woman" has neither a clearly recognizable first-person nor a third-person narrator to provide the reader with a unifying perspective. Instead, the fiction presents itself directly through the collective voices of the capital letters. Still, these voices can be assimilated by the reader into one fictional character, whose reconstruction, finally, is the source of coherence among the fiction's multiple fragments. This character, a sort of hapless, latter-day knight errant, is invented especially for Barthelme's composition and has no counterpart in reality or in conventional fiction. Though the knight resembles a popular fictional character, the reader cannot reconstruct him as a Gawain or a Galahad because he has been displaced from Arthurian legend into a world which will not sustain knightly tradition. A discussion between "I" and "M" about how to woo a disinterested captive indicates how the voice of each capital letter contributes to the invention of this one, bungling, quixotic personage.

"Speak to her. Say this: My soul is soused, imparadised, imprisoned in my lady."

"Where's that from?"

"It's a quotation. Very powerful."

"I'll try it. Soused, imprisoned, imparadised."

"No. Imparadised, imprisoned. It actually sounds better the way you said it, though. Imparadised last."

"O.K. I'll say it that way. Thanks. I  
 love mine more than you love yours."  
 "No you don't."  
 "Yes I do."  
 I bit off my thumb, and bade him do as  
 much (A, pp. 96-97).

As the dialogue in this fragment is run together, neither "I" nor "M" presents itself through its speech as characteristically different from the other. In fact, within the quotation marks, "I" is used by both voices. Therefore, the source of coherence in the interior structure of the collage format is the reconstruction of one fictional personage who speaks simultaneously through the voices of all the capital letters. Since "I" does not distinguish a first-person narrator, the reader invents the word-being "I" as he reconstructs the collective narrative speakers.

Within the collage formats of Barthelme's fiction, the function and structure of character alters, particularly through the permutation of the first-person narrators. Whereas "I" in "Views of My Father Weeping" is fragmented into multiple identities with distinctively different voices, the "I" in "The Captured Woman" is only one of several dissociated fragments of a single fictional personage. In the earlier composition, the interior fragments of the collage cohere as the multiple personae radiate from the illusory, omnipresent "I." Conversely, in the later composition, the interior fragments cohere as "I" and all other capital letters combine to invent one omnipresent character. As the ambiguous "I" in Barthelme's collage com-

position becomes increasingly abstract, however, it may evolve into a gratuitous verbal presence which exists only as itself. Even when reconstructed through wordplay associations in the text, this grammatical being offers no resemblance to anything beyond its own invention. Such a verbal presence is invented for "What To Do Next," a composition in which the wordplay is a delightfully convoluted game of cross-referencing pronouns in a list of instructions on "what to do next" (the occasion for the instructions is never disclosed, but their remedies are general enough to effect one's recovery from any "desperate situation"). Once again, the play of words originates in the permutation of the first-person narrator but now with abrupt shifts to other pronominal beings. This time, however, reconstructing the associations within the text leads to nothing more than the invention of an illusory verbal presence.

In "What To Do Next," the "I" or "we" in the composition is the disembodied, authoritative voice of the instructions, the sentences themselves, while the "you" is a vacancy to be filled either individually or collectively by whoever is using the text. The vacancy, however, may not be occupied by a detached reader, for the instructions demand that "you" be a grammatical participant in the fiction.

...We have therefore decided to make you a part of the instructions themselves--something other people must complete, or go through, before they reach their individual niches, or thrones, or whatever kind of plateau makes them, at least for the time

being, happy. Thus, we have specified that everyone who comes to us from this day forward must take twelve hours of you a week, for which they will receive three points credit per semester, and, as well, a silver spoon in the "Heritage" pattern. Don't hang back. We are sure you are up to it. Many famous teachers teach courses in themselves; why should you be different, just because you are a wimp and a lame, objectively speaking? Courage. The anthology of yourself which will be used as a text is even now being assembled by underpaid researchers in our textbook division, drawing upon the remembrances of those who hated you and those (a much smaller number) who loved you. You will be adequate in your new role (A, p. 86).

"You" now seems to be a fathomless reservoir for pronouns and, by implication, the world of beings, objects, and even other words which those pronouns may designate. Since "you" is a part of the instructions, it contains the word-beings "I" and "we." In addition, "you" contains all others who will participate in or "go through" the text, not only the "they," "them," and "everyone" mentioned above, but also "he," "she," "him," and "her": "It is true that what she is saying doesn't interest you very much, but don't tell her (or, if you are a woman, him--the instructions are flexible, the instructions do not discriminate)" (A, pp. 82-83). Finally, these pronominal word-beings may become ambiguously cross-referenced with other words by way of a linking verb: "--she is interesting but false. (It is not true that she is interesting but it is true that she is false.)" (A, p. 83). The interior structure of the fiction is thus patterned not by the deceptive linear design of the instructions, but by a convoluted wordplay among the pronouns, a wordplay which places those

pronouns in equivocal relationships with each other and with other words.

When the reader, an involuntary participant in both the "I" and the "you" of "What To Do Next," seeks a reliable narrative personage by reconstructing the associations among the pronouns, he discovers in the process nothing more than an illusory word-being. Character in Barthelme's collage compositions may thus be abstracted to the extent that it evolves into a gratuitous verbal presence. Instead of representing a being with a face, an age, a history, a profession, "I" may suggest the simultaneous presence of multiple personae ("Views of My Father Weeping"), or it may point to their absence from the fiction ("The Captured Woman," "What To Do Next"). "Thus, whereas it initially signified the organizational principle of the text in its generality," Jean Ricardou concludes, "'I' is subsequently transformed until it no longer designates anything but the simple word it constitutes among others. And the reader himself, reduced to a word, indeed becomes 'one grammatical actor among others.'"<sup>32</sup> But even without the unifying perspective of a fixed, identifiable "I," the interior of Barthelme's collage texts still coheres. One cohesive interior structure, as we have seen, is the omnipresent word-being. A second and equally effective interior structure is the word-object. Word-objects, like the verbal presence "I," are used not to signify a world of objects somewhere beyond the fiction, but to present the text as an invented world of its own.

Raymond Federman's term, "word-being," is adequate to suggest the verbal presence that evolves from the effacement of character, but it ignores the equally assertive presence of other language fragments which are a part of the textual landscape as well. "Word-object" is posited here as a complement to Federman's label for the indeterminate, mobile structure "I" that speaks for the text. Just as the "I," repeated and displaced in ambiguous temporal and spatial zones, is denied a stable identity, other words--those typically used to signify objects or ideas--may be similarly repeated, displaced, altered, or unexpectedly juxtaposed. This permutation of language suggests that the words are themselves objects whose structures, like the "facts" of contemporary experience, are as many and illusory as our perceptions. In a dreamlike segment from "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," "the shop signs are in a language which alters when inspected closely, MÖBEL becoming MEUBLES, for example,... (UP, p. 38). The illusory structures of the words confuse their grammatical function: as nouns, they are objects or "furnishings" in the shopwindow of the dream; but as an adjective, "meubles" (changing, moveable, unstable) simultaneously reflects both visual and aural messages about the mutable shapes and sounds of the words. Like the "I" in "The Captured Woman," the words have no clear referents. Moreover, since the protean structures disallow their conventional use as "signs," what the words "mean" seems to be a property of the words themselves. By thus mani-

pulating the materials of his text as if they are objects, Barthelme opens his fiction to a range of unexpected associations and delivers language from the strictures of habitual use.

Barthelme uses a variety of techniques to discover the multiple covert properties of words. One technique is to create a word-object by repeating a word or phrase in numerous verbal fragments, some familiar, some invented, until the word seems to have no one plausible meaning. For Barthelme, the phrase "Falling Dog" inspires a seemingly endless list of incongruous associations, all of which are properties of the word-object, "Falling Dog."

But now I had the Falling Dog, what happiness.

(flights? sheets?)  
of falling dogs, flat falling dogs like sails  
Day-Glo dogs falling

am I being sufficiently skeptical?  
try it out

die like a  
dog-eat-dog  
proud as a dog in shoes  
dogfight  
doggerel  
dogmatic

am I being over-impressed by the circumstances  
suddenness  
pain  
but it's a gift. thank you

love me love my

styrofoam?

(CL, pp. 36-37)

The three letters, "d-o-g," are the core of the "sentence," but each repetition suggests a new context for that sentence. Conventionally, a reader would select one context to determine the word's meaning and reject the others as false or thematically inconsistent with the rest of the fiction. In this text, however, "Falling Dog" is presented like an object whose structure, finally, is the sum of all its possible perspectives. Thus, multiple views of the word-object, like those of the illusory "I," are displaced and altered throughout the fiction.

Another technique that Barthelme uses to explore the mutable structures of the word-object is to create an incongruous cluster of associations by altering the spelling of a word or by substituting one word for another in an idiomatic expression. The unexpected structural change opens the text to a range of possible associations to be considered simultaneously by the reader. When Snow White laments, "'I am tired of being just a housewife!'" (SW, p. 43), the reader is inspired to reconstruct the cluster of associations which allow the sudden leap from "housewife," a word with a familiar stereotyped referent, to the invented word "horsewife," a word object which has no referent beyond a surreal prototype of domestic drudgery conjured in the reader's imagination. Like "möbel" and "meubles," the language of the text seems to alter when inspected closely. Sometimes Barthelme can create these mutable structures without even changing the appearance

of the word on the page. Instead, the unexpected proximity of contradictory words can trigger the permutation within the reader's mind. In "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne," the narrator's estranged wife ends a string of drunken toasts with the dubious tribute, "'Health to the dead!'"<sup>33</sup> The contradictory words seem to blur and form the illusory structure "death" as the narrator and the reader comprehend that the narrator's wife is about to shoot him with a horse pistol (one of the errors of his marriage was to deny his child a horse). But the permutation of the words does not end here. Though the wife misses her target, the "health" of the narrator is still tenuous. After his wife leaves him, he sustains himself by consuming a bountiful supply of Scotch; there is, he tries to assure us, "no immediate danger of a dearth" (S, p. 13). Once again, even without altering in appearance on the page, the words blur to form an illusory configuration (health/death/dearth). The configuration may be considered a word-object since, like "Falling Dog" and "horsewife," it is an ambiguous verbal structure which has no meaningful referent beyond the text.

Finally, Barthelme's most challenging technique for exploring the multiple covert properties of words is to disrupt the syntactical relationships that define the structure of conventional sentence models. As the reader moves through the text, clusters of words may take shape, falter, and rearrange themselves to form temporary word-objects that blend

into one another. The purpose of such an enterprise, Barthelme explains, is not to write a beautiful sentence--"Every writer in the country can write a beautiful sentence"--but to construct "the ugly sentence that is also somehow beautiful."<sup>34</sup> In such compositions, Barthelme may juxtapose words from all areas of spoken culture, so that words which "in isolation mean nothing or mean only what the dictionary says they mean," come together in his fiction to create surprising and pleasurable effects and to tap a "realm of meaning that is not quite sayable,"<sup>35</sup> an area of language that cannot be located through a definitive interpretation of words. "Bone Bubbles" and "Sentence," for instance, are compositions written in homage to the visual and aural appeal of words and are invented through this sort of misuse of language. In both compositions, the expected syntactical relationships of words are denied, either in whole or in part, to allow parts of speech to shift in and out of nonsensical combinations. In addition, the tempo of the two texts is accelerated to inhibit a hesitancy in the reader; such a hesitancy might deflate the spontaneity of invention inspired by the strangeness of the ungrammatical word-objects.

Of the two compositions, "Bone Bubbles" is the more abstract. Its text rushes out in all directions with strings of illogically patterned words: "bins black and green seventh eighth rehearsal pings a bit fussy at times fair scattering grand and exciting world..." (CL, p. 117). The movement of

the opening text, speeded up by a quantity of monosyllabic words, eliminates the possibility of designating specific grammatical function, of forming and retaining logical word combinations, or of forcing the words to convey some predetermined significance. Even if we slow down the text, as we might rerun a film in slow motion, any effort to give meaning to the mutable word-objects is still futile. Removed from the text, the configuration, "bins black and green," for instance, is a sound enough image if one interprets "bins" to be receptacles. But if the same configuration is read aloud swiftly, "bins" is also "beings" with slurred articulation and truncated spelling (like "damfino" in "Great Days" [GD, p. 1697]). What to one reader evokes a Dempster-dumpster image may to another reader conjure up a host of mottled aliens. To take this whimsy a bit further, neither of these images remains stable when replaced in the text. Either configuration must collapse and reshape itself in order for the reader to make sense of another word group. Thus, "green" may be joined with "seventh eighth" to form an inverted reference to an area on a golf course, or (the choice is arbitrary) the first configuration may be deserted entirely to rationalize the point of "seventh eighth rehearsal." Pursuit of meaning in these word-objects, particularly in the abstract context of "Bone Bubbles," is therefore a hopeless endeavor. The composition coheres not through a preconceived significance held in the words, but through a tension put into play

as successive configurations of word-objects repeat, retract, and question the validity of one another across the space of the page.

Though no qualitative meaning may be attached to these configurations, the word-object as Barthelme uses it is nevertheless an effective interior structure for a collage format. Like its complement, the word-being, it embodies the characteristic elements of collage: simultaneity, paradox, and multiplicity. Moreover, when the mutable properties of the word-object are put into play, words are not allowed to align themselves in a conventional linear sentence pattern; instead, the dissociated verbal fragments come together, fall apart, and regroup in a spatially oriented, prismatic spectrum. Despite the linear arrangement of its components on the page, then, the sentence may be a model for the spatial dimensions of the text's larger design, just as the familiar construction of the grammatically correct sentence may be considered a model for the linear framework of plot. Unlike the conventional counterpart, however, a sentence structured through combinatorial wordplay is not primarily a vehicle of meaning or information, but a site for exploring the very nature of language. As the lyric voice of the interminable "Sentence" reminds us, the textual lines of Barthelme's fiction are invented, like their components the word-objects and their voices the word-beings, to discover the unexplored possibilities of the fictionist's medium: "...it reminds us that

the sentence itself is a man-made object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones" (CL, p. 114).

With the substitution of collage for plot to provide the exterior design of his fiction, therefore, Barthelme makes corresponding changes in the interior structures of his compositions as well. The gradual effacement of character evolves into two new fictional structures--word-beings and word-objects--to substitute for the unifying perspective of a centrally located character. Although the reader may enter the text through the verbal presence "I," he does not come to know that presence as a stable identity but as a dissociated word-being who speaks directly from the fiction's various fragments. Moreover, word-beings are not caught up in the machinations of events but are juxtaposed on the landscape of the fiction in unexpected proximity with illusory word-objects. The two structures, in fact, blur and impinge upon one another since the whole of the composition's wordplay is sounded through a fugal narrative voice. A potential for a sort of transient coherence within the collage framework is contained in the inexhaustible relationships that the words may inspire. Having entered the fictive world, Barthelme's reader is allowed the imaginative freedom to put those relationships into play.

The contradictions and paradoxes generated by the interior wordplay of Barthelme's fiction complement the multi-

ple displacements of narrative going on at the surface of the collage. Whether these displacements are created by abrupt shifts in verb tense and perspective or by rapid juxtapositions of cinematic "scene changes," the exterior design of the composition, like the interior webwork, is shaped not by thematic order but by Barthelme's notion of the intended literary object and the process of its creation. Essential to Barthelme's artistic intention is that the literary object share the world's illusory structures and that the reader, no less than the writer, be responsible for turning the inexhaustible possibilities of that world to the advantage of art. Artistic intention, therefore, substitutes for theme to shape the construction of the inventive fictions, just as the mobile, spatially oriented patterns of collage substitute for linear plot, and an indeterminate textual voice substitutes for character. Thus, Barthelme's inventive fictions offer structural alternatives to conventions which have too long denied fiction a creative influence in contemporary art. The inventive fictions go beyond both the "literature of exhaustion" and its parodic counterpart to free narrative art from the closed, static, linear forms of convention and open the genre to new structural possibilities.

### Notes to Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup>Raymond Federman, "Surfiction--Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction," in Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Donald Barthelme, "After Joyce," Location, 1 (Summer 1964), 14.

<sup>3</sup>See, for instance, Jerome Klinkowitz, "Donald Barthelme," The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), pp. 50-51. Asked if he has "any consciously formed notions about time and space," "imagination," or "'reality'" that influence his work, Barthelme glibly replied, "'No.'"

<sup>4</sup>Barthelme, "After Joyce," 13.

<sup>5</sup>Barthelme, "After Joyce," 13-14.

<sup>6</sup>Barthelme, "After Joyce," 13.

<sup>7</sup>Donald Barthelme I, Pacifica Tape Library, BC2720.01-04, 1976.

<sup>8</sup>Donald Barthelme et al., "A Symposium on Fiction," Shenandoah, 27, No. 2 (Winter 1976), 25.

<sup>9</sup>Barthelme, "After Joyce," 13-14.

<sup>10</sup>Donald Barthelme II, Pacifica Tape Library, BC2720.01-04, 1976.

<sup>11</sup>Donald Barthelme III, Pacifica Tape Library, BC2720.01-04, 1976.

<sup>12</sup>Barthelme, "After Joyce," 14.

<sup>13</sup>William S. Rubin, Dada and Surrealist Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1968), p. 37.

- <sup>14</sup>Barthelme, "After Joyce," 14.
- <sup>15</sup>Rubin, p. 95.
- <sup>16</sup>Andre Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p. 275.
- <sup>17</sup>Sharon Spencer, Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. xxi.
- <sup>18</sup>Richard Schickel, "Freaked Out on Barthelme," New York Times Magazine, 16 August 1970, p. 15.
- <sup>19</sup>Herta Wescher, Collage, trans. Robert E. Wolf (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1968), p. 22.
- <sup>20</sup>Alan Spiegel, Fiction and the Camera Eye: Visual Consciousness in Film and the Modern Novel (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976). See especially pp. 163-166.
- <sup>21</sup>Spiegel, p. 38.
- <sup>22</sup>Spiegel, p. 37.
- <sup>23</sup>Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Slaughterhouse-Five (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), p. 88. First published by Delacorte Press, Inc., 1968.
- <sup>24</sup>Donald Barthelme, "Our Work and Why We Do It," Amateurs (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 6. Future references to this collection will be given throughout the text by abbreviation (A) and by page number.
- <sup>25</sup>Donald Barthelme, "Cortés and Montezuma," Great Days (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 41-52. Future references to this collection will be given throughout the text by abbreviation (GD) and by page number.
- <sup>26</sup>Roland Barthes, Critical Essays, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 181. The notion of "fugal continuity" in Barthelme's work was suggested by Barthes' discussion of linguistic continuity in Butor's Mobile.
- <sup>27</sup>Jean Ricardou, "Nouveau Roman, Tel Quel," in Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), p. 112.
- <sup>28</sup>Ricardou, p. 113.

<sup>29</sup>Ricardou, pp. 123-124.

<sup>30</sup>Federman, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup>Jacques Ehrmann, "The Death of Literature," in Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow, ed. Raymond Federman (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1975), p. 245.

<sup>32</sup>Ricardou, p. 118.

<sup>33</sup>Donald Barthelme, "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne," Sadness (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), p. 12. Future references to this collection will be given throughout the text by abbreviation (S) and by page number.

<sup>34</sup>Rust Hills, ed., Writer's Choice (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1974), p. 26.

<sup>35</sup>Donald Barthelme I.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE INTERMEDIA COMPOSITIONS: EXTENDING THE PERIMETERS OF PLAY

Barthelme's intermedia compositions are collages composed of both verbal and graphic fragments. Inexplicably collected with parodies, satires, pastiches, and inventive fictions, the intermedia collages resist formal typecasting. They seem to belong, rather, on the far wall of a cross-generic gallery of "speaking pictures."<sup>1</sup> Constituting this gallery is a variety of intermedia structures--emblem poems, illustrated fictions, shaped texts, Dada and surrealist collages--in which both words and pictures have the capacity to function as signs for each other or for a world of reference beyond the composition. Yet the degree to which artists inform these intermedia works with order and meaning depends in part upon the needs and expectations of their respective audiences. An Elizabethan, for instance, would expect the artist to resolve the ambiguities of his world in a predictable scheme of correspondences. In sixteenth-century emblem poems, the meaning which links motto, picture and text is implied in the emblem's pictorial details and explicitly stated in the poem's moral

instruction. On the other hand, contemporary audiences are learning to expect from art neither systematic orders nor authoritative instructions about the world. Barthelme's intermedia compositions, like Dada and surrealist collages, often divert an audience's expectation for correspondence with incongruities among aural and visual images.

These structural variations may be historically traced to the gradual dysfunction of images and words as credible forms of reference. The popularity of emblem books lapsed when in the seventeenth century, picture-poems became instruments for tedious homilies and banal platitudes; the moralizing shaped texts of George Herbert et al. ("The Altar," "Easter Wings") evolved into typographical calisthenics and the meaning (more-or-less) sound poems of surrealists; and collage emerged early in the twentieth century to counter the decadence of illustrated serial novels commercialized in nineteenth-century magazines. Barthelme's intermedia compositions reflect a similar shift in genre. Interestingly, those with the simplest construction appear in Guilty Pleasures and, like the non-fiction parodies, seem to play against "exhausted" conventions preceded by artists in earlier times. On the other hand, those at the most complex level of construction appear in City Life and Sadness, collections noted for their examples of "literary disruptions."

The corpus of Barthelme's intermedia works is therefore something of a gallery in itself and may be read as both

comment on and instance of generic evolution. Some compositions resemble the familiar forms of other intermedia works. Superficially, "Brain Damage" is a facsimile of a sixteenth-century emblem book; "Eugénie Grandet" is a parodic counterpart of Balzac's illustrated novel by the same name; "The Dassaud Prize" and "A Nation of Wheels," each a patchwork of fragments, recall the revolutionary collages of Dadas and surrealists. Yet another work, "The Expedition," adapts the non-literary form of a photograph album to the inventive purposes of fiction. The most complex works, however, are assembled in collage formats, where temporal and spatial associations play across the pages of each composition. To diminish the disorienting effects of such an eclectic gallery, Barthelme's intermedia compositions are presented here in a systematic arrangement with several purposes: first, to illustrate where the works belong in the broader scope of "speaking pictures"; secondly, to identify techniques used within and among pictorial assemblages; and finally, to illustrate the "fugal continuity" of aural and visual play in increasingly complex structures.

1. Artistic Intention: "Assent" to Disorder  
in a "World Made New"

Placing Barthelme's intermedia compositions within the broader scope of "speaking pictures" is rather easy. With only slight deviation, for example, the contemporary work "Brain Damage" is arranged, like an Elizabethan emblem book,

with pictures, text, and motto on each two-page spread open to the reader. A comparison of Promethean plates (Figures 1 and 2) reveals obvious formal similarities between a sixteenth-century picture-poem and Barthelme's intermedia fiction. The upper engraving is an emblem from Geoffrey Whitney's A Choice of Emblemes (1586)<sup>2</sup>; the second engraving is the third of six plates in Barthelme's "Brain Damage." Despite formal similarities, the two compositions are intended for audiences with entirely different expectations for art. Their underlying structures, moreover, reveal significant discrepancies in their artists' visions of the world. In the popular emblem books of sixteenth-century England, "the plates were intended to be read as part of the text,"<sup>3</sup> that is, as mimetic illustrations of what was explicitly stated in the accompanying poems. Inspired by his sense of order, the Elizabethan made conditioned leaps from the picture-poem to its allegorical references and resolved any contrary elements of the work in a "higher unity" or moral scheme. The chief aim of the emblem was ""to instruct us, by submitting the figure to our view, and the sense to our understanding.""<sup>4</sup> To accomplish this end, the emblem artist often chose allegorical figures which could spontaneously evoke a unified idea, despite a suspension of time or disruption of space within the picture plane.

For instance, Whitney's image is a narrative emblem; through its familiar symbols--the fallen god Prometheus, his



### Prometheus

To Caucasus, behold PROMETHEUS chain'd,  
Whose liver still a greedy gripe doth rent;  
He never dies, and yet is always pain'd  
With tortures dire: by which the poets meant  
That he, that still amid misfortunes stands,  
Is sorrow's slave and bound in lasting bands.

For when that grief doth grate upon our gall,  
Or surging seas, of sorrows most do swell,  
That life is death, and is no life at all,  
The liver rent, it doth the conscience tell:  
Which being launch'd, and prick'd, with inward care,  
Although we live, yet still we dying are.

1 From Geoffrey Whitney: A Choice of Emblemes. 1586.

*I worked for newspapers. I worked for newspapers at a time when I was not competent to do so. I reported inaccurately. I failed to get all the facts. I misspelled names. I garbled figures. I wasted copy paper. I pretended I knew things I did not know. I pretended to understand things beyond my understanding. I oversimplified. I was superior to things I was inferior to. I misinterpreted things that took place before me. I over- and underinterpreted what took place before me. I suppressed news the management wanted suppressed. I invented news the management wanted invented. I faked stories. I failed to discover the truth. I colored the truth with fancy. I had no respect for the truth. I failed to heed the adage, you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. I put lies in the paper. I put private jokes in the paper. I wrote headlines containing double entendres. I wrote stories while drunk. I abused copy boys. I carried favor with advertisers. I accepted gifts from interested parties. I was servile with superiors. I was harsh with people who called on the telephone seeking information. I gloated over police photographs of sex crimes. I touched type when the makeups weren't looking. I took copy pencils home. I voted with management in Guild elections.*

**RHYTHMIC HANDCLAPPING  
SLEEPING  
WHAT RECOURSE?**



2 From Donald Barthelme: "Brain Damage." 1970.  
(3rd of six plates)

adamant chains, the relentless eagle, the barren rocks--the story of Prometheus's conflict with Zeus and the eternal punishment which Zeus inflicted upon Prometheus is transfixed within the picture plane in one instant of time. To the beholder, the "sense" of the symbols is clear: as an instrument of Zeus's vengeance and Prometheus's fate, the eagle connotes strength and power; the chains are the eternal bonds of a rebellious will; the rocks, a remote, isolated, very earthbound exile; and Prometheus, "the symbol of magnanimous endurance of unmerited suffering, and strength of will resisting oppression."<sup>5</sup> In a glance, the Elizabethan would grasp these symbols; "the pleasure of the reader" then "lay in identifying the significant details and correlating them with moral doctrines" to be gleaned from the accompanying poem.<sup>6</sup> In Whitney's emblem, the moral which unifies motto, picture, and text is delivered by an authoritative voice in epigrammatic couplets at the end of each stanza:

That he, that still amid misfortunes stands,  
Is sorrow's slave and bound in lasting bands.

Which being launch'd, and prick'd, with inward care,  
Although we live, yet still we dying are.

With these terse instructions, the speaker explains not only what "the poets meant" by singing the myth of Prometheus, but also what is meant by the emblem's pictorial detail. Whitney's sixteenth-century emblem would therefore challenge the Elizabethan's wit, but more importantly, it would meet

the audience's expectations that art resolve the ambiguities of the world in an orderly scheme of correspondences. Motto, picture, and text thus made "sense" as integral parts of one unity or order.

The expectations and needs of Barthelme's audience for art, however, are quite different from those of the Elizabethan. Just as the picture-poem of emblem books reflected the Elizabethan's larger vision of universal correspondences, the dissociated structures of Barthelme's intermedia collages reflect contemporary skepticism that out of chaos art can create such unequivocal orders and meanings. For instance, though the Promethean plates share some formal similarities, the motto, picture, and text of Barthelme's intermedia works do not cohere through a moral scheme, but only through the play of wit. Like the Elizabethan, Barthelme's reader tends to look first at the picture of Prometheus and then at the accompanying text for significance. The allegorical detail in Barthelme's plate does resemble that in Whitney's emblem, yet three new symbols have been added. The women, apparently trying to aid Prometheus in his resistance to Zeus's will, fit the familiar narrative scheme. But the boy at the foot of the barren crag, now a mere stub of a boulder, seems indifferent to the drama unfolding just above him. Disconcerted by this incongruity and the seemingly irrelevant headlines that proffer the emblem's motto, the reader may search the adjacent text for a meaningful explanation. Here, however, he finds not an au-

thoritative code of instruction, but a confessional litany of "offenses," none of which corresponds to the heroic magnitude of Prometheus's offense. The confessions are delivered by a mere writer who has willfully "reported inaccurately," "misspelled names," "garbled figures," "put lies in the paper," "put private jokes in the paper," "gloated over police photographs of sex crimes," "voted with management in Guild elections," Etc. (CL, p. 138). The text seems to make nonsense of the accompanying picture; nevertheless, a thread of coherency may be unravelled by leaps of the imagination as the offenses are chanted off like beads on a rosary. The confession, unlike the sixteenth-century text, is amoral in content and archly satirical in tone, but it does bear a perverted correspondence to the illustration. The writer's tongue-in-cheek penance promises to be as endless as Prometheus's punishment (the confession has no summarizing couplets); his half-hearted guilt is the menacing eagle which, here, only threatens to gnaw at his conscience; and though an inverted list of instructions is implied by the litany (don't mess with typeset; don't mess with management; don't mess with truth), the writer seems to have no intention of following the dictates of conscience ("Guilty pleasure are the best."). The subservient speaker is like a hired gun who keeps tally of his offenses by notching his weapon. Any resemblance between Whitney's emblem and Barthelme's emblem is thus superficial, yet it is just such resemblance and the familiarity of the Prome-

thean myth which engages Barthelme's audience, like the Elizabethan audience, in looking for order and meaning, in sorting out the sense from the non-sense of Barthelme's intermedia structures.

The subversive game that seems to be at work in both the creative process of writing/illustrating "Brain Damage" and the recreative process of reading it is common to all Barthelme's collage fictions. In this respect, the structure and even the purpose of Barthelme's intermedia fiction are very like those of dada and surrealist artists. By balancing sense and non-sense, meaning and non-meaning, in structures which are both familiar and strange, Barthelme follows particularly the example of Max Ernst, another artist with a penchant for cut-and-paste technique. Ernst's collages emerged early in the twentieth century in counterpoise to yet another intermedia form, the sentimental serial novel commercialized in nineteenth-century magazines. Ernst enjoyed, as Barthelme does now, frequenting second-hand bookstores where he found a wealth of material for his collages in the newspapers and novels of the previous century. By decomposing and then reconstructing the melodramatic models, Ernst created his romans-collages in part to undercut the exaggerated emotional element of sentimental fiction and "restore the dramatically poetic illustrations to their original banality" (Figures 3 and 4).<sup>7</sup> Following Ernst's example several decades later, Barthelme also mocks the artificial orders and contrived dramas of nineteenth-century fiction.



3 From Jules Mary: Les Damnées  
de Paris. 1883.



4 From Max Ernst: Une Semaine  
de Bonté. 1934.

"Eugénie Grandet," for example, is an "illustrated" parody of Balzac's novel by the same name. The text of Barthelme's fiction is a collage which, in its parts, humorously recalls unforgettable, yet melodramatic moments in the original story. In Balzac's version, after Eugénie's beloved cousin Charles Grandet is orphaned and left destitute, two subplots are initiated. Eugénie discovers in an unfinished letter that Charles is bidding farewell to his love Annette because he will be dishonored by his deceased father's debts. Though Eugénie anguishes that she must give up hope of having Charles for herself, she resolves in martyr fashion to give him all her money. Meanwhile, Eugénie's father plots a miser's vengeance; he hopes to avoid paying his brother's debts, but still shed the light of honor upon himself, and, if possible, turn a handy profit. Grandet's ploy to initiate his plan without drawing suspicion to himself or his motives is to stammer in the presence of his banker and notary until they are literally forced to put the words of his plan into his mouth. In his parodic counterpart to this subplot, Barthelme recreates the impression of Grandet with a paragraph of typographical play in which "butter" is stamped out eighty-seven times.

Barthelme further shatters the whole of Balzac's novel with a collage that includes shards of the original story, as well as mocks illustrations. Letters in Eugénie Grandet are always missiles of bad news. The first in the novel is written by Charles's father to announce his financial ruin and impending

suicide and to give charge of Charles's future to M. Grandet. As Barthelme splices the story together, he includes only a ragged piece of the letter.

Part of a letter:

. . . And now he's ruined, a friends will desert him, and humiliation. Oh, I wish I ha straight to heaven, where his but this is madness. . . I re that of Charles.

I have sent him to you so news of my death to him and in store for him. Be a father to not tear him away from his would kiss him. I beg him on m which, as his mother's heir, he But this is a superfluous ple will realize that he must not Persuade him to give up all his time comes. Reveal to him th which he must live from now still has any love for me, tell not lost for him. Yes, work, wh give him back the fortune I ha And if he is willing to listen who for his sake would like to

(GP, p. 23)

The lofty tone of the original is still pervasive, but the intended tragedy is lacking in motive and consequence.

Barthelme similarly mocks the melodrama underlying Eugé-  
nie's discovery of the second fatal letter. In Balzac's  
story, the subplot of Eugénie's love for Charles is transfixed  
by one illustrator as Eugénie enters Charles's room (Caption:  
"The door stood ajar; she thrust it open"<sup>8</sup>). Charles lies  
slumped in his chair before a desk strewn with sealed letters.  
The pages of the unfinished letter to Annette, however, are

fatefully open for Eugénie to see (Figure 5). Barthelme undercuts this melodramatic moment by combining it with Eugénie's perusal of the last letter in Balzac's novel, a "Dear Cousin" note from Charles announcing his plan to marry a fortune. Barthelme considerably shortens Balzac's high-handed version of Charles's letter. Investing the letter with a rogue's indifference to Eugénie's grand sacrifice, Barthelme chips away the euphemistic language that serves as a veneer to Charles's intentions. "A brilliant life awaits me, is what I am trying to say to you, if I don't marry you, and that is why I am marrying this other girl, who is hideously ugly but possessed of a notable, if decayed, position in the aristocracy" (GP, p. 29). Finally, instead of transfixing Eugénie's despair at this calamity in a sentimentalized illustration, Barthelme nonchallantly shifts the focus of the moment from the grieving heroine to the cad who penned the letter. By accompanying his note with an expressionless "photograph" of Charles in the Indies, Barthelme, like Ernst, belies the contrivance of illustrative art and restores it to "its original banality." Barthelme's other illustrations--a pencil outline of Eugénie's hand, a woodcut print of Eugénie holding a ball--similarly present the heroine as a simple, if spoiled, child, incapable of the tragic development that Balzac or the illustrator created for her.

The subversive game that Barthelme, Ernst, and other contemporary artists play through the disorienting structures



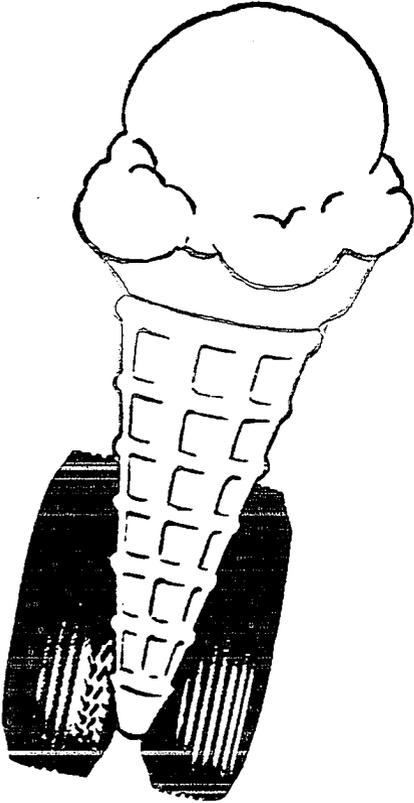
5 From H. de Balzac: Eugénie Grandet. 1899 ed.

of collage springs from a ploy of counter-espionage to what Richard Gilman recognizes as a "confusion of realms" between art and life, a confusion almost unknown to the Elizabethan. This confusion, as noted earlier, is precipitated in part by the failure of artificial orders to resolve the contradictions of contemporary life. But it is also linked to the absorption of art into a commodity-oriented culture. The confusion, exploited and satirized by twentieth-century artists, seems to have its roots in the technological revolution of the nineteenth century. French novelist Théophile Gautier bitterly remarked in the preface to Mademoiselle de Maupin (1834) that the publication of his new book would be announced in a three-line advertisement, "crammed 'between rubber girdles, crinoline collars, bottles with inalterable nipples, Regnault toothpaste and toothache remedies.'"<sup>9</sup> (This list is a remarkable facsimile of the "trash phenomenon" that clutters many Barthelme fictions). Working against such exploitation, Ernst assembled his collages to subvert the misuse of pictorial art for serialized novels in newspapers and magazines. As if in support of Ernst's point, Barthelme reproduces Ingres's portrait of Mademoiselle Rivière as the centerplate of "That Cosmopolitan Girl" (GP, p. 17), a parodic fiction which begins with a mock advertisement for Cosmopolitan (it could as easily have been Mademoiselle) in the New York Times and continues with a testimonial spoof from a disgruntled ingenue. The problem, however, is no longer just the misuse of

art as a commodity. As one observer points out, "If, in our world where everything is sold because everything is bought, the work of art has become a commodity, the opposite has also happened: every commodity has become a potential work of art."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, artists are expected to produce "a new sensation each season,"<sup>11</sup> but as one of Barthelme's personae laments, "The development of new wonders is not like the production of canned goods" (S, p. 139). Intermedia collages, like ready-mades, found objects, and Pop art (Warhol's soup cans, Lichtenstein's comic strips), therefore, draw attention to the irony of this questionable exchange between art and life by borrowing materials from popular culture--typically in the form of visual representations--and juxtaposing them in a frame of reference (book, canvas, museum) conventionally reserved for art. Before the cornerstones of art may be re-laid, contemporary artists seem to say, the public must recognize that boundaries have been blurred, and collage serves this purpose ignobly.

As Barthelme and other intermedia artists use it, collage shares with parody a shameless disrepute as subversive art. "One could say," writes an unabashed admirer of Ernst's work, "that the perfect collage is like the perfect crime."<sup>12</sup> It would seem, moreover, that the one who erects this bogus tableau of duplicity and conceit is a "con" artist, skilled at sleight-of-hand technique. Lurking somewhere behind the illusion, he "diddles the manifest" and, like the parodist,

compounds his "crime" by borrowing materials from works already in one form of print or another. The graphic configurations of Barthelme's collages, for instance, contain pictures of classical sculpture, "photographs" of characters, illustrations from science and technical manuals, perspective drawings, or engravings of weeping heroines from turn-of-the-century novels. Though the prints have been taken from their original contexts and incongruously assembled on a new picture plane, the arrangements which make the perceiver ask, "What's wrong with this picture?", are often minimal in design and subtle in their perversity. Ernst limited himself to "minimum collage," altering the original illustration (the Jules Mary illustration, for example) with only a few foreign elements.<sup>13</sup> These, like the boy at the foot of Barthelme's Promethean picture or the tire-with-cone and tire-with-horn images (Figures 6 and 7), are so subtly introduced that the point of attachment or overlay is almost indiscernible. Such minimal change is especially effective for the artist who wants to show his audience the folly of artificial orders or the ironic interchanges of art and life, rather than confuse his audience with "'undépaysement extraordinaire,' an extraordinary disorientation," which instead of conciliating art with reality, conciliates "the real" with "the marvelous."<sup>14</sup> The word games of "Bone Bubbles," one of Barthelme's most disorienting collage texts, illustrate the disadvantage of yielding too freely to spontaneity and creating disorientation beyond an audience's



6 From Donald Barthelme: "A Nation of Wheels." 1970. (2nd of twelve plates)



7 From Donald Barthelme: "A Nation of Wheels." 1970. (4th of twelve plates)

capacity for acceptance. Barthelme, as well as other contemporary artists, is more successful when his compositions exude a sort of "ongoing low-grade mystery"<sup>15</sup> by consistently balancing the familiar with the strange.

For both the artist and his audience, the creative activity of reconstructing the world should therefore take place in a zone of reciprocity between order and disorientation. At the site of mutual acceptance and participation occurs what Allan Wilde terms the activity of "assent" to disorder, an intermediary activity which, like the world and the art that engages it, is "dynamic, exploratory, on-going, experiential."<sup>16</sup> To engage his audience in "assent" and offer that measure of disorientation which will allow a proper rehearsal in the vagaries of life, the artist must match the paradoxical activities of his audience with similarly balanced structures of paradox in his art. The point is not to "correct" the confusion of reality by falsifying it in the still life of artifacts, but to diminish its effects in smaller, contingent realities, more selectively constructed but equally dynamic. This point is supported by Richard Gilman's insistence that in constructing a "new reality" the literary imagination must attend to what is accepted "without being compliant, to resist at the same time as it stays in connection, and to find in that tension the foundation of its would-be art."<sup>17</sup> The chief difficulty in accomplishing this balance, notes J. H. Matthews, is "how to implicate elements borrowed from ob-

jective reality in a new representation, formal enough in appearance to engage the attention of the reasoning mind, without at the same time submitting expression to regulation by rationalist thinking."<sup>18</sup>

To this end, the graphic configurations of Barthelme's intermedia fiction, even more than those of the "literary object," are particularly effective. Barthelme engages the reasoning mind's attention initially by selecting images of beings and objects that are concrete in detail and common in appearance. Pictures of tires, machines, buildings, ice cream cones, nuns, nudes, umbrellas, birds, babies, and a volcano are all on loan in Barthelme's collages. Using a process which Rene Magritte calls "resemblance,"<sup>19</sup> Barthelme then brings these shapes from the apparent world into unexpected proximity on the picture plane and overturns their predictability as artistic symbols for a world of reference beyond the picture plane. As José Pierre observes, perception thereafter "is a matter of speculating on fragments of pictures, already perfectly significative, which their more or less arbitrary meeting will place in a situation overflowing their original meaning."<sup>20</sup> The comparison of Promethean emblems discussed earlier illustrates how this rearrangement works. That the constitutive elements are quotidian, banal, and simplistic, therefore, is not incidental; they must be for the perceiver to invest his trust before engaging in the abstract, associative patterns of the larger design. Whereas

familiarity in the verbal collages is established only in glimpses of conventional narrative forms or fragments of language which are allowed to fall into expected models of syntax, in the intermedia compositions, familiarity is established as well through readily accepted visual models that resemble the everyday world. The composition's "resemblance" to the world deceives the viewer into thinking that he can successfully categorize and interpret his perceptual experience, while the tenuous relationships among the graphic and verbal fragments, varied, repeated, and retracted, counter his ordering activity with the experience of disorientation. As one Barthelme character reminds us, "Signs are signs, and ...some of them are lies" (CB, p. 109).

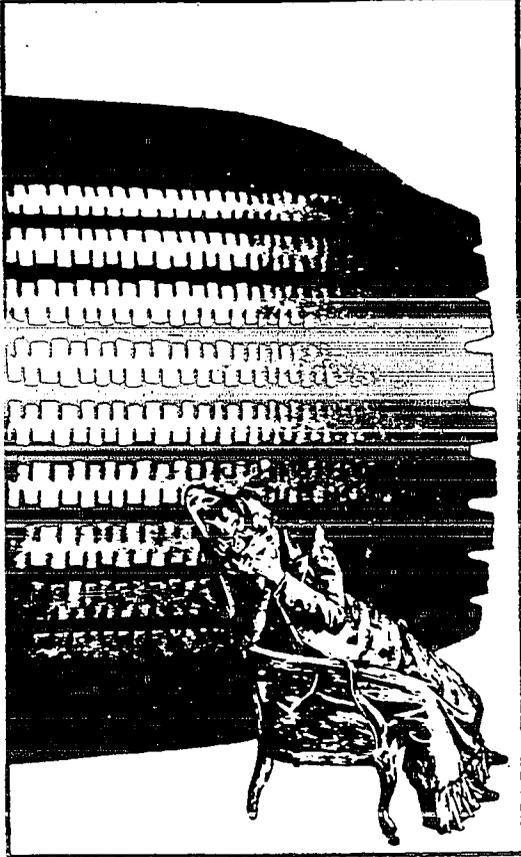
The play space of Barthelme's collage fiction, John Leland points out, is therefore located "between the promise and the lie of signs."<sup>21</sup> The discussion of Eugénie Grandet indicates how paradox, already at work among the unsettling "illustrations," corresponds to mutual occasions of disruption in the text. Conventionally, the plates in illustrated fiction dramatize critical points in plot sequence and must comply with a strict order dictated by the story. But as a study of the syntactical arrangement of Barthelme's plates will show, correspondence with the accompanying text is, to an extent, random. Fragments of image and text may be imaginatively gathered across the space of the fiction to construe an implied narrative, like the tenuous correspondences in the

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Promethean emblem of "Brain Damage"; yet the same elements may be recombined with the remnants of the composition to create quite different implied narratives. In "A Nation of Wheels," the disproportionately large image of a tire is inexplicably attached to both an ice cream cone and a horn. These incongruities are further complicated, though, by the ironic repetition of another picture. Superimposed on one more tire image is a picture of a distraught woman, a picture which Barthelme also uses in "Brain Damage" (Figures 8 and 9). Barthelme's pictorial arrangements, it seems, do not comply with any specific order, but cohere instead through patterns of "visual rhythms" established by repeating and varying familiar images within the assemblage. Similarly, the personages represented in the plates are as unstable as those voiced through the text. By convention, an imaged pose, frozen perhaps in an attitude of joy, despair, fear, or indifference, announces the presence of a character caught at some point on the gridwork of plot in the corresponding narrative. The emotive power of "body language" prompts the perceiver to reconstruct a "situation" or narrative event that may reasonably contain the image. The illustration of Eugénie about to discover in the unsealed letter that Charles loves someone else is just such an image. In Barthelme's intermedia fiction, though, what is signified by the pose of characters is often undermined by the flat tone of an ironic caption. (Plate: A woman menacingly bends over her sleeping spouse and prepares



9 From Donald Barthelme:  
"Brain Damage." 1970.  
(4th of six plates)



8 From Donald Barthelme: "A Nation of  
Wheels." 1970. (7th of twelve  
plates)

to hammer a spike into his ear. Caption: "Scenes of domestic life were put in the show" (S, p. 137). As we have already seen, a consequence of such unstable identity in the text renders the personage "I" an unreliable spokesman for either the legitimacy of his own presence or the vagaries of narrative perspective. The juxtaposition of figures in the collage plates, sometimes with flagrant disregard for the equivalent of proportion and perspective in the spatial plane, similarly refuses the perceiver a stabilizing anchor in the assemblages. Thus, while fragments of pictorial and narrative form summon a call to order in the composition, displacements across the mutually inhabited spaces of image and text answer that summons with disorientation.

The structures of Barthelme's intermedia collages are consequently formal enough to engage the attention of the "reasoning mind," without yielding more than momentarily to the interpreting habits of "rationalist thinking." In the paradoxical balance of order and disorder, Barthelme's audience lingers in its dynamic activity of "assent." Here, disorientation is presented as a game of problem-solving. If the participant can resolve for himself the contradictions which he perceives in the play space between the "promise and the lie of signs," he has made a successful move into the fiction; however, unlike the play in most games, his move does not pose a challenge for his opponent, but only another challenge for himself. In this way, the comic exchanges within and be-

tween the two sign systems--picture and text--moderate the discomforts of anxiety with the pleasures of play. As Allan Wilde concludes, though the "gaps and discontinuities" of contemporary experience persist, their breadth is diminished in the contingent world of Barthelme's art:

...no longer the familiar cause of horror or paralysis or suspensiveness, they are transformed rather...into the source of a continuing activity predicated on the need to choose, to confer meaning: to add to the humility of acceptance (even, or especially, of those gaps in which future meaning lies latent) the irreducibly human function of assent.<sup>22</sup>

Roused from his fear or lethargy of adventure, Barthelme's reader moves into the play space of "a world made new," where, in confronting the paradoxes of art, he learns to confront the world directly.

## 2. The Pictorial Paradox: "Assent" to Displaced Structures in Implied Narratives

Removed from their respective compositions, Barthelme's graphic assemblages illustrate how visual images create a metaphorical sign language for their accompanying texts. The correspondences established between the graphic and verbal structures in Barthelme's compositions, however, are unlike those familiar in conventional illustrated fiction. Rather than coordinate the two sign systems thematically, so that the messages of one reinforce and support the intended messages of the other (the method of Balzac's novel), Barthelme

coordinates the sign systems structurally, balancing the multiple paradoxes of the text with similar paradoxes among the plates. Despite the familiarity of its objects, a pictorial composition may contain its own structural paradox. If it is a representational picture (drawing, painting, film), it seems, unlike written language, to denote a "message without a code"; that is, its impression on the perceiver is at first immediate, direct, and stable.<sup>23</sup> Unless the artist has taken liberties to distort his subject, a picture of a dog, a child, a house, or a tree will be spontaneously accepted by the viewer as a truthful reproduction of a familiar reality, a faithful image of the "real" being or object. But the same analogical composition may also connote a variety of secondary messages as well. Even without the influences of a text, the pictorial message is shaped by the implicit influences of the medium (the artist's treatment of line, shade, texture, color) and by the way that the composition is "read." For instance, the pictorial components may be endowed with cultural values "connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs."<sup>24</sup> Working from this "stock of signs," the traditional fictionist and his illustrator attempt to control the paradoxical features of pictures. Typically, they select and order the composite elements of plates to repress all secondary meanings that do not contribute to the text's intended theme. Moreover, they control the perceiver's interpretation of the re-

lated image series in order that the sequence of pictures will have a cumulative effect, linking the chain of signifieds through the strict order of a corresponding plot. The edition of Eugénie Grandet alluded to in this chapter contains three illustrations, strictly ordered in sequence by captions taken from sentences in the text. The moments in plot which these captions designate follow the same strict order. The effects of the still shot and its meaning may be reversed, however, to create a desirable measure of disorientation. Barthelme's image of the weeping heroine is an ideal example of a stock character for illustrated fiction. Even without the text the audience expects that a character in the accompanying story is caught in the developing crises of plot. In "A Nation of Wheels," though, the emotion signified by the distraught figure is comically overturned by the ludicrous image of a tire; the credibility of the figure is further discredited when it appears once again as the fourth emblem in "Brain Damage."

Countering the repressive tactics that reduce options for meaning are a number of "connotation procedures," techniques which turn the structural paradox of mimetic images to the purposes of collage construction. Among the "connotation procedures" which generate disorientation in Barthelme's pictorial images are "trick effects," the "pose," and repetition with variation in the syntactical arrangement of pictures.<sup>25</sup> "Trick effects" are produced by a physical alteration in the pictorial image. The change may be subtly accomplished by super-

imposing a familiar figure in a space where its dimensions "fit," even if the implied circumstances are unexpectedly compromising (a favorite ploy of political propagandists); Bartheleme uses this device in a plate from "At the Tolstoy Museum." Using the image of Tolstoy that opens the fiction (Figure 10), he reduces the portrait considerably and superimposes it on a group portrait of Siberian hunters (Figure 15). "Trick effects" may also be used for a radical juxtaposition of images entirely dissociated in their usual contexts (i.e., the tire-on-horn image). The special interest of "trick effects," Roland Barthes explains, "is that they intervene without warning in the plane of denotation; they utilize the special credibility of the photograph"<sup>26</sup> and thus overturn the predicted value of the traditional stock of signs.

The "pose," on the other hand, conveys meaning through a figure's look, gesture, and stance or through the selection and arrangement of objects that commonly induce particular associations. One picture from "At the Tolstoy Museum," for example, plays upon the associations of a posed portrait of "Tolstoy as a youth" (Figure 13). In the picture the youth is well dressed, from polished boots to cravat at his throat. Firmly clutched in his right hand is a wine glass, while an open book dangles from his left hand. The message of the pose, generally interpreted, is that the youth is a young scholar of some worth. A subtle touch, however, is the oversized, loose-fitting coat or vest which the youth wears; the

apparel may be the style of the period, but the suggestion in this context is that the young arrogant is destined to grow into his "greatcoat." The visual pun already at work here is enhanced when the pose of the picture is "read" in syntactical arrangement with another plate, one which precedes the portrait of the youth and reverses the order of association. The earlier plate features the writer's coat as a museum artifact of monumental size, equal in height and breadth to the magnitude of Tolstoy the elder. In the disordered arrangement, the posed portrait of Tolstoy as a youth paradoxically foreshadows the earlier pose of the writer's "great coat." More often, though, images in Barthelme's intermedia collages are not thus reinforcing in the assemblage as a whole. In addition, Barthelme usually plays against the clarity and puns of such graphic messages by disrupting his audience's expectations that the accompanying text will convey in detail a narrative implied by the posed figures and objects in the picture. The text in Barthelme's intermedia compositions either has little or no correspondence to the picture, or, like the text for the Promethean emblem, undermines the graphic message with a comic interpretation. Furthermore, though Barthelme often repeats images in a sequence, the associations which they induce vary when the familiar images are unexpectedly combined. Like the special effects of "word-beings" and word-objects in Barthelme's "literary object," the "connotation procedures" work to release pictorial images from their predicted categories of order and meaning.



10 From Donald Barthelme: "At the Tolstoy Museum."  
1970 rpt. (1st of nine plates)



11 From Donald Barthelme: "At the Tolstoy Museum."  
1970 rpt. (2nd of nine plates)



Tolstoy's coat

- 12 From Donald Barthelme:  
 "At the Tolstoy Museum."  
 1970 rpt. (3rd of nine  
 plates)



Tolstoy as a youth

- 13 From Donald Barthelme:  
 "At the Tolstoy Museum."  
 1970 rpt. (4th of nine  
 plates)



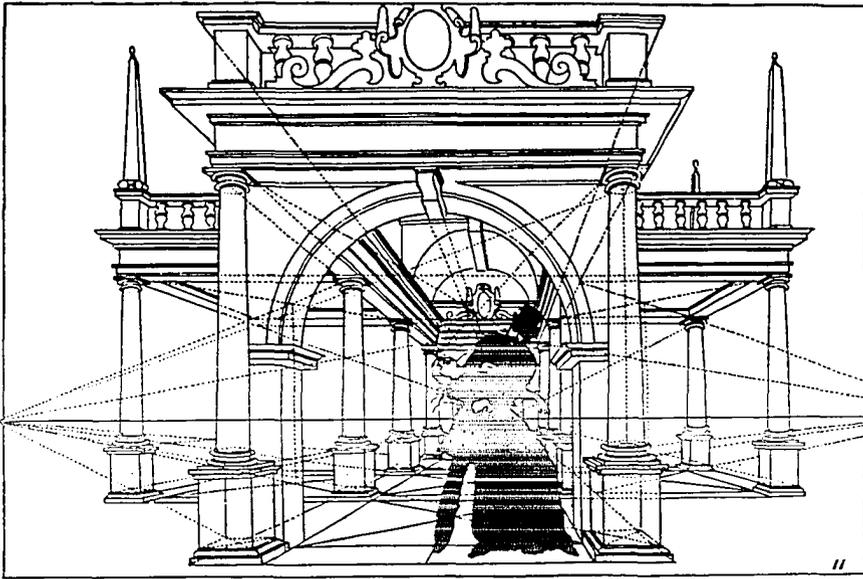
14 From Donald Barthelme:  
"At the Tolstoy Museum."  
1970 rpt. (5th of nine  
plates)

At Starogladkovskaya,  
about 1852



Tiger hunt, Siberia

15 From Donald Barthelme:  
"At the Tolstoy Museum."  
1970 rpt. (6th of nine  
plates)



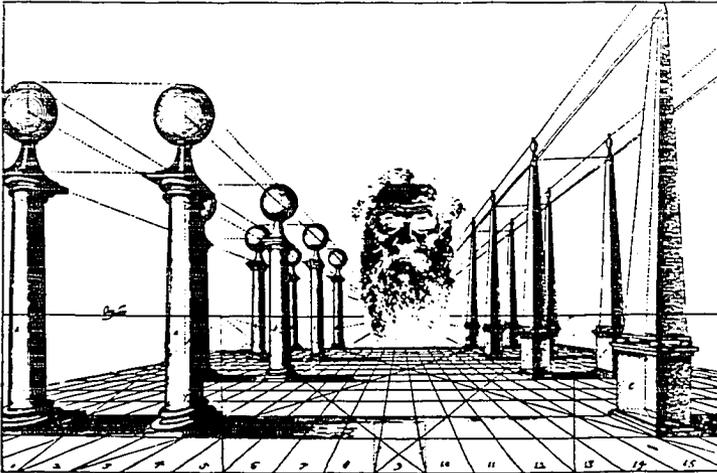
The Anna-Vronsky Pavilion

16 From Donald Barthelme: "At the Tolstoy Museum." 1970 rpt.  
(7th of nine plates)



At the disaster (arrow indicates Tolstoy)

- 17 From Donald Barthelme: "At the Tolstoy Museum."  
1970 rpt. (8th of nine plates)



Museum plaza with monumental head (Closed Mondays)

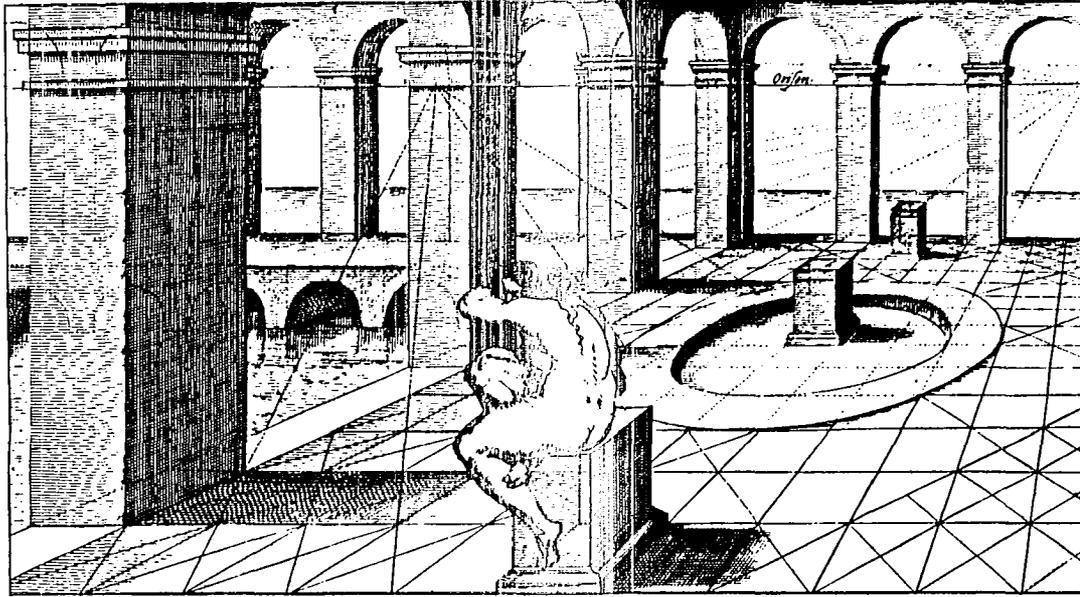
- 18 From Donald Barthelme: "At the Tolstoy Museum."  
1970 rpt. (9th of nine plates)

"Connotation procedures" effect displacements of graphically implied perspective, proportion, character, and plot, similar to the displacements of narrative structure in Barthelme's texts. Barthelme frequently uses "trick effects" in his intermedia compositions to counter the illusions of systematic orders and, like other collagists, to heighten "the impression of reality as dislocated, forced to participate in breaking its own rules; for instance, when laws of proportion and perspective are flouted."<sup>27</sup> Included in "At the Tolstoy Museum" and "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" are several plates which adapt eighteenth-century perspective drawings to the purposes of Barthelme's collages. Each drawing is grounded in the restrictive policies of the perspective artist who attempts to stabilize the illusion of appearances in a network of lines. To the naked eye, that part of the world represented in the picture is perfectly ordered, relinquished as it is to the mathematical ideals of Pythagorean laws. No problem here. No need for further categorizing. The perceiver's impressions are quickly stabilized on the gridwork of the drawing, and his need for order insulated. Nevertheless, the picture is flawed. In its isolation, it is cold, mechanical, and static, a representation of reality as deceptive as magic's grand illusions. The lie is exposed when another image is unexpectedly superimposed on the picture plane.

Barthelme intrudes upon the benign calm of his Romanesque structures by deftly pasting figures evocative of mystery and

suspense at the strategic center (fore or aft) of the picture plane. "At the Tolstoy Museum" incorporates two such drawings into its fiction (Figures 16 and 18). Struggling front and center in one is a distressed damsel, clutched in an embrace, while in the last plate of the fiction is an image in negative of the monolithic portraits of Tolstoy hung at the entrance to the fiction. In the latter, the image of Tolstoy is suspended imperiously at the horizon where the disappearing lines of perspective converge. Similarly altered is one of the three perspective drawings in "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" (Figure 19). Seated at the center of the structure is a half-turned nude, peering with mystery and suspicion over the arm that partially shields her face. Though the figures in each of these plates "fit" the picture plane proportionately, their presence radically alters the way that the systematic drawings are "read." After another image is superimposed on the drawing, the pictures become problematic, for the otherwise static images now seem paradoxically to harbor mysteries and imply fictions which the perceiver is challenged to reconstruct.

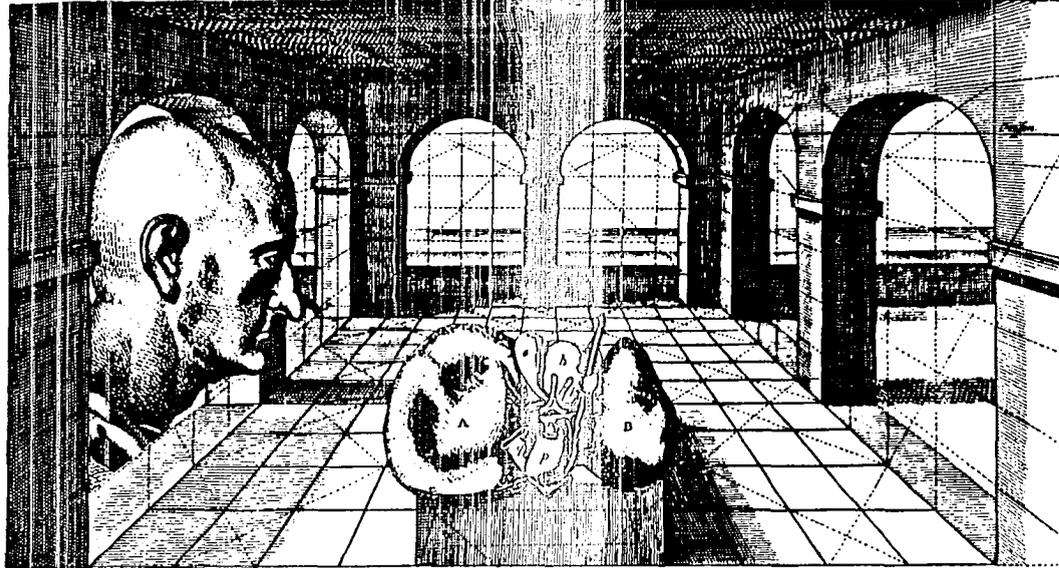
The insulating perspectives of architectural drawings are further disrupted in another plate from "Flight," one in which the contradictions of content and technique are especially disorienting (Figure 20). While Barthelme adheres to the guidelines of the perspective artist, he takes liberties with laws of proportion. Unlike the other pictures--images of



Then, the Sulking Lady was obtained. She showed us her back. That was the way she felt. She had always felt that way, she said. She had felt that way since she was four years old.

19 From Donald Barthelme: "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace."  
1972 rpt. (3rd of eleven plates)

open-air pavilions and ambulatories--this plate contains an elaborate line drawing of an interior structure with vaulted openings on each of the three sides that are visible from the viewer's point of perspective somewhere inside the architecture. Superimposed on the drawing are two images, an anatomical study of a human liver, its parts lettered for precise identification, and the side view of a human head, its unemotional features rendered with classical simplicity. Countering the cold, mechanical style of the drawing's image, however, is the seemingly flagrant disregard for proportion. The liver study, though centered at the foreground of the structure, is disturbingly large and incongruous with the rest of the picture. Even more disturbing is the monumental head thrust through one of the vaulted openings, its gaze directed at the liver. The latter image recalls one of the many displaced perspectives of the narrator's father in "Views of My Father Weeping": "My father thrusts his hand through a window of the doll's house. His hand knocks over the doll's chair, knocks over the doll's chest of drawers, knocks over the doll's bed" (CL, p. 11). In "Views," Oedipal concerns prompt the disproportionately large image of the father; his disorienting presence is heightened and exaggerated by the narrator's feelings of remorse and guilt. The technique, similar to Magritte's exaggeration of objective images in "Personal Values" (1952), is repeated in the plate from "Flight." The irrational feelings which inform Barthelme's



I put my father in the show, with his cold eyes. His segment  
was called, My Father Concerned About His Liver.

20 From Donald Barthelme: "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace."  
1972 rpt. (8th of eleven plates)

disproportionately large images are confirmed in the caption that accompanies the picture: "I put my father in the show, with his cold eyes. His segment was called, My Father Concerned About His Liver" (S, p. 136). The static precision of systematic orders, graphically illustrated in the architectural drawings, is here overturned by the dynamic perspectives of "being" in the world and the hint of contingent interior worlds that cannot be surrendered to reason.

"Trick effects" are often used intermittently or combined with other "connotation procedures" in Barthelme's pictorial collages. Combined with the "pose," for instance, the meaning conveyed by a figure's gesture in one part of a plate may be contradicted by the attitude of a superimposed figure in another area of the picture. The balance in paradox is comparable to that in Barthelme's modified perspective drawings. The individual images are sufficiently identifiable in isolation to assure a meaningful reading or interpretation, but in their collage format they unexpectedly field numerous possibilities for reconstruction. The "pose" may therefore be considered an unreliable index to character in either the accompanying text or in an implied narrative. In the Promethean collage from "Brain Damage," the "trick effects" are so subtly executed that the incongruous pose of one of its figures may at a glance go unnoticed. The greater part of the plate is given to an illustration of the shackled Prometheus, straining atop his cliff against the onslaught of a

ravenous eagle, destined to tear his flesh and feed on his liver. Aiding Prometheus in his struggle with fate are the two feminine figures (the daughters of Oceanus, perhaps); one has already fallen in an agonized swoon to the rock at Prometheus' feet. As previous discussion suggests, the story which the picture illustrates is familiar enough, and were it not for another figure superimposed in the left-hand corner of the plate, the picture's interpretation would not be questioned. But the line of the composition directs the viewer's eyes from the eagle's wing at the top of the plate, down Prometheus' torso, diagonally across the fallen maiden, and then halts on the figure of a youth at the base of the truncated cliff. A member of that race for whom Prometheus risked all, the manchild sits casually on a rock, inspecting the sole of his foot, indifferent to the climactic scene just above him. At this point, the perceiver's initial categories of meaning collapse, since not all the posed figures "fit" the story implied by the primary image. The import of the collage is clear, however, if the reader has already encountered mock heroics against another eagle in "The Glass Mountain" or Barthelme's fractured version of the fairy tale in Snow White. Encoded in the juxtaposition of images is an awareness that the classic myth is no longer operative; the heroics of Prometheus, like those of the archetypal figures of "Snow White," are discredited through a mocking humanization of the characters. In reconstructing the secondary

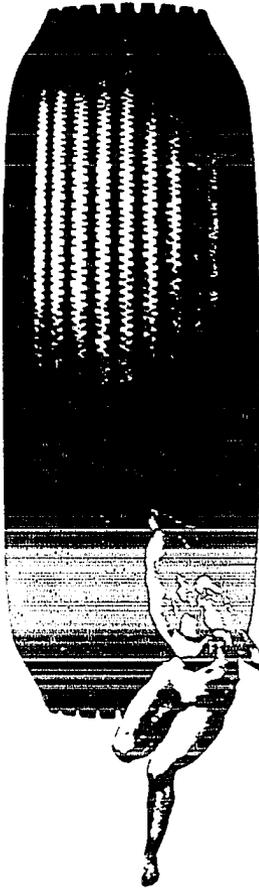
messages of the image, then, the perceiver is manipulated by the paradoxes of "pose" and "trick effects" to reject the implied narrative initially denoted in the familiar scene.

The manipulative value of "trick effects" and the "pose" are particularly significant, however, when they are used to enhance paradoxical structures created in the fiction's syntactical arrangement of plates. It is chiefly through these pictorial designs that the perceiver's "assent" to disorder is engaged in the ongoing, dynamic reconstruction of implied narratives. Rather than expand one narrative through a unified sequence of pictures, in the way that plot develops story through a sequence of episodes, the arrangement of graphic images manifests a network of regressions, retractions, and cross-references to equal those found among the verbal structures of the text. These variations generate a disorienting play among the fiction's pictorial messages; yet paradoxically the images sustain their capacity to fulfill the perceiver's need for order. The familiarity which reinforces this need is established in the assemblage as a whole through the repetition of images. Visual rhythms, created by the "regular recurrence of identical or similar features within a spatial or temporal field,"<sup>28</sup> offer a surrogate assurance of continuity, even while the same features contradict one another as signs. The ironic effects of these paradoxical structures are clearly illustrated in "A Nation of Wheels," an intermedia composition in which nine of the

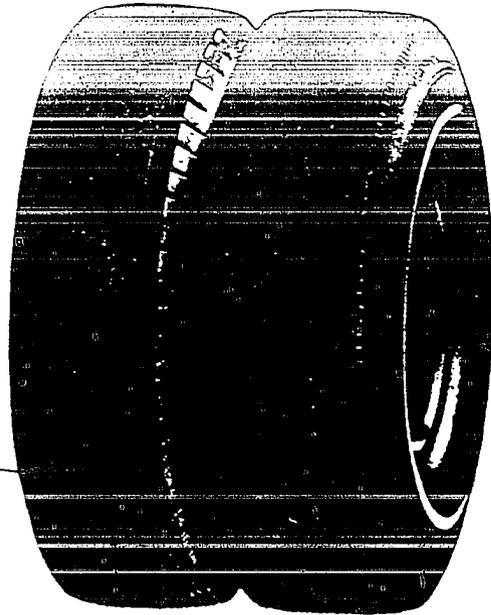
twelve plates repeat the image of a tire. By superimposing the tire image with a variety of incongruously posed and proportioned beings and objects--the swooning heroine, a cityscape, the horn and cone--the pictorial arrangement induces the perceiver to fantasize narratives, even without the help of title or text. The activity of playing with possible reconstructions is pleasurable, moreover, since the dynamic variations are typically comic in their exchanges.

At least half of the plates in the composition may be generally reconstructed as exaggerated metaphors for rampant technology. The first plate sets the tone for the rest of the assemblage (Figure 21). A picture of an upright tire--a static image in itself--is endowed with monstrous implications by superimposing a much smaller, nude woman in terrorized flight at the foreground of the collage. The satiric suggestion of science out of control is reinforced in the fifth plate of the fiction, where an enormous tire is seen looming over a row of buildings, threatening to crush everything in its path. The special features of the plate recall, of course, the "trick effects" in science fiction films that allow tarantulas, apes, and prehistoric dinosaurs to assume mammoth proportions and terrorize entire cities. On the other hand, in several other plates in "A Nation of Wheels," the "pose" of figures is especially useful for reinforcing the syntactical relationship of repeated images. Returning to the first plate, the perceiver may see the nude's pose,

rather than the monstrous implications of the tire, to be the key in reconstructing the graphic messages. The gestures and stances of figures in other plates, usually superimposed on a tire's image, seem then to reflect the attitudes of a nation overrun by wheels. In the seventh plate is the familiar Victorian figure. Collapsed in a chair with head in hands, she apparently weeps in despair. Interestingly, the tire in this picture is on its side and appears to be resting, like a cat that studies its cornered prey. Contrasting with the distraught heroine, however, is a figure in the next plate of the pictorial arrangement (Figure 22). Epée in hand, the figure gallantly lunges at two upright tires, as if to run them through right between the treads. Another pair of plates is similarly contrasted, and the effect, once more without the influences of text, is comic. In the third plate of the assemblage is a man, legs apart in an authoritative stance. Apparently alarmed by the invading tires seen in other pictures of the fiction, he sounds a hunting horn to rally the nation in defense. But the urgency conveyed in this plate is undermined in the next, where a similarly dressed man, standing at ease with legs together, plays a musical horn; the bell of the horn is a tire (Figure 7). Implied narratives may in this way be reconstructed by working with the plates in various combinations, each of which contains at least one element that may be cross-referenced with another configuration. The repeated images, though they sustain no



21 From Donald Barthelme:  
"A Nation of Wheels."  
1970. (1st of twelve  
plates)



22 From Donald Barthelme: "A Nation of Wheels." 1970.  
(8th of twelve plates)

consistent meaning as signs in a related sequence, nevertheless induce a sense of pattern and order.

The patterns of repetition, highly visible in "A Nation of Wheels," are not random occurrence in Barthelme's inter-media compositions. On the contrary, visual rhythms seem to be as carefully controlled as the patterns of his verbal structures, whose repetition and variations are timed and placed for optimum effects. As the graphic assemblage in "A Nation of Wheels" shows, the variously posed images are often repeated in pairs. Intervening fragments then disrupt the configurations and initiate new clusters of associations before a familiar element recurs. The pattern is almost identical to the sort of timing, placement, and hyperbole that give the spatial arrangements of Barthelme's verbal structures their comic rhythms. The following excerpt from "The Glass Mountain" illustrates this syntactical construct:

64. My acquaintances moved among the fallen knights.
65. My acquaintances moved among the fallen knights, collecting rings, wallets, pocket watches, ladies' favors.
66. "Calm reigns in the country, thanks to the confident wisdom of everyone." (M. Pompidou)
67. The golden castle is guarded by a lean-headed eagle with blazing rubies for eyes.
68. I unstuck the lefthand plumber's friend, wondering if--
69. My acquaintances were prising out the gold teeth of not-yet-dead knights.
70. In the streets were people concealing their calm behind a façade of vague dread.

(CL, pp. 62-63)

Sentences 64 and 65 are paired, with the repeated element varied in the second sentence so that its tone mocks that of the first; sentences 66 and 70 are similarly repeated. Yet at the same time, sentences 66 through 68 disrupt the first pattern with references to other loci of perspective--the eagle, the knight "stuck" to the mountain, the people in the streets--frequently repeated in the story's text. But with the ludicrous exaggerations of sentence 69, comic only in its interplay with sentences 64 and 65, the earlier configuration and its familiar elements are unexpectedly thrust back into focus. The recurrence of the familiar feature is startling, and the core sentence momentarily illuminated before the patterns shift their perspective once more.

Barthelme's reader may discover a similar pattern of visual rhythms at work in a number of the graphic assemblages. What has been recognized in the collage format of the "literary object" as a "fugal continuity," through which "identifiable fragments ceaselessly reappear," is here complemented by a similar continuity in the arrangement of pictures. In fact, the primary graphic images in "At the Tolstoy Museum" occur at precisely the same intervals as the varied core sentence in the excerpt from "The Glass Mountain," with comparable emphasis on the third instance. The fiction opens with a pair of identical portraits of Tolstoy, whose awesome, disembodied countenance looms omnipotently, back-to-back, on either side of one page (Figures 10 and 11). The second pic-

ture is varied, however, by the comically incongruous juxtaposition of a squat Napoleonic figure in the left-hand corner of the plate (the same site of incongruity as in the Promethean collage). The next three plates--a pair of which contains the "great coat" pun--then shift the focus of perspective away from the portraits to other images significant in the collage assemblage. Similar to the repetitive elements in "The Glass Mountain," these images too may be cross-referenced with the text, with each other, or with the collage plates that follow to shape a number of simultaneous configurations. Quite unexpectedly, the Tolstoy portrait then reappears in the sixth plate, where its size is surprisingly diminished, and the head, through "trick effects," is superimposed on a body that is equal in proportion to the other figures in a group portrait of tiger hunters in Siberia. The "message" of the first two portraits is thus varied and contradicted, and the familiar syntactical pattern (interval 1-2-6) is completed.

The visual rhythms in this syntactical arrangement of "Tolstoy" plates, finally, are reinforced for the reader by unexpected repetition and variation in the sizes of pictorial images and by careful manipulation of value, intensity, and volume within the monochromatic scheme. As in "Views of My Father Weeping" and "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," proportion is once more determined by the relative importance of the objects being scrutinized. The portraits of Tolstoy--

not intended to be replicas of the man--have no "real" counterpart but instead are imbued with the power of myth. The effect of omnipotence and venerability is achieved through stark counterplay of light and dark, with radiance highlighting the full, grayed beard and furrowed brow. In addition, the suspension of the image on a black background creates an otherworldly effect, the whole in marked contrast to the blank whiteness of the adjoining page. The hyperbole of this initial graphic statement is then humorously enhanced in the third plate by the oversized relic of Tolstoy's coat and in the second plate by the tiny Napoleonic figure, who appears to be studying the awesome visage of a man that dwarfs his own importance. The reader too feels dwarfed, since the eyes that greet him at the entrance to fiction and museum appear to follow his tour through the interior structures and usher him out at the exit, where Tolstoy's countenance appropriately appears in negative as museum and fiction are closed.

Within the graphic assemblages, therefore, "pose," "trick effects," and variation of repeated images work chiefly to undermine thematic readings of Barthelme's collage plates, while visual rhythms counter the disorienting influence of these techniques with structural coherency. Laws of proportion and perspective may be flouted and characteristic portraits contradicted to belie the illusions of limited viewpoints, yet the assemblage as a whole is patterned in such a way that the perceiver willingly assents to its ongoing and

experiential reconstruction. Though the plates themselves imply multiple possibilities for accompanying narratives, they are complemented and supported by further possibilities in the texts.

### 3. The Composite: "Assent" in the Balance of Intermedia Structures

In illustrated fiction, the separate features of the composite plate conventionally form a reliable correspondence to one another: the text resolves any questions raised by the generally connoted meaning of the plates; the plates, in turn, bring into focus specific appearances or events (the figure posed at a critical narrative point) described at length in the text; while a caption freezes the moment of correspondence with a terse statement firmly linking the image to its temporal site in the story. Even without "trick effects," the constitutive elements of a picture may suggest a number of associations, but if the correspondence between image and text is intended to be the direct, both text and caption work to repress all but the preconceived message of the illustration. In contrast, Barthelme's intermedia fiction proffers neither a reliable correspondence between image and text nor a consistent frame of reference for the work as a whole. The value of "connotation procedures," in fact, is to release images from predicted meanings by a lack of correspondence or a disrupted scheme of reference that is both surprising and fortuitously liberating. This radical scheme

is furthered, moreover, by the subversive messages of captions. Countering the extravagances of pose or event, the legend may undermine its picture with a tone of nonchalance, or it may be dislocated in the text with inconsequent, bold-faced headlines (CROWD NOISES MURMURING MURMURING YAWNING). Such titles, Matthews notes, never fix correspondences between image and text, but serve instead to aggravate the realist "by accentuating the discrepancy between what the habitual has led him to expect and what collage technique has enabled the artist to show."<sup>29</sup> Taken together, then, the major features of the intermedia composition may be reconstructed to shape an object which shares, rather than orders or negates, the disorienting mobility of the world.

Barthelme's intermedia compositions may be located on three levels of complexity according to the degree of disorientation generated within and among the primary structures of each composite work. Gathered at the first level are pieces that exhibit pictures as mere accessory to the text. Mustering but a casual departure from the conventional use of plates in illustrated fiction, these pieces claim little more than peripheral importance to the discussion at hand. At the second level, however, the graphic assemblages not only are presented in full complement to, but may even dominate the text. Within the works that comprise this group, the increased level of disorientation is typically abated in one or a combination of three ways. If the imagery of the

graphic assemblage offers little continuity (no implied narrative is apparent), the text, though perhaps fragmented and reduced to a fretwork of captions, tends to be comparatively stable and continuous; contrarily, if the configurations and digressions of verbal structures are complex, continuity among the plates is enhanced with strong patterns of visual rhythms; however, if collage structures are used comprehensively in the fiction, the graphic and verbal structures cohere through a complex interplay of their fragments in ironic correspondences of image and text. This interplay of graphic and verbal structures is characteristic at the third level of complexity also. Yet here neither "visual rhythms" nor narrative "situation" momentarily stabilizes the composition's hermetic illusions. Disorientation is abated instead through subtle associations of "word-beings" and word-objects as they are variously combined with visual counterparts. The range of complexity among the intermedia works is therefore keyed to the extent that collage construction disrupts both visual and narrative forms.

The three compositions in which pictures are included as accessory to the text appear in Guilty Pleasures. In these works, pictures support the little puns and surprises of a comparatively stable and continuous text, but are not necessary to sustain its coherency. The pictures simply occasion more possibilities for deflating expectations or contradicting them momentarily. In "The Photographs," for in-

stance, only two pictures are used, and their strict correspondence to the unclimactic narrative diminishes expectations for mystery and suspense. A piece of "bastard reportage" on the incidental photographing of the human soul, "The Photographs" opens with the two images, presumably different views of the same amorphous object. The text which follows is chiefly a deadpan dialogue between two scientists, somewhat deflated by the unethereal look of the soul; the correspondence between image and text, explicit to a fault, is equally deflating:

"Looks rather like a frying pan"... "A heavily, uh, corroded frying pan. You see that handle sort of part, over to the right"... "like something someone's been frying eggs and kidneys and God knows what all in for just ages and ages..."  
(GP, p. 155)

In the cumulative impressions of the joint narrators (only the familiar repetition of the core sentence has been lifted here), the mystery of the soul is lost in its quotidian analogue, and the blatant descriptions confirm, rather than transcend or contradict, what the reader has already disappointingly perceived for himself. In contrast to the disorienting structures of more complex intermedia works, "The Photographs" plays upon expected correspondences in order to complement levelled contours of plot and (like some of Ernst's collages) to reduce to banality the pictures' potential for sensationalism.

The other two compositions which use pictures as accessory to the text are "Eugénie Grandet" and "That Cosmopolitan Girl." In these works, image and text correspond through moments of tension, rather than reinforcement, when the message of one or the other is overturned in the double entendre of pun. For example, the centerplate of "That Cosmopolitan Girl" (Ingres' portrait of Mademoiselle Rivière) is the picture of a demure coquette of urbane presence and fastidious style. The portrait, however, is an incongruous image for either the provocative beauty who typically graces Cosmo's cover or the disgruntled feminist who pens the textual letter of complaint.

Of course the next day when Stephen picked me up for dinner at Vuitton, looking hysterically handsome in his Vuitton coveralls, I was a shade taken aback when he literally demanded that I pay for the cab. (He always used to do little things like that as a matter of course!) Well, I paid cheerfully, because I have this magazine I read that teaches me how to be natural and healthy and resilient, but then when we got out of the cab he loaded this immense steamer trunk on my back. I said, "Stephen, what are you doing?" He said, "Just get it inside, dollbaby." Well, I don't know if you've ever marched into Vuitton with a Vuitton steamer trunk on your back, huffing and puffing and bent half double, but I can tell you this, it makes you feel kind of weird. But I coped--I just pretended I was some kind of super-soigné woman mover! (It's silly to preserve the old clichés about roles and such when naturalness and freedom and health are so much better but this time I did throw my back out! [GP, pp. 15-167]).

Even more effective than the incongruities of Mademoiselle Rivière and the ingenue of "That Cosmopolitan Girl" are the

visual puns in "Eugénie Grandet." The impression of the three pictures--the wobbly contour of a child's hand, the block print of Eugénie with a ball, and the nondescript photograph of Charles--are supported by conventional terse captions (i.e., "A photograph of Charles in the Indies"). Yet the textual statement which precedes the first picture ("A great many people are interested in the question: Who will obtain Eugénie Grandet's hand?" [*GP*, p. 217]) humorously plays against the image of the childish heroine's drawing. The "photograph" of the man in the last plate is similarly perplexing, since Charles is fictitious and since the man's expression reveals nothing of the indiscreet scoundrel of the accompanying narrative. These moments of contradiction, like the labored correspondences in "The Photographs," contribute to the effect of humor; nevertheless, the compositions do not rely on the play of interior structures for their coherency or sense of order.

Despite their intermedia features, "Eugénie Grandet" and "That Cosmopolitan Girl" belong more appropriately to Barthelme's parodies. In form, tone, and style, each clearly mocks a familiar text or type of text (Balzac's portrait of a fate-forsaken heroine, the testimonial letter-as-advertisement) and works chiefly in resistance to a set of expectations exterior to the parody. Moreover, none of the three compositions in this group use collage construction within the plates themselves. Except for the fragmented form of "Eugénie

Grandet"--purposefully abbreviated to parody the diminutive book digest form of a novel-length work--neither the plates nor their texts show the influence of the collage process significant to intermedia compositions at more sophisticated levels of construction. This discrepancy is clear with a consideration of the disorienting collage structures in works at the second level.

In the intermedia compositions at the second level, plates are used in full complement to the texts and may dominate the spatial layout of the work; yet here the structures of paradox are well balanced. As disorientation is generated within one of the primary structures, it is reciprocated with a sense of order in another. In three of the works at this level--"The Expedition," "The Dassaud Prize," "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace"--the plates taken together shape a discontinuous assemblage. Gathered from a variety of sources, the pictures imply no temporal arrangement, and in the first two, the spatial patterns of visual rhythms are all but negligible. Nevertheless, the disparate fragments are tenuously held by a stable yet skeletal narrative, reduced in "The Expedition" and "The Dassaud Prize" to a fretwork of terse captions. The narrative's playful ordering illustrates how even the eclectic objects of the graphic collage may be construed to have at least a transient relationship in the contingent worlds of fiction.

The miscellany of plates in "The Expedition" generates disorientation from several sources. First, though the assem-

blage is intended to resemble a photograph album, only half of the fourteen images typify the banal content of such mementos. The other half, roughly counted, seem to be suspenseful illustrations--rousing brawls, profound scientific discoveries, disasters at sea--from thickly plotted novels. Further belying their accepted poses as "photographs," some features of the pictures are allowed to protrude beyond their frames into the space of the page or even the space of another picture (Figure 23). In addition, the narrative itself is spatially dislocated in unexpected areas. The reader must therefore turn the book and allow his eyes to follow the lines of the graphic assemblages in order to find the successive lines of the text. These disorienting effects are minimized, however, in the brief but progressive captions that correspond to the pictures in a sustained sequence of contradiction and understatement. Two pictures, for instance, illustrate disastrous collisions at sea (Figures 24 and 25). The understated caption of the first picture--"Not our fault!" (GP, p. 119)--is comically reinforced in the caption of the second--"It became apparent that the navigator, Lieutenant Petrie, was less than competent. He was replaced" (GP, p. 120). The pictures are accompanied, moreover, by a schematic design of the narrative as a whole, graphically "plotted" by the album's assembler in a chart of the expedition's zigzag course. Finally, despite the disorienting spatial arrangement, frequent temporal transitions ("We mustered on May 9, 1873..."; "Just before we sailed..."; "After

Colonel Goudy

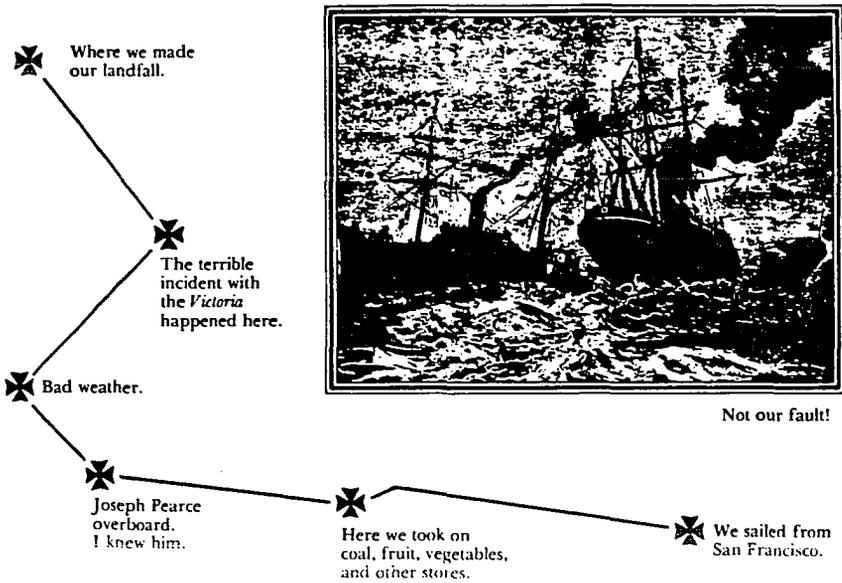


Major MacDennis  
—a good man.  
He later died on  
the ice.

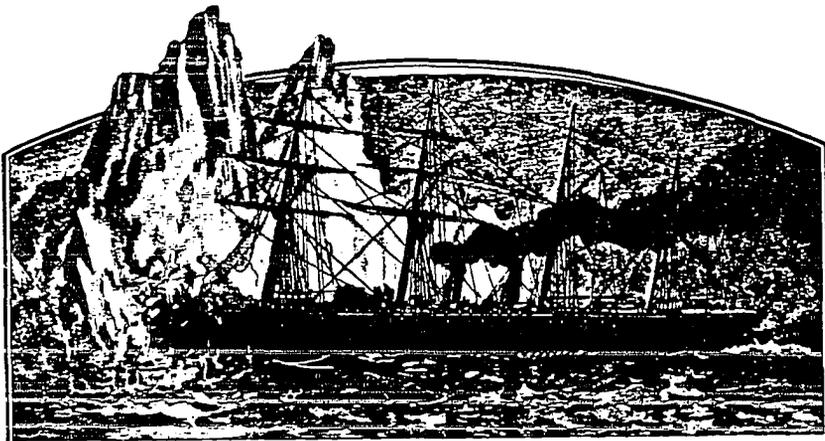


This was fabricated specially for the expedition.

23 From Donald Barthelme: "The Expedition." 1972.  
(2nd, 3rd, and 4th of fourteen pictures)



24 From Donald Barthelme: "The Expedition." 1972.  
(7th of fourteen pictures)



*It became apparent that the navigator, Lieutenant Petrie, was less than competent. He was replaced.*

25 From Donald Barthelme: "The Expedition." 1972.  
(8th of fourteen pictures)

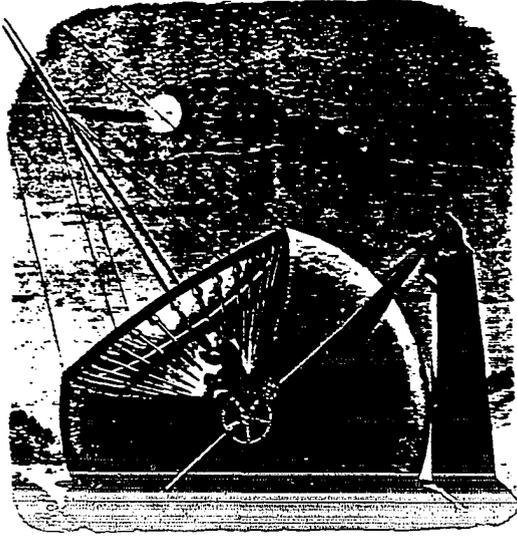
we left the ship...." (GP, pp. 115, 118, 1217) move the reader from the beginning to the end of the expedition with a modicum of effort. In this comparatively simple design, then, the paradoxical structures of image and text are balanced.

The collage structures in "The Dassaud Prize"<sup>30</sup> bridge the minimal design of "The Expedition" with the more elaborate patterns of "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace." Both "The Dassaud Prize" and "Flight" abate the disorienting variety of their pictures with a comprehensive narrative "situation"--the general area of coherency common to the "literary object"--yet the textual and pictorial structures of the respective works show evidence of graduated complexity. In "The Dassaud Prize," for instance, the text is once again dislocated to the conventional site of captions, but it lacks the stabilizing transitions that give "The Expedition" its sequential design. Though the first and last captions are conventionally clearcut, the middle of the work assumes the mobile patterns of collage. The interior plates with captions--still shots of the "brave and gifted investigators" competing in a search for God--are spatially arranged on the successive pages with no further regard to chronology. The pictorial designs are also more complex; given the expanse of a magazine layout, each page of "The Dassaud Prize" is a collage in itself with several images juxtaposed in an asymmetrical arrangement. On the successive pages, moreover, the designs are gradually

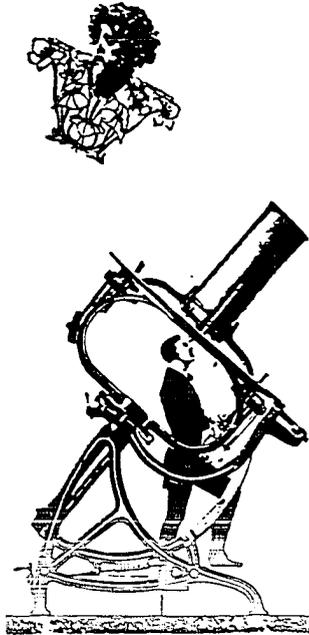
elaborated: while the five images on the first page are slightly separated, five of the seven images on the last page are superimposed in a disorienting and incongruous scheme (Figures 26 and 27). Interestingly, however, the disorientation is moderated here by the only repetitive visual pattern in the work, a god-like image superimposed somewhere on every page of the composition (once on each of the first three pages, four times on the last page). Despite the increased complexity of the collage design, therefore, a balance, if not a strong correspondence, is maintained between the paradoxical structures of image and text.

The textual structures of "Flight," are significantly more complex than those of the other two compositions in this group, yet they still give a sense of coherency to the variety of content and technique in the graphic assemblages. The "situation" which imaginatively embraces such incongruous images as the "amazing Numbered Man," the "Sulking Lady," the "Father Concerned About His Liver," an explosion, a volcano, a miscellany of "babies, boobies, sillies, simps," is, to use the original title, "The Show." The "show" is a fantasy of escape for a public bored with the triviality of la vie quotidienne; it is an arena of stunts and surprises staged by artists expected to "produce a new sensation every season." Under the tent of this fantasy, the menagerie of images is both displayed and contained. The audience is made to sit still, moreover, by the stabilizing commentary that announces

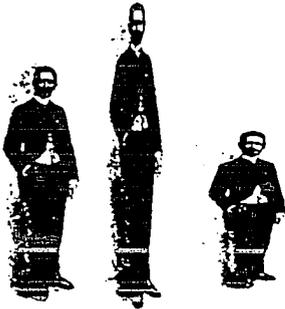
# THE DASSAUD PRIZE



As a preliminary to the Paris World Exhibition of 1900, the firm of Dassaud Frères, instrument-makers, sponsored a grand scientific competition with a prize of 50,000 francs. Object: to find—that is to say, locate in time and space—God. A number of brave and gifted investigators set immediately to work.



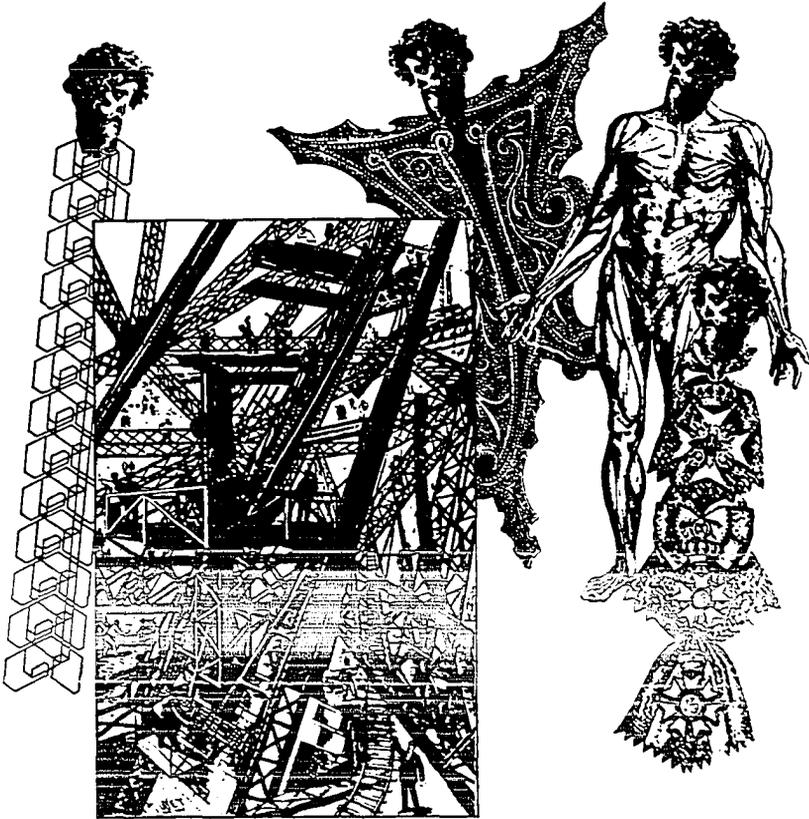
The development of superior telescopes was an obvious first step. The apparatuses of Professors Cassegrain and Falconetti kept the Dassaud (and other) workmen late at their benches.



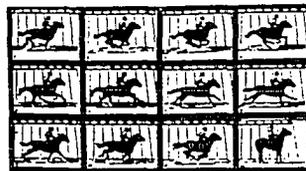
The Dassaud brothers: (l-r) Antoine, Pierre, and Hercule, sponsors of the Competition.



Many in the scientific community ignored the Prize and continued to occupy themselves with purely secular pursuits.



Like that other Tower, with which it was frequently compared, the giant construction of M. Eiffel was both thinkable and unthinkable—what could this madman have in mind? It was known that he bought his slide rules at Dassaud's.



The Dassaud Prize, perhaps predictably, was never awarded. But can any initiative which produced such advances as the Photographic Rifle and Horse Stopper of M. Zieff be judged a failure? It is for the ages to decide.

each sensation. The text which opens the fiction opens the show also; the first several commentaries and a few thereafter, though highly imaginative in content, correspond in explicit detail to their accompanying images; and temporal progression, established in the first few descriptions, is recalled with occasional transition. Aside from these moments of stability, however, the reader is led into textual areas where meaning or purpose is shaded in contradiction and uncertainty.

The text is intermittently disorienting when temporal transitions that hinge fragments in the first part of the composition gradually dissipate in catalogues, digressions, or ellipses. As the text is expanded, detail corresponding to images blurs; captions appear and dissolve in a flow of associations. Spatially balanced on one page, for instance, is a three-part text and the image of a ballerina standing on a trapeze (Figure 28). The text, blocked out on the left-hand side of the page, is just slightly shorter than the image of the trapeze, whose supporting wires extend diagonally to complement the length of the text. But the content of the two structures is disorienting. The reader is drawn into the first of the three textual fragments with a stable transition: "In the summer of the show, grave robbers appeared in the show" (S, p. 134). The descriptions of bizarre acts which follow fit the narrative "situation" as a whole, yet seem to have no correspondence to the image on the page. The fragment ends, however, with an announcement that suggests a tenuous

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 its tradition. In the soft evening of the show, a troupe of agoutis performed tax evasion atop tall, swaying yellow poles. Before your eyes.

The trapeze artist with whom I had an understanding . . . The moment when she failed to catch me . . .

Did she really try? I can't recall her ever failing to catch anyone she was really fond of. Her great muscles are too deft for that. Her great muscles at which we gaze through heavy-lidded eyes . . .



- 28 From Donald Barthelme: "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace." 1972 rpt. (6th of eleven plates)

association not only to the pictures but also to the next two fragments: "In the soft evening of the show, a troupe of agoutis performed tax evasion atop tall, swaying yellow poles. Before your eyes" (S, p. 134). As the audience's gaze is imaginatively directed to the top of the tent, the illusion blurs. "Before your eyes" is not a troupe of agoutis, but the image of the trapeze artist, swinging high above the crowd. The visual and aural transitions that occur in the magic of a moment carry the reader into the next two fragments, but just as swiftly shift perspectives. As the trapeze artist is brought into focus for the crowd, the tone of the text slips from objective commentary to the fragmented, lyric reminiscence of one onlooker:

The trapeze artist with  
whom I had an under-  
standing...The mo-  
ment when she failed  
to catch me...

Did she really try? I can't  
recall her ever failing to  
catch anyone she was really  
fond of. Her great muscles  
are too deft for that. Her  
great muscles at which we  
gaze through heavy-lidded  
eyes... (S, p. 134)

With the repetition of "eyes" and the pronominal shift from "I" back to "we," the textual caption is completed. The "situation" of the work then resumes as the narrator moves abruptly into another catalogue of acts.

Such shifts and digressions occur several times in the text, balancing occasions of temporal and spatial stability

with the disorienting features of collage. The last digression, located just before the final plate of the composition, is a transparent defense by the artist in which, paradoxically, both the purpose for beginning "the show" and the suggestion of its closing are encompassed:

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 (S, p. 139).

Despite the threat that the show (the fiction) will be closed, the ending of the composition lacks the finality evident in "The Expedition" or "The Dassaud Prize." Discussing the process of its own creation, the text turns back upon itself, and instead of folding its tents, announces yet another sensation: "The new volcano we have just placed under contract seems very promising..." (S, p. 139).

In "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," the comprehensive use of collage is clear, particularly as the work is contrasted to the simplistic design of "The Expedition." Though an increased use of "pose" and "trick effects" enhances the disorienting variety of the graphic assemblages, the work

as a whole is given a tenuous coherency through the well balanced, if not linear, narrative "situation." However, in "At the Tolstoy Museum," the most complex intermedia work at this level, digressions and instabilities in the text are more frequent and are balanced not only by strong patterns of visual rhythms among the plates, but also by a comprehensive interplay of graphic and verbal associations.

In "At the Tolstoy Museum," all traces of temporal continuity are abandoned for a spatial arrangement keyed to the content of text and pictures. The four pages of prose fragments are composed of "facts" about Tolstoy, his work, and the architecture of his museum. Similarly, the nine plates include photographs corresponding to biographical data, the content of the museum itself (portraits, stories, personal artifacts), and architectural equivalents of the museum. Though the textual content corresponds more or less to the content of the plates, the prose fragments are seldom juxtaposed with their appropriate pictures. On the second page of the text, for instance, are three fragments, spatially balanced with the picture captioned, "Tolstoy as a youth." Aside from a subtle reference to the visual pun on Tolstoy's "great coat" in plates 3 and 4, not one of the three fragments corresponds to the accompanying picture. The first fragment, a description of the museum's exterior architecture, refers instead to plates 7 and 9, the perspective drawings of the museum's pavilion and plaza. In fact, the architectural pre-

ponderance described in the text--a facsimile of stacked boxes-- plays against the systematic line drawings of the picture and comically links the "floating" image of Tolstoy in the last plate with the "floating narrator" who voices the fiction. "Viewed from the street," he tells us,

/The museum/ has the aspect of three stacked boxes: the first, second, and third levels. These are of increasing size. The first level is, say, the size of a shoebox, the second level the size of a case of whiskey, and the third level the size of a box that contained a new overcoat. The amazing cantilever of the third level has been much talked about. The glass floor there allows one to look straight down and provides a "floating" feeling. The entire building, viewed from the street, suggests that it is about to fall on you. This the architects relate to Tolstoy's moral authority (CL, p. 45).

The second textual fragment of this page is a spatial transition to the third fragment, a description of the saddening effect that Tolstoy's monolithic portraits have on his public. This fragment corresponds to the looming portraits of Tolstoy at the entrance to the fiction and may also be cross-referenced with fragments on the first and fourth pages of the text:

At the Tolstoy Museum we sat and wept. Paper streamers came out of our eyes. Our gaze drifted toward the pictures. They were placed too high on the wall. We suggested to the director that they be lowered six inches at least. He looked unhappy but said he would see to it. The holdings of the Tolstoy Museum consist principally of some thirty thousand pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy.  
(CL, p. 43)

People stared at tiny pictures of Turgenev, Nekrasov, and Fet. These and other small pictures hung alongside extremely large pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy.  
(CL, p. 49)

The fragment which corresponds to "Tolstoy as a youth," finally, is in the third textual fragment of the page preceding the youth's picture. Among a smattering of mock facts about Tolstoy's life is the item, "As a youth he shaved off his eyebrows, hoping they would grow back bushier" (CL, p. 43).

"At the Tolstoy Museum" is thus the most complex work at the second level of Barthelme's intermedia compositions. While all the works at this level use collage construction within plates and texts, most balance the disorienting features of one assemblage with the stabilizing features of the other. Though the visual rhythms in the "Tolstoy" piece are strong, they are not chiefly responsible for countering the absence of a temporal narrative scheme. The coherency of "situation" is sustained instead primarily through the interplay of primary structures across the space of the composition. This interplay, however, is especially critical at the third level of complexity, where even the supportive patterns of visual rhythms are absent. Here, as "Brain Damage" illustrates, the balance of order and disorder is almost lost in the subtly reconstructed features of image and text.

Sources of disorientation are pervasive and startling in "Brain Damage." Not only does the text lack temporal continuity, but it has no narrative "situation," not even the circus tent of a fantasy to contain its sphinxes and hippogriffs. Its phenomena, instead, seem all too real, its features evidence that the fiction is the cause, the effect, the product, the very site of "brain damage":

This is the country of brain damage, this is the map of brain damage, these are the rivers of brain damage, and see, those lighted-up places are the airports of brain damage, where the damaged pilots land the big, damaged ships....And there is brain damage in Arizona, and brain damage in Maine, and little towns in Idaho are in the grip of it, and my blue heaven is black with it, brain damage covering everything like an unbreakable lease--.  
(CL, p. 146)

The perceiver moves from one stimulus to another, from the litanies and anecdotes of the text, to the surreal and banal details of the plates, to a mockery in glaring headlines ("WHAT RECOURSE?") of his inability to connect (a distressing symptom of brain damage). Like the dislocated narrator, he alternates between acceptance of things as they are and "the new electric awareness," assenting, finally to linger "in that gray area where nothing is done, really, but you vacillate for a while, thinking about it" (CL, p. 134).

Yet thinking about the phenomena of such a tapestry is paradoxically the way to connect to the world--not through reason, but through the liberating play of the imagination. Interwoven with the fabric's irrelevancies is an intricate webwork through which familiar threads run in diagonals and cross-stitches, tenuously connecting one part of the fiction to another. The connections are reconstructed through pun and anecdote and the subtle interplay of pictures and word-objects. In one textual fragment, a narrator takes tea with his spiritual adviser at a university "constructed entirely of three mile-high sponges" (CL, p. 143). Moving across the

horizon, he is told, is the tenured faculty, a body with hundreds of tentacles, each tentacle a university department (the Department of Romantic Poultry, the Department of Great Expectations). In addition, "spirit teachers"--nuns, monks, a Mother Superior, an ESP counselor--speak in litanies and perform rituals in other sites of the fiction. There is also a thread of the thematic, a recurrent motif of monetary exchange, corrupting the narrators' dreams and spiritual lives as it does their everyday existences. The spirit teachers promise "a rich new life of achievement, prosperity, and happiness" (CL, p. 133) and the power to repel would-be muggers; but experience turns heads to the penny-ante rewards of fishing in the gutter. An old woman beckons: "'Look down there,' she said pointing to the gutter full of water, 'there's a penny. Don't you want to pick it up?'" (CL, p. 137). Money commands behavior in the hierarchy of employment as well. In one anecdote, nine waiters "pass the buck," pass pennies, quarters, fives, tens, and a fifty-dollar war bond. In another anecdote, a "great waiter" achieves renown for selling a thirty-dollar bottle of wine to a novice. Thus, while the shards of the tapestry do connect in one space or another, the ties that bind are not logically but imaginatively construed.

The textual fragments in "Brain Damage," particularly the incantatory catalogues at the end, imply that no one can make the necessary, logical connections of what is perceived; yet the interplay of text and pictures purges the anxiety of such

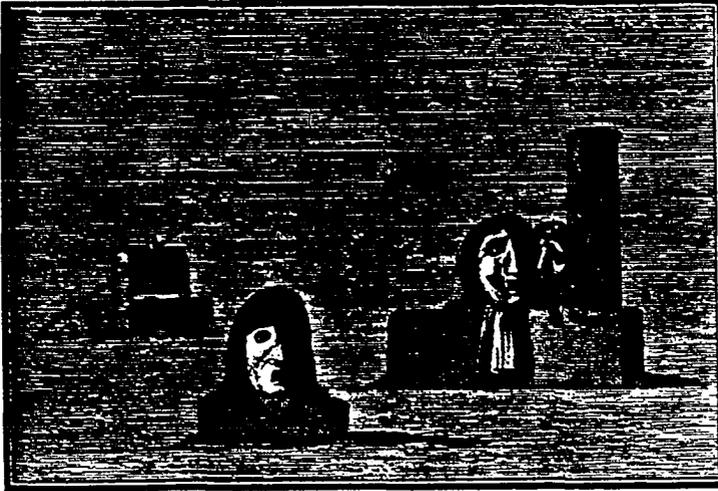
an awareness by mocking the reader's order-seeking pursuits. In the first plate (Figure 29), disembodied heads, resting on blocks, their mouths agape, comically mime the audience (blockheads?) who read aloud the accompanying words in bold type:

CROWD NOISES  
MURMURING  
MURMURING  
YAWNING

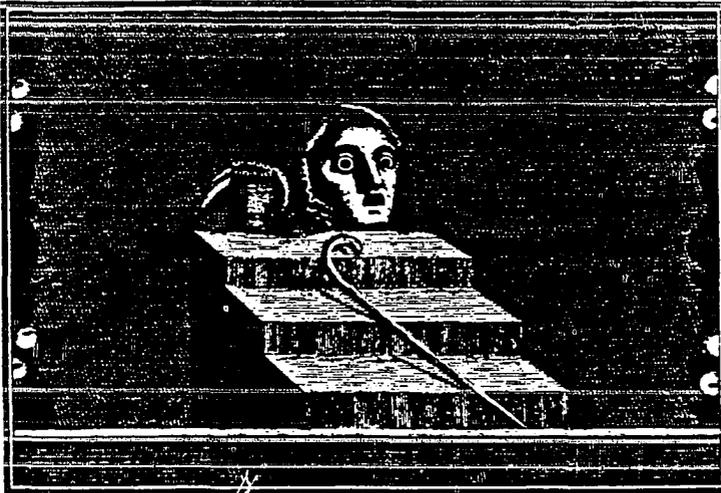
(CL, p. 135)

The text which follows is the anecdote of the "great waiter," who at his death is ritually poached in wine and laid out on a bed of lettuce in the establishment where he had "placed his plates with legendary tact" (CL, p. 136). The next picture (Figure 30) repeats the earlier motif of the disembodied head, which, juxtaposed as it is to the waiter story, now seems ready for the platter. And placed at some distance from its yawning orifice is a set of teeth--the waiter's "plates," perhaps. The non-sense of these connections mocks the reader's endeavor to fix the ever-changing structures of the world in a network of constant signs; yet in "Brain Damage," such non-sense is an essential part of the tapestry's fabric. As Barthelme remarks in his evaluation of Joyce's tapestries, "the fabric falls apart, certainly, but where it hangs together we are privileged to encounter a world made new."<sup>31</sup>

"Brain Damage," possibly more than any other intermedia composition, fulfills Barthelme's intention to create "a new



29 From Donald Barthelme: "Brain Damage." 1970.  
(1st of six pictures)



30 From Donald Barthelme: "Brain Damage." 1970.  
(2nd of six pictures)

reality" which "may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came" but is also "an itself."<sup>32</sup> Its phenomena, selectively dislocated from the larger world to the play space of Barthelme's fiction, recreate the source and site of ambiguity in contemporary experience. Conditioned to the thematic orders and predicted correspondences of conventional illustrated fiction, though, Barthelme's reader may find the dysfunction of its signs so disorienting that he is unwilling to "assent" to exploring its imaginative possibilities. For this reason, the well balanced assemblages at the second level of complexity better serve Barthelme's purposes and the paradoxical needs of his audience. "Pose," "trick effects," and variation of repeated images may undermine thematic reading of collage plates, laws of perspective and proportion may be overthrown, and characteristic portraits contradicted; yet while the intermedia collages lack the systematic correspondences of other structures in the gallery of "speaking pictures," the compositions as a whole are patterned to give the paradoxical impression of moving grounds of stability. Within the disorienting variety of "word-being," word-objects, and their graphic counterparts--the play space between the "promise and the lie of signs"--may be found numerous alternatives for possible meaning and order. Thus, despite their cross-generic structures, the intermedia works, like most of Barthelme's inventions, open fiction to the exploration of "assent," rather than close its chapters to exhaustion.

## Notes to Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup>The term "speaking pictures," common in Elizabethan England, is adapted for a study of pictorial poetry by Milton Klonsky, ed., in Speaking Pictures: A Gallery of Pictorial Poetry from the Sixteenth Century to the Present (New York: Harmony Books, 1975). See especially pp. 1-26.

<sup>2</sup>Reprinted in Klonsky, pp. 36-37.

<sup>3</sup>Rosemary Freeman, English Emblem Books (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p. ix.

<sup>4</sup>Freeman, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas Bulfinch, Mythology, abridged by Edmund Fuller (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1959), p. 27.

<sup>6</sup>Freeman, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup>Werner Spies, "The Laws of Chance," in Homage to Max Ernst, G. di San Lazzaro, ed. (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1971), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup>H. de Balzac, Eugénie Grandet, The Country Parson and Other Stories, trans. Ellen Marriage (Philadelphia: The Gebbie Publishing Company, Ltd., 1899), I, p. 125.

<sup>9</sup>Werner Hofmann, "Max Ernst and the Nineteenth Century," in Homage to Max Ernst, G. di San Lazzaro, ed. (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1971), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup>Hofmann, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup>Donald Barthelme I, Pacifica Tape Library, BC2720.01-04, 1976.

<sup>12</sup>Spies, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup>Spies, p. 18.

<sup>14</sup>J. H. Matthews, The Imagery of Surrealism (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1977), p. 90.

- <sup>15</sup>Donald Barthelme II, Pacifica Tape Library, BC2720.01-04, 1976.
- <sup>16</sup>Alan Wilde, "Barthelme Unfair to Kierkegaard: Some Thoughts on Modern and Postmodern Irony," Boundary 2, 5 (Fall 1976), 64.
- <sup>17</sup>Richard Gilman, "Fiction: Donald Barthelme," The Confusion of Realms (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 43.
- <sup>18</sup>Matthews, p. 108.
- <sup>19</sup>Matthews, p. 219.
- <sup>20</sup>Matthews, p. 80.
- <sup>21</sup>John Leland, "Remarks Re-marked: Barthelme, What Curios of Signs!" Boundary 2, 5 (Spring 1977), 797.
- <sup>22</sup>Wilde, p. 66.
- <sup>23</sup>Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 17.
- <sup>24</sup>Barthes, p. 19.
- <sup>25</sup>Barthes, pp. 20-25.
- <sup>26</sup>Barthes, p. 21.
- <sup>27</sup>Matthews, p. 95.
- <sup>28</sup>Morse Peckham, Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior and the Arts (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 37.
- <sup>29</sup>Matthews, p. 80.
- <sup>30</sup>Donald Barthelme, "The Dassaud Prize," New Yorker, 51 (12 January 1976), pp. 26-29.
- <sup>31</sup>Donald Barthelme, "After Joyce," Location, 1 (Summer 1964), 14.
- <sup>32</sup>Jerome Klinkowitz, "Donald Barthelme," in The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 52.

## CHAPTER V

### AFTERWORD

Despite reports to the contrary, contemporary fiction is neither "dead end" nor exclusively innovative. The formal rejections and structural changes illustrated by a selected arrangement of Barthelme's parodies, inventive fictions, and intermedia compositions reflect a generic shift that has been occurring in American fiction for more than two decades. All the signs indicate that fiction promises--so far as promises or signs may be trusted--to remain dynamic and exploratory. Beyond its usefulness as a mirror and instrument of change in fiction, Barthelme's literature may also help us to understand both the relation of fiction to other art forms and the relation of art to contemporary life. The inventive structures commanded by new ways of looking at the world extend the perimeters of fiction into poetry, painting, film, music, and sculpture, chiefly through the purposes and techniques of collage. This affinity among the arts seems to be keyed to the needs and expectations of a contemporary audience.

In a 1970 interview, Barthelme asserted that "'the principle of collage"--the structural principle which inspires most

of his fiction--"is the central principle of all art in the twentieth century in all media."<sup>1</sup> Taken with a character's related assertion, "Fragments are the only forms I trust," the frequently misunderstood statement was later qualified and half-heartedly recanted: "(Maybe I should have said that anxiety is the central principle of all art in the etc., etc.)"<sup>2</sup> Despite the underlying irony of the parenthetical remark, both comments echo more fully developed speculations that form articulates human feelings, whether euphoria or anxiety, and that art, especially contemporary art, serves paradoxical human needs: the need for disorientation, expressed in a demand for innovation, and the need to stabilize impressions through order and meaning. To simplify Morse Peckham's assumptions, the essential experience of art is a rehearsal for the disorienting experiences of life, and if it is innovative, it may create a measure of anxiety. "Art is the exposure to the tensions and problems of a false world so that man may endure exposing himself to the tensions and problems of the real world."<sup>3</sup>

Among contemporary audiences, the demand for innovation is not a "rage," perhaps, but it is popular or at least vocal enough to sustain Barthelme's parody of it. "Falling Dog" exaggerates the expectations of the gallery world that an artist "produce a new sensation each season; the artists in "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace" book one sensation after another in an effort to keep the show going; and a host

of Barthelme characters lament the boredom and triviality of la vie quotidienne, all the while hoping to glimpse the extraordinary beneath the "dreck" of everyday life. On the other hand, much of mankind's energy is expended in trying to close the gaps between the patterns that he is accustomed to seeing and the disorienting shapeshifting of the world. Thus, he engages in his search for order and meaning, vainly endeavoring to fix the ever-changing structures of the world in a network of constant signs. As Roland Barthes tells us, "--man likes signs and likes them clear."<sup>4</sup> The pursuit of either order or disorder exclusively is undesirable, though. To become unnerved by disorder and accept that nothing can be known with certainty is to insulate oneself, like Jacob Horner, in the paralysis of inactivity. Conversely, to participate fully in chaos is to risk, like McMurphy, a different kind of separation from the world. In his lobotomized condition, McMurphy is set adrift in a void with all channels between mind and matter short-circuited. A balance, it would seem, is to be found at the point of reciprocity between the two needs.

Barthelme, like artists in other media, has discovered the instrument of this balance. Rather than suggest withdrawal from the world or match what threatens to consume it with hostility, Barthelme's literature encourages a gradual assent to disorder through the creative possibilities of play. "Play," claims Eugene Fink, "is an eminent manifestation

of human freedom"<sup>5</sup>; on the other hand, Barthelme reminds us, repression of the "Eros-principle" means "total calamity."<sup>6</sup> Just as they are found in other contemporary media, therefore, structures of play may be found at every level of Barthelme's literature, from the puns and mockeries of parody to the illusory textures of "Brain Damage." Though each type of work--parody, inventive fiction, intermedia composition--seems to be cluttered with the disorder of the world, the play of wit always appeals to the "reasoning mind" and moderates randomness with order. In his estimation of Snow White, Richard Gilman explains the value of Barthelme's work to contemporary audiences:

...it keeps the very possibilities of fiction alive, and by doing that shows us more of the nature of our age and ourselves than all those novels which never recognize the crisis of literature and therefore do nothing but repeat its dead forms.<sup>7</sup>

The value of Barthelme's work, finally, is more than to reflect change and innovation in fiction. By balancing order and disorder, meaning and non-meaning, the familiar and the strange in creative structures of play, Barthelme restores for us the pleasures of both participating in art and living in the world.

Notes to Chapter Five

<sup>1</sup>Jerome Klinkowitz, "Donald Barthelme," in The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers, ed. Joe David Bellamy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Klinkowitz, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup>Morse Peckham, Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior and the Arts (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 314.

<sup>4</sup>Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 29.

<sup>5</sup>Eugene Fink, "The Oasis of Happiness: Toward an Ontology of Play," trans. Ute and Thomas Saine, Yale French Studies, No. 41 (1968), 25.

<sup>6</sup>Donald Barthelme, "After Joyce," Location, 1 (Summer 1964), 16.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Gilman, "Fiction: Donald Barthelme," The Confusion of Realms (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 52.

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