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The Politics of Playful Confrontation: Barthelme as Disgruntled Liberal

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Barthelme's writing career is roughly coterminous with the short story renaissance that began in the late nineteen-sixties. A central figure in that renaissance, he wrote with undeviating verbal wit about domestic themes similar to those associated with the work of John Updike and Ann Beattie. Though he has been as popular as the domestic realists, his Beckettian reductions and occasional metafictional shenanigans have also earned him a place among such postmodernist or experimental fabulists as Borges and Cortázar. Several full length studies of his work have been completed that present Barthelme as a ludic individualist, an ironist who uses humor to preserve his freedom from social demands; this essay, alternatively, explores his short fiction to relate his playfulness to the more serious-sounding matter of the politics of his play.[1]

Donald Barthelme is more frequently shelved with the playful than with the serious. In an interview he once took exception to the idea that he was apolitical or generally unconcerned with the world beyond his writing, that he had no interest in such "relevant issues" as the Vietnam war, racial strife, or political scandals: "I think a careful reading of what I've written would disclose that all those things you mention are touched upon, in one way or another—not confronted directly, but there" (McCaffery 1983, 41). Barthelme's offhand comment is a distress signal indicating an under-appreciated aspect of his work.

In *Homo Ludens* Huizinga observed that "Civilization […] has grown more serious; it assigns only a secondary place to playing" (96). Certainly, Barthelme accepted this formulation in part—and in part re-

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sisted Huizinga's formulation of a "pure play": "Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil" (6). In his playfulness Barthelme does not really mean to abandon the world, even if Huizinga found it less playful than it might be. Instead, playfulness confronts unplay in his stories. Barthelme generates playful good will precisely through his ironic juxtaposition of wisdom and folly, or good and evil. He once spoke of humor in his work not as an evasion of the real world, but as an alternative to psychosis. Involving stories about ethnic strife, tension between the sexes, and even the crisis of authority in American government, Barthelme's fiction is seriously playful.

Though some critics have argued for such an evolution, Barthelme's work does not really "evolve" or "mature" in the ways we have expected a writer's *oeuvre* to do since Joyce gave stylistic maturation a heroic and evolutionary role in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914).[2] It is better to say that Barthelme's playfulness exists in a more or less constant balance with his tacit assumption that art is and should be publicly responsible. In celebrating Barthelme as a self-cultivating liberal ironist, we have neglected his role as a social commentator. Many of his stories portray the world with Kafkaesque stage props; still, Barthelme's congenial treatment of dire themes almost always assumes an audience that will be more amused than anxious about the alienation and fragmentation presented in his art.

Barthelme gives fictional attention to the matter of art's relationship to civic authority in two ways: art is represented as ironically disjunct from the demands or capacities of civic authority, as we see in "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" and "The Indian Uprising." Or, in "Paul Klee" and "I Bought a Little City," the aesthetic is harmonized with the political, the civic, or even the military, in a self-deflating fantasy. Both approaches actually play with the separation of art and political reality, but the former group of stories mocks the politically adept for lack of imagination. Other writers have "indicted" society for failing to live up to social ideals, but Barthelme at his most political establishes a wry point of view that can be altogether critical, even if it

lacks the self-righteousness required to indict. Harsh judgments are too heavy for Barthelme's inverse gravity in which most objects lacking in levity float away.

Regarding political matters related to race and class, Barthelme presents recognizable political tensions in part as a way to mark his own ironic distance from those concerns—but only in part. "Margins" and "Sakrete" respectively deride the assumptions of liberal civic discourse, mocking the demands such ways of thinking make upon artists. They are also a good pair to begin with because they demonstrate two main dramatic modes of Barthelme's work, the dialogue and the monologue.[3] These stories fuse Kafkaesque alienation with Beckettian banter, even as they remain uncompromisingly comic. Barthelme has reminded his readers in interviews that Kafka was a comic artist, but there is an undeniable *angst* running through Kafka's work, especially in his depictions of the bureaucratic imagination, much more muted. Beckett spoke of how the "consternation is in the form" in Kafka's work (Shainberg 104), but readers have not been struck by consternation in Barthelme's stories, even though they may depict such unpleasantness as racial violence ("Margins") or the Orwellian reorganization of a community ("Sakrete").

Except for a few sentences that operate as stage directions, "Margins" is written entirely as a dialogue between Edward and Carl. The first sentence sets the stage: "Edward was explaining to Carl about margins" (*Sixty* 9). Edward then presents a brief graphological disquisition:

> "The *width* of the margin shows culture, aestheticism and a sense of values or the lack of them," he said. "A very wide left margin shows an impractical person of culture and refinement with a deep appreciation for the best in art and music. Whereas," Edward said, quoting his handwriting analysis book, "whereas, narrow left margins show the opposite. No left margin at all shows a practical nature, a wholesome economy and a general lack of good taste in the arts. A very wide *right* margin shows a person afraid to face reality, oversensitive to the future and generally a poor mixer."
> "I don't believe in it," Carl said. (*Sixty* 9)

Edward turns his attention to the sign that Carl is carrying, observing that Carl's "*all-around wide margin*" designates him as a person "with love of color and form" and as one who "lives in his own dream world of beauty and good taste"(*Sixty* 9). Carl, who appears up to the point to be the practical character rather than victim of an *idée fixe*, once again expresses doubt, prompting the following exchange:

> "I'm communicating with you," Edward said, "across a vast gulf of ignorance and darkness."
> "*I* brought the darkness, is that the idea?" Carl asked.
> "You brought the darkness, you black mother," Edward said. "Funky, man."
> "Edward," Carl said, "for God's sake." (*Sixty* 9-10)

Thus do we learn that Carl is black and Edward white. In the dialogue that follows, Edward's programmatic way of thinking is perfectly suited to the racial prejudice inherent in many of his questions—Are you a drug addict? Are you a Muslim?

Up until this point Carl is still the pragmatic one (despite his all-around wide margins), but then Barthelme undermines the pattern of consistent character development by presenting to the reader the contents of Carl's sign:

> "I Was Put In Jail in Selby County Alabama For Five Years For Stealing A Dollar and A Half Which I Did Not Do. While I Was In Jail My Brother Was Killed & My Mother Ran Away When I was Little. In Jail I Began Preaching & I Preach to People Wherever I Can Bearing the Witness of Eschatological Love" (*Sixty* 10).

Carl, who has appeared tough-minded in his skepticism, portrays himself in his sign as a stereotypical victim of white injustice, and in this respect he has suddenly converted from a character who resists stereotypical representations into the embodiment of a narrow-minded white man's fantasy. At the phrase "eschatological love," the attempts to communicate across the vast divide devolve into absurdity. In his attack on literalist thinking, Barthelme turns our expectations concerning character inside-out, betraying the ways in which the demands of character within conventional fiction are akin to the de-

mands on individuals in a racially divided society: "character," if it will be regarded as realistic, must conform to a set of laws or probable aspects prior to its individual existence. But this set of laws then has a tendency to reduce us to stereotypes of ourselves.

The dialogue between Carl and Edward proceeds like a vaudeville skit in which a number of odd topics are bandied about, but in which all of the remarks, it finally appears, can be measured by their proximity to the violence which concludes the story. After presenting the reader with the text of Carl's sign, Edward continues his pedantic analysis:

> "Your capitals are very small," Edward said, "indicating humility."
> "My mother would be pleased," Carl said, "if she knew."
> "On the other hand, the excessive size of the loops in your 'y' and your 'g' displays exaggeration and egoism."
> "That's always been one of my problems," Carl answered." (*Sixty* 10)

Once again Edward is on the offensive, making contradictory and therefore self-canceling assertions about Carl, whom he continuously designates as "other." Carl vacillates between ironic curt responses (note the humility in his admission of egotism) and attempts to change the subject:

> "Do you think I'm a pretty color?" Edward asked. "Are you envious?"
> "No," Carl said. "Not envious."
> "See? Exaggeration and egoism. Just like I said."
> "You're kind of boring, Edward. To tell the truth."
> […]
> "Carl, I'm a fool," Edward said suddenly.
> "Yes," Carl said.
> "But I'm a *white* fool," Edward said. "That's what's so lovely about me."
> "You *are* lovely, Edward," Carl said. "It's true. You have a nice look. Your aspect is good."
> "Oh, hell," Edward said despondently. "You're very well-spoken," he said. "I noticed that."
> "The reason for that is," Carl said, "I read. Did you read *The Cannibal* by John Hawkes? I thought that was a hell of a book." (*Sixty* 11)

Edward is the straight-man while Carl provides entertainment in the form of irony, good sense, and the good taste of a person who reads experimental fiction. With racial prejudice as the chief source of tension, the story becomes a single joke with variations between verbal violence and elegant rearrangements of the conversation. Like the characters in most Barthelme dialogue-stories, these two deploy verbal resources, create occasional absurd reversals, and maintain a general pattern of banter that is generally comforting to the reader. That this approach to character may be *superficial* is a matter reflected upon by the very characters in the story themselves:

> "Listen Carl," Edward said, "why don't you just concentrate on improving your handwriting."
> "My character, you mean."
> "No," Edward said, "don't bother improving your character. Just improve your handwriting. Make larger capitals. Make smaller loops in your 'y' and your 'g.' Watch your word-spacing so as not to display disorientation. Watch your margins."
> "It's an idea. But isn't that kind of a superficial approach to the problem?" (*Sixty* 13)

When Edward suggests that Carl read his handwriting book, and offers the prospect that a careful perusal might someday land him the job of Vice-President, Carl says "That's something to shoot for, all right." Frustrated that he cannot discuss John Hawkes' literary innovations, Carl becomes impatient with Edward's pretensions to civic responsibility. But Edward's suggestions also give parodic expression to the purely aesthetic approach to literary art divorced from meaning or historical context. In one of many Beckettian juxtapositions, this quality is yoked to Edward's other quality, an invasive interest in Carl's "inner reality." Though Barthelme apparently disowns Carl's attention to surface details in this juxtaposition, many of his books contain final statements similar to the following—a proudly precise afterthought to *Sixty Stories*—which oddly echo Edward's attention to surface detail:

A NOTE ON THE TYPE

> The text of this book was set in Weiss, a typeface designed in Germany by Emil Rudolf Weiss (1875-1942). The design of the roman was completed in 1928 and that of the italic in 1931. Both are well-balanced and even in color, and both reflect the subtle skills of a fine calligrapher.

The whole-hearted attention to detail and craftsmanship in the "Note on the Type" is of course wholly unlike Edward's manipulative approach to handwriting analysis, and it is just this verbal and artistic will to power that "Margins" satirizes. Dealing as it does with racial tension, where the two characters are not "even in color," the story can be said to live in the world rather than in an imaginary land of pure art, free from the pains and dangers of this world. The charm of a Barthelme story is in the way it uses verbal and situational wit to play in the world without ever forgetting the difference between the "only pretend" that constitutes play and the worldly demands that are anything but playful. "Margins" confronts the unplayful subject of racism, and for most of the story the reader is entertained by the fantasy that verbal wit can circumvent the dangers inherent in narrow-minded thinking. This confrontation approaches its limit abruptly at the story's conclusion, however. Carl asks Edward to wear his sandwich boards while he goes to the bathroom, and notes that they are heavy on the shoulders.

> "They cut you a bit," Carl said with a malicious smile. "I'll just go into this men's store here."
> When Carl returned the two men slapped each other sharply in the face with the back of the hand—that beautiful part of the hand where the knuckles grow. (*Sixty* 13)

While the ending can be said to follow from the tensions presented (though not *developed*) in the story, Carl has never before been "malicious" and no particular motive has been added that accounts for the fight. This is not merely a fight between Edward and Carl, nor is it just an admission of larger racial tensions. As evinced by the final verbal flourish, "that beautiful part of the hand where the knuckles grow," the story concludes with the unresolved tension between aestheticism

and morality in art. The absurdity of their conjunction in art is symbolized by knuckles that "grow" on the back of the hand as though fruit on a vine. Their knuckles cannot really be said to grow, and this small verbal silliness in the midst of a most unplayful kind of behavior confirms for the reader, contrary to what Jacques Derrida might argue, that there is an outside to the text. The silly/pleasant twist that Barthelme gives to the unpleasant social reality marks the difference. The story confronts the violence of racism, but it absolutely refuses to do so in a serious way such as in Faulkner's "Dry September." As a comic artist, Barthelme acknowledges the worst, but always on his own terms.

Though it also dwells in the embarrassing region between art and social responsibility, "Sakrete" differs markedly in form from "Margins"; it is a comic monologue rather than a dialogue in the manner of Beckett. In particular, it is the monologue of a put-upon husband who also happens to be an artist. In response to a civil emergency (missing garbage cans throughout the neighborhood, many rats sighted), he pretends that he has been ordered to imagine its cause: "In fact, if I were ordered to imagine who is stealing our garbage cans, I could not do it. I very much doubt that my wife is doing it. Some of the garbage cans on our street are battered metal, others are heavy green plastic" (*Forty* 193). The husband views the mock-crisis (a serious matter within the fictional world of the story) with an artist's eye, and so he is more concerned with ornament, material, and color than with the actuality of the missing cans: "Heavy green plastic or heavy black plastic predominates. Some of the garbage cans have the numbers of the houses they belong to painted on their sides or lids, with white paint. Usually by someone with only the crudest sense of the art of lettering" (193). A proper Barthelme garbage container might have a 'NOTE ON THE TYPE' etched under the lid. These cans, however, do not impress the husband as feats of human engineering: "In fact, if I were ordered to imagine what might most profitably be invented by a committee of rats, it would be the dark plastic garbage bag. The rats run up and down our street all night long" (193).

Perhaps Barthelme is twitting us for worrying that art has descended from its stature as the most impressive expression of the highest minds to that of mere cultural flotsam and jetsam. The put-upon husband, presented in the Thurberesque mode, bespeaks the fall of the artist from the height of romantic pretension—but not from any real social power. Because of circumstances beyond his control, the narrator finds himself wondering about the mischief of rats, the construction of the garbage can, and about the activities of his wife, whom he knows to be in many ways empowered by the rat-garbage-can-crisis. He wonders about such things, but has not been *ordered* to imagine them: he is on the periphery of the crisis management and does not even know the secret handshakes of the committee formed to respond to the problem.

The social constructionist world view (the idea that everything is man-made and that nothing has 'natural priority') scuttles through this story in a furtive sort of way, much like the rats that the narrator has not been ordered to imagine. The idea that 'everything is socially constructed' can be a conspiracy theory of the highest order, and the only real solace to the loss of nature is that some things are made better than others. Most garbage cans are poorly lettered, except for "One Nineteen, which has among its tenants a gifted commercial artist" (193-94).

The idea that the world itself is nought but art ought to be solace enough, but it has two rather depressing effects for the makers of Art. First, this view places the creative artist in a society that consists of a hierarchy of 'artists' with whom she or he must compete, not always successfully. Second, the world itself, regarded as art, is something of a mixed achievement. In addition to rainbows and architecture and that sort of thing, there is junk. How shall the artist work in a world where the line between trash and art has become the subject of Orwellian or Kafkaesque conspiracy theories?

One response to the junk-as-art problem is to make a provisional distinction between junk and 'junque.' The Rat/Can committee made an inventory of junque as found in the garbage cans of the Louis Escher family:

> one mortar & pestle, majolica ware; one English cream maker (cream is made by mixing unsalted sweet butter and milk); one set green earthenware geranium leaf plates; one fruit ripener designed by scientists at the University of California, Plexiglas; one nylon umbrella tent with aluminum poles; one combination fountain pen and clock with LED readout; one mini hole-puncher-and-confetti-mark; one pistol-grip spring-loaded flyswatter. (195)

Junque is junk artistically regarded, and when junk is thus regarded it undergoes a magical transformation, much like the ironic swirl of pattern and object in the art of M. C. Escher. The assemblage of Barthelme's Escher household is certainly not representative of all the residents. The list is compiled to assess the possibility that the Escher family, by disposing of such valuable garbage, may be the "proximate cause" of the disappearing garbage cans. It is interesting that Barthelme has selected items which can all be recognized as non-garbage. There are no egg shells or stained coffee filters, for example. What gives this archeological heap the status of garbage is precisely its inventory form, which, in terms of conventional art, would be an anti-form or a lack of form: the collage as a challenge to conventional principles of composition. In an Age of Junque it would appear that the creative artist is "ordered" to imagine such things, though not by any committee. In Beckett's phrase, modern art must find a form to accommodate chaos. It must accommodate junk.

The narrator is intermittently suspicious of his wife, who is apparently the chief beneficiary of the rat-garbage can connection: "If my wife is stealing the garbage cans, in the night, while I am drunk and asleep, what is she doing with them?" His wife drives a yellow Pontiac convertible, and, although there are as of yet no witnesses, he "can imagine her lifting garbage cans into the back seat of the yellow Pontiac convertible, at four o'clock in the morning, when I am dreaming of being on stage, dreaming of having to perform a drum concerto with only one drumstick" (*Forty* 194). Although he can find no material evidence or logical connection, the appearance of the rats, the empowerment of his wife, and the disappearance of his own artistic power (signified by the missing drumstick) exist in a montage. As the

problem develops, or rather accumulates, the narrator is more and more an outsider in his own community:

> My wife has appointed me a sub-committee of the larger committee with the task of finding large stones. Is there a peculiar look on her face as she makes the appointment? Dr. Maugham has bought a shotgun, a twelve-gauge over-and-under. Mr. Wilkins has bought a Chase bow and two dozen hunting arrows. I have bought a flute and an instruction book. (*Forty* 195)

In a sense, he has been incorporated into the increasingly militant community structure, but his appointment is at a low level and his task is bizarre—to search for stones to weigh down the garbage cans. Whereas other men are empowered by this situation, finding rather than losing phallic totems, this narrator acquires a most unwarlike instrument and an instruction book, signifying his apprentice-level efforts even in that artistic realm.

Though the narrator is finally given a job, he is ordered to imagine how artificial stones may be formed out of sakrete when real stones are found to be a rarity in the neighborhood. The narrator complies as best he can, mockingly comparing his creation to the work of Creation: "One need only add water and stir, and you have made a stone as heavy and brutish as a stone made by God himself" (196). However, as he comes to learn, "a good-looking stone is not the easiest of achievements." His wife comments, "I don't like them […] They don't look like real stones." He concedes they look "like badly thrown pots, as if they had been done by a potter with no thumbs" (196).

No-thumbs is the latest in the accumulating list of missing things. This recession has continued through the story until an equilibrium is reached at the story's end:

> There are now no garbage cans on our street—no garbage cans left to steal. A committee of rats has joined with the Special Provisional committee in order to deal with the situation, which, the rats have made known, is attracting unwelcome rat elements from other areas of the city. Members of the two committees exchange secret grips, grips that I know not of. My wife drives groups of rats here and there in her yellow Pontiac convertible, attending

> important meetings. The crisis, she says, will be a long one. She has never been happier. (196)

Barthelme's Orwellian vision of communal reorganization amuses but never terrifies. The external rat threat bolsters the internal regime, and, as in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the animals and humans are last seen cooperating in a way which directly contradicts the anti-rat ideology bracing the wife's committees.

"Sakrete" is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the world of politicians, social problems of general concern, and secret committees. The artist/husband finds himself more or less on the outside, but he is never the object of overt persecution. The put-upon voice of the outsider is paradoxically a voice of empowerment, and this is true of Barthelme's ironic mode of social observation in general. Presumably smiling grimly at each verbal cue, the reader identifies with the voice of the witty outsider and thus smugly transcends the everyday banality of political infighting, seeing it as merely buying sakrete at a hardware store. The put-upon voice is central to the story from beginning to end precisely because it is the frame of reference that gives all the events, details, and junque inventories a narrative shape.

Not all of Barthelme's stories explore social and political themes through the more or less indirect medium of the absurdist parable. "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning," published in 1968 but before Robert F. Kennedy's assassination, juxtaposes a number of viewpoints in order to show how our "real" politicians exist in surreal relation to their constituents. Among the twenty-five or so ways of looking at a Kennedy, we really have two views from the artist: the artist in the story "regards K. with hatred" (*Sixty* 81) for making a philistine remark about his art, and Barthelme as writer of the story regards Kennedy wryly. Barthelme's irony, a clinical view that is more detached than that of the artist within the story, sets up a tension between Kennedy as social icon and Kennedy as typical politician (an ingrate). The Kafkaesque reduction of a person to his initial has, in this context, a side-effect of comic compression. Kennedy has been reduced to a heroic, well-rounded man with many ordinary strengths.

The eponymous final section of the story separates Kennedy from the archaic heroic vestments that are regularly draped over fallen Kennedys:

> *K. Saved from Drowning*
> K. in the water. His flat black hat, his black cape, his sword are on the shore. He retains his mask. His hands beat the surface of the water which tears and rips about him. The white foam, the green depths.

"He retains the mask"—even in drowning, the Kennedy surface is all the narrator can know. "Depth" is indicated briefly and matter-of-factly, since there is no depth to the simulacra called "K." It is as though the narrator rescues a campaign poster:

> I throw a line, the coils leaping out over the surface of the water […] I am on the bank, the rope wound round my waist, braced against a rock. K. now has both hands on the line. I pull him out of the water. He stands now on the bank, gasping.
> "Thank you." (85)

What remains after Barthelme's ironic reduction process is a Kennedy drained of mystery. But a phoenix springs from the ashes: as in Warhol's repetitious portraits of celebrities, the mass production of an image, in draining its artistic aura, refurbishes it with a new kind of aura. The Kennedy that says "Thank you" as he escapes death is mysterious because he remains interesting despite his own xerographic continuity. In this respect, Barthelme's K. is a postmodern political hero, a mock-form of the original which indulges the conventional longings for a paragon, while it also satisfies the iconoclastic urge to treat any and all ideals with caustic doubt. A mutant form within the species of political hero-worship, "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" provides enjoyment for disgruntled liberals, but without the sacrifice of honesty that many kinds of political affiliation require.

Though he generally aims to please, Barthelme is not a maker of *kitsch*—the kind of work which, according to Milan Kundera, stems from a "desire to please at all costs" (Carlisle). The pleasures of art are

occasionally tempered by the pain of history. "The Indian Uprising," for example, can be said to approach the treatment of Native Americans by the United States government through the mock form, or it can also be read as a satire on the involvement of the United States in Vietnam. That is, the story juxtaposes suburban comfort with battle zone behavior so as to question the imprecision of "our" involvement in that war. The story begins in the voice of "one of us," since he says "We defended the city as best we could":

> The arrows of the Comanches came in clouds. The war clubs of the Comanches clattered on the soft, yellow pavements. There were earthworks along the Boulevard Mark Clark and the hedges had been laced with sparkling wire. People were trying to understand. I spoke to Sylvia. "Do you think this is a good life?" The table held apples, books, long-playing records. She looked up. "No." (*Sixty* 108)

That the arrows "came in clouds" is the sort of cliché that Barthelme likes to isolate within a web of more alert language; the result is that he defamiliarizes and, in a sense, redeems the cliché. Sylvia's flat and humorless denial of privilege and enjoyment similarly derides the strict organization of hatred that develops quickly with announcements of war.

By juxtaposing suburban entitlements with the embattled mentality of white settlers who would displace Comanches from their land, Barthelme once again stakes out the uneven ground of American liberalism. He criticizes American foreign policy while freely enjoying the pleasures of American life; he scrutinizes the past policies of the United States government while at the same time continuing to inhabit land gotten through that dirty work. Thus, the story reflects many of the incongruities of American liberal thought. This is not to make a conservative or an anti-liberal of Barthelme—he defended liberalism as best he could. Once again, his playful approach to the most serious of problems opens up a way of having it both ways. The reader who identifies with the wit of the Barthelme voice can enjoy a political sympathy without sacrificing his or her badge of independence: doubt. This is one of the merit badges common to postwar

American literature. The sort of belief or commitment to a cause that enables or requires the subordination of the individual self is anathema within Barthelme's universe of discourse.

Though "The Indian Uprising" presents several images which could be said to reflect the brutality with which Native Americans have been treated, the story is scarcely a linear narrative of that history. Written in a narrative collage form, the story also contains intermittent commentary on the products of high culture, episodes concerning the narrator's efforts to make a table, and occasional shards from the narrator's love life. Within this collage form, juxtaposition and anachronism occasionally hint at perceptions of brutality alongside cultural elegance in a way that invites political critique, but the collage form is also a form of indirection, a way of looking awry at the jangle of culture and history. This wry smile, never a full-blown smirk, confronts the worst aspects of American history without surrendering to the *cri de coeur*, a less dialogic mode of utterance tending to relax artistic tension and reduce the possibilities of conversation.

By approaching the horrors of history wryly, the writer stirs plausible deniability into the political commitments and sympathies at which readers might guess. The collage effect at once provides a way of connecting past with recent examples of American aggression; but at the same time the burlesque tone insulates the passage:

> Patrols of paras and volunteers with armbands guarded the tall, flat buildings. We interrogated the captured Comanche. Two of us forced his head back while another poured water into his nostrils. His body jerked, he choked and wept. Not believing a hurried, careless and exaggerated report of the number of casualties in the outer districts where trees, lamps, swans had been reduced to clear fields of fire we issued entrenching tools to those who seemed trustworthy and turned the heavy-weapons companies so that we could not be surprised from that direction. And I sat there getting drunker and drunker and more in love and more in love. We talked. (108)

By the repetition "more in love and more in love" instead of the more conventional "more and more in love," we know that the unplayful image of the captured Indian has given way to bathos. There is no bathos in the image of the Comanche being tortured, and the ana-

chronism of the heavy weapons battalion could go either way: it could suggest that nothing has changed in American policy toward native cultures or undeveloped nations, or it could begin to overload our willingness to take the image seriously by undermining the historical frame of reference. The verbal representation balances the reader on a fence separating engaged from detached interpretations. The collage form can be construed as politically progressive in that it offers protection from the monologic approach of, say, the proletarian thesis novel; at the same time, the increasingly silly juxtapositions ward off the danger of responsibility, implying, as that would, a call to action. Anachronism attenuates the immediacy of this call, which, for Barthelme, is in its pure form a threat to literariness.

Instead, we have an approach somewhere between that of the comedian and the anthropologist, each role assuming a close awareness tempered by a clinical detachment: "And he was friendly, kind, enthusiastic, so I related a little of the history of torture, reviewing the technical literature quoting the best modern sources" (111). As in "Sakrete" this interest and detachment are compounded in the junkyard inventory, though in "The Indian Uprising" the heap is actually a barricade:

> I analyzed the composition of the barricade nearest me and found two ashtrays, ceramic, one dark brown and one dark brown with an orange blur at the lip; a tin frying pan; two-liter bottles of red wine; three-quarter-liter bottles of Black & White, aquavit, cognac, vodka, gin, Fad #6 sherry; a hollow-core door in birch veneer on black wrought-iron legs; a blanket […] a Yugoslavian carved flute, wood, dark brown; and other items. I decided I knew nothing. (*Sixty* 109)

Most of the items in this inventory would be familiar to Barthelme's readers, many of them advertised in the pages of *The New Yorker*, which had first refusal rights to Barthelme's stories. The perception of the items as exotic or luxurious commodities gradually displaces their corporate existence as a barricade. The sentence "I decided I knew nothing" is a fairly direct echo of the Beckettian epiphanies found throughout *Malloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. In Beckett this

line is an act of disowning, but in Barthelme it is really a mock-form of Beckettian renunciation. The narrator knows exactly what is valued in his culture.

As the Freudian dream avoids the direct statement of the frustrated wish and instead produces a distorted message that will more successfully circumvent the censor, Barthelme's use of the mock form in stories such as "The Indian Uprising" includes many images which readers of *The New Yorker* generally might wish to avoid within a form that will often delight them. Amid the dwarfs, joke inventories, and mock-melodrama, are such smuggled images:

> We attached wires to the testicles of the captured Comanche. And I sat there getting drunker and drunker and more in love and more in love. When we threw the switch he spoke. His name, he said, was Gustave Aschenbach. He was born at L____, a country town in the province of Silesia. (113)

The image, initially an entirely unplayful matter, is the irritant around which the subsequent absurdity forms. That Barthelme repeats the "more in love and more in love" joke suggests an artistic self-consciousness about this process, as does the reference to Gustave Aschenbach, the aristocratic German hero of *Death in Venice* who destroys himself by submitting to forbidden desires. The absurdity of the juxtaposition is such that Barthelme at once represents the evils of American history and at the same time respects an apolitical literary taboo: thou shalt not confuse writing with Amnesty International work.

Once the form of a story like "The Indian Uprising" becomes clear, what remains for the reader are the occasionally outstanding one-liners, and, even more important, the overall rhythm of the story. In the collage form the writer is not held to the unities that Poe associated with the tale. Instead, we look for the arrangement of the dream-like elements to determine the final emphasis. A dream that is merely a string of neural garbage without narrative direction is not finally interesting.[4] The tension for readers of "The Indian Uprising" relates to Barthelme as a political fence-sitter: will he wind up on one side,

the other, or poised between? Will "The Indian Uprising" finally become a determinate fantasy rather than a disorganized cut-up of movie westerns, war zone news footage, and bad love scenes? The title "The Indian Uprising" and the final scene give this story a shape that many of its middle paragraphs resist:

> We killed a great many in the south suddenly with helicopters and rockets but we found that those we had killed were children and more came from the north and from the east and from other places where there are children preparing to live. "Skin," Miss R. said softly in the white, yellow room. "This is the Clemency Committee. And would you remove your belt and shoelaces." I removed my belt and shoelaces and looked (rain shattering from a great height the prospects of silence and clear, neat rows of houses in the subdivisions) into their savage black eyes, paint, feathers, beads. (114)

After letting us run along through his series of formally slack (if witty) juxtapositions, this conclusion operates as the choke-chain on the reader (much like the surreal observation of "where the knuckles grow" at the conclusion of "Margins"). The children killed by helicopters and rockets bring to mind the victims of bombing in Vietnam, but the image also belies the mythology of how the West was won. Though there are moments of cartoonishly heroic hand-to-hand combat earlier in the story, the final paragraph focuses on the kind of details that make wars hard to sell to the suburban public, to the people who live in the "neat rows of houses in the subdivisions."

In Barthelme's image of the bureaucratic cleanup operation, the Indians have won, and the narrator must stare into "their savage black eyes." What Barthelme confronts the reader with here is not the reality of Indian life as a scholar in a Native American studies department might reconstruct it, but with the cliché or Hollywood image that functions as the cultural ghost of the lost reality. The savage black eyes stare from behind a desk, and this juxtaposition of savagery and civilization comically undermines that dichotomy. Read in this way, "The Indian Uprising" undergirds the critical change-the-system-from-within attitude that separates the liberal from the radical, but, as with all of Barthelme's writing, it supports the basic division of labor

between politics and art that is also a tenet of liberal rather than radical dogma.

Barthelme has occasionally written stories—elements of this are in "Sakrete"—that satisfy the wish that art and government could collaborate harmoniously for the greatest civic good. "I Bought a Little City" is a story in this mode, although the narrator is a doggerel poet rather than a genuine artist. "Paul Klee" expresses this fantasy more clearly than any other Barthelme story. With playful intelligence, Barthelme coordinates the two voices in the story which presumably should be at odds, that of Paul Klee and that of The Secret Police. In the story Paul Klee has been transferred into the Air Corps where he and other artists "presented ourselves as not just painters but artist-painters. This caused some shaking of heads" (*Forty* 80). While he eats lunch, one of the three airplanes he has been ordered to oversee has somehow been stolen—an occurrence not lost on the Secret Police as they spy on Paul Klee.

The story involves a series of alternating sections headed either by "Paul Klee said" or "The Secret Police said" (80). Early in the story the Secret Police spy on Paul Klee and notice that he is reading a volume of Chinese short stories in translation. While we are given no other information about the stories (and Paul Klee himself has questions about the faithfulness of the translation), it is a convention in certain kinds of Chinese wisdom literature to precede brief narrative episodes with phrases such as "The Master said" or "Then Confucius said" or "Chuang Tzu said." Barthelme appears to mimic this tradition in "Paul Klee," the chief difference being that the story has two alternating sources of authority rather than one primary sage or system of value. This format initially promises a dialogic clash of values and languages, since Paul Klee's descriptions are refracted through the artist's optic, whereas the Secret Police spy on Paul Klee through a different sort of lens. The Secret Police ultimately view the situation in terms of power rather than aesthetic composition.

The Secret Police claim omnipotence for themselves, and so their ideal point of view might be the panopticon as described by the

French theorist of social power, Michel Foucault. But while Foucault's work extends what has been called the "hermeneutic of suspicion," charting as it does the way in which various social discourses constrict the freedom of the individual, Barthelme's police are Keystone totalitarians:

> Our first secret is where we are. No one knows. […] Omnipresence is our goal. […] With omnipresence, hand-in-hand as it were, goes omniscience. And with omniscience and omnipresence, hand-in-hand-in-hand as it were, goes omnipotence. We are a three-sided waltz. However our mood is melancholy. There is a secret sigh that we sigh, secretly. We yearn to be known, acknowledged, admired even. What is the good of omnipotence if nobody knows? (81)

Unlike a real secret police force, which is likely to be organized by paranoia rather than a secure sense of omnipotence, Barthelme's secret agents have inverted J. Walter Mitty fantasies into a hoped-for reconciliation with the public.

When the Secret Police follow Paul Klee into the restaurant where he "eats a hearty lunch" and reads the book of Chinese short stories, they, like Paul Klee, fail to witness the disappearance of the airplane. Their claims of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence are all overthrown by this event: "There is something we do not know. This is irritating in the extreme" (82). Paul Klee's response, in contrast, is initially matter-of-fact: "Now I see with my trained painter's eye that instead of three canvas-covered shapes on the flatcar there are only two. Where the third aircraft had been there is only a puddle of canvas and loose rope" (81-82). But his response is absolutely aesthetic:

> The shape of the collapsed canvas, under which the aircraft had rested, together with the loose ropes—the canvas forming hills and valleys, seductive folds, the ropes the very essence of looseness, lapsing—it is irresistible. I sketch for ten or fifteen minutes, wondering the while if I might not be in trouble, because of the missing aircraft. […] might not some officious person become angry? Shout at me? I have finished my sketching. (82)

Paul Klee is aware of the non-aesthetic demands of the real world, but they do not interrupt his aesthetic pleasure. That an *officious* person

might become angry is a graceful touch in a fantasy of art harmonized with military and political realities. Note also the comma after "might not be in trouble," which makes "because of the missing aircraft" merely non-restrictive additional information.

The Secret Police face the same problem, and, surprisingly, have an exactly parallel response. Their report on Klee approaches the embarrassing problem of the missing aircraft with the same gentle but fastidious attention to detail as Klee's own meditations on the problem: "The knotty point, in terms of the preliminary report, is that we do not have the answer to the question 'Where is the aircraft?'" (83). Like Paul Klee, the Secret Police regard the missing airplane from the various perspectives from which that event will be of consequence, considering for example the overall social effects in addition to the particular impact the loss will have on their own careers:

> The damage potential to the theory of omniscience, as well as potential to our careers, dictates that this point be omitted from the preliminary report. But if this point is omitted, might not some officious person at the Central Bureau for Secrecy note the omission? Become angry? Shout at us? Omissiveness is not rewarded at the Central Bureau. We decide to observe further the actions of Engineer-Private Klee […]. (83)

Rather than a mean-spirited or otherwise blameful attitude, they patiently await a more satisfying solution, while taking care to protect themselves.

As they are concerned about their careers, Paul Klee worries that the cost of the aircraft, which is valued at an amount greater than that of all his drawings combined, will be deducted from his pay. Lacking a better solution, Paul Klee falls back on his art:

> With my painter's skill which is after all not so different from a forger's, I will change the manifest to reflect conveyance of *two* aircraft […] to Fighter Squadron Five. The extra canvas and ropes I will conceal in an empty boxcar. […] Now I will walk around town and see if I can find a chocolate shop. I crave chocolate. (83)

The Secret Police are absolutely satisfied with this solution and predict that Engineer-Private Klee will go far, but their pleasure in his actions faces a limit: "We would like to embrace him as a comrade and brother but unfortunately we are not embraceable. We are secret, we exist in the shadows, the pleasure of comradely/brotherly embrace is one of the pleasures we are denied, in our dismal service." (*Forty* 84). To step back from this line of humor and interpret it seriously is to see that the fantasy of art-harmonized-with-power, brought to its ideal limit, requires the assurance of artistic independence. The artist may serve the Secret Police, with aesthetic enthusiasm as well as the forger's sureness of detail, but it is a more complete fulfillment of the wish if the artist cannot know that he does serve. The artist, at least in his own fantasy, must not so much transcend as outlast the demands of the State: "I eat a piece of chocolate. I am sorry about the lost aircraft but not overmuch. The war is temporary. But drawings and chocolate go on forever"(84).

Since his death in 1989, several memoirs of Barthelme have appeared, many of which note the muzzled manner of the man who did the writing. Phillip Lopate comments on just this quality in "The Dead Father: A Remembrance of Donald Barthelme":

> He was difficult to approach, partly because I (and I am not alone here) didn't know what to do with his formidable sadness, partly because neither did he. Barthelme would have made a good king: he had the capacity of Shakespearean tragic monarchs to project a large, self-isolating presence. (121)

By comparing Barthelme to a king, Lopate alludes to Barthelme's posthumously published novel *The King*, a work which leaves us with a last pour of Barthelme's vintage humor. In between the battles of World War II, King Arthur considers the rumors Lord Haw-Haw spreads about Guinevere; the effects of the atomic bomb upon chivalry are also occasionally considered. The point of the anachronistic wit may be just this: to the degree that we can see fragmentation and entropic decline from a comic rather than tragic perspective, chivalry

is not dead. Readers of Barthelme's stories who know nothing of his life, what with its Lear-like silences, will come away with the impression of a man who took ironies against a sea of trifles and, by posing, upended them.

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NOTES

[1]There are just a few exceptions to this rule. See Courturier and McHale for political commentaries that stay well within the realm of postmodern critical theory: Barthelme is political because he subverts our expectations and brings philosophical certainties into question. Maltby's *Dissident Postmodernists* is the most developed approach to Barthelme as an epistemological activist. Ebert, who discusses Barthelme's subversion of patriarchal entitlement, relates Barthelme's debunking strategies to extra-textual oppression. See for example Wilde, Molesworth and Couturier on interrelations between philosophical attitude and artistic form in Barthelme's work. Also interesting is Wayne B. Stengel's *The Shape of Art in the Short Stories of Donald Barthelme*, a study which divides over one-hundred Barthelme stories into four main types: stories of identity, dialogue, society, and art. The most direct treatment of Barthelme as a writer who comments on extra-textual political events is Stengel's "Irony and the Totalitarian Consciousness in Donald Barthelme's *Amateurs,*" a brief study touching on a number of themes developed in this essay. Stengel writes, "At his best Donald Barthelme was a highly moral and political American short story writer" (145). Stengel underlines Barthelme's anti-totalitarian themes, but it does not distinguish Barthelme from very many Cold War authors to do so. In this essay I attempt not just to say what Barthelme was against, but what, in specifically political terms, he was for.

[2]See Gordon for a chronological review of Barthelme's fiction.

[3]A third direction might include those stories that involve actual collages or illustrations. Playful as they are, in the McCaffery interview Barthelme has dismissed these stories as products of his own artist-envy.

[4]Barthelme and other prose writers challenge readers with apparently unrelated objects in ways which bring into question the psychological function of art. Ursula Le Guin theorizes that in dreams we experience a series of static objects, but that we form a narrative of these dream-objects upon awakening. Psychotics, the theory goes, are unable to assemble psychic objects into a dream narrative. See her essay, "Thoughts on Narrative" in her essay collection *Dancing at the Edge of the World*.

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