BEYOND FRAGMENTATION:
DONALD BARTHELME AND WRITING AS POLITICAL ACT

by

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ABSTRACT

“Beyond Fragmentation: Donald Barthelme and Writing as Political Act” extracts Barthelme from recursive debates over postmodernism and considers him, instead, within the intellectual contexts he himself recognized: the avant-garde, the phenomenological, and the transnational. It is these interests which were summoned by Barthelme in order to develop an aesthetic method characterized by collage, pastiche, and irony, and which together yielded a spirited response to political phenomena of the late twentieth century. I argue that Barthelme was an author who believed language had been corrupted by official discourse and who believed, more importantly, that it could be recovered through acts of combination and re-use. Criticism influenced by the cultural theory of Fredric Jameson has frequently labeled Barthelme’s work a mimesis of an age in which meaning had become devalued by rampant production and consumption. I revise this assumption by arguing that Barthelme’s work reacts to what was in fact a stubbornly efficient use of discourse for purposes of propaganda, bureaucracy, and public relations.

Drawing on the biographical material available, and integrating that material with original archival work, I uncover the specific sources of Barthelme’s political discontent: Watergate, the war in Vietnam, a growing militarization in the United States, and the ideological rigidity of the 1960s counterculture. In three biographical chapters I connect these concerns to Barthelme’s novels and short stories, which represent attempts to create avant-garde objects that might challenge the specific rationalities (the commonality of violence, for example) political action is premised upon. I show
Barthelme inserting political subject matter into texts alongside a formal apparatus that suggests the way such matter had been misconceived and misrepresented, often with horrific consequences. In two chapters of close reading, I first read the short story “Paraguay,” from City Life (1970), as a critique of American neo-imperialism in Latin America. In that piece, Barthelme explores the dual ways--official and cultural--a homogenizing American influence is felt abroad. Next, I compare Barthelme to author and activist Grace Paley, whose story collection Enormous Changes at the Last Minute (1974) provides revealing context for Barthelme’s own political interventions.
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A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

Nearly all of Barthelme’s short stories first appeared in magazines and Barthelme often later revised these stories for book publication. My references to Barthelme’s stories are to those revised texts. I have used two story anthologies, Sixty Stories and Forty Stories, when they feature a short story’s only appearance in book form. Otherwise, I have used the original story collections, which are sadly no longer in print. Collections are abbreviated in citations according to the following: Come Back, Dr. Caligari appears as CMDC, Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts as UPUA, City Life as CL, Great Days as GD, Overnight to Many Distant Cities as OTMDC, Guilty Pleasures as GP, Sixty Stories as SS, Forty Stories as FS, and the non-fiction collection Not-Knowing appears as NK. In the final chapter, Grace Paley’s Enormous Changes at the Last Minute is abbreviated as ECLM.
INTRODUCTION

Writing in his 1983 essay “Not-Knowing,” Donald Barthelme sums up the chief problem faced by writers of the late twentieth century:

The question is, what is the complicity of language in the massive crimes of Fascism, Stalinism or (by implication) our own policies in Vietnam? In the control of societies by the powerful and their busy functionaries? If these abominations are all in some sense facilitated by, made possible by, language, to what degree is that language ruinously contaminated? . . .

(NK 16)

Barthelme would later write that the author does well to look to the “messy” parts of everyday life, advice which seems to suggest how language might be reclaimed from those forces responsible for imperialism, war, and totalitarianism (NK 20). Much of the available criticism, however, describes Barthelme as a passive chronicler of an age in which language and meaning had been contaminated beyond repair by commodification and the excessive production of information. “Fragmented” is the term of choice for this lamentable condition and it is, indeed, a term Barthelme himself once used: the narrator in “See the Moon” at one point famously proclaims, “fragments are the only form I trust” (UPUA 153). But far from declaring admiration or acceptance for an experience without continuity, the narrator’s confession suggests dismay for the still-rigid orders represented by official discourse--what the narrator calls “poppycock” (UPUA 15)--and admiration for the form resistance to that discourse might take.
In short, scholarship has overwhelmingly left Barthelme stranded in retrograde understandings of the postmodern: understandings that, as per Fredric Jameson, emphasize an apolitical adherence to the (yes, fragmented) social logics of postmodernity. I show here that, far from blindly reproducing an age allegedly dominated by consumption and incoherence (and, insofar as pop culture is concerned, the consumption of incoherence), Barthelme’s fictions express a strategically disordered vision of American life at odds with ideological and political certainties. Specifically, they are at odds with the political calculations responsible for Watergate and the war in Vietnam, as well as those intellectual pieties underlying the counterculture of the 1960s.

Recasting Barthelme as a fundamentally political writer requires removing him from the critical discourses surrounding postmodernism (with its emphasis on ontological fragmentation) and placing him within an avant-garde tradition he himself closely studied and linked to political purpose. I have done this by examining Barthelme’s responses to episodes of personal and historical crisis and showing how his fiction embodies those responses through use of collage, irony, and pastiche. I describe, for example, how Barthelme’s exposure to Communist propaganda while serving as a U.S. army reporter in Korea informs parodies of young American radicals in *Snow White* (1967). I explain how his opposition to the war in Vietnam is expressed through the odd mixture of pop-culture, war journalism, and domestic ennui in the story “The Indian Uprising,” from *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968). And later, I link Barthelme’s criticism of U.S. military buildup and corporate invasions into the home

Most scholars who have examined Barthelme’s work have come to quite different conclusions about evidence of any social or political interest. Between 1981 and 1992, seven monographs and one collection of critical essays were dedicated in whole or in major part to Barthelme.¹ He was often read during this period in light of Jameson’s bleak description of the postmodern subject in the essay “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” For Jameson, that subject had become overwhelmed by “a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (71). And, Jameson continues, if the postmodern subject is unable “to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but ‘heaps of fragments’ and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory” (71). Cultural production, in other words, is restricted to an experience of the world dominated by rapid and irrational consumptions of history and of identity.

Lois Gordon, very much in this spirit, looks squarely at Barthelme’s relation to what she calls the “fragmented contemporary condition” and reads Barthelme’s energetic cutting and pasting of modernist sources as a rueful, if instructive, mimesis of that condition (22). And Charles Molesworth insists Barthelme’s fictions reproduce the absurd dislocations of the contemporary world but, crucially, also “acknowledge its familiarity and make it safe” (40). In anticipation of Jameson’s critique, Molesworth
writes that Barthelme offers neither a “sardonic rejection” of the present nor a “naive nostalgia” for the past (34), but Molesworth nonetheless finds such ambivalence useful, as Barthelme instead presents for the reader’s edification “the irrational and fragmented social structures that dominate our lives” (31).

Wayne Stengel, similarly, finds that Barthelme’s work affirms dominant orders by diminishing its alternatives. Stengel argues that the feckless counterculture found in Barthelme’s work offers no reprieve from stifling middle-class norms. Thus, “the real sadness of the human imagination in these tales results from the mind’s inclination to rebel from accepted social standards by forming alternative dreams and desires which seem as stereotyped or predictable as the worlds they attack” (Shape 207).² The stories are here gloomy affirmations, at best “reflections on individuals’ inability to find an artful way out of the morass of modern life” (Shape 208). I agree with Stengel’s central observation: the downtown New York counterculture, as represented in Barthelme’s fictions, fails to represent any workable substitute for bourgeois conformities. Yet I disagree that this failure is an indictment of the work’s political imagination. Instead, I argue in this dissertation that it is often the texts themselves, not scripted forms of rebellion, which represent alternatives to social homogenization.

Larry McCaffery names Barthelme a metafictionist who described his own isolation from meaning and order. Like Jameson, McCaffery links a perceived limitation of expression to a strictly conditional, or historical-logical, effect: “Barthelme’s metafictional examinations of how our symbols and fiction systems operate--or fail to operate--offer direct and revealing insights into the sadness, anxieties, terrors, and
boredom of the modern world" (*Metafictional* 100). For McCaffery, then, the disorder and fragmentation of Barthelme’s texts are simply affirmation of our collective loss of meaning and the alienation of the subject from language.

Since 1992, when the main run of Barthelme scholarship ended, no monographs have appeared, and Barthelme criticism has been relegated to a modest number of essays and book chapters. Christopher Donovan appears to articulate the academy’s change of heart in his study *Postmodern Counternarratives* when he dismisses Barthelme as “largely irrelevant” (13). Donovan’s complaint is rooted in the familiar conviction that Barthelme and peers like John Barth had set out merely to reproduce the subject’s experience of postmodernity. He writes:

> But even if the seminal postmodernists framed the challenge of their bulky texts--their indistinguishable characters, inscrutable plots, and erudite conceptual systems--in order to represent or embody the moribund conditions of society, they chose to do so to such an exaggerated degree that their work ultimately constitutes an affront to the reader, adding insult to injury, so to speak, the storyteller managing his story, depriving it of its replenishing effects. (12)

The methodologies of these writers, according to Donovan, prohibit a sustained consideration of industry, culture, and politics. They are too willingly preoccupied by the pleasure of their own creations and abandon the public to the incomprehensible. Form becomes theme, according to this reasoning, rather than procedure. These are familiar
criticisms of the postmodern, perhaps, but are striking because Donovan identifies a second wave of postmodern authors (he focuses on Don DeLillo, Tim O’Brien, Charles Johnson, and Paul Auster) he believes manage to demystify master narratives through irony while constructing a provisional narrative field that retains concepts of truth and reality.

Such emphasis on the ability of certain (privileged) authors to acknowledge narrative artifice while retaining meaning can be traced to Linda Hutcheon’s seminal work, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989). The disruptions of postmodern fiction are, according to Hutcheon, ideal processes for understanding historical memory, as “postmodern relativity and provisionality are not causes for despair; they are to be acknowledged as perhaps the very conditions of historical knowledge” (64). Timothy Parrish, in his study on the postmodern novel, extends Hutcheon’s argument, writing that if the postmodern reveals how history approximates fiction, “we should treat some types of fiction as we do history” (*Apocalypse* 6). He argues Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and *Song of Solomon* (1977), Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason and Dixon* (1997), and DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), among others, retell history from various pluralist perspectives. Much like Donovan, however, Parrish pointedly distinguishes his subject texts from work by Barthelme, William H. Gass, Robert Coover, William Gaddis, and Barth, a group Parrish calls too skeptical of language to insist on the truthfulness, as do Morrison, et al, of their narrative versions of U.S. history: “Where Gass and Barthelme, say, practice linguistic skepticism as a mode of perceiving that never gets beyond itself,
Morrison and [Denis] Johnson write to affirm a version of communal truth that its practitioners, or believers, assume to be transcendent and enduring” (*Apocalypse 5*).

The intellectual groundwork had been laid for the selective exclusions made by Donovan and Parrish years before. In a series of essays during the 1970s, Gore Vidal offered a broad censure of avant-garde postmodern texts by Barthelme, Grace Paley, Gass, Pynchon, and Barth, authors Vidal dismissed as elitists writing for the college classroom. Vidal’s conclusions came at the beginning of a long period of anti-postmodern sentiment, still ongoing, which includes texts like Terry Eagleton’s *The Illusions of Postmodernism* and “Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking After the New Left,” by Sean McCann and Michael Szalay. What these texts often reveal is just how contested postmodernism is, as there remains little agreement as to who qualifies as a postmodernist, whose postmodernism has submitted to the dangers of fabulation and relativism, and who deserves a place in the liberal canon.

I begin my project to restore Barthelme’s reputation as both a meaningful author and an author of meaning with a three-chapter critical biography in which I describe Barthelme’s ascension from Houston cub reporter to member of the New York arts vanguard. I draw primarily from two texts in this section: *Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound* (2001), a memoir-cum-biography by Barthelme’s second wife, Helen Moore Barthelme, and *Hiding Man*, a more comprehensive study published in 2009 by Tracy Daugherty, an author of fiction and Barthelme’s former writing student. Daugherty’s biography opened up many interpretive possibilities for a body of work that
has often seemed closed to readers. Daugherty documents the full range of Barthelme’s associations, collaborations, and friendships, all of which have tremendous importance for an incomparably referential style of writing. Although Barthelme died in 1989 from throat cancer, Daugherty is able to vividly render him through interviews, letters, and an exhaustive pursuit of the many source texts and events Barthelme’s work is informed by. Daugherty also must be credited for describing with great clarity those times and places most formative for Barthelme: the aspirational cultural scene of Houston in the mid 1950s and the tremendous energy of the downtown New York avant-garde in the early 1960s.

Following the publication of *Hiding Man*, there was an opening, as yet unfilled, for scholarship that would connect Barthelme’s fiction to the private, intellectual, and political issues to which he was dedicated. Daugherty himself makes great strides in addressing this gap, although he largely foregoes committing to a characterization of a consistent politics beyond a broad anti-authoritarianism and a sense of civic responsibility. Further, I have added to the existing biographical record by presenting previously unpublished letters and typescripts discovered during archival research at the University of Houston. Letters written by Barthelme during the launch of *Forum*, a journal he edited while a student at the university, are of particular interest, since they establish an early commitment to challenging the reading public. In addition, I have drawn on early typescripts of *The Dead Father* (1975), as well as letters between Barthelme and his own father, in order to speculate on the genesis of the quasi-mythical character of the novel’s title. The more abject Dead Father of the typescripts is unlike
the final, occasionally regal figure who signifies a range of political, spiritual, and cultural fathers. Instead, the father of the drafts is an unremarkable drunk who turns belligerent in the evenings while reading *Time* magazine. This figure closely resembles Barthelme himself, who often struggled with fatherhood and the requirements of home life. The transcripts thus suggest a correspondence in Barthelme’s work between domestic concerns and the more vividly social concerns of the novel, which offers opportunities to understand the rationale for Barthelme’s political critique.

I have also made extensive use of the Barthelme essays and interviews collected by Kim Herzinger in *Not-Knowing* (1997) and consulted as well an unedited version of a *Paris Review* interview preserved in the archives. I have found that Barthelme is consistently his own best critic; his two essays on writing, “After Joyce” and “Not-Knowing,” offer insightful bookends to his writing career and are extensively treated here. In “After Joyce,” the earlier of the two essays, Barthelme praises the avant-garde modernist text, describing it as a subversive art object that remains stubbornly independent from the ordinary. He moves, in “Not-Knowing,” toward a revised understanding of the ordinary as the place where experiences at odds with normalizing behavioral scripts lurk. These essays have not yet been considered sufficiently, if only because most Barthelme scholarship predates the release of *Not-Knowing*. They provide important evidence he was engaged less with rote debates over postmodernism than he was with determining how fiction might adapt the modernist avant-garde’s methods for producing whimsical antagonisms to war, corruption, and homogeny.
I begin the first chapter with Barthelme’s upbringing in Houston and describe his troubled relationships with his father and the church. I also discuss Barthelme’s entanglements with censors as a young army reporter in Korea from 1953 to 1954. Barthelme’s simultaneous exposure to Communist propaganda (according to Daugherty, the radio in the newspaper office was usually tuned to Radio Moscow [99]) and to official U.S. public relations rhetoric shaped a body of work attuned to the transnational flow of false discourse. Following the war, Barthelme returned to Houston and enrolled in Maurice Natanson’s class in phenomenology at the University of Houston. Natanson, a Husserlian who wrote on the phenomenological literary modes of Sartre and Camus, introduced Barthelme to a philosophy of aesthetic method dedicated to challenging totalizing discourses of officialdom, those already acutely visible to him following the war and in his new job as a public relations editor. Natanson’s work stressed the mutability of the conscious mind in the face of the imaginative, and his influence is apparent even in Barthelme’s first collection of stories, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (1964). These early stories feature the basic components of his more developed work: satiric irony, bizarre happenings, and a spirited mixture of the popular, the literary, and the everyday. Lacking in character or plot development, these texts leave one certain a mockery has been made of education, the arts, the church, the family, and nearly anything for which decorum is usually reserved.

Barthelme is routinely noted for friendships with Barth, Coover, Gass, and Pynchon, but the grouping together of these postmodern luminaries often reinforces suspicions that postmodern writing was uniformly dedicated to documenting the
disruptions of postmodernity. Barthelme’s relationships, and the cultural literacy those relationships suggest, was in fact uniquely broad. In 1963, Harold Rosenberg invited Barthelme to edit the arts journal Location in New York City, and Barthelme grew close to a collection of artists, writers, and intellectuals who don’t easily fit into the postmodern genealogy. He frequently visited Willem de Kooning’s studio, for example, and also established friendships with Susan Sontag, the art critic Thomas Hess, and Roger Angell, Barthelme’s editor at The New Yorker. In chapter two I trace the effects of such varied influences as collage, the journal Tel Quel, and abstraction to the formal innovations of his most well-known story collections, Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts and City Life (1970), as well as to his two most popular novels, Snow White (1967) and The Dead Father.

These texts use collage—the juxtaposition of bits of cultural effluvia represented by both text and image—to pursue the “ineffable” truths of the unknown, which he deemed more attuned to human need than the facts proffered by official language (KN 65). Mixed in, too, are satires of the emergent student protest movement and Richard Nixon. I discuss here Barthelme’s disaffection from the New Left of the 1960s, which, as my reading of Snow White and my discussion of Barthelme’s response to young radicals he encountered makes clear, Barthelme saw as prone to incoherent propagandizing. Although he was opposed to the war in Vietnam (Marion Barthelme, email), Barthelme’s fiction captures a skepticism toward the effectiveness of the marches, broadsides, and sit-ins that were the hallmarks of the protest movement. He turned to his fiction to carry out acts of dissent: to irony, collage, and the use of loosely-
determined symbolisms. One result of these efforts was *The Dead Father*, a novel that manages to satirize Nixon while invoking other symbols of unwelcome paternity. The Dead Father embodies a host of political, ecclesiastical, and cultural figures, a sliding signification that grants readers a measure of interpretive play implicitly critical of the forms of paternalist supremacy on trial. Creative modes of production and reception, along with erotically-charged passages, point to the pleasures that might neutralize the dead fathers contained within the novel.

*The Dead Father,* however, is not the subject of extensive discussion here. For while *Snow White* and *The Dead Father* are the works Barthelme is most identified with, he often struggled, by his own admission, to make the novel format work. The very things the novel requires--sustained narrative, exposition--are precisely those things Barthelme, in words he used to describe Beckett, “throws away” (*NK* 9). It is rather the short stories--bursts of character, action, and humor that briefly mesmerize the reader--that showcase Barthelme’s signature use of parody and collage.\(^4\) Thus, I devote my attention in this chapter to the short stories that deal with the American political leadership and the war in Vietnam: “Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning,” “The Indian Uprising,” “Report,” “Game,” and “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel.” I show how these selections attempt to move beyond conventional modes of dissent by telling stories that transform American political leaders and the wars (cold and hot) they wage from authentic to performative, and from noble to grotesque.

The third chapter continues to document Barthelme’s unease with the counterculture of the 1960s and turns to its legacy in the decade following. He persists,
during this late stage in his career, in critiquing the programmatic political and cultural opposition he had first satirized in *Snow White*. The collection *Great Days* (1979), for example, describes a roster of aging radicals given to producing hackneyed pieces of art and music. It is perhaps ambivalence for the U.S. cultural scene that explains why Barthelme became increasingly focused during this period on members of the transnational avant-garde (notably, Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Bernhard, and Peter Handke) and can be found, in interviews, trying to locate his own place within it. Handke’s *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, in particular, emerges as a paramount late influence for Barthelme. In that novel, Handke develops a poetics of self-inquiry that he uses to tell the story of his family’s escape from East Berlin years earlier. He represents conventional literary discourses as one more site of totalizing subjugation that must be evaded. That novel was bound to be edifying to an author like Barthelme, who had long believed in the liberating potential of form.

I also discuss in the third chapter Barthelme's admiration for Milan Kundera, who refuses, in *The Art of the Novel*, to privilege the disruptive role of fiction in Europe, choosing, instead, to pose fiction as an essential alternative to monocultural political logics wherever they happen to appear. According to Kundera, the uncertainty of the avant-garde powerfully threatens the accumulation of power in both West and East. Kundera's belief that literature of imaginative complexity resisted a global phenomenon of Kafkan authoritarianism manages to articulate both Barthelme's political fears and his aesthetic methods. Kundera insisted avant-garde fiction held a universal activist value. Barthelme, however, plainly envied a European status of authorship that provoked
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genuine discomfort at the highest levels of state power. Subsequently, Barthelme’s
typically-overlooked late novels, *Paradise* (1986) and *The King* (1990), along with the story
collection in *Sixty Stories* (1981), convey an attitude of self-questioning; fears of efficacy
are sublimated into dread over mortality and sexual potency. These novels bring
Barthelme’s inquiries into the politics of erotic expression to an anguished end, as they
follow subjects who have transcended ideological limits on desire but rushed perhaps
too quickly toward the satisfaction of that desire.

Part two of this dissertation offers more sustained treatments of the politics of
Barthelme’s fiction through close reading and comparative analysis. In my fourth
chapter, I argue the short story “Paraguay” scrutinizes cultural and official neo-
colonialisms at work in Latin America. Written the summer after Nelson Rockefeller’s
1969 fact-finding trip to South America on behalf of the Nixon administration, “Paraguay”
uses parody and pastiche to construct a timely critique of U.S. empire in its various
forms. The story borrows its opening paragraph from Jane E. Duncan’s *A Summer Ride
through Western Tibet* (1906), an early twentieth-century travel narrative, and later
integrates a modified selection from Le Corbusier’s *The Modulor* (1954). Use of the
former suggests a skepticism of American influence in the region, while the latter points
toward the dangers of forced standardization in the global arts. In “Paraguay,”
emissaries of a Western cultural movement attempt to understand and assist the
Paraguayan population but manage only to normalize that population racially, culturally,
and politically. The story implicates what John Carlos Rowe calls the chief limitation of
modern U.S. liberalism: an assimilatory logic represented by “the U.S. nation, whose
form is presumed to encompass cultural, racial, political, and sexual differences, but only as long as they fit the national symbology” (11). More than a political allegory, the story represents a distinctly postmodern take on social commentary, in which the text’s own indeterminacies suggest the difficulty of surrendering the very tendencies being scrutinized: habits of seeing non-U.S. peoples as subjectless, placeless, and passive.

Barthelme has a habit of expressing self-doubt in his texts, and this can obscure his political ambitions. In my fifth chapter I read Barthelme alongside Paley, another political writer who was also a neighbor and close friend to Barthelme. By reading Barthelme alongside Paley, who was less burdened by concerns of efficacy, it becomes clear why he is not credited more consistently for being overtly political. Paley’s *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974) describes women who live and tell stories according to an ethics of maternal nurture and responsibility. I argue that this ethics extends to the collection’s omissive form, which avoids standards of communication she elsewhere links to masculinity and the war in Vietnam. A utopian politics ultimately emerges from the collection’s many indeterminacies; it is one which I argue is inspired not only by maternity, but by the traditional leftist quest to interrupt reified narratives. In Barthelme’s stories, however, a politically-subversive ethics of erotic pleasure is sometimes complicated by the taboos of fatherhood and domestic life.

I discuss here the work of Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse, whose descriptions of a libidinous experience with reformist energies informed the work of both Barthelme and Paley. Work by these authors encouraged Barthelme to explore erotic opportunities in his fiction as a means to challenge repressive logics responsible for
human destruction. Paley seems to draw specifically from Marcuse in staging the unknown in her work as a space for the satisfaction of (maternal) desire, one in a dialectic with canonical knowledge. Not only does the chapter provide an original reading of the politics of Paley’s aesthetic method, but it also describes differences between these two authors that explain why Barthelme, who placed the individual before ideology, sometimes questioned his own influence.

Even for one of Barthelme’s most reliable defenders, the notion of a decidedly logocentric analysis of the sort I have proposed is anathema. Jerome Klinkowitz argues that the partial, deferred meanings in Barthelme’s work represent a pleasure that needs no materialist justification. He insists, “social satire or Freudian analysis miss the essence of Barthelme’s art” (9). Klinkowitz finds that a play aspiring to nothing but the joy of combination demonstrates the failings of modernism’s socially corrective ambitions (the attempts to provide order where there is none). As Klinkowitz’s position suggests, more than twenty years after Barthelme wrote the essay “Not-Knowing,” critics have much too sporadically wrestled with the central goal he lays out in that text or investigated in what measure he achieved it: to find the “meliorative” properties of a language that Barthelme otherwise associated with public relations jargon, war-making, and propaganda (NK 24).

There are indeed critics who have taken up the themes Barthelme lays out in “Not-Knowing,” but they are few. Paul Maltby reasons in his book *Dissident Postmodernists* that Barthelme was part of an “adversarial postmodernism” which
pasted mass media to reveal its domination over the subject (11). Maltby insists the characters in his stories are often “estranged from the sign-systems” they use, a gap that suggests a “critical distance” (48). Language in Barthelme’s fiction is, according to Maltby, devoid of any use-value, an observation in keeping with a Marxist critique that links the abundance of language dreck in Barthelme’s work to “the poor condition of language in a society whose channels are saturated with degraded messages” (74). It is collage, writes Maltby, that finally allows Barthelme to “transcend the degraded condition of language by investing it with fresh signifying power” (75). Maltby defines the scope of Barthelme’s protest rather narrowly, however, as a critique of political economy and its mass-cultural institutions. Though Maltby acknowledges postmodernism’s response to “the political implications of language,” this is rather broadly defined as the rise of “white, bourgeois meaning-systems” reliant on market-driven history (22, 80).

Barthelme was himself rather wary of leftist critiques of capitalism and mass-culture, which are more notable in the work of those authors whose careers followed Barthelme and who were working at a time, after the Cold War had ended, when the global marketplace had arguably replaced the state as the primary site of power. John Duvall calls DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985), for example, a “satiric examination of the ways in which contemporary America is implicated through proto-fascist urges” (127). But the totalizing aspects of U.S. life in that novel come, writes Duvall, not from state-sanctioned ideology, but from a consumer experience that had replaced authenticity with the consumption of simulacra. Barthelme, writing in the decades before DeLillo and against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, is less convinced institutional control doesn’t
still yet play a major role in American life, and though he turns his attention at moments
to late-capitalist consumer culture, in Barthelme’s textual universe that culture is more or
less consistent with political ideologies of conformity. Marcuse, in his 1966 introduction
to *Eros and Civilization* (1955), articulates how consumer culture was then still linked to
state power: he writes of an “economic and political dominion” that seeks to satisfy
desire “within the framework of profit and desire” (xxiv, xxiii).

Maltby writes that the meanings generated by Barthelme’s collage aesthetic are
“meanings which cannot be accommodated by prevailing meaning systems” (75), and
while this is in places undoubtedly true, it also underplays the extent to which many of
Barthelme’s stories articulate rather precisely-conceived critiques of the government--of
U.S. policy in Latin America, for example, in “Paraguay,” the subject of my fourth
chapter. Barthelme was certainly capable of creating straightforward satire, just as he
was capable of creating rational, critical subjects, a conclusion that Michael Zeitlin
arrives at in his essay “Donald Barthelme and the President of the United States.” Zeitlin
finds Barthelme’s stories reveal traces of a politicized subject at odds with
postmodernity’s mediated identities. Specifically, Zeitlin argues that the narrator of “The
President” contemplates authority in a manner consistent with psychoanalytic (and
therefore humanizing) modes of admiration and rebellion. Such responses, says Zeitlin,
indicate the resilience of a rational, reflective subject during a period increasingly bereft
of authentic personhood. This subject suggests an antipathy for the dangers lurking
within the mystique of the political persona: “For Barthelme, writing in 1964, on the eve
of America’s full-scale escalation of the war in Vietnam, some version of an American fascism-in-readiness is the political unconscious of his narrative . . .” (“President” 70).

According to Philip Nel, who has written one of the most recent essays on Barthelme, it is the reader who is prompted to bring critical reason to Barthelme’s stories. Nel finds Barthelme’s surreal use of cliché demands that the reader take notice of language, feel its incongruities, and perhaps recognize “society’s structural inconsistencies” (81); for Nel, the moment of reader response is the moment historical consciousness enters the text. And indeed, conclusions about the efficacy of Barthelme’s critique seem to come to this: is the reader befuddled by irony, dramaturgical dialogue, inconsistent use of narrative convention, and the logic of dreams? Or does the reader find herself in a state of transcendent illumination, witness to those creative freedoms which symbolize all that is denied and concealed from her? Every reader, will, of course, decide for him or herself, but the biographical evidence contained in this dissertation suggests that Barthelme, at least, saw himself in close relation with the reader, was perplexed by accusations of gratuitous difficulty, and remained consistently hopeful he might participate in radical change through texts that offered the indirect argumentation of avant-garde aesthetic adventure.  

Among Barthelme’s more approving readers, one tends to find a stance of rare sympathy. Charles Baxter’s elegiac essay “The Donald Barthelme Blues” is representative:
Like his creation Hokie Mokie, the King of Jazz, no one could top Barthelme at . . . these collages built from castoff verbal junk--and imitation was beside the point, because his work was not a compendium of stylistic tics but grew out of--has anyone bothered to say this?--a spiritual enterprise owned up to in the work. . . .” (158)

Which is to say, opposition to perceived misunderstandings and the desire to recoup and defend an author who retains a loyal following (particularly amongst writers of fiction) has itself become an established tradition. And yet, such pugilism remains validated by those understandings of the postmodern which pose Barthelme as a simulationist or an incompetent deconstructor of narrative.⁶

If Barthelme’s work can be said to evoke a dominant logic, it is one that was in his lifetime only first emergent: a global power expressed foremost by the state but which is ultimately a stateless, adaptive form that operates through the production of language, relation, and behavior. It is that which Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have described as “Empire”: a power “relatively autonomous from the sovereign nation-states,” that is “capable of functioning as the center of the new world order, exercising over it an effective regulation, and, when necessary, coercion” (15). Though there is much that separates Barthelme from this Marxist vision of stage-oriented capitalism, his late work, in particular, anticipates a new global order in which the state is subservient to transnational phenomena of coercion and normalization. Barthelme’s America is subject to a host of unsuspected dangers most Americans might have identified with Cold-War Europe or the dictatorships of Latin America: war-mongering, the creep of the
bureaucratic into the home, the coordinated use of propaganda, and the enforcement of ideological conformity.

The biographical approach I offer in this dissertation allows Barthelme to emerge as a writer who was more than symptom or counter-symptom of postmodernity. I instead portray him as a consistent opponent of reckless political authority and what he saw as knee-jerk pseudo-revolution. I have attempted to make clear that Barthelme’s aesthetic philosophy, which borrows much from the emphasis on an expanding, protean consciousness offered by phenomenology, belongs to an avant-garde tradition of protest that models an instructive intellectual iconoclasm for unsuspecting audiences.\textsuperscript{7}
Notes

1 See Klinkowitz, Gordon, Maltby, McCaffery, Molesworth, Couturier, Stengel, and the volume edited by Patteson.

2 Patrick O’Donnell argues something similar in his essay on *Paradise*. See chapter three.

3 For a fuller discussion of Vidal’s response to the postmodern, and Barthelme’s reaction to the vituperations of Vidal and others, see chapter two.

4 It is worth noting that Barthelme is an outlier among the canonical postmodernists he is generally grouped with in this regard. Pynchon, Coover, and Barth are all known for novels of excess--excess of knowledge, of size, and of historiographical ambition--whereas Barthelme follows in the example of Beckett, who writes by subtraction. This is one clue that Barthelme is not interested in rewriting history, as *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), *A Public Burning* (1977), and *The Sot Weed Factor* (1967), all arguably do. Instead, Barthelme is interested in resisting the telling of history as it is usually told, or even, as it might be retold within a liberal postmodern tradition. Brevity could be seen as an ideal mode for an epiphanic pleasure that offers an alternative to a grim twentieth-century history. Barthelme’s writing is ultimately rooted in an ecstatic mode of possibility that takes on political resonance.

5 Of note for its insistence that Barthelme’s satire was in a critical dialogue with political and social normativities is “The Politics of Playful Confrontation: Barthelme as Disgruntled Liberal,” by John Whalen-Bridge. Whalen-Bridge sees Barthelme relying on
an ironic mode that suggests detachment from unseemly political discourses, whereas I locate Barthelme as squarely within these discourses.

6 Such understandings also limit Paley, the other key subject of this dissertation, whose texts invoke the historical moment in a way that is neither blandly representational (and therefore historically irrelevant) nor simply parodic. Paley’s metafictional passages on narrative inquire into the link between power and storytelling in ways that work with Hutcheon’s critical apparatus, but she is less interested in the ways a ludic irony remakes the past than she is in encouraging imagination of the moments that are to come.

7 I’m thinking here of the dadaist’s anti-art performances in particular. Against ideals and ruling aesthetics, the dadaists claimed to practice difference, “without cause and without theory,” as Tristan Tzara would have it in *Dada 3* (38). The performances at the Cabaret Voltaire had aimed to summon an experience outside the domain of the professional classes, and to demonstrate, as Tzara wrote, that “Everything one looks at is false” (39). See Russell for a description of the continuous genealogy of the avant-garde. Russell separates the avant-garde from modernism, as the former takes on a “prophetic and activist role” (7), whereas the latter reflects declining values of culture and history. This same distinction in many ways separates my reading of Barthelme from those critics who read his work as a representation of a hysterically entropic age.
PART ONE
CHAPTER ONE
Discovering the “Power of Revolt”: 1931-1966

Klinkowitz: Do you have any favorite comedians, and reasons for liking them?

Barthelme: The government.¹

Donald Barthelme was born in Philadelphia on April 7, 1931 to Helen Bechtold Barthelme and Donald Barthelme, Sr., an architecture student at the University of Pennsylvania and the eventual protégé of Beaux-Arts master Paul Philippe Cret. Barthelme, Sr. never achieved the renown of Cret or of his one-time collaborator Frank Lloyd Wright, but he was a voice for an architecture guided less by formalist ideals than by humanist anticipations of the interactions between individual and structure, or what, in an impassioned letter to his son, he suggestively called “environment”: “If you start with the concept of a building as a thing you immediately bring into play a complete set of rules, thinking, concepts, criteria, etc., etc., that relates to objects,” and this “leads to a street lined with objects, a city full of objects, and an entire built environment consisting solely of objects” (letter to Donald Barthelme). According to Barthelme, Sr., the architect is responsible not for objects and things but for environments that might have “subjective consequences.”²

That the modernist structure could transcend academic exercise was evident by local reaction to the Mies van der Rohe-inspired house Barthelme, Sr. designed for his
family. Barthelme recalled in an interview with Jerome Klinkowitz that the house “was wonderful to live in but strange to see on the Texas prairie. On Sundays people used to park their cars out on the street and stare. We had a routine, the family, on Sunday. We used to get up from Sunday dinner, if enough cars had parked, and run out in front of the house in a sort of chorus line, doing high kicks” (NK 200). Though likely an exaggerated (if not apocryphal) account given his father’s severity, Barthelme took evident pride in the home’s ability to startle. The account, and his affection for his father’s humanist architecture, says something of the aesthetic philosophy Barthelme would later develop: forms dreamed up by an artist can, through provocation, transform daily fare into something strange and new and can trigger a new awareness of one’s immediate world.

If it was Barthelme, Sr.’s progressive feeling on the role of structure that would shape Barthelme’s own vision of literary function, it was his father’s habit of inscrutable command that would influence his choice of subject. Both Tracy Daugherty’s biography and Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound, an earlier, partial biography by Barthelme’s second wife, Helen Moore Barthelme, describe Barthelme’s early life as a struggle to escape twin authorities: an overbearing father and the moralizing discipline of the Catholic church. Phillip Lopate recalls Barthelme describing his father as “very uptight” and speculating this was caused by a fear of children (128). Helen suggests Barthelme, Sr. could be both condescending and competitive, and writes that Barthelme and his father routinely quarreled over “ideas or writers” (53). She further writes that Barthelme felt his father adhered to a process of “continual disapproval” in his treatment
of his sons (53). Barthelme’s youthful pursuits, including jazz, journalism, and films, all met with Barthelme, Sr.’s vocal displeasure.

And yet it was Barthelme, Sr. who seems to have been the first one to stir his son’s intellectual ambition and, ironically, his confidence. Daugherty writes, following interviews with Barthelme’s younger siblings, “the Barthelme children learned from their father that anything was possible if they put enough thought into it, and put it into words” (24). Further, though he expected unfailing obedience inside the home, he encouraged “unconventional thought outside the home” (24). Afraid Barthelme was wasting his intellect on frivolity, Barthelme, Sr. gave his son a copy of Marcel Raymond’s From Baudelaire to Surrealism when he was in high school (NK 275), an introduction to the avant-garde that would have a transformative effect on Barthelme’s life and career. Barthelme, Sr. was, after all, in his professional life something of an iconoclast, and a breaker of rules, a quality which his son absorbed and redirected back at his father.

From his mother, Barthelme inherited a keen wit, which he used, as he would later use ironic humor, to assail the opposition; Helen observed he could be “sharp and sometimes biting” when dealing with his father (53).

Helen was Barthelme’s companion in Houston from 1955 to 1963, the years immediately before he moved to New York City. Her biography, which is frequently doting (and forgiving), portrays the young man who emerged from the crucible of the Barthelme home as a figure of great confidence and expectations, with an understandable sensitivity to unwanted interference. She writes that as a young man Barthelme resented his father’s iron fist, but he himself always had rather clear ideas of
how things ought to go—“autocratic” is how she describes him (16). His aversion to the displays of authority that so dominate adolescence was nothing short of total: he was so distraught after being denied the newspaper editorship at St. Thomas High School that in February, 1948 he fled with a friend to Mexico City. Helen reports him later confiding that he believed himself “too strong willed” for the discipline-heavy parochial school (12). After transferring to and finally receiving his diploma from Lamar High School in the River Oaks neighborhood of Houston, he resisted his parents’ urgings to attend an Ivy League school and instead entered the University of Houston. According to Helen, Barthelme recalled he was “unwilling to submit himself to the authority and discipline of a more traditional university” (14). This spirited rebellion continued as his formidable writing skills, showcased at the campus newspaper, gained him a staff position as cultural critic at the *Houston Post*. Although a newspaper neophyte, Barthelme loathed unwelcome interruption by Editor Hubert Roussel and Barthelme “lived in fear of Roussel’s caustic criticism” (HMB 19).

Barthelme’s decision to leave St. Thomas represented the beginning of a steady movement away from the Catholic Church (both his later political philosophy and the travails of his personal life conflicted with monotheist models of ecclesiastical power). In 1981, when J.D. O’Hara suggested, in response to comments made earlier during an interview for *The Paris Review*, that “you seem not to believe in God,” Barthelme would only reveal that he was “willing to believe that there’s a central principle somewhere that I don’t understand” (interview by O’Hara 10). The response was in keeping with the phenomenological metaphysics he discovered as a philosophy student at the University
of Houston, which encouraged the subject to imagine orders beyond the visible so as to better understand one’s own consciousness. As for whether that ineffable might be the elaborately structured one offered by the church, Barthelme is quite clear in his response, in which he points to the imperfection of the most visibly manifested institutional authority, the government: “[God] troubles me only in the sense that there’s a government that I know, in our country, an imperfect one, and I sort of see things as hierarchies” (10).

Despite Barthelme’s consistent disapproval of the church, Daugherty and Helen both attribute much of Barthelme’s later formal and ethical interests to his Catholicism. Helen, for example, attributes a “pure idealism and seriousness of heart” in Barthelme’s fiction to his Catholic education (12). Indeed, the Basilian fathers who ran St. Thomas were known for social justice causes, including a lengthy campaign to provide support for Mexican migrant workers in the Houston area. And Daugherty reports that the school’s curriculum emphasized the work of Dante and Thomas Aquinas, authors chosen for their exploration of the transformational power of moral action (if also of the dangers of sin) and “whose writings would echo throughout [Barthelme’s] work” (34). Daugherty revisits this theme later in his book when discussing Barthelme’s involvement with the PEN organization’s campaign to release dissident intellectuals in the early 1970s: “For Don, now in his early forties, political conscience was inextricable from a traditional, almost religious, notion of morality that valued generosity and tolerance--values linked to his Catholic schooling and his father’s modernist crusade” (377). While this is no doubt true to an extent, it perhaps diminishes the scope of a political
awakening inspired by engagement with the historical and cultural phenomena of the 1950s and 1960s, beginning with his time as a reporter for the U.S. army.

A twenty-two-year-old Barthelme was drafted into the Korean War and arrived at the front on July 27, 1953, the day the armistice was enacted. The unexpectedly peaceful state of affairs and his quick reassignment to the public information office at division headquarters resulted initially in a largely happy experience for Barthelme. At headquarters, Barthelme wrote news releases for the division newspaper, a shot at war journalism that thrilled a literary romantic such as Barthelme. He was careful not to relay in letters too much of his excitement, but the reports contained obvious enthusiasm for finding himself, Hemingway-like, on recently-active frontlines, where men now spent the day drinking beer and planning visits to whorehouses in Tokyo (HMB 23).

Within a few weeks, however, letters home began to convey a deep dissatisfaction. His superiors rejected story ideas they found dangerous, such as an investigation into reports of intra-squad fragging (24). His unhappiness with the censors stemmed in part from the same defiant character that had bristled at editorial interference while he was a cub reporter for the Houston Post, but it was also a byproduct of a more specific disillusionment with national narratives. In a letter to his friend Joe Maranto, he admitted there were “sunny pictures being painted in Stateside publications” and connected these to the “indoctrination classes” he was made to sit through, comparing the latter to 1984, Orwell’s famous anti-propaganda novel (24). Adding to his impression was his observation of a congressional visit that amounted to
photo-ops followed by extravagant vacations for officials in Tokyo (29). He recalled that the newsroom radio was frequently turned to Radio Moscow, then in the habit of broadcasting English-language propaganda (HMB 24), a tuning selection no doubt meant as a show of cheek by irreverent newspaper men but which, in the wake of the public relations machinations he had witnessed, likely left Barthelme with the impression his reporting belonged to a transnational accumulation of governmental disinformation and double-speak.

In his final piece for the *Indianhead*, his army division’s newspaper, Barthelme wrote powerfully and with a worldly maturity about the final moments before the ceasefire took effect, a passage all the more impressive since it was informed by interviews rather than personal experience:

At 2154 hours, regiment ordered all shooting stopped.

At 2200, despite many warnings, men dashed from their bunks, shed their flak jackets, and stood in little groups on the edge of a no-man’s land that was suddenly safe.

On the opposite side of the line, the Chinese poured out of their bunkers and caves by the hundreds. They waved and shouted unintelligible English words and phrases. Many wore peculiar dead-white garments. Many sat out in the open and began to eat.

Men got the feeling that something, or a part of something, was finished.

KATUSAs began singing quietly among themselves. (HMB 31)
The U.S. army could not prevent him from staging its final victory as a moment of stunning ambiguity. Barthelme was already pushing back against conventional narratives—here, nationalist narratives of victory and moral supremacy. The article also, quite significantly, anticipated Barthelme’s emerging interest in the failure of discourse within politicized spheres.

By the end of his military assignment he had developed a strong aversion to any sort of information management. When Maranto wrote back to Barthelme with news that he was considering a job in advertising, Barthelme wrote back, enraged, calling the industry a “cess pool” and a “disaster,” and demanded, ludicrously, that Maranto withhold from making any career decisions until Barthelme could send further instructions (HMB 32). It is therefore easy to imagine Barthelme’s dismay when in 1955, soon after returning from the war, he reluctantly took a job with the University of Houston public relations department. In the story “See the Moon,” from *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), his second story collection, the narrator refers to a job he once had at his old school, and describes a placement officer asking, “You seem married, mature, malleable, how would you like to affiliate yourself with us here at the old school? We have a spot for a poppycock man, to write the admiral’s speeches. Have you ever done poppycock?” (*UPUA* 159). The poppycock writer is he who famously insists “fragments are the only form I trust” (164), a statement Barthelme lamented had been taken as his own articulation of a cynical worldview, and which he was often at pains to explain was simply “a statement by the character about what he is feeling at that particular moment. I hope that whatever I think about aesthetics would be a shade
more complicated than that” \((NK\ 205)\). The character’s allegiance to fragments is, then, a response to those respectable but ultimately disingenuous modes of rhetoric he was instructed to compose, and Barthelme’s penchant for disassembly can perhaps be traced to this: a youth spent navigating the production of propaganda and institutional publicity in the years leading up to the Vietnam War.

These were not the unimpassioned complaints of an armchair-radical-in-the-making. Indeed, around this time there appeared signs of the depression that would haunt Barthelme for much of his life. He worried in his letters that the experiences in the information office had left something “permanently gone” from him \((HMB\ 33)\). And a few months before leaving Korea, Don wrote a gloomy letter to Maranto laying out plans for an advanced degree in English that would lead him to theater criticism in New York. He then worried, “this master plan is of course subject to being screwed up by a number of things: recall into the army, for one, a third world war, the fall of the H bomb, divorce, anything” \((34)\). Barthelme’s personal despair would often be fed by these kinds of \((parodied)\) secular eschatological fears.

In what was likely an attempt to quiet these mounting anxieties, Barthelme dedicated himself to writing, and he appeared to Helen to be interested “solely in literature and the arts” after returning from Korea \((55)\). Even before returning home, Barthelme explained by letter that an early attempt at fiction had little invested in the “historical past” \((26)\). He was more interested in aesthetic invention as an exercise in thwarting the banal. His plan was for an “unlove story” he likened to the unbirthdays in
Alice and Wonderland (26). Barthelme had not yet consciously connected the antagonistic potential of the surrealist logics described by Raymond to his growing frustration with official rhetorics, although the early stories certainly suggest hostility for public relations and political discourses. He framed his stories not as a response to but as an escape from fears of war and military service: as Helen points out, the stories were opportunities to transcend workaday language and mundane experience for a man who was quickly outgrowing Houston’s cultural offerings. Helen notes that during this period Barthelme expressed to her a desire to “explore his own consciousness, his ‘dissatisfaction’ with the world and his desire to go someplace ‘where everything is different’” (95).

His early stories are attempts to achieve this alterity. As the narrator of “Hiding Man” approvingly notes while sitting in the cinema—one of Barthelme’s favored routes of escape—“Flight is always available, concealment is always possible” (CBDC 27). Barthelme would shortly aim to draw his readers away from the real with equal enthusiasm, and would do so in a way that felt less private, as these stories very often do. “Florence Green is 81,” for example, is a long, somewhat exhausting record of a dinner party, with many allusions to Barthelme’s biography. A young man, Baskerville, reports to the assembled gathering, “I edit with my left hand, a small magazine, very scholarly, very brilliant, called the Journal of Tension Reduction (social-psychological studies, learned disputation, letters-to-the-editor, anxiety in rats)” (CBDC 4). The line is a playful sendup of Barthelme’s great aims to transform the public relations office’s
alumni newsletter into an academic journal, and its inoffensive mission ruefully satirizes Barthelme’s great hopes for the publication.

These stories are largely anodyne fantasies encoded with private pleasures and jokes that promise the author an imaginative outlet to re-experience his own history. Still, there are hints here of the greater social significance of escapism and pleasure, which Barthelme would soon explore more thoroughly and with a more focused methodology. As the film-watcher of “Hiding Man” assures us, “Keep moving, counterpunching, examination of motives reveals appeal of dark places has nothing to do with circumstance. But because I feel warmer. The intimation was, most people do what they are told, NO LOITERING, NO PARKING BETWEEN 8 AM AND 5 PM, KEEP OFF THE GRASS, CLOSED FOR REPAIRS KEEP OUT” (CBDC 27). In company-manner America, formal creativity and the pleasures of art are linked to a sensibility opposed to scripted modes of social behavior and enlightenment (there are suggestions the cinema in “Hiding Man” is a replacement for the church). “Hiding Man” suggests film can be such an expression of subversive pleasure, while the text’s obscure style points more immediately to itself.

While working for the university public relations department, Barthelme resumed taking classes and intended to complete his still-unfinished degree. And it was in a philosophy course instructed by a young Husserlian by the name of Maurice Natanson that Barthelme first encountered the phenomenological and existential ideas that would become the lasting foundations for his aesthetic methodology. When a Pacifica radio
interviewer questioned Barthelme in 1975 about the origins of his thinking and the source of his erudition, Barthelme responded by discussing Natanson:

> You know, you go through college, or go to college, and if you run through one or two or three very good teachers you’re extremely lucky, and I had a philosophy teacher whose name was Maurice Natanson. He is now in the Philosophy Department at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and he’s just a wonderful guy, an excellent teacher, and I took everything. Semester after semester I took everything he offered pretty well. Not that I was such an excellent student, but he was a marvelous teacher. He won the National Book Award in Philosophy and Religion, I think last year, for a book on Husserl. Excellent book. We’re still friends and so on. (NK 208)

When Barthelme first encountered him in the late fifties, Natanson was beginning to publish a series of articles later collected in *Literature, Philosophy, and the Social Sciences*, and which included introductions to Husserlian phenomenology, investigations of its existentialist variants, and an attempt to use phenomenological theory to better understand “what it is that certain literary works have which leads us to call them philosophical” (*Literature* 87). Natanson proposes that the phenomenological author challenges totalizing epistemologies and, more specifically,

> the fundamental unstated thesis underlying the situation of man in the daily public world which holds that there is a real external existent world which persists in space and time and which is much the same for all men.
Doubts, fears, anxieties, questions, hypotheses all presuppose the thesis of the natural attitude because, in varying ways, they all take for granted the being of the world-totality of which some special part arises to be questioned, doubted, interrogated. (6)

Albert Camus, for example, gives voice in his fiction to an atheism at odds with naturalizing epistemologies of the metaphysical: “at the center of Camus’ thought is a struggle to locate the limits of a radical humanism which at once frees man from his bondage to God and permits him to realize a moral life” (143). The questioning undertaken by the Camusian open consciousness “is the power of revolt” (151). The phenomenological commitment to a knowledge based in consciousness rather than naturalized ontologies articulated Barthelme’s disillusionment with the manufactured truths of the military, the church, and university administrators. Further, the discovery of an expression of that commitment in literature lent an urgency to his still-inchoate interest in new aesthetic forms.

Since joining the public relations office, he had lobbied administration officials to allow him to reformulate the existing public relations magazine, Acta Diurna. Finally, in September of 1956, with Natanson as unofficial consigliere, Barthelme published the first issue of Forum, a scholarly journal showcasing publications by university faculty. Forum largely featured phenomenological and existential treatments of art, history, and literature. Helen remembers, “through his work on Forum, he was becoming more and more absorbed in philosophy” (45). Barthelme began reading widely in search of contributors. He first discovered Walker Percy, an eventual Forum contributor, in The
Letters to potential contributors uncovered during my archival research reveal Barthelme’s steady attendance at a range of symposia, lectures, and association meetings that were available in the Houston area. In the winter of 1957 for example, he wrote to W. Burtie Brown, a member of Tulane’s Department of History, to inquire about a talk he had given at the Southern Historical Association meeting entitled “Presidential Candidates and the Fireside Virtues” (letter 28 Oct. 1957). Those, like Brown, who politely declined, often received a follow-up letter asking them to reconsider, sometimes as much as two years later.

Barthelme envisioned *Forum* as just that: a soapbox from which authors might make an impression on alumni who were now middle-class professionals long-removed from collegiate experiences of intellectual exploration. As he explained in a letter to E.B. White, whose essays for *The New Yorker* Barthelme had long admired, “the magazine is addressed not to scholars, but to the educated general reader; the idea is to offer the kind and quality of thinking that a university, ideally, represents to a primarily non-academic audience” (letter 22 July 1958). In this sentiment there are remnants of Barthelme, Sr.’s architectural vision: putting ideas in the service of the public, rather than indulging in self-satisfied but soulless expressions of mastery within a field. Barthelme had proposed presenting faculty work alongside the work of other renowned scholars as a way to advertise “the University’s contribution to the community in terms of solid scholarly and cultural achievements” (letter to Pat Nicholson). In selling his vision for *Forum* to university officials, he argued such an “indirect” method for
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promoting university achievement was preferable to the usual alumni-letter cheerleading (letter to Pat Nicholson). Even here, Natanson’s influence is evident, for Natanson calls “indirect argumentation” the central principle of philosophical rhetoric (“Rhetoric and Philosophical Argumentation” 27), and suggests such argumentation, as opposed to standard strategies of argument, eschews simple acts of convincing for a more dialectical process of self-discovery. In his introduction to *Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Argumentation*, he explains that argumentation means the philosopher creates for the subject the “risk” of losing complacent epistemologies: “Risk is established when the affective world of the person is existentially disrupted, and this disruption means that his immediate life of feeling and sensibility is challenged and made open to challenge” (“Claims” 19). And while Barthelme was in part simply rationalizing a vision for an ambitious journal he hoped would generate notice in New York intellectual circles, his insistence on an indirect achievement of aims is also an early articulation of the argumentation-rich literary practices that would characterize his writing career.

Barthelme’s mention of indirection is also an early indication of his notable admiration for Kierkegaard, as Natanson points to Socrates, Montaigne, and particularly Kierkegaard, called by Natanson “triple moments in the exploration of indirect argumentation (“Rhetoric and Philosophical Argumentation” 27). Kierkegaard’s confrontations with the Danish population over the corruption of Christianity, carried out through self-inquiry and subjective understanding, appealed to both Barthelme’s suspicion of authoritarian totalities (including, of course, the Catholic church) and his squeamishness about fighting such totalities with his own brand of poppycock.
Natanson’s obvious affection for Barthelme and his assistance with *Forum* would have been a welcome relief from Barthelme, Sr.’s withdrawn and judgmental parenting style. When Natanson left Houston in 1957 for a job at the University of North Carolina, Barthelme was crushed. Barthelme’s disappointment grew steadily, and it was around this time that he and Helen started talking seriously about moving to New York City (HMB 55). Barthelme and Helen had wed in October, 1956. In their first few years of marriage, the couple endured a string of miscarriages, a fetal death, and then an agonized decision to donate the stillborn for medical testing. Barthelme was also bothered he did not have much time to write fiction, a pursuit he had become serious about after reading *Waiting for Godot* in an issue of *Theater Arts* in the summer of 1956 (HMB 46). Samuel Beckett seems to have proven possible to Barthelme the kind of writing his phenomenological training had demanded. In the essay “After Joyce,” written eight years after his discovery of *Godot*, he applauds Beckett for the way he “retraces the rationales of simple operations” and finds “comic shocks” hidden beneath what is most ordinary (*NK* 9). Beckett further conducts “a search for the meanings to be gleaned from all possible combinations of all words in all languages,” a process of epistemological expansion he calls “heroic” (9). Over the next several years he would read all of Beckett’s drama and prose. Beckett’s work represented to him the response of an individualist consciousness to mediated mass reality.

His introduction to Beckett accompanied continued intellectual investment in Natanson’s work. In the Fall of 1959, Natanson had published the article “Sartre and Literature” in *Forum*, which would be later reprinted in *Literature, Philosophy and the*
Social Sciences as the chapter “Existentialism and Theory of Literature.” According to Natanson, Sartre believes literature requires “an imaginative consciousness” that recognizes the literary object as “unreal” (111). In order for the subject’s imagination to function, however, it must determine a relationship to its opposite, or as Natanson describes it, “the condition for the imaginary is the paramount reality of worldly existence” (112). According to Sartre-via-Natanson, understanding the structures of everyday reality meant briefly forfeiting them. When considered from the existentialist critical perspective, fantastic forms become the imaginative horizon from which one might locate himself. Confronting the literary object means “my ordinary being in the world, my knowledge of its historical past, its scientific explanation, are all set aside for present purposes” and “the stream of my own awareness” is finally understood (112-113). Years later, in “Not-Knowing,” first delivered as a talk in 1982 and published as an essay in 1985, Barthelme would emphasize the importance of the forfeiture of the known not only to literary reception, but to literary production as well: “The not-knowing is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there could be no invention” (NK 12). Because such invention is made within a dialectic, “art is always a meditation upon external reality rather than a representation of reality or a jackleg attempt to ‘be’ external reality” (23).

A more formalist introduction to the social politics of the avant-garde came as a result of Barthelme’s friendship with the art critic Harold Rosenberg. In 1959 Barthelme urged Robert C. Morris, director of the Contemporary Arts Museum of Houston, to allow
him to contact Harold Rosenberg (who had written an introduction to *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*) about writing a catalog introduction for an upcoming museum show. The show was to feature established figures of abstractionism like Miró alongside local members of the avant-garde like Jim Love and Guy Johnson (Daugherty 156). Always on the lookout for prestigious contributors to *Forum*, and eager to collaborate with an intellectual hero, Barthelme used the opportunity to solicit an essay from Rosenberg and was rewarded with “The Audience as Subject.” Barthelme’s contact with Rosenberg began one of the most important friendships of his life, second perhaps only to his relationship with Natanson. In an essay on Barthelme, Lopate writes that when he asked Barthelme during his final years whom he preferred to talk literature with, Barthelme could only think of two figures, Rosenberg and *The New York Times* art critic Thomas Hess, both of whom had recently died. Barthelme reported to Lopate he was “still working off that old knowledge” (128).  

Rosenberg’s theories of a socially-conscious abstraction, combined with the continental philosophy Barthelme read under Natanson, provided a crucial context to the playful provocations of Barthelme’s fictions.

Rosenberg was, at the time of their meeting, writing the essays that would be collected in *The Anxious Object* (1964). Rosenberg’s work, quite famously, represented an existentialist alternative to Clement Greenberg’s purely formalist approach to abstraction. Greenberg, who began writing on art during the Second World War, wrote in 1939 that the modern masterwork had to be marked by immunity to ideological usefulness, and he saw abstraction, in particular, as a response to the fascists’ use of kitsch to generate public support. To avoid the enlistment of his work in ideological
concerns, the painter must turn to the canvas: modernists “derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated by these factors” (7). The avant-garde is thus “the imitation of imitating”: a self-conscious use of media and the only art of a high order (8). Working strictly with problems of form, reasoned Greenberg, led artists to a stylistic sophistication that secured the work against demagoguery.

Rosenberg shared Greenberg’s appreciation for the stubborn, non-logocentric complexity of the avant-garde. In a review of the 1961 Brazilian Bienal, for example, Rosenberg identified the crude literalism of Soviet propaganda paintings as a cause for the continued vitality of the avant-garde tradition. He writes with evident satisfaction that abstract art refused to risk a reduction to “decoration, an unsavory exploitation of political crisis that makes any ‘pure’ abstraction seem noble by comparison” (19). But Rosenberg saw abstraction as an expressive act by an individual subject, a position which leant itself more easily to political possibilities. He writes in *The Anxious Object*, for example, that art that defamiliarized the visible world effected change in part “through the upsetting effect on politicians of its unfamiliar forms” (215). It was a sentiment Barthelme would echo in “After Joyce”: it would not be untoward, wrote Barthelme, “to say that Governor Rockefeller, standing amongst his Mirós and de Koonings, is worked upon by them, and if they do not make a Democrat or a socialist of him they at least alter the character of his Republicanism” (*NK* 5).
In 1960, while immersed in Rosenberg’s art criticism, Barthelme read William Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, a text that provided Barthelme “his first comprehensive account of the Nazi death camps” (Daugherty 31). The book might have distressed even the most impassive reader, and according to Helen, Shirer’s book exacerbated Barthelme’s already severe depression, for which he was undergoing treatment with a prominent Houston psychoanalyst. She recalls, in her characteristically understated way, that “Don was affected by the work to the extent that I became apprehensive that he might commit suicide” (66). Shirer based his text in large part on the diaries of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, and it is thus likely that Shirer’s work provided further, devastating evidence of the dangers of a limited, and managed, field of knowledge. Barthelme had in the past felt personally aggrieved by the limitations and requirements of poppycock, and of stern authority. Here they were married in an unfathomable evil, at the dark limits of moral failure.

According to Daugherty, Barthelme had previously confronted the events of the Second World War as a child watching newsreels before movie features--probably swashbuckling adventures (30). The war had been a period of opportunity for the Barthelmes, having given Barthelme, Sr. a chance to exercise a utopianist architectural modernism. He co-designed the Avion Village, a housing development for defense industry workers near Dallas, which was carefully designed to improve the lives of its inhabitants (Daugherty 30). But with the arrival of Shirer’s book, the war became fodder for the moral skepticism Barthelme had first developed in Korea; according to Helen, “he
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seemed to now live with an intense consciousness of the world as evil” (66). It is therefore with great significance that Barthelme references what appears to be Shirer’s book in his first novel, *Snow White*: “Hogo was reading a book of atrocity stories. ‘God, what filthy beasts we were,’ he thought, ‘then. What a thing it must have been to be a Hun! A filthy Boche! And then to turn around and be a Nazi! A gray vermin! And today? We co-exist, we co-exist’” (64). For readers, Hogo’s faith in the social concord of his present age would have been quite ironically misplaced, stated as it was during the early years of the Vietnam War. Whereas support for U.S. entry into the war was premised on a myth of moral exceptionalism that was rooted in the liberation narratives of the Second World War, Barthelme would frame the war as the inheritor of the early-century’s toxic mix of public faith and terrible violence.

Shortly after reading Shirer, Barthelme decided to leave the University of Houston’s public relations department and write full time. The short stories Barthelme produced, including “Hiding Man,” “Me and Miss Mandible,” and “The Player Piano” were immediately accepted for publication in small magazines. But Barthelme worried small magazines would not gain him the kind of national attention he desired and so in 1961, Barthelme replaced Morris as director of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. Here, he hoped, he might meaningfully participate in national discourses on art in ways that were impossible for him to do as editor of *Forum*. Barthelme’s debt to Rosenberg during this period is made clear in his catalog essay for the museum’s 1961 exhibition on “The Emerging Figure,” an exhibition notable for its inclusion of an
example of de Kooning’s *Woman* series. In his essay he writes on the value of a new, more abstract figuration, and on the hollowness of pictorial painting:

The direct, unmistakable, and unclouded recapitulation of some aspect of human experience (“LOOK MA I’M DANCING”) is today self-defeating. We cannot rid ourselves of the feeling that such an account has been won too easily; we can place little faith in it. It is not that we prize difficulty for the sake of difficulty, only that we hope to know, as in the case of the collector who steals, that the experience is genuine. (*NK* 169)

This passage offers a subtle rebuke to Greenberg (and the expectation that art be self-absorbed and difficult) and suggests a growing fascination with what the affective vocabularies of abstraction could offer the viewer. It was a subject he would shortly reckon with more fully in the essay “After Joyce.”

Though the museum afforded Barthelme entry to the local arts scene, he felt increasingly limited by Houston’s unabashed provincialism. When he invited Kenneth Koch to give a poetry reading, recalls Koch, “someone in the audience asked me why I didn’t make up my own language and write poems in that. I think the idea was that if I was going to be so obscure I should take it all the way” (142). Thus, in 1963, Barthelme joined Rosenberg and Hess in New York to help them produce *Location* magazine, a magazine guided by Rosenberg’s faith in art’s activist potential. Daugherty notes that Barthelme and Rosenberg would often have lunch together to discuss their vision for *Location*: “At the heart of these lunch conversations was the modernist conviction,” writes Daugherty, “dimmed perhaps but not extinguished, that art could change the
world--that art must change the world or the world would be doomed” (200). And yet the magazine resisted calls to be too grossly topical, mindful of the ease with which art turns to propaganda. Instead, they wanted to restore to the avant-garde its transformative aesthetic daring and to extract from modernism the formal habits that might continue to evoke sufficient sensations of alterity. How this might be achieved, and whether the modernists had achieved it to begin with, is one of the major subjects of Barthelme’s essay “After Joyce,” which first appeared in the second and ultimately final issue of *Location* in 1964.

He begins the essay by challenging Kenneth Burke on the character of “revolutionary art” by defending avant-garde texts by Stein and Joyce against Burke’s charge in “The Calling of the Tune” that in the hands of these authors “the literary work becomes an object in the world rather than a text or commentary upon the world--a crucial change in status which was also taking place in painting” (*NK* 3-4). Barthelme responds:

Satisfied with neither the existing world nor the existing literature, Joyce and Stein modify the world by adding to its store of objects the literary object--which is then encountered in the same way as other objects in the world. The question becomes: what is the nature of the new object? Here one can see the immediate result of the shift. Interrogating older works, the question is: what do they say about the world and being in the world? But the literary object is itself “world” and the theoretical advantage is that in asking it questions you are asking questions of the world directly. (4)
Unsurprisingly, Barthelme draws from the phenomenological lexicon in making his defense of modernism. Husserl had assigned primacy to consciousness (as opposed to language, or language-as-consciousness, as the structuralist would have it) as that which creates experience. And consciousness, as described by Husserl, is always intentional, i.e., directed at something. It is the perceptual tension between object and consciousness from which the real emerges: objects are, according to Husserl in *The Paris Lectures*, that which “render possible for me the very existence of both reality and appearance” (7). Barthelme retains the Husserlian belief that while consciousness depends on objects, it is consciousness that constitutes the object. Husserl again: “An object exists for me; that is to say, it has reality for me in consciousness. But this reality is reality for me only as long as I believe that I can confirm it” (23). Similarly, it is the reader, writes Barthelme, who “reconstitutes the work by his active participation” and defines the literary object (4). Kierkegaard, for whom explicit meaning was anathema, is also an influence here. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard had written that his earlier work, *Either/Or*, was not intended to be instructional, but formative:

If it has any merit, this will essentially consist in not giving any result, but in transforming everything into inwardness: in the first part, an imaginative inwardness which evokes the possibilities with intensified passion, with sufficient dialectical power to transform all into nothing in despair; in the second part, an ethical pathos, which with a quiet, incorruptible, and yet infinite passion of resolve embraces the modest ethical task, and edified thereby stands self-revealed before God and man. (228)
As Kierkegaard can only model an ethical subject as given to “imaginative inwardness,” Barthelme perceives the reader as engaged in an imaginative venture of his or her own making, in which the real is transformed by the reader via the text/object. This is the phenomenological horizon that results in a “changed situation” that will, ultimately, “modify the beholder” (NK 5). Barthelme was keenly aware of the potential for such modifications to challenge powers who rule by meticulously-crafted messages. When one considers the influence of the author of abstraction, “Soviet hostility to ‘formalist’ art becomes more intelligible” (5).

After Joyce, the challenge, as Barthelme saw it, was to resurrect the avant-garde’s capacity to revise conventional modes of perception, even while conservative commentators clamored for “a return to fiction’s traditional virtues” (7). He cites the critic Mary McCarthy as among those who feel the supposed irreality (to use a term he attributes to McCarthy) of “the Bomb, Buchenwald, and the population explosion” should not be reproduced using new forms and who believe instead that writers ought to return to those things it is within their ability to manufacture: “people, plot, character, the social” (7). Barthelme bristles at the idea that “the facts of contemporary life are not ‘real’ facts,” assumptions that would make “my enterprise impossible” (7). McCarthy had articulated what would turn out to be a lasting criticism of the emergent postmodern in proposing that the authors of innovative fictions were mirroring an experience that had become irrational and grotesque. In truth, he writes, the facts of daily life are as real as ever, but cannot be reckoned with using “outmoded forms” of representation (7). Instead, there are, after Joyce, two formal modes available to the fiction writer, “that of aggression and
that of play” (7). In the former category he places William Burroughs, Norman Mailer, James Purdy, Jean Genet, Terry Southern, and Hubert Selby, Jr. All of these writers so destabilize the surface of everyday existence that their work “suggests a chunk of a large building may fall on you at any moment” (8). These writers all display what Barthelme terms a “terroristic purpose,” Burroughs in particular, whose Dr. Tetrazzini in *Naked Lunch* approximates “what might be heard tuning across the broadcast band of a radio built to receive all the asylums of the world” (8). Of this category he is sympathetic, but unconvinced. These texts, his essay suggests, are overwhelmed by the desire to confront, and are too antagonistic to sustain ample imaginative space.

In the latter category, for which his favor is evident, he includes Beckett, Kenneth Koch, J.P. Donleavy, Henry Green, and Vladimir Nabokov. Beckett seemed to point the way forward: “His art is reductionary in that, like a painter, he throws ideas away. The things he throws away are precisely those things Miss McCarthy cherishes: character, social fact, plot, gossip” (9). In tossing away those things, Beckett expressed pessimism toward a stifling “bourgeois consciousness” and thus cannot be said “to be doing anything other than celebrating life” (9). In his rejection of a literary mode most closely associated with observations of the quotidian, Beckett suggested those outlying realms of experience, both ecstatic and melancholy, that might elevate the reader’s alertness to the real. Barthelme thus revises high modernist abstraction as an early model of an adaptable tradition of ludic play, one which was, after Joyce, pushed forward by Beckett and which might continue to produce imaginative literary objects.
Those objects would allow the reader to see mass murder and the threat of nuclear annihilation not as unknowable (and therefore unstoppable) social phenomena, but as the effects of a more precisely observed social totality whose rough literary equivalent was the nineteenth-century novel. What’s more, these new texts need not be widely read. The insertion of a new object into the world is radically irreversible, and immediately transcends the modest materiality of the text. *Finnegans Wake*, for example, “works its radicalizing will upon men in all countries, even those who have not read it and will never read it” (5). Barthelme is anticipating his critics here; even an art that might seem inaccessible to the reader (as his work has been called) by its very appearance challenges the normative logocentrisms in which every text participates.

“After Joyce” was interested in resurrecting the principles of modernism (as his fictions would often reanimate the modernist texts themselves), but it was his father’s modernism: a modernism which could crystallize and redefine human relations, not a modernism beholden to formalist ideas of a medium’s abstract or mimetic perfection. As his partitioning of the modernist tradition into more and less socially redemptive forms suggests, “After Joyce,” despite its naming of conservative critics who urged a return to traditional narrative function, actually targeted those leftist criticisms of modernism which proposed that the modernist aesthetic represented an obsession with the unconscious, and as such had turned its back on material phenomena.

In the same issue in which “After Joyce” appeared, Barthelme published the short story “For I’m the Boy Whose Only Joy is Loving You,” an homage to the Hades chapter of *Ulysses* and an example of the ways the Joycean paradigm might persevere, in both
the story’s literal resurrection of Joyce’s text and in its manner of pastiche. The pastiche technique would contribute to the combinatorial character of Barthelme’s text-objects and allow him to throw away convention, like Beckett, and retain only the radical canon which serves as the text’s guide. A brogue-tongued character named Bloomsbury attends a funeral with friends Huber and Whittle and frets over his sexual alienation from Martha, his estranged wife.\textsuperscript{10} Martha is likely a reference to Barthelme’s first marriage, which seems to have been strained by his wife’s demanding graduate work on the symbolists: “Ah Martha coom now to bed there’s a darlin’ gul. Hump off blatherer I’ve no yet read me Mallarmé for this evenin’” (\textit{CBDC} 57). Huber and Whittle insist Bloomsbury share the particulars of his suffering over the loss of Martha. They demand of Bloomsbury, “\textit{Give us the feeling}” (63), a command Bloomsbury refuses until the final moments of the narrative, when the friends beat him with a broken brandy bottle and a tire iron. The ending suggests Barthelme’s discomfort with direct affective confession and the difficulty of resisting the cheap emotional force of more traditional fiction. Ultimately, however, the story’s combination of inter-text, biography, and arcane cultural referents (aerodromes, Pontiacs, Buck Rogers, British intellectual movements) is a plain exercise in Beckettian reduction in which the connective narrative tissue has been excised and the remainder is celebratory essence: great books, cultural detritus, life: those things that give one “the feeling.”

“For I’m the Boy Whose Only Joy is Loving You” appeared in \textit{Come Back, Dr. Caligari}, Barthelme’s first story collection, which arrived in April 1964, shortly before the last issue of \textit{Location}. His fiction career was taking off at just the right moment. \textit{Location}
had published its last issue just as Barthelme grew disillusioned with its habit of cheerleading favored artists at the expense of more critical content. Barthelme complained in an internal memorandum that the staff “seem radically bored” with American literature, as evidenced by the appearance of a Saul Bellow essay defending novels of social realism (Daugherty 226). He suggested the magazine take on a more “radical position” and challenge the reader in the manner originally conceived by him, Rosenberg, and Hess (226). Barthelme’s move toward a more oppositional position was part of a larger, still-nascent mood of political discontent that followed the Kennedy assassination the previous November. After Barthelme’s frustration with nationalist narratives in Korea, the permission John Kennedy seemed to grant to return to that former idealism had no doubt been a welcome relief. When Kennedy came to Houston in 1960 to campaign, Barthelme and Helen drove to the neighborhood around Rice University and “stood alone on the grass” as Kennedy’s motorcade passed by (HMB 68)—a striking image somewhat at odds with the posture of the skeptic Barthelme had adopted. Much of this was now lost—not only whatever feeling of renewal Kennedy had offered, but the beatific habits of a certain kind of New Yorker in the early 1960s. He had, on his arrival, thrown himself into the New York arts scene. He had become a regular companion of Elaine de Kooning, was photographed by Andy Warhol in Times Square, wandered in the afternoons from one downtown gallery to another, and in the great tradition of the village bohemian, filled his nights with jazz and booze. But as Daugherty writes, “the art parties continued in Elaine de Kooning’s Broadway loft, but they were grim occasions now. JFK’s murder paralyzed her. She took the assassination
personally, since she had met the man” (251). The easy certitude that had accompanied even the more strained moments of the Kennedy presidency, in other words, demanded reconsideration.

In search of inspiration for a novel, and looking to escape the growing commitments of a relationship with the literary agent Lynn Nesbit, Barthelme had traveled to Denmark in the summer of 1964 (Daugherty 253). One of Nesbit’s clients, the Danish writer Per Laursen, was then returning from the U.S. to Copenhagen. Barthelme thought traveling with a mutual acquaintance would prevent his trip from appearing reckless to Nesbit. In addition, the choice of Denmark would no doubt have struck Barthelme as serendipitous, given his great love for Kierkegaard. Compared to sacrosanct influences such as Beckett, Rosenberg, and Husserl-via-Natanson, there was much that Barthelme found troublesome in Kierkegaard’s writings, as is evident by his critique of the philosopher’s skepticism towards irony in “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” and the jab at his religiosity in “The Leap.” Despite his disagreements (discussed at greater length in chapter two), Barthelme admired Kierkegaard’s dedication to the ethical and his efforts to reconcile the ethical with the aesthetic, an interest evident in “After Joyce.” Speaking of Kierkegaard to an interviewer in 1978, he took stock of their differences and stated, “as a moralist, he is my superior” (interview in Radical 47). In Either/Or, which Barthelme read under Natanson’s guidance (Daugherty 127), the pseudonymous author of the second volume describes the ethical as “under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live” (169). The ethical as a
kind of consciousness, as a guide for perception and experience, as opposed to a set of ideological beliefs, would guide Barthelme’s political growth and his disapproval for political factions on both the left and right and their response to the war in Vietnam.

Upon his arrival in the city, Daugherty reported that he rushed to Kierkegaard’s grave as a first order of business (254). But after a few days, Barthelme’s routine in Copenhagen largely matched his routine back home. He wrote in the mornings, walked the city in the afternoon, and spent the evening listening to jazz or attending ballet. He was left unimpressed, however, by the leftist orthodoxy of the counterculture he encountered in Copenhagen. In a letter to his parents and to Helen, Barthelme wrote he had been on a date with a professed Communist, but the date ended badly when he was caught “chuckling about some aspect or other of the Hungarian Revolution” (HMB 155). Barthelme’s incredulity for Marxist-inspired revolutionary rhetoric would later place him at odds with many in the New York protest community, but this incredulity was not mere contrarianism on his part in the face of a fashionable ideology. Nor was it simply an effect of his time immersed in North Korean Communist propaganda. Barthelme’s brand of avant-garde innovation was rooted in a faith in the reader’s conscious mind as the thing which, when challenged, might discover new ontologies. Barthelme considered himself a dedicated phenomenologist who followed Kierkegaard’s conception of the “truth as inwardness” as opposed to “truth as knowledge” (Postscript 226). The distinction was, for Kierkegaard, the basis for existential humanism: he wished “that our superfluity of knowledge could be taken away, in order that we might again learn what it means to be a human being” (229).
In his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, however, Marx had quite explicitly rejected a phenomenological model in which metaphysics or self-consciousness exists prior to social organization:

In the social production of their lives men enter into relations that are specific, necessary and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a specific stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis from which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond specific forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process generally. It is not the consciousness of men that specifies their being, but on the contrary their social being that specifies their consciousness. (160-61)

A Kierkegaardian like Barthelme was thus bound to find talk of the modes of production somewhat unconvincing and even antagonizing. As he would write shortly in *Snow White*, on the subject of Snow White’s loneliness, “I don’t go along with those theories of historical necessity, which suggest that her actions are dictated by ‘forces’ outside the reasonable. That doesn’t sound reasonable, in this case” (70). His opposition to materialist thought had left him somewhat socially marginalized. But he was in luck. In the same letter home, he reported approvingly that he had met another woman “who seems a little less doctrinaire” (155). The woman he met was Birgit Egelund-Peterson and she would become Barthelme’s third wife and the mother of his first daughter. Birgit
spoke five languages and, according to her daughter, read Kierkegaard with ease (Daugherty 256). She also had a certain moral pedigree that no doubt appealed to Barthelme: her father, a university professor, had smuggled Jews to Sweden during the Second World War.

Barthelme was anxious about attaining a divorce from Helen, and was also acutely distressed by Lyndon Johnson’s military buildup in Southeast Asia. Barthelme was in Copenhagen in August, 1964 when the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed and Johnson launched air strikes against North Vietnamese air bases. Daugherty reports he was “desperate for English-language newspapers” during this time (254). He was also busily arranging for Birgit’s emigration and writing stories so that he might unburden himself of a sizable debt of advance payment he owed *The New Yorker*, where his stories had began appearing regularly.

At the end of 1964 Barthelme sent a work more mature in its historical scope--“The Indian Uprising”--to the magazine. In the months since Tonkin, troop deployment had increased dramatically. Despite Barthelme’s insistence in “After Joyce” that the art object stands apart from the historical real--and need not even be read--“The Indian Uprising” shows Barthelme crafting literary objects that were quite plainly in dialogue with political subjects. In “The Indian Uprising” a band of Comanche Indians besiege a nameless city of which the narrator is among the defenders. Despite the invasion, the narrator’s concerns remain oddly mundane; he frets about whether the table he has constructed from a hollow-core door will be well-received, and he further worries a man named Kenneth is more desirable to women than himself. When the attack begins, he is
distracted by his own grim stasis: “We defended the city as best we could. The arrows of the Comanches came in clouds. . . . People were trying to understand. I turned to Sylvia. ‘Do you think this is a good life?’ The table held apples, books, long-playing records. She looked up. ‘No.’” (UPUA 3). The torture of a captured Comanche, including waterboarding and electrocution, is mentioned briefly, in passing. As is often the case in Barthelme’s stories, even the most extraordinary is reduced to the stubbornly ordinary, and a major crisis is overshadowed by trifling anxieties. Here the narrator’s preoccupations seem to distract him from evident danger. As Kierkegaard championed an ethics that was not immobilized by social norms but looked instead to the self and the metaphysical, social life is here that which blinds the narrator, who remains curiously dispassionate throughout to the horror outside his door. The story’s combination of a motif taken from Sunday morning children’s programming with the travails of war points to a source of the U.S. public’s disaffection while enacting the formal means--collage-- by which that insensitivity might be decontextualized, recognized, and overcome.

In response to New Yorker editor Roger Angell’s displeasure with the uneven punctuation of “The Indian Uprising,” Barthelme wrote, “when the sentences suddenly explode or go to hell . . . it contributes materially I think to the air of fear etc etc hanging over the story” and elsewhere remarked “the whole damned [story] is a tissue of whispers, hints and echoes and for that reason most annoying but I can’t help that” (Daugherty 260; ellipses in orig.). The surreptitious “hints and echoes” of Vietnam led to complaints by Angell about “unnecessary misdirections” (261), but these misdirections,
or more accurately, indirections, were essential to Barthelme’s contribution to discourse about the war. It is the manner in which the story seamlessly integrates war into the ordinary and thereby transforms it that a new recognition of the conflict is achieved. What could be said about the war in mannered conversation, or, for that matter, in a fiction ruled by “character, social fact, plot,” was inadequate. Through combination, however, these banal discourses are restored to vitality. When Miss R., a teacher in the city under siege, lectures on the “aesthetic excitement” of words in combination (UPUA 9), of a pure faith in language stripped of context and theme, it is hard not to hear Barthelme himself:

“The only form of discourse of which I approve,” Miss R. said in her dry, tense voice, “is the litany. I believe our masters and teachers as well as plain citizens should confine themselves to what can safely be said. Thus when I hear the words pewter, snake, tea, Fad #6, sherry, serviette, fenestration, crown, blue coming from the mouth of some public official, or some raw youth, I am not disappointed.” (8)

Ironically, restricting oneself to an anodyne lexicon becomes, through combination, a return to “the hard, brown, nutlike word,” and its potential to stimulate (9).

Brian McHale and Moshe Ron have attempted to read the story as an allegorical satire of “wars of national liberation” including but not exclusive to the war in Vietnam, but the authors lament that the “public-political story” in “The Indian Uprising” fails under inconsistent and contradictory symbology (53). The story further fails to make clear moral commitments, but the authors are careful to point out this doesn’t mean the story
illustrates the poststructuralist “critical cliche, viz., ‘The Indian Uprising’ is ‘about’ its own unknowability” (63). They instead insist the reader is allowed multiple “provisional” and “weak” interpretations by the story (64). I would suggest it is the story’s very narrative provisionality that provokes the reader in a manner consistent with avant-garde strategies of disruption, while avoiding rigidly-determined structural components that mimic political hegemonies. In a letter Barthelme characterized the story as intended to elicit a “very sharp effect of alienation” in the reader (Daugherty 262).

In a 1975 interview with Pacifica radio, he describes how “The Indian Uprising” briefly quotes another meditation on war ruin, “The Waste Land” (a favorite source of Barthelme’s) but updates the earlier poem by mentioning heroin:

Then it was learned that they had infiltrated our ghetto and that the people of the ghetto instead of resisting had joined the smooth, well-coördinated attack with zipguns, telegrams, lockets, causing that portion of the line held by the I.R.A. to swell and collapse. We sent more heroin into the ghetto, and hyacinths, ordering another hundred thousand of the pale, delicate flowers. (*UPUA 6*)

The line is an oblique reference to a short passage in the opening dirge of Eliot’s poem, “The Burial of the Dead”: “‘You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;’/‘They called me the hyacinth girl” (35-36). Barthelme’s version of the line, he explained, was meant to achieve a suggestive contrast between the illegal but tolerated heroin trade and the allegedly illegal but untolerated Communist action in Southeast Asia, but he worried this “political dimension sounds a little pompous” (*KN 232*). Indeed, the opportunity to
pastiche modern masterworks is most useful to Barthelme as offering a raw material, those “nutlike words” which may, in combination, suggest associative meanings--here orbiting themes of death, class, and power--but which must be turned over to the reader. In the same interview, he seemed more excited that the story might induce an active readership: “in this story in particular, the reader is being asked to work pretty hard. I don’t think it’s in any sense at the limit of what a reader can do, but he is asked to do a lot of work. So that the reader’s participation is very great, which is a thing I want, and invite” (233). The reader, in other words, must activate whatever critique the text makes possible.

Shortly after submitting “The Indian Uprising” for publication, Barthelme submitted “Game,” a surprisingly allegorical story which ties Cold War paranoia to mental illness. The narrator and Shotwell have been on sentry duty in an underground bunker for over one hundred days: “If certain events take place upon the console, we are to insert our keys in the appropriate locks and turn our keys. Shotwell has a key and I have a key. If we turn our keys simultaneously the bird flies, certain switches are activated and the bird flies” (UPUA 105-06). As in “The Indian Uprising,” a largely unseen conflict between twin forces is displaced by a narrative of personal unrest: “Each of us wears a .45 and each of us is supposed to shoot the other if the other is behaving strangely” (106). The underlying paranoia of the Soviet/U.S. relationship is mirrored in the unsteady and deteriorating relationship between the two men. As they both descend into madness, the reader is given access to the equally mad political epistemology that animates their actions.
One senses Barthelme responding to Angell's comments on “The Indian Uprising” by attempting a story less diluted by strategies of indirection and combination. The story of the two men, who are alternately seen cradling each other in their arms and staring at the other with gruesome determination, might be read as a comment on the difficulties of human relation. But the parallels between their experience and their task identify the story as a critique of mutually assured destruction. And yet, there is still something of the Barthelme of “After Joyce” here; as it plays out between the two men, this paranoiac fantasy is very much beholden to bourgeois consciousness: “In the beginning I took care to behave normally. So did Shotwell. Our behavior was painfully normal. Norms of politeness, consideration, speech, and personal habits were scrupulously observed” (106). Interrogated here is the connection between habits of middle-class propriety and ideologies of war. The formal initially conceals the latter, but such concealment is plainly untenable.

Barthelme’s complaint against the U.S. government was more than intellectual. In a letter to Helen from Copenhagen he complained that “the immigration business is . . . suitably Kafkaesque and hideous” (HMB 156; ellipses in orig.). The statement is likely an exaggeration, but it was far from facetious, and it suggests the war had advanced Barthelme’s suspicion, dating back to Korea, that the U.S. government was a large-scale bureaucracy with whose methods and public principles he was at odds. And as in Korea, political disillusion engenders a deeply-felt moral distress. Later in the letter he wished she was “prospering, as much as one can prosper in this evil world” (156). He
felt disappointed not only in his circumstances, but in himself as well. He lamented in a letter to his parents, “I am sorry that I did not treat the announcement of new domestic arrangement seriously enough or that I somehow did it in the wrong way, or that I am somehow wrong, wrong, probably fundamentally” (Daugherty 158). Barthelme returned with Birgit and their newborn daughter Anne to his apartment at 113 West 11th street, where he would reside until moving to Houston full time in 1981.

Barthelme returned in 1965 to a changed, more politically charged New York. Anti-war rallies had become increasingly common. The first teach-in had taken place in Ann Arbor, Michigan in March and the protest movement was spreading quickly, particularly in downtown Manhattan. Barthelme seems to have avoided most direct action upon his return despite indications from “The Indian Uprising,” “Game” and a third story, “Report,” that he was against the war. In “Report,” the narrator’s anti-war group dispatches him to talk to a group of weapons engineers. An engineer assures the narrator they will not use their weapons, assuring him, “we have a moral sense. It is on punched cards, perhaps the most advanced and sensitive moral sense the world has ever known” (UPUA 52). He returns to his group with what is quite evidently a false promise. Not only does the story unequivocally establish Barthelme’s opposition to the war and comment on the bureaucratization of moral duty (as alternative to individual conscience), it demonstrates too the beginnings of Barthelme’s long disenchantment with the methods and effectiveness of the counterculture. When the narrator of “Report” speaks to the chief engineer he is passionate and direct:
I spoke to him then about the war. I said all the things people say when they speak against the war. I said that the war was wrong. I said that large countries should not burn down small countries. I said that the government had made a series of errors. I said that these errors once small and forgivable were now immense and unforgivable. I said the government was attempting to conceal its original errors under layers of new errors. I said the government was sick with error, giddy with it. (UPUA 49)

But “Report” ends in a stalemate, with the narrator ambivalent, his group unconvinced. When another anti-war protestor turns up later in “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel,” he notes the emotional inadequacies of protest marches and satirizes any kind of group affiliation as silly tribalism: “I march, it’s ludicrous. In the last march, there were eighty-seven thousand people marching, by the most conservative estimate, and yet being in the midst of them, marching with them . . .” (CL 84; ellipses in orig.). The speaker trails off, his frustration evident. The narrator wonders if direct action (as opposed, we might conjecture, to indirect writing) has any transformational potential.

Despite his resistance to organized counter-politics, Barthelme befriended one of the literary scene’s most outspoken critics of the war. Grace Paley was Barthelme’s West Village neighbor and an author of short fiction whose work, according to Daugherty, he knew well upon their meeting (287). His first glimpse of her came when he observed her standing on the corner of Eleventh Street and Sixth Avenue, just down the block from his apartment, where she wore a smock painted with “Money/Arms/War/Profit” (287)--an exercise in suggestive juxtaposition Barthelme

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would likely have adored. Paley was an established member of the Greenwich Village anti-war community, having aggressively protested nuclear proliferation in the 1950s and having more recently become, as she described it, “a kind of medium-level worker in one tendency in the nonviolent direct-action left wing of the antiwar movement” (Just 57). In 1969 she would travel to Hanoi with the War Resisters League.

Barthelme and Paley became friends and were later briefly lovers (Daugherty 288). So carefully did Barthelme observe Paley’s publishing career after 1965 that in 1973 he remarked to her that she had enough pieces for a second story collection. Of the ones she then produced for him he insisted, correctly, that she was forgetting a number, telling her, “you’re missing at least two more” (Just 236). A reader of the resulting collection, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, which spans 1960 to 1974, finds stories of home and family refracted through the imaginary and fantastic. Her distortions of everyday life, placed alongside clear moral-political sentiment, suggest a skepticism toward bourgeois pieties that a reader of Barthelme would recognize. In “Faith in a Tree,” the narrator watches as a protest march at the playground she and her young son frequent is dispersed by police. Her son complains, “I hate you. I hate your stupid friends. Why didn’t they just stand up to that stupid cop and say fuck you” (*ECATLM* 99), a bizarre outburst that leads to a kind of awakening for the narrator:

And I think that is exactly when events turned me around, changing my hairdo, my job uptown, my style of living and telling. Then I met women and men in different lines of work, whose minds were made up and
directed out of that sexy playground by my children’s heartfelt brains, I thought more and more and every day about the world. (99-100)

When the narrator forfeits the petty insecurities of middle-class Manhattan motherhood, she achieves a moral clarity which demands an acknowledgment of external suffering.

Despite the clarity of her public opposition to the war, “Faith in a Tree” doesn’t protest the war (the war’s immorality is a given) so much as it protests those things which confine subjective examination and individual moral expression. It was a message to which Barthelme was strongly drawn. In a blurb for *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, Barthelme calls Paley “a wonderful writer and troublemaker” and concludes, “we are fortunate to have her in this country.” Paley recognized in Barthelme’s work a kindred spirit. Behind his comic exploration of the ordinary, Paley identifies the discontent of the social critic:

“You can write anything you want but you may not mention the weather,” he told his classes at City College in New York and at the University of Houston. The weather, the very geography of platitude. Still, he knew about those easy clichés. He knew their ancient usefulness and perseverence. He grabbed them, gave them a good half turn to laugh a social truth into a sentence—he was certainly a sentence maker. (Just 235)

This ethics of social critique is traced by Paley to an old-fashioned civic-mindedness: “he was in his life and work a citizen. That means he paid attention to and argued the life of his street, his city (New York or Houston), his country” (235). Daugherty (once
again drawing on his Catholic upbringing) confirms Barthelme’s zeal for neighborliness during his time in both New York and Houston. The author Kirk Sale, Barthelme’s downstairs neighbor in New York after 1965, tells Daugherty that Barthelme once called a building-wide meeting after another neighbor lit her bed on fire. Barthelme was concerned, in particular, for the safety of an older man with a prothesis on the top floor: “no one thought there was much chance of a serious fire in that solid building, which had fire-spray thingies in the hallway and the old guy said he could make it down the stairs if we had to, but we had a long talk, and Don said that everyone should get a rope fire-ladder. He did. No one else” (286-87). The episode convinced Sale “he was basically a regular guy who cared about his neighbors” (287). Barthelme would also supply neighbors with furniture, and lend his labor to moving efforts when required.

Though Paley was unable to inspire in Barthelme a love for the activist left (his later refusal to use his stewardship of the PEN organization for direct political action eventually led to a strain between the two),¹² she did help solidify his opposition to the war, and after this time he spoke more forthrightly in interviews and essays about the political aspirations of his fiction. As his fourth wife, Marion Barthelme put it, “he was against the war (having Grace Paley as a dear friend, who could not be?)” (email message to author). The first half-decade of Barthelme’s career had turned out to be a conflation of suspicions of conventional thought and avant-garde responses, and these were now attuned to the conflict in Southeast Asia, as they would be later to Watergate and U.S. action in Latin America.
Despite work by Barthelme on the war, consensus later emerged that a socially-allof formalism was the main weakness of the postmodern. Charles Russell, in his 1985 defense of the political avant-garde, sums up the then-current state of critical response to postmodernism by noting that continental critics have argued that the avant-garde, instead of sustaining an alienated and socially antagonistic posture, has allowed itself to be “recuperated” by the mechanisms of the bourgeois culture industry. In turn, the avant-garde seems to repay the art market with largely self-reflexive, formalist works dedicated more to the tradition of artistic and literary innovation than to social change. (237)

But in Barthelme’s case, as his tutelage under Rosenberg and Natanson makes clear, formal consciousness was tied to social action. And if Barthelme doesn’t abandon ordinary social fields--indeed, a story like “The Indian Uprising” presents a stubborn fidelity to common experience--in favor of more “antagonistic postures,” it is because the ordinary is precisely where he might meet the reader (as if a neighbor) and where the work of political consciousness presumably takes place. As Russell goes on to suggest, “The postmodern individual, the writer, and the text now experience and articulate themselves self-consciously from within the social context from which, nevertheless, they may still feel alienated and of which they may still be critical” (246). Barthelme’s early work and training suggest the social is the shared space from which and into which a writer might launch avant-garde objects. In his early treatments of everyday life, even as it was imagined in an absurdly-rendered war zone, Barthelme had developed a
way to reach out to the reader and amplify, through indirection, the threads of violence, paranoia, and control that were woven through U.S. Cold War life.
Notes

1 From a 1971 interview with Jerome Klinkowitz. (Barthelme, NK 205)

2 The 1978 letter from Barthelme, Sr. to his son was written in response to a suggestion by Barthelme that the architect write a textbook. The reply, which documents the older man’s beliefs on form and function, provides new insight into the character of Barthelme’s chief formative influence. The letter typescript was uncovered during my archival work.

3 See “Whose Side Are You On,” an essay by Joyce Carol Oates that appeared in The New York Times Book Review in the summer of 1972. Oates quotes Barthelme’s line on fragments and attributes it to “a writer of arguable genius, whose works reflect the anxiety he himself must feel in book after book that his brain is all fragments . . . just like everything else” (ellipses in orig.). But she warns that embracing fragments can only lead to real disaster: “There is a point in history at which Wilde’s remark comes horribly true, that life will imitate art.” Oates feared the writer of fragments was withdrawing from the responsibility of the author to say something and to establish an identity.

4 The interview with Klinkowitz from which this quotation is taken concludes with a mock newspaper article Barthelme composed for inclusion, which begins “WRITER CONFESSES THAT HE NO LONGER TRUSTS FRAGMENTS” (NK 206).

5 Though Barthelme remained perhaps preeminently influenced by Natanson, Rosenberg, and Hess, he found inspiration from a host of cultural phenomena. Barthelme’s combinatorial pastiches draw from commercial advertisements, Antonioni films, chili recipes, Saturday morning cartoons, and anything else an exceedingly
impressive memory was able to store. Frequently, the allusions are literary: Kafka, Ehrenzweig, Barthes, Eliot, Raymond, Beckett, Joyce, Freud, and Kierkegaard are the subjects Barthelme wrestles with most often. These allusions document the influences, and the anxieties of influence, that guided Barthelme’s career. In addition, the astute reader will detect references to Tolstoy (quite unambiguously, in fact, in “At the Tolstoy) and Dante. See the discussion of Overnight to Many Distant Cities in chapter three for more on pastiche as a signifier of pleasure in Barthelme’s work. Additionally, the modernism-heavy inter-text points to the project articulated in the essay “After Joyce” of reviving the modernist project for contemporary audiences.

6 According to Serge Guilbaut, abstract expressionism “provided a way for avant-garde artists to preserve their sense of ‘social commitment’ (so important to artists of the Depression generation) while eschewing the art of propaganda and illustration. It was in a sense a political apoliticism” (2). Guilbaut argues that the midcentury American avant-garde was more than the exhibition of a “formal superiority” but was (2), rather, in its rejection of both the propagandistic fresco and commodifiable kitsch, an ideological negotiation between the far left and the right:

Faced with the annihilation of the individual in the totalitarian regimes and with the absorption of the individual into the mass of consumers in the capitalist regimes, the American left tried to stake out a middle ground from which the individual painter or artist could assert his independence of both left and right. (198)
Guilbaut writes that such a position expressed “the values of the majority, but in a way (continuing the modernist tradition) that only a minority was capable of understanding” (3). Barthelme’s career, which reflected his lasting fascination with abstract expressionism, certainly supports Guilbaut’s characterization of the avant-garde. Barthelme saw the avant-garde as a radical challenge to the ideologies and homologies that threatened individual expression amongst the public. He reminded an interviewer in 1981 that the avant-garde serves the same function as the rear guard: “to protect the main body” (NK 277). See chapter two for a discussion of Barthelme’s disapproval of both establishment and countercultural ideology during the 1960s.

Barthelme’s depression flows just below the surface in both full-length biographies, without its ever being identified by either author as a potentially decisive chronic condition. Lopate is the only memoirist/biographer to portray this as a major component of Barthelme’s worldview, perhaps because Lopate knew Barthelme after he had returned to Houston, when years of alcohol abuse had diminished his zest for writing and exaggerated his already formidable melancholy. There is evidence that as far back as the 1950s, heavy alcohol use had amplified Barthelme’s gloom. Barthelme’s friend Herman Gollob tells Daugherty, “Don was a bitter drinker. He drank when he was sad and it added to his gloom. When he was drunk, he could be a cold motherfucker. You did not approach him frivolously. He’d freeze you out quickly” (115). The suicide of Barthelme’s third wife, Birgit, which occurred after their separation but while they were still closely connected by their daughter, seems to have been another blow to Barthelme’s mental health. Paley sees his tendency toward “opposition” as an
outgrowth of his perpetual worrying about his late wife, writing, “there was a sadness in our lightest conversations, across that literature of his. We laugh, but the poem in the prose is dark” (Just 235).

8 Ironically, the letter quoted earlier in which his father articulated those ideas may have been a reaction against “After Joyce.” The letter’s distinction between object and ecology is quite possibly aimed at the description in Barthelme’s essay of the modernist object: independent and aloof, and yet epistemologically significant.

9 See Teres 24-32 for a discussion of the Partisan Review and its influential editorial crusade for orthodox Marxist literary form.

10 Of course, the name Bloomsbury points not only toward Leopold Bloom but to the famed group of London intellectuals. The layering of allusion was not an uncommon feature of Barthelme’s work and contributed to its suggestive interpretational flexibility as well as to a sense of near manic delight in various cultural traditions. See the second chapter’s discussion of The Dead Father for more on one of the key reflexive figures populating Barthelme’s texts.

11 Of course, focus on subjective consciousness could sometimes turn to egoism. Barthelme quite callously complained to Angell that “Report” was doomed to go unnoticed, as it jockeyed for space in a New Yorker issue devoted to the Six-Day War (Daugherty 301).

12 For a more sustained comparative study of Barthelme and Paley, see chapter five. In that chapter I place Paley in a feminist tradition of experimental writing that avoids masculine canonical practices in favor of a style that reproduces an ethics of familial
relation and responsibilities. I conclude that for Barthelme familial relationships are, on the contrary, the very things which compromise the anti-normative erotic habits that inform his political critique.
CHAPTER TWO
Arriving at the “Untruth”: 1967-1976

Some people feel you should tell the truth, but those people are impious and wrong, and if you listen to what they say, you will be tragically unhappy all your life.

-Donald Barthelme

Barthelme had what turned out to be the biggest commercial success of his career in 1967 with the novel *Snow White*, first published in its entirety in *The New Yorker*. In Barthelme’s version of the fairy tale, Snow White and her companions (Bill, Kevin, Edward, Hubert, Henry, Clem, and Dan) are engaged in a polygamous sexual relationship that leaves all principals unfulfilled. The group produces Chinese baby food—“baby dow shew,” for instance—an occupation the men augment by cleaning skyscraper windows (18). Snow White longs for something more: she cooks and cleans for her roommates but reads *Dissent* magazine and studies “Modern Woman, Her Nature and Responsibilities” for a class at Beaver College (25). Snow White’s lovers, meanwhile, also have intellectual pretensions; they are given to bouts of bohemian criminality and to long discussions on the importance of sexual desire and the nature of language. As the novel progresses, the narrative is increasingly dominated by Hogo de Bergerac, the usurper who wishes to win Snow White for himself, through kidnapping if necessary, and who replaces Bill in Snow White’s cohort when he is hanged at the end of the novel.
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Snow White’s displeasure is mirrored by the aesthetic restlessness of the text, which is without the kinds of arcs and subplots a reader expects of a novel. Rather, it makes its hostility to the obligations of the psychological novel--those things he found wonderfully absent in Beckett and which he named “character, social fact, plot, gossip” (Not Knowing 9)--plain in a parodic section entitled “THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SNOW WHITE:”

IN THE AREA OF FEARS, SHE FEARS

MIRRORS

APPLES

POISONED COMBS (17)

Neither is there conventional resolution at the story’s end. The reader finds, instead, a perfunctory list of possible endings:

THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE’S ARSE

REVIRGINIZATION OF SNOW WHITE

APOTHEOSIS OF SNOW WHITE

SNOW WHITE RISES INTO THE SKY

THE HEROES DEPART IN SEARCH OF

A NEW PRINCIPLE

HEIGH-HO (181)

Additionally, the novel fails to present a consistent or at times clear narrator. It proceeds via short episodes, monologues, occasional pastiches of The Waste Land, and block-lettered statements --“PAUL: A FRIEND OF THE FAMILY” (47)-- that appear on an
otherwise blank page. Most bizarrely, there appears a questionnaire midway through the novel which begins by asking readers, “1. Do you like the story so far? Yes ( ) No ( )” and continues in similar fashion until number fifteen: “In your opinion, should human beings have more shoulders? ( ) Two sets of shoulders? ( ) Three? ( )” (82-83). The novel was more ambitious than anything Barthelme had published before, and its suggestion of various discursive styles (newspaper headlines, billboards, library card catalogues, etc.) more aggressively combinatorial. Here was a familiar story told with familiar forms, but in a way that radically transformed both.

Reviewers seemed unsure of what to make of it. *Time* called the novel “an explosion, a staccato burst of verbal star shells, pinwheel phrases, cherry bombs of Joycean puns and wordplays” but was unsure of its value, finally calling the book a “jape” (“Books”). Readers were less ambivalent however, and the first modest publication runs sold out; during the summer of 1968, a paperback edition began to sell quickly and by the fall of that year the novel had sold over 200,000 copies (Daugherty 298). The playful, somewhat grotesque rewrite of a beloved fairy tale represented a liberating impertinence toward good taste and literary decorum, and it likely felt in tune with the social and political rebellions then unfolding dramatically in Europe and in the United States (Daugherty 298).

*Snow White*, with its free-loving, wealth-loathing, philosophy-spouting characters, provides a surrealist snapshot of the mid-sixties cultural milieu, and of the rise of new leftist groups like Students for a Democratic Society. But *Snow White* is no bible of the counterculture; the novel gleefully pokes fun at a generation of middle-class youth then
being radicalized. As they would be in stories that appeared until Barthelme’s death twenty-five years later, members of the new left are consistently depicted throughout as lacking intellectual seriousness, as when Clem (who belongs to the rather entrepreneurial business collective at the center of the book) proposes a system of money redistribution to be carried out “By making the rich happier. New lovers who will make their lives exciting and ‘rich’ in a way that . . . We must pass a law that all marriages of people with more than enough money are dissolved as of tomorrow” (141; ellipses in orig.). The political posturing of Clem and the others yields what may most sympathetically be described as a popular but goofy vision of revolution, even as they voice a youthful, anti-conformist impulse Barthelme would have sympathized with: “Normal life. And a fine October chill in the air. It is unbearable, this consensus, this damned felicity. When I see a couple fighting I give them a dollar, because fighting is interesting” (67). The omission of conventional narrative practices validates such sentiment while the novel’s satire critiques the forms the anti-conformist movement had in fact taken.

Among other subjects, the mystic pretensions of Eastern religion and drug experimentation are skewered remorselessly:

Edward was blowing his mind, under the boardwalk. “Well my mind is blown now. Nine mantras and three bottles of insect repellant, under the boardwalk. I shall certainly be sick tomorrow. But it is worth it to have a blown mind. To stop being a filthy bourgeois for a space, even a short space. To gain access to everything in a new way. Those cream Corfam
shoes clumping overhead. I understand them now, for the first time. Not their molecular structure, in which I am not particularly interested, but their sacredness.” (142)

When “ANATHEMATIZATION OF THE WORLD IS NOT AN ADEQUATE RESPONSE TO THE WORLD” appears toward the end of the novel, it presents a rebuke to the shallow escapism, rejectionism, and self-loathing that is mistaken for real achievement of vision by Edward (178). And in a section that includes some of the novel’s most pointed satire, the appearance of Snow White’s hair spilling from an apartment window affects the men powerfully, and they submit the hair to a number of interpretational frameworks then en vogue amongst young intellectuals. Bill claims “the significance of this act” is known to him, “as well as the sexual meaning of the hair itself, on which Wurst has written” (Wurst of course being that preeminent German philosopher, the sausage) (92). Bill then unfurls a series of existentialist non-sequiturs:

It means that the ‘not with’ is experienced as more pressing, more real, than the ‘being with.’ It means she seeks a new lover. _Quelle tragédie!_ But the essential loneliness of the person must be considered. Each of us is like a tiny single hair, hurled into the world among billions and billions of other hairs, of various colors and lengths. And if God does not exist, then we are in even graver shape than we had supposed. (92)

Barthelme was certainly not opposed to existentialism. Natanson wrote glowingly of Jean Paul Sartre and what he called the French philosopher’s “phenomenologically-grounded existential philosophy for the theory of literature” (_Literature_ 103). Sartre had,
according to Natanson, articulated the links between an imaginative literature and the achievement of critical modes of consciousness. But existentialism had grown faddish; as George Cotkin recalls, “hardly a college student in the 1960’s could be found without a dog-eared copy of Walter Kaufmann’s collection *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*” (1). *Snow White* gleefully lampoons hackneyed, systematized approaches to existentialist method as well as the pretentious posing of those who would claim it as their primary analytic system. As the final words of the novel (quoted above) suggest, its characters are peripatetic thinkers, gusting from one principle to another, only seizing each long enough to articulate the most vulgar of understandings.

Dan makes no explicit mention of the hair in a speech he gives within the section “*Lack of reaction to the hair,*” although it is clear the hair and the possibility of sorting out its meaning remain very much at issue (96). Dan begins by invoking yet another German thinker, one who turns out to be a high fidelity speaker brand: “You know, Klipschorn was right I think when he spoke of the ‘blanketing’ effect of ordinary language, referring as I recall to the part that sort of, you know, ‘fills in’ between the other parts” (96). Dan believes it is not self-evident symbols, such as the hair, to which attention must be paid, but the deluge of language filler that has overwhelmed such symbols, or what he calls “stuffing”:

The ‘endless’ aspect of ‘stuffing’ is that it goes on and on, in many different forms, and in fact our exchanges are in large measure composed of it, in larger measure even, perhaps than they are composed of that which is not ‘stuffing.’ The ‘sludge’ quality is the heaviness that this ‘stuff’
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has, similar to the heavier motor oils, a kind of downward pull but still fluid, if you follow me, and I can’t help thinking that this downwardness is valuable, although it’s hard to say just how, right at the moment. (97)

Inevitably, Dan concludes, there is no recourse to deal with stuffing save to embrace it and presume there is a value not immediately evident. Drawing a parallel between language stuffing and “the per-capita production of trash in this country” (97), Dan then surmises trash must be considered anew:

I hazard that we may very well soon reach a point where it’s 100 percent. Now at such a point, you will agree, the question turns from a question of disposing of this ‘trash’ to a question of appreciating its qualities, because, after all, it’s 100 percent right?” (97)

Dan appears to suggest that any attempt to read the hair as a conventional symbol (of sex, femininity, desire, etc.) is doomed by the tendency of language to prevaricate more completely than it can articulate.

Critics have used Dan’s treatise on language as evidence that Barthelme’s own work should be spared traditional explication. The description of a language trash redeemed by indeterminate qualities has led to conclusions that Barthelme’s own work is inherently without content but can, at least, transform the source of postmodern doom into a momentary entertainment. It is evident, however, given the novel’s satirized subject, that Dan’s attempt to articulate a contemporary language criticism is but another flawed effort to represent an otherwise sound theory, in the present case of the sort of post-structuralist defenses of the avant-garde then appearing in Tel Quel, the
massively influential French journal edited by Philippe Sollers (which Barthelme reportedly read). 2 One of the most formative pieces to appear in the journal was Roland Barthes’s “Literature and Signification,” published in 1964 as an elaboration on *Writing Degree Zero*, a text which Barthelme greatly admired once he had the opportunity to read it in translation. The essay continues the aggressive critique of social realism Barthes had begun in the earlier work, and he writes, “to create meaning is very easy, our whole mass culture elaborates meaning all day long; to suspend meaning is already an infinitely more complicated enterprise—it is an ‘art’ . . . ” (272). Like Dan, Barthes notes meaning has metastasized to the point of irrelevancy, and, also like Dan, who suspects there is value in the rapidly accumulating language waste, Barthes insists such reckless generation might be put to use through acts of suspension. The suspension of meaning is, according to Barthes, an exercise in critical dialectics, for “any ‘nonmeaning’ is always a ‘countermeaning’: there is no such thing as a zero degree of meaning” (“Literature” 272). In “After Joyce” Barthelme had laid out a similar claim for a reductionist literature that challenged realist obligations of “people, plot, character, the social” and the prevailing social attitudes such obligations represented (*NK* 7). Thus, Dan’s ideas are best understood as an incomplete statement of belief in the transformative ability of an unconventional literary form that emphasizes absence over content. The novel is itself an example of waste turned into something oppositional. *Snow White*’s playful combination of cultural trash--of fairy tales, newspaper headlines, commercial advertising--recalls his stated admiration in “After Joyce” for Beckett’s “combinations of all words in all languages,” a tactic Barthelme had called a “celebration
of life” (NK 9). Here are those things outside the realm of literary discourse--various kinds of trash--inserted into the staid form of the novel.

The passage has been consistently read as a testament to language exhaustion. Yet while Barthelme had expressed a skepticism toward outdated literary forms, and toward those things considered the traditional provenance of the novel, he never expressed a similar skepticism toward language’s signifying power. In fact, Barthelme seems to suggest in “After Joyce” that radical literary forms matter because totalizing language systems continued to maintain the status quo, and that to “attain a fresh mode of thinking” (NK 5), the writer must try “short-circuiting the expected order of things” (NK 9). Thus, the turn toward trash discourses in *Snow White* should not be seen as the resigned attempt to make use of a dead language, but as a recognition and transformation of those areas of language where meaning was now most rapidly produced--including the vapid public information speak he once termed poppycock. As he would later write in the catalog essay for Love’s exhibition at Rice University’s Institute for the Arts, trash offers rich deposits of meaning, and seems already to contain a comment on its original use:

Love, an urban archeologist, makes his discoveries in the detritus of an industrial society; one bucket of odd parts from a Fort Worth junkyard yielded, he says, thirty objects. The prior history of these things blesses them with a special poignancy; their previous existence endures in the life of the new object. (NK 176)
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Barthelme’s celebration of trash in *Snow White* must be considered in light of trash’s potential to be thrillingly reassembled into an original product that both presents and transcends the world from which it’s taken. The discourses, styles, and characters who come together in *Snow White* through juxtaposition create opportunities for inspection and understanding. It is this aesthetic of combination that Barthelme would come to perfect and which provided opportunities to critique the push toward ideological certainty on both left and right. As an unnamed narrator at one point declares in *Snow White*, “In the midst of so much that is true, it is refreshing to shamble across something that is not true” (62).

According to Helen, *Snow White* articulates Barthelme’s “decision to give up ‘romantic’ love” while on the brink of a third failed marriage, and she sees a clear link between Barthelme’s growing discontent at home and Snow White’s difficulty in finding sexual and domestic fulfillment (164). Though now divorced from Helen, Barthelme confided to his ex-wife that Birgit was growing unstable and could no longer care for Anne. Birgit had inherited Huntington’s Disease from her mother, and Daugherty tells us she was then first beginning to display “unpredictable onslaughts of melancholy or anger” (300). Birgit’s illness challenged the couple’s attempts to establish a stable home life, and it led to an increase in Barthelme’s already prodigious consumption of white wine, a habit that had its own deleterious effects on their homemaking efforts.

During visits to Copenhagen, Barthelme discussed the disease with Birgit’s father and was impressed by the equanimity the older man exhibited when he recalled caring
for Birgit’s mother (Daugherty 301). Despite any noble aspirations, however, Barthelme was a man who had grown accustomed to indulgence—he was then spending late evenings in jazz clubs and was also involved in an affair with Lynn Nesbit, his agent (Daugherty 217). Barthelme seemed unable to reconcile his appetites with his desire for a healthy relationship, and Snow White captures, if not the full-throated romantic cynicism his former wife suggests, at least a guilt-plagued restlessness: “Vacillations and confusions of Snow White: ‘But who am I to love’? Snow White asked hesitating, because she already loved us, in a way, but it wasn’t enough. Still, she was slightly ashamed” (12). Snow White longs for Paul, who the novel helpfully instructs “is the prince figure” (82), but the prince is made uncomfortable by the sight of Snow White’s black hair falling from an open window: “It has made me terribly nervous, that hair. It was beautiful, I admit it. Long black hair of such texture, fineness, is not easily come by. Hair black as ebony! Yet it has made me terribly nervous” (13). Snow White appears to share both the guilt of the ruling classes, embodied by Paul, and the libidinous appetite of the free love movement, embodied by her lovers. As it would be in the late novel Paradise, in which a divorced architect enters into a thrilling, but terrifying relationship with three young women, the repression of sexual desire is clearly problematic in Snow White, but so too is unchecked indulgence. Chapter five deals more extensively with the ways sexual desire both informs and limits Barthelme’s aim of social heterogeneity.

As in Snow White, the central figure of “Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning,” submitted to The New Yorker shortly after Snow White was published, bears some resemblance to Barthelme. Barthelme remakes Kennedy into K., a mysterious figure
who, despite passages that seem to affirm Kennedy’s reputation as a hero of the social justice cause, ultimately remains unknowable. K. is, like Barthelme, terribly sensitive to tales of human suffering: “An account of an earthquake in Chile, with its thousands of dead and homeless, may depress him for weeks” (UPUA 35). Snow White had expressed a similar sensitivity, at one point telling Dan, without any context but with much moral distress, “I just don’t like your world. . . . A world in which such things can happen” (Snow White 68). In addition, K. feels compelled by an ethics of social action:

Sometimes it seems to me that it doesn’t matter what I do, that it is enough to exist, to sit somewhere, in a garden for example, watching whatever is to be seen there, the small events. At other times, I’m aware that other people, possibly a great number of other people, could be affected by what I do or fail to do, that I have a responsibility, as we all have, to make the best possible use of whatever talents I’ve been given, for the common good. It is not enough to sit in that garden, however restful or pleasurable it might be. The world is full of unresolved problems, situations that demand careful, reasoned, and intelligent action. In Latin America, for example. (UPUA 42)

An application of talent to certain unresolved problems appears to be taking place in the story itself. The particular problem to which the text devotes itself turns out to be what K. in part symbolizes: U.S. political spectacle parading as truth.

K. is, the reader learns in the opening line, “neither abrupt with nor excessively kind to associates. He is both abrupt and kind” (33). He is surrounded by sycophantic
aides but is deeply alone. He is empathetic but flippant. In the final sentences K. appears with cape and sword, a tribute to the Rafael Sabatini novels Barthelme devoured in his youth, although, confoundingly, K. is at that very moment being ignominiously saved from drowning. A story which promises discovery of a public figure reveals only the public figure’s ultimate unknowability and an image that turns out to be largely staged: He must “at all times present an aspect of freshness, a demand which he solves by changing clothes often” (38).4

The choice of Kennedy wasn’t accidental. Barthelme was once visiting the Pace Gallery in Midtown, examining artwork by Kenneth Noland, when Kennedy entered with an entourage. In accordance with the Color Field movement’s interest in figure and color, Noland’s pieces were of a highly geometrical style. Barthelme recalled Kennedy came in and “did make the remark attributed to him” (NK 230). The remark to which Barthelme alludes is recreated in the story: “K. enters a large gallery on Fifty-seventh Street, in the Fuller building. . . . K. looks at the immense, rather theoretical paintings. ‘Well, at least we know he has a ruler.’ The group dissolves into laughter” (UPUA 39). The remark clearly dismayed Barthelme. He had grown wary of political officials during his time in Korea, and had posed Nelson Rockefeller as the embodiment of the status quo in “After Joyce,” yet he had not been immune to the hope the Kennedy brothers would prove to be exceptional. Barthelme would have been sympathetic to Kennedy’s well-known objections to escalation in Vietnam during his time as senator. To hear Kennedy make a comment at once small-minded and patronizing, and for which he was roundly applauded, seems to have challenged whatever faith in political leadership
Barthelme had left at a time when he was already deeply troubled by the government’s handling of the war and the protest movement’s response. In “Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning,” one’s understanding of the political order (and its representative personalities) is revealed as the product of an apocryphal narrative. Furthermore, the hope Barthelme expresses in “After Joyce” that the politician confronted with abstraction comes away changed had been seriously strained by the episode.

Still, Barthelme complicates attempts to read the story as an ironic broadside against intellectual dishonesty in the style of *Snow White*. K. remains a deeply sympathetic character whose compassion, though balanced by callousness, is unmistakably genuine. Further, the near-final section, “*He Discusses the French Writer, Poulet,*” frames K.’s mercurial aspect as the achievement of a phenomenologically-enlightened consciousness (43). K. quotes literary critic and phenomenologist Georges Poulet, whose ideas of “a pastless, futureless man, born anew at every instant” he approvingly recounts (44). This man “is constantly surprised. He cannot predict his own reactions to events. A condition of breathlessness and dazzlement surrounds him” (44). The state of dazzlement that K. aspires to bears remarkable similarity to that which Natanson describes as the outcome of “the phenomenological approach to social reality”: transcendence over artificial actualities and then a return “to the social world in its full richness and urgent complexity” (*Literature* 166). The protean subjecthood K. displays can therefore be considered at once a measure of his inauthenticity and a sign of phenomenological enlightenment. The story teeters between versions of Kennedy that both turn out to be only partially true: heroic and aspirational, and on the other
hand, constructed and selfish, and the space of their conflation is exactly where assumed knowledge absolutes turn unstable.

Barthelme had constructed a portrait in *Snow White* of a bumbling and pretentious youth movement. It must have come as something of a shock, then, when students and striking workers in Paris nearly toppled Charles de Gaulle’s government in May of 1968. The protest movement’s disparate intellectual heroes--Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre, Sartre, Luis Althusser—all shared a belief in the subversive potential of the avant-garde. A loosely-affiliated group of surrealists named the Situationist International had taken to painting graffiti slogans on the walls of Paris, which became common practice in the weeks leading up to the revolt. These slogans--“Be Cruel,” “Club Med, A Cheap Holiday in Other People’s Misery,” etc. (Marcus 31)--were often contrarian and ironic and their role in the uprising seemed to confirm what Barthelme had himself argued, which was that the status quo could be reformed by confronting a public with the counter-intelligible. Barthelme had in fact mocked Situationist-style graffiti in *Snow White* as an antinomy of peace and aggression:

“Sometimes I see signs on walls saying *Kill the Rich,*” Clem said. “And sometimes *Kill the Rich* has been crossed out and *Harm the Rich* written underneath. A clear gain for civilization I would say. And then the one that says *Jean-Paul Sartre is a Fartre.* Something going on there you must admit. Dim flicker of something.” (66)
But in Europe, such practices had achieved near-revolutionary results. Daugherty is convinced Barthelme was delighted by the uprisings (309-311), but the stories Barthelme wrote following May 1968 suggest Barthelme remained skeptical of radical leftist politics even while sympathetic to rhetorics of disruption and anti-war aims.

The events of 1968 showed up in Barthelme’s next story, “The Policemen’s Ball,” later published in City Life (1970). Horace, a police officer, and his date, Margot, are followed as they move about town by an enigmatic entity named “the horrors.” While Margot believes Horace represents “what is best in the society: decency, order, safety, strength, sirens, smoke,” the horrors, waiting outside the ball where they dance, insist, “safety does not exist” (CL 56). Margot’s reverence for order is plainly at odds with Barthelme’s interest in irrational logics, and yet the horrors represent a sensibility found in texts Barthelme had dubiously labeled “terroristic”: those which challenge “the safety of the bourgeois,” but do so by introducing “constructs which are hostile to life” (NK 8).

While the horrors are found waiting outside the ball and promising, “We get even policemen, in the end” (56), Horace is studiously committed to moderation: “I must try to be an example for the rest of the people” (53). The story ends with a kind of mutual culpability: the horrors emit a villainous laugh, while Horace is fulfilling a plan to overcome his date’s resistance through authoritative forcefulness. In short, it is difficult to parse where guilt and innocence lie in the story, and who, if anyone, emerges as morally supreme.

While his fiction suggested an ambivalent reaction to the events of 1968, his reading list continued to favor the forerunners of 1960s countercultural politics, at the
expense of the New York liberalism offered by such thinkers as Lionel Trilling, Michael Harrington, and Irving Howe, who were not yet convinced that the free gratification of desire and imagination was more useful than focused democratic work. Barthelme had read Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death* (1959) with great interest and had in “After Joyce” alluded to Brown’s belief that erotic containment resulted in widespread social disfunction. He now read a work that more directly connected theories of the unconscious to subversive modes of artistic production: *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967) by the Austrian psychoanalyst Anton Ehrenzweig. According to Daugherty, Barthelme “claimed it was the most enlightening book he had ever found about creativity” (Daugherty 320). Barthelme’s fiction had until then expressed a squeamishness about psychoanalysis. Stories such as “The Sandman” and “Florence Green is 81” depicted self-righteous analysts that satirized Barthelme’s early psychological treatment in Houston. At the same time, those stories and others indicate a familiarity with psychoanalytic texts that at the very least indicated a sincere curiosity he now returned to.

Ehrenzweig’s hermeneutic approach to art criticism bore remarkable similarities to Natanson’s existentialist discussions of literature, in that both valued art which explored alternatives to common modes of consciousness. For Natanson, the individual exhibiting an unvarying faith in totalities revealed an immature brand of cognition, one problematically devoted to the material, and which could be overcome. For Ehrenzweig, the conscious mind was simply one mode of cognition among many, one which happened to be characterized by “sharply crystalized modes of rational thought” (xiii).
Ehrenzweig used theories of psychological depth to explain artistic production, insisting art comes from suppressed zones of consciousness outside the provenance of rational thought--a suggestion he admits is not radical but for his attempt to “vindicate” the “seemingly chaotic structure” of those depths (4). According to Ehrenzweig, modernist art embraces a “surface fragmentation” (65) redolent of unconscious formal logics in order to articulate “outright attacks on conscious order and reason” (70). These attacks inevitably themselves grow familiar and fall victim to traditionalizing gestalts, as perceptions change to reflect the hidden orders uncovered by art. Immortal art, however, will continue to appeal to “deeper, untouched levels” (77). Barthelme had already understood modernism as an aesthetic, and politics, of opposition, but Ehrenzweig’s work suggested from whence the modernist imagination originated and where it could find restoration. In the period to come, Barthelme’s fiction-collages would become more daring, and they seemed to demonstrate a renewed faith in the fragmentary as the true source and subject of artistic creation.

Barthelme was reading and writing at a furious pace despite difficulties between him and Birgit. In 1971, the couple separated, and Birgit moved to a nearby apartment on Seventh Avenue. Barthelme drifted between New York and Houston, and initiated several short-lived affairs--one with a woman whose previous affair with Miles Davis greatly troubled Barthelme’s confidence (Daugherty 345). Barthelme had spent most of his pay from *Snow White* on a build-your-own harpsichord kit for Birgit and was deeply in debt to *The New Yorker*. His relationship with the magazine was becoming strained at
just the moment he needed a steady income. Angell disliked the latest submissions and rather frankly informed Barthelme he was “in a slump” (Daugherty 351). The war, now under the leadership of Richard Nixon, continued to trouble Barthelme as well.

Birgit and Anne returned to Copenhagen in early 1972, following a drug overdose by Birgit (Daugherty 342). They came back to New York City later that year but Birgit and Barthelme couldn’t reconcile; mother and daughter once again returned to Copenhagen. Barthelme was drinking heavily, and Daugherty reports he would often black out in the evenings after copious helpings of scotch (341). Despite these personal setbacks, Barthelme had published two story collections in two years: City Life in 1970 and Sadness in 1972. In addition to including some of Barthelme’s most frequently-anthologized stories, these collections mark the first appearance of some of Barthelme’s most well-known innovations, the use of image alongside text in particular.

From his remarks in interviews, it appears the inclination to include visual elements was the culmination of a longstanding fascination with collage, a process he described succinctly for Jerome Klinkowitz in 1971: “The point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality” (NK 204). Barthelme was particularly fond of Kurt Schwitters, a German neo-dadaist he referred to often. According to Dorothea Dietrich, Schwitters had seen collage as a fundamentally democratic use of materials and elements, one opposed to the “hierarchical Western culture and capitalist political systems” that had caused the war and which had not been reformed adequately during the Weimar era (9). In his “Merz” series of collages, Schwitters juxtaposed waste products (scraps of newspaper mostly, but also burlap and
bus tickets) suggestive of past ruin into a unified composition, allowing familiar materials to take on new properties in the viewer’s eye. It was a radically anti-hegemonic generation of original meaning and had clear parallels with Barthelme’s sense of narrative function (if also a certain gestalist utopianism Barthelme never favored).

Barthelme had already shown a penchant for rhetorical mixing and matching in *Snow White*. But Ehrenzweig’s paean to the artistic exploration of undifferentiated consciousness seems to have instigated in Barthelme a desire for a more rigorous method of reaching what Ehrenzweig had called “untouched levels” of consciousness (77). Barthelme’s typographic distortions in *Snow White* had recalled Schwitters’s Merz poems, which attempted to reproduce some of the visual dissonance of collage by manipulating font and layout. But the new work gained inspiration from the collages themselves, sometimes even referencing particular Merz compositions. “A Nation of Wheels,” for example, features several newspaper cutouts of automobile tires, a possible reference to Schwitters’s most famous collage, “Difficult,” in which an assortment of paper cutouts appears to burst outward from a Firestone tire.

“A Nation of Wheels” appeared in *The New Yorker* on June 13, 1970. In it, Barthelme combines the tires with Victorian-era illustrations and text to create a picture history of an apocryphal 1970s in which tires become self-determining and stage a rebellion against their human masters (an accord is eventually reached). Like “The Indian Uprising,” the story invokes but does not explicitly name the war. There is, for example, an image of a weeping lady on a Louis XIV chair and a few lines of ominous text: “Things could be worse. Worse things could be imagined. Worse things had been
endured, and triumphed over, in the past. This was not the worst. The worst was yet to come” (GP 140). There is also the government’s attempts to cover up the recent past in the interest of appearing to maintain control: “The inevitable work of rewriting the history of the culture proceeded apace. ‘America is based on the wheel,’ the president said, ‘and furthermore, it always was’” (144). Barthelme had been a skeptic of official discourse since his time in Korea, but Vietnam had refined that skepticism following the widespread suspicion that the Gulf of Tonkin attack had been manufactured by the Johnson administration, the flawed assessments issued before the Tet Offensive, and Nixon’s callous response to the student deaths at Kent State just a few months prior to the publication of “A Nation of Wheels.” The inky, baroque heaviness of the Victorian illustrations and the angular simplicity of the photocopied tire images suggests an irreverence toward official, linear histories that is underscored by the text’s creative historiography. As in collages by Schwitters, symbol and text taken from commerce, from war, and from culture are mixed into a creative dissonance that requires the reader to remake those subjects with imaginative understanding.

Barthelme’s most ambitious collages from this period did not involve any cutting and pasting, but rather exhibited a simple mixture of shape and text. In “The Explanation,” and “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel,” a series of opaque black boxes periodically appears throughout the texts. In the two stories, which appear contiguously in the center of City Life, Barthelme parodies Michael Fried’s essay, “Art and Objecthood,” a defense of non-figurative art published by Artforum in its June, 1967 issue. The stories also touch on the usefulness of irony, the effectiveness of direct
action, Maoism, the comparative value of technology and art, and a host of additional topics briefly raised and then forgotten by speakers A and Q.

Fried celebrates a series of black-box sculptures by Tony Smith, and he uses them as examples of what he terms literalist ideology: the rejection of modernist painting and sculpture’s inevitable tendency toward “pictorial illusion,” or the incomplete commitment to abstraction in favor of figuration (12). In addition to works by Smith, Fried describes works by the minimalist sculptor Donald Judd—large, plasticine pieces that suggest a hollow internality. The literalist object avoids resorting to humanoid or natural forms but retains an existential character, a performatory quality Fried describes as the literalist “situation,” which he identified as the hallmark of literalist art (15). Though Fried mostly discusses painting and sculpture, his complaints seem to extend toward collage: The modernist canvas is limited by the “relational character” of its components and must (12), according to Fried, organize its surface elements into a new shape, lest modern artworks risk being “experienced as nothing more than objects” (15). Of course, the organization of the collage by the viewer/reader to achieve social commentary is precisely how, in Schwitters’s model of collage, the artwork derives its power. It is an approach consistent with “After Joyce,” in which Barthelme had suggested that the modernist text does its work by forcing the reader to assimilate the new logics of the text. The polemical aspect of these stories demonstrates the growing importance of collage to Barthelme’s aesthetic and the sense that his work did not only belong to the modernist tradition of Joyce and Eliot, but to a fuller multi-media spectrum of modernist abstraction and combination.
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As part of his discussion, Fried prints sections of interviews with Smith, using a Q
and A format Barthelme would reproduce for the entirety of “The Explanation” and
“Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel”:

Q: Why didn’t you make it larger so that it would loom over the
observer?

A: I was not making a monument.

Q: Then why didn’t you make it smaller so that the observer could see
over the top?

A: I was not making an object. (16)

Spanning Barthelme’s two stories is a similar dialogue between a questioner and
respondent that at some moments resembles a psychotherapeutic examination, at
others a philosophical dialectic, and at yet others, insofar as Barthelme somewhat
resembles Q, an author interview. The first time one of the large, page-dominating black
boxes appears, at the opening of “The Explanation,” Q refers to it as a machine, and
asks A if he believes it “could be helpful in changing the government” (69). A remains
skeptical, complaining “it offers no clues” (70) and wonders, “why should I trust it?” (71).
Q’s exuberance for the machine mocks Fried’s description of the literalist object as a
necessarily symmetrical, ordered sculpture capable of producing a predictable effect in
the viewer. Q’s proposition that the machine might be helpful in changing the
government comes off as particularly ludicrous; art focused on mechanically
reproducing the sensations behind banal human experiences--Smith discloses that his
black boxes were inspired by a drive on the freeway--lacks abstract modernism’s
confrontational zeal. Q is unable to make anything of the box, despite Fried’s assurances of existential performance. And when Q offers to show A a picture of his daughter, the black box appears once again, a gleeful sendup of Fried’s suggestion that the plasticine literalist object/machine is “biomorphic” in its ability to reproduce an effect of human presence (19). Abstraction without context or juxtaposition is here disclosed as silly and vacant. But insofar as the black box instead serves as an object of discussion, contemplation, and creativity, it gathers in aesthetic force.

The critique of Fried is combined in “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” with a critical discussion of the titular philosopher, in which A complains Kierkegaard’s reading of Schlegel’s *Lucinde* is, as the title suggests, “unfair” (90). Kierkegaard, the reader learns, accused Schlegel of trying to replace the imperfect historical moment with a romantic poetic utopia: “What is wanted, Kierkegaard says, is not a victory over the world, but a reconciliation with the world” (89). But A is unsure *Lucinde* should be read as a formula for living or the representation of a new paradigm for existence, and suggests, instead, in echoes of “After Joyce,” that it be valued as an object. A’s concern, however, is not ultimately with defending Schlegel but with critiquing Kierkegaard’s beliefs on the ironic mode, which the philosopher viewed as another form of ontological replacement. According to A, Kierkegaard identified irony as one of the chief ways an author might achieve victory over the world, since, in the ironical treatment, “The object is deprived of its reality by what I have said about it” (88). Kierkegaard argued that irony replaces the real, and this clearly troubled Barthelme, who often used irony in the pursuit of a satire intended to transform the real in the eyes of the reader.
The indictment of Kierkegaardian poetics is complicated by A's confession: “Because that is not what I think at all. We have to do here with my own irony. Because of course Kierkegaard was ‘fair’ to Schlegel” (90). But even this is not true; later A seems to resolve that he likes irony after all, despite its imperfections. Like the boxes, which cannot show readers what the speakers want us to see, the reader cannot know what A thinks about irony, only that he is thinking about it, and perhaps even using it. Though this is likely the type of aporia that has frustrated critics and resulted in accusations of nihilism, the text’s constantly revised argumentation should be seen as a pattern of “irruption”—the word A’s ex-wife employs when complaining about A’s habit of calling her to report erotic dreams—that prevents meaning from coalescing. The black boxes, Q's comically attentive interest in A’s sexual fantasies, references to Hitchcock and Truffaut, and sections of nonsense all suggest a playful pleasure in recollection and combination that is extended via the requirements of indeterminacy to the reader. In sum, the relationally-active modernist art object which the text’s parody implicitly defends is on vivid display here. Not only is such juxtaposition a defense of modernist method, but it seems to suggest that Barthelme’s texts could not be finally reduced to weak ironic jests. They demanded, in fact, a creative reception that maintained opportunities for Kierkegaardian reconciliation.

In “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel,” A complains the existing expressions of political dissent had failed him: Q: You’re not political?
A: I’m extremely political in a way that does no good to anybody.

Q: You don’t participate?

A: I participate. I make demands, sign newspaper advertisements, vote. I make small campaign contributions to the candidate of my choice and turn my irony against the others. But I accomplish nothing. I march, it’s ludicrous. (84)

But there was evidence the process of protest via argumentative indirection was working, or that at the very least Barthelme had pierced the complacency of his readers. In a New York Times Magazine profile, “Freaked out on Barthelme,” published two years earlier, Angell revealed that Barthelme’s stories were the source of more angry letters than those of any other author published by The New Yorker (Schickel 14). Despite the hand-wringing on display in City Life, other stories in the collection suggest Barthelme cheerfully accepted his role as provocateur. In “Brain Damage,” also from City Life, the narrator boasts of the inevitability of drastic cognitive change his fictions represented:

And you can hide under the bed but brain damage is under the bed and you can hide in the universities but they are the very seat of brain damage-- Brain Damage caused by bears who put your head in their foaming jaws while you are singing ‘Masters of War’ . . . Brain damage caused by the sleeping revolution which no one can wake up . . . Brain damage caused by art. I could describe it better if I wasn’t afflicted with it . . . (146; ellipses in orig.).
Brain Damage, it seems, will come to the bourgeois and the folk singer alike, despite the false assurances of those who feel “you should tell the truth” (145). The story, unsurprisingly, is one of the most flamboyant collages to appear in City Life. It features a sketch of a woman with enormously exaggerated breasts beside a nun holding an umbrella, one of the weeping ladies from “A Nation of Wheels,” decapitated heads on podiums, a Victorian woodcut illustration of Prometheus chained to Mt. Caucasus, and and in large type the words, “TO WHAT END?/IN WHOSE NAME? WHAT RE COURSE?” (145).

The implied parallel in “Brain Damage” between conscience and derangement is in some ways unusual for Barthelme. Although André Breton had suggested in the first “Manifesto of Surrealism” that surrealism might find inspiration in the deranged or intoxicated mind, Barthelme tended to gravitate towards thinkers like Natanson and Ehrenzweig, who saw the surrealist fantasy as rooted in imagination or in the unconscious: modes of cognition that are not immediately available but consistent with a healthy mind. Still, a description of the reformist energies of a corrupted psyche shows how indebted Barthelme remained to the tradition of the European avant-garde, and demonstrates how much a collage like “Brain Damage,” far from attempting to duplicate a kinetic postmodern energy, was offering sparks to the imagination. As Breton had written, “The words, the images are only so many springboards for the mind of the listener” (35).

Still, as “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” makes clear, Barthelme continued to grow frustrated by the lack of a more explicit weapon against a government that seemed
increasingly deceitful and oppressive. The Pentagon Papers, published by *The New York Times* in June, 1971, affirmed a sustained pattern of government duplicity underlying public statements about the war in Vietnam. Most damningly, they revealed that President Johnson had planned to expand the war while calling for its deescalation. The papers also made public the details of Nixon’s secret carpet-bombing campaign of Cambodia and Laos. It had been during a student protest in reaction to Nixon’s initial announcement of a Cambodian invasion that four students had been killed at Kent State University in Ohio. Then, in the summer of 1972, arrests were made in connection to a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate hotel. That fall, government investigators concluded the break-in was part of an elaborate spying operation carried out by the Nixon campaign.

Barthelme soon accepted a part-time teaching position at SUNY Buffalo, and he there observed the kind of dramatic protest then happening at campuses across the country. The reports of political espionage on behalf of Nixon’s reelection campaign had added a veneer of criminality to the war’s already deeply distrusted leadership. Buffalo policemen in riot gear were not an unfamiliar sight on the campus. Barthelme watched as faculty were arrested, tear gas canisters released, and students placed in handcuffs, all of which, recall some former students, left Barthelme mopey and visibly disquieted (Daugherty 353).

Still, Barthelme remained ambivalent about the protest movement and declined to join his students and colleagues in their insurgency. He did, however, begin publishing satires of the American political leadership in *The New Yorker’s* “Talk of the
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Town” and “Notes and Comment” sections, among other high-profile locations. They were, he explained, “written out of anger, obviously a very creative emotion, at the government” (KN 237). The satires contained the full range of Barthelme’s wit and irony. He would later tell an interviewer of his satirical work, “it doesn’t do anybody any good,” but added, “on the other hand, it is a necessary defense mechanism” (interview in Radical 47). Recalling Kierkegaard, Barthelme explained that irony is “kind of a push in the direction of freedom. You are trying to disassociate yourself from something that is going on around you” (interview in Radical 46).

Though Barthelme had attempted to complicate the ironic mode in his fiction, he was considerably less circumspect when it came to his editorials. In October, 1972, Barthelme published “Swallowing” on The New York Times Op-Ed page, three days before that year’s presidential election between President Nixon and George McGovern. “Swallowing” captures both the ironic zeal and the emotional seriousness of the satires, of which there are roughly a half dozen:

The American people have swallowed a lot in the last four years. A lot of swallowing has been done. We have swallowed electric bugs, laundered money, quite a handsome amount of grain moving about in mysterious ways, a war more shameful than can be imagined, much else. There are even people who believe that the President does not invariably tell us the truth about himself or ourselves--he tells us something, we swallow that.

In the history of swallowing, the disposition of the enormous cheese--six feet thick, twenty feet in diameter, four thousand pounds--which had been
Wisconsin’s principal contribution to the New York World’s Fair of 1964-5, is perhaps instructive. (*GP* 65)

Here Barthelme expands a common cliché by retaining its physiological significance. By framing one’s confrontation with official misinformation as bodily abuse, the experience of passive citizenship becomes more viscerally grotesque. The analogy also makes a clever parallel between political naivety and capitalist consumption, suggesting wholesale cultural atrophy is partially to blame for continued support for Nixon. In another piece, published in *The New Yorker* around the same time but left unsigned, Barthelme flatly accuses Nixon of announcing troop withdrawal for political gain (*NK* 150).

In January, 1973, Nixon’s credibility further eroded when *The Washington Post* connected officials inside the administration to the Watergate burglary. Though Nixon announced a suspension of military offensives in Vietnam that same month, existing suspicions of Nixon’s handling of the war were inevitably compounded by the scandal. For an author who had long distrusted official government rhetoric, Watergate seemed to confirm Barthelme’s most cynical suspicions. What Barthelme had witnessed in Korea suggested the government could be disingenuous. Watergate, however, disclosed a government that was criminal and corrupt, and which had nonetheless succeeded in winning public support. Thomas Pynchon occasionally stayed at the apartment below Barthelme’s on West Eleventh Street during this period and Barthelme, who would grow lonely after a morning spent in front of the typewriter, visited his neighbor most afternoons (Daugherty 373). Pynchon recalls that Barthelme’s politics--
with its nearly equal measure of hostility toward both counterculture and establishment—were hard for friends to pin down, but remembers, “Watergate sure did get him revved up” (*The Teachings of Don B.* xv). Barthelme’s first reaction to the scandal was “The Royal Treatment,” a satirical poem published by *The New York Times* on Nov. 3, 1973 under the pseudonym Lily McNeil. The author identifies herself as a member of Nixon’s silent majority and declares:

> I would like to publicly proclaim that I, for one, do not think the President is guilty of base, low, or tiny-minded malfeasance.

> And although the former Vice-President has made me sad, at least he didn’t do anything that could correctly be described as high treasance.

(*GP* 85).  

McNeil goes on to announce a string of acquittals (the Attorney General, Counsel to the President, etc.), until by virtue of magnitude the apologia becomes untenable. “The Royal Treatment” then shifts, from a satire of naïve public reaction, to an attack on the government itself, which McNeil finds “exhausted and puffing and panting” (86). As solution, she nominates herself as “first woman king” (87), which though “anti-democratic, un-American, and anachronistic” would at least provide an accountable solitary leadership (88).  

So profoundly unjust was the current state of affairs, claims the self-dubbed Lily the First, that absolute monarchy could only be an improvement.

Then, in March of 1973, the last American troops left Vietnam. A Senate committee ordered the end of the American bombing campaign in Cambodia that
summer, and within a year, Nixon resigned. As the nation’s political fortunes improved, so too did Barthelme’s personal affairs. He was appointed Distinguished Visiting Professor at New York’s City College, and he was embarking on an affair with Marion Knox, a reporter for *Time* magazine and later Barthelme’s fourth wife. After meeting Marion he wrote to a friend, “I am happy and know myself to be happy--a rare state” (Daugherty 370). It was during this period that Barthelme composed *The Dead Father* (1975). The novel, widely regarded as Barthelme’s masterwork, is the story of an aged tyrant being led by his son, Thomas, to burial. Details of time and place are sketchy. The novel is both unmistakably contemporary and, in its descriptions of swords, inns, and maidens, decidedly archaic. The Dead Father is himself of indeterminate status, described at the outset of the journey as “dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead” (3). He is at one moment of mythological proportions, stretching across city blocks, and at other moments utterly human in scale, even diminutive, as when seated at dinner: “Thomas rapped the Dead Father sharply in the forehead, across the cloth. Toe fell from mouth. The Dead Father clutched his forehead” (55).

Reaction to the novel settled around disagreement over its apparent symbolism. Richard Todd, writing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, was convinced the novel was “heavy on symbol,” particularly the figure of the Dead Father, who is “a symbol of some plasticity” (112). Todd attempts to account for the full spectrum of allegorical possibility in one swift motion, writing that the stubbornly undead father Thomas struggles to bury “is God first of all. God as father. And father as God. After that he’s what you will: The Novel, Western Culture, Truth, Duty, Honor, Country. He is the order that we seek, and the
control we escape” (112). Daugherty echoes this interpretation in his treatment of the novel, writing that by the end of the book the Dead Father “has come to represent traditional literature and Western cultural history as well as the weight of paternity” (387).

At least one reviewer found such claims misdirected. In a review for *The Antioch Review*, Nolan Miller asks, “parable, myth, perhaps allegory--What matter?” (369). Miller rejects even the most multidimensional symbolisms and is instead convinced the novel was frantically, indiscriminately playful: Barthelme is “an innovator running the field” whose work is “the province of the best nonsense we have had since Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear” (369). It was praise Barthelme would have welcomed. In his own eagerness to portray the novel as free from any allegorical orthodoxy, Barthelme somewhat overstates the novel’s autonomy from external concerns. During an interview with Pacifica Radio shortly after *The Dead Father* was published, he recounted, “someone asked just the other day, and I assume seriously, if this had to do with the fall of President Nixon . . . you know, shocking . . . how can it possibly be read that way?” (*NK* 212; ellipsis in orig.). Such shock is, of course, disingenuous. One year after Nixon’s resignation it would have been impossible to read the story of a paranoid leader, at odds with a set of youthful antagonists and unmoved by the suffering he has caused, without thinking of the recently-deposed American president. In fact, a description of Nixon by Pynchon, taken from his brief account of Barthelme’s politics, can easily be taken as a description of the abject figure at the center of Barthelme’s novel and is perhaps partially inspired by it: “Nixon by then had already mutated into a desperate and
impersonal force, no longer your traditionally human-type President, but now some faceless subgod of folly” (*Teachings* xv-xvi). What’s more, the Dead Father’s whimpering behavior recalls other literary treatments of Nixon that had painted him as a predominantly comic if occasionally sympathetic figure.11

And while Barthelme was similarly elusive about the novel’s grandly-announced Oedipal implications, the Dead Father’s insufferable bombast plainly invokes Barthelme, Sr. A letter to Barthelme from Barthelme Sr. in 1978 suggests the two continued to have a competitive, if intellectually stimulating relationship. Barthelme had suggested to his father that he write a textbook for advanced architecture students. The epistolary reply is at turns petulant, insecure, and preening. Barthelme, Sr. insisted architecture “is in need of a fresh direction” and immodestly adds, “I think I have one.” Architecture was then, wrote Barthelme Sr., caught in the habit of navel-gazing. By endlessly reformulating its own orthodoxies, it had become formulaic: “If you start with the concept of the building as a thing, you immediately bring into play a complete set of rules, thinking, concepts, criteria, atc., atc.[sic]” (letter to Donald Barthelme). Was Barthelme, Sr. critiquing his son’s characterization in “After Joyce” of the text as object? Given their competitive history, it is altogether possible, even though Barthelme’s description was of an art object that was free of the sort of orthodox thinking Barthelme, Sr. was condemning. And yet the tone of the letter indicates the father felt put on the defensive by the suggestion that he attempt an academic text, perhaps interpreting the gesture as a comment on his ambition. Barthelme, Sr. interrupts himself at one point with a belligerent skepticism: “Am I boring you? Have you heard it all before? Is it just plain
obvious?” The letter ends with a subtle rebuke of the original request: “That’s a lot of
time and effort I spent doing something that turns out not to make good sense,” before
signing off, “your rueful father, Pop.”

In early drafts of *The Dead Father*, the eponymous character is much closer to
this vexatious “pop” than the final, more fantastic figure. A first-person narrator, later
jettisoned, underscores these parallels: “The Dead Father has presented a bill of
particulars against me. First, it is alleged that I do not think clearly” (*The Dead Father*
TS). Though the description of an unrepentant bully points quite unambiguously to
Barthelme Sr., there are hints too in these drafts that the Dead Father is Barthelme
himself. It was he, after all, who had spent much of his time with Birgit and Anne as a
drunk:

> Our father is drunk tonight but he doesn’t want us to know it. His grizzle is
> showing. We see it. His eyes are behind Time Magazine. He turns the
> pages and reaches for his drink. No one can speak to him. Our mother
can speak to him but she is not speaking to him. He can speak to us
anytime he likes. He can say anything he wishes to us. He can tell us how
terrible we have been, how terrible we are. If he says anything to us, that
is what he will say. He will say: “Just *who...in the hell...do you think you
are?”* We have never seen anyone so angry. (*The Dead Father* TS)

The tableau mirrors other domestic scenes Barthelme had written featuring a troubled,
alcoholic father.¹² Autobiography was clearly central to Barthelme’s method of
composition, although he consistently mediates autobiographical work in a manner
consistent with a method of phenomenological investigation that moves from familiar to extraordinary.

To be sure, then, the authorities--familial, political, religious--that Barthelme feared, and seemed to fear becoming, all appear and find a clever synthesis in the obscene paterfamilias of the title, as signaled by Barthelme’s enthusiastic denials. *The Dead Father* thus poses a unique problem to critics who wish to avoid over-simplified allegories while making sense of a strikingly suggestive set of subjects. Richard Walsh concludes that the various hegemonic forces towards which the novel gestures “are derivative from the literal sense of paternity in the novel, not hidden codes that provide its driving force,” since “no single interpretation satisfies” (175). The Dead Father must, in other words, be understood as a proxy for the difficulties inherent in fatherhood rather than as a symbol for a particular father. Barthelme’s loosening of the determinants around the Dead Father allowed various complaints--against himself, against Nixon, against his father--to (loosely, tantalizingly) inhabit one central figure.¹³

The multi-profiled figure of the Dead Father, in addition to providing Barthelme with deniability, also reflects a continued evolution in his use of collage, one that was moving away from juxtapositions between shape and text, and from tricks of font and layout, and toward a more sophisticated combination of motifs and milieux that often appeared within the same sentence. A fragment from the early drafts shows the productive frictions that emerge in this regard:

I wanted to speak in a clear and simple way about serious things, and there were others in the city who wanted the same thing. I had met some
of them and we had kept up with each other. Among the things we discussed was whether nuns were better in or out of habits, the susceptibility of white girls to black man’s jive, the rottenness of the government, and whether the Dead Father ought to be, or indeed, could be, killed. When we tired of talking about these things we talked about if love existed and if so where it was to be found. (The Dead Father TS)

The narrator’s desire to speak directly about important subjects is compromised by a mixture of the profane, and even racist, with the profound and political. But as had long been the case for Barthelme, “clear and simple” in the conventional sense is discarded in favor of an evocative indirection, a rhetorical principle that continued to coalesce stylistically around collage-like juxtapositions.

Though this kind of crosspurposed discussion is smoothed over in the published version of the novel, plenty of thematic and linguistic alterities--or irruptions--remain. Notably, the epic collides against the ordinary, the Arthurian with the contemporary, most noticeably within the figure of the Dead Father himself: “The Dead Father plodding along, at the end of his cable. His long golden robes. His long gray hair to the shoulder. His broad and noble brow. Awfully calm, said Julie. Placid as a mailman, Thomas agreed, he is trying to be good” (The Dead Father 80). Further, the novel mixes together language cultures (artistic, vernacular, cinematic, etc.) with great energy, as had been done with slightly less precision in Snow White. His frequent nominalization of action sequences in The Dead Father, for example, recalls the intertitles of silent films:
“Outrage of the Dead Father. Death of a guitar, whanged against a tree, in outrage. Guitar carcass added to the fire” (21).14

Explaining his admiration for such combinatorial processes in the Pacifica interview, Barthelme remarked, “I think that the effort is to reach a realm of meaning that is not quite sayable. You stay away from what can be said and you try to reach what can’t quite be said. Yet it is nevertheless meaningful” (NK 214). At a symposium that year at Washington and Lee University with Paley, William Gass, and Walker Percy, Barthelme returned to this idea, speaking of “the ineffable”: a place “in what may fairly be called truth exists” (KN 65). In his allusions to the metaphysical territories collage aspires to, Barthelme seems to have the symbolists in mind, Stephané Mallarmé in particular, on whom Rosenberg and Raymond had written, and whom his first wife had studied extensively. He would later write, “Mallarmé shakes words loose from their attachments and bestows new meanings upon them, meanings which point not toward the external world but toward the Absolute, acts of poetic intuition” (NK 16). Barthelme was not as enamored with the vaguely supernatural as was Mallarmé, however. It becomes clear that reaching toward the Absolute is for Barthelme an existentialist exercise, as doing so reveals “how much of Being we haven’t yet encountered” (NK 21). Collage had clearly become Barthelme’s preferred tool for reaching toward the phenomenological horizon--a place beyond consciousness that spared Barthelme from allegiance to meaning, or to cause, but which resonated with purpose and humanity.

An attempt to read The Dead Father under the guidance of a unified framework must therefore be considered the entitlement of a reader confronted with odd
combinations of subjects, allusions, places, discourses, and temporalities, and who must from these construct a linear narrative. In the Pacifica interview, Barthelme drew a clear distinction between the allegory the interviewer supposes might be seized, as if it were available but uncooperative, and that which the reader constructs, and bears responsibility for:

Sherman: See, I immediately try to grab onto allegory or something and then--

Barthelme: --That’s not what I want--

Sherman:--it’s hard to let it go and say, “Let go now.”

Ruas: Yeah, but to a certain extent you can’t avoid allegory. For example, in The Dead Father--

Barthelme: Well, you bring the allegory in, you see. (NK 212)

Consistent with the novel’s gestures towards the anxieties of influence, Barthelme indicated that the rigid requirements of allegory must be included among the text’s scrutinized subjects. To read any final intentionality into the scattershot symbology of the Dead Father is ultimately to surrender the joys of play entirely to the author, when the central conflict of the novel makes clear the author is at the very least dubious about being, in the apt words of Roland Barthes, “the father and owner of the work” (“Work to Text” 160).\(^\text{15}\) It would be rash to simply ignore the Dead Father’s indeterministic usefulness as signifier, but so too is it foolish to ignore the semiotically-subversive blending he brings to the novel. *The Dead Father* may be symbolic, but only insofar as it is constructed by the reader: as the reviews suggest, one reader might see God in the
visage of the Dead Father, where another might see the U.S. political leadership. 
Description of the Dead Father emanating prophetic contentment while “sitting in the 
cathedral gardens” amidst “Bronze doors opening” and “Confessionals in Rows”
certainly suggests a church authority too dependent upon ritual (85), while scenes of 
cathartic swordplay suggest American policies informed by a reckless militant 
machismo: “Then the Dead Father resumed his sword work in earnest slaying divers 
[sic] small animals of every kind, so that the heaps mounted steaming to the right and to 
the left of him with each passionate step” (53). The juxtapositions and half-glimpses of 
genre and of symbol create a certain homology between Barthelme and his readers: 
both are free from allegiance to the logocentric. No single symbolic understanding 
satisfies, in isolation, but it is the productive interplay between them in combination that 
creates a fresh examination of the book’s various targets.

The year The Dead Father was released was also the year the American 
embassy in Saigon fell. This was not the end of Barthelme’s political activism, however. 
He was shifting toward a more expansive consideration of social welfare, one which 
reflected an acute civic conscience and a distrust for dominant public discourses. In a 
“Notes and Comment” column published in The New Yorker in November, 1975, for 
example, he took aim at the iniquity of soaring bank profits during a national recession. 
He devotes much of the column to parsing the ideologically over-determined public 
discourses he clearly felt had inhibited reform thus far. He begins with standard ironic 
fare:
There is something President Carter can do that will enable him to go
down in history as the greatest American President since Abraham
Lincoln. He can free the banks. As everyone knows, banks have
historically been second-class citizens in America. They are everywhere
hated, despised, reviled. (NK 41)

Freeing the banks, it turns out, means nationalizing them, to restore “a footing of
equality with any other citizen” (41). The column then quickly turned defensive in
anticipation of conservative enforcements: “Now, I am not against ‘profit,’” writes
Barthelme. “I believe in profit. Keeps the wheels whirling and all that. This is called
‘incentive.’ A good thing. My one quibble is that from what I hear around town the banks
incentivize very few of their fellow citizens” (42). Later in the column, he elaborates on
his anti-Communist bonafides: “Now, it may appear to some that my proposal has what
might be called a ‘Communist’ or ‘Socialist’ tinge. Not right. In point of fact, I met a
Communist once and didn’t like him at all. He was wearing clothes I didn’t like, he was
rude, and he ate his peas by picking up each individual pea with two fingers on his right
hand” (42). Barthelme is glib here, perhaps, but the right-wing criticisms the column
anticipated, and its care to disassociate from socialist politics, confirms that much of
Barthelme’s political thinking remained focused on fashionable establishment and
countercultural rhetorics, and the intellectual enforcements they represented.

Ideological pieties had long been a favorite subject of Barthelme’s and his
treatment of its dangers culminated with his next collection, Amateurs, published in
1976. Barthelme included several uncollected pieces from earlier in the decade that
appear to be included for their contribution to the particular theme of the collection. “Our Work and Why We Do it,” for example, had been published by The New Yorker in May, 1973, and might have been included in Sadness but was withheld. In this story, a group of printing press employees are forced to navigate the absurd demands placed on them by the press’s owners and a group of radicals representing the “Tanberian Revolution” (Amateurs 7). The conflict between bourgeois and counterculture, right and left, leaves the workers of the press (those who, like Barthelme, produce text for public consumption) little choice but to focus on their craft in the hope their work will find purpose.

William, one of the owners, at one point delivers a long, programmatic sermon in defense of capitalist ethics: “It is good to be a member of the bourgeoisie, he said. A boy likes being a member of the bourgeoisie. Being a member of the bourgeoisie is good for a boy” (8) and so forth, a position the reader learns occasionally fills William with “self-hatred” (8). The Tanberians, for their part, threaten the press with revolutionary action despite holding several contracts with them, including one for “original manifestos hand-set in specially nicked and scarred Blood Gothic” (7).

Barthelme had sympathies for both of these cultural values. He was, for example, fond of the kind of high-design furniture his father had once decorated with (Lopate considered him a “prisoner of a bourgeois lifestyle dedicated to discreet good taste” [135], although he charitably admits this assessment might stem from his own cynicism toward domestic bliss). But their values have been here grievously translated into dogmatic performances in speech and print.
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Barthelme had always polarized critics, but beginning with *Amateurs* even those critics who had once been sympathetic to his work (or who indicated they had previously been) increasingly expressed disenchantment with a style that had, many agreed, become too practiced. Richard Locke, in *The New York Times Book Review*, called *Amateurs* “relatively weak,” as “absurdities become as routine as the clichés that convey them: the japes become jokes, the satire a lampoon” (5). Philip Stevick, in the *Nation*, applauded the collection, but not before noting that “privately, if not in print, more than a few of the admirers of his first three collections, especially the brilliant *City Life*, have felt a measure of disappointment in his latest work,” which has often threatened to become an aggregate of “middle-high camp” (119).

It is hard not to suspect this souring had much to do with a critical climate that had become hostile toward the avant-garde, and toward Barthelme in particular. In a blistering essay in the *New York Review of Books* that year, Gore Vidal painted Barthelme as the unfortunate inheritor of French poststructuralist thought, a systematizing set of ideas, in his opinion, which had reduced literature to programmatic interpretations at the encouragement of university English departments: “Envious of the half-erased theorems--the prestigious signs--of the physicians, English teachers now compete by chalking up theorems and theories of their own” (31). Speaking of *Snow White* he writes, “the author tries not to be himself a maker of dreck but an arranger of dreck” (32). Vidal clearly relished the chance to cultivate an attitude of raffish boorishness, and was light on Barthelme’s specific indiscretions, but he seems to suggest Barthelme was frozen by the new self-consciousness of sign-production. And in
another essay that year for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Vidal insisted Barthelme and John Barth produced novels “written not so much to be read as to be taught” (183). *The Dead Father*, he wrote, was not very interesting but offered an ironic treatment of linguistic deterioration that university professors might make some use of. In 1978, John Gardner would seize the moment to publish his broad indictment of postmodernism, *On Moral Fiction*. Of Barthelme, Gardner writes frankly, “he cares not about people but about ideas” (80). Literature should instead be, in the tradition of Leo Tolstoy and Henry James, “helping us understand intellectually and intuitively both others and ourselves” (81). Of course, this is the same type of criticism in defense of literary good taste Barthelme had been battling since “After Joyce.” Gardner’s critique had less to do with Barthelme than with the avant-garde in general. But as the zeitgeist of sixties radicalism faded, Barthelme was less insulated from such criticisms and was beginning to seem a relic of a movement he had never much liked to begin with.

Whatever its biases, Vidal’s essay was not uninformed. Barthelme had been thinking about Barthes since *Snow White* and had read Barthes’s *Writing Degree Zero* (a text Vidal found particularly irksome) with great admiration. But Barthelme was likely less interested in semiotic mechanics than he was in the political implications of Barthes’s theory. In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes complains the traditional novel presents a world “purged of the uncertainty of substance,” and that it codifies the “mysterious” and “absurd” without acknowledging the great pains it has taken in doing so (31). He indicates the bourgeoisie maintain social authority much the same way: by making the false appear real (“Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning” comes to mind...
The duty of the fiction writer is therefore to expose the performative aspect of language through noticeable, creative transformation. It is clear from “Not Knowing,” Barthelme’s later essay on fiction, that *Writing Degree Zero* played a critical role in Barthelme’s development of an ethics of language use. After first discussing Mallarmé’s efforts to “renew language” by moving past the linguistic, he writes:

The silencing of an existing rhetoric (in Harold Rosenberg’s phrase) is also what is at issue in Barthes’s deliberations in *Writing Degree Zero* and after—in this case a variety of rhetorics seen as actively pernicious rather than actively inhibiting. The question is, what is the complicity of language in the massive crimes of Fascism, Stalinism, or (by implication) our own policies in Vietnam? In the control of societies by the powerful and their busy functionaries? If these abominations are all in some sense facilitated by, made possible by, language, to what degree is language ruinously contaminated (considerations also raised by George Steiner in his well-known essay “The Hollow Miracle” and, much earlier, by George Orwell)? *(NK 16)*

In Barthes, Barthelme found confirmation of what he had long suspected: written language and visual vocabularies had been institutionalized and used for ideological endeavors, and it was up to the artist to reform and reclaim those languages. Vidal’s assumption that Barthelme was documenting the imperfections of the mechanics of production robs Barthelme of the subversiveness his formalism aspired to.
The rigidly conventional use of language by the government to maintain a uniform ideology necessitated a response. In *Amateurs*, as in *The Dead Father*, that response was a confrontation of conformity with radical, combinatorial difference. Combination was an acknowledgment that language remained logocentrically contained and autocratically disposed when used in conventional ways for conventional purposes (the consolidation of organization, power, homogeneity). Barthelme’s use of existing bits of language and culture was not an acknowledgement that language could no longer produce meaning, but that it shouldn’t continue to do so in the same uninterrupted manner.

The threat of savage danger, which had entered Barthelme’s writing in the murderous form of the Dead Father, in *Amateurs* almost exclusively emanates from self-empowered authorities demanding intellectual conformity or, at the very least, compliancy. “Some of Us Have Been Threatening Our Friend Colby,” for example, is the story of a group of friends in agreement over the need to execute the unfortunate fellow of the title, who the reader is told “had gone too far” (*A* 29). And in the story “What to do Next,” a narrator addresses an unnamed figure whose dog has died, and provides a set of instructions on how to proceed, instructions, it becomes quickly apparent, intended mainly to bring the mourner into cultural accordance. The mourner is told to write a will, since it is prudent, and to indulge in travel and cheap affairs rather than submit to introspection. Recovering from the dead dog, it turns out, is not at all the focus of the instructions, but rather they are intended to address an underlying problem: “you stick
out from the matrix of this culture like a banged thumb, swelling and reddening and otherwise irrupting all over its smooth eventless surface” (86). Yielding to middle-class regularity turns out to be the real point of the instructions.

The theme is developed most aggressively in “The New Member,” in which a hopelessly (and comically) bureaucratic committee engaged in philanthropic work issues rules and outcomes for those individuals for whom it has assumed responsibility. The Presiding Officer, for example, “would urge, strongly urge, that Cynthia Croneis become pregnant immediately and that she should have twin boys” (162). When in a sudden fit of transparency, the committee members offer membership to a man who has been peering through the window of the committee room, the neophyte quickly becomes the committee’s most ruthless autocrat: “All right, he said. The first thing we’ll do is we’ll make everybody wear overalls. Gray overalls. Gray overalls with gray T-shirts” (164). In almost every story included in the collection, in fact, group solidarity poses an imminent but inchoate menace to those who remain stubbornly unaffiliated, the political implications of which remain remarkably overlooked.

The long-held belief that a hackneyed methodology fatally compromises Amateurs has particularly limited understandings of the text in this regard. The complaints that crystallized during this time have left behind an undeserved reputation of late-career decline. Even Barthelme’s champions remember the latter collections as lacking. After The Dead Father, decides Lopate, “his fiction lost most of its emotional openness, devolving on the whole into clever, guarded pastiche” (133). Further, scholars have only lightly treated Amateurs and what follows (in part because Barthelme
scholarship slowed considerably after the 1980s, when his later work was published), or have attempted to separate it from the allegedly more vital mid-career work. Wayne Stengel, for example, in the only article to appear solely focused on Amateurs (there is also a chapter devoted to it in Gordon’s Donald Barthelme), writes that the book represents a “significant fault line” for a (once) “highly moral and political American short story writer” (“Irony” 145). According to Stengel, Barthelme switches from rejecting “the tendency of human consciousness to force imaginative writing into conventional, preordained shapes and containers” to an ill-advised attempt (he is using Barthelme’s own references to Kierkegaard here) “to forge a reconciliation with the world” (“Irony” 145-46) by surrendering the more outlandish formal techniques that implicitly challenged that world’s more depraved habits.

Echoing Gardner, Stengel writes that the stories suffer from authorial indifference, and leave unchallenged “the triumph of groupthink” (“Irony” 145). As cause, he names stylistic self-regard. The collection’s tendency to make “totalitarianisms that wish to devour us seem all too humane, amusing, understandable, or aesthetically appealing” he attributes to Barthelme’s delight in his own comic style. In “Some of Us Have Been Threatening Our Friend Colby,” for example, Stengel finds the rise of collective psychology is left unchallenged by any humanizing irony and he asks, “don’t we, us the audience, as well as Barthelme, eventually enjoy threatening our friend Colby?” (“Irony” 151). Admittedly, when Colby is finally and remorselessly hanged, the narrator’s humor remains pitch-perfect: “It didn’t rain, the event was well-attended, and we didn’t run out of scotch or anything” (34). A reader waiting for a gap in the conceit, or
any formal element which might present a moral signpost for handling Colby’s execution at the hands of a ruthless and unreasoning mob, is indeed left unrequited. But the group’s action is so flamboyantly unjust that the story surely remains morally vibrant for readers even while withholding judgment. It is hard to see how comedy makes the executioners particularly humane; their studied irreverence while carrying out the sinister only adds to the appearance of callous criminality.

The stories in Amateurs hint unmistakably at the absurdities of ideological polarization between right and left in America, but forsake satirical surety for combinatorial play. Throughout the collection, Barthelme consistently feigns only passing interest in the narratives’ central conflict. In “Some of Us Have Been Threatening our Friend Colby,” the bulk of the story is occupied by the callously peripatetic concerns of the executioners, such as the suitability of Ives’s Fourth Symphony as execution song, the choice between pine and rosewood for construction of a gibbet, and the advantages of wire over rope as a hanging instrument. And in “The Captured Woman,” an inauspicious group of men begin abducting women in imitation of one another and keep the women as companions, a plotline frequently hijacked by juxtapositional sublimity:

Yesterday she rushed at me and stabbed me three times viciously in the belly with a book, the Viking Portable Milton. Later I visited her in her room and was warmly received. She let me watch her doing her exercises. Each exercise has a name and now I know all the names: Boomerang, Melon, Hip Bounce, Bridge, Flags, Sitting Twist, Swan, Bow and Arrow,
Turtle, Pyramid, Bouncing Ball, Accordion. The movements are amazingly erotic. I knelt by her side and touched her lightly. She smiled and said, now now. I went to my room and watched television—*The Wide World of Sports*, a soccer match in São Paulo. (95)

Such mixtures are surely what certain critics had in mind when naming Barthelme an aloof aggregator of contemporary novelties. But in *Amateurs*, it is clear a dangerous and repressive uniformity (best represented by Colby’s executioners), and not a schizophrenic late-capitalist disorder, is the controlling principle of everyday life. The “emotional life” of the individual and “the social organization of the country,” were, if one were to take a frank look, “messy,” and the role of the artist became “to render messy accurately,” an endeavor that should “ideally, frighten your shoes” (*NK* 20-21). To combine Milton, yoga, soccer, and an expression of sexual intimacy (between captor and hostage, no less), as Barthelme does, is to render that messiness through collage while suggesting universal interest in sexual desire and domestic boredom.

The most intriguing aspect of the combinatorial reformulation of the everyday in “The Captured Woman” is perhaps the disassembly of erotic banalities that occurs. The reformulation of the erotic is perhaps the element of Barthelme’s formal play that has the greatest potential to destabilize rational social uniformities, something I discuss in greater detail in chapter five. Herbert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man* (1964) had suggested a literature that captures authentic paradigms of erotic experience most efficiently resists monolithic popular and political cultures. According to Marcuse, avant-garde literature is susceptible to use as mere entertainment, but those texts that
express authentic sexuality remain alien to contemporary mores, and are secure in their resistance to cultural adoption. Such a literature lies “beyond the reaches of the established Reality Principle, which this Eros refuses and explodes” (*One* 77). If culture manages to rationalize and normalize sexuality, eventually even the “Destruction Instinct” that animates armed conflict becomes tolerated (*One* 79). And so creating new, transgressive sexual logics that preserve unassimilated desires becomes a broadly social gesture.

Barthelme would later, in *Paradise*, offer a more sustained treatment of a new radical erotic norm, but his literary collages from this period suggest an interest in renewing erotic, and therefore social experience through language. His explanation of the usefulness of collage during the Washington and Lee symposium demonstrates a faith in the ability of new erotic mixtures to achieve what Percy had moments earlier called the “cultural refreshment” authors offer language:

> I tend to see it not as a problem, but as an opportunity. We were talking here earlier about experimentalism and one of the funny things about experimentalism in regard to language is that most of it has not been done yet. Take *mothball* and *vagina* and put them together and see if they mean anything together; maybe you’re not happy with the combination and you throw that on the floor and pick up the next two and so on. (*NK* 73)

Something along these lines also happens in *The Dead Father*, where within the flood of myth, political symbol, and mundane dialogue, references to erotic subjects
randomly percolate. Looking for a topic of conversation, Thomas suggests “fatherhood as a substructure of the war of all against all,” but a moment later Julie interrupts:

   The vagina, she said, is not where it’s at.
   We agree, said Thomas, we’ve heard that.
   Moving north, one finds a little button. (*Dead Father* 76)

This is a telling passage: its subject in part reflects the still-marginal status of discourses addressing female sexual pleasure, while its irruptive quality moves to provoke the conservative prudishness responsible for such marginality. And in another of the novel’s erotic passages, when Thomas caresses Julie at cocktail hour, a contest over freedom of erotic expression is summoned:

   Thomas smoothed Julie’s stomach with his hand.
   Don’t touch! she said, you’ll make the others angry.
   The crowd stopped laughing, both men and women, moved nearer, was looking at Thomas with angry looks.
   Who do you think you are? a man shouted angrily.
   I am this lady’s lover, Thomas shouted back.
   Leave our stomach alone! the man shouted.
   *Your* stomach? Thomas asked pointedly. (30-31)

While not all of the novel’s erotic content is so socially-oriented, the frequent, sudden references to male and female genitals that appear in the narrative certainly challenge storytelling that ignores or condones sexual repression.
Not only does collage lend itself to a radical treatment of erotic topics, but Barthelme seems to see collage as itself a fundamentally erotic process, as his choice of words in “Not-Knowing” makes clear: “The combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generation of meaning once they’re allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven’t yet encountered” (NK 21). So collage smuggles the erotic across borders of acceptability by choice of subject, but further, in its very form; it manages to channel casual sex as a way of reaching the ineffable. *Amateurs* suggests the messiness of life, whether erotic or banal, is not to be corralled into the order promised by political conformities or social groupings but might be converted through art into new precincts of experience.

Barthelme had emerged from the war era sensitive to many of the counterculture’s political aims but still skeptical of direct action. Barthelme had instead developed a process of combination that alerted readers to the instability of the epistemological plane on which the factionalized debates over war, corruption, banking regulations and the like occurred. Collage revealed a more alien, more potentially activating set of truths within the familiar that suggested unease with political choices. In a catalog introduction for an exhibition by Robert Morris, written the same year *Amateurs* was published, Barthelme made it clear collage is not only the work of the artist, but of dialectical collaboration between artist and audience. He celebrated Morris’s surrealist, photographic collages for their artificiality. In his introduction he calls
them “reliable, straightforward untruths” with “taken-for-granted credence” (*NK* 170); the untruth of a given combination paradoxically compels an artwork toward vividness for the viewer. Observing a collage featuring images of Abraham Lincoln, Civil War General George McClellan, and military helicopters, “we suddenly feel the blast from the inexplicably present rotors” (170). A collage is effective precisely because it is rationally impossible, and presents the viewer with an opportunity to experience the mundane in entirely new ways.

Barthelme found in juxtaposition creative ways to trigger an illuminating recognition of “things the mind already knows” but has not yet realized, a comment he attributed to Rosenberg’s reflections on Jasper Johns (*NK* 65). The writer is in particular need of collage’s aesthetic of untruthful indirection, if he is to achieve ethical purpose: “What is left to the writer? What can the writer do? If I go up to a reader, grab him firm by the lapel, look him straight in the eye, and say ‘Eating people is wrong,’ well, I’ve told him something, as we would all agree, but nothing new” (*NK* 65).16 But in confronting the audience with what is not-true, an argumentative indirection, they have risked their certainties, their faith in language, their credulity for a government that showed little accountability, and moved toward a recognition of existential disorder. In all of this, Barthelme is describing a renewed sense of agency, not unlike what he longingly called in one of his political pieces “real participatory democracy” (*NK* 150). While not a utopian vision, the possibility for historical change via art carries with it some of the radical sixties spirit which Barthelme resisted but could not at last avoid.
Notes

1 From “Brain Damage.” (CL 145)

2 Daugherty writes that Barthelme “kept an eye on Tel Quel,” although what this precisely means is unclear (402). He had a limited reading knowledge of French, which he had picked up in Korea and from his first wife, a Mallarmé scholar. Barthelme likely found excerpts in translation or discussed the magazine with people he knew.

3 Paul Maltby, in Dissident Postmodernists, was the first to insist the postmodern literature of Barthelme, Coover, and Pynchon was not showcasing an apocalyptic “exhaustion and imminent demise of ‘bourgeois-rationalist culture,’” as previous critics had it, but rather was reacting against “the consolidation” of that culture (17-18).

4 K. represents one of Barthelme’s least concealed intertextual moments, as most readers will recognize K. from Kafka’s The Castle, which, like “Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning,” suggests the individuals behind government bureaucracy are ultimately unknowable and unaccountable. And in The Trial, where K. also appears, Kafka presents a ruling class who offer little more than a dangerous simulation of law and order, with, as K. discovers, nothing but pornography in their law books. The description of the U.S. political scene as Kafkaesque anticipates Barthelme’s admiration for Kundera, who (with a nod to Kafka) writes in The Art of the Novel of a global phenomenon of censorship. See chapter three for further discussion.

5 See Sadness 3-13 for “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne,” Barthelme’s treatment of Lefebvre’s work by the same name on urban homogenization.

6 For a longer discussion of Brown’s impact on Barthelme’s work, see chapter five.
His perceived sexual competition with Davis suggests a troubling credulity for those primitivist notions of black sexuality popularized by Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipsters” (1957). Mailer’s essay, which first appeared in *Dissent* magazine (the same publication Snow White is described reading), defined hipness as an essential defense against “the totalitarian tissues of American society.”

Mailer poses such hipness as a product of masculinity, specifically black-masculinity:

> A totalitarian society makes enormous demands on the courage of men, and a partially totalitarian society makes even greater demands for the general anxiety is greater. Indeed if one is to be a man, almost any kind of unconventional action often takes disproportionate courage. So it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries.

The marginalized negro, according to Mailer, had no choice but to embrace “the art of the primitive”: jazz, the “music of orgasm,” which communicates a life of feeling and desire, and which represents rebellion. The black male experiences life with a subversive sensitivity thehipster can only simulate, wrote Mailer. Though Barthelme would have been unconvinced by Mailer’s argument that the hipster was an authentic non-conformist, he does seem to experience anxiety over the black jazz man as a sexualized, dissident signifier. The episode suggests further study is needed on racial attitudes at work in Barthelme’s fiction. I suggest in my introduction to chapter four that Barthelme and his peers are perhaps too quickly dismissed as writing a narrowly white experience. That chapter further shows that when Barthelme did look beyond the
theater of his own national and racial identity, he was capable of a critical consideration of anglo-normativity. And yet, Barthelme’s credulity for Davis as a threatening sexual body does raise questions about his sensitivity to the politics of racial marginalization.

David Witzling writes on this issue in Everybody’s America: Thomas Pynchon, Race, and the Cultures of Postmodernism. Witzling wonders whether Pynchon’s commitment to a nation-centric assimilationist liberalism excluded a more pluralist vision of U.S. life. Also see Hogue, 42-93, for a discussion on the reduction and dismissal of Otherness in Pynchon’s V (1963) and Paul Auster’s The New York Trilogy. According to Hogue, both Auster and Pynchon “delimit the Other as a means of controlling and assuring white, masculine, privileged identity/selfhood, which they never throw into crisis” (42).

8 It is Daugherty who suggests Barthelme was familiar with the essay, although he mischaracterizes the essay somewhat as an attack on Rosenberg’s “anxious object” and only briefly visits its significance for City Life (327).

9 See Nixon’s address to the nation, broadcast from the White House on Nov. 3, 1969. Nixon famously draws a distinction between “the young people of this nation who are particularly concerned” and the “great silent majority of my fellow Americans.”

10 He would later explore this idea in “I Bought a Little City,” about a man who buys Galveston, Texas. See Sadness 51-60.

11 See Hunter S. Thompson’s Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72 for a brief but particularly entertaining version of this (most of the book follows the Democratic
primaries, however). Also see Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*, which in 1977 would present another Dead Father-like version of Nixon: tragic, gravely human, vicious.

As in “Critique de La Vie Quotidienne” from *Sadness*:

> Our evenings lacked promise. The world in the evening seems fraught with the absence of promise, if you are a married man. There is nothing to do but go home and drink your nine drinks and forget about it.

> Slumped there in your favorite chair, with your nine drinks lined up on the side table in soldierly array, and your hand never far from them, and your other hand holding on to the plump belly of the overfed child, and perhaps rocking a bit, the chair is a rocking chair as mine was in those days. (4)

The narrator is here more despondent than angry, although it is not difficult to imagine a great displeasure simmering beneath a placid surface.

The use of the Dead Father as an elastic symbol again suggests Barthelme’s conceptual fluency in psychoanalytic thought and criticism. The novel’s generous semiotic play recalls a 1970 seminar given by Jacques Lacan, collected as *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, in which he equated dead fathers with *jouissance*—his term for a transgressive pleasure. Because death is “properly speaking unknowable” (123), it represents the pleasure which we desire to know but cannot. And because it is knowledge of the father that most closely approximates knowledge of death, the dead father comes to represent all unknown pleasures. Barthelme located the promise of true meaning in the ineffable, and the equation of the dead father with knowledge of the
unknown is therefore significant. To quote Lacan: “The fact that the dead father is jouissance presents itself to us as the sign of the impossible itself” (123). Of course, Lacan had only been published sporadically in English until 1977 when the first English edition of Écrits was published, so it is impossible to meaningfully link The Dead Father to psychoanalytic poststructuralism, however closely affiliated they appear.

We do know, however, via Daugherty, that Barthelme had read The Interpretation of Dreams as a youth and reread the text in the late 1960s (321). In that text, Freud discusses the composite nature of the dream image: “They frequently have one or even several meanings and, as with Chinese script, the correct interpretation can only be arrived at each occasion from the context” (366-67). Freud later clarifies that arriving at latent content for a particular dream symbol depends on both “translating symbols” according to the psychoanalytic method and “making use of the dreamer’s associations” (372). Thus, interpretation requires the subject’s unique understanding of that symbol, a creative sense of symbology that finds some translation in the Dead Father’s overdetermination and reliance on the reader’s intuition.

The allusion to silent (particularly expressionist) film is not without precedent; he had paid homage to Robert Wiene’s The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari with the title of his first collection, Come Back, Dr. Caligari.

The dogmatic constraints of authorship were something Kierkegaard had struggled with, as evidenced by his habit of pseudonymous authorship.
Natanson makes a remarkably similar point on the inadequacy of moral instruction in his introduction to *Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Argumentation* when recounting an encounter with a racist:

Striking up acquaintances with fellow men in the course of our travels is supposed to be one of the far-from-home-ly joys of the wayfarer. On a recent trip such a boon companion initiated the conversation by asking where I was from. When I told him I lived in North Carolina, he said, “The niggers are certainly taking over the South, aren’t they?” Now where does one begin his answer? Is this to be a vignette for the *Reader’s Digest* in which I plant a few friendly ideas in the raw soil of my friend’s mind, those spanking new fresh seeds which his local library will water, those sudden inspirational shoots to be nurtured by a subscription to the Anti-Defamation League biweekly newspaper? Is it to be a “Let’s define our terms” approach? Or is it not the case that an immense weariness informs the scene, an old and burdened haunting of bad faith which makes it practically impossible to have an argument at all (11-12).

Natanson proposes that the terms of argument must be liberated “from their ordinary placement in a mundane world which presupposes their meaning” (13) if speaker and listener are truly going to “see something of the structure of [their] immediate world” (15).
CHAPTER THREE
Autocracy at Home: 1976-1989

“Remember that I was, once, in accord with them. Passionately, if I may say so, in accord with them. I did whatever they wished, without thinking, hated their enemies, participated in their crusades, risked my life. Even though I only carried trays and wiped up tables. I heard the singing of the wounded and witnessed the burial of the dead. I believed. Then, over time, I discovered that they were lying. Consistently. With exemplary skill, in a hundred languages. I decided to take the ships. Perhaps they’ll notice.” He paused. “Now. Do you wish to accompany me, assist me?”

“More than anything.”¹

The years Barthelme spent working on the stories collected in Great Days (1979), from 1976 to 1979, would be among his last years living full time in New York City. The charm Barthelme once found in the city’s cacophonous energy was now overwhelmed by the daily struggles of city life. Ann Beattie, a friend and fellow contributor to The New Yorker, recalls a particular irritant: “He was always having to argue with the landlord about his rights as a rent-controlled tenant. . . . No one was impressed that he was Mr. Barthelme, long-time tenant” (Daugherty 407). So great was Barthelme’s sense of injustice that he eventually included an interchapter featuring a villainous landlord in the collection Overnight to Many Distant Cities (1983). Beattie tells Daugherty she feared his customary walks through the West Village were now only
serving to “increase his sense of isolation,” as the observable world of the city, which had once thrilled Barthelme as an eager flâneur, now seemed mundane and incapable of abating a growing feeling of loneliness (407).

Music remained one of Barthelme’s great pleasures during this period. When Beattie grew frustrated by Barthelme’s depression and asked him what, if anything, made him happy, he referred to writing “at its best” and music (407). It is therefore no surprise that there is much invested in the production and reception of music in *Great Days*; it is the form the collection’s inhabitants strive to master (“The King of Jazz”) and to decipher (“The New Music”), and it is the form the establishment strives to protect from newcomers (“On the Steps of the Conservatory”). Further, pop music is here linked to modern experiences of homogenization (“The Abduction from the Seraglio”). Barthelme had always looked outside literary tradition for inspiration, most frequently to the visual arts. But whereas collage and abstraction offered Barthelme techniques to revive the modernist project, jazz seems mostly to have been for Barthelme a representation of the pleasure available in art, and of the means afforded by form to escape drudgery. The art object as described in “After Joyce” had emphasized the imaginative as a pathway to recognition of the real. The new jazz text, if we might call it that, explored the ways joy might mediate the burdens of a world which had, sadly, not been radically reformed, and which was, quite the contrary, seeing greater emphasis on intellectual homogeny, on political and cultural assent, and on the hyper-systematization of social organization.
Barthelme’s many references to jazz in *Great Days* identified him as a member of what was now an aging generation, and his references to country western in “The Abduction from the Seraglio” put him firmly outside regional cultural interests. There could be no mistaking that by the late 1970s, Barthelme was no longer among the downtown New York vanguard. Punk music and performance art had taken hold in the East Village, in the areas around the Bowery and Tompkins Square Park. Daugherty tells us that Barthelme believed the new downtown arts scene suffered “a lack of subtlety,” although the similarities between his aesthetic philosophy and a performance pioneer like Alan Kaprow make drawing a simple conclusion on his feelings about the performatives arts difficult (401). If Barthelme’s fiction would occasionally satirize performance art’s more outlandish endeavors (masochism, for example, in “Visitors”), this is perhaps only consistent with Barthelme’s long-standing and unsparing skepticism toward the fashionable.

The stories in *Great Days*, rather, aim Barthelme’s skepticism squarely at the subjects Barthelme was most intimately familiar and associated with: the complex relationship between the postmodern avant-garde and the legacy of the 1960s counterculture. In “The Abduction from the Seraglio,” an artist explains that he produces giant steel artichokes. Such large installation pieces had been yoked to the postmodern school even though, as evidenced by Barthelme’s parody of what Fried called literalism in “The Explanation” and “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel,” he saw them as somewhat at odds with his own project; around this time he refers to “conceptual art” during an interview as being “a bit sterile” (*NK* 267). But by characterizing the artist in this way
Barthelme is having some self-deprecating fun with his reputation as a postmodernist, a moniker which (as in the attacks by Gardner and Vidal) had become shorthand in some quarters for ostentatious nonsense:

I’d been thinking about bread, colored steel bread, all kinds of colors of steel bread--red yellow purple green brown steel bread--then I thought no, that’s not it. And I’d already made all the welded-steel four-thousand-pound artichokes the world could accommodate that week, and they wouldn’t let me drink no more, only a little Lone Star beer now and then which I don’t much care for. (GD 91-92)

The passage also captures the effect the last round of reviews were having on Barthelme, as he appears to be making light of the accusation that his style had become rigid and predictable.

The narrator of “The Abduction from the Seraglio” sets out in search of Constanze, who currently resides in the titular seraglio, or harem:

Chorus:

Oh Constanze oh Constanze
What you doin’ in that se-rag-li-o?
I been poppin’ Darvon and mothballs
Poppin’ Darvon and mothballs
Ever since I let you go. (92)

The story’s mimicry of country western music to describe a man addicted to opiate pain-killers is instructively at odds with the absurdly high-brow occupation of the artist, and
neutralizes the criticism of elitism invoked earlier. And whereas the formal use of pop culture in *Snow White* was marked by a triumphant spirit of reformulation, the appearance of pop-cultural forms here also indicates entrapment within a banal and anesthetized life, which becomes clearer in what follows the first chorus:

> Well, I motored out to the seraglio, got blindsided on the Freeway by two hundred thousand guys trying to get home from their work at the rat poison factories, all two hundred thousand tape decks playin' the same thing, some kind of roll-on-down-the-road song. . . . (92)

Not only does a passage like this underscore the narrator’s boredom, but the representation of workaday life positions the story as a kind of working-class romance, one squarely rooted in human concerns, constituted by the popular, and opposed to the merely academic. Barthelme’s work had long featured men of labor, from the dwarves of *Snow White* to the printer of “Our Work and Why We Do It.” The latter, in particular, contained implications for the nature of textual production, suggesting a noble worker’s compulsiveness at odds with the frivolities of the bourgeoisie or the counterculture.

Similarly, the speaker’s association with the suffering working masses here challenges the notion of an avant-garde geared toward the classroom, or, as in the case of the artist’s steel artichokes, toward the art gallery.

> When Constanze (possibly named for Mozart’s wife--Barthelme was, as ever, fond of mixture, here of musical genres and personalities) is introduced, she is the sort of hip figure memorably maligned in *Snow White*: a one-time “talented and elegant country-music groupie” who knows the latest prices for “happy dust” but is,
unfortunately, “dumb” (93). This last indictment stems from her being enthralled with the pasha, a car dealer with “this mysterious power over people and events which is called ten million dollars a year, gross,” and from what her abject status suggests of a once more robust rebellion (94). Feigning authenticity but having surrendered authentic principles, she lives in an industrial loft “because she’s not so dumb she’d be caught dead in a big fancy layout in River Oaks or somewhere. She’s got values” (94). The token radicality of the *Snow White* dwarves is reprised in such a description. Here, however, the text includes an alternative to superficial rebellion, as it is the artichoke artist himself who presents a clear corrective to Constanze’s inanity: “She’s not conservative. I’m some kind of artist, but I’m conservative. Mine is the art of the possible, plus two” (93). The allusion to conservatism is both a defense of the spirit of postmodern work—which was pilloried for its indulgences—and a concise articulation of an existential literature described by Maurice Natanson, one which exceeds the ordinary but keeps it in view, so that it may be reconsidered. While Constanze has largely abnegated moral responsibility, the narrator remains constant as a non-ideological craftsman; he is a humble worker abandoned by his former lover for a life of wealth, leisure, and sexual objectification.

The artist makes clear Constanze’s ethics of opposition was once more robust: “I can’t understand this. She is so great. . . . She contributes to the United Way and got gassed in great cities a time or two while expressing her opinion of the recent war” (94). Ultimately, the story turns elegiac: “We used to walk down the street, bumping our hipbones together in joy, before God and everybody. I wanted to float in the air again
some feeling of that” (95). By concluding with this image, Barthelme draws on a theme that would grow increasingly important in this, his later work: the rare authentic pleasure of companionship and sexual play. This is further manifestation of the jazz-spirit which elsewhere finds catharsis in the combinatorial gesture and which challenges the emotional coldness and prudery that will increasingly, as we’ll see shortly, emanate from narrowly totalizing social systems.

A former lover of much the same political cut as Constanze shows up in “The Crisis.” The story is written in a subjectless dialogue format, similar to the Q and A exchanges of “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel,” and one that first showed up in its present form in the discussions between Julie and Emma in The Dead Father. One of the speakers announces, “Clementine is thought to be one of the great rebel leaders of the half century,” to which the other responds, “I loved her for a while. Then, it stopped” (4). Much of the story is given over to asking “the kinds of questions that deserve serious attention,” which seems to be an accounting for the rebellion’s mistakes: “Blocking forces were not provided to isolate the Palace. Diversions were not created to draw off key units. The airports . . .” (7, 5). The ineffectiveness of Clementine’s rebels mirrors the follies of the dwarves in Snow White, an intertextual correspondence that becomes explicit when Clementine is shortened to Clem, the character in Snow White who believed making the rich happier would discourage further inequitable collection of wealth. These are the dwarves, it seems, 15 years on: still tactically inept, still profoundly confused.
In the mid-seventies, leftist factions had turned to anarchism and guerrilla anti-imperialism, led by Abbie Hoffman and the Weather Underground respectively. Though Jonah Raskin, a sometime Weather Underground member, recalls “the rank and file” left considered the latter “a kind of spectacle,” they were nonetheless a visible face of the radicalized counterculture (123). They were particularly visible to Barthelme; the 1970 townhouse explosion that killed three Weather Underground members attempting to build a nail bomb occurred at 18 West 11th street, just across Sixth Avenue from Barthelme’s apartment at 113 West 11th street. The actions of other revolutionary organizations, such as the Symbionese Liberation Army’s abduction of newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst in 1974, further created the impression that principled protest had yielded to ideologically-driven underground armies. These fears show up in Great Days in “The Crisis,” in which a speaker sympathetic to “a rebellion of our own” nonetheless turns “once again towards the kinds of questions that deserve serious attention” (7). The other speaker follows up a moment later: “I don’t quarrel with their right to do it. It’s the means I’m worried about” (7).

Despite the somewhat exaggerated nature of the characterizations in these stories, Barthelme insisted in an interview the year the collection was published that “The intent is far from satirical,” as satire is “rather murderous and with the intent of doing away with something or changing something” (interview in Radical 53). Though irony unquestionably persisted in Barthelme’s fiction (as did the desire for change), it seems the ambivalence about the ironic he had articulated in “Kirkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” now tilted firmly toward disapproval. This should be considered more a
statement on the changing nature of Barthelme’s self-assessment than of any
significant methodological change. He seemed hesitant to appear too fatuous about the
representation of individuals who were previously and perhaps still then his peers.
Instead, he now considered his stories “an accurate picture of how things are” (53).
Barthelme did not want to be seen as establishing, through ironic fiction, a distance from
the world or an alternative to the world as he described it in “After Joyce,” likely because
having done so previously had put him at the mercy of the critics. But the
phenomenological method was intact. The Husserlian formulation that “consciousness
is always consciousness of something” (13), which Barthelme would repeat verbatim
during a 1987 interview (NK 314), allowed him to consider acts of imagination and
exaggeration as always rooted in the real: the imaginative art object represents a latent
logic detected in the world, rather than symbol of an alternative world. Still, this new
emphasis on the real provides insight into Barthelme’s political thinking, as it becomes
apparent in the interview that “how things are” has much to do with the global
preponderance of the “single ideal,” as typified by “Communism or Christianity or
whatever” (54). Communism and Christianity, however, do not appear in Great Days in
any consistent way; it is the utopian ideal of the countercultural left that is relentlessly
targeted. A few years later, discussing Adorno with an interviewer for The Paris Review,
Barthelme still sounded very much angered by a dubious activism:

. . . at the height of the German SDS insurrection they sent naked girls into
his class to dance in front of his lectern and to taunt him and make the
point that, Herr Doctor Professor, you are not speaking to fundamental
issues of life and death. And I believe his death, his heart attack, resulted from this kind of treatment by elements in the student population. And that’s a very strange situation. After all, he was a philosopher of the Left, and he was pushed around by punk leftist students. What in God’s name did they want of him? (interview by O’Hara 23)

Ever sensitive to the waywardly revolutionary, Barthelme was unsurprisingly still captivated by what he perceived as his generation’s ideological enforcements.

In “The New Music” it is the speakers themselves who represent corrupted ideals, as exhibited through their dubious appreciation for the avant-garde. Their foppish reverence for the power of the new music—a jazz variety—makes a mockery of it, and their attempts to mimic the new music go quickly awry. One of the speakers mentions that when he listens to the new music “everything else drifts, goes away, frays” (21). But it becomes clear the fragmentation the speaker celebrates is an escapist negation that stands in opposition to his own sense of principled disorder; the strange music he applauds is corrected by bourgeois fantasy, as when the two speakers make plans to visit the city of Pool, an idyllic community that amounts to little more than a car-free zone. As Barthelme himself explained, the speakers in the story have lost their way: “They are separated from all notions of, or belief in, progress in the world” (interview in Radical 58). The act of dismantling here seems to equal a nihilism of self-satisfaction. The two speakers believe unshakably in the importance of the new music but such a faith, absent an ethics, can only be an affectation. These men are not lapsed revolutionaries. They are, rather, hangers-on, members of an intellectual class that
privileges style over purpose. These are the sort of characters who unwittingly confirm Vidal’s previously discussed assumptions of the postmodern avant-garde, as he characterized its practice by Barthelme: without real imagination, convinced of the impossibility of original discourse, and enthralled with its own snobbish superiority. And so, as in “The Abduction from the Seraglio,” Barthelme acknowledges the immoderations of the postmodern, and suggests that beneath such bastardizations there lies a more “conservative” form in which language is in fact the pathway to uncommon possibilities.

“The New Music” features the alternating lines of dialogue that characterizes much of the writing in Great Days. The form recalls the earlier dialogue stories “The Explanation” and “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel,” but exceeds those prior efforts in abstraction as “Q” and “A” have been dropped in favor of simple em dashes. For his part, Barthelme called the dialogue form a chance to “reduce a lot of authorial intervention” and found that, like musical form, it had a visceral edge that allowed him “to get to the center of a situation very quickly” (interview in Radical 55). This is Beckettian reduction once again: a distillation of language through written attempts at the immediacy of speech. The dialogue form appears to reprise Barthelme’s use of collage as a means to the ineffable--those meanings “not immediately accessible to reason” which remained his central focus at the expense of the “single ideal” (interview in Radical 54).

Describing his process during yet another interview that year, this one with Larry McCaffery for Partisan Review, he described looking for “a particular kind of sentence,
perhaps more often the awkward than the beautiful" (NK 262). Such a sentence is a way of “getting past the reader’s hardwon armor” (262). Thus, the intellectual malaise that Barthelme depicts in Amateurs and with a more personal inflection in Great Days is also the barrier, it seems, his fiction must by necessity pass through during its reception. To this end, Barthelme again shows his debt to Beckett, as character identity is largely forsaken in Great Days in favor of a Godot-esque repartee-in-a-void that strikes the reader with a mostly affective logic. Consider the following passage from “The New Music”:

--Out for a long walk one early evening I noticed in the bare brown cut fields to the right of me and to the left of me the following items of interest: in the field to the right of me, couple copulating in the shade of a car, tan Studebaker as I remember, a thing I had seen previously only in old sepia toned photographs taken from the air by playful barnstormers capable of flying with their knees, I don’t know if that’s difficult or not--

--And in the field to your left?

--Momma. Rocking.

--She’d lugged the old rocking chair all that way. In a mauve mood.

--I tipped my hat. She did not return the greeting. (GD 31)

The reader encounters, in such passages, a profane and liminal world, one whose deprivities (the reversal of family affection, for example, another favorite theme of Beckett’s) are communicated with tragi-comic weight.
The gloomy tone in *Great Days* matched Barthelme’s darkening political mood; an unsigned “Notes and Comment” piece published in *The New Yorker* toward the end of 1975 begins, “Because the government isn’t very good and the New York Cultural Center is being sold and there is so much pornography around, many people have been persuaded these are dark times” (*NK* 48). Still, despite a vague sense of political ruin, *Great Days* largely forgoes explicitly political subject matter. Barthelme was becoming increasingly involved with the PEN American Center, a political organization for writers Barthelme had first joined in the 1960s (Daugherty 376). PEN seemed (temporarily, at least) to provide Barthelme a preferred outlet for political activity. In 1974, Barthelme had signed a cablegram protesting the detention of Russian dissident writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (376), and by the late seventies he was a respected voice in the organization, in frequent contact with Executive Director Karen Kennerly (409). The sizable soapbox the organization commanded likely allayed fears that direct action was useless while fictional satire potentially destructive.

When Grace Paley and a group of activists were arrested in 1978 during a nuclear proliferation protest at the White House, Barthelme responded in his capacity as PEN Vice President with an Op-Ed that appeared in *The New York Times* on Feb. 2, 1979. In “As Grace Paley Faces Jail Time with 3 Other Writers,” Barthelme accuses the government of “proceeding in a somewhat ham-handed fashion” as the protestors “offered no threat,” and their message “was not inconsistent with some of President Carter’s statements about the arms race and about nuclear power.” And while Barthelme’s immediate concern was freeing Paley and her associates, he was clearly
troubled by what their arrest augured. He called their threatened imprisonment a sign of eroding civil liberties within the United States, which risked joining “Chile, Argentina, Iran, the Soviet Union, South Africa and four dozen other nations on P.E.N.’s dismal roster” of repressive regimes: “As of this writing, P.E.N. reports no American writers in prison for expressions of opinion. On Feb. 13, this may change.” Later, when his skepticism for direct political discourse seems to have returned, he claimed “it’s barely possible” his intervention had any effect, though Paley received only a small fine and a suspended sentence (interview by O’Hara 11).

Barthelme’s editorial was significant for its conflation of totalitarian and U.S. governments. This would become a consistent theme of his later work. The collection *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* would scrutinize the way U.S. bureaucracy imprisons the individual, and the responsible parties in those stories seem animated by a hybridized Cold War ideology, in many ways Soviet, in other ways uniquely American. The movement toward homogeneity Barthelme’s work had long documented would became increasingly indistinct from global phenomena. There are some early hints of this in *Great Days*, when, for example, one of the speakers in “The New Music” announces he “went to the grocery story and Xeroxed a box of English muffins, two pounds of ground veal and an apple. In flagrant violation of the Copyright Act” (21). It is a passage that gestures in a multitude of directions and seems to combine anxieties over censorship, authenticity, and governmental bureaucracy, and there is clearly a concern for the political and cultural limitations imposed on private life. In the *Partisan Review* interview he addressed this phenomenon: “Contemporary life engenders, even
enforces passivity, as with television. Have you ever tried to reason with a Convenience Card money machine? Asked for napkin rings in an Amtrak snack-bar car? Of course you don’t” (NK 269).

The turn toward the globalized authoritarian threat was put on hold by a series of events that inaugurated a period in which Barthelme’s fiction was dominated by feelings of depression and self-doubt. In July, 1978, Rosenberg, whose introduction to From Baudelaire to Surrealism Barthelme had first discovered as an adolescent, suffered a stroke and died. Two days later, Hess died from a heart attack (Daugherty 417). Already struggling through the vicissitudes of his mental well-being, Barthelme was deeply saddened by the loss of two important mentors and friends. Confounding matters, he and Robert Angell were again at odds, Angell having written to Barthelme that he found the new dialogue stories “private and largely abstract” (413). Barthelme’s run of difficulties continued into the next year, when Great Days appeared to a disappointingly mixed set of reviews. The Times featured the book as an “Editor’s Choice” for several weeks, but in the newspaper’s review Christopher Lehmann-Haupt admits he doesn’t “quite know what to make of the seven colloquies” included in the collection. He finds they “verge on banality,” and are “bewildering” in their abstraction. The review expresses disappointment in its alleged mimetic realism; the dialogue form captures for Lehmann-Haupt nothing but the mundane and he concluded by likening the stories to “slowly hit grounders.” In a review for the Nation, James Rawley is more receptive to the dialogue form, but, like Lehmann-Haupt, finds the Barthelme of Great
Days somewhat enervated. He calls the collection “a quiet achievement” that replaces “mere funniness” with “a set of serious burlesques as a tribute to the tragedy of life.” Rawley’s review could be considered laudatory if it didn’t imply a certain dubious maturity, or a career that could heretofore be reduced to irrelevant comedy. For both reviewers, Barthelme had, for better or worse, lost something of his playful spirit. The limitations of the era he lampooned were the limitations of the text. He was an author in twilight.

Fears of professional inadequacy figure prominently in “The Farewell,” a story of a career and life in stasis. First appearing in The New Yorker, it was later collected in Sixty Stories, which appeared in 1981. “The Farewell” reprises “On the Steps of the Conservatory,” a dialogue story from Great Days. In the earlier story, Hilda and Maggie discuss Hilda’s desire to join the Conservatory, an impossibly exclusive academy to which Maggie already belongs. At the opening of “The Farewell,” Hilda informs Maggie she has “finally been admitted to the damn Conservatory. Finally.” (SS 424). But Maggie promptly informs Hilda she has transferred to the Institution:

--A new place. Very rigorous.

--You mean people are leaving the Conservatory?

--Yes. Switching to the Institution.

--It’s called the Institution?

--Yes. It’s a new place.

--What’s so good about it?

--It’s new. Very rigorous.
Chapter Three

--You mean after I've killed myself to get into the Conservatory there’s a new place that’s better? (424-25)

The earlier story, appearing beside pieces like “The New Music” and “The Abduction from the Seraglio,” suggested a loss of artistic integrity to disciplinary politics. Like those other stories, in which ideals (and their cultural counterparts) are misplaced or superficially adopted, “On the Steps of the Conservatory” documented the replacement of craft with prestige. In the context of Sixty Stories, however, “The Farewell” suggests something else, namely, a fear of unresolvable limitations and professional inadequacy. Following the reviews of Great Days, the story captures an author frustrated by the literary establishment’s growing disenchantment with his work.

Chief among the limitations characters face in Sixty Stories is age. In “Thailand,” an aging Korean War veteran tells war stories while the younger man to whom he speaks perceives only decrepit irrelevancy. The old soldier prattles on about the “Krian War” while the young man dreams distractedly of enchiladas and women (434). As the old soldier describes the “terrifying bugles” that signaled a night attack, the young man passes a final judgment: “I consign you to history, said his hearer. I close, forever, the book” (436). It may be that the death of close friends confronted Barthelme with a prospect he had already hinted at in Great Days: generational displacement. Kirkpatrick Sale, a historian and Barthelme’s downstairs neighbor during his years in Greenwich Village, confirms that recent deaths contributed to Barthelme’s melancholy, as did “a sense of failure to have a larger influence on literature, and the culture around him, and an awareness that he had said what he had to say and there wasn’t much point in
saying it over again” (Daugherty 429). *Great Days* had quite decidedly reprised earlier work, and this might have contributed to a fear that he had, as Sale put it, “written himself dry” (429).

Generational anxiety also appears in “Bishop,” in which the eponymous protagonist is accosted at the market by an infant child who “points at him and screams: ‘Old man!’” (SS 448). It appears some limitations are self-inflicted, as Bishop also struggles with alcoholism: “The martini rule is not before a quarter to twelve,” he reminds himself, before admitting to consuming a breakfast beer (444). The alcohol makes him abusive; he has “hideous bouts of black anger in the evening. Then a word or sentence in the tone she can’t bear” (445). Bishop, in his meanness and his self-corruption, recalls the Dead Father at his most stultifying. But whereas the Dead Father is a figure that evokes little sympathy, Bishop is pushed to his cruelties by pity and despair. By the story’s end, Bishop is drinking scotch in bed (he has, it seems, broken the five o’clock scotch rule), plaintively thinking of the ranch house where his grandmother and grandfather once lived. There, in a “shallow river” behind the house, Bishop remembers “skipping rocks across the river, intent . . .” (449; ellipses in orig.). Such naked nostalgia had not appeared often, if ever, in Barthelme’s work, and while it represented an impressive new emotional heft, it contributed to the sense of crisis that pervades the collection.

Barthelme’s younger brother Frederick was then writing the stories he would publish as the collection *Moon Deluxe* two years later. During the *Paris Review* interview (published the same year as *Sixty Stories*), Barthelme expressed sympathy for
Frederick’s challenge in making the Barthelme name his own: “My brother Rick, who is a novelist and scrupulous to avoid confusion with my work, suffers under the handicap of having to come after me and having the same name” (interview by O’Hara 3).

However, from *Sixty Stories* it is clear Barthelme is also concerned for himself and for his vulnerability as the very sort of Dead Father he had himself previously reacted against. At the outset of his interview with O’Hara, Barthelme responded to a question about literary biography by speculating, “I don’t think [a Barthelme biography] would sustain a person’s attention for a moment.” He continued: “My ordinary life is pretty dull, and I see nothing to celebrate in it, or to elaborate” (1). Barthelme’s comment is in certain respects a rather commonplace authorial plea to let the work speak for itself. But the conviction with which he broadly dismisses the virtues of his own existence confirms the fears of personal and professional irrelevancy found in *Sixty Stories*. “My eyes are getting worse,” he ruefully told O’Hara. “Everything’s getting worse” (6).

When *Time* encouraged Marion Barthelme (they had married in 1978) to spend some time at a non-New York bureau in order to be, as she puts it, “like other correspondents,” it was a serendipitous opportunity for change, although Barthelme was not convinced it was yet time to leave New York (Daugherty 415). Marion eventually left *Time* to freelance, but they remained open to relocating. Barthelme was soon invited to join the creative writing faculty at the University of Houston. Barthelme had recently turned down John Barth’s request that he join the faculty at Johns Hopkins University (Barth), but he was in that instance perhaps wary of stepping on the toes of--and being stepped on by--his brother Frederick, who was a graduate student there. But the offer
from the University of Houston provided an opportunity to return to his hometown, and Barthelme felt he had achieved whatever he could in New York (Daugherty 429). Barthelme was then teaching at New York’s City College, but his part-time salary was modest in comparison to what a full-time salary would bring. He earned very little from his publications—less than $1,300 a year, according to Daugherty (448)—and was submitting new stories with less frequency. Further, his wife was now pregnant and Barthelme felt a teaching job would help them support a baby (429-30). Barthelme agreed to begin teaching in the fall of 1981.

Helen, meeting Barthelme for lunch following his return to Texas, found him alternately “cheerful” and “sad” (HMB 179). Though pleased to be in Houston, Barthelme had suffered another loss. Mary Anne Hayes, formerly the managing editor of *Forum*, had died of brain cancer after being briefly cared for by Barthelme in New York. The loss of friends weighed heavily on Barthelme, both as a cause of mourning and as confirmation that he was immersed in a world that was now fading. He discussed a novel he was then working on tentatively titled *Ghosts* (181). And when they again met for lunch several weeks later, little of his cheer remained. His initial pleasure in returning home had worn off: “He admitted that he would like to be back in New York, that he would like to say goodbye to his students and return immediately to his Manhattan home. But he had to earn money” (183). It is also clear from these discussions that Barthelme continued to struggle during this period with his own self-worth. He seems to rationalize his alcoholism by associating himself with Faulkner, a correlation laden with insecurity and callousness. As Helen recalls:
I mentioned a well-known incident in which Faulkner compared himself to Shakespeare. Jill Faulkner had asked her father not to drink and pleaded with him to “think of me.” I was sympathetic with Jill, but Don reminded me--with intense feeling for Faulkner--that Faulkner had replied, “Nobody remembers Shakespeare’s children.” (183)

Additionally, the first critical treatments of Barthelme’s work had appeared during the previous few years and were, at best, ambivalent. While they confirmed Barthelme’s place as an important subject in an emergent canon, they had also muted much of his oppositional thrust. Alan Wilde, for example, used Barthelme’s short stories to illustrate a dichotomy of depth and surface that he related to the modern/postmodern split. In something of a precursor to Jameson’s essays in *Postmodernism*, Wilde cites Barthelme’s “gratuitous play” as exemplifying the postmodern ironist’s assimilated position *within* the world, in distinct opposition to the modernist, who is suspended on a perch *above* the world, from which the author summons unity from chaos (53). Such play is not at odds with “moral force,” since it models an iconoclastic way of being that understands “meanings are neither altogether stable nor completely clear” (53, 54). But while this position does broadly suggest an understanding of Barthelme’s complaint against homogenized intellectual and social ideologies, it is for Wilde a limited one. Barthelme’s work doesn’t, in modernist fashion, challenge underlying epistemologies by suggesting alternate realms of absolute existence, but simply presents the possible advantages to be gleaned from participating in the already-corrupted world of the everyday. It is reasonable to assume Barthelme would have been nonplussed by his
forcible removal from the modernist tradition and the characterization of his ethics as one characterized by assent.

McCaffery, another early critic, was rebuffed during his interview with Barthelme for his suggestion that Barthelme’s work was heavily invested in metafictional technique, a formal locus that implies a limited, teleological concern with language and narrative. Attention to the metafictional had featured strongly in McCaffery’s article “Barthelme’s Snow White: The Aesthetics of Trash,” as it would in The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass. A year after his first meeting with Barthelme, McCaffery informed Barthelme by letter that the material in his forthcoming book was “directly contradicted by our interview. One of the hazards of trying to write about contemporary writers, I suppose” (letter 26 Sept. 1981). It was no small mistake; these articles seemed again to confirm Vidal’s assertion that Barthelme’s fiction simply replicated academic preoccupations with entropic conceptual systems, and stood in benign observance of a world stripped of meaning.

In TriQuarterly, a journal Barthelme references in his Partisan Review interview with McCaffery, Morris Dickstein had come to a similar conclusion, calling Snow White “a book about language” that “suits the theory of the new fiction a little too well” (268-9). Dickstein’s article portrays him as an experimentalist secretly wistful “for traditional art and old-fashioned feelings,” a mode Dickstein claims Barthelme briefly perfected in City Life (269). It is this longing for realism that animates the work and gives it pathos; “he can’t try to be Tolstoy” writes Dickstein. “But he can plumb his ambivalence and make that contribute to the enigma, adding thick shadows to his subject” (269). Dickstein
remained largely contemptuous of a streak of self-consciousness and dislocation in a postmodernism he described as misguided in its attempts to replicate modernist conventions that lacked the original daring. Further, Barthelme’s combinatorial process often falls flat, as in *Sadness*, in which “cultural trash” is “lovingly collected but barely transformed” (269, 271). Dickstein reprises familiar complaints: Barthelme longed for the authenticity of former literary modes but could only document his attempts to restore the alternatives to such modes.

Some relief from an increasingly destructive gloom came with the birth of Barthelme’s daughter Katherine (Daugherty 449). He also found a store of enthusiasm for his teaching, and he developed a reputation as a fierce advocate for students and a hard-working editor of their manuscripts (434-35). Lois Parkinson Zamora, a colleague, remembers his “institutional energy” (180). Philip Lopate describes the faculty as surprised by Barthelme’s interest in the day-to-day running of the program. Lopate insists the interest stemmed from a deep sense of social duty: “Donald had one of the most pronounced civic consciences I have ever come across, and was fond of exhorting us with the Allen Ginsberg line: ‘Come, let us put our queer shoulders to the wheel’” (123). Additionally, teaching gave Barthelme a chance to enact one of his favorite dramas: patricide. Padget Powell, a favorite student, recalls in an essay, “one of the first things he did in assessing your suitability was roll you over and check you out for father rage” (163).
The pleasures of work were interspersed with depressive episodes, however. Barthelme told Powell on several occasions he was thinking of retiring (165). Such peripatetic expressions of mood point to the turns between turmoil and felicity that marked the remaining eight years of his life. Lopate’s portrait of Barthelme during this period is of a severely depressed man of “inner weather and melancholy” who also “seemed reasonably contented much of the time, at home with Marion and his two daughters” (133, 135). He recalls both Barthelme’s lusty taste for the performative--singing Cole Porter songs in his kitchen, for example--as well as an outwardly-evident boredom. Lopate insists Barthelme was “bored with literature, much preferring the visual arts” (126).

But from his two recent interviews and from the essay “Not-Knowing” (which he first composed a year after moving to Houston, in 1982), it is clear Barthelme was ardently exploring new avenues of reading. Barthelme’s reading focus was taking a noticeable shift toward Germany and Latin America from France, long a source of romantic attraction as the home of the surrealists and Picasso’s first *papier collé*. Barthelme felt the so-called French New-New-Novelist (Sollers, Pinget, Butor: the inheritors of the *nouveau roman*) had gone too far in the direction of “pure abstraction” and were moving “further and further away from the common reader” (*NK* 266). Barthelme’s feelings toward the French avant-garde signaled a growing disillusion with the surrealist enterprise (one that smacks of self-flagellation after his own self-professed turn toward abstraction in *Great Days*) but are consistent with his interest in an
abstraction that can be reformulated by the subject and which is dedicated by the author toward thematic subject.

When asked by McCaffery in 1987 who he was reading, Barthelme responded:

Along with the South Americans, who everyone agrees are doing well, I think the Germans: Peter Handke, Max Frisch, certainly Gass, Thomas Bernhard, who did Correction. I think the Americans are doing well. The French perhaps less so. (NK 272)

He never failed to mention his contemporaries--Paley, Barth, Gass, Coover, John Ashbery, Pynchon, Beattie--when mentioning important authors. And yet a distinct shift had taken place. On the Latin American side, he expressed favor for Borges, for Marquez, and for Carlos Fuentes. In the Paris Review interview, Barthelme speculated that Marquez’s The Autumn of the Patriarch, which takes a Latin dictatorship as subject, is not about autocratic power, but is instead about “the process of corruption” (interview by O’Hara 4). It is a telling distinction, one that stresses the distorting effects of political power on individuals, rather than regional political phenomena. Still, the new geographies of his reading suggest an interest in literary production that was taking place against backdrops of totalitarian governance, and in literary representations and reactions to the Cold War more generally. Whereas Barthelme’s interest in ideology had once drawn him to Franco-American dynamics of counterculture and ruling classes, it now pointed him toward a revised transatlanticism and a new panamericanism.

Handke, in particular, became increasingly important to Barthelme. A reading list of eighty-one books Barthelme used in place of a syllabus included Handke’s A Sorrow
Beyond Dreams and Kaspar and Other Plays (Moffett). An additional mention of Handke in “Not-Knowing” as a fellow, unfairly-maligned postmodernist demonstrates the centrality of Handke to this new interest (NK 15). Like Marquez’s novel, A Sorrow

Beyond Dreams focuses on the often unwelcome interactions between history and subject. Handke tells his mother’s story in the wake of her death, documenting a lifetime spent abjectly conforming to social and political pressures. As a young woman in small-town Austria, she escapes to the city for a life “less hemmed in” by rural conservatism (11). During the rise of the Third Reich, Handke’s mother embraces a wartime prescription for nationalist gaiety, but she later grows weary of the pressure to conform to post-war bourgeois affectations. After returning with her husband and children to her village, she endures the oppressive domestic expectations of provincial poverty. Life is unkind to Handke’s mother during this period, as she self-administers an abortion and withstands beatings by an estranged husband. Just as she at long last “was gradually becoming an individual,” she suffers the nervous breakdown that culminates with her suicide (48).

As his family attempts to flee East Berlin, the young Handke becomes aware of his own politicized identity: “They had no papers. They crossed two borders illegally, both in the gray of dawn; once a Russian border guard shouted ‘Halt,’ and my mother’s answer in Slovenian served as a password; those days became fixed in the boy’s mind as a triad of gray dawn, whispers, and dangers” (31). From these experiences, an epistemic split emerges. Government power is relegated to the world of the rational, and of language, and kept separate from the non-totalized interior of the individual: “Politics
was concerned only with the things that could be talked about; you had to handle the rest for yourself, or leave it to God” (47). The response to the fear of the totalitarian state and the criminal status it enforced upon the subject could not be another political position, which would match certainty with certainty, but had to be self-inquiry.

The appeal of Handke’s existentialist inquiries for Barthelme is not difficult to locate. The defiant investigation of one’s own consciousness at the expense of more normalizing language structures provided Barthelme with a new sense of literary kinship. In addition, Handke documents in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* a process of formal investigation that seems to have suggested to Barthelme an anti-ideological ethics of innovation that went beyond the broad dislocations of the avant-garde. The association Handke identifies between politics and literary speech inevitably required an interrogation of the limitations of language in his role as author. In a short chapter given over entirely to parenthetical asides, Handke struggles to locate the essential singularity of his mother’s existence outside the generalizations required by literary method. Only by questioning conventional discourses does Handke approach his mother as “a particular person” (28). Inquiry, in other words, becomes a leitmotif that extends to problems surrounding the production of the text. Thus does Handke imply that the political and social totalitarianisms that confronted him and his mother operate together with ordinary poetics as forces of subjugation. Handke’s unease with literary discourses can be traced to Barthelme’s claim in “Not Knowing” that an original style is necessary to free the author from association with political “abominations” like fascism and Stalinism that are “facilitated by, made possible by, language” (*NK* 16). That Barthelme
found such kinship in an author writing about Communist and fascist misrule would have confirmed an awareness, which dated back to his time as a reporter in Korea, that the American experience bears subtle traces of authoritarianism, and that language remains the site where that experience is both affirmed (through propaganda, mediated performance, misinformation campaigns like that which preceded the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, speechifying, etc.) and resisted.

The articulation of the avant garde’s response to a transnational censor-state is perhaps best articulated by another author Barthelme greatly admired: Milan Kundera, in *The Art of the Novel*. Barthelme’s syllabus for his writing classes at the University of Houston included Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. And though *The Art of the Novel* would not be published in English until 1988, it articulates a parity between the role of fiction in both democracy and autocracy in the late twentieth century that contextualizes Barthelme’s interest in Handke, et al. For Kundera, both the totalitarian East and democratic West are united by a transideological authoritarian organization of public and private life best described as “Kafkan.” West and East “produce the Kafkan in the broad social dimension: the progressive concentration of power, tending to deify itself, the bureaucratization of social activity that turns all institutions into boundless labyrinths; and the resulting depersonalization of the individual” (107). He continues:

> Totalitarian states, as extreme concentrations of these tendencies, have brought out the close relationship between Kafka’s novels and real life. . . . the society we call democratic is also familiar with the process that
bureaucratizes and depersonalizes; the entire planet has become a theater of this process. (107)

Barthelme’s fictions had long hinted at American vulnerability to totalitarian consolidations of power. Notably, a Kafkan vision of the West had appeared in “Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning,” in which the enigmatic authority of *The Castle* is embodied by the mercurial K, who is himself plagued by the depersonalization resulting from a frantic accommodation to all aspects of the dominant system. Parallels had shown up more recently in *The Dead Father*, in which a self-deifying tyrant, to use Kundera’s terminology, resembles the U.S political leadership. Barthelme also alludes to these authoritarian connections in “Not Knowing” when he links “our own policies in Vietnam” with the atrocities of the mid century (*NK* 16). And so the Kafkan schema of Cold War political continuity is likely one Barthelme would have recognized, and it sheds further light on his interest in writers like Handke.

While Kundera declines to characterize the specific Kafkan elements in Western democracy beyond the broad phenomena he lays out, he argues there is a “common spirit” in the West that is “camouflaged by political diversity” (18). Kundera writes that it is the novel’s “spirit of complexity” (18) that serves as the best answer to dissent-quashing power structures. The novel is according to Kundera the ideal forum for “relativity, doubt, questioning” or discovering a “new segment of existence” (14), much as the unassimilated meaning of combinatorial fiction is for Barthelme the thing which transcends assumed knowledge structures and “reveals how much of Being we haven’t yet encountered” (*NK* 21). Kundera fears for this tradition in the West (it was all but
impossible in the Soviet East), but the focus on uncertainty and inquiry nonetheless points to a thriving group of mutually-sympathetic writers that included Handke and Barthelme.

Barthelme was certainly sensitive to the surreptitious manner in which the Kafkan had entered Western democracy and dissent been neutralized. As he would tell an interviewer in 1988, “Americans have political problems which they don’t recognize as political” (NK 317). The consolidation of military power, suggested Barthelme, goes unnoticed, as does other “damage to the country” committed by the Reagan administration (NK 318). He seemed to be thinking in particular of U.S. intervention in Latin America: 5 Reagan had provided funding for the Nicaraguan Contras beginning in 1981 and had gone on to issue a range of military and political support for (often brutal) anti-drug and anti-Communist activities in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Grenada, and Bolivia. The administration had taken measures to ensure public discourse remained oriented toward consensus-building. A 1987 congressional report on the Iran-Contra affair uncovered a coordinated effort between the White House and the National Security Council to distribute pro-intervention propaganda to news outlets. Titled “Project Democracy,” the program was designed to shape news coverage in support of interventionist policy.

Barthelme sounded almost wistful during that late interview in his conclusion that U.S. writers have the greater challenge in making political dissent noticed than their European counterparts, Kundera specifically, since Reagan did great “damage to the
country,” but in a fashion that was difficult, even after Iran-Contra, for the writer to summon:

A great advantage Central European writers have is the absolutely miserable political conditions in their home countries. It’s what gives Kundera his bite, his ability to be radical, go to the root. Outrages have been done him and his countrymen of a dimension we can barely intuit. He derives an insight into the dark side of human possibility from this, it informs his work every step of the way. (NK 318)

He also lamented, “In one sense, it’s very good for European writers because (like with Kundera) it gives everything they write a very important dimension. Here, you can attack the government as violently as you want and no one is going to throw you in jail. The government doesn’t even notice” (NK 313). Still, what came next suggests that Barthelme had been energized by his discovery in his reading of what Kundera would call the cosmopolitical “spirit of complexity.” In an unsigned “Notes and Comment” article that appeared in the spring of 1982, Barthelme recalled with consternation visiting a Midwestern library in search of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* and discovering the book had been banned. “It was all being done to protect the children,” he explained (NK 156). The piece portrays censorship as a byproduct of bureaucratic social organization: “Nothing of mine had yet been banned, [the librarian] told me, but a special subcommittee of the Banning Committee had been formed to consider my case, and I could have high hopes” (NK 157). The true target of bureaucratic authoritarianism is heterodoxy; the censors believed they were “protecting children from complexity” (NK
165), complexity being that which Kundera identifies as essentially opposed to autocratic control and which was fundamental to Barthelme’s aesthetic.

Complexity also informs Barthelme’s next collection, *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* (1983), in which the erotic provides counterpoint to episodes of bureaucratic homogenization. This, the last collection composed entirely of new material, quite noticeably bears the influence of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*: it pits the individual logics of the intensely private realm against the limitations of social expectation. In “Lightning,” for example, a journalist discovers the value of erotic pleasure while seeking to understand an experience (the lightning strike) that suggests epiphanic knowledge. The journalist, Connors, has been sent in pursuit of lightning strike victims for a spread in *Folks* magazine. Connors hopes to appease his editor by locating “the core of the experience” but instead arrives at banalities (*OTMDC* 49). After talking to one of his subjects he musters the feeblest of observations: “*Lightning changes things,* Connors wrote in his notebook” (44). It is only after Connors meets Edwina, a model who elicits in Connors a powerful lust, that Connors surrenders the hope of finding an epigrammatic significance to the lightning strikes: “In his piece Connors described the experience as ‘ineffable,’ using a word he had loathed and despised his whole life long . . .” (51). At the Washington and Lee Symposium, Barthelme had made a similar comment on the simultaneous weakness and necessity of this word: “If there is any word I detest in language, this would be it,” but, Barthelme continued, the word is useful since “that’s the place artists are trying to get to” (*NK* 65). The vividness of the erotic event convinces Connors the similarly ecstatic experience of electric strike cannot be generalized or
even discursively captured. Connors’s sexual pleasure becomes akin to the rapture of the victims, an ineffable ecstasy that he once described as the end result of his language collages. Collage and sex, it seems, are both antithetical to linguistic rationalities.

“Affection,” another story from the collection, not only confirms the complexity of erotic logics but specifically highlights the incompatibility between those logics and bureaucratic language. A husband’s desire for his estranged wife is interrupted when his wife adopts the style of regulatory discourse:

Sarah decided that she and Harris should not sleep together any longer.

Harris said, What about Hugging?

What?

Hugging.

Sarah said she would have a ruling on hugging in a few days and that he should stand by for further information. (OTMDC 31)

Institutionalized language is revealed as absurdly inhuman in this playful treatment. Desire, of course, turns out to be messier than Sarah’s dictate assumes. When Sarah later tells Harris she’s had a miscarriage, Harris is saddened but also relieved to be free of his obligation to Sarah. Harris assumes he is now free to court Claire, “but when Harris rushes to declare his love for Claire, he’s crushed to learn that she is married to Sarah” (34). Harris and Claire are united in the final passage, and despite a series of miscommunications (stemming from an inattentiveness that had also burdened Harris’s
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relationship with Sarah), the couple appears to have found happiness: “He bought Claire a beautiful black opal. She was pleased. He looked to the future” (36).

Sarah’s use of bureaucratic language in “Affection,” in addition to demonstrating the conflict between desire and power, points to the creeping influence of Kafkan “boundless labyrinths” in the home. Barthelme had complained of bureaucracy since creating Forum in the face of resistance by administration officials at the University of Houston, but letters uncovered during archival research suggests Barthelme had become particularly sensitive to the way corporate bureaucracy had entered the domestic space. In a letter to the New York Telephone Company, dated December 19, 1975, Barthelme questioned the contents of a recent billing notice. “Many thanks for your interesting letter of 16 December,” began Barthelme. “I have considered its contents carefully” (1). The issue appears to be late payment, even though, as Barthelme fastidiously documented, he had made thirteen prompt payments over the course of the year. The letter’s playfulness—he attributed his large August bill to “the spiritual phenomenon of the alone to the alone, as Husserl beautifully phrases it” (1-2)—barely concealed a withering anger: “You will notice, dear Sir or Madam, that the new year was a scant one week old when I slammed my first payment in there (on January 8)” (1). Such anger no doubt stemmed in part from the frustration of being asked for a deposit against future billings, but the real source of Barthelme’s ire seemed to be the “dunning letters” he had been subjected to at the behest of malfunctioning billing “Machines” (2). Nearly ten years later he complained again of “( . . . computer generated) messages threatening in tone” in a letter to the Better Business Bureau of
New York regarding a billing discrepancy with the HBO television channel (letter 10 Dec. 1984). His reference to a technological bureaucracy indicated a sensitivity to the automation of daily life, and underscored his assumed status as a disembodied account number. The indeterminate erotic experience, which is also located in the home, finds itself in peripheral contact with forces of homogenization.

Barthelme draws the reader’s attention to bureaucracy once again in “The Sea of Hesitation.” A worker at the city Human Effort Administration processes applications later to be rejected by bureaucrats who “do not agree with me, that people should be permitted to do what they want to do” (OMDC 95). Like Harris and Claire, Thomas is involved in a strange affair. His ex-wife is demanding a bed for her new apartment so that her new lover no longer has to sleep on the couch. And like “Affection,” such oddity ultimately turns out to be redemptive. Thomas announces by way of farewell, “I pursue Possibility. That’s something” (103). The possibility he pursues is the possibility of the inexplicable erotic encounter, as in “that moment when one looks at a woman and finds that she is looking at you in the same way that you are looking at her” (103). At last, “She takes your arm and you leave the newsstand, walking very closely together, so that your side brushes her side lightly. Desire is here a very strong factor . . .” (104). In contrast to the bureaucrats, to the anonymous letter writer who addresses Thomas as “Greasy Thomas,” and to Francesca (who is obsessed with the tactical failures of the Confederacy), Thomas is comfortable with an erotic activity that has no end but itself and that cannot be rationalized; he concludes of those moments of sublime connection between lovers, “There is no particular point to any of this behavior. Or: This behavior is
the only behavior which has point. Or: There is some point to this behavior but this behavior is not the only behavior which has point” (105).

Barthelme does extend complicating erotic logics to the collection’s formal apparatus, as one might expect, although he does this in ways less radical than his readers had become accustomed to. After criticism that *Great Days* had moved too far in the direction of abstraction, it is not surprising to see a nod to more conventional practices. The dialogue form that marked *Great Days* and *Sixty Stories* is gone. In its place are stories of character and action, albeit ones that retain a combinatorial energy. Further, the collection’s twelve interchapters lend it an appearance of unity often absent from prior efforts. The first line of the opening interchapter acknowledges those earlier criticisms: “They called for more structure, then, so we brought in some big hairy four-by-fours from the back shed and nailed them into place with railroad spikes” (9).

But in the only article to be written exclusively on the collection or its contents, Michael Trussler finds the suggestion of more structure a tease. For Trussler, the interchapters invite and then resist interpretation. The discursive properties of the city being built in that first interchapter--from a distance it spells fastigium, an architectural apogee--promises signification, and a clarity of meaning as sharp as an apex. But according to Trussler, the interchapters then complicate such meanings, layering allusions, or “contradictory codes” that point in multiple intertextual directions (“Metamorphosis” 199). The interchapters, for example, evoke Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925) at the same time as they evoke Italian philosopher Tommaso Campanella’s *The City of the Sun*, and they contain further modernist “resonances” of Milton, Eliot, as
well as Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Brazilian architect Lucio Costa, allusions which point in conflicting directions as to the possibility of a unified text (196). In Our Time, for example, uses vignettes to approach its central thematic purpose, and its use here could subsequently indicate the collection might be wholly articulated through the interchapters. Kafka’s “The City Coat of Arms,” however, another intertextual presence which shares with Overnight to Many Distant Cities a reference to the Babel tower, is more interested in the process of textual construction than in final products. Ultimately the texts contradict and remake one another: in Barthelme’s collection, modernist texts “are interwoven in such a way that they alter signification as much as they are changed, compounding the problem of making connections in the fluidity of a postmodern text” (202). Trussler insists such layering ultimately questions “the mechanics available for reading,” as all meaning in the collection and the purpose of the source texts remain provisional (199).

Ambiguity had of course long been a centerpiece of Barthelme’s aesthetics, but a comment Barthelme made during an interview for Southwest Review the year prior to the collection’s publication suggests he used a density of allusion to provide multiple opportunities for readers to access a book, rather than as deconstruction of meaning: “I try to use more allusions than perhaps every reader will get, so that there will be things that if he doesn’t remember this, he will get that” (NK 307). Overnight to Many Distant Cities is about pleasure, and the hints of Hemingway and Calvino and others suggest a lifetime of happy literacy. The title itself points to intellectual travel. The collection assumes a pleasurable knowledge of the historical sweep of literary tradition, and of
modernism in particular. If, as Trussler suggests, the allusions in the dreamlike interchapters of *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* don’t move toward fastigium, it’s because one’s confrontation with prior cultural events in a Barthelme collection is destined to be incomplete, combinatorial, and more exciting for what those events suggest than for what they might allegorically signify. In the face of authoritarian uses of language, this is a record of language without singular purpose. In other words, the collection’s suggestion of a subversive desire shows up in the text’s structural flexibility. It is therefore perhaps not completely free from a defining structure, as Trussler suggests, or of possibilities for reading, but rather, the reading is a practice of choice, and construction. The ethics of pleasure found in the book, applied variously by its characters and by combinatorial form, affirms a license to choose, and to indulge. This is what a few years later, in a catalog essay for an exhibition of painting and collage by the American artist Elaine Lustig Cohen, Barthelme called “the pure unmediated delight” of contemplating a collage 

The reviews for *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* (and there were noticeably fewer for this collection) appeared in December of 1983, and cemented Barthelme’s status as a once-faddish, now unfashionable writer. In *The New York Times Book Review*, Joel Conarroe called the collection “curiously vacuous,” and found the interchapters to be little more than “private intrusions.” The stories themselves were more “cute” than funny (22). “What is one to make of such material,” asked Conarroe, a question that perhaps speaks more to the diminishing audience for surrealism than it does to Barthelme’s latest work (22). The decidedly unplayful fiction of authors like
Raymond Carver and Barthelme’s own brother, dubbed minimalism, was on the rise in the literary magazines. What Conarroe referred to as Barthelme’s “idiosyncratic effusions” appeared unmodern and baroque in comparison to the relative concision of this new generation (22). Elsewhere in the Times, Anatole Broyard complained that for Barthelme to “surrender, without resistance to the absurd is absurd.”\(^8\) And The Washington Post hyperbolically insisted the collection “repels any understanding whatever” and ascribed to it a nihilist’s credo: “Life means nothing, art is false, understanding is impossible” (Penner). Here too one suspects Barthelme suffered from the fluctuations of intellectual fashion, as the review seemed to offer a sneering summation of presumed deconstructionist principles at work in Barthelme’s stories rather than any attentiveness to the stories themselves.

As had been the case with Great Days, professional disappointment was accompanied by personal loss. Barthelme got word his third wife, Birgit, to whom he had dedicated Snow White, had jumped to her death from a window in Copenhagen (Daugherty 458). The couple’s daughter together, Anne, left her longtime home in Denmark to join her father in Houston. Anne observed in Barthelme the fluctuations of mood that characterized his time in Texas. Barthelme was worried his marriage to Marion was not going well (Daugherty 460). And Anne took note of his perennial sense of world-historical gloom: “His mind took in so much stuff . . . politically . . . in every way . . . it had to be tiring for him” (Daugherty 460; ellipses in orig.).
Although Barthelme had expressed skepticism to O’Hara about the efficacy of PEN’s activism, he remained involved with the organization during his years in Houston and in 1986 he and Kennerly co-organized the 48th International PEN Congress. Scheduled to take place in New York City, the conference was given the theme “The Imagination of the Writer and the Imagination of the State” by Barthelme and the poet Richard Howard. Despite the oppositional aspirations such a theme indicated, Barthelme became dispirited when the conference quickly turned contentious (Daugherty 466). Norman Mailer, then PEN president, had unexpectedly asked Secretary of State George Schultz to speak at the congress, and the invitation sparked denunciations from members including Paley and E.L. Doctorow, who protested Shultz’s appearance on the grounds that he was a chief architect of an imperial U.S. foreign policy. Given Barthelme’s comments on the absence of opportunity for meaningful protest in U.S. fiction, it is perhaps surprising that he was not more encouraged by the energy of the conference. It is possible that Barthelme preferred to investigate the contours of the authorial imagination precisely because it offered an alternative to the more pronounced modes of dissent routinely ignored by U.S. authority. Still, the congress seemed to have triggered discussions relevant to Barthelme’s work. For example, Günter Grass’s assertions at a symposium with Saul Bellow and Salman Rushdie, repeated in a *Times* article, that American capitalism “struggles from crisis to crisis” in a “ritualized manner” no different from state communism, raised the fundamental Kafkan equivalence Kundera would soon articulate and which Barthelme seems to have already detected. But it was the perceived failures of the conference that
seemed to weigh heaviest on Barthelme. A functional alcoholic for much of his adult life, Barthelme was lapsing into public drunkenness. Rushdie writes of the congress, “I remember meeting Donald Barthelme, whose work I loved, but who was so drunk that I had the feeling of not really having met him.”

The year of the PEN congress, and eleven years after his last novel, Barthelme published *Paradise* (1986). The story describes the complexities of a polygamous sexual relationship between Simon, a middle-aged architect, and his young female housemates. Recalling in some ways the autobiographical hybridity of the Dead Father, Simon at once resembles both Barthelme’s own father (Simon is an architect who once worked in Philadelphia, much like Barthelme, Sr.) and himself (both Simon and Barthelme, for example, suffered from petit mal seizures as children, and Simon spends most of the novel in New York City). Though *Paradise* tempts the reader to assume Simon is, as the women occasionally put it, in “hog heaven,” Simon warns categorizing his situation as male fantasy is “the dumbest possible way to look at it” (8, 55). The messiness of erotic experience is here considerably less redemptive than in *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* and recalls rather *Snow White*, another novel featuring a polygamous sexual relationship that seems to offer its participants little in the way of meaning or pleasure. Simon’s sexual duties to the three women he discovers at a hotel bar fill him with dread: “Dore will come in and demand to know where my penis has got to. I don’t know, I’ll say, it was there yesterday, more or less. You call that *there*, she’ll say, scornfully, and I’ll say, I am a poor relic, a poor husk, a leftover, a single yellow bean covered with Cling Wrap sailing on a flawed plate through the refrigerator of life”
Simon does not apologize for his (surprisingly explicit) hedonism, but neither does he seem to enjoy it. The delight the earlier collection takes in sex (the meaning Connors finds in the erotic, for example, in “Lightning”) is here overshadowed by its attendant anxieties.

Sex is not Simon’s only problem; his profession is under attack: “New architecture is ‘soulless,’ Simon reads, again and again” (68). He’s sympathetic to these complaints but is wary of returning to the “messianic, maniacal idea that architecture will make people better, civilize them,” an idea he attributes to the early efforts of Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Wright. The comment also gestures toward his own father’s humanist architectural principles (69). Simon’s postmodern aesthetic stance is consistent with Barthelme’s, who had seized on a rather different (avant-garde) modernist impulse and used collage to undo the standards of dominant ideologies. If part of the high modernist architectural aesthetic was a forced assimilation to modernity, Simon prefers to think of himself as an outsider, much like a giraffe, with its “weird” and “improbable design” (71). The uncompromising nature of his aesthetic peculiarities extends to his particular sexual ethics, despite whatever reservations he may have about his adequacy. He insists that despite a sad divorce caused by previous infidelities, “the sixth commandment is wrong,” reasoning “I don’t think God gives a snap about adultery” (76, 77). Thus do Simon’s sexual exploits become a kind of principled behavior in the name of disorder. Of the women, Simon explains “what they knew was so wildly various, ragout of Spinoza and Cyndi Lauper with a William Buckley sherbet
floating in the middle of it” (59). This is sexual politics as design, the erotic as collage, and ultimately, perversion as social protest.

Patrick O’Donnell, however, argues the ordering, modernist structures Simon resents ironically recur in the normalization and security he offers these previously-battered women and of the protection his apartment offers from sexual judgment; in *Paradise*, “the erotic is made symmetrical and sensuality made routine, banal, as contemporary commonplaces . . .” (211). Thus, “This conception of male utopia, in essence, exists as a recapitulation of those orders and anxieties that, implicitly, and however temporarily, should have been transcended and subsumed in the figuration of paradise” (211). Sexual liberation, in other words, becomes another confinement, or a “continuance of the status quo,” as Simon feels compelled to normalize sexual desires that are too unpredictable when embodied by the much younger women (215). The repressed desires Simon recounts through dreams for Q (in a return to the Q and A dialogue form), could be, in this regard, responses to a libido that ultimately remains deferred. Q in turn reports a dream in which he is in pest control, and has been “pumping and spraying” throughout the house of a young wife (191). The transmutation of depravity into institutionalism may be said to be expressed in these comic sexual fantasies.

A biographical reading yields a slightly different conclusion. Barthelme felt confined in Houston by the monotony of domestic experience. It’s likely that the inevitable commitments of home life, rather than any normalization of new sexual cultures, are what partially neutralize an erotic experience that remains quite extra-
ordinary. Simon, who as an architect is a builder of homes, offers the women the safety of his own, and the unavoidable safety of domestication does lead to the deferral of some erotic risk. Published a few years prior to Paradise, “Chablis” had demonstrated that in middle age, one’s gestures of personal and artistic difference are destined to be domesticated. Once a self-described “black sheep,” the narrator of “Chablis” has moved on to the predictability of suburban homesteading: “My wife wants a dog. She already has a baby. The baby’s almost two. My wife says that the baby wants the dog” (FS 11). The narrator envisions scenes that are extraordinary only for the ways in which they are thoroughly prosaic: “I can see myself walking all over our subdivision asking people, ‘Have you seen this brown dog?’ ‘What’s its name they’ll say to me, and I’ll stare at them coldly and say, ‘Michael.’ That’s what she wants to call it, Michael” (12). The narrator finds his current position demeaning. He recalls “the time, thirty years ago, when I put Herman’s mother’s Buick into a cornfield,” using the real name of childhood friend Herman Gollob (13). A reader accustomed to Barthelme’s recontextualization of cliché would be disappointed; the story is notable for a relative lack of playfulness. Earlier stories like “La Critique de la Vie Quotidienne” had targeted domestic rigmarole with transformative combinations of everyday phenomena and a defiant humor, but in “Chablis” references to “the damn baby” feel sorrowful, despite a final passage indicating a winking affection (11). In “Chablis,” as in Paradise, it is ultimately the narrator’s position as father that prohibits intemperate behavior. Simon doesn’t just sleep with the women; he provides for them. It is those duties that appear to require the
subjects to reproduce for their children, real and literal, the surprising limitations of domestic experience in the free world. 9

“Chablis” was collected in Forty Stories, a second compendium released in 1987. Barthelme continued to appear regularly in The New Yorker, with three stories appearing by the summer of that year. He collaborated with Seymour Chwast on Sam’s Bar: An American Landscape (1987), a graphic novel set in a pub that recaptured some of the old spirit of combination. And that same year he composed a mixed-media project with Jim Love for a show at the Glassell School of Art. He also wrote the catalog introduction for an exhibition of work by Sherrie Levine and Mary Boone at New York’s Michael Werner Gallery. Levine was known for rephotographing well-known photographs and art prints, such as Walker Evans’s famous exhibition Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

In his introduction to the exhibition, Barthelme insists Levine makes a paradoxical effort to be “original in negating originality” (NK 193). What matters is not the materials used, but the ways in which these are presented. In Levine’s case, she uses prior work to reestablish “unmediated experience,” to present that work outside expert interpretation (NK 193). The reappropriation of felt experience was consistent with Barthelme’s aesthetic philosophy, but also provides an opportunity to consider Barthelme’s domestic boredoms as the loss of original contact with the external world. There is a narrowing of interest in the essay aimed squarely at these limitations: “Art is always aimed (like a rifle, if you wish) at the middle class. The working class has its own culture. . . . The upper class owns the world and thus needs know no more about the
world than is necessary for its orderly exploitation” (NK 194). In middle-class Houston, it was difficult, save for the diversions of art, not to feel cut off from the stimulations of city life and from experience more broadly.

An opportunity to return to the world beyond Houston came in November of that year, when Barthelme joined Paley, Coover, Walter Abish, Marilyn French, Rita Dove, Lisa Alther, William Gaddis, and others in West Berlin for a conference on American writing. Named “The American Chapter,” the conference was overshadowed by a secretly-arranged meeting with writers in East Berlin. In an abandoned pottery shop not far from the Brandenburg gate, the authors discussed the particular challenges posed by censorship and, for those from the West, cultural indifference. Paley and Barthelme gave readings. Lutz Engelke, a conference organizer who was in attendance, writes that Barthelme somewhat sheepishly reminded the audience his work was intended for a culture in which words were drowned out and “forgotten” (98). His fiction was meant, he explained, to restore “aesthetic possibilities” to that culture (98). His stories were nonetheless received by the East Berliners with great interest, as one might expect of texts that were designed to resist rigid patterns of interpretation: “The absurdity of his arbitrariness appeared, as if in a flash, as a Molotov cocktail for a system which looked at every detail for sense and meaning, although the official metaphors for sense had been reduced to stupid rituals of repetition” (Engelke 99). Despite the differing politics of artistic reception, Barthelme felt a kinship with the Berliners and the economies of control they confronted. Asked about Houston, Barthelme replied, “if you compare Houston with East Berlin, I think it’s like two poles of the same world” (99). While one
location suffered from linguistic indifference, and the other from oversensitivity, both presented dangers to individually-conceived meanings. The conference was something of a culmination for Barthelme, a chance to confront a more manifestly visible mode of autocracy while simultaneously articulating the universal indications for a fiction of combinatorial potential.

In 1988, after being mistakenly treated for a sore throat with antibiotics, Barthelme was diagnosed with throat cancer (Daugherty 482). Doctors eventually removed a tumor from Barthelme’s pharynx. The illness forced him, at last, to reckon with his addictions, and he checked in to a rehabilitation clinic to quit alcohol and tobacco (483). Despite the extent of his alcoholism, Barthelme found quitting surprisingly easy (although he worried doing so would affect his creative capacities). He insisted on returning to work after a brief recovery at home, and colleagues at the University of Houston found Barthelme looking extremely unwell and, deprived of his customary glass of white wine, very much out of sorts (Lopate 139). He was enervated and depressed, telling friend George Christian he wanted to “go to sleep and never wake up” (Daugherty 484). But Barthelme’s cancer soon entered remission and his spirits and health revived. By the spring of 1989, he was well enough to accept a senior fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. According to Daugherty, Rome excited Barthelme and restored his eagerness to work. He resumed the walks he had once found so inspirational in New York. Rome offered what suburban life in Houston did not: the unfiltered messiness of routine urban collisions and dissonances. He reported once
following a man whistling the Marine Corps Hymn for many blocks, and on another occasion was delighted to come across a newspaper headline with a smattering of both Italian and English. He would eagerly record his experiences after returning to the academy’s villa (484-85).

In Rome Barthelme began work on what would be his final novel. The King (1990) is an Arthurian legend set in the London Blitz. The Knights of the Round Table pursue the war’s holy grail: a bomb that will defeat the axis powers and deter an attack by Arthur’s son Mordred. The novel revisits many of Barthelme’s favored topics: patricide, myth, warfare--there is a brief comedic look at mutually assured destruction--but most striking are the book’s examinations of mortality and sexual freedom and the links between them. Launcelot, for one, worries a culture of tawdry gossip will overwhelm his heroic legacy. He meets with the obituary writer from the Times to remind him that his had been a privileged and singular life: “I told him that although my life has been in many ways a life like many another, in other ways it had been unlike many another, because of the peculiar circumstances of my birth, class and history. I then explained chivalry to him . . .” (King 19). Launcelot’s decidedly orthodox invocation of a rare heritage puts him culturally at odds with the loosening of sexual taboos going on around him, an evolution that in fact might allow him to pursue his adulterous affair with Guinevere more freely. Like Simon in Paradise, Launcelot cannot fully commit to the radical social terms that might legitimize his sexual choices.

Launcelot is determined to be prepared for death. The Blue Knight, however, insists a predictable, eschatological return to paradise is unlikely. In the knight’s
apocryphal book *On the Impossibility of Paradise* he argues such fantasies “did not square with my experience. . . . I wasn’t even happy in the womb” (77). More problematically, ascendance to heaven doesn’t match the Blue Knight’s aesthetic predilections: “It’s too symmetrical. There are no twists. Just Paradise, zip, Fall, zip, and Paradise again, zip. And I had a very strong feeling, an intuition if you will, that even if Paradise were regained it would have music by Milhaud and frescoes by the Italian Futurists” (78). When Launcelot is found in a death-like slumber in the final passage of the novel, two observers do in fact construct for him a paradise, but it is a paradise of erotic pleasure that recalls the Blue Knight’s vision of a modernist eternity. Launcelot, tired from his exploits, rests under an apple tree:

“But Launcelot sleeps on, undisturbed! I wonder what he’s dreaming.”

“He is dreaming that there is no war, no Table round, no Arthur, no Launcelot.”

“That cannot be! He dreams, rather, of the softness of Guinevere, the sweetness of Guinevere, and the sexuality of Guinevere!”

“How do you know?”

“I can see into the dream! Now she enters the dream in her own person, wearing a gown wrought of gold bezants over white samite and carrying a bottle of fine wine, Pinot Grigio by the look of it!”

“What a matchless dream!”

“Under an apple tree . . .” (158; ellipses in orig.)
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The scene enacts a death fantasy that is consistent with the kind of liberated sexual practices Barthelme had celebrated, and it is difficult not to hear an elegiac reckoning on the part of the author in these final lines, more so since the novel was published posthumously in 1990.

The loss pervading the novel is not always assimilated so easily. The knights are aware they are displaced, and that theirs is a vanishing culture. As the Brown Knight puts it, “The machine gun is not a comely weapon” (46). But as Launcelot’s somewhat self-defeating vanity makes clear, The King shies away from nostalgic romance. It is instead quite frank about the distortions that sentimentality can bring, including those aesthetic sentimentalities dear to the author. The voice of Ezra Pound comes through the radio at intervals transmitting anti-Semitic propaganda. If Barthelme was ever tempted to consider 1920s Paris as the high watermark of modernist production (at least pre-Beckett, as “After Joyce” suggests), it is here one more meddlesome father in need of burying. Though still clearly in its debt, modernism as it is represented in The King is an ideologically-oriented political misadventure--and much like Arthurian legend, ripe for a rewrite. There are layers of appropriation in The King, and the novel keeps modernist method (its rewriting of myth, for example) while symbolically discarding certain authoritarian politics. Barthelme had remarked to an interviewer that Pound’s maxim to “make it new” was “a rather mechanical exhortation,” and therefore unsatisfactory (NK 315). Faith in systems leads to distortions, whether the system is chivalry, Catholic metaphysics, the Communism favored by Walter the Penniless, Fascism, or, ironically, a too-rigidly conceived program of modernist renewal. The anti-modernist oddity of the
avant-garde that Simon aspires to in *Paradise* is continued in *The King* by a confrontation with modernism’s penchant for the ideological.

Barthelme and Marion returned to New York in the spring of 1989, where they still kept their apartment, and it was not long before Barthelme again became sick. He traveled for treatment to Houston, where doctors found his cancer had spread (Daugherty 489). He died the morning of July 23, 1989, at the age of fifty-eight. His obituary in the *Times* (which included a one-column photo; in *The King*, Launcelot, bearing an unabashedly healthy ego, requests three) called him “one of the leading innovative writers of modern fiction” (Mitgang).

In his final interview, however, he had fortuitously referred to “innovative” as a term that was “congratulatory, if imprecise” (*NK* 315). He disfavored a characterization of his work that privileged its formal elements. He insisted his fiction, and postmodernism more generally, was “a way of dealing with reality, an attempt to think about aspects that have not, perhaps, been treated heretofore” (*NK* 316). This was a slight revision to Barthelme’s earlier interest in the alien art object. In the later essay “Not Knowing” he revises his insistence that “the [art] object is itself world,” and this is where he notes, “art is always a meditation upon reality rather than a representation of external reality or a jackleg attempt to ‘be’ external reality” (*NK* 23). He repeated this argument several times, in interviews, insisting the author’s consciousness is rooted in its perception of the real. In truth, not much had changed in Barthelme’s thinking, and the reformulation was likely a response to the ease with which the earlier essay leant
itself to criticisms of postmodern detachment. His early emphasis on an alterity-inducing art object was based on an eventual, modified return to a more vividly-rendered real. Later he simply switched to insisting the art object captured a mysterious, ineffable logic of disorder that was already latent in our ontology, if heretofore unrecognized and repressed. It was a shift from imagination to observation, perhaps, but the text remains in both conceptualizations--writing as phenomenological transcendence or as depth theory--that thing which documents challenges to the incomplete ethics of the ordinary.

Less than six months after Barthelme’s death, the Berlin Wall fell. And while this meant that the political divisions Barthelme had satirized and reformulated were much diminished, the subsequent homogenization of global politics by neo-liberal capitalist ideology leaves his literary project conceptually sound. His playful, circumspect announcements of totalizing social organization were fundamentally a process of denaturalization, a process that remains relevant given the radical normalization of imperial capitalist systems.\(^\text{10}\) His late comment that U.S. life is political in ways that go unrecognized hinted at the rise of a secret security apparatus and the broad, global willfulness to endow an openly hegemonic political order with credibility--what Slavoj Žižek has termed the “ideological fantasy” (33).\(^\text{11}\) Barthelme’s habit of putting unlike things together in his fiction--whether bodies or bits of culture--offers readers difference where there might only be similitude. Barthelme’s postmodernism opted for plasticity of meaning and an ethics of pleasure in favor of ideology.
That pleasure would emerge in Barthelme’s fiction as a system for interacting with the world and with the text is ironic, coming from a man who struggled to locate pleasure in his own day-to-day existence. But pleasure remains in these texts, most readily for the reader. Beneath the outward appearance of a dissolute, schizoid world order, Barthelme sensed a consolidation of the same forces of homogeneity (political, cultural, and sexual)—what Kundera called the “common spirit” of the West (18)—that had competed with the aspirations of the modernist avant-garde. Thus does one find in Barthelme’s stories and novels a fiction that gleefully combines components of the ordinary with the unexpected, unassimilated, and unforeseen, and affirms the wonderfully grotesque aspects of one’s experience in the midst of a globalized (and globalizing) politics of control.
Notes

1 From “The Mothball Fleet.” (Barthelme, OTMDC 129-30)

2 See “Happenings in the New York Scene,” in which Kaprow discusses the importance of chance and audience in terms that strongly suggest a familiarity with collage forms. Trussler in “Literary Artifacts” points out that the art object at the center of “The Balloon” resembles a happening in its temporally-limited parameters and in the way it at once represents and questions discourses surrounding art production. Though Kaprow predates the late-seventies performance movement, the latter’s penchant for transcending commodifiable forms points to the lasting importance of Kaprow’s work and his emphasis on the ephemeral. (See Goldberg for a concise discussion of the 1970s performance movement). Ultimately, Barthelme aspired to a performative immediacy: “I’m on the stage and I suddenly climb down into the pit and kick you in the knee. That’s not like writing about kicking you in the knee, it’s not like painting you being kicked in the knee, because you have pain in the knee” (NK 265). It would be foolish to assume the shock value of work by artists like Vito Acconci and Chris Burden would have been anathema to Barthelme, who had often attempted to stun jaded readers into a consciousness of quotidian indignities.

3 The essay and interview collection Not-Knowing includes the version of this interview that appeared in The Paris Review in the summer of 1981 under the title “Donald Barthelme: The Art of Fiction LXVI.” I have opted here and in several other places to use an earlier, less expurgated typescript of the interview found in the Barthelme papers at the University of Houston.
4 For a discussion of *The Art of the Novel* as itself transcending, in its extra-formal considerations, the discussions of postmodern politics articulated by Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon, see Parrish’s “Tribal Politics and the Postmodern Product,” 653.

5 Barthelme had already dealt with the disparate forms of U.S. imperialism in Latin America in the short story “Paraguay.” See chapter four.

6 Kundera is also interested in the ways the Kafkan affects the private. Noting that Kafka was less politically interested than companions like Max Brod, Kundera finds that Kafkan historical “tendencies” are frequently felt on the private level (107). He tells the story of a friend who survived a Stalinist show trial but had to serve a 14-year jail term for crimes against the Party. Visiting his friend one day after her release, he finds she has been berating her son for oversleeping. When he challenges her, it is the son who rises to her defense. Kundera concludes, “What the Party never managed to do to the mother, the mother had managed to do to her son. She had forced him to identify with an absurd accusation, to ‘seek his offense,’ to make a public confession” (109).

Kundera discovers that the world of private encounters functions in parallel to the political order: “I understood all at once that the psychological mechanisms that function in great (apparently incredible and inhuman) historical events are the same as those that regulate private (quite ordinary and very human) situations” (109). Kundera’s anecdote is primarily meant to show how a non-political observer of human behavior like Kafka had come to serve as the great political allegorist of the twentieth century, but it also suggests the influence of totalitarian power systems in the private realm. By referring to what he sees in his friend’s home as a “Stalinist mini-trial,” it is apparent that
the mother’s behavior is not just mimicking her own encounters with the Party, but following them (109).

7 Recall Barthelemy’s ironic depiction of the black box in “The Explanation” as a machine that might “be helpful in changing the government” (CL 69). There is undoubtedly a technophobia in Barthelemy’s writing and the reference here is telling as to why: the rigidly patterned algorithms of computation hide disorder beneath a veneer of order—a behavior at the heart of cultural homogenization.

8 Broyard’s review also indicates Barthelemy was suffering beneath the weight of an increasingly codified postmodernism. “It’s not our culture that rots and falls into desuetude to be chronicled by Mr. Barthelemy,” wrote Broyard, “it’s the stories themselves.” The collection was destined to disappoint a reader expecting to find evidence of entropic phenomena, as Barthelemy had always been more interested in the creative potential of the surreal.

9 See chapter five for an in-depth discussion of the link between sexual anxiety and Barthelemy’s eros-as-politics.

10 For a discussion of neo-liberal homogenization in the twenty-first century see the preface to Laclau and Mouffe.

11 Barthelemy speculated the U.S. population had been shielded from the “tragic history of the twentieth century,” which had largely taken place in Europe (NK 313). He concludes that as a consequence, “our political involvement is watered down” (NK 313).
Global contact has been established as a major topical and formal component of modernist literature, but scholars have not yet considered with equal measure the transnational vectors of influence in the study of U.S. postmodernism. For a body of literature that engaged the transatlantic slave trade (Toni Morrison), the war in Vietnam (Donald Barthelme, Norman Mailer), the Second World War (Thomas Pynchon), the intersections between art and global terror (Don DeLillo), and immigrant lives in New York City (Grace Paley), these elements remain surprisingly underinvestigated by scholars, particularly those texts, such as the one considered in the present chapter, concerned with locations outside established (Euro-U.S.) transatlantic stomping grounds.

A good deal of this oversight has to do with the politics of canon-making. With a few exceptions (Morrison chief among them), postmodernism as a label is most often applied to white males and white male preoccupations. Rone Shavers sums up the problem in a recent reevaluation of William Gaddis’s perceived elitism, writing, “the genre of literary postmodern fiction is now considered to be exclusively white and male, mainly because of its most visible and/or popular members,” adding, “literary postmodernism is now perceived in popular culture to be solely one among various ‘multicultural’ identities present in the world” (162). Casual lists attempting to identify
preeminent postmodern texts usually include work by DeLillo, Pynchon, Paul Auster, Barthelme, John Barth, Robert Coover, David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Lethem, etc.: an allegedly homogenous group of U.S. authors depicted as either lamenting lost masculinities,\(^1\) metafictionally navel-gazing in the fashion of pampered academics,\(^2\) or protesting the unjust and silent power structures of the West, not necessarily for their propensity toward exploitation, but for their surreptitious functioning. It is as if, according to this particular interpretational bias, what has most crucially been perpetrated against these disgruntled authors is the withholding of earned patriarchal privilege.

Contemporary analytic methodologies built upon globalist perspectives do promise to pull the postmodern into their sweeping transhistorical and transnational visions. The field of global U.S. studies, for example, has questioned exceptionalist ideologies as well as credulity towards narratives of Adamic heroism and uniquely moral struggle. Wai Chee Dimock argues national politics of protectionism and sovereignty compromise the politics of the discipline, insisting “the field can legitimize itself as a field only because the nation does the legitimizing” (2). For these critics, localized American experiences are, as is the local for all peoples, in contact with places outside increasingly indistinct territorial markers. In *Apostles of Modernity*, for example, Guy Reynolds investigates the relations between postmodern authors and ideologies of global development. He considers DeLillo and Richard Powers, and examines how these authors have responded to “a fresh internationalist paradigm” at the end of the twentieth century (201). Reynolds finds both authors imagine the U.S. citizen abroad
during this period as consistently confronted with rebukes to exceptionalist ideology while being helpless to shed a national identity.

Still, this fledgeling project remains quite incomplete. Postcolonialism, perhaps the most visible transnational critical practice, maintains microcanons of national and regional interest that have in fact exacerbated the perceived male whiteness of the postmodern. Whereas geomodernism has studied the role of non-Western authors in high modernist literary production and considered the ways in which modernity was experienced outside metropolitan capitals, authors who might otherwise be considered part of a contiguous global postmodern phenomenon have instead been siphoned away, placed under the aegis of the postcolonial in Africa and Asia, or in the case of Latin America, a subject of this chapter, the neobaroque and transmodern. In Latin America this partitioning follows a scholarly tradition, established by autonomy-minded intellectuals like José Martí and Octavio Paz, of protecting non-anglo writers from the neutering effects of an assimilationist cultural globalism. Postmodernism is for these authors more than a cultural form; rather, it is representative of a cultural-political ideology. Neil Larsen has argued in this vein that postmodern criticism disfavors anti-imperial agitation in Latin America. According to Larsen, “Marginality is postulated as a condition which, purely by virtue of its objective situation, spontaneously gives rise to the subversive particularity upon which postmodern politics pins its hopes. But where has this been shown actually to occur?” (emphasis in original). Larsen sees a post-Marxist disinclination for class struggle as characterizing postmodern criticism and as responsible for its inability to account for colonized Latin masses.
The result of these divisions has been the codification of postmodernism as a category restricted to North America and characterized by a distinctly North American anxiety over modernity. The postmodern in such a conceptualization excludes interest in Latin American subjects and is also closed to the allegedly parochial, anti-dictatorial politics of boom-generation authors such as Julio Cortázar and Carlos Fuentes. While the postmodern has occasionally been found to document a transracial language and history in the U.S., extranational exclusions have tended to reinforce the postmodern’s position as a swan song for a white boho middle class that is mourning a loss of power, authenticity, and the privileges of leisure. The placement of authors into more nationalized and regionalized categories has perhaps preserved certain subaltern identities, but it has also essentialized those same authors at the expense of a comprehensive theory of late-century avant-garde literary production that acknowledges a universal exchange of method. So too have these critical habits precluded an understanding of the transnationalist ethics at work in the avant-garde.

My concern in this chapter is not with disciplinary politics, however. Nor is it with defending a universal postmodernism of the sort that intends to be inclusive but reinforces suspicions of exclusionary anglocentrisms. I am instead concerned with establishing Barthelme’s sense of hemispheric connectivity by way of the short story “Paraguay.” Barthelme has often been cast as the lead mascot of high postmodernism, a nod, it seems, to his conceptualist prowess. And the treatment of postmodernism as a phenomenon largely of the U.S., in terms of both literary production and cultural subject, has therefore limited comprehensive understandings of Barthelme’s writings on the
Vietnam War, European communism, Latin America, and even domestic ennui, which I’ve argued in previous chapters is in Barthelme’s work connected to a global state of autocratic bureaucracy and homogeneity. I hope the current chapter might diffuse a number of the suspicions that underlie critical treatment of Barthelme’s work by showing a radical (if imperfect) planetary consciousness at work in one of his most intriguing texts. A close reading of “Paraguay” makes it clear that far from blindly belonging to a movement closed to the ethical awareness of others, Barthelme remained sensitive to the various forms of U.S. foreign intervention even as he seemed to be unaware of how his own fiction reproduced imperial politics. I argue below, for example, that the indeterminacies produced by Barthelme’s aesthetic mimic a blindness toward the Other found in the political and countercultural classes.

Jonathan Arac has described the literature of the U.S. in the age of its neo-colonial power as characterized by an irreducible cultural, political and historical complexity--what Arac terms “imperial eclecticism.” Such a conceptualization is useful for an analysis of Barthelme’s “Paraguay,” for while Barthelme was a vocal opponent of the nation’s interventionism, the story eludes simple political categorization. It is at once skeptical of a privileged, imperial gaze toward Latin America and at the same time open to the possibility of an uninformed, constitutive rendering of Latin America through the practices of writing and reading. Further, it mocks the exploitation of Latin America occurring in the service of Cold War interests but itself uses Latin places rather indelicately as a tool to understand troubling connections between postmodern poetics and totalitarian strategies of suppression.
Barthelme’s various treatments of U.S. power are often accompanied by a set of neuroses that has proven limiting for literary critics. In *The Dead Father*, for example, anxieties over the unchecked political authority of the Nixonesque antagonist are refracted by the lens of father-resentment that Barthelme spent his career disconsolately gazing through. “Cortes and Montezuma,” another story on anglo-Latin relations, depicts a homoeroticized relationship between the European and Aztec leaders with an eye toward dramatizing the fleeting loyalties of sexual companions—another frequent motif for Barthelme. And large portions of “Paraguay” appear dedicated to defending the story’s own formalisms, a self-conscious lapse into the realm of postmodern poetics that enacts one of the genre’s most roundly vilified indulgences. What fascinates me about Barthelme’s texts, however, is the way aesthetic, biographical, and social interests merge and transfigure. His texts remain politically potent while accommodating self-criticism. It is that tendency that I’ll focus on here. I’d like to suggest that in “Paraguay,” which first appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1969 and was included in the collection *City Life*, Barthelme both critiques and himself enacts the tendency by Americans to see non-U.S. locations as placeless, that is, to treat them as promising vessels for the U.S. political and cultural imagination. In doing so he manages to challenge the legitimacy of various forms of U.S. neo-colonial thought and activity while problematizing his own response to such activity, and the politics of postmodern form more generally.
“As Much Art as His System Can Tolerate”: Neo-Colonial Utopianisms

“Paraguay” is at once a mock travel guide, an outlandish exercise in fantasy, and the record of an expedition. Although the narrator describes his journey with the detached interest of the anthropologist, by the story’s end he finds himself marching at the head of a column charged with the task (familiar to readers of Barthelme) of “allowing a very wide range of tendencies to interact” (CL 27). The destiny of the nation, in other words, ends up as similar to the collage-inspired aesthetic path of the author. Leading up to this moment, the story is divided into subsections, some of which are predictably named according to the travelogue genre (i.e. “Where Paraguay Is,” “Temperature”) while others allude to some of the region’s more outlandish customs regarding art and hygiene (“Rationalization” and “Skin”).

A central conceit behind the story is that it does not refer to the South American nation of Paraguay, but rather to its negative. Once the destination is announced, the narrator provides an addendum that it is “not the Paraguay that exists on our maps. It is not to be found on the continent South America; it is not a political subdivision of that continent, with a population of 2,161,000 and a capital city named Asunción” (CL 20). A vaguely international, but ultimately indeterminate setting of this kind is not unusual for Barthelme, whose stories wander peripatetically through temporality and geography. In “Abduction from the Seraglio,” a Texan sets out to recover a former lover from the Turkish-style harem of the title. “Views of my Father Weeping” begins with an aristocrat running over the narrator’s father with a horse and carriage. Such hybridity is often due
to frequent and combined intertext. *The Dead Father*, for example, reads like a European fairy tale; its delusional patriarch and his forced march across a landscape populated by inns and kingdoms would not be out of place in Cervantes or an Arthurian tale, the latter a genre Barthelme pastiched more unambiguously in his novel *The King*. Settings are routinely taken from experience, from reading, and from objects of childhood delight.

Barthelme’s stories, in other words, exist in an unrecognizable topography: a cosmopolitan landscape of biographical and intertextual combination, geographic play, and abstraction. Setting is as prone in Barthelme’s stories to combinatorial treatment as any other element. Frequently, the superposition of place with place animates an ironic sense of Barthelme’s own time and location. In “Abduction from the Seraglio,” for example, Eastern and Western juxtaposition mirrors the discord between the love object’s former sixties radicalism and her more recent attempts to establish a liberal-bourgeois respectability. “Paraguay” also suggestively pairs the familiar with the foreign, but the central juxtaposition in “Paraguay” is between Paraguay and its negation: the Not-Paraguay announced at the story’s introduction. The insistence on Paraguay’s status of alterity recalls Barthelme’s claim in his essay “Not-Knowing” that the artist “discovers that in being simple, honest, and straightforward, nothing much happens: he speaks the speakable, whereas what we are looking for is the as-yet speakable, the as-yet spoken” (*NK* 15). It is this ontological and philological horizon of difference that Maurice Natanson believed would expand the imagination and return it to the given
world with renewed vision. It is a process which Barthelme detected in practices of jazz variation, and which he considered a template for artistic production:

There is one thing of which you may be sure: I am not going to play “Melancholy Baby” as written. Rather I will play something that is parallel, in some sense, to “Melancholy Baby,” having to do with “Melancholy Baby”—commentary, exegesis, elaboration, contradiction. The interest of my construction, if any, is to be located in the space between the new entity I have constructed and the “real” “Melancholy Baby,” which remains in the mind as the horizon which bounds my efforts.

This is, I think, the relation of art to the world. (NK 23; emphasis in original)

The gap between Paraguay and Not-Paraguay is an imaginative space of opportunity fixed on a real subject. According to such a logic of alterity, the real Paraguay is the substrate awaiting discovery and reflection beneath Not-Paraguay’s hallucinatory irreality. Such a premise, however, raises the ethical issues so elliptically at work everywhere in “Paraguay”: is Paraguay in need of outside discovery? Should place and history be constituted within the postmodern by processes of imagination?

Of course, Paraguay had already been discovered by the political imagination in the U.S. and that is precisely what this story itself sets out to critique. “Paraguay” appeared in The New Yorker on September 6, 1969, following by a few months Nelson Rockefeller’s well-publicized fact-finding tour of Latin America on behalf of the Nixon administration. The government was then providing loans and military training
throughout the region in exchange for cooperation in eradicating Communist factions, and in Guatemala the Green Berets had intervened against rebels more directly. Twenty years later, in his final interview, Barthelme, having grown even more attentive to Latin America during the era of Reagan’s interventionism, described ongoing efforts in Central America as “clearly wrong” (NK 312). His comments suggested a dismay over continuing U.S. misadventure abroad following the war in Vietnam.

In the run-up to Rockefeller’s visit, *The New York Times* ran a story documenting efforts by Paraguayan clergy and students to petition the government for the release of political prisoners, who had in some cases been held without trial for over a decade. This was thanks to what the article characterized as the nation’s longstanding “state of siege” (Browne, “Paraguayans”). But Rockefeller’s visit had the effect of only prompting further political purges. In Rio De Janeiro, prominent dissidents had been jailed in preparation for the governor’s arrival. And his visit to Paraguay that same week was met by little of the anticipated mass protest, a testament to the efficacy of the Stroessner regime’s apparatus of repression. The newspaper *Comunidad* did publish a piece linking Rockefeller family oil interests to the Chaco war with Bolivia, but evidence of dissent had largely vanished (Browne, “Harassment”).

Rockefeller’s diplomatic junket becomes fodder for satire in the opening pastiche of “Paraguay.” Barthelme lifts a full paragraph from Jane E. Duncan’s *A Summer Ride through Western Tibet* (1906), which he dutifully acknowledges with a footnote. The chapter from which it is taken describes Duncan’s journey through the Deosai Mountains of Pakistan on her way into Tibet and appears near the beginning of her
book. The excerpt describes Duncan’s ascent to Sari Sanger Pass before descending to the valley below. Barthelme modifies only the final line:

The upper part of the plain that we had crossed the day before was now white with snow, and it was evident there was a storm raging behind us and that we had only just crossed Burji La in time to escape it. . . . At the summit there is a cairn on which each man threw a stone, and here it is customary to give payment to the coolies. I paid each man his agreed-upon wage, and, alone, began the descent. Ahead was Paraguay. (CL 20)

There is a banal Orientalist quality to the passage that immediately and unmistakably introduces a theme of global exploration. As political satire, the pastiche is rather forthright; Rockefeller, like Duncan before him, had exercised the soft-power of information-gathering on behalf of an empire whose power in a given region was then on the rise.7 The fantasy of a stoic U.S. isolationism that characterizes narratives of reluctant military and diplomatic activity unravels against comparisons to traditional imperial enterprise.

After the opening pastiche, however, the story largely forgoes invoking contemporary hemispheric politics, and instead imagines U.S. neo-colonial hegemonies in the guise of more surreptitious cultural forms. Nameless artist-missionaries have aggressively reformed the local art industry in “Paraguay” and have taken the participation-based empowerment politics of the American conceptual arts movement to its extreme finality. Here, “Each citizen is given as much art as his system can tolerate”
(23). Further, the artists have replaced pre-modern production methodologies with an elaborate version of pop-art’s technological efficiencies:

Production is up. Quality-control devices have been installed at those points where the interests of artists and audience intersect. Shipping and distribution have been improved out of all recognition. (It is in this area, they say in Paraguay, that traditional practices were most blameworthy.) . . . Foamed by a number of techniques, the art is then run through heavy steel rollers. Flip-flop switches control its further development. Sheet art is generally dried in smoke and is dark brown in color. Bulk art is air dried, and changes color in particular historical epochs. (23)

The artists, in autocratic spirit, have also reified the processes of meaning generation in the arts by implementing a process of “rationalization” in which art is “translated into a statement of symbolic logic” prior to its enforced distribution (23). A system for art distribution that in some aspects recalls the democratizing principles behind sixties-era innovations like happenings, pop-art, and performance art is here also a system of semiotic control.

The passage is consistent with Barthelme’s chronic distrust of a counterculture which condemned conformity but in which he often detected ideological enforcement. The novel *Snow White* had just a few years earlier described a set of young activists who struggle to achieve intellectual coherence yet nonetheless exhibit a striking sense of certitude when discussing social reform. “Paraguay” extends the scope of that
certainty, and gestures toward the New Left’s dubious interest in Latin America following the 1959 Cuban revolution. In his landmark essay “Caliban,” Roberto Fernández Retamar documents the popularity of the Caribbean in 1971 as an object of leftist affection, a popularity Retamar traces to the perpetuation in the English-speaking imagination of a certain Caribbean inhabitant Columbus describes in his letters: the Taino Indian, a peaceful and paradisiacal figure. The lure of the Taino has, according to Retamar, long been a potent force for colonialist idealism. “The notion of an edenic creature comprehends,” writes Retamar, “a working hypothesis for the bourgeois left, and, as such offers an ideal model of the perfect society free from the constrictions of the feudal world against which the bourgeoisie is in fact struggling” (7). These missionaries resemble those same “perpetuators” who, as Retamar says, “unflaggingly propose to countries emerging from colonialism magic formulas from the metropolis to solve the grave problems colonialism has left us and which, of course, they have not yet resolved in their own countries” (7). It is not difficult to see in the description of an automated production of universal art evidence of a certain overbearing (and familiar) utopian spirit of access and consciousness-raising.

The transformation of form into a socially-useful unit of meaning is perfectly articulated by the source of the story’s second pastiche: The Modulor (1954), Le Corbusier’s combination memoir, manifesto, and textbook. In the text, subtitled A Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale Universally Applicable to Architecture and Mechanics, Le Corbusier proposes a “new visual measure” that might match the architectural demands of “modern mechanized society” (17). According to Le Corbusier,
measurement systems were hampered by regional difference (he is specifically concerned with the French metric and British imperial systems of measurement) and a lack of fidelity to the human form, a model for measurement that Le Corbusier believed was more appropriate for industry. He proposes the modulor as a standard that might unlock the potential of industrial production. The source of Barthelme’s pastiche is a section titled “The Wall,” in which Le Corbusier describes constructing an apartment building along the Boulevard Michelet in Marseilles:

Our design for the lift tower left us with a vast blind wall of in situ concrete coming down to the ground in front of the main entrance hall (see fig. 58). There was thus a danger of having a dreary expanse of blank wall in that immensely important part of the building. A solution had to be found. The great wall space would provide an opportunity for a gesture of thanks to the “Modulor”: the stone of which I have just spoken would be placed in front of it; and, instead of standing in the shadows, the Stele of the measures would be brought there also. The great concrete wall monument would be divided, by means of deeply incised grooves, into panels of varying sizes, representing the figurations of the “Modulor.” (142)

The stone to which Le Corbusier refers was a ceremonial first-stone, designed as “an architectural improvisation in honour of the ‘Modulor’” (138). In Barthelme’s rendering, however, the wall area, originally conceived as a testament to the visual power of Le Corbusier’s new standard, is reimagined as a site of play and chance:
Our design for the lift tower left us with a vast blind wall of *in situ* concrete. There was thus the danger of having a dreary expanse of blankness in that immensely important part of the building. A solution had to be found. The great wall space would provide an opportunity for a gesture of thanks to the people of Paraguay; a stone would be placed in front of it, and, instead of standing in the shadows, the Stele of the measures would be brought there also. The wall would be divided, by means of softly worn paths, into doors. These varying in size from the very large to the very small, would have different colors and thicknesses. Some would open, some would not, and this would change from week to week, or from hour to hour, or in accord with sounds made by people standing in front of them. Long lines or tracks would run from the doors into the roaring public spaces. (CL 24)

Le Corbusier’s belief in regimented, universal solutions to the experience of modernity is being scrutinized here. Whereas art in “Paraguay” seems to work in accordance with colonial aims of standardization and progress, the reworking of “The Wall” offers a momentary respite. Here the regulation of form is remade into the randomization of experience. The second pastiche is therefore much like the first: neatly parodic. The juxtaposition, furthermore, in the story between pastiche, narrative, and phony anthropology offers a playful counterpoint to the standardization of the arts described above. “Paraguay” takes aim at the imposition of western cultural solutions in foreign
places by presenting its own genre-defying take on those same solutions, and the text suggests a remedy to homogenizations of form that suggest political standardization.

Leading the standardizing reforms in “Paraguay,” apart from Le Corbusier’s intertextual presence, is the artist Herko Mueller. Herko wouldn’t have been out of place in the downtown New York milieu Barthelme found alternately exhilarating and exasperating. Herko is an emissary of left-wing cultural forms, an artist-reformer cut from the mold of happenings pioneer Allan Kaprow. He describes his occupation as an “arbiter of comedy” who establishes performance parameters to be carried out by an audience in the interest of stimulating the imagination (CL 21). The performative arts in the U.S. had tacitly opposed the violent politics of American expansionism by emphasizing participation, the sacred immediacy of lived experience, and the futility of rational establishment orders. As Kaprow explained in his 1961 essay “Happenings in the New York Scene,” happenings are “a moral act, a human stand of great urgency, whose professional status as art is less a criterion than their certainty as an ultimate existential comment” (21). Barthelme, as discussed earlier, used collage with aims in many ways consistent with Kaprow’s principles of chance and empowerment. Herko, however, offers little illumination on the humanizing and destabilizing potential of chance, such as it was explored by Kaprow and described to an extent in “Paraguay’s” rendition of “The Wall.” His comedies appear to be little more than a set of rules for which he acts, as he describes it, as watchful “umpire” (CL 22). The real opportunities for chance and expression in this scheme are minimal. In this possibly well-intentioned corruption of avant-garde forms, Herko is a familiar Barthelmean leftist foil.
Herko’s mixture of neo-colonialist ambition with hackneyed practices of social reform seems specifically to point toward a critique of two developments then affecting the major leftist organizations which Barthelme kept a watchful eye on: an expanding anti-colonial agitation and increasingly radical political positions. As for the latter, the 1969 national convention for the Students for a Democratic Society split acrimoniously over strong support among delegates for the Worker Student Alliance. Barthelme, of course, had long been wary of Marxist-inspired politics. It is therefore reasonable to speculate that this combination of elements within the New Left—of support for proletarian-led reform with a sense of transnational responsibility—would have struck Barthelme, fairly or not, as ironically similar to mainstream imperial politics. Though Herko aspires to cultural practices that emphasize human authenticity, he represents practices of ideological uniformity. Thus it is in “Paraguay” that tacitly Manichean forces (Herko and Rockefeller/narrator) work in tandem as paternal forces of conquest and control. “Paraguay” records the subjugation of local inhabitants at the hands of an inchoate and monolithic influence, one that is both right and left-leaning, establishment and radical.

Erasing the Mestizo

Herko not only represents a wayward progressive cultural movement, but he is also at the troubled center of the story’s complex racial politics. Herko insists the Paraguayan mestizos are “the glory, pride, present and future of Paraguay” (CL 22). But
there is a problem among this population the narrator laconically refers to as “the problem of the shedding skin” (20); it seems the population prefers “pink, fresh, taut” replacement skin (26). Herko’s wife Jean, herself a mestizo, is observed by the narrator sitting “on a rubber pad doing exercises designed to loosen the skin” (23). The discarded skins are “like disposable plastic gloves,” a description that suggests commonalities between the practice of flesh whitening and consumer waste (22). A desire to achieve whiteness here entails mimicking U.S. culture’s cycles of commodity use and disuse. There is therefore a fundamental irony Herko seems unaware of; in introducing rationalized popular art objects whose meaning is uniform, the artists have introduced the people of Paraguay to a process of consumerism they extend, very much like their northern neighbors, to identity politics. And while it may be too much to imply causality, the authentic multiracial Paraguayan identity Herko patronizingly celebrates is one the Paraguayans have rejected, choosing (or consuming) instead a vision of American life based on anglo-normativity and its thrust toward identity performance. The standardizations of meaning and experience Herko and the artists bring produce the expected outcome: a (racialized) homogeny of personhood.

Given the story’s backdrop of forced modernization, the skin-whitening of Paraguay bears similarities to historical patterns of anti-indigenous racial erasure. In an article on Indian representation and miscegenation that provides some useful context for this discussion, Debra Rosenthal reviews genres of Andean Indian portrayal used by Latin American literary scholars that she argues would advance understandings of literary and social approaches to native peoples throughout the Americas. Novels of the
socialist indigenista genre, common to the Andean region during the first half of the twentieth century, encouraged an aggressive process of racial mixture in the interest of national progress. Rosenthal describes the socialist indigenista genre as depicting “interracial mixing with whites so that Indian race and culture loses distinct identity, on the theory that the mestizo would inevitably adopt the dominant white culture and reject Indian identity as inferior” (126). Herko’s support for the mestizo, with consideration given to his role as ringmaster of mass production, looks suspiciously as if it belongs to a larger tradition of de-indianization. The standardizing modernization charitably undertaken in “Paraguay” implies the mestizo remains a single, tenuous step away from primitive folk practices. Caught between the modern and the pre-modern, the mestizo can be forgiven for symbolically moving toward the modern by shedding darker, mature skin. Further, de-indianization historically involves a sexual politics that is also reproduced in “Paraguay.” The indigenista process begins with contact between the Spanish male colonizer and an Indian woman, a moment duplicated in Barthelme’s story via Herko’s marriage to Jean and his sharing of Jean with the narrator—an event alluded to briefly in a passage titled “The Temple” and which describes the “very free” sexual customs of Paraguay (CL 26). Jean is in fact the first person the narrator encounters as he enters the city, and that first meeting quickly takes on a sexual quality: “The girl at once placed her hands on my hips, standing facing me; she smiled, and exerted a slight pull” (20). Though likely in part a play on bohemian sexual mores, Jean’s eventual objectification continues the practice of liberalization through male sexual conquest.
Scrutinizing the Postmodern

While the story, elliptical as it first seems, manages to explore the vulgar cultural roles and racial significations assigned within the U.S. to Latin America, it too struggles to provide a more dignified set of human particularities. First, in reading “Paraguay” one can’t help but find in its imperfectly-rendered location a spectrum of American imperial objects, a semiotic reflexiveness that suggests a blindness to non-white difference. The story seems to produce a “homogenous postcolonial victim” to use Ritu Birla’s term, an effect chiefly achieved by the story’s opening pastiche (89). That passage’s language of colonialist discovery inevitably in 1969 recalled not only Rockefeller’s trip to Latin America but U.S. presence in Vietnam, in addition to the original text’s subject of Tibet during expanding British control of the area. The easy play across the map recognizes the reach and comparative historical magnitude of U.S. military power, but it also consigns the victims of that power to a status as shared colonial object.

Second, one discovers a troublesome deferral of Paraguayan identity in the story, thanks to its fidelity to the principles of not-knowing. If, according to Barthelme’s model of jazz variation, the space between the imagined and the real creates an opportunity for understanding on the part of the reader, it is necessarily a partial, imaginative understanding. Barthelme had previously parodied the limitations of the American imagination in his preeminent anti-war story, “The Indian Uprising.” In that text, the Vietnamese masses are conjured according to the limited means of American
pop culture. An insufficiently understood Other emerges out of Westerns, cartoons, and historical myth. In the story’s final lines, the enemy remains a shiny, costumed mystery: “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” (*UPUA* 11). The story parodies the easy racisms embedded in the U.S. cultural imagination and connects those attitudes to an indifference towards military action.

In “Paraguay,” anglocentric expectations of the foreign are again scrutinized, but at the expense of a more roundly-informed mimesis. Herko’s patriarchal cultural missionizing is satirized, but the Paraguayan people remain invisible. There are no descriptions of a native population, save Jean, and instead only a parodic accounting of customs. Descriptions of odd phenomena, such as the temperature at which intercourse takes place (66-69 degrees) in Paraguay’s “silver cities,” mock the degrading zoologist’s lexicon at work in the parodied travel guides but can only leave one guessing as to what authentic and humanizing material such texts have excluded (*CL* 21). In short, a formal economy of imagination becomes too broad in “Paraguay,” and the real Latin American nation often seems a randomly-chosen signifier that remains unknown. The limited knowledge of the Other that “The Indian Uprising” invokes is not meaningfully overcome here.

Metafictional passages on the nature of production and reception attempt to defend the story’s studied indeterminacy. The narrator’s mocking description of “the rationalization process” for producing non-esoteric art, for example, surely alludes to the
dangers that lurk in those alternatives and revisions to an avant-garde that had allegedly abandoned the viewer/reader to the incomprehensible (22). Elsewhere, Jean tells the narrator “that in demanding (and receiving) explanations you are once more brought to a stop. You have got, really, no farther than you were before” (25). Comments such as these describe quite nicely the reasoning behind a story that values the endurance of interpretational plasticity and uncertainty; the transformation of “The Wall” into a celebration of play is an apt expression of this purpose.

Barthelme’s long exploration of the avant-garde was, as he described it, an exercise largely in reaching for the ineffable--that place of unknown metaphysics--and of pushing language, in the spirit of Mallarmé, until it reveals what’s beyond its limitations. Such a dedication to the ethics of indeterminacy stands in clear opposition to the rationalized, interpretationally-vacant methods favored by the automating artists. In the present case, however, it is hard to ignore that the lavish push toward indeterminacy also suggests the final impossibility of understanding people and place outside one’s own perilous subjectivity. If the reader is inspired to reconstitute Latin America through fiction, and if Latin America is therefore dependent upon the U.S. imagination, the legitimacy of the colonial project remains intact.

To its great credit, and that of Barthelme’s work more generally, “Paraguay” does acknowledge the limitations of deferred meanings. Those same passages which articulate a postmodern poetics of the indeterminate simultaneously suggest the ways in which incomprehension enables autocratic methods of suppression. For Barthelme, there could be no doubting the risk of an epistemology that values mystery and
obfuscation was real. In a passage ominously named “Terror,” Jean tells the narrator, “we try to keep everything open, go forward avoiding the final explanation. If we inadvertently receive it, we are instructed to 1) pretend that it is just another error or 2) misunderstand it” (24). The error to which Jean refers is one mentioned earlier and which represents a uniquely bureaucratic monstrosity, that of the accidental death of “a statistically insignificant portion of the population” (22). In that error the monstrous euphemistically hides; the refusal to witness such monstrosity is an essential control mechanism of total power. And in the passage “Behind the Wall” (a title which unmistakably points to Cold War iconography, in addition to Corbusier’s text) a luminous field of red snow must, at Jean’s urging, be accepted simply as “an ongoing low-grade mystery” (27). The parallels between the formalisms of the story and autocratic methods of censorship, terror, and civil control expose the uneasy equivalences between the rhetorics of oppressive regimes and avant-garde formal antagonisms. Barthelme would write that not-knowing can be “meliorative” and refer specifically to the need to revive a language that supported Stalin’s corrupted certainties and American aggression in Vietnam (NK 16). But here not-knowing is both a radical formal quality and the achievement of repressive logics, an odd and probing combination.

But while Paraguayan people remain largely absent and silent, they are not altogether powerless over the narrator and perhaps even the reader. For in traveling to Paraguay, the narrator becomes inextricably linked to its inhabitants. By the story’s end the narrator has accepted, at Herko’s bequest, a position as mace-carrying unit leader in an ill-defined military campaign. It is clear by this point in the text that the narrator has
won more than a shepherding responsibility; he has gained a kind of dual citizenship. At the story’s close, the narrator knows not whether he is marching away from Paraguay, or deeper into its territory: “We began the descent (into? out of?) Paraguay” (CL 27). It is as if escape, having been implicated in the nation’s destiny, is impossible. The narrator’s migration has become a journey of mutual affectiveness, for he submits Paraguay to his scrutiny but gains a measure of belonging. “Paraguay” is in this regard consistent with what Mary Louise Pratt describes in her study on travel writing as the formidable powers of influence found within the “contact zone,” her term for the space of exchange between colonizer and colonized. The term “invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect” (8). Though exchange takes place “within radically asymmetrical relations of power,” it requires a degree of mutual dependence (8). Similarly, the narration describes a place of ultimately transformative interaction. The narrator poses as an objective visitor, yet idealized detachment is not an option. He ends up repeating patterns of sexual and political exploitation but finds himself naturalized following these experiences. 

We might consider the text itself such a contact zone, where the reader’s opportunity to encode the Latin American comes with the cost of involvement. Though readers may construct Paraguay through postmodern acts of imagination, they are in turn constructed by the text, forced into a state of inquiry and ironic reflection that destabilizes assumptions of U.S. unassailability. The hints of geopolitics in “Paraguay,” and of various forms of U.S. imperial ambition in particular, while somewhat inscrutable,
were nonetheless at odds with prevailing American identities rooted in altruism and fairness.

Latin America is imagined in “Paraguay” as a place of profoundly indeterminate character, an imaginary that resists Cold War diplomatic strategizing and far left utopianisms. While this indicates a sensitivity to the failure of the rigidly-conceived ally/enemy polarities then failing spectacularly in Southeast Asia, as well as to the limitations of the resistance movement, that same indeterminacy results in a problematic invisibility of Paraguayan identity. Thus does “Paraguay” challenge orthodoxies of right and left while demonstrating that the ethnocentrisms which make such manipulations possible are not easily overcome. Barthelme interrupts the emerging narrative of Latin America, but in doing so ends up putting the postmodern on trial. As the text shows, the process of formal omission bears troubling similarities to that other Cold War political reality: the radical censorship carried out by autocratic power.

In making this point it is worthwhile, before closing, to turn briefly to Edward Said. Just as, Said tells us, the Occidental writer approaches the East by assuming a knowledge drawn from previous Orientalist documents (including, of course, travel narratives), Barthelme’s knowledge of Latin America is mostly secondhand. Barthelme had never been to Paraguay, or anywhere in Latin America, save a brief sojourn to Mexico City as a teenage runaway. He mentions Borges, Márquez, and Fuentes as writers whose work he admired, but this appetite for Latin texts wouldn’t develop until later. Thus, the story’s choice of subject is likely inspired by the aforementioned
newspaper reports and by magazine articles. But whereas the Occidental writer establishes a knowledge base with a view towards explication for an interested public, Barthelme in “Paraguay” replaces the act of illumination with investigation. As Said writes, “Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West” (20). But Barthelme remains suspicious of his sources and his own synthesis of them, and makes Paraguay speak only by cleverly not allowing it to, a process which keeps it suspended between understanding and estrangement, voice and voicelessness. In not speaking, “Paraguay” avoids misrepresentation and encourages curiosity, even while risking its subject’s invisibility. The struggle between knowing and not-knowing is a central paradox of the text: it is both a work of political advocacy and a satire of such advocacy, a postmodern work of incomplete figuration and a consideration of the dangers of any measure of ignorance.
Notes

1 See Medvecky on Barzelme.

2 See Vidal on Barth, Barthelme, William H. Gass.

3 For an example dealing with Latin America, see Geist and Monleón.

4 As in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). See Mvuyekure.

5 See Payne 37-75 for a previous essay dedicated (in part) to the politics of “Paraguay.” Payne yokes “Paraguay” to Uruguayan protest writer Nelson Marra’s “El Guardaespalda” and finds that “Barthelme, in a manner analogous to Marra, reconstitutes the detritus of language and narrative conventions into a parodic commentary on the stale rhetoric of official culture” (53). Payne attends to how these works parody right-wing methods of control, with particular concern for the Uruguayan military dictatorship, but does not wade into colonial dynamics.

6 Barthelme was fond of printed arcana. His 1971 picture book for children, *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine, or the Hithering Thithering Djinn*, was made up of images and legends which, according to Daugherty, Barthelme pieced together from 19th-century illustration and printer’s type specimen books (349). The books, which had no copyright restrictions, provided ample (and arresting) source material for pastiche.

7 In fact, Rockefeller would recommend in his official report that the U.S. decrease involvement in the area, insofar as economic aid was concerned. The U.S. had at that time, beginning with President Johnson, temporarily turned most of its policy instrumentation toward Southeast Asia. But, tellingly for future U.S. involvement in the
region, Rockefeller also urged a long historical view and argued the emergence of repressive regimes should not deter long-term efforts of modernization (Taffet 185-89).

8 Herko may also be, in a typical bit of Barthelmeian layered arcana, a reference to Max Mueller, another Victorian Orientalist. Mueller contributed translations to *Sacred Books of the East*, a series that appeared beginning in 1879 and which made Muslim, Confucian, Buddhist, and Hindu scripture available in the West for the first time.

9 The opening pastiche points toward yet another referent aside from that already mentioned. According to an abstract available with the story in *The New Yorker’s* archives (one likely written by longtime editor Roger Angell, or possibly by Barthelme himself), “Paraguay” parodies, among other items, the essays of Leopold Tyrmand. A Polish-born concentration camp survivor, Tyrmand wrote articles for *The New Yorker* which offered a haughty, bemused reflection on American culture as well as indictments of its restive counterculture. In an essay appearing under the title “Revolution and Related Matters” in the August 16, 1969 issue he calls “the adolescent American revolutionary of today” a mere “repetition” of the eighteenth-century romantics (40). The former finds his only unfavorable distinction from the latter in that he “demands all possible privileges from the order he tries to shatter” (41). Barthelme’s pastiche of Duncan’s travel text is, in addition to whatever other functions it may serve, a bit of mocking fun at Tyrmand’s expense. And yet, even if Barthelme found Tyrmand’s style somewhat demeaning, Barthelme and Tyrmand were not completely at odds in their evaluation of sixties youth culture.
In March of 1969, the article “Paraguay’s Changing Image” appeared in the *Times* and reported that a nation most would likely imagine as “a strange and violent country somewhere in the deepest depths of South America that one either flees to or from in the middle of the night” was increasingly becoming a tourist destination for big-game hunters (Maidenberg). The article’s banal descriptions of Paraguay’s geography and climate, interspersed with brief acknowledgment of histories of smuggling and political oppression, might have been amongst the inspirations for Barthelme’s story and its rather feeble characterizations a parodic target.

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In October, 1975, Grace Paley joined Donald Barthelme, William H. Gass, and Walker Percy at Washington and Lee University for a day-long discussion on fiction. It was uncommon to see Paley grouped with such experimental U.S. fiction writers. Gass and Barthelme were notable torch-carriers for postmodernism, along with Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, John Hawkes, and Ronald Sukenick. But Paley, despite high-profile publications in *The New Yorker*, was less frequently classified in this manner. And her appearance that fall was by no means indicative of changing fortunes of recognition for her or for the nation’s other female writers. A little over a decade later, in 1986, Paley would assist in organizing a women’s caucus at the 48th International PEN Congress, the very same one organized by Barthelme, to protest inadequate representation amongst panel moderators.¹ But on this day she joined her male peers for a wide-ranging talk that included such postmodern preoccupations as the possibilities for meaning after modernism, the role of the reader in literary production, and the state of language in a nation increasingly shaped by popular and consumer culture.

Paley had just published her second collection of short stories, *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974). In that collection’s best known entry, “Faith in a Tree,” the titular character converts to a life of deeply-felt moral responsibility after witnessing war protestors march through her local playground:
Chapter Five

And I think that is exactly when events turned me around, changing my hairdo, my job uptown, my style of living and telling. Then I met women and men in different lines of work, whose minds were made up and directed out of that sexy playground by my children’s heartfelt brains, I thought more and more and every day about the world. (99-100)

The appearance of the passage represented an enormous change of its own: the original version of the story, published in 1967 as “Faith: In a Tree,” ended without it. Paley rewrote the ending following her visit to Hanoi in 1969 as part of a delegation of nonviolent peace activists. Her comments at the symposium suggest the effects of that experience on her literary conceptualizations. Consistent with the turn toward a global social commitment recorded in “Faith in a Tree,” she described a model for writing and reading rich with potential for profitable discovery of the world. Paley presented a forceful case for a fiction of biopolitical engagement, characterizing her work as a collaborative project between author and reader, in direct challenge to Gass’s isolationist formalism. Gass advocated an economy of signification tied closely to the artist’s mastery of his medium and a text’s “formal coherence” (Barthelme, NK 60). But Paley thought he was “underestimating” his audience, and insisted knowledge is arrived at through a creative relation between writer and reader:

I think what you’re forgetting, what you’re underestimating, are the readers. . . . It’s perfectly true I can’t say everything about my block in the city. I never can, but I can say enough so that anybody who is anywhere out there who lives or who understands or who guesses at it can build up
enough of the rest of it and recognize that block, maybe even in a better way than a kind of quantification of events and people and paving stones and rubble and pieces of brick. (NK 62; emphasis in orig.)

Of the reader and his or her ability to contribute to the narrative process she commented, “People don’t know how much they know” (67).

In this chapter I explore how Paley’s interest in her readers and compassion for her characters were part of a utopian ethics of inclusion, one that signaled a politics roughly in accord with her public opposition to the Vietnam War. Her comments, on these and other issues, represent a uniquely feminine voice among the expositors of the avant-garde in the second half of the twentieth century. It is one that is perhaps essential if scholars are to continue to better their understanding of postmodernism and the diverse voices which gave it shape. Barthelme also saw fiction--combinatorial, collage-inspired fiction in particular--as a means to mutual discovery, or, as he put it at the symposium, the “ ineffable” (65). In light of this and other shared interests in the connections between form, knowledge, and social change, I examine in this chapter some of the more significant correspondences between the works of these two authors.

Paley and Barthelme both wrote stories that recast conventions of plot and character through play: juxtaposition, pastiche, and indeterminacy, to name a few favored techniques. And both aimed the disruptions such play represented at political targets. But whereas Paley’s fiction is enthusiastically political, Barthelme’s can be shadowed by expressions of self-doubt, particularly late in his career. Ultimately accounting for this difference are two diverging attitudes toward the home. Paley draws
from experiences of maternity to inform a mode of writing dedicated to narrative and social possibility. Barthelme, on the other hand, depicts the home as a place that compromises the erotic experiences which might challenge a status quo based on normative sexual behaviors. Furthermore, there is an Oedipal rage and an anxiety of influence in Barthelme’s work that is matched in Paley’s work by love for children (and love by children) and maternal optimism.

Barthelme was, as this dissertation has shown, a consistently dialogical writer, an impresario of intertext and intermedia who wrote as much about the history of authorship as about human relations. The study of form acts in his fiction as a conduit for the more pressing study of ideas. As his essay “After Joyce” attests, he was hounded from the early days of his career by that modernist ideal to make it new (despite his criticism of Pound’s famous maxim in *The King*), fearing for lack of relevancy should his fiction fail to find original ways of representing experience. Succeeding in his project inevitably meant being sensitive to the vicissitudes of literary fashion. It was perhaps therefore inevitable that the civic-minded Barthelme would take a particular interest in those writers who inhabited his immediate geographic milieu, with the greatest consideration given to writers sharing his short stretch of pavement in Greenwich Village. Grace Paley was one of those writers. She was his neighbor from across the block, his peer in the fiction pages of *The New Yorker*, and, as Daugherty discovers, she was also briefly his lover: a significant relationship for an author who wrote often about sexual pleasure and its attendant feelings of guilt (288). Paley writes
that it was Barthelme who in 1973 encouraged her to gather together her published material for the collection that would become *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (*Just* 235-36). And it was also Barthelme, so careful a reader was he of her fiction, who rightfully insisted to Paley’s surprise that the group of pieces she initially produced was short in number.

Though their relationship is scarcely discussed by critics, it is evident that these two authors read and influenced each other’s work.\(^3\) There is, for starters, an analogous humor throughout their texts, one steeped in observations of the ways officialdom constrains daily experience. In “Faith in a Tree,” for example, Faith asks, referring to the playground she is perched above, “Does the world know, does the average freeman realize that, except for a few hours on Sunday afternoon, the playing of fretted instruments is banned by municipal decree?” (*ECLM* 81). The line is echoed years later by Barthelme in his comedy of sexual companionship, “Affection.” When Harris asks his estranged companion Sarah if they might consider hugging, her response recalls Faith’s words: “Sarah said that she would have a ruling on hugging in a few days and that he should stand by for further information” (*OTMDC* 30-31). The appearance of the bureaucratic in their fiction demonstrates a shared concern for methodologies of control in the U.S., as well as a desire to recast and disrupt the language implicated in those methodologies through humor. Their fictions capture with rare wit the comic absurdity of domestic life--witness the exaggerated precociousness of both Faith’s son Richard in the “Faith” stories and the daughter found casting death masks in “Critique de La Vie Quotidienne.” Paley’s women, however, are not nearly as troubled by these absurdities
as are Barthelme’s suffering patriarchs, and seem, on the contrary, to draw strength from the idiosyncratic aspects of the home.

They shared too a public opposition to the war. Both Paley and Barthelme issued “reports” on the Vietnam War during the 1960s. Barthelme’s “Report” appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1967, and Paley delivered her “Report from North Vietnam” to anti-war groups and later published it in her prose collection *Just as I Thought* (1998). The similarity in titles is likely incidental, but the two items are notable for a shared depiction of the inevitability of American military action. Paley describes a technocratic “logical military brain” adept only at mass destruction that is much like the unidentified military-industrial engineers interviewed by the narrator in “Report” (70). Paley refers to an unnamed “they” whose history of eco-disaster demonstrates a compulsion toward destruction: “It’s true, they are overkilling the Vietnamese countryside and the little brooks, but that’s America for you, they have overkilled flies, bugs, beetles, fish, rivers, the flowers of their own American fields. They’re like overgrown kids who lean on a buddy in kindergarten and kill him” (68). The lame compulsion afflicting Paley’s unidentified “they” resembles the hollow assurances of self-control proffered by “we”—a group of engineers—to a representative sent by an anti-war group in “Report”:

“We could unleash all this technology at once. You can imagine what would happen then. But that’s not the interesting thing.”

“What is the interesting thing?”
“The interesting thing is that we have a moral sense. It is on punched cards, perhaps the most advanced and sensitive moral sense the world has ever known.”

“Because it is on punched cards?” (UPUA 52)

Where Paley preferred to consider her fictional work part of this larger project of direct action, Barthelme’s ironic distances can notify the reader of the extent to which political critique is necessarily imperfect. In this chapter I examine the ways in which Paley’s texts use omission--omission of canonical narrative convention, of description, and of recognizable rubrics of genre--to pursue in fiction roughly what she carried out through direct action: alliance (with readers and between characters) against marginalizing power structures. I first look at indeterminacies found within Paley’s stories and demonstrate how these work as part of a collaborative method of writing between author and reader. Paley and her story-telling protagonists leave out characterization and story development (crisis, remission) as a means to allow characters to expand and to prosper outside the confines of the text. A textual economy of participation, based on feminine modes of storytelling and communal collaboration, presents an alternative to male-dominated processes of knowing and communication, which Paley linked to military aggression in Southeast Asia. I discuss the phenomenon of omission further in the following section, arguing its use is consistent with a Marxist utopian poetics and represents not only a feminist sensibility, but a calculated response to bourgeois values and literary habits. I’ll focus largely throughout these sections on Enormous Changes at the Last Minute, the middle of three story collections Paley
published, and the one that includes stories published at the height of the anti-war movement. While Barthelme’s work also aims to elevate the political consciousness of readers, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, Barthelme is often carefully self-limiting in a way that has resulted, unfortunately, in his dismissal. To explain this difference, I draw a distinction between Barthelme’s Oedipal, sexual, and paternal anxieties and the more buoyant maternal sentiments of Paley’s work.

Egalitarian Omission

A story like “Faith in a Tree,” with its frank references to the war and the resistance, proves to be an exception to a body of work that is, more commonly, inexplicitly political. More typically, Paley’s fictions model the formation of compassionate communities through acts of listening and recording; there is a strong push toward bearing witness in her work. Faith and the other female narrators who populate Paley’s stories are often seen remembering lost friends, asking after those mothers and children who populate their social circles, and listening, at kitchen tables, on walks, and over the phone, to the particulars of their lives. As she stated at the symposium during a charged discussion on the responsibility of the writer, “People ought to live in mutual aid and concern, listening to one another’s stories” (Barthelme, NK 82).

Listening stands in countercultural opposition to what Faith in a “Midrash on Happiness” calls “the dumbness of men,” explaining, “By dumbness she meant
everything dumbness has always meant: silence and stupidity. By silence, she meant refusal to speak; by stupidity, she meant refusal to hear” (Just 44). The particular dumbness at issue in that story is the dumbness of “the cruel war economy” (44). In her “Report from North Vietnam,” Paley demonstrates an alternative to that silence and stupidity, presenting her trip to Asia as a discovery of previously silent voices. She listens to military leaders and villagers as well as American POWs, and finally speaks as well: through the text, as observer.

In her fiction, the reader is asked to listen and speak as well; it is the reader’s voice which the stories require before there is to be any coherence. Consider “Samuel,” which appeared in 1968. In that brief story, Paley expunges conventional components of character development, a strategy that ultimately requires a sort of speculative action on the part of the reader. It is in some ways an unusually orthodox story for Paley, in that something unambiguously dramatic occurs: Four boys ride for thrills in the open space between two New York City subway cars until a passenger pulls the emergency brake and Samuel falls to his death beneath the wheels. Throughout the story, an omniscient voice hovers over the passengers of the subway car, disclosing their private reflections:

The men and women in the cars on either side watch them. They don’t like them to jiggle or jump but don’t want to interfere. Of course some of the men in the cars were once brave boys like these. One of them had ridden the tail of a speeding truck from New York to Rockaway Beach without getting off, without his sore fingers losing hold. (ECLM 103)
It is during one of these passages that the reader discovers “three of the boys were Negroes and the fourth was something else she couldn’t tell for sure” (104), but little else is known about them. Thus, when Samuel’s mother is told of her son’s death, the sharp intensity of her grief comes as something of a surprise:

She did not know how she could ever find another boy like that one.

However, she was a young woman and she became pregnant. Then for a few months she was hopeful. The child born to her was a boy. They brought him to be seen and nursed. She smiled. But immediately she saw that this baby wasn’t Samuel. She and her husband together have had other children, but never again will a boy exactly like Samuel be known.

(106)

The conclusion is curious; the reader knows nearly nothing about Samuel that would justify such an exceptionalist premise and he has until this moment been without particular distinction. The suggestion that he is finally irreplaceable reverses the developmental logic of the story, in which the boys are largely interchangeable. The omission of identifying information, including any for the man who pulls the emergency brake, lends itself to the suggestive symbolism of social critique. The reader sees how disconcertingly simple it is, during a time of war, for a middle-aged man unduly concerned with rectitude to send a dark-skinned boy to his death.

But such critique is only part of a more significant outcome in this story: The elder passenger’s failure of empathy finds a corrective in the way descriptive inexactitude demands one work to confirm Samuel’s unique humanity. Thanks to the mother’s
lament, it becomes clear that a young boy rendered invisible within racist systems of social value has a rich story in need of imaginative attention. Broadly put, the omission of ordinary detail provides spaces of opportunity for the compassionate reader both to listen and to speak. In its encouragements to restore omitted material, Paley’s short fiction demonstrates what Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs in their survey of women’s experimental literature call egalitarian writing: an indeterminate form oriented towards various kinds of subject/object collaboration and which implies radical political positions. Indeterminacy has routinely been tied to the epistemic fragmentation of postmodernity, the atomization of the individual, and other late-century phenomena. In literary historiographies that justify postmodernism’s periodization by pointing to a loss of meta-narratives, indeterminacy is the formal response to an experience without any teleological synthesis. But Friedman and Fuchs see modes of omission not as postmodern mimesis, but as the foundation of a feminist, egalitarian text. With particular attention paid to Gertrude Stein, Susan Sontag and Kathy Acker, the authors define the “affirming feminine” as that which “does not exclude or privilege or conceive hierarchically” (42). On Sontag’s *The Benefactor* (1963) and *Death Kit* (1967), they write, “Sontag forces indeterminacy upon the reader, accomplishing in her fiction what she advocates in her criticism--in other words, yielding Logos to the experience of otherness . . .” (28). The disfavor for logocentrism and the suggestive use of absence amongst certain experimental women connects to a set of anti-paternalist possibilities of literary production and reception. The non-privileging text evades a host of pre-determinations that interfere with a text’s reception. It is those determinations which
Roland Barthes describes in decidedly patriarchal terms in “From Work to Text”: “The author is reputed the father and the owner of his work: literary science therefore teaches respect for the manuscript and the author’s declared intentions . . .” (160; emphasis in orig.). Paley often avoids burdening her text with paternalistic expectations through practices of omission and reduction that distinguish her texts from more canonical work. In this, as per Friedman and Fuchs, there is already a (feminist) principle of dissent at work.

Among the omissions suggestive of a commitment to egalitarian form in Paley’s work is a striking categorical indeterminacy. Notions of truth and fiction have little currency in Paley’s texts; most stories appear at least partially biographical. This tactic is consistent with Paley’s disregard for the presumed borders between art and life. As Paley biographer Judith Arcana observes, Paley failed to distinguish between her various daily roles as mother, daughter, and author: “Keeping the writing integral to the rest of her life, she has rejected the romantic image of the (archetypically male) artist as lonely seeker and interpreter of truth and beauty” (80). Unencumbered by the myth of the author as mystic genius, Paley was free to demonstrate in her stories the relationships between domestic, political, social, and creative life. This is not only articulated in the subject of Paley’s stories, which feature women balancing motherhood and writing, but in their loosely biographical form.

The story “Debts” allows for a careful look at this phenomenon. In that story the narrator begins by identifying herself as a writer, one who has been asked to write a story: “A lady called me up today. She said she was in possession of her family archives. She had heard I was a writer. She wondered if I would help her write about her
grandfather, a famous innovator and dreamer of the Yiddish theater” (*ECLM* 9). The metafictional set-up—the storyteller recounting the genesis of the story—establishes a frank, confessional mode. Convinced by her friend Lucia of the need to tell those stories in danger of being forgotten, the narrator endeavors to tell Lucia’s own story, one which begins with a fairly prosaic description of immigrant struggle: “The grandmother’s name was Maria. The mother’s name was Anna. They lived on Mott Street in Manhattan in the early 1900’s” (10). Such a terse style, lacking in any creative affectation, most strongly suggests fact. But within a page, a surprisingly idiosyncratic voice has emerged, and the text turns quickly from aloof documentation to something suggestive of a heady imagination. Maria meets a man named Michael, but is already married to a man in Italy:

In order to live with him, Maria explained the following truths to her reasonable head:

1. This man was tall with a peculiar scar on his shoulder. Her husband had been tall and had a scar on his shoulder.

2. This man was redheaded. Her dead husband had been a redheaded.

3. This man was a tailor. Her husband had been a tailor.

4. His name was Michael. Her husband had been called Michael. (11)

Though telling a story that takes place sixty years earlier, the narrator auspiciously uses contemporary phrasings; the method and style of her reasoning evokes a particularly postmodern approach to information that involves the interpretation of data sets.
The result of Paley’s obfuscation of genre in “Debts” is twofold: first, as is broadly applicable to the avant-garde, the reader must respond to the contradictory experiences of reading with interpretation, an action that mimics acts of citizen-action. If bourgeois social passivity underlies habits of unquestioning cultural consumption, then feedback processes in art come to represent a more participatory (and therefore disruptive) stance toward a cultural apparatus that serves political and economic control. Second, the story highlights the process of storytelling itself. The narrator in “Debts” describes that process as a compassionate speech act: “Actually, I owed nothing to the lady who’d called. It was possible that I did owe something to my own family and the families of my friends. That is, to tell their stories as simply as possible, in order, you might say, to save a few lives” (10). As Jacqueline Taylor writes, Paley draws on the oral tradition of “women’s personal narratives” as a way of eluding “the criteria of the dominant (male) literary tradition” (92). Taylor’s research on the feminine oral tradition finds women’s stories traditionally focus on daily events, on family and household, and feature narratives of collaborative action rather than dramatic conflict. Such is the power of hearing, telling, and re-telling that it becomes a duty. In “Debts” that duty is multi- vectored: it connects Lucia to the narrator (who hears and re-imagines Lucia’s story), Paley to the reader (who must construct the narrator/author from the text’s slippery modality), and finally, reader to Lucia.

Critics have written extensively about Paley’s destabilization of genre, and her disregard for typical distinctions between the literary and the political, the factual and the artificial. And so it is another, less remarked upon form of indeterminacy, one that not
only rebukes what Paley identified as a phenomenon of male silence by modeling acts of listening and telling, but which challenges a certain brand of male utterance--the canonical text--that I wish to make the subject of a longer discussion. When the adult narrator in the story “A Conversation with my Father” tells an omissive micro-story about a drug-addicted neighbor that gives no names, conveys no dialogue, and eschews the development of narrative tension, her father responds with dyspeptic consternation. Pa reproaches her for her use of a minimalism that fails to emulate canonical norms:

You left everything out. Turgenev wouldn’t do that. Chekhov wouldn’t do that. There are in fact Russian writers you never heard of, you don’t have an inkling of, as good as anyone, who can write a plain ordinary story, who would not leave out what you have left out. I object not to facts but to people sitting in trees talking senselessly, voices from who know where . . . (ECLM 162; ellipses in orig.)

The father, in making reference to people sitting in trees, has issued a complaint against not only the narrator, but against Paley, author of “Faith in a Tree.”

Paley and her storyteller women leave everything out. The daughter in “A Conversation with my Father” describes a mother and son who live in Manhattan and who together fall victim to heroin addiction. Her story ends (the first time it’s told, before she acquiesces to her father’s demand that she add detail) with the son’s abandonment of the mother. Little is known about the characters. On the page, the story lasts a paragraph only. Of the son, the daughter states rather matter-of-factly, “This boy at about fifteen became a junky, which is not unusual in our neighborhood” (162). Her
story is strikingly deficient in knowledge. When the narrator asks her father what it is she’s excluded that so troubles him, he requests conventional description: “Her looks, for instance” (163). But it becomes clear he requires description mostly as pretense, for he has already determined that the story should conclude with an acknowledgment of human suffering. Pa, as he’s called here, asks his daughter finally, “Tragedy! You too. When will you look it in the face?” (167). The ordinariness of a story, we discover, for him lies ultimately in this: not its description, but its tragic outcome. Everything but this is for him detail which finally lies outside the fixed knowledge of the text.

Pa’s canonical expectation is the expectation of intractability. What is left out by the daughter and that which so troubles him is certainty: a certainty of meaning and of outcome. But the daughter in “A Conversation with My Father” cannot, or rather, will not tell a story circumscribed by destiny: “I would like to tell such a story, if he means the kind that begins: ‘There was a woman . . .’ followed by plot, the absolute line between two points which I’ve always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life” (161-62; ellipses in orig.). Hope and omission are inextricably bound together for the daughter; telling stories is not only, as it was in “Debts,” the fulfillment of duty to the other, but a bequest of freedom. Stories that revolve around feminine logics of storytelling, and which include space for participation and adaptation, turn out to be illogical only from a masculine, canonical perspective in which knowledge is complete, and formalized.
Paley’s own father was an immigrant and a survivor of Siberian exile. She visits his history often throughout her fiction, describing various incarnations of Jewish European émigrés who have left behind old-world horrors for new-world successes. These sketches taken collectively yield a portrait of a man grateful for the opportunities encountered in the U.S. but convinced of the comprehensive finality of grim knowledge.6 In “Enormous Changes at the Last Minute,” for example, Alexandra’s father has lived out a narrative of American prosperity, yet he lectures his daughter on the triumph of death:

But there’s nothing to fear my dear girl, her father said. When you get there you will not want to live a hell of a lot. Nothing to fear at all. You will be used up. You are like a coal burning, smoldering. Then there’s nothing left to burn. Finished. Believe me, he said, although he hadn’t been there yet himself, at that moment you won’t mind. Alexandra’s face was a bit rumpled, listening. (ECLM 126)

And in “The Immigrant Story” the narrator’s father escaped jails, pogroms and military service in Poland, but after losing his first children to famine, his life in the U.S. is haunted by trauma. An ominous darkness looms in her childhood memories:

They are sitting on the edge of their chairs. He’s leaning forward reading to her in that old bulb light. Sometimes she smiles just a little. Then he puts the paper down and takes both her hands in his as though they needed warmth. He continues to read. Just beyond the table and their heads, there is the darkness of the kitchen, the bedroom, the dining room,
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the shadowy darkness where as a child I ate my supper, did my homework and went to bed. (ECLM 175)

“Faith in the Afternoon” provides perhaps the most vivid example of this father-composite’s conflict between what we might categorize as American experience and European knowledge. Faith’s father languishes prematurely (at his and her mother’s own behest) in the Children of Judea nursing home, where he writes poems ruminating on the subject of mortality. He ruefully insists to Faith, “You picked yourself out a hard world to raise a family” (ECLM 48). Though the father scolds Faith for her Americanized belief in happiness—he calls it “selfish”—he too dreams with a particularly American fervor (48). He desires freedom from Faith’s mother and her rancorous companion, Mrs. Hegel-Shtein, she who carries “a whole bag of spitballs for the world” (47).

Thus the most consistent male voice to enter Paley’s stories, while perhaps not guilty of silence and stupidity (the father is in “Faith in the Afternoon” a poet), does consistently represent a fatalism pegged in “A Conversation with my Father” to a tradition of male writing. Pa asks his daughter for details simply as a prologue to the morbid truths he knows must come. He is, to make a connection with the literary fathers he favors, in some ways like Iona the livery driver from Chekhov’s “Misery,” who repeatedly attempts to tell those who enter his sledge that his son has died: “He wants to tell how his son was taken ill, how he suffered, what he said before he died, how he died. . . . He wants to describe the funeral, and how he went to the hospital to get his son’s clothes” (64; ellipses in orig.). Iona feels a great need for the catharsis of speech, but to talk of his son does not change that “to think of him and picture him is insufferable
anguish” (64). As literary critic, Pa is of much the same mind as Iona, stressing the importance of exposition while understanding expression will not change the dim inevitable.

While plainly in awe of her father’s survival, the narrator in “The Immigrant Story” insists life in the U.S. should provide not only an enduring source of relief, but celebration as well. So enamored is the narrator by popular American themes of redemption and possibility that she is scolded by a male friend: “You fucking enemy, he said. You always see things in a rosy light. You have a rotten rosy temperament. You were like that in the sixth grade. One day you brought three American flags to school” (ECLM 173). He insists she is misremembering what was, in fact, an abject childhood: “One hundred and Seventy-second Street was a pile of shit, he said. Everyone was on relief except you” (173). But the narrator is unfazed, and takes the opportunity to tell the story of her father’s escape from Poland.

In part, the father’s adoption of a more assured middle-class American identity has been compromised by the narrator’s new style. In “Enormous Changes at the Last Minute,” we find out that one of the key markers of the father’s passage into bourgeois respectability was a literacy that involved Victorian classics: “He remembered the first time he’d seen the American flag on wild Ellis Island. Under its protection and working like a horse, he’d read Dickens, gone to medical school, and shot like a surface-to-air missile right into the middle class” (ECLM 122). If he is no longer canonically literate, he loses a hard-won social status. The father relies on the canonical organization of knowledge, not only because it confirms his notions of experience, but because it
establishes credibility; it is the currency he uses to gain entry to the American citadel. “Hardworking and intelligent” are the shibboleths of the upwardly mobile émigré. But there is nothing to be gained for the female storytellers in Paley’s work by the approximation of canonical forms. By breaking them, however, they interrupt a masculine epistemology that assumes the inevitability of destructive violence, and of war. This is perhaps what Paley meant when she remarked during the symposium that “women haven’t told stories yet, not really. I think of myself as a woman who has been a writer and who has been in a tradition which is largely male” (Barthelme, KN 80).

In a way, both father and daughter can be said, ultimately, to be protecting the family: the father because canonical knowledge accesses the American middle-class, the daughter because the dissolution of that knowledge implies an ethical speech of hope and fairness. For the father of “Enormous Changes at the Last Minute,” however, America is a respite undeserving of critical inquiry. Thus, when Alexandra tries to read her father a report in the Times of “bombed, burned lepers’ colonies in North Vietnam,” he is unmoved and charges her with disseminating “propaganda” (ECLM 122). He cannot share the daughter’s sense of injustice given his own persistent expectation of violence in places beyond the national border.
Utopian Dialectics: A Conversation

We must identify a subtext running through the literary critical dialectics in “A Conversation with my Father,” one that will help explain why a fiction of open destiny is more than a feminist reversal of masculine epistemologies. Underlying the daughter’s resistance to canonical paradigms, and her defense of omission more generally, is a uniquely Marxist suspicion of naturalizing narratives. The biographical evidence supports such a reading; Paley was immersed in leftist discourses from a young age and has described a youth surrounded by vocal, erudite thinkers:

[My grandmother] did describe sometimes what supper was like in her house in Russia in the town of Uzovka in the earliest 1900s. It was an occasion for infuriated political arguments between swallows of borscht or kotletki—my father a socialist, my uncle Grisha an anarchist, Aunt Luba a Zionist, my youngest Aunt, Mira, a Communist. My grandmother didn’t say what Rusya was. He was murdered in 1904 or ’05 carrying the red banner of the working class. (Just xiv)

Later in the same prose collection she remembers witnessing such encounters first-hand: “On Saturday morning, at home, all the aunt-mothers are arguing politics. One is a Zionist, one is a Communist, one is a Democrat. They are very intelligent and listen to lectures at Cooper Union every week. One is a charter member of the ILGWU. She said she would leave me her red sash” (40). And in the Faith stories we see Faith’s mother in
a similar position, surrounded by women of (albeit somewhat vague) intellectual partisanship: witness Mrs. Hegel-Shtein, Mrs. Darwin’s constant companion.

Given Paley’s political positions on the war and disarmament, the discovery of a radical intellectual pedigree is perhaps unsurprising. It does, however, contextualize the connection between narratives of omission and political speech. The daughter’s plea in “A Conversation with My Father” for a writing of open destiny can be seen as a revolutionary utopianism, one that refuses to know according to a complacent, bourgeois consciousness. Considering the way Paley’s indeterminacies represent an alternative to a naturalizing historicism helps us understand what made her unique among postmodernists: While Barthelme’s work is finally circumscribed by a degree of ambivalence, Paley pushed the avant-garde away from its ironic distances and her fiction represents a more unapologetic idea of social change.

Paley took the intellectual interests of her elders seriously, as she did the Jewish ethical heritage of which they were a part. Though she calls it a sentimental idea, she confesses, “I had this idea that Jews were supposed to be better. I’m not saying they were, but they were supposed to be; and it seemed to me on my block that they often were” (Just 49; emphasis in orig.). It is an observation in keeping with both Jewish theological exceptionalism (Jews as the chosen keepers of the covenant) and the Ashkenazim’s historically-motivated interest in social justice. Paley’s pride in this tradition and her fluency with Jewish pedagogic forms (see the story “A Midrash on Happiness”) suggest ample opportunities exist for further critical contextualization of her work in this regard. At present, though, I wish only to remark on the compelling
parallels between the alternatives of form represented in Paley’s fiction and certain contemporary concepts in Marxist poetics.

Both the father and daughter characters in Paley’s fictions agree on the need for speech, a position Mr. Darwin ties in “Faith in the Afternoon” to Jewish philology: “‘You see,’ said Mr. Darwin, ‘To a Jew the word “shut up” is a terrible expression, a dirty word, because in the beginning, if I remember correctly, was the word! It’s a great assault. Get it?’” (*ECLM* 41). But the two differ on the ideal character of that speech, a difference that roughly mirrors the faultline between a critical dialectic and naturalizing reifications. In “Enormous Changes at the Last Minute,” the father is too immersed in old world/new world binaries that assign positive (if limited) value to the U.S. to take her criticisms of it very seriously. For the daughter, however, here and notably in “The Immigrant Story,” although the U.S. remains a place of possibility, positive outcomes stem from a confrontation with the nation’s social, economic, and policy failures. She imagines stories in which the conflict between the status quo and reform are made manifest. The narrative the daughter defends in “Conversations with my Father,” for example, is one that pits the inevitability of urban decay against a literal and aesthetic renewal. When the daughter justifies the story’s thinly-drawn characters to her father as creating opportunities for positive expansion, it is clear the reader is meant not only to witness the late-capital degradations included in the narrative, but to anticipate alternatives to it. These texts both oppose the real and realism, pushing the limits of social responsibility and the canon.
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Such utopian dialectics were significant components of the new methodologies of cultural production being theorized in the 1960s. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *One Dimensional Man* (1964), popular texts during the writing of *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, Herbert Marcuse argued Western culture required antithetical alternatives to a falsely-gratifying status quo. As Marianne DeKoven points out in her book on 1960s utopianism, these theories were central to the utopian spirit of the age: “Marcuse’s scathing analysis of the cooptation of resistance in one-dimensional society inspired the radical left and the counterculture to attempt to throw off society’s chains” (34). Similar to the Althusserian belief in the ability of capitalist ideology to reproduce itself without the knowledge of the proletariat, Marcuse suggested that many popular and literary forms unwittingly supported an ideological monoculture via the credibility they gave to language and to sexual politics. The father characters of *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, who will not surrender normative nationalist values, the belief in struggle, and a canonical certainty, represent the stubborn irrationality of which Marcuse speaks, in which war is common and expected, peace is impossible, and humans suffer alone. It is against this “surrender of thought, hope, and fear to the powers that be,” that Marcuse establishes opposition (*One* xiii).

Paley’s characters have room to expand to the limits of their desire. The writers and storytellers in Paley’s fiction, as well as Paley herself, inherited Marcuse’s attention to “the rule of society over its language” (*One* 181); they are, in response to this, developing modernist modes of feminist egalitarianism. Furthermore, Marcuse makes it clear in the 1966 “Political Preface” to a new edition of *Eros and Civilization* that “refusal
to speak the dead language of affluence” is also directly related to “the protest against neo-colonial war and slaughter” (xxi). As what Marcuse calls “new independent nations” of the neo-colonial age join a system dominated by “exploitative societies,” those nations come to represent external, antagonistic forces that have been internalized and must therefore be reckoned with (xvi). They are, Marcuse writes, “the enemy within the system” (xvi). Thus is it possible to see how language and form that are instructive of ways “to live in joy a life without fear” represented a threat to dominant power structures responsible for the Vietnam War (xvi).

The daughter’s push in “A Conversation with my Father” for a fiction of open destiny challenges narratives of one-dimensional certitude, such as her father requests. When Pa asks his daughter to retell her story she accedes, but the inclusion of greater detail does not mollify him: “I see you can’t tell a plain story. So don’t waste time” (ECLM 166). Nor is he any more convinced of the possibility for change, or for escape from the deprivations of modernity, for he tells his daughter, “Poor woman, poor girl, to be born in a time of fools, to live among fools. The end. The end. You were right to put that down. The end” (166). In response, the daughter insists on a full spectrum of possibility open to the woman: “It doesn’t have to be. She’s only about forty. She could be a hundred different things in this world as time goes on. A teacher or a social worker. An ex-junkie!” (166). As if to justify her claim, she revises the “end” she has previously announced and pursues the story further, even as greater finality appears to contradict her stated belief in a purely open destiny:
She did change. Of course her son never came home again. But right now, she’s the receptionist in a storefront community clinic in the East Village. Most of the customers are young people, some old friends. The head doctor has said to her, “If only we had three people in this clinic with your experiences . . .” (167; ellipses in orig.)

And so not only does she change, but she shapes reform in the community, and represents a conversion to a kind of community consciousness, similar to the one Faith experiences in “Faith in a Tree.” Again, however, the father remains unconvinced and demands, “Truth first. She will slide back” (167). The father’s vision of human suffering is announced with a prophetic certainty that is fundamentally opposed to radical possibility. As Horkheimer and Adorno write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “The conceptual apparatus determines the senses, even before perception occurs; *a priori*, the citizen sees the world as the matter from which he foretold it” (84).

For her part, the daughter develops an opportunism that is sometimes tied to community but that in other texts (“The Immigrant Story”) is tied, somewhat paradoxically, to clichéd narratives of economic mobility. The internal stories and the texts themselves are curious in this regard: they combine aspects of a Marxist idealism with distinctly capitalist motifs of deserved happiness. Paley’s affirming stance toward domestic life as a source of stories worth preserving helps explain this seeming aporia; though many aspects of the social apparatus clearly trouble her, the locus of U.S. social life and prosperity—the nuclear family—provides the material from which she constructs
her challenges to that apparatus. The country, despite its failings, still stands in beneficial opposition to European histories of imprisonment and war.

**Productive Play in Barthelme and Paley**

With even greater vehemence than the daughter in “Conversations with My Father,” Barthelme objected to canonical orthodoxy. Notably, in his essay “After Joyce” he observes that the enemies of literary modernism tend to offer canonical realism as a preferred alternative while categorically limiting what constitutes the real. Summing up the reasoning used by the critic Mary McCarthy, Barthelme writes, “The facts of contemporary life are not ‘real’ facts, like the facts available to Tolstoi; therefore either my enterprise is impossible or I must return to the kind of material it can accommodate, that is, to the substance of the nineteenth-century novel” (NK 7). Thus is realism, as Barthelme describes it simply a nostalgic longing for the past. Barthelme was frequently pugnacious, and no more so than when defending the social validity of the avant-garde. In “After Joyce” McCarthy served as a convenient straw man for Barthelme’s formal conceptualizations in much the same way that Pa does for Paley. Pa and McCarthy are literary critics who demand “truth first,” to use Pa’s formulation, without acknowledging any underlying ideology (ECLM 167). In both cases those ideologies are pointedly anti-utopian, whether it is McCarthy’s middle-class nostalgia or Pa’s post-totalitarian dystopianism. Hence Barthelme’s and Paley’s displeasure with convention implies similar aims: an imaginative literature that might counter social ideologies of limitation.
Barthelme, like Paley, conceived of form as a socially symbolic act. For both authors it was play—whether a play of omission or collage—that served as a basis for political possibility. For Paley, it was the possibility of an incomplete feminine identity as well as a relationality (modeled by author and reader) among family and community that might oppose a war-making premised on the failure to listen and speak. For Barthelme, political possibility meant, if not quite a radical community consciousness, at least a transformative sensitivity to social ills. Consider that it was also in “After Joyce” that Barthelme guessed the eminently genteel New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller might gaze at the canvases of his modern art collection and be somehow transformed, “and if they do not make a Democrat or a Socialist of him they at least alter the character of his Republicanism” (NK 5). And in his own texts he tries to achieve something similar. In central texts such as “Paraguay” and “The Indian Uprising,” Barthelme uses collage, pastiche, and indeterminacy to prod the reader into interrogating the images and actions underlying justifications for American power. The acts of interpretation and participation such methods require imply the need for public understanding of events that are otherwise faced with ambivalence. But despite all this, the hope that characterizes Paley’s texts is less easily come by in Barthelme’s texts. Though the reader is given interpretive flexibility, he or she is confronted by the limitations of interpretation (as in “Paraguay,” where interpretation parallels a hegemonic gaze) and play (as in “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel,” which indulges in considerable hand-wringing over the political efficiency of irony). These texts suggest both the need to transgress and the anxiety that such transgression is deeply problematic. In “Report” for example, there is
little doubt the war group’s visit with the engineers has failed. Paley has the revolutionary’s confidence. But whereas a comfortable position in the leftist political tradition establishes Paley’s formal methods and aims, Barthelme’s political convictions often seem to stem from the emancipatory spirit of the avant-garde and from the erotic, a concept that is given to instability.

His phenomenological training, under the tutelage of Maurice Natanson, had stressed critical, subjective inquiry into alleged totalities, and beginning in the mid-1960s Barthelme routinely saw form as a way of inquiring into specifically sexual norms. This was necessary to avoid what he called in “After Joyce,” borrowing from Norman O. Brown, the “total calamity” of an underexpressed “Eros-principle” (NK 10). Like Marcuse had before him, Brown wrote on the social dangers of erotic containment and the possibilities available to a civilization infused with libidinous pleasure. Specifically, he proposed a psychoanalytic theory of art in *Life Against Death* (1959) that shared the reformist notion of Eros that Marcuse had begun to develop in *Eros and Civilization*. In the earlier text, Marcuse acknowledges Freud’s belief that the inhibition of the sex instinct leads to an ordered civilization built on mature relationships (sex as reproduction). But he also detects within Freud’s writing an “idea of civilization very different from repressive sublimation, namely, civilization evolving from and sustained by free libidinal relations” (207). Marcuse points to Freud’s understanding of certain unsublimated or partially sublimated expressions of desire, such as relations between friends, and from this he developed a new conception of Eros, or the “aggrandizement of sexuality” (205). Marcuse describes Eros as a transformed libido no longer restricted
to the genitals and which could sensualize labor, reason, and the body more generally (205). In this he had given the free-love generation its theoretical blueprint: a demystification of pleasure that might inhibit destructive repressions.

Brown thought the psychoanalytic establishment had not done enough to address the potential role of psychology in social change. According to Brown, psychoanalysis was quickly becoming an unimaginative discipline built around a benign conceptualization of the unconscious. He criticized Lionel Trilling for his belief that art was constituted by multiple conflicting codes, traceable back to the unconscious, which are ultimately neutralized by reason. As Brown disapprovingly put it, “The ego remains the master in the house of art” (56). In place of this, Brown sought a theory of art that might capture the importance of art to human life, as well as art’s capacity to “undo repressions” (63). In his introduction, Brown describes his attempt to reckon with the Freudian death drive, positing that “mankind, unconscious of its real desires and therefore unable to obtain satisfaction, is hostile to life and ready to destroy itself” (x). The extension of Eros to art, in other words, might neutralize the death drive. Drawing on Freud’s *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Brown determines “that art, both as a return to the pleasure-principle and as a return to childhood, must be essentially a play activity” (61). Thus to undo the real social dangers of repression, the artist undertakes a libidinal gesture of defiance. To play is necessarily a commitment first to pleasure and puerility, and then to reform.

These texts served as a crucial prologue in Barthelme’s intellectual, and specifically, psychoanalytic education, which led him next to Anton Ehrenzweig’s *The
Hidden Order of Art (1967). Like Brown, Ehrenzweig saw artistic fragmentation as a deeply subversive gesture. It was Ehrenzweig’s interest in gestalts that led to Barthelme’s increasing reliance on collage. It was in the spirit of these texts that Barthelme’s fictions often trace the nexus between erotic repression, political censorship, and hoary forms of various stripes, a habit vividly on display in a story Barthelme wrote at the height of the war resistance movement. “Eugénie Grandet” is a parody of Balzac’s 1833 novel which Barthelme wrote shortly after the student and worker uprisings of May, 1968. As Daugherty observes, Balzac had widely been connected by authors Barthelme admired (Sartre, Natalie Sarraute) to “narrative exhaustion,” and his decision to target Balzac, combined with the story’s timely sympathy for youthful revolt, suggests the political danger Barthelme perceived lurking in such exhausted forms (311).

Barthelme was often his best, or at least his most fun to read, as a parodist; “Eugénie Grandet” exudes unrestrained glee as it condenses, cuts, and rewrites Balzac’s story of the love affair between Eugénie, a wealthy but deprived young woman, and her cousin Charles. He inserts unrefined, hand-drawn diagrams into the text along with nineteenth-century woodcut ink illustrations. Though appropriate given the date of the original novel, a woodcut labeled “Photograph of Charles in the Indies” injects an odd juxtaposition into the story given its noticeably (and comically) updated language (GP 28). One brief section repeats the word “butter” seventy-six times, in effect scrutinizing the language a pre-modernist novel like Eugénie Grandet accepts without critical appraisal. Ultimately, the linked formal and political restraints the text gestures
toward coalesce around erotic repression. The titular character asks her mother, has she noticed French society “tends to be a little . . . repressive?” (22; ellipses in orig.). Once she is pressed to explain herself, Eugénie comes up with the following: “Your desires are stifled” (22). Eugénie soon receives confirmation of her observation as she embarks on a futile romantic pursuit of her cousin Charles, one prohibited by her father. Transgression comes, to the extent that it does, through authorial innovation and the kind of creative (and tolerant) reception it requires.

The story’s implicit challenges to Balzac’s crusty realism, to social control, and to prudery, parallel Eugénie’s generational ostracism and her violent determination to free herself from it. The reader is informed in one terse passage, “Eugénie Grandet decides to kill her father,” an action she eventually carries out by stunning her father with news of her decision to give her monthly income to the church (26). Eugénie’s conflict with her father will feel familiar to a frequent reader of Barthelme’s texts. Indeed, the various autocratic objects discussed in this dissertation, both formal and actual, literary and political, are frequently framed as tyrannical, desire-stifling fathers. The Dead Father provides the clearest and most extended example of this phenomenon. In that novel the father is a castrating, erotically-competitive force who is occasionally found trying to grope Thomas’s lover. He is simultaneously an autocrat of malfeasant intent, one bearing resemblances to Nixon and given to random massacres. As in “Eugénie Grandet,” it is left to the text itself to neutralize the Dead Father, which it does, of course, through play. Such play in that novel includes erotically-charged fragments--
decontextualized, profane blurts from the unconscious--that puncture the novel’s multiple long dialogues:

- Being raised in the Faith felt foul?
- That’s what I said you hard of hearing or something?
- I think foreplay is the most interesting part.
- Yes foreplay is the most interesting part.
- Some people like consummation.
- I’ve heard that. But in my opinion foreplay is the most interesting part.
- It’s more interesting.
- Haven’t thought about it much really I studied English. (*Dead Father* 90)

Further, the narrative’s fragmentation mimics the particularly erotic mechanics of collage, by which viewers/readers express desire for their own ordering logic as they assemble parts into a whole (itself a suggestive process of coupling).

But if Barthelme’s texts sympathized with sons and daughters on the younger, libidinous end of the generational divide, they increasingly gave voice to men who had passed over it, from sons to fathers, and who represent the containment of pleasures. In “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne,” and “Chablis,” both of which I have discussed elsewhere, the protagonists are father-figures who suffer depravations of homogenizing domestic life but who nevertheless reconstruct these limitations for their children. In “Critique” a bored, alcoholic father regretfully duplicates for his daughter the same banal forms of disappointment he is dogged by. When his daughter asks for a horse, he agonizes over his response, reasoning the request
is of course absolutely out of the question, and so you say “No!” as forcefully as possible—a bark rather like a bite—in such a way as to put the quietus on the project, having a horse, once and for all, permanently. But placing yourself in the child’s ragged shoes . . . you remember that time long ago on the other side of the Great War when you too desired a horse. . . . (Sadness 4)

In “Chablis” a slightly less burdened father nonetheless exposes his infant to his discontent, as well as to a host of mundane protections (non-toxic crayons, etc.) that mirror his own separation from youthful indiscretion. And in The Dead Father Thomas labors to escort his father to his grave, a noble pursuit given the Dead Father’s constant bullying, but at the end of that journey lie the inheritance of power and the brutal corruptions that process suggests. Such is the fate of Oedipal conflict: victory is gained at the cost of blindness.

The obligations of fatherhood often complicate Barthelme’s enthusiasm for erotic liberation and all it implies. Indeed, readers are subjected to Barthelme’s most discomfiting moments when this conflict overwhelms the text. Brown categorizes the juvenile and the sexual together as the two psychic components of a subversive, artistic play, and, tellingly, it is the combination of these elements that also challenges Barthelme’s aging characters. In an early story such as “Eugénie Grandet,” the appearance of this rather scurrilous combination contributes to the text’s atmosphere of impish misbehavior. An unidentified speaker proposes, “In my opinion, Eugénie wasn’t fondled enough as a child” (GP 25). Eventually the dialogue leads to a condemnation of
Balzac, the unspoken villain of the story, along similar terms: “Balzac himself wasn’t fondled enough!” (25). In “Visitors,” however, published nearly twenty years later, Bishop is hyper-aware of his daughter’s pubescence: “In the afternoon they’d gone, groaning, to a horror movie about wolves taking over the city. At vivid moments she jumped against him, pressing her breasts into his back. He moved away” (FS 106). In the time between these two texts, Barthelme had raised two daughters. That experience is plainly evident here.

In *Paradise*, Simon acts simultaneously as giving father and depraved lover toward the three young women temporarily staying in his apartment. Simon discovers the realization of sexual fantasy raises the issue of his own weakened virility and the restriction of sexuality in the home. Fatherhood is across the span of Barthelme’s texts both a form of tyrannical erotic repression and a just or unavoidable cause of the minimization of sexual identity. While expressions of eros in both form and content frequently inform the fiction’s political agitations, there are also suggestions of guilt, and the inevitability of erotic assimilation.

While the conflicts inherent to paternity lead to an appearance of self-consciousness in Barthelme’s texts, the obligations of maternity lay beneath the vigor with which Paley dedicated herself to a utopian mode of storytelling. Arcana calculates that of forty-five stories Paley published in three collections, “twenty-two have motherhood as a central focus, and at least eight others include it as a major issue” (150). A dogged fidelity to familial interest flows from the same ethical impulse toward relation and responsibility which characterizes her formalisms. Faith calls raising
children “work”: “By work to do she included the responsibility of raising children righteously up. By righteously, she meant that along with being useful and speaking truth to the community, they must do no harm” (Just 45). Faith similarly aims to prove to her parents that she has succeeded in their aspirations for her. Children here seem to embody the social possibilities (and obligations) expressed through formal indeterminacy. Thus does Faith at the start of “Faith in the Afternoon” exhort the reader to leave future generations with a legacy of productive speech, something she enacts in that story through biographical storytelling:

As for you, fellow independent thinkers of the Western Bloc, if you have anything sensible to say, don’t wait. Shout it out loud right this minute. In twenty years, give or take a spring, your grandchildren will be lying in sandboxes all over the world, their ears to the ground, listening for signals from long ago. (ECLM 31)

Following its didactic opening, with its political urgency, the story unexpectedly switches to tales of absent or philandering fathers. Faith laments that her own children’s father is absent and eventually experiences paternal alienation of her own, brought out in part by her depression and her father’s fading love for her mother (48). But the story itself fulfills the desire for a sensible speech through its stubborn documentation of those domestic travails outside the borders of canonical interest and its omission of the expected sources of conflict and drama.
Barthelme’s sensitivity to the economies of influence that Paley takes for granted showed up in his efforts to compartmentalize more explicit political commentary. An article by Barthelme advocating the release of Paley, who was being held for trespassing on the White House lawn, appeared in 1979 on the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*. Other political pieces routinely showed up in the “Notes and Comment” section of *The New Yorker*. The divisions he created, between political work and fictional work, suggest he believed that an overtly didactic (patriarchal) fiction would compromise the countercultural effect of his formal play. The expressions of limitation in Barthelme’s work help to keep his political critique from bordering on the programmatic. Paley was largely unbothered by such concerns, since storytelling, motherhood, and political speech are synonymous within her work, connected by ethical acts of speaking and listening. *Just as I Thought* shows how intertwined these became. Some of the items included in that collection are transcripts of speeches she gave, in which she mixed storytelling, memoir, and advocacy. The Faith story “A Midrash on Happiness,” for example, appears within a talk called “Like all other Nations,” a discussion of Jewish attitudes toward Israeli security policy. This is not unlike “Debts,” in which the core story is contextualized by the narrator as serving a broader social mission of remembrance.

Much of the appeal of Paley’s writing is found in rule-breaking, as it was in other ways for sixties writers who wrote fantasias of drug use and misbehavior (Thompson, Wolfe, Selby). But Paley’s brand of insurrection is based not on a willingness to shine a light into the profane quarters of the cultural unconscious, erotic or otherwise, but to search out seeds of change within traditional social organization--stories of caretaking
daughters and of distraught mothers, for example. Paley writes frankly about sex in *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*, but there is little sense of indulgence to these descriptions, and they often appear as counterparts to loneliness. The emphasis is never on reform as part of a greater rebuke to social norms, but as a logical extension of storytelling and family life. Rather than representing liberation from domestic duties, from middle-class pieties and chastity, which Barthelme’s protagonists so urgently desire but begrudgingly accept, Paley’s texts of utopian reform draw from these activities: a neighbor is allowed to come to a happy, altruistic ending, a dead son becomes a symbol of human vitality, a daughter who dutifully loves the nation her parents fled to turns that duty into a skepticism over war policy. The crux of Paley’s sixties radicalism, aesthetic and political, is a surprisingly traditional set of priorities and pleasures. If the nature of social limitations, according to the Marxist worldview, is the sublimation of relation into the commodity, then protecting a very ordinary set of domestic relations between people (and building still more between author and reader) is itself a radical gesture. The radical in the ordinary--this is an essential view of the postmodern provided by Paley. Domestic relationships can be stultifying to Barthelme, for whom the home was the domain of unwanted influence by a host of fathers and the place where containment of the erotic takes place. Thus, one of the conceptual roots of his political critique can be a source of self-questioning even while the resulting fear of becoming paternalistically ideological remained consistent with his encouragement of a doggedly individualist politics.
Notes

1 Norman Mailer, then president of PEN, would casually remark during the final conference panel that women simply lacked the requisite intellectual heft. Paley had already chastised Mailer for failing to publicly read a letter she had helped draft protesting Secretary of State George Shultz’s appearance at the event. See Daugherty 462-67 for an excellent description of the conference culled from interviews and news reports.

2 See DeKoven, who argues persuasively for a more thorough consideration of the influence of feminism when interpreting the rise of postmodernism. Also see Friedman and Fuchs 3-51, which covers their introduction to an edited collection focused on the contribution of women to twentieth-century experimental fiction. Whether Paley is indeed a postmodernist at all might strike some as a question largely irrelevant to her work, since she herself wasn’t particularly interested in literary politics, but as Friedman and Fuchs persuasively argue in their introduction, “Not attached to a particular literary discourse, many women’s experimental works slip into obscurity” (41).

3 Daugherty proves the exception here, although he does not allow himself much time to examine the various frictions between their work.

4 A place for further study, perhaps already under way, would be to look at the progression from Paley’s focus on family to contemporary experimental women’s writing, by authors such as Aimee Bender and Karen Russell, which owes much to Paley’s style but often features women who have been thrust out into a larger world
than the home (or have been literally kicked out, as per the opening premise of Bender’s *An Invisible Sign of My Own*), and must in strange terrains find identity and meaning.

5 For particularly insightful studies on this issue see Brandel and Newman. Of “Faith in a Tree,” Newman writes: “We are not securely outside the story (in our tree), nor are we snugly inviolable, sharing the headspace of a narrator” (7).

6 My discussion of the fathers and daughters who appear throughout Paley’s work assumes a high degree of correlation between these subjects. The many similarities of characterization between stories and the biographical imprint that uniformly marks her work suggest such a reading is justified.

7 Schweitzer writes on the prominent inclusion of male voices in Paley’s stories and suggests their appearance indicates a politics of inclusion, or what she calls the achievement of “political effects through the telling of stories that discomfort, interrogate, but ultimately enlarge us” (174). Male voices, in other words, act as more than socially-obstructionist bogeymen, but rather as necessary counterpoints. To extend Schweitzer’s observation to the current discussion, a male voice challenges Paley’s narrator to look beyond a sentimental faith in American belief, a challenge reflected elsewhere in her underlying political skepticisms. Furthermore, the fathers, the central voices in these stories, are figures to whom the daughters affectionately return, and it is during dialogue with these figures that self-awareness is frequently gained. In short, listening and speaking are extended to male figures outside the network of female companions that populate Paley’s stories.
For example, her identity as Jew mixed uneasily with her identity as an American.

Paley’s protagonists simultaneously exhibit an American optimism and a sense of the immigrant’s alienation. In “Faith in the Afternoon” her experience in America is characterized as similar to the wayward assimilations of her grandmother, who first immigrated to a German neighborhood: “Her grandmother had pretended she was German in just the same way that Faith pretends she is American” (ECLM 33). Just a few lines later, however, this description is corrected: “Faith really is an American and she was raised up like everyone else to the true assumption of happiness” (33). Faith straddles subject and other: she is outsider and insider, American and foreigner.

Other critics have discussed Jewish topics in Paley’s fiction in more detail. See Goffman for a discussion of Jewish multiculturalism in Paley’s work, and Lefkovitz on relationships between Jewish fathers and daughters as depicted in “The Loudest Voice.”
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