IRONY IS LIKING THINGS:
DONALD BARTHELME'S POSTMODERN POETICS

BY

MARK CAUGHLIN

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

*****

COPYRIGHT PERMISSION PAGE

IRONY IS LIKING THINGS:

DONALD BARTHELME'S POSTMODERN POETICS

BY

MARK CAUGHLIN

A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

ABSTRACT

On the one hand, the fiction of Donald Barthelme is distinctive and makes a strong impact on its reader, but on the other, both its meanings and accomplishments are elusive.

I argue, however, that Barthelme must first and foremost be understood as an ironist, and in order to contextualize his work, I have formulated a theory of postmodern irony that borrows more from the philosophy of Schlegel and of Husserl than from traditional literary theory.

I also contend that Barthelme employs language as an object, and that from the avant-garde and pop art traditions, as well as from late modernism, Barthelme has learned to express language as manifestation rather than as meaning. Such a strategy, in conjunction with his use of the meaningless of signs, not only allows him to transform the reified state of language under late capitalism, but also allows him to radicalize the commodity logic that I argue is inherent in literature.

I conclude, finally, that Barthelme's fiction has productive results, despite its tendency to rupture and to parody existing forms. I demonstrate, for instance, how it counters the pessmistic vision of the world Baudrillard offers but affirms the epistemological positives that Lyotard uncovers in the postmodern condition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Evelyn J. Hinz for her general openness to my ideas, for her specific input concerning this project, and for her diligence in editing my work.

I would also like to thank the University of Manitoba for financial support in the form of a University of Manitoba Graduate Fellowship (1995-96), and the Department of English, for support in a variety of forms.

For Mom and Dad

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Living in what during his time came to be known as "the postmodern world," American author Donald Barthelme intuited that as a subject and as an author, he was without agency and, for that reason, potent indeed. In incorporating other people's texts and illustrations, in parodying other people's styles, in grafting his language onto an indeterminate signifying system, and in refusing to create any definite system of meaning of his own, Barthelme produces writing the value of which is indirect and contingent. Yet his work has a distinct style, and from his slippery use of language and from his skeptical acceptance of the world, he creates works that are not only stirringly imaginative but also peculiarly responsive to the environment he inhabits.

Influenced in part by the tendencies of what Peter Burger calls the "historical avant-garde" movement, Barthelme's fiction absorbs both the surrealist's dreamscape, and the dadaist's world of real objects. I will argue that Barthelme, however, attempts to express more than do these artistic precursors, especially the dadaists, whose structural attack against the discourse of art itself was by necessity of limited scope. This he does chiefly by aestheticizing their interventions and, in fact, by following the lead of what is actually a later phase of the avant-garde: strangely accepting of the wasteland of late capitalist culture, of the slipperiness of signs, and of the

meaningless of his own subjectivity, Barthelme adopts certain strategies typical of the pop art movement, such as its ambivalence to the commodity and, in particular, its discourse of irony. Irony is, in fact, of paramount importance to Barthelme's vision and expression of the world. His adoption of the mode is both expansive and elusive, however, and so my opening chapter focuses on the use of irony in his work. Irony is, in addition, crucial to postmodernity in general, so this chapter is in part an attempt to posit a theory of postmodern irony, as well as an attempt to better understand Barthelme's work.

Barthelme could be considered an ironist above all else. His irony gives his writing its distinguishing tone and voice; it is his author-function. Without it, and without, of course, the unifying authority of his name, it would be difficult to tie Barthelme's works together at all, for his writing features a multiplicity of strategies; he variously produces fragments, dialogues, fantastic stories, collages, parodic allegories, experiments in language, critiques of the media and of pop culture, and extended jokes. Common to much of this medley of treatments is a parodic tendency in which, Charles Molesworth notes,

> there are often more than two layers; in other words, there is seldom a single clearly parodied structure or content against which a "straight" or serious counterpart is being set. . . . The story becomes a

> field of free-floating parody, where no anchoring content or style serves as the central vehicle of intention against which the other structures are judged or interpreted. (46)

For Molesworth, Barthelme's "chief stylistic device" is collage, and his collage of modes "creates an ironic context that qualifies the validity of each, without giving priority to any" (53).

Such de-prioritization, however, though born of a pop attitude of acceptance, is more the result of the mixture of authorial self-effacement and of authorial agency that is of a kind with the romantic impulses that philosopher Friedrich Schlegel outlines in his theory of irony. My intention is to show how Schlegel's irony is not only crucial to Barthelme's artistry and vision, but how its romantic component is also critical to an effective understanding of postmodernism itself and constitutes an important part of the discourse that takes us beyond modernism to postmodernism. The extent of the schism between the two periods is rooted in the level of control that the ironist has over his material.

Furthermore, postmodern writers view undecidability not as an end-point, as do the modernists and the post-structuralists intent on theorizing them, but rather as a possibility for expression. In "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," Ihab Hassan derives a rather useful neologism that hints at the nature of Barthelme's strategy:

"indetermanence." Hassan uses the term to designate "two central, constitutive tendencies in postmodernism"--obviously indeterminacy and immanence (92). His view of the interplay between the two concepts is quite on the mark, though his second term is in dire need of development. My contention is that the question of being is central to the concept of immanence, and so I focus on how Barthelme's fiction moves away from problems of representation to the use of language as a means to uncovering the being of words, worlds, and objects. Liberated perhaps by a knowledge of Husserl and Heidegger, Barthelme is predisposed against the kind of epistemological closure that both interpretation and determinacy insist upon. I deploy these two philosophers to show how Barthelme's use of irony is not so much epistemological as it is ontological, which in effect allows him to embrace indeterminacy as a positive value.

Barthelme is further liberated by having watched Beckett, Stein, and Joyce take modernism to its logical extreme. By confronting him with the inscrutibility of their works, these figures suggest to Barthelme the possibility that the literary work is an object in its own right, a point to which I give extended treatment in my second chapter. I argue that, enlightened by this vision of words and works of literature as objects--and hence, as objects with their own being--while simultaneously informed by a pop sensibility that allows him simply to accept the givenness of objects,

especially the reified and meaningless objects of late capitalism, Barthelme is able to turn modernist pessimism about undecidability into a free appreciation of the ontological and qualitative value of language.

By appreciating the manner in which paratactical constructions of language have inherent value as linguistic objects that can "shine forth" in their particularity, I also argue that Barthelme is not only able to suggest new modes of being, but that he is also able to react radically to the world that late capitalism presents to him. Part of my purpose in the third chapter is to evaluate the connection between commodities, following Marx's analysis, and language. Given that exchange revolves around an arbitrary establishment of value just as language does, but given that the commodity logic of language reinforces itself tautologically through the arbitrariness of exchange, I attempt to argue that Barthelme's presentation of a more ontological form of language ruptures the commodity structure and is surreptitiously radical.

My analysis, finally, assumes that Barthelme's works move constantly between two levels: between the level of language and the level of story. At both levels Barthelme creates objects of some sort, so at both levels he presents the reader with a manifestation of being. Therefore, though Barthelme's words lose their link to the signifying chain, and though his stories lose their link to the real world,

they still express new possibilities of being and not losses of meaning. Accepting the world's ordinariness and its indeterminacy, then, Barthelme uncovers the extraordinary in the world by manipulating its indeterminacy to transform its meaningless ordinariness into extraodinary meaning.

CHAPTER ONE
SCHLEGEL, NOT HEGEL: TOWARDS A THEORY OF POSTMODERN IRONY

> ***A: But I love my irony.***
> ***Q: Does it give you pleasure?***
> ***A: A poor . . . a rather unsatisfactory . . .***
> ***Q: The unavoidable tendency of everything particular to emphasize its own particularity.***
> ***A: Yes.***
> ***(Barthelme, "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," City Life 92)***

The word irony has its origins in the Greek terms *eiron* (dissembler) and *eironeia* (simulated ignorance). While the differences between these two words are not strict, and their meanings may not seem to diverge in particularly remarkable ways, they reveal two poles of emphasis quite relevant to any discussion of ironic discourse. The concept of "dissembling" connotes that something is being--and therefore *can* be--hidden, thus suggesting a simple irony, the prerogative of which would be to say one thing but to mean another. The act of simulating ignorance, however, has a specific place within the philosophical tradition; part of the Socratic method, it originates in dialogues, and relies on the feigning of ignorance to construct an argument.

For Kierkegaard, the very concept of irony "makes its entry into the world through Socrates" (9), whose speaking was unlike that of conventional philosophers, for whom "the lecture itself is the presence of the idea"; in contrast, in Socrates's speech, the "outer was not at all in harmony with the inner . . . and only under this angle of refraction is he to be comprehended" (12). Kierkegaard uses the example of a

picture of Napoleon's grave to illustrate what such "refraction" entails: in the picture there are two trees on either side of a grave, in between which there is nothing but empty space. As the eye follows the outline of the trees, however, "suddenly Napoleon himself emerges from this nothing, and now it is impossible to have him disappear again." So also with Socrates's speeches: "There is not one single syllable that gives a hint of any other interpretation, just as there is not one single line that suggests Napoleon, and yet this empty space, this nothing, is what hides that which is most important" (19).

From the fundamental nothing of Socrates's words, however contingent and problematic, Plato was able to build a philosophical system. While irony at a simple level, with its connections to evasions and games, constitutes part of the surface armament of postmodernism, it is only from this latter more philosophical perspective that the rich blanket of Barthelme's irony can be understood; through it, from the apparent senselessness of his own writing, Barthelme is able to build a meaninglessness that means. In Barthelme's art there is a dialectic of positive and negative signification: within his irony there is a deep void that he is able to transform--like Plato did, but in a different way--into something with positive value. Although Plato's method has numerous antecedents, of course, Barthelme adds new elements to the mix, making his own version worth close consideration.

Douglas Muecke, a contemporary theorist of irony, provides two headings that can serve as catalysts for further discussion. Verbal (or "Behavioural") irony, like dissembling, occurs when one says something, only to mean its opposite, or at least something quite different from what is apparent. Muecke calls it the "irony of an ironist intentionally being ironical" (28). His phrasing thus gives this form of irony a metafictional spin, or is at least indicative of a rather self-consciously "literary" manipulation of language. Muecke calls his second mode of irony "Situational" (or Unintentional, Unconscious); this is the "irony of an ironic situation or event in which there is no ironist but always both a victim and an observer" (28). Although situational irony is thus more existential and free-floating than verbal irony, it nevertheless suggests a formal set-up: the dramatic irony of Greek tragedy, for instance.

Muecke then focuses on the ironist as the observer who "sees the world as in reality absurd or contradictory" (31). He thereby emphasizes the importance of the ironist's sensibility, his regard for the world that prompts both a more expressive and a more detached response to it. In addition, when Muecke widens his scope to include "general irony," he begins to identify that area where irony receives its revolutionary transformation: general irony confronts man when he is considering topics like death, the future, free will, objectivity and subjectivity. Most of these issues,

Muecke writes, "are reducible to one great incongruity, the appearance of self-valued and subjectively free but temporally finite egos in a universe that seems to be utterly alien, utterly purposeless, completely deterministic, and incomprehensibly vast" (68). By identifying the ego as "subjectively free," Muecke takes irony beyond the formal constraints of the Greek cosmos, suggesting instead a disjunction between the individual and the world based not on the acceptance of a specific cosmos, but on an attitude to the world fostered by a personal interaction with it. Historically, the romantics were the ones to cultivate this form of irony; the postmodernists come along much later and appropriate it.

Though there were many significant changes in irony's perceived purpose in the period between the Greeks and the romantics, Lilian Furst does not overstate the case when she cites Friedrich Schlegel's "Lyceum" fragments of 1797 as "the turning-point in the European history of the concept of irony" (24). In Fictions of Romantic Irony, she illustrates the attitude behind traditional verbal irony, which she uses as a foil to her subsequent analysis of works of romantic irony. Although the verbal ironist differs from the satirist ("who lives among black and white images") by being concerned instead with "the many shades of greyness that make up the spectrum of ambivalence" (11), the traditional ironist's task is nonetheless to guide the reader to a *correct* reading:

"Balancing transparency and opacity, irony is like a game of hide and seek in which the object should not be too readily spotted nor so thoroughly hidden as to be irretrievable" (14). The traditional ironist therefore clearly operates against a generic code, or provides "stylistic winks" (gaps and self-betrayals, disparities, and extravagant claims) that enable a "proper" reading of the text.

Moving outside of language, Schlegel develops his version of irony by picking up on Kant's shift to the transcendental subjective, and by taking advantage of its creative possibilities through the precepts of romanticism. As he remarks in the "Anthenaeum Fragments": "Kant introduced the concept of the negative into philosophy. Wouldn't it be worthwhile trying now to introduce the concept of the positive into philosophy as well?" (161). This Schlegel does by emphasizing the creative and transformational power of irony in the hands of the individual artist. Romantic irony transcends the negative by being simultaneously perceptual and tactical: it is both a vision of the world and a strategy against the world so envisioned. So Schlegel's irony is not only "the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos" (247), as Schlegel himself states, but it also, as Anthony Whiting explains, "affirms the power of the mind to construct a world out of chaos" (1). Schlegel's ironist confronts the world with the shaping force of his art, but because of his larger vision of the world as

uncontrollably chaotic, he remains well aware of the dubiousness of his enterprise. Whiting identifies the consequence of such ambivalence: "Aware that these constructs are finite patterns imposed by the mind on an infinite and dynamic universe and hence have no final validity, the ironist adopts a deeply skeptical attitude toward them" (1). This skepticism in turn extends the irony beyond the mere confines of language since, as Lloyd Bishop points out, "romantic irony is more than a stylistic device used in the service of a limited context; it is a mode of vision with psychological and philosophical implications" (15).

Although Bishop and Furst recognize that romantic irony is necessarily both expansive in scope and highly dialectical, they tend to see all forms of irony other than the verbal as forms of romantic irony. As I see it, Schlegel's break and its consequences need to be pushed farther than these critics seem willing to do. The irony of authors such as Austen, Flaubert, Byron, and Stendhal, for example, is not romantic as they reason. Also, though Furst demonstrates an understanding of the scope of romantic irony, she is greatly mistaken when she ascribes a certain "danger" to Schlegel's irony: the failure to read verbal irony leads only to minor misunderstanding, she argues, whereas the failure to perceive large-scale romantic irony produces a "radical misinterpretation" (29). This talk of "misinterpretation" re-instantiates the very hermeneutic

model to which Schlegel fails to lend much credence.

Moreover, when Furst writes that the "destructive de-creation of irony is envisaged as a vital step for the subseqent re-creation on a higher plane" (28), her spatial metaphor fails to recognize--rhetorically at least--the skepticism at the heart of romantic irony. Her metaphor, especially when adopted in the context of Schlegel's irony which she too recognizes as dialectical, is strongly Hegelian. Nowhere in Schlegel's thinking, however, do we have anything like Hegel's *aufhebeung*, which translates quite literally as a "lifting up": Schlegel's irony is not teleological.

Indeed, out of this distinction, we can begin to connect romantic irony with postmodern writing, both because the latter is explicitly anti-teleological and because the literary period that serves as its most immediate foil, modernism, can be linked to Hegel. Speculation and literary modernism, after all, have much in common: Hegel's project is an utterly heroic attempt to control and thereby to redeem the sheer complexity of reality by absorbing it piece by piece into a teleology simply by a monumental effort of will. Equally confident in the scope of their abilities and influence, the modernists totalize what they see despairingly as a fragmented world by incorporating its pieces and consolidating them by shaping them artistically. In contrast to Hegel's or Joyce's heroic confidence, the more radical

skepticism that underlies both the Schlegelian and postmodernist world-views is finally what allows both Schlegel and Barthelme to transform and redeem the world through their irony. Ironically, their ability to do so is rooted in a freedom bred by their recognition that there is finally only so much that an artist can do.

Although, according to Alan Wilde, the modernists recognized the disorder inherent in the world and attempted to resolve it by striving only towards the condition of paradox, what they really wanted was control: "control being . . . one of the chief imperatives of the modernist imagination" (10). The modernist use of myth and symbol, or narrative strategies that embrace formal patterns such as repetition and circularity, are attempts to shape chaos in a way that for Schlegel is quite impossible. Schlegel writes,

> so powerful is the instinct for unity in mankind that the author himself will often bring something to a kind of completion which simply can't be made a whole or a unit; often quite imaginatively and yet completely unnaturally. The worst thing about it is that whatever is draped about the solid, really existent fragments in the attempt to mug up a semblance of unity consists largely of dyed rags. And if these are touched up cleverly and deceptively, and tastefully displayed, then that's all the worse. (155)

So Schlegel establishes a relationship to the world quite

different from that of the modernists, who use irony to control and unify the complexity of reality "cleverly and deceptively." Against the modernists's insidious assertion of their own dominion over reality, Schlegel demands instead that any such assertion be done obviously enough that the gesture be seen for what it is: an act of artifice and will.

Barthelme's irony allows him to assert himself exactly that way--in skepticism--by producing signs that refuse to signify the world and that thus signify only themselves while ignoring the world. Barthelme consistently lays open his "dyed rags," allowing them to be seen for what they are; he moves, however, beyond metafiction in its more limited sense to create something with these rags. A scene in one of his early works, Snow White, can loosely serve to illustrate his method: two of the dwarves are busy trying to explain Snow White and her relationship to the world, specifically as she relates to themselves. Edward provides a conventional psychological analysis, to which Dan responds, "You are making the whole damned thing immensely more difficult than it has to be" (100). He then proceeds to show Edward that the question can be resolved rather more neatly:

> Now, what do we apprehend when we apprehend Snow White? We apprehend, first, two three-quarter scale breasts floating toward us wrapped, typically, in a red towel. Or, if we are apprehending her from the other direction, we apprehend a beautiful snow-white arse floating away

> from us wrapped in a red towel. Now I ask you: What, in these two quite distinct apprehensions, is the constant? The factor that remains the same? Why, quite simply, the red towel. I submit that, rightly understood, the problem of Snow White has to do at its center with nothing else but *red towels*. Seen in this way, it immediately becomes a non-problem. We can easily dispense with the slippery and untrustworthy and expensive effluvia that is Snow White, cleave instead to the towel. (100-01)

In Barthelme's fiction, mere signifiers--these red towels--have their own richness per se, however much they simplify the relationship between signification and the world; in ignoring the "expensive effluvia," Barthelme shows that much is to be gained.

In his irony, Barthelme "cleaves" to the red towel because, though superficial, the opacity of such a signifier provides to his fiction not only an evasive quality, but also a compensating aesthetic constancy that helps to translate Socratic irony artfully into fiction. Where for Socrates coming to know grows out of the recognition that one knows nothing, Barthelme discovers that coming to signify, in postmodernity, grows equally out of the recognition that one cannot signify. Kierkegaard makes plain the implications of such a dynamic: "Ultimately the ironist always has to posit something but what he posits in this way is nothing. But

then it is impossible to be earnest about nothing without either arriving at something . . . or despairing" (270). Barthelme does not despair precisely because he provides something--just not something that accords with conventional patterns of meaning. The traditional reader, after all, will agree with the voice that says, "I don't want a ratty old red towel. *I want the beautiful snow-white arse itself*" (101). Barthelme, however, makes up for an apparent absence with much else, though the task remains to decipher just what exactly that may be. For now it is a red towel, the importance of which endures in its positive red presence, and not in its ability to depict Snow White.

Barthelme does not, it is clear, simply fill the void left by his irony with his own version of the romantic persona. This fact, in conjunction with the insight that Barthes's "death of the author" concept provides, allows us to see how Schlegel, though the theorist *par excellence* of romanticism, can nevertheless accommodate Barthelme's postmodern agency. Schlegel's dialectical conception of irony centers around the issue of freedom. On the one hand, Schlegel states: "The capacity for self-destruction is the ultimate measure of man's faculty for free self-determination" (qtd. in Furst 28). On the other hand, though this link between freedom and self-destruction comes across as in itself highly romantic, it must be read in light of the link that Schlegel also makes between freedom and Socratic

irony: "It is the freest of all licenses, for by its means one transcends oneself" (Schlegel 156). Finally, these two versions, in combination with Barthes's "death of the author" scenario, provide an irony amenable to the postmodern artist who may not, strictly, believe in romantic precepts.

The death of the author, Barthes explains, occurs because at the very moment of writing, the author detaches himself from the world by shifting himself into language:

> As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (142)

By a similar but more specific interjection of language into the world--a strategy that functions to affirm the negativity of the world--Socrates enters into his death. Socratic irony destroys its author simply because he must by definition be part of the world that irony has destroyed; this places the ironist's disconnection from the world at a higher level than it does for Barthes's author. According to Barthes, "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text" that is false because in fact "there is nothing beneath [writing]: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it" (147). Irony similarly closes the possibility of

interpretation, not by denying limits to the text, but by denying meaning at the outset--Sontag's "against interpretation" applied not just to the text but also to the world. Where Barthes's death of the author ends with the birth of the reader and a birth into indeterminacy, the ironic writer frees language *before the fact* by having made the kinds of assumptions about the world itself that Muecke allies with general irony.

Assuming that the world is "absurd and contradictory," the ironist goes one better than the authorless text by providing a worldless author. Although in effect he confirms this worldlessness only by setting the world into language in the form of a denial, still rather than be subject to the whims of language, he refuses to participate in the usual economy of representation and creates a world of his own making. So doing, the ironic writer frees irony into itself rather than, as is conventional, into language. Barthelme anticipates his own death as author by recognizing his inability to represent, but turns this around by creating something new in his irony--a move that in the end serves to make him an author in a positive sense, if not in a traditional sense.

If the author dies by having his ego dissipate into language, and if the Socratic ironist dies by denying the whole world, then Barthelme dies either by controlling and transforming language without originating it or, as in the

case of his fantasy stories, by completely turning his back on the world. He dies by not taking his world seriously; that is to say, he dies by refusing to be an artist in the traditional sense. "In Barthelme," Molesworth writes, "what we have is a misrepresenting of the mechanics of representation" (46). Not quite true, I would argue: Barthelme does not so much misrepresent representation as *repudiate* it, though as a means of renewing it, since such a repudiation allows him to achieve two levels of freedom: freedom from having to make language refer, and freedom from the same world that Socrates has already denied.

While Barthes is right in seeing the death of the subject who writes, he fails to recognize the fact that at the very moment that the author (or, really, the subject) dies, the author-who-has-written is created. Similarly, just as Socrates denies the world, he affirms himself in the process of that denial, by instantiating himself as the one-who-denies. Barthelme's trick is to confirm himself as an artist by conjoining the two principles with which Barthes and Socrates work--the indeterminacy of language and the contingency of the world--and by making these principles productive by embracing the principle that two negatives make a positive.

What Barthelme has discovered is that a language that does not refer is the best tool to "represent" the world that makes no sense. Indeed he recognizes that the artist's job

is not to represent but to play, an activity, however, that is not as frivolous as it sounds. Johan Huizinga has argued convincingly that, as a general principle, play is anterior to culture: "culture arises in the form of play" (46). For instance, the concept of justice, he explains, originates out of the agonistic instinct in humanity, a play instinct born of games in which the idea of winning or losing takes precedence over notions of right and wrong. As civilization develops, however, this play element gradually recedes, largely to be absorbed by the sacred sphere; in the present-day legal system, the playfulness of "courtroom theatrics," is downplayed in the name of justice. Similarly, the riddle finds its way into mystic philosophy (111), just as the literary vision of epic romance leads first to chivalry, and then finally to an ethics of international law of the kind that the United Nations would embody (96).

Huizinga contends that "playing is no 'doing' in the ordinary sense" (37); Barthelme's irony, equally, is no "writing" in the normal sense. Indeed, Barthelme's fiction works out of the same two poles--the ludic and the serious--that Huizinga sees operating in dynamic reciprocity: "In play we may move below the level of the serious, as the child does; but we can also move above it--in the realm of the beautiful and the sacred" (19). Huizinga generally characterizes play as detached from culture, and it is exactly by such detachment that Barthelme makes his impact:

even his most politically pointed stories are achieved with playful yet effective indirection. To link Barthelme's irony with Huizinga's play, however, is not to suggest that Barthelme is somehow "making" culture or even creating something sacred; to do so would miss the whole point, which is simply that his irony has positive value despite its conventional meaninglessness; it is by no means merely aesthetic self-indulgence. The outcome of games, after all, is unimportant because a game begins and ends in itself as Huizinga explains; winning nonetheless confers a "sense of superiority in general" to the victor (49-50). It is in this capacity that Barthelme can outmanoeuvre Nixon, for example.

* * *

The death of the author and the instantiation of play in the author's stead enable us to return to and invoke Schlegel's notion that the ironist can "transcend" himself, since such a notion deals with the importance of detachment as well. "In order to write well about something," Schlegel writes, "one shouldn't be interested in it any longer. To express an idea with due circumspection, one must have relegated it wholly to one's past; one must no longer be pre-occupied with it" (146-47). While it would be inaccurate to say that Barthelme is literally not interested in his subjects, what can be said is that, due to his skepticism regarding his ability to represent the world in the traditional manner, Barthelme refuses to make "serious" (or

literal) representations of his subjects. According to Schlegel, "real skepticism would have to begin and end with the assertion of and demand for an infinite number of contradictions" (227). Barthelme produces these contradictions, but rather than leaving him with nothing as the addition of contradictions logically should, these leave him with more: he operates in the same way that Schlegel envisages the artist, who is "both involved in and detached from his creation, aware of the contradictions of his endeavour, but able to transcend them" (Furst 26).

In laughter, parody and fantasy, Barthelme both detaches himself from the world and contradicts it, producing marvels of humour and imagination in the process. Skepticism liberates him from the exigencies of the world, whereby this very attitude acquires a positive turn. In "A City of Churches," for instance, Cecilia arrives in Prester, a city made up only of churches, to open a car-rental agency. While being shown apartments by the real estate agent, she discovers that the only places where she might be able to live on her own are in belfrys, where the bells ring three times a day. Not only is this an apparent problem since Cecilia is not religious, but also she hears someone yell out that no one in Prester will ever need to rent cars.

Finding this to be in fact true, she decides to leave, but the real estate agent will not let her go, telling her that having her positioned behind a rental counter is

essential to making the town complete: "'We are like other towns, except that we are perfect,' he said. 'Our discontent can only be held in check by perfection. We need a car-rental girl. Someone must stand behind that counter'" (Sadness 54). While the story veers away from the world in the manner of a fable, it is not designed to illustrate a conventional moral. Indeed, it has no point other than to be itself--to be a pleasurable story, the red of the red towel. Like Prester, which recognizes its imperfection when the arrival of the car-rental agency is denied, Barthelme forces the world to recognize what it in turn may lack, though harmlessly, by adding to it only impossibility and absurdity.

According to Kierkegaard, the ironist "does not have the new in his power" but instead "destroys the given actuality by the given actuality itself" (262). To create his city, however, Barthelme multiplies an "actual" element--the church--and rather than destroy actuality, he generates a completely new environment that adds to actuality instead of providing it with a reproach: Barthelme thereby transcends the world using Schlegel's "really existent fragments" explicitly as "dyed rags." A city of churches is as meaningful to our world as a car-rental agency is to Prester, but because this city lays bare the unreal in the real without focusing its energies on "mug[ging] up a semblance of unity" in the world, such a "dyed rag" becomes an imposition of consequence, however conventionally "meaningless" the

fable that contains it may be.

At this point it is instructive to consider Robert Scholes's use of the term fable. In describing writers with agendas similar to Barthelme's--insofar as they belong to what has been called the "black humorist" tradition--Scholes uses the term "fabulation." He notes that, compared to fables, stories which "traditionally have lent themselves to preaching" (10), the work of a writer like Vonnegut demonstrates "an affection for this world and a desire to improve it--but without much hope for improvement." Aware that there is "no evidence that satire ever cured any human ailment" (47), fabulators respond rather differently to the world, deigning to "rejoice and refresh us" by taking "an extraordinary delight in design" and by producing a "sense of pleasure in form" (10). This emphasis casts a significant reversal in the conventional economy of value in literature, yet in some way the old *utile et dulce* rubric seems to hold: Scholes describes how "comically but relentlessly [these fabulators] seek to make us thoughtful" (53) in just the non-dogmatic manner that a postmodern world-view requires: "intellectual comedy like Vonnegut's offers up moral stimulation--not fixed ethical positions which we can complacently assume, but such thoughts as exercise our consciences and help us keep our humanity in shape" (55).

Although Barthelme's fiction partakes of the fabulist tendency, I would argue that his "de-creation" of the world

also leads to a particular form of acceptance of the world of events, people, and objects around him that sets him apart from Scholes's list of fabulators. Rather than concentrate on the redeeming beauty of form and design, Barthelme focuses on the specific and particular value of the elements of the world around him, however uninteresting or faulty they may be. Too skeptical to see these elements transcend the world as anything more than themselves, he is able to refresh these forms and make them pleasurable by focusing on what is immanent in them, rather than what can make them transcendent.

Fully to appreciate Barthelme's kind of fabulation, one needs to consider how it conjoins with another mode of perception and transformation that operates at a similar level of play: namely "camp." According to Susan Sontag in her seminal essay "Notes On 'Camp'," camp is a mode of aestheticism that converts its own skepticism into enjoyment by overturning the usual value structure of art through the promotion of artifice as an ideal. Calling it a quality that inheres in objects and people (277), Sontag depicts camp principally as an attitude and mode of perception, one that "sees everything in quotation marks" (280), and finally that overturns the normal standards of art both as a means to personal emancipation, and as a response to the the paucity of late capitalist culture.

For Sontag, camp has contradictory roots: in Jewish

moral seriousness on the one hand, and homosexual aestheticism and irony on the other. Where these come together is in the extent to which Jews have used liberalism for the purposes of self-legitimization and the extent to which homosexuals "have pinned their integration into society on promoting the aesthetic sense" (290). At the same time, and ultimately by appreciating vulgarity, camp overturns the meaninglessness of commodity culture by finding pleasure "in the arts of the masses," which it learns to possess "in a rare way." Sontag dubs camp "Dandyism in the age of mass culture" and explains that it "makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object. Camp taste transcends the nausea of the replica" (289) by being alive to a double sense, not between the literal and the symbolic, as per the norm in art, but between meaning and artifice: under camp, both are equally valid.

Like fabulation, camp is a comic vision of the world, and according to Sontag, against tragedy's "hyperinvolvement" with the world, comedy "is an experience of underinvolvement, of detachment" (288). The point of such detachment, she argues, is to promote the possibility of dethroning the serious by making the frivolous serious and the serious frivolous. It does so by reversing traditional polemics: "Camp taste turns its back on the good bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement. Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What

it does is to offer for art (and life) a different--a supplementary--set of standards" (286). Detachment nonetheless breeds a genuine and tender engagement: "Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation--not judgement. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. . . . Camp is a tender feeling" (291-92).

Such tenderness comes through in a lot of Barthelme's fiction. For instance, he has written several stories in which he takes real-life icons such as Leo Tolstoy, John F. Kennedy, and George Washington and, by dismissing the grit of their reality, turns them into funny, quirky figures. He transforms them into artifical and historically arbitrary characters, and by making the "real" ludicrous, he is able to provide "supplementary" political commentary. In "An Hesitation on the Bank of the Delaware," for example, George Washington shows more concern for his dispatches arriving with news about his various houses, estates, and retreats than he is about launching his famous attack across the Delaware: "and then there is the matter of the mosquito nets for my tiny little retreat and hideaway in the Louisiana territory" (Guilty 82), he gripes in pleasurably petty fashion. Eventually the reader discovers that Washington's properties have cost the citizens of the young Republic four million pounds, and the story ends with his refusal to cross the Delaware until still more funds are appropriated for a house for his horse: "One river crossing under hazardous

conditions, two thousand pounds, payable in advance" (84) is his demand.

Barthelme's overriding humour allows him to master reality very differently than did the modernists. Schlegel praises "ancient and modern poems that are pervaded by the divine breath of irony throughout and informed by a truly transcendental buffoonery" (148), and this buffoon image easily translates to Barthelme's work. The latter "transcends" the world within the self-marginalizing dialects of serious play that the clown inhabits. Where the modernists were both too "serious" to allow themselves to be seen as clowns and too controlling to be swallowed up by their own iconoclasm, Barthelme in contrast not only "de-creates" George Washington but in the process, because Washington is a historical figure, also destroys his own plane of reality. This allows him to re-create the world in altered form in a direct and playful attack that gives him all the more freedom because it too is made from within the chaos of the world. Barthelme's clownhood thus serves as his version of the "capacity for self-destruction" that promotes the "free self-determination" of the romantic ironist that Schlegel describes. Barthelme nonetheless remains free from any real self-destruction through his camp refusal to take the world seriously or, in this instance, to present Washington in such moral terms that also reflect upon himself.

By detaching himself from reality, Barthelme can thereby do many things with that reality. His reader, able to enjoy this depiction of Washington, feels momentarily freed from the weight and authenticity of the historical figure himself and of history in general; indeed, the ethical implications of Washington's hesitation can become more "real"--especially to a contemporary audience whose relationship with him is as with an icon anyhow--than might the moral issues that history would have us believe are important. This transformation creates a gentle kind of iconoclasm: rather than to expose the president as some kind of remote idol, Barthelme first makes him lovable--and thus approachable. Replacing overt deconstruction with "moral stimulation" (to use Scholes's term) by allowing the reader to possess this icon--this mass produced idea--"in a rare way" (to use Sontag's term), Barthelme is able both to save a figure like Washington from reification and to criticize him without making him subservient to an explicit political agenda. Barthelme thus provides himself with the ability to escape from the constraints of reality and from himself through aesthetic distance; his emphasis on the sensuous--the funny, the pleasurable--becomes his source of freedom.

Sylviane Agacinski, reading Kierkegaard, shows how simple verbal irony provides the first step to such an achievement: "By means of this stylistic figure known as 'irony,' the speaking subject affords himself the possibility

of breaking free of the bonds that, when he is expressing 'his thought' adequately, tie him to it and thus to himself" (145). Furthermore, verbal irony in "An Hesitation" is not under the strident control of the modernist ironist, but under the rather more philosophical control of the romantic ironist whose irony, Whiting notes, however grounded in skepticism, is no less the product of artistic wilfulness: "the mind is sincerely committed to its creations even as it indicates its awareness of their limitations through its playful attitude toward them" (12). In the end, romantic irony concerns the same dialectics of "serious play" that Barthelme considered crucial even as far back as 1963 when he wrote:

> Play is one of the great possibilities of art; it is also, as Norman O. Brown makes clear in his Life Against Death, the Eros-principle whose repression means total calamity. The humorless practitioners of *le nouveau roman* produce such calamities regularly, as do our native worshippers of the sovereign Fact. It is the result of lack of seriousness. ("Joyce" 16)

Barthelme thus frees his project and makes it meaningful just as the playful practitioners of camp emancipate and elevate themselves: by overturning the value structure of meaning and by refusing to take the world seriously.

* * *

In Irony's Edge, a study of the politics involved in

such a mode, Linda Hutcheon recognizes the great complexity of verbal irony and her approach enables us to see how such irony contributes to the larger romantic frame as it operates in Barthelme's hands. In her attempts to "rethink the standard semantic notion of irony as a simple antiphrasis which can be understood by a straightforward meaning substitution" (58), she emphasizes the need for an additive theory of irony. Rather than suggesting an either/or relation, where something must be read either literally or ironically, Hutcheon claims a residue (my term) for irony, which for her "hold[s] in suspension the said plus something *other than* and *in addition* to it that remained unsaid" (63). Between the literal and ironic poles, she envisions an oscillation or a simultaneity that she likens to triple voicing in music: "two notes played together produce a third note which is at once both notes and neither" (60). Hutcheon claims for irony both an "inclusive pleasure" similar to that found in jokes and puns--which tend to bring together discordant elements--as well as the means to a radically positive epistemology: "irony's doubleness can act as a way of counteracting any tendency to assume a categorical or rigid position of 'Truth' through precisely some acknowledgement of provisionality and contingency" (51).

This softening of communicative dogmatism has links to Hutcheon's earlier A Theory of Parody, wherein she had argued for a double motion which works within a positively charged

scope of acceptance and continuity: "I see parody as operating as a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance" (20). Furthermore, Hutcheon's use of a particular spatial metaphor discloses an impulse in her thinking that can not only be linked to Kierkegaard's aforementioned image of Napoleon, but that can also be differentiated from Hegel's vertical metaphor of transcendence: she suggests that irony "happens in the space *between* (and including) the said and the unsaid" (Irony 12). Because her approach to irony is pragmatic, however, this space makes Hutcheon nervous, and indeed, Irony's Edge serves best as a foil to my argument by foregrounding the difference between a communicative model of irony and the philosophical model that I feel is more relevant to Barthelme's fiction.

Hutcheon's concern, that is, is finally not with play, but with what she calls the "edge" between comprehension and miscomprehension; for her, the main feature of irony is not what it expresses as irony, but how it affects communication by both enriching and confusing it. "Irony means never having to say you're sorry" (Irony 50), she quips, but this point distresses her: because irony blurs the transmission of information, neither participant in ironic communication is ever fully able to hold the other responsible for what is being understood. The message sender's obligation towards clarity is consequently lessened, a fact which can have dire repercussions, as Hutcheon demonstrates in her analysis of an

exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. A supposedly post-colonial exhibit, the curators presented colonial documents and artifacts without intervention, allowing the attitudes of Canadian settlers in Africa to condemn themselves. In seeing the exhibit, however, many visitors of African-Canadian descent were unable to cross over the "edge" into an ironic reading, and were thus unable to share the intended meaning of the exhibit: to many, their cultures were being depicted in a racist manner all over again.

One of the primary problems that Hutcheon attributes to the show is that the view of the colonizers was "the *only* view offered in the exhibition; so too was the colonizers' the only authenticated voice" (197). Barthelme, in contrast, attempts to produce either no view, or a multiplicity of views. By arguing that irony can be dangerous because it sidesteps normal interpretive/exchange relations, Hutcheon's analysis allows us to recognize that Barthelme's parodies and commentaries operate politically in a fashion quite different from such an exhibit. Because his verbal economy is subsumed under the larger context of romantic irony, which naturally embodies a skepticism about reality, Barthelme's irony is put to use at some aesthetic distance from the "actuality" with which the problems of the exhibit can be associated. This does not mean, however, that Barthelme avoids politics: his writing simply approaches political issues more in the fashion of the buffoon or the court jester, figures who get

away with being more critical of society than regular members of the community because they come across as more playful.

Behind many of Barthelme's stories is social critique, though a brand of critique that usually cannot operate as satire because it resists satire's clear-cut ethics of signification. Barthelme's writing follows a logic that Schlegel imparts to Socratic irony, where "everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden" (156). His version of verbal irony contributes to his project only when it can go beyond antiphrasis to a participation in an ironic economy that denies, as did Socrates, the stability and certainty of the world. Within such a frame, verbal irony gives Barthelme a vocabulary with which to explore his postmodern habitat.

Because his signs all slip, Barthelme's political condemnations occur below the surface and feature the same kind of humility that is characteristic of Socratic irony, which according to Kierkegaard originates with the premise that "to know that one is ignorant is the beginning of coming to know" (269). Although Agacinski argues that the Socratic dialectic of ignorance and wisdom is doubly negative, in that "it negates without positing anything" (122), as I see it, against any such negativity lies both the logical inscrutability of Socrates's founding premise, and the material presence of his establishment of that premise.

Even as Socrates's speeches undermine the world, they

fill pages and help him to construct a philosophy. Though finally establishing nothing for certain, Socrates is able to scrutinize and to ridicule the maintenance of false ideals. Furthermore, he spices up the proceedings with humour, adding to the pleasure of the critique itself by way of his ironic demeanour. As much as Barthelme undermines the world, his characters, or a variety of languages and jargons by ridiculing them--by making them mannered, foolish or fantastic--so much does his project also involve filling pages. While born in negativity, Barthelme's method shows that within his concatenation of nothing is the productive euphoria of an abyss. His strategy, to use John Barth's term, "replenishes" the fiction and language current in the "unactual" world of late capitalism that he inhabits.

Back in 1967, when Barth first spoke of a "literature of exhaustion," he perceived literature to be threatened by what he called "the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities" formerly available to the literary tradition ("Exhaustion" 64). In his 1980 essay entitled "The Literature of Replenishment," he specified that these possibilities belonged to the "aesthetic of high modernism" (71). What he was actually looking at in "The Literature of Exhaustion"--a point that he clarified in this follow-up essay--are the means by which certain authors replenish literature given this used-upness. At about the same time that Barth was developing his theory, Barthelme was

recognizing the limits in the ability of the signifier to attach itself to a signified in late capitalist culture. In a manner analogous to what Barth saw his exemplary artists doing, what Barthelme attempts to do in his fiction is to replenish signification by manipulating the exhausted compatibility between signifier and signified in order to free himself to new forms of expression.

Barth uses the example of Jorge Luis Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" to show how an author can confront the supposed death of the novel by using the *idea* of literary exhaustion to combat exhaustion itself. Borges's story captures the musings of a scholar interested in an author who re-writes portions of Don Quixote--not another version, but the exact same work: "His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide--word for word and line for line--with those of Miguel de Cervantes" (39). The tale itself is one of Borges's typically erudite quandaries; Borges's artistic "victory," according to Barth, "is that he confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work" (69-70).

Concerned himself with both the meaninglessness of language and of culture, Barthelme essentially camps up both: he uses language to renew itself and the world by cultivating the artifice of the signifier rather than its meaning. His work is like Borges's, which according to Barth illustrates "how an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of

our time into material means for his work--paradoxically, because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his refutation" (71); Barthelme transforms his skepticism about the disorder of the world into a production that translates Schlegel's "transcendental buffoonery" into a depiction of the late capitalist, postmodern world around him.

Because both Hegel and Kierkegaard are unable to accept the disorder inherent in the world, and are predisposed not to embrace its artifice and limitation as posibilities, they are diametrically opposed to Schlegel's philosophy and strenuously object to such romantic irony. Both are locked into a teleological belief system that seeks to deny the chaos that Schlegel's irony foregrounds and to incorporate that chaos into order. Ironically, their objections serve only to expand Schlegel's sparse, aphoristic treatment of irony and to clarify its usefulness beyond romanticism: read unsympathetically, Kierkegaard's objections enable us to eke out the potentials and possibilities of Schlegel's vision of irony.

In a brief commentary on irony in his study, The Romantic Legacy, Charles Larmore remarks that it is not surprising that Hegel, "the philosopher of belonging and reconciliation with the world," should reject Schlegel's use of "the sensuous images of art" to respond to the world (80): Hegel pitted his speculative system against exactly the kind of sensual, personal, and unsystematic notions that Schlegel

embraces. To Hegel, romantic irony relies on what he believes to be an excess of subjectivity, and this, Furst suggests, subsequently "became the focal point of contention" in general debates about irony (33). As a disciple of Hegel's in his views about irony, Kierkegaard follows suit by focusing on the subjective and by reasoning that "in irony, the subject is negatively free, since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there" (262). Furthermore, Kierkegaard dismisses irony, understanding it as "absolute infinite negativity," because he generally envisions irony in its Socratic form,

> directed not against this or that particular existing entity but against the entire given actuality at a certain time and under certain conditions. Thus it has an intrinsic apriority, and it is not by successively destroying one portion of actuality after another that it arrives at its total view [as occurs in the Hegelian dialectic], but it is by virtue of this that it destroys in the particular instance. (254)

Yet despite this dismissal, Kierkegaard's conclusions emphasize how, within irony, Hegelian negativity can be reversed into a negativity that both comes before the phenomenon and that privileges the phenomenon not as a temporary obstacle of dialectics, but as its own "particular instance." In so doing, not only do Kierkegaard's protestations enable us to see how Barthelme's irony allows

him both to present the negative as an *a priori* condition, but they also furnish a historical precedent whereby Barthelme can retroactively establish the validity of his presentation.

Barthelme sees the world as essentially chaotic and meaningless, and besides the fact that this makes Kierkegaard's concern for "actuality" seem rather irrelevant, he shows through the negative freedom of his irony that his own world is unactual in the same way that Socrates is justified to do in Kierkegaard's eyes: Kierkegaard excuses Socrates for his irony because, he argues, it was not "actuality in general" that Socrates negated, but the particular actuality of his time and place. Socratic irony signifies to Kierkegaard not only that "the whole substantial life of Greek culture had lost its validity" for Socrates, but also that "history has judged Socrates to be world-historically justified" in this belief (271).

Socrates, despite the fact that Kierkegaard sees his situation as exceptional, thus provides a blueprint for the function of irony in those cultures--such as postmodern culture--that might likewise be described as "unactual." Moreover, once this irony begins to establish its ground, it begins to undermine certain features of actuality that Kierkegaard would probably like to protect: "With regard to what authorizes irony to behave as described," Kierkegaard muses, "it must be said that it is because irony knows that

the phenomenon is not the essence" (279). Barthelme, like Schlegel and informed by his ironic ground, skirts the idea of essence altogether. Consequently, in his fiction he concentrates on the phenomenon in and of itself, which he uses to discover a new means to the (literary) ineffable.

Kierkegaard also makes it clear in his differentiation between doubt and irony that the fundamental poles of faith and skepticism are what separate his philosophical position as a Hegelian and Christian from that of the romantics and later from that of the postmodernists. Embracing irony instead of faith, however, becomes a positive gesture:

> In doubt, the subject is an eyewitness to a war of conquest in which every phenomenon is destroyed, because the essence must continually lie behind it. In irony, the subject is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself--that is, in order to perserve itself in negative independence of everything. (257)

By presupposing the possibility of finding an essence behind it, doubt destroys the phenomenon; in irony, the subject focuses more on itelf, and merely undercuts the phenomenon instead of destroying it. For Barthelme and Schlegel, the shift from doubt to irony represents a positive shift in attitude, because though it actually signals a shift away from faith towards skepticism, irony allows the phenomenon to be saved--through aesthetics.

Negative freedom becomes, simply, freedom; this shift enables both Schlegel and Barthelme to re-envision the possibility of creation, which the latter does by returning to the world. Barthelme's attitude is unlike that of romantics such as Tieck, von Kleist, and von Arnim, for whom the artist is the principal source of the extraordinary and can therefore ignore the world. In contrast to their romantic conception of the world, in postmodern literature the phenomenon seems to be the limit of the ineffable.[1] In Barthelme's writing, the extraordinary is to be found in the ordinary itself: given that the phenomenon is unable to convey "truth" for the postmodernist since it has no essence, nothing can be lost if it is given the chance to become extraordinary in its own right. The world is thus created anew by being itself, and Hegel's empiricism is replaced with a more radical empiricism, akin to Edmund Husserl's.

* * *

Though admittedly Husserl's phenomenological approach professes to lead to certainty, as does Hegelian speculation, its mode of inquiry reflects a greater receptivity to that same world in flux that, following Schlegel, Barthelme recognizes. By emphasizing the role of intentionality in experience and object relations, Husserl's phenomenology presupposes the impact of the subjective on rational investigation, and so accepts as a given the impact of the individual on the world. If Schlegel's irony affirms the

power of the mind to construct the world out of chaos, and if even Kierkegaard recognizes that there is truth in irony insofar as personality is incommensurate with actuality, then the fact that Husserl's reality is construed as a vector of intention provides an appropriate point of contact between his mode of investigation and irony's.

In addition, according to Peter Koestenbaum, there is "no absolute criterion of precision" for Husserl: "precision is a function of context and subject-matter," he points out, so it must be granted that "vague experiences are legitimate objects of philosophical scrutiny" (xiii). Husserl's method of investigation, though proceeding by reduction, takes into account ambiguous and borderline experiences that would normally be deemed meaningless or emotive, thereby turning them into positive evidence: "in a sense, everything is a given . . . even the most contrived, phantasmagoric, and erroneous construction, has its moments of untramelled givenness" (xxvi). In reduction, Husserl takes phenomena and attempts to strip away whatever prior beliefs or interpretations have been attached to them, in order to discover their logical essence: he attempts to find the essence *in* the phenomenon. Because ontology is prioritized, however, not only does Husserl accept the positivistic view that sense data are the genuine givens, but he also acknowledges the infinite number of contaminations out of which reality is composed.

In being forced to turn to the particularities of phenomena as a means to discovering essence, Husserl demonstrates his skepticism about the world: he is too doubtful to find truth in a grand system of belief, or simply the world in its general form. Furthermore, the stripping away of distracting beliefs and interpretations involves, clearly, the identification of those intentionalities that produce negativity, rather than their repression within a larger system. Hegelian dialectics, in contrast, absorbs negativity into a total view that usurps each negative occasion, thereby softening the effect of the negative.

Husserl, of course, is not as extreme as Schlegel, who, in stark contrast to Hegel, is perhaps even more skeptical than Husserl and certainly more prone to romantic gestures, both creative and destructive. He envisions a similar but even more radical situatedness in the world than does Husserl. According to Whiting:

> Schlegel views romantic irony as the mode of existence in which the self acquires an ever richer sense of itself. In the continuing process of self-creation and self-destruction, the self experiences itself and the world in ever more differentiated ways and hence gains an increasingly complex sense of its own identity. (31)

Although Husserl's and Schlegel's approaches have much in common, in the way they diverge we begin not only to get a glimpse at the difference between, on one hand, the

detachment of the rationalist, and on the other, the personal involvement of the artist, but also the difference between Schlegel's romantic self-destruction and Barthelme's death as an ironic author.

By establishing what he calls "horizons," Husserl both animates the world and atomizes it, and so his work leads to a greater differentiation of the world; his phenomenology is sensitive to flux, and in fact catalogues it, thereby complicating the world rather than synthesizing it. Kierkegaard repudiates irony because it is "always at its beginning" and so "whatever the ironist creates, be it personage or environment, is new, has no link to what came before" (Whiting 26-27). In contrast to Kierkegaard, Husserl supports the idea of getting rid of all links to "what came before," and so he remains detached from the world much like the ironist.

It is in this detachment that Barthelme's and Schlegel's irony and Husserl's technique of bracketing (or *epoche* in the Greek) most correspond. Bracketing is the prime means by which Husserl reduces; by this method he discards all the beliefs and suspends all the judgements that normally pervade experience, in order to find an essence. Yet insofar as bracketing involves "adopting a reflective and disengaged attitude" towards experience, and focusing "on the presentational structure of phenomena" (xvi), it is Husserl's technique that most closely resembles Barthelme's irony,

whereas Schlegel's romantic impulses provoke a more self-involved and less attentive engagement with the world.

Because he is an author, however, Barthelme also puts a spin on Husserlian reduction, and what he does, in fact, is to reverse the process that Husserl initiates. Reduction--an appeal to the phenomenon at the stage prior to belief and interpretation--is in a sense a turn to the meaninglessness of the phenomenon, performed by removing what attributes belong to that phenomenon within the dictates of conventional signification. Like Husserl, Barthelme atomizes knowledge in order to produce something more concrete than what belongs within Kierkegaard's "larger context," but in contrast to Husserl, for Barthelme the phenomenon is still not the essence and so by reducing, what he finds is the skeptic's essence--if there is such a thing--which is meaninglessness itself. At the same time, it is at this level that he begins to rebuild, and to do so, he uses language. When Barthelme produces lists, dialogues that do not work like dialogues, non-sequitur logic and syntax, and just plain gibberish, the main purpose of what he produces is its being-there as language. Thus he sheds the normal assumptions about logical and interpretable relationships, the point of which is to discover new relationships that are produced in the same manner that Husserl reduces phenomena to produce their "horizons."

Horizons are concepts used in the understanding of the

structure of intentionality, and take the form of the potentialities that we imagine a phenomenon to have when we perceive it. Koestenbaum explains:

> Husserl's position is, in effect, that potentiality is an aspect of the experience of any object. The potentiality of sugar to dissolve in water is, in a real sense, part of the total experience associated with the object "sugar." The dispositional properties of objects have their own unique and discernible presentational structure, which is a mixture of remembrances and anticipations. (xxxvi)

Bracketing allows Husserl to focus on the object's potentialities, just as irony skews a word's ability to signify, and ekes out new values. Indeed, what Barthelme does is to combine Husserlian circumspection with a Schlegelian impulse to affirm the power of his own mind to construct a world out of its inherent possibilities.

If Husserl and Schlegel thus demonstrate the productive value of skepticism, the work of both also helps us to see how Barthelme's world-view can be productive. In addition, when Kierkegaard frames his objection to irony by comparing its method of asking questions to Hegel's, he unwittingly adds to these arguments, echoing Husserl's argument in particular. Hegel's speculative method, Kierkegaard suggests, presupposes a plenitude, whereas irony presupposes an emptiness. Speculation, he claims, involves asking

questions "with the intention of receiving an answer containing the desired fullness, and hence the more one asks, the deeper and more significant becomes the answer." Conversely, irony asks questions "without any interest in the answer except to suck out the apparent content by means of the question" (36), leaving only emptiness. The case is not so simple, however. Kierkegaard also argues that the purpose behind asking questions is "to free the phenomenon from any finite relation to the individual. Inasmuch as I ask a question, I know nothing and am related altogether receptively to my subject" (34-35). Such receptivity is most possible when questions are asked without a predetermined path of resolution already in mind, whereas by having part of an answer, Hegel's dialectician is blind to the utter variety of the world. Having no answers, the skeptic is by and large forced to remain receptive to the world. Just such receptivity characterizes Barthelme's irony precisely because he presupposes an emptiness, and because what remains can never actually be nothing--only "apparent content" is ever actually dissolved. The skeptic does not, after all, dwell in an emptiness: Schlegel's de-creation always implies a re-creation.

In his picture story, "A Nation of Wheels," Barthelme uncovers new horizons through the collage of several modes and scales that, in Molesworth's terminology, "creates an ironic context that qualifies the validity of each" (53). By

juxtaposing text with various illustrations of human figures wearing clothing from a number of different eras combined with tires blown up in relative size, the potentialities of the images and the language are both explored and exploded. The pictures of the tires, emotionally and conceptually static by themselves, are activated by Barthelme's prose and placed into an "ironic context." By combining an oversized wheel with a streetscape, and writing, "All defenses were found to be penetrable" (Guilty 138), the potential meaning of a tire has been extended to include a new horizon of threat. Each image of a tire nonetheless remains conventionally intact.

The fact that the streetscape seems to date from a lost era, and that none of the people is dressed as though the scene were contemporary America being taken over, defamiliarizes the context even more. Temporal indicators come to read, then, not as historical signifiers, but as signifiers of difference itself; indeed, they are re-eroticized as signifiers of the fantastic. Barthelme manages such a transformation by reducing the images to themselves by bracketing them from their former contexts and then by combining these images with language and with one another in such an unusual manner that they produce the surreal. In this story, even history is rewritten: a classical Greek sculpture combined with a rubber wheel (the "Venus of Akron") become part of the propaganda that has historians claiming

that "America is based on the wheel . . . and always was" (144). Through his *a priori* irony, Barthelme uses the radical sliding of the signifiers not only to destroy "in the particular instance," but also to construct a narrative environment of positive, if unusual, value.

For Husserl, the identification of horizons is part of a positivist endeavour, but a strange one: by problematizing areas that exist only potentially, the reduction of an object to one potential becomes an act of creation of other potentials. Husserl tries to reduce intentionality, but in so doing he produces yet more. Thus by stripping away, Husserl actually creates more rather than less, even though he finally reduces to just the phenomenon and its essence, and it is this ability to create more that makes him a useful model for fictional production. In "A Nation of Wheels," Barthelme reduces his own intentionality by presenting images and language in their concrete but non-meaning forms and in radically new combinations. By doing so, he allows the dress that does not read historically to reveal its potential to being read fantastically.

* * *

Kierkegaard makes two further observations about irony that are not only closely related to one another, but that can also be combined to produce a less negative vision of the ironist. First, he admits that "just as much of life now is not actuality and just as there is something in *personality*

that at least momentarily is incommensurate with actuality, so also there is a *truth in irony*" (253). Though Kierkegaard's admission that life is not all "actuality" is key, more important is that his sense of "truth" can be linked to Husserl's, because by focusing on personality, Kierkegaard raises the question of intentionality.

Second, Kierkegaard uses the metaphor of seduction to depict irony. He describes the relationship between Socrates and his student Alcibiades as a "love-relation" (47), adding that "if we ask what it was in Socrates that made such a relation not merely possible but inevitable . . . I have no other answer than that it was Socrates' irony" (48). Since the role of the ironist is "never to articulate the idea as such but only casually to suggest it" (49), the ironist both excites the curiosity of his listener, and refuses to provide the answers for which his listener accordingly needs begin to search: "precisely because it is the nature of irony never to unmask itself . . . the infatuated youth must inevitably experience so much torment" (48). Though seduction draws its power from desire, and is thus rooted in the negative (in lack), it also provides two positives: the force of attraction itself and a personality to desire. Seduction constructs a vectorial relationship between personalities, and so in this regard, Kierkegaard contradicts his own suggestion that irony sucks all the content from the world and leaves only emptiness.

Thomas Docherty sees seduction as one of the main emblems of postmodernism in general, due to the slipperiness of the postmodern work: "postmodernism does not produce: the postmodern work of art does not actually exist, is not produced as product or object in the conventional essentialist sense of the word, and prefers to organize itself around a trope of seduction" (15). In his fiction, Barthelme fills the world with his personality, his *a priori* skepticism and his genial nature. Barthelme seduces the reader because he never fully articulates meaning. Barthelme thus provides only a red towel, the artifice of which tends to emphasize himself and not the world; his work is in this sense much like the fabulator's which, Scholes notes, "by its very shapeliness, asserts the authority of the shaper, the fabulator behind the fable" (10). Realizing that it is impossible to produce the world, Barthelme fills the void with his own personality; seducing with his humour rather than resolving questions about the "human condition," he is one part Schlegel's romantic persona and another part Barthes's dead author.

Whereas successful reference to the world actually places the world within someone else's particular system, when a seducer such as Barthelme foregrounds his own artifice and so refuses the world, the reader is confronted with his own essential desire and lack. Given that the ironist repeals his reader's externally imposed urge to interpret, he

reduces his reader's relationship to the text to an encounter with the reader's own pure intentionality. Consequently, when Hegel and Kierkegaard criticize ironists for existing in a world of their own making, it is they who really fall prey to their own criticism. Schlegel accounts for Kierkegaard's warnings about the pitfalls of the ironist's own self-involvement before the fact by making it clear that the world he presents is of his own making, thereby liberating his own reader. Scholes sees the same impulse in the fabulators: "A different way to come to terms with the discrepancy between art and the Real thing is to affirm the artificial element . . . and make the artifice part of your point" (137). Hegel and Kierkegaard veil their own fabrication of the world, so their work is all the more devious and negative.

Nonetheless, against an overtly artificial romanticism like Tieck's that tries to *impose* the fantastic or the heroic onto the world, Barthelme tries to work out of the world that is there, constructing negative relations out of positive matter. He functions mainly as what Jerome Klinkowitz calls an "assembler and constructor" (Literary 76) who does not piece together his raw material within a teleology, but rather within the space of his own negative value as a seducer. Interestingly, when one of the speakers in Barthelme's story, "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," raises relevant concerns regarding the negativity of such an approach, the speaker's language points the way out of the

problem: "The object is deprived of its reality by what I have said about it. Regarded in an ironical light, the object shivers, shatters, disappears. Irony is thus destructive and what Kierkegaard worries about a lot is that irony has nothing to put in the place of what is destroyed" (City Life 88).

A story such as "The Flight of the Pigeons from the Palace" shows what happens when an object "shivers" and "shatters": it does *not* really "disappear." This story is another one of Barthelme's illustrated tales, and in it he wrenches images from their usual contexts and renders them meaningless as such. An anatomical drawing is taken out of its medical context, and three architectural renderings become designs without meaning, becoming what Jacques Derrida calls "field[s] divested of [their] forces"-- literally the architecture of the deserted city that the philosopher uses to evoke structuralism's destruction of signification through empty form in "Force and Signification" (Margins 5). Transformed, however, the first drawing becomes "the amazing Numbered Man" (Sadness 130), a genial, polite man part of "the show" for which the architectural drawings become stage sets. Other elements, many which in the "real" world would not be plausible, also become acts for the show: "The new volcano we have just placed under contract seems very promising" (140), muses the narrator, while under the picture of a blast appears the line: "We auditioned an explosion"

(133). The explosion no longer destroys itself in its manifestation, as it otherwise should, because it no longer signifies a real explosion: it becomes a signifier. In so doing, however, it gains concreteness--the volcano becomes part of "the show" and can explode any time that it wants.

Barthelme's irony transforms static illustrations by first destroying their former reality, and then by putting something in the place of what is destroyed: in this case, a fantasy circus that presents fabulously unique performances. Barthelme finds through his fiction what could perhaps be called the "force" of his language and images through an unveiling juxtaposition: "By its very articulation force becomes the phenomenon," Derrida writes; "Force is the other of language without which language would not be what it is" (26-27). Barthelme therefore seduces us with an ineffable that is integral to language and thus acutely positive: he unveils the force that is in fact always already in language, but hidden by the reifying signifier/signified loop.

"The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace," with its combination of pictures and bits of text, and its larger narrative ruptures, is but one among many of Barthelme's stories that are composed of fragments. The reason for such fragmentation is that Barthelme works at a small scale; he tries to uncover the extraordinary by beginning with the particular. Placing objects in reduced relation to one another in an idiosyncratic context, he uses words that are

real *as words*, not as signifiers connected to signifieds.

The method involved is one he explains in his essay "Not-Knowing," one of his last and most lucid discussions of his own work: "The world enters the work as it enters our ordinary lives," he declares, "not as a world-view or system but in sharp particularity: a tax notice from Madelaine, a snowball containing a resume from Gaston" (121). The writer, he explains, must therefore begin with the concrete, though from the vantage of a negative not-knowing: "the writer is a man who, embarking upon a task, does not know what to do . . . . This is not to say that I don't know anything about Jacqueline or Jemima, but what I do know comes into being at the instant it's inscribed" (113). Though this moment of inscription, as we've seen, instantiates Barthelme's death as a conventionally signifying artist, it pulls him out of his not-knowing, because it pulls him into irony. Likewise, Husserl escapes his not-knowing by bracketing that which prevents him from knowing.

Both Barthelme's irony and Husserl's bracketing produce, but the difference between them is that Barthelme's use of reduction--the moment of fictional production--takes the form of an assemblage. Barthelme's technique is in large part collage, and in an interview he delineates the particular outcome of such a method:

> The point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. This

> new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may also be much else. It's an itself, if it's successful. ("Donald" 51-52)

Whereas Husserl focuses on producing a "comment" on the reality from which he comes, for Barthelme it is equally important for his language to consolidate itself as "an itself" as it is for his language to comment on the world. Nonetheless, in collage, objects as positivities are brought together and are proven "unlike"--that is, they are exposed as "dyed rags"--and so are not "mugged up" in the kind of semblance of unity that Schlegel despises.

Barthelme manages to avoid producing such a false unity because his form of collage maintains strongly Husserlian assumptions. "Gaston" and his snowball get "bracketed" into their very own particularity because they get decentered in relation to other particularities instead of against a "straight" content, a content that would obscure Gaston's and the snowball's essences by placing them into a limited and specific context of interpretion. This decentering, however, produces horizons that, understood, do not lead to Husserlian truth, but instead to possibilities of relation that focus on joy rather than essence, by way of Barthelme's eccentricity. Barthelme's discussion of his story, "Paraguay," quoted by Klinkowitz to emphasize Barthelme's use of materials from the world "as is" to construct "pleasing artifacts," helps to

explain the spirit of this eccentricity:

> Mixing bits of this and that from various areas of life to make something that did not exist before is an oddly hopeful endeavour . . . . The sentence "Electrolytic jelly exhibiting a capture ration far in excess of standard is used to fix the animals in place" made me very happy--perhaps in excess of its merit. But there is in the world such a thing as electrolytic jelly; the "capture ratio" comes from the jargon of sound technology; and the animals themselves are a salad of the real and the invented. (74)

Barthelme's fictional synthesis of jargon and objects is constructed out of an ironized form of negativity, occasioned not only by juxtaposition but also in immanence--the inherent tone and texture of "electrolytic jelly." Such negativity avoids becoming absorbed in a teleology because it features exactly the kind of non-dialectical impulses that Agacinski, incidental to her discussion of Kierkegaard, attributes to irony. She speaks of how irony can represent "a means of criticizing or resisting the 'System' in a non-contradictory, thus in principle, in a non-dialectizable way--perhaps one of the only means of 'contesting' speculative dialectics without immediately becoming part of it" (139). Indeed, Barthelme's "electrolytic jelly" does not step onto the field of oppositions belonging to dialectical thought. Instead the language "displaces without opposing" and "contests without

contradicting" by making sheerly qualitative distinctions and by allowing each displaced term simply to rub against other, equally displaced, terms.

Such a positivist presentation of words has strong connections to the objects of pop art, and to Alan Wilde is preferable to the wilfully chaotic writing of (for example) the surfictionists; as he sees it, pop works are not only "superficially more shapely than works like Sukenick's, [but also] finally less reductive, more relational--the relation being one . . . of consciousness and what is outside it" (147). By focusing on what remains external to consciousness in this way, the artist allows his material to be more relational because he can deal with the elements of Kierkegaard's "actuality" in freedom, as phenomena unconnected to essences. Barthelme characterizes his own non-essentialist approach to writing--an approach that he sees as "a process of accretion"--with a metaphor which confirms Wilde's view of his affinity with pop: "I'd rather have a wreck than a ship that sails," he explains; "Things attach themselves to wrecks. Strange fish find your wreck or rock to be a good feeding ground; after a while you've got a situation with possibilities" ("Interview" 34).

If we come to understand the constructions of relations external to consciousness that Wilde and Barthelme both describe, each in their own way, and especially if we come to understand them in terms of Kierkegaard's dichotomy of doubt

and irony, then we can begin to see how an ironic demeanor is more positive than the essentialist/doubtful world-view. The crux of the matter is that irony leads to successful seduction whereas essential doubt leads to thwarted desire.

Joseph Conrad's classic modernist work, Heart of Darkness, can here serve as a useful foil by which to understand the consequence of Barthelme's mode of operation. Kierkegaard declares that, in doubt, "the subject continually wants to enter into the object, and his unhappiness is that the object continually wants to elude him" (257). Kurtz is an ideal example of such an elusive object, and the novella itself can be read as a thematization of the frustration of Marlow's desire to penetrate Kurtz's mystery, the essence of which constantly eludes Marlow yet remains forever foregrounded in the work. Kierkegaard explains that, in contrast, "in irony, the subject continually wants to get outside the object, and he achieves this by realizing at every moment that the object has no reality" (257). Here the results are doubtlessly more cheerful, though no less relational, as Barthelme's discussion of the "electrolytic jelly" and "wreck or rock" images would seem to indicate. Barthelme's language attaches itself merely to the surface of the object to which it is supposed to refer, without attempting to delineate its essence. Like pop artists with their images, Barthelme not only captures the concreteness of language but also combines it with the more unreal and more

relational possibilities of negative signification, thereby solidifying negativity as positive freedom. And because he does not attempt to provide an essence, instead of frustrating his reader like Conrad does, Barthelme seduces his reader into contentedness.

* * *

Besides making an appropriate connection between Barthelme's work and pop, in Horizons of Assent, Alan Wilde more importantly develops the general theory of irony that best describes postmodern practice, and Barthelme's work in particular. Wilde presents a chronology of irony that highlights three distinct though flexible modes: mediate (pre-modern), disjunctive (modernist), and suspensive (postmodernist). By presupposing a world "lapsed from a recoverable . . . norm" (9), pre-modern writers use irony in what Wayne Booth would characterize as its "stable" form--a return to the verbal formula at its most basic: saying one thing really just to mean another. Disjunctive irony differs from mediate irony in that it "both recognizes the disconnections [inherent in the world] and seeks to control them." This control "achieve[s] not resolution but closure--an aesthetic closure" that substitutes for pre-modern irony's implicit idea of regaining paradise the image of a paradise "fashioned by man himself" (10). Suspensive irony, or postmodern irony, "abandons the quest for paradise altogether [and] the world in all its disorder is simply (or not so

simply) accepted" (11). Acceptance is Wilde's key motif, and suspensiveness provides a subtle but important shift away from Schlegel's irony; it involves "embracing chaos at all conceivable levels--universal and mundane, cosmic and quotidian" and engenders responses that range from the "most expansive" to the "most shrunken and shriveled" (135). Suspensive irony is romantic irony's more humble sibling.

Wilde traces the shift from modernism to postmodernism as a shift in attitude. For him, the modernist impulse to impose order on the universe is born in crisis; it is a despairing strategy for survival and is not, interestingly, ethically motivated. Built into modernism is a tension rooted in the fact that the modernists "proved incapable either of accepting chaos or denying it" (40). In time, though, modernism's difficult harnessing of reality through a commerce in ambiguity and paradox--a violent, heroic yoking of opposites--and tentative, momentary, hard-won visions, give way to postmodernism's "low-keyed engagement with a world of perplexities and uncertainties" (11). For Wilde, the typically modernist "razor edge of balance between two opposite forces" (193) that Virginia Woolf describes in <u>To the Lighthouse</u>, the resolution of which produces "extreme fatigue" (209) in her artist-doppel Lily Briscoe, is replaced by "limited, local, and temporary" affirmations accomplished through "small gestures" (154), leading to "modest pleasure" (165).

Though Wilde's gentle vision of irony is in part accurate, he misses the confused exhilaration associated with using the world in complete freedom. His "small gestures" supposedly lead to a "difficult, hard won assent" (154), but the implied scale of this achievement partly contradicts his prescription that postmodernism fulfill "the blocked energies inscribed in the modernist crisis" (49); he seems unwilling to let go of the modernist image of the author at battle. Similarly, although he ultimately concludes that Barthelme's affirmations are based, like Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's, on an ethic of "subjectivity and risk" (188), there seems to be something strained about his final version of postmodern irony, especially when it moves from suspensiveness to what he calls "assent." Concluding with an image of "hard-won" reconciliation, Wilde's new formulation recalls modernism's "brave helplessness," and forgets in the process the joy Barthelme finds in the world.

Wilde's recognition that the main risk of suspensiveness is passivity--a certain "willingness to float aimlessly in an ocean of urban flotsam and technological junk" (155)--is what prompts his shift to a more heroic vision of irony, and so leads him to transform suspensive irony into the "more affirmative aironic attitude of assent" (183). To be "aironic" according to Wilde is to respond to disparity with "a complementary, more conceptual vision of wholeness or singleness" (30)--a unity that Schlegel would deem quite

false, and that more reflects the modernist (or speculative) fetish for control. Wilde's vision of wholeness nonetheless introduces the complicated dialectics of negativity that inhere in the ironist himself. Given the peculiar "death" undergone by the ironist author, who creates from this flotsam and junk rather than from words, and who seduces rather than produces, combined with the fact of his indisputable centrality, a negative conceptual whole in the form of the ironist's personality is surely born. After all, Kierkegaard is not completely incorrect to suggest that "the ironist at every moment leads . . . back into himself" (147).

The ironist's wholeness and singleness is minimized, in contrast to what Wilde argues, by the fact that he ignores "actuality" even as he operates on it. Such activity nonetheless turns the ironist into a new kind of romantic figure, both more gentle and more assertive. Barthelme's subjectivity is constructed through the acceptance of what is outside of himself, including the junk and effluvia of late capitalist culture, but he then asserts himself through his vision of it. Part of his negative freedom, then, is an acceptance of the world. Barthelme is as a writer like the title character from <u>The Dead Father</u> is as a father: Barthelme's irony produces something in excess of what is usually signified, just as the Dead Father, a cypher both of idiosyncrasy and capitalist commodification, produces more than just children:

> I fathered upon her in those nights the poker chip, the cash register, the juice extractor, the kazoo, the rubber pretzel, the cuckoo clock, the key chain, the dime bank, the pantograph, the bubble pipe, the punching bag both light and heavy, the inkblot, the nose drop, the midget Bible, the slot-machine slug, and many other useful and humane cultural artifacts, as well as some thousands of children of the ordinary sort. (36)

Even though Wilde claims that "any deviation from simple acceptance opens the way still further to an irony mediated by the impulse to correct or improve or assert" (177), this list asserts, by the flotsam itself, something beyond the mere signified of language. It produces a humourous, individual response to the world, and uncovers the hiddenness of that world in the form of pleasure.

What is indeed aironic--and romantic--is Barthelme's willingness to be idiosyncratic. What signifies his "death" as an author is the fact that he produces his fiction from the dreck of the world outside of him, by "talking every phenomenon out of its reality" (257) as Kierkegaard would have it. So doing, though, he saves not only himself, but also his reader, from meaninglessness and ennui. Perhaps the best example of such a transformation can be found in the charming story, "Down the Line with the Annual, which turns the language of the Consumer Bulletin Annual into the vocabulary for one couple's melodramatic affirmation of their

love for one another:

> I ventured into the basement, found Candace there on her knees before the washing machine, which was filled with Swedish tennis balls. Candace in tears. I took her hand. "What?" I said. "Oh, Charles," she said, "is everything galley-west? Everything?" I gave it some thought. Then: "You've been reading the Annual." She looked away. "It said these Swedish tennis balls could be washed in an automatic drier without deleterious effects. I had to *try*, didn't I?" Washing machine has ineffective lint filter, which I discovered last week when it strangled on a new rug, 50 percent Dacron and 50 percent iron pyrites, purchased by Candace without first looking it up in the imposing, authoritative, annual Annual. Candace, however, is blameless, racked as she is by irritation of the lungs from overuse of aerosol hair sprays (page 15), unpleasant drying and crusting of the lips from overuse of indelible lipsticks (page 17). "I do not blame you, Candace," I said. "I blame your inadequate education at that expensive Eastern girls' school." Iron-pyrite particles pulsing in her golden hair. . . . And in her eyes there was a misty light, produced by defective contact lenses (page 50). (Guilty 3-4)

The Annual even sends Charles on a chivalric quest of sorts into a department store; he sets out to check the loops of a

terry towel for durability, done by inserting a pin into the towel's loops and pulling: "Pin poised, I advance into the murky depths of the towel store, clearly a man on a mission" (8). Poor pedal design, noisy desk fans, and suspect tire-gauge designs also plague the couple. Small wonder that Charles cries out: "O brave Consumer Bulletin Annual, holding the line in a world where the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity!" (7).

In this story, Barthelme turns commodity culture into an expression of Charles's love for Candace and his ability to accept her faults; poor consumer products serve to make their love stronger by challenging it. "Down the Line" is thus an illustration of those achievements that Wilde associates with suspensive irony: in it, Barthelme produces a "modification, limited and partial" of phenomena, providing his fiction "in the face of--but not the place of--a meaningless universe" (148). Wilde best manages to capture how irony achieves its "limited and partial" modification of the world, however, with his explanation of the related concept of "generative irony," which in Barthelme's work becomes a textural variation on Husserl's responsiveness to the empirical world. Generative irony, Wilde explains,

> attempts to activate consciousness as a whole, making of its relationship with the world something dynamic, kinetic, and reciprocal. It responds, that is, not to a concept of the world but to its texture, embodying that

> texture--or its impact on consciousness--in the shifting but ultimately unified modulations of attitude and voice. Tone then becomes an instrument of discovery. (154-55)

Just as Husserl's mode of investigation limits itself to working through consciousness to produce the horizons that express intentionality, Barthelme's irony works through consciousness to achieve a tone that allows for "the exploration and creation of tentative, even momentary meanings or values in the world" (155). In "Down the Line," tone becomes the means to question and to discover without signifying; Barthelme thereby needs only partially to modify the language of the Annual--of capitalism itself--to intervene in the face of its meaninglessness.

The story thus disproves Kierkegaard's claim that irony has no purpose because it produces only its own immanence, demonstrating instead the strong presence of "actuality" within that immanence. Furthermore, Kierkegaard fails to take into consideration the ironist's own liberation through the immanence of his own irony. Wilde notes perceptively that while postmodern fictions may or may not resolve things into aesthetic wholes, they will "in any case, reveal the sign of their author's connection with being: the emblem of an intentional relation to the world" (14). Not only does Barthelme's irony in "Down the Line" express his camp tenderness and generosity towards his characters, their

environment, and the Annual itself, but as Wilde argues, the playfulness and suspensiveness in his writing persist "not as a denial of meaning, of referentiality, but as an assertion of [his own] privilege to create meaning" (Wilde 187-88).

In that sense, Barthelme extends Beckett's fictional tendencies because he recognizes that despite the latter's massive pessimism and the fact that he depicted the lives of profoundly lost and disconnected heroes, his writing was nonetheless itself an important act of creativity. Compared to Beckett's work, Barthelme's response to the negative of the world is only more obviously positive. Lloyd Bishop highlights an aspect of Beckett's optimism when he discusses, for instance, the "unembarrassed tendency" of Beckett's people to philosophize: "They never succeed in finding answers, but they must be applauded for asking some of the right questions" (199), questions such as "What is being?" or Heidegger's "Why is there something rather than nothing?"

If to ask questions is to open oneself up receptively to the world, and to free the phenomenon from a finite relation to the individual, as Kierkegaard suggests, then the richness produced in negativity is tremendous. But why not have these questions remain under the auspices of philosophy? Because the reaction of the artist to the world is of a completely different character than that of the philosopher. Beckett's worlds differ from those that Socrates imagines; his centers of consciousness do not operate from the same superior

vantage point to the world that Socrates occupies. Molloy and Malone do not simply contemplate their inability to know (for sure); they really are unable to know. Schizophrenic, bed-ridden, wandering, waiting, they live their lives in the very manner that Socrates only suspects life to operate. The enjoyment in Beckett's writing is its mimetic expression of the meaningless world.

The enjoyment that Barthelme produces arises most often from his humour. Indeed, Barthelme responds to Heidegger's question by making a joke of it. Yet his response is, in a sense, no less philosophical. For Heidegger, it is by grasping the possibility of the Nothing that Dasein can understand and appreciate Being to its fullest and most essential. Barthelme's "Nothing: A Preliminary Account" is a joyful depiction of this problem of the Nothing; more positive than Heidegger, the slipperiness of the story's language no less successfully responds to the matter of nothingness. Barthelme begins: "It's not the yellow curtains. Nor curtain rings. Nor is it bran in a bucket . . . None of these is nothing. A damselfish is not nothing, it's a fish" (Guilty 161). Only by making a list can he present nothing, but the list can never be completed. He ends the story most tellingly:

> Nothing ventured, nothing gained. What a wonderful list! How joyous the notion that, try as we may, we cannot do other than fail and fail absolutely and that

> the task will remain always before us, like a meaning for our lives. Hurry. Quickly. Nothing is not a nail. (165)

All that he produces here are barnacles, but though he even quips, "What Heidegger thinks about nothing is not nothing" (164), Barthelme produces more than jokes. He uses the pleasurable exhaustion of signification to seduce the reader into considering an impossible problem and into taking a step towards Heideggerian authenticity.

Barthelme also uses the meaninglessness of language in "Report," but this time with quite different purpose: in this story, written during the Vietnam era, he wants to communicate a more pointedly political message. The story's narrator, who represents an anti-war group of some kind, is sent to talk to "the engineers," and with a surreal touch, when the narrator arrives at the meeting he notices that a large number of the engineers have fractures, "of the humeral shaft, of the os calcis, of the pelvic girdle..." (Unspeakable 52). Subsequently, he delivers an anti-war speech, to which the chief engineer responds with Catch-22 military logic, before shifting the discussion to the new technological "marvels" with which the group of engineers has come up. Among them is a pseudo-ruminant stomach for underdeveloped people, which the chief characterizes as "one of our interesting things you should be interested in" (54).

When the narrator makes it clear that he is non-plussed

with the chief's evasion of the concerns that he has presented to the group, the chief responds threateningly by describing a fantastic list of weapons--a sort of Rabelaisian representation of the military-industrial complex--before saying:

> -We could unleash all this technology at once. You could 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. (56-57)

By combining morality with punched cards and the term "interesting" rendered meaningless by repetition in this particular passage, and by using lists and technological jargon throughout, Barthelme allows the "itself" of language to evoke the threat produced by faceless military and bureaucratic machinations. He uses the tone of the language, rather than its signified content, to express the dangers of Vietnam-era military mentality. So not only does he use the exhaustion of meaning to create a new text, but he also uses that exhaustion to express by indirect mimesis the problem of the situation at hand, a problem whose nature becomes all the more clear when we find out that all of the engineers with fractures have received them from one of the group's own weapons.

* * *

In his catalogue of irony, neo-Aristotelian critic Wayne C. Booth offers a version of irony that Barthelme's work calls into question, even though on the surface it seems to accommodate Barthelme's fiction. In fact, what Booth calls "unstable irony" is supposed to apply not only to postmodern writers like Barthelme, but also to intermediary figures like Beckett, and even to high modernist works like Finnegans Wake. His unstable irony, however, connotes pure negativity, limited as it is to constructing indeterminacy. What it asserts "is that no stable reconstruction can be made out [of] the ruins revealed through irony . . . The only sure affirmation is that negation that begins all ironic play: '*this* affirmation must be rejected'" (240-41). Against such indeterminacy, Booth prefers the possibility of a "stable reconstruction" of the ironic utterance that unstable irony will not allow; his ideology is clearly rooted in a discursive set of assumptions and, as we know by now, Barthelme's work begs a wider context.

Although Booth does envision irony as a facilitator of "literariness"--"most ironies, even stable ironies, are richer than any translation we might attempt into non-ironic language" (6)--for him anything that does not produce that kind of richness must be written off as a negation, a rejection, or an undermining of the world. In contrast, to Booth's focus on rejection, the postmodernists celebrate the

significatory freedom allowed by such instability. In Barthelme's work, what we find is a new literary "richness" in language that can even have a political edge and a forceful one: in its refusal to say something unequivocally, irony can become, in Hutcheon's words, "a strategic way to be oppositional by exploiting the discourse of power to different ends" (Irony 50).

For the most part, as Wilde notes, because for postmodern writers "there is no consolation in the thought of other, more perfect worlds" (185), the best response to the world is an assent to what he calls the "inherent possibilities" (15) of the disjunct, disintegrated world. For Barthelme, as Wilde sees it, richness comes not from some kind of "ultimate reality"; instead he believes implicitly in Oscar Wilde's formulation that "the true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible" (183); it is in language itself, in the texture of words like "bubble pipe" or "midget bible" and their connotations.

Given the impossibility of "ultimate reality," the extraordinary in the ordinary produces the ineffable that we still probably need, as human beings, within our culture--something *immanent* rather than transcendent, the possibility of some ultimate meaning permanently pervading the universe, remaining and dwelling in an imperfect world. Indeed, Wilde's comment that Barthelme is "less seriously attracted by an escape into the realm of total otherness than by the

temptation to find within the ordinary possibilties of a more dynamic response" (178) is rather apt, because just such an escape is not only played out and finally dismissed in one of his stories, but also replaced with much else.

The two characters in "The Leap" contemplate taking Kierkegaard's leap of faith, which is, finally, Kierkegaard's own departure from "actuality." Taking the form of a dialogue, the piece begins: "Today we make the leap of faith. Today." The first response sets the tone of the story, calling into doubt the escape into "total otherness" that the leap of faith implies: "Today?" This same voice, after some discussion, asks: "Might we postpone it?" to which the first speaker responds: "Meditate instead on His works? Their magnificence." Barthelme suggests in "Not-Knowing" that art should always be "a meditation upon external reality rather than a representation of external reality" (123), and this is precisely what the two characters begin to do. Trying to decide what to contemplate, they enumerate a number of possibilities: animals, a glass of water, a blue sky, the human voice, cancer, economic inequality. They then decide to postpone the leap. What they do in its stead exactly involves finding within the ordinary "possibilities of a more dynamic response," in the form of one of Barthelme's linguistic escapades, which is continued in much the same way in the next, final, and title story of Great Days. After postponing the leap, the characters decide to try it another

day:

-Try again another day.

-Yes. Another day when the plaid cactus is watered, when the hare's-foot fern is watered.

-Seeds tingling in the barrens and veldts.

-Garden peas yellow or green wrinkling or rounding.

-Another day when locust wings are baled for shipment to Singapore, where folks like their little hit of locust-wing tea. . . .

-When you accidentally notice the sublime.

-Somersaults and duels.

-Another day when you see a woman with really read hair. I mean really red hair.

-A wedding day.

-A plain day.

-So we'll try again? Okay?

-Okay. (153-54)

In the language of this conclusion, there is nothing strictly of substance being engendered: language remains an *itself*, unable (or better--unwilling) to refer to larger structures of reality. Barthelme moves away from signification to a production of language as a particularity, as immanent. The words are reduced and appreciated as such by means of Barthelme's commitment to his irony rather than to the kind of meaning that Kierkegaard prizes. So though he does not believe in Kierkegaard's "actuality" or even language's

ability to refer, Barthelme produces something in which he can believe, thereby maintaining a positive stance to the world, however fatalist.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WORD AS OBJECT: "IT'S AN ITSELF, IF IT'S SUCCESSFUL"

> ***I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should like everybody.***
> **Is that what pop art is all about?**
> ***Yes, it's liking things.***
> ***Andy Warhol, interview with G. R. Swenson (Russell 116)***

> ***I believe, for example, that Kierkegaard fastens upon Schlegel's novel in its prescriptive aspect--in which it presents itself as a text telling us how to live--and neglects other aspects, its objecthood for one.***
> ***(Barthelme,"Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," City Life 90)***

Barthelme's particular use of irony enables him to displace without opposing, to embrace artifice, and to escape from a stable and definite center, and so erode the conventional use of meaning structures. His ability to express and transform the world around him with all the freedom that he requires, and then to produce something of value out of its inherent meaninglessness, however, emerges from important precedents. A large part of Barthelme's freedom is due to his close proximity to two antecedent twentieth-century traditions in art: pop art and, before that, what Peter Burger calls the "historical avant-garde."

Burger includes under his banner a specific set of movements: dada, surrealism and the Russian avant-garde after the October revolution, and to a lesser extent Italian futurism and German expressionism. These movements, especially dada, were developed as attacks against art as an institutional discourse, and have opened the way for an art

not only free from the solidity of aesthetic convention, but also an art that has a particular relation to the world of objects. The avant-garde's peculiar return to the world, combined with its aestheticization of that world, and the consequent manner in which it contributes to pop art crucially inform Barthelme's sensibilities as a writer. The composition of the avant-garde work relates particularly well to Barthelme's use of the signifier, and to the immanent presentation of his fiction.

According to Burger, the various movements of the historical avant-garde share one main feature: "they do not reject individual artistic techniques and procedures of earlier art but reject that art in its entirety, thus bringing about a radical break with tradition" (17). Within these movements, art enters a crucial self-critical stage, where an "'objective understanding' of past periods" in the development of art becomes possible (22). Burger's most important insight, which sets him somewhat apart from a number of other critics of the avant-garde, is his suggestion that the avant-garde's main tactic is to return art to the praxis of life. Burger, however, is careful also to historicize avant-gardist strategies, so for him this return to the praxis of life is primarily a meta-artistic move that serves to make a number of art's attributes as a "work" recognizable, thereby setting the stage for a clarification of art's place in bourgeois society.

By examining the avant-garde from an historical perspective, Burger's interpretation of it differs greatly from that of another important proponent of the same movements, Theodor Adorno. On the one hand, Adorno saw the avant-garde as the only possible response to capitalism's co-optation of existence, but on the other, he thought that art could succeed only by separating art from reality. As Andreas Huyssen explains, according to Adorno "serious art could only negate the negativity of reality. It is only through negation, he believed, that the work maintains its independence, its autonomy, its claim to truth" (144). Burger agrees instead with a colleague of Adorno's at the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse argues in his essay, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," that a radically autonomous work of art creates a "beautiful world of illusion" that "occurs with no obligation" and thus satisfies human needs in an unreal way: as a result, "beauty decontaminates truth" (qtd. in Huyssen 145).

Burger does nonetheless make use of the taxonomy of the avant-garde work that Adorno outlined in his Asthetische Theorie, where one of his key observations is that the avant-garde work is "inorganic." Conventional art is "organic" in that its comprehension is filtered through a sense of its whole, while the parts are able to lend themselves only to a minor revision of this whole. Conversely, the inorganic work resists creating the kind of "total impression" that enables

the comprehension of its meaning, so that its individual parts are no longer "subordinated to a pervasive intent"; rather, the parts "emancipate themselves from a superordinate whole" (80). No longer subsidiary to the whole, the parts become necessary to themselves, as any real object would to itself.

As part of his historizing strategy, Burger argues that the avant-garde was made possible only by the appearance of aestheticism in the late nineteenth century. "It is in aestheticism that art in bourgeois society becomes conscious of itself," Burger observes, because it emphasizes its use apart from life (111). Whereas the avant-garde reacts against the establishment of autonomy that is aestheticism's main achievement, it nevertheless extends aestheticism's self-conscious and non-pragmatic agenda:

> Aestheticism had made the distance from the praxis of life the content of works. The praxis of life to which aestheticism refers and which it negates is the means-end rationality of the bourgeois everyday. Now, it is not the aim of the avant-gardists to integrate art into this praxis. On the contrary, they assent to the aestheticists' rejection of the world and its means-ends rationality. What distinguishes them from the latter is the attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art. . . . Aestheticism turns out to have been the necessary precondition fo the avant-gardist intent. (49)

By presenting objects from the profane world without mediation, by using chance and the subconscious as principles of construction, and by merging the roles of producers and recipients of art, art in the hands of avant-gardists loses it apartness from life. But by destroying art's autonomy, yet calling this destruction art, and by making art a more "practical" activity, yet placing objects at a remove from real usability, the avant-gardist produces a rupture in the conventional means-end ideology of art. What it does is to place art's continuity with life and apartness from it into dialectical relation.

Burger is nonetheless quite aware that the shock value that such a rupture produces dissipates quickly enough. He knows that the avant-garde protest against art is quickly appropriated as art: "The *objet trouve* thus loses its character as antiart and becomes, in the museum, an autonomous work among others" (57). The main point that he salvages is that avant-garde art foregrounds the principle of construction when it emphasizes both the artifice of the work and the role of the artist. This subsequently serves to demystify art's fetish of the whole: "The organic work of art seeks to make unrecognizable the fact that it has been made. The opposite holds true for the avant-gardist work: it proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artifact" (72). Montage is the dominant inorganic organizing principle, one that, according to Adorno, refuses to produce a "semblance of

reconciliation" by the sublation of its parts, leaving them instead as reminders of unmediated life.

The result, then, is that the avant-gardist work emphasizes its made quality, but then degrades its autonomy as a made object: "The insertion of reality fragments into the work of art," Burger observes, "fundamentally transforms the work" (78). The rupture of reality into the art of the avant-gardists is produced by the presence of real things as things and as themselves. Within Barthelme's work, we have a parallel situation: signifiers are objects, just as his larger works are "themselves."[1] Barthelme uses words as words, fiction as fiction; his fantasies, for instance, cannot be absorbed into "fantasy" as a genre. There is no sublation of his elements into a larger whole in the conventional narratological fashion, though they *are* absorbed into its autonomy--Barthelme's highly aestheticized treatment of the world without doubt sets itself apart from that world. This detachment, however, is useful: Burger is quite right to point out that "an art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it" (50). Barthelme's manipulation of reified language, after all, is made possible only by his aestheticization of it, even if it then serves as an emblem of the real world unmediated by art.

* * *

Subsequently, it can be argued that modernism serves

postmodernism just as aestheticism served the avant-garde. The modernists emphasized the autonomy of the work of art: Joyce's image of the artist paring his finger nails over his work epitomizes such autonomy. Barthelme logically extends Joyce's image by focusing on the objecthood of some of the more formally radical examples of modernist fiction. In his essay, "After Joyce," he cites Kenneth Burke's observation that in the hands of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, the literary work becomes an object in the world. According to Barthelme, in their dissatisfaction with the world and with literature, these writers modify the world by adding their own objects to it. Finnegans Wake becomes a lifetime project, always problematic and unexhausted--"the book remaining there, like a landscape surrounding the reader's home." For Barthelme, as important as Joyce's work's status as an object is his concrete use of language in it; describing Joyce's method as that of "a man weaving a blanket of what might be found in a hardware store," Barthelme feels that while Joyce's fabric often falls apart, "where it hangs together we are privileged to encounter a world made new." This for Barthelme is a crucial achievement, because making the world new is exactly what he looks for art to do: "The artist's effort, always and everywhere," he pronounces, "is to attain a fresh mode of cognition" (14). Barthelme, however, achieves his own fresh mode of cognition without creating such monumentally problematic texts as Joyce and

Stein construct, and the relative simplicity of his work makes all the difference.

Although Barthelme follows the modernist turn towards aestheticism as a means of giving to language the weight of objects, he replicates the avant-garde by inserting equally concrete signifiers into his work with the intent of producing fiction fragmented into parts with only immanent value. Where Joyce endeavoured to replicate the chaos of real life and also to shape it, Barthelme introduces his lists, his pictures, his recipes and his parodies of other styles explicitly to interrupt the narrative with language as "real world." By using words as linguistic "objects," he provides an aesthetic imitation of the avant-garde's resistance to the subordination of its parts within an organic work of art, where "the political and moral contents the author wishes to express are necessarily subordinated to the organicity of the whole" (89)--a subordination which persists, after all, even in the radical works of Stein and in the later works of Joyce.

Whereas each sentence of Stein's Ida, for example, contributes to an organic development of a linguistic theme--however little each may contribute to the development of the "character" of Ida--Barthelme's signifiers appear as more glowingly and more exclusively themselves. His signifiers are red towels rather than pointers to Snow White or Snow Whiteness, just as almost every one of his stories becomes an

"itself." Barthelme's use of dialogues perhaps best illustrates the relationship between his use of language and the larger organic form. In his work, the dialogue format is as much the medium for an exploration of language as it is the *raison d'etre* of that language, and what this form does is to give the story enough shape so that we can still appreciate the signifier's relationship to itself even when it is completely free-floating, but without it being constrained by narrative teleology. The dialogue thus compares to Burger's vision of the avant-gardist work, in which "the individual sign does not refer primarily to the work as a whole but to reality" (90), though in Barthelme's work this interruption of reality takes the form of a signifier which, because it has no signified, has concrete value as language, and can thus rupture narrative.

Each question and answer or each part of the dialogue are part of the dialogue form's unity, but do not orient themselves around achieving a whole. Similarly, what is achieved in a story like "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning" is realized in the uneasy relationship of anecdotal fragments that thereby construct an ironic work, which is not to be confused with a work in its usual sense, and certainly not of the realist tradition. Barthelme puts together various segments under such headings as "Described by Secretaries," "K. Reading the Newspaper," "Speaking to No One but Waiters, He--," "He Discusses the French Writer, Poulet," but the

story leads up to "K." getting saved by the narrator:

> I pull him out of the water. He stands now on the bank, gasping.
>
> "Thank You." (Unspeakable 47)

These anecdotes are used exactly to contribute to the ending as an irony rather than as a climax, a climax that is an almost purely tonal achievement. Unified by the consistent format of its fragmentary construction--a heading and a brief passage repeated and varied in content--the ending is not an ending, and the story does not follow Aristotle's beginning-middle-end formula. The purpose is expressive; the story serves only as an idiosyncratic depiction of Kennedy. His being saved by the narrator and the build-up have no necessary relationship.

The story thus consists of a centrifugal collection of parts, explicitly in excess of narratological exigency. This excess produces something uncontainable by typical bourgeois hegemony, and becomes a record of memory rather than of forgetting, because according to Adorno:

> All of bourgeois society stands under the law of exchange, of the "like for like," of calculations which leave no remainder. By its very nature, exchange is something atemporal . . . . But this means no less than that memory, time, and recollection are liquidated as a kind of irrational remnant. (qtd. in Burger 59)

Embracing the irrational rather than the purposive, Barthelme

resists fashioning a convincingly organic work, or developing K. in order to make him compelling or to have him learn anything: Barthelme resists telling a story. The parts cannot be totalized, and cannot thereby have their temporality cancelled, sublated into a purposive whole. They remain merely a particular sequence of parts.

The final result, then, is a complication of art's vision of the world, or at least a reversal in perspective. Although, as Burger acknowledges, the avant-garde is subject to a waning of effect, whereby such works become, within the very act of reception, subject to a hermeneutic understanding that subordinates the parts to the whole, the historical occurrence of the avant-garde nonetheless posits a new ideal for the reception of art after the avant-garde: "a critical hermeneutics will replace the theorem of the necessary agreement of parts and whole by investigating the contradiction between the various layers and only then infer the meaning of the whole" (82). Barthelme's method, then, is clearly (however indirectly) influenced by the insights produced by the avant-gardist attack against art. His work in that sense expresses the post-avant-gardist sensibility to which Burger's treatise was directed.

A story such as "Captain Blood," which grows exclusively through tone and detail, reflects just such a sensibility. While they contribute to a complete statement, the parts work as details, having "emancipated themselves." Consequently,

the value of language changes from that of regular literature, since the import of the story is not that the parts "mean" but that they are allowed to "be." Captain Blood "locks the doors and windows of his house on Cow Island personally" (Forty 197), and "cooks *tallarines a la catalana* (noodles, spare ribs, almonds, pine nuts) for all hands" after successful excursions (199). Blood considers throwing the ship's women overboard when he discovers that he's being pursued by the Dutch Admiral Von Tromp. If it is not already clear to the reader that those other details are meant to be enjoyed simply for themselves, then Blood's deliberations, as he lapses from strategic calculation into daydreamy eloquence, should demonstrate how Barthelme's consignment of language is tonal and pleasurable:

> So that they will drift, like so many giant lotuses in their green, lavender, purple, and blue gowns, across Van Tromp's path, and he will have to stop and pick them up. Blood will have the women fitted with life jackets under their dresses. They will hardly be in much danger at all. But what about the jaws of sea turtles? No, the women cannot be thrown overboard. Vile, vile! What an idiotic idea! What could he have been thinking of? Of the patterns they would have made floating on the surface of the water, in the moonlight, a cerise gown, a silver gown.... (197)

This story is clearly something more or at least other than

what might be dictated by a character sketch, which would itself prompt a dissolution into conventional humanist or even narratological ideologies. And yet the final scene is beautifully human. The story concludes with a loving description of Captain Blood dancing the sardana--"the grave and haunting Catalonian sardana," his favorite dance--with his men: "He frequently dances this with his men, in the middle of the ocean, after lunch, to the music of a single silver trumpet" (202). Barthelme uses his own particular, tender engagement with the idea of the pirate, taking the stereotype as a given and going straight to the variations, which exceed signification in their rich linguistic being and produce the object--a curious combination of *l'art pour l'art* and a return to the world as the being of the language of signifiers.

Such an engagement shows that far from being overly self-conscious, the literary work as object brings to the world possibilities that go well beyond simple metafiction. According to Barthelme, in being free from the world, the producer of the object as work places himself "in a position to gain access to a range of meanings previously inaccessible to his art," because this object, having its own immanent value to justify itself, allows the "intention of the artist [to] range in any direction" (14). The new range of meanings to which Barthelme has access differs from those of Joyce and Stein, for what enables him is a new attitude to the world.

* * *

In an enlightening commentary on aesthetics, Barthelme reveals an indebtedness to pop art and intimates how Husserlian intentionality can be understood alongside some of pop's tenets. "What makes the literary object a work of art is the intention of the artist," he writes; "When Roy Lichtenstein proposes as art a blown-up comic strip, a replica in every detail except in scale of an actual comic strip, we are presented with the artist's intention, his gesture, in its nakedness" ("Joyce" 14). For Barthelme, not only does Lichtenstein's precedent open up to his artistic consideration the possibility of a wholesale appropriation of images from the late capitalist world, but it also suggests the kind of relationship that should accord between the artist and this world.

Lichtenstein's re-presentation and transformation of popular comic strip imagery into art is accomplished by his complete acceptance of such imagery, an attitude that is provoked by a specific "consciousness of" objects and images fostered by the world in which he lives and which John McHale characterized effectively in his 1967 essay, "The Plastic Parthenon." McHale, a then-pioneer in futures studies, describes how, with the advent of media culture and global information systems, images are constantly re-created and renewed, generating a "replaceable, expendable series of icons . . . requiring no act of faith for their acceptance"

(51). Lichtenstein's unquestioning acceptance of lowbrow imagery and its adaptation for the production of serious art comes out of an "intention" or "gesture" engendered in part by a conciousness of icons as expendable and readily accepted, transformed, and replaced. In contrast, Barthelme is concerned less with what is being "accepted" as art than with what can be done with this new range of malleable material.

Such elasticity and expendability in icons could foster an obliteration of meaning, however, as objects remain too much apart from one another and too much in flux to be reconciled. Burger casts such developments in avant-garde art as crucial to society: "This refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient," he argues. "And this is the intention of the avant-gardist artist, who hopes that such a withdrawal of meaning will direct the reader's attention to the fact that the conduct of one's life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it" (80). But if the intentionality of the artist is determined by his new sense of objects in the pop era, then meaningless is transformed into potential referential agility and thus positive value. Surrounded by a sheer preponderance of useless icons and objects, the pop artist is so distracted from himself by the constant flow of images from the media and information systems that he is forced to record his being-in-the-world through his consciousness of objects and

images. In so doing, he directs readers to the fact that they too must record their being through such objects.

Furthermore, pop is able to sidestep the anti-art associations of such mundane, "real" objects because dada has not only used such objects as artistic ruptures, but it has also set up a new standard for what is acceptable as art; the *objet trouve* can now be found, after all, in the museum. The basic empirical object metamorphosizes into a positive entity, and because of this newly perceived fluidity of images and objects, pop not only has found objects and images available to it, but it is also free to transform them.

To attack the institution of art, Duchamp assailed what Benjamin later called the "aura" of the art object. In so doing, he discovered a principle that Christopher Finch dubs the "irony of affirmation" in his book on pop art. By introducing the ready-made, Duchamp brought the banal, mass-produced commodity object into art, in order to destroy art. Yet he also re-introduced the object--a radically empirical move oddly in line with Husserl's empiricism. Finch encapsulates the moment nicely:

> Duchamp's meta-irony is a method of disarming himself (and us) so that he can more easily allow himself to enter into harmony with the language of objects and thus penetrate that mysterious zone . . . where things become symbols and symbols become things. (33)

Although Finch's use of the term "symbol" may be relatively

loose, his strong sense both of the "mysterious" and of the dialectic between the real and the aesthetic captures what Duchamp does when he turns the profane into art--perhaps giving back the "aura" to that which had supposedly lost it.

Mario Amaya is correct to note that Duchamp not only provided "a form of denying the possibility for defining art" but also discovered a means of "generating a new truth for the object" (57), which is where pop art explicitly comes in. Duchamp's Fountain (1917) is perhaps his most important single artistic gesture; by simply signing his name to a urinal, Duchamp used a mass-produced object more for its profanity than for its ordinariness, and Duchamp was able to question the parameters of acceptability in art. The piece was a gesture against the institution of art, and not an aesthetic treatment of the urinal. Although the shelf life of avant-gardism is short--and quickly thereafter the urinal became acceptable as art--as Burger ascertains by historicizing his argument, the historical avant-garde does "have a revolutionary effect" (59) nonetheless. The questions that Duchamp raised about the organic work of art served to expand the vocabulary of what is considered art, and Duchamp is a precursor to a whole set of new questions.

The consequence of Duchamp's move is that the artist can now assent, like Wilde's suspensive ironist does, to the "inherent possibilities" (16) of a mundane, fragmented, commodified world, and can begin by appreciating the being of

the objects used to attack art. This assent leads to a greater perception of the complexity of our relationship to the world; Duchamp's use of ordinary objects, after all, reveals their extraordinary value. As Finch points out, the ready-made is subject to the snapshot effect, which arrests an object in a specific time and place, thereby making it unique, no matter how many other such objects may exist: "An object is chosen--for example, a comb--and a new thought is created for it. This new thought emerges from a confrontation of choice and chance" (30).

A number of pop artists followed Duchamp's lead, turning ordinary objects into extraordinary works. Finch describes how Clive Barker translates "the banal into the particular" (66) by chrome plating ordinary objects such as an art box, a dripping tap, and a set of teeth. Detaching objects such as these from their reality, even while maintaining their natural parameters as objects, prompts their surreal transformation. The artists's detached focus on ordinary objects, Finch argues, also promotes a certain clarity: "as object data accumulates, the rules of syntax should become plainer and their rules governing the alternation of syntax will reveal themselves" (71). Objects thus begin to reveal themselves in much the same way that Husserl's phenomena do, and so the surreal becomes both a means of bracketing and of evoking the extraordinary, hence the value of Finch's "irony of affirmation."

With pop artists, there is a significant shift in attitude towards acceptance (or suspensiveness), as I have discussed. Coming after dada, pop artists were able to be "neither for nor against [Duchamp's] urinal," Finch points out; "they would merely accept the object as a reality with artistic properties as yet unexplored" (57). Whereas, according to Georges Hugnot, dada "utilizes for its own ends what has been done already and then turns against it threateningly" (qtd. in Amaya 55), pop artists have a much less antagonistic or predatory view of the world. Amaya describes pop artists as "refus[ing] to fight at all, accepting everything benignly, whether popular culture, art of the present, art of the past, or the bourgeois concepts of art. There is a complacency which indicates they . . . wish to work within the given framework" (55).

This last sentence begs closer examination, insofar as the question of complacency has already arisen in Wilde's discussion of suspensive irony. Such an irony encodes a certain transformation, the same kind that occurs once the pop object is worked through by the dialectics of art. Just as Duchamp's ready-mades experience a metamorphosis of meaning, complacency transformed by irony becomes something else entirely: the romantic/aironic willingness to be idiosyncratic serves to uncover the hiddenness of the world by a closer examination and affirmation of the world *on its surface.* Similarly, successful pop art prompts a

sophisticated dialogue with the world of objects and objecthood itself.

On a somewhat different note, Barthelme was an art curator before he became a publishing writer. More than likely, in this and related capacities and as part of the contemporary art scene,[2] he would actually have assimilated some of the attitudes that art could have made available to him. Indeed, he could simply have absorbed the pop mindset itself: "if it is *accepted* as art, then it *is* art," Amaya explains, continuing: "With one brilliant stroke of irony, [pop artists] have swept away the age-old arbitrary divisions between 'fine,' 'applied' and 'manufactured' art" (21). Pop artists follow camp's rejection of the good/bad distinction and its overturning of the meaning/artifice hierarchy with the goal not of enfranchising themselves, but of instead affirming their own age and the images readily available to them.

Amaya observes that never before the pop era has humanity been so inundated "by images printed, painted, photographed, stencilled and otherwise copied, both moving and still" (11), while Larry McCaffery speaks of the "sheer quantity of things that we are bombarded with" (Metafictional 114) in our own time. Mass production, advertising and the media produce a whole set of immediately available and recognizable objects and images, and as McHale recognized, this changes the way people relate to their world. Like any

group of artists, pop artists react to the environment they inhabit, and so become "interested in exploiting the psychological, sociological, mythological (as well as purely visual) elments of such images" (Amaya 11). Moreover, whereas their predecessors produced art while under the siege of the world wars, pop artists generate theirs merely under the siege of the advertising and information age. Between these environments, it is not surprising that a shift in attitude occurs, from the heroic pessimism of war-era artists to the bemused irony of pop artists, who need not accept the expressive possibilities of a war machine, but only of an increasingly commodified world bloated with information.

Barthelme also avails himself of the expressive potential of this latter age. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Barthelme demonstrates an accute awareness of the possibilities provided to him by the cinema. "The movies provide a whole set of stock situations, emotions, responses that can be played against. They inflect contemporary language. One uses this." Although Barthelme goes on to deny having much recourse to pop culture, rightly, he does use other objects (found pictures, stock situations, jargons) in the same way that he professes to use pop culture: "What's attractive about this kind of thing is the given--you do very little establishing, can get right to the variations" (42). In "The Joker's Greatest Triumph," one instance where he does use a pop icon, he coopts Batman to experiment with a

quotidian tone mixed in with an action narrative (Teachings 37-44). But he does the exact same thing in "Down the Line with the Annual," where he uses the staid language of the Consumer Bulletin Annual to springboard him into something out of the ordinary. Likewise, he appropriates illustrations for his picture stories simply to provide the basis for whatever unlikely variations he can devise.

When Finch suggests that Duchamp's ready-mades take on the importance that they do only by coming about in the framework of American culture (74), he is probably suggesting that it is in America that one may find the most extensive reification of life and world. Plastic, porn and Campbell's soup presumably have an entirely different texture than what one would find in European objects: a texture in even more need of transformation and re-humanization. The Campbell's soup can is not only reproduced exactly, over and over, but its label expresses the degradation of a specific image and pattern. Conversely, pulled away from the world and carefully placed, the Campbell's soup can exhibits a kind of ersatz elegance all its own.

Similarly, words that Barthelme cites--here we can return to his "electrolytic jelly" example--that are invisible within their own appropriate discourses, when detached from the world, gain a certain texture. Neither the soup can nor "electrolytic jelly" gain any "meaning," however. Warhol leaves his image as is, but by wrenching it

from its context, tells us simply to take a closer look at it. In contrast, Barthelme does more than to re-contextualize words and images. What he does, just as a number of pop artists do, is to go a step further than Warhol and to make an active transformation of his given material. Amaya, in a fashion, encapsulates the process: "Instead of taking up the fight against mass-think, [pop artists] have repeated it, parrot-like, in their own words, over and over again until it sinks into the spectator's sensibilities . . . they hope to make ordinary banalities take on a new, mysterious, totemic meaning" (17).

Barthelme does not create disjunction in order to express the idea that reality is complex and discordant: instead he wants simply to suggest that banal reality is not so banal after all. Thus he imagines new syntheses and combinations, seeking new insights without the burden of overriding resolutions. In "Concerning the Bodyguard," for instance, Barthelme constructs his story as a series of questions, largely variations upon a basic formula: "Does the bodyguard...?" "Is the bodyguard...?" and "Can the bodyguard...?" Although he repeats the word "bodyguard" probably fifty times, uses a mechanical format, and focuses on a stereotype--a job type--rather than a specific person, Barthelme vitalizes his central figure.

In an interview with Klinkowitz, Barthelme once stated: "I'm very interested in awkwardness: sentences that are

awkward in a particular way" ("Donald" 52). The banal interrogative form of "Concerning the Bodyguard" helps him to achieve a certain awkwardness in his prose, and as a result the story's subject becomes unfamiliar and more interesting. The strain that the question form imposes on the story's prose can well be seen in the second and third sentences from the opening: "Does the bodyguard scream at the woman who irons his shirts? Who has inflicted a brown burn on his yellow shirt purchased expensively from Yves St. Laurent? A great brown burn just over the heart?" (Great Days 107).

From this opening on, the figure of the bodyguard becomes conspicuous--not the person whose job it is to protect people, as character-oriented fiction would have it, but the stereotype itself. Barthelme's narrator humanizes the stereotype by asking questions particular to a bodyguard: "Can the bodyguard adduce instances of professional success?" (109), he asks, or: "Is the retirement age for bodyguards calculated as it is for other citizens?" (111). When he wonders whether the bodyguard's "principal" makes conversation with him, "as they wait for the light to change, in the dull gray Citroen" (107), he is really wondering whether in his job capacity the bodyguard is considered to be a person, or a function. Finally, when the narrator asks, "Does the bodyguard patronize a restaurant called the Crocodile? A place packed with young, loud, fat Communists? Does he spill a drink, to disclose his spite?" (112), he is

politicizing a role--a function--perceived as without opinion, volition and ideology, and changes it completely.

* * *

In Pop Art: Object and Image, as his title suggests, Finch is as much concerned with those objects that are at the heart of pop art as he is with its images. He begins his book oddly enough by discussing Nicolas Poussin, but this strategy provides a number of insights. As Finch explains, Poussin's peculiar detachment from the world--which can be likened to Barthelme's irony--may be traced to one particular cause: "By the time Poussin arrived in Rome, in 1624, very little of this original tension between illusion and reality remained; in order to replace it with a new tension he was led to adopt a totally different attitude to painting" (12). What Poussin does in Landscape with Snake, for instance, is to portray as a minor element within a naturalistic setting the scene of someone being poisoned by a snake. The discord between the violence of the incident and Poussin's presentation of it as a minor element produces a tension that not only turns the naturalistic vocabulary into a mannerism, but that also transforms the environment. Finch argues that rather than use the "language of representation" to represent, Poussin turns the painting into "the thing itself" (13), and the entire landscape, as a consequence, "becomes metaphysical" (149).

Finch sees strong parallels between Poussin's canvasses

and Andy Warhol's infamous "Death in America" series. Presenting photo-journalism as art, Warhol silkscreens scenes of car crashes and leaves them without commentary, other than by way of repetition and variation. He substitutes Poussin's manipulation of classical imagery and geometry with replication. "Such traditional qualities as design, layout, colour arrangement and form are not ignored in the new art; if anything, they are overstressed," Amaya observes of pop; "But the difference between this sort of realism and that of the past is that the artist now sees his objects detached, separated from their immediate surroundings, things for and by themselves, as totemic symbols" (19-20). The totemic qualities of the images are eked out through the personality of the artist, in conjunction with his detachment from the world; Warhol manages to translate the desensitization produced by the monotonous repetition of shocking images in the news to great effect, and without having to create something over and above what already exists. Such disjunction is what Barthelme also looks for in his manipulation of the material he parodies, and he too is able to do it by looking directly at the surface of the world.

Warhol's art produces pop in its most avant-garde form, in the sense that his work is mainly an attack on or protest against the institution of art. His method nonetheless provides a blueprint that enables later artists to use the world differently, just as Duchamp's urinal introduces the

ready-made into the discourse of art. Because Warhol seems to be more skeptical about art than reality, he can use his art rather deftly to raise a number of problems for reality. His own version of the irony of affirmation--his emphasis on the self-evidence of icons through their replication--throws "reality" into question with only a minimal recourse to negativity and personality. By presenting a relatively unmediated actuality, he not only problematizes the question of authorship, but also Kierkegaard's argument that the ironist's freedom is guaranteed by the negativity produced by an excess of personality. Indeed, Warhol almost completely takes personality out of art, going so far as to have assistants produce the actual prints of a number of his works, yet fulfills Duchamp's requirement that "the artist must be a masterpiece" (qtd. in Amaya 57), by effecting transformations to Marilyn Monroe and Campbell's soup by his sensibility, if not by his brushstroke.

Warhol's art, in Husserl's terms, brackets its subjects, but this reduction to an almost single intentionality shows the world to be unreal. As an artist, Warhol makes little intervention into the world: he is not even there, except to rupture art. He refuses to seduce his audience with any form of mystery at all. He captures his objects as wholes: Liz Taylor, Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe are concrete and literal in their own undeniable immanence.

What Warhol finally does in what seems to be a limited

meta-art statement is not simply to put art into a new context, but to do the same for the objects that he reproduces. His objects are completely present, and they are whole, but in their absolute presence their absolute absence is affirmed, and the viewer is seduced anew by the consequent mystery. As Finch explains, Warhol reveals the co-optation of the real by the image:

> To see a famous personality on a television screen is as near as most people ever get to meeting him. That scanned television image can take on a very considerable dimension of reality so that if you should . . . meet him at a party, and he is not living up to his screen image, you may . . . sense a loss of reality that his physical presence can do nothing to compensate for. (97)

Just as Warhol uses obvious, literal images to express the ambiguous dialectic between the real and the artificial, so the same kind of blurring can be seen in Barthelme's "Games Are the Enemies of Beauty, Truth, and Sleep, Amanda Said."

A depiction of Hector and Amanda, obsessive game players, the story begins suitably enough with a list of board games. By repeating the same basic signifier type, Barthelme uses the list to work against the natural flexibility of syntax to produce a monotonous, reified language that emphasizes the word-in-itself. Yet even in the opening, the idiosyncrasy of the narrator enlivens the prose:

"I was playing Password, Twister, Breakthru, Bonanza, Stratego, Squander, and Gambit. And Quinto, Phlounder, Broker, Tactics, and Stocks and Bonds. All at once. On the floor. It was my move. When I play alone, it is always my move. That is reasonable" (Guilty 127).

Over the course of the story, Barthelme lists about fifty games, both real and imagined. The imaginary ones tend to undermine the "reality" of the games, but not over-much. The tension occurs when Amanda begins to question their game-playing. Hector's answer is to play new games, which they can invent together. For example, they can play "Contretemps," a game in which the player describes social situations with a potential for embarrassment, with each situation getting more elaborate as the game goes on. With these invented games, the list of fifty slowly loses its concreteness, and games become possibilities of performance instead of the commodities that the language suggests they are--for Barthelme as much as for his characters.

Finally, Hector announces one last game: "Ennui." Barthelme begins the word with a capital letter, making it homologous with the names of the concrete and actual games of the list. But Ennui has no rules, no board and no equipment: it is "the absence of games" (134). So though this word is slotted, syntactically and semantically, to represent a concrete and literal form, Ennui comes instead to stand for an absence, the final annihilation of language as a strict

commodity. Barthelme thus manipulates the word's linguistic possibilities to re-contextualize a list of fifty objects: he uses language to re-eroticize the commodity, both freeing it and making it metaphysical.

If it can be argued that Barthelme is more readable and more appealing than Stein, Beckett or the later Joyce, but no less playful and self-conscious, then part of the reason has to do with the concreteness and availability of many of the images and languages that he enlists. Andreas Huyssen points out that pop is radically skeptical about contemporary art, and indeed has "revealed the elitist and esoteric nature of traditional avantgardism" (149). Amaya contrasts the pop artist to the abstract expressionist, who "relied on his subconscious and his alienation from a hostile society to demonstrate a personal gesture on the canvas area" (11): pop artists refuse to value art as something separate and distinct from life. They allow themselves to be inspired by what is readily to be found, items which, as in the case of the game names in Barthelme's story, have a certain steadying effect. Indeed, when asked what function his lists serve, Barthelme responded: "Litanies, incantations, have a certain richness per se. They also provide stability in what is often a volatile environment, something to tie to, like an almanac or a telephone book" ("Interview" 43). This stability, this anchor provided by the object, seems a return to "actuality" of some sort: it counteracts the fluid

improvisation that Wilde dislikes in Sukenick and Federman, or that Kierkegaard sees as a move away from the world into a preponderance of ego and subjectivity.

In the McCaffery interview, Barthelme clarifies certain other related biases he has about writing in his discussion of the "New-New-Novelists" of France. He sees their work as a move toward pure abstraction, and winds up dismissing it not so much because it turns away from the world but because these writers "get further and further away from the common reader. I understand the impulse--toward the condition of music--but as a common reader I demand this to be done in masterly fashion or not at all" (38). To this effect, he admires both Mallarme and Stein, but in his own work he has a distinct purpose, one at which he hints in the same interview. When McCaffery asked him what it is that one of his narrators is referring to when he speaks of the "fantastic metaphysical advantage" possessed by painters, Barthelme responded:

> The physicality of the medium--there's a physicality of color, of an object present before the spectator, which painters don't have to project by means of words. I can peel the label off the bottle of beer you're drinking and glue it to the canvas and it's there. (36)

In most of his stories, Barthelme attempts to gain this metaphysical advantage in some way, making his work, if still not quite obvious to the common reader, then at least not

quite so abstruse. Most of his stories have an accessible image or macroscopic structure, even when the language is improvisational. Stories such as "Sentence" (City Life 107-14) or "Traumerei" (Sadness 17-22), which are relatively pure experiments in language, are much less common than stories with more explicit--however fragmented--iconography.

Barthelme perhaps reacts to his modernist predecessors and his French contemporaries in much the same way that pop artist Robert Indiana envisions his colleagues reacting to the abstract expressionists. According to Indiana, pop art "springs newborn out of a boredom with the finality and over-saturation of Abstract Expressionism which, by its own aesthetic logic, *is* the end of art." He suggests that it is because his fellow artists are "stifled" by expressionism's "rarefied atmosphere" that many "turn back to some less exalted things like Coca-Cola" (Russell 79-80). Joyce and Beckett and the New-New-Novelists foster an equally "rarefied atmosphere" and each of them attempts in his own way to bring literature to an end.

Additionally, in "The Plastic Parthenon," McHale provides an optimistic vision of the place of man in relation to the objects and icons of postmodern society. His premise is that automation "returns value into man": with the increased development of industrialization, and a move away from an economics of scarcity, the object can be "produced prodigally" and so becomes completely expendable. As a

result man becomes the "the only unique and irreplaceable element" in culture, because "the only unique resource input is information--organized human knowledge" (49). The direct response to the external world, and not a cowering abstraction of it, thus affords to the artist the best means of discovering his particular significance in the postmodern world.

* * *

We have already seen how Barthelme prefers to libidinalize rather than to abstract. In "Games" he manages, like pop artists according to Amaya, to reflect ways in which people now pass their time, "through mindless distraction, repetition, and an inexorable desire for change" (28). Though pop artists embrace the same anti-teleological methodology that informs abstract expressionism, they replace a completely personal vision for one that accepts the facts of the world outside of them. This in turn procures for them a distinct aesthetic--even "metaphysical"--advantage over abstractors, by what John Cage calls "simply a way of waking up to the very life we are living" (qtd. in Amaya 30). Barthelme, for whom art's purpose is to attain a fresh mode of cognition ("Joyce" 14) and to meditate upon external reality ("Not-Knowing" 123), is clearly in agreement with such a mindset. Part of the "waking up" involves a move both away from the self, and away from an already internalized version of that outside world. Suzi Gablik is after all

quite right to argue that found and ready-made images "are one way for an artist to escape the limitations of his own personality" (Russell 17). The best results and the best works reflect however a dialectical relationship between the personal and the objective. As William Fleming points out, "the real irony at the heart of pop works like [Robert Rauschenberg's] Monogram is that however trite, commercial, debased, and nostalgic the contents, they have been composed, interpreted, and transformed by the means and standards of a living pictorial tradition" (466).

Indeed, the shift from the avant-garde and abstract expressionist ideologies to the pop mentality with which Barthelme has the closest affinity can best be understood by comparing Duchamp's ready-mades to Robert Rauschenberg's "combines." Rauschenberg's approach to cast-offs re-establishes the connection between art and reality that got severed when painting came to deal exclusively with painting, and in a fashion less concerned with exploding art than with expanding its vocabulary. Rauschenberg likes most to explore the relation between the object or the mechanically produced image and the hand-made mark. His work is an expression of the encounter between the world and the "organized knowledge" of McHale's "unique" man and is an attempt to uncover value for man amid a world full of junk and meaningless repetition, without turning away from that world.

While very much following Duchamp's lead, Rauschenberg's

combines push the objecthood of the ready-mades one step further. By putting those ready-mades together in his combines, and by adding paint--thus an expressive or gestural component--Rauschenberg "enters into harmony with the language of objects" differently than Duchamp had done in his time. By moving away from the single object and by creating assemblages instead--a variation on the "irony of affirmation," which Rauschenberg describes as an art of *inclusion* rather than of exclusion--he is able "to confront us with objects in such a way," Finch notes, "that we begin to grasp the new syntax. We are taken one step further in the task of regaining contact with the language of objects" (34). This new syntax de-realizes these concrete, material objects by placing them into unusual, paratactical relation to one another. Amaya describes the process:

> Rauschenberg's choice of sub-aesthetic objects, transformed into something else by being placed in a new painterly context, exercise a powerful effect. The objects, such as discarded chairs, stuffed sheep, clocks, radios and electric fans, are meant to lose their old identity and become an integral part of the work. (51)

By being consolidated as part of a work, the "sub-aesthetic" objects that seem to plague contemporary society are infused with a new meaning, are redeemed in a sense, by being placed in new relation to one another and not in relation to some

larger teleology.

Rauschenberg thus provides the kind of model by which Barthelme could have learnt to incorporate and libidinalize the language of his world, whether commercial language, jargon, or even what Barthelme calls the blanketing effect of language--his version of Rauschenberg's "sub-aesthetic objects" that he has Dan, one of his dwarves from Snow White, outline:

> You know, Klipschorn was right I think when he spoke of the "blanketing" effect of ordinary language, referring, as I recall, to the part that sort of, you know, "fills in" between the other parts. That part, the "filling" you might say, of which the expression "you might say" is a good example, is to me the most interesting part. (96)

To this effect, in "The Zombies" Barthelme adapts the meaningless repetition of conversational filler in order to blur the relation between such language and the extraordinary. The story opens:

> In a high wind the leaves fall from the trees. The zombies are standing about talking. "Beautiful day!" "Certainly is!" The zombies have come to buy wives from the people of this village, the only village for miles around that will sell wives to zombies. "Beautiful day!" "Certainly is!" (Great Days 115)

Elsewhere, while they "skitter and dance," the zombies say:

"Did you see that lady? Would that lady marry me? I don't know! Oh what a pretty lady! Would that lady marry me? I don't know!" (116). By placing cliched and merely phatic utterances into the mouths of zombies and having them repeat them nervously and automatically, Barthelme both normalizes the zombies and revitalizes quotidian speech by using it in such unusual circumstances. One zombie's strategy for wooing potential brides is even to describe to a group of them "the breakfast they may expect in a zombie house" (117)--he then proceeds breathlessly to produce one of Barthelme's extravagant lists of food.

Raushenberg is also not the only pop artist bringing human gestures back to objects. Finch describes how Peter Blake "re-humanizes" girlie pictures by repainting them and turning flesh into a "pink sheen," and he notes that Colin Self distorts pre-existing photographs in order to "impose an idiosyncratic quirkiness upon images that are at base anonymous" (129). Likewise, Roy Lichtenstein blows up comic strip panels and James Rosenquist reproduces details from magazine photographs by hand.

These artists libidinalize sterile images and objects by filtering them through their own personalities. "The perceptions which all these artists are organising already exist in some processed form" (126), Finch notes. The results of their "organising" are similar to what happens when Warhol moves photo-journalism into fine art in his

"Death in America" series, where he reveals the totemic possibilities inherent in his images without doing much more than distorting them slightly and re-arranging them. Barthelme does much the same thing in his parody of other styles, transforming texts by combining and de-centering them, and exactly the same thing in his transformations of reified language.

In the story "Snap, Snap," for example, Barthelme begins by citing twenty-three actual instances where the verb "to snap" is used instead of "to say" in either Time or Newsweek. His purpose seems to be to show how meaningless and reified such supposedly "active" language becomes through repeated usage, and secondarily how the media subtly manufactures excitement and interest. He alters these aims, however, when he moves from these citations to an inquiry into the character of one Charles Clitterhouse. Clitterhouse has been at the Bureau of Hatcheries for twenty-three years with nothing to show for it, and wonders if it is now time to change his style, to "learn to snap" (Guilty 33). He then imagines himself being quoted in the papers "snapping," and plans to catch the eyes of his superiors by also "crying," "warning," and "urging," but the narrator provides another list of citations that undermines these terms as well.

Thus out of the reification of language, Barthelme provides the impetus for an inquiry into a personality. Clitterhouse may think he knows why he has not moved up in

his company--"Because I am soft-spoken. Because I am slow to anger. Because I mull, think through" (33)--but these are all potentially good character traits. Barthelme clearly ironizes his third-person narrator when he has him state: "Clitterhouse, do you get the message? Pay attention to speech. Basically, you're not a bad fellow, but you have this terrible habit of . . . *saying* everything. Don't *say*. Snap, cry, urge, warn" (36). Barthelme evokes Clitterhouse's steady, ordinary decency by contrasting it with the meaningless flash of the world around him. He thus uses the found/ready-made language of newsmagazines to depict one man's relationship to the postmodern world, ironically returning meaning to its language in the process.

Similarly, in a series titled My Marilyn, visual artist Richard Hamilton was inspired by some publicity photographs of Marilyn Monroe to add hand-painted variations to her photographic likeness. "The actress had scribbled--often quite savagely--across the photos she did not like," Finch explains; from the "tension between these hand-made marks and the photos themselves" (101), Hamilton started off on a whole set of formal explorations. Where Hamilton's starting point is the reified image and Monroe's relationship to it, Barthelme's starting point in "Snap Snap" is the reified word and Clitterhouse's relationship to it. Both artists infuse new meaning into their consumed forms by presenting them faithfully, as givens, and then by directly altering them or

their context.

The strategy behind Barthelme's transformations, especially in some of his more enigmatic works, sometimes most closely resembles that of still another pop artist: Jim Dine. Dine's method is in turn, within pop art, closest to the spirit of Husserlian reduction, with its radical empiricism and reduction to a single intention. Best known for attaching ready-mades (such as a faucet or a light bulb) to canvases and adding relatively simple brushwork alongside the object, to amplify and to transform it--often without juxtaposing it alongside other objects as is common for other pop artists--Dine approaches art in less than scientific fashion; "the canvas is the last vestige of unreality," he declares, adding: "It is so unrealistic to put that washbasin on canvas that I have to do it" (qtd. in Amaya 78). His approach may be irrational (or a-rational), but it allows him to re-animate the object without making much of a departure from it. His attitude is optimistic, brought about not only by an ironic disregard for "meaning" in the usual sense, but also a heightened concern for transformation. He side-steps the question of absurdity as epistemological crisis by embracing his objects as ontological givens, asking simply: "What is the object, now?"

Barthelme makes virtually the same kind of manoeuvre in a number of his stories. His transformations, however, tend to serve rather more narrative ends, spawning fictional

environments rather than just making objects "unreal." In "The Photographs," Barthelme begins with pictures of some unidentifiable object, but then has his two scientists decide that they are "photographs of the human soul" (Guilty 153). The story describes the subsequent conversation that takes place between the two of them. In "I Bought a Little City" (Amateurs 51-58), Barthelme's "object" is a city. His narrator, probably just because it is such an "unrealistic" thing to do, buys Galveston, Texas. As its owner, he can do whatever he wants there, so, for instance, he moves all of the residents out of one whole city block in order to build a park there, or shoots six thousand dogs, and then writes an editorial in the Galveston News denouncing himself.

Whereas in these two instances his linguistic "canvas" re-animates the photographs and the city mainly to foster narrative, Barthelme shows that he can also focus on the object itself (or a string of objects in this case) as well: in "Cornell," the narrator places a name in an envelope, and puts that envelope into another envelope, and then yet another, which happens also to contain "a woman tearing her gloves to tatters." He eventually puts the whole thing into the Victoria and Albert Museum, which he in turn places "in the program of the Royal Danish Ballet" (Teachings 112), and so on, again simply because it is so unrealistic to do so.

* * *

All of these disjunctions and alterations that Barthelme

and the pop artists effect are not simply lighthearted gestures without consequence, however. They are best understood as transformations of a certain kind of object: the object without an "aura." In his ambivalent discussion of film in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Frankfurt School marxist Walter Benjamin constructs a bridge of sorts between dada and pop that can serve to put Barthelme's strategy into proper perspective.

Benjamin explains that the authenticity of the object is guaranteed by its presence and its uniqueness, which combine to give the object an aura. In the age of mechanical reproduction, however, this aura is eroded, and so the work of art is emancipated from what he calls its "parasitical dependence on ritual" (576). Also as a consequence of mechanization, exhibition value becomes the more important of the two poles of meaning associated with a work of art. The opposite pole is cult value, and whereas the importance of the cult object is its simple existence, the importance of the exhibition object is its "being on view" (577). For Benjamin, film is the best example of a medium where exhibition value replaces cult value, designed as it is as spectacle and for the masses. But film's mechanical foundation also normalizes a certain kind of shock effect by making such an effect enjoyable and subsequently acceptable to the members of the audience, who thereby become accustomed to the absorption of rupture within their regular habits of

perception.

Furthermore, according to Benjamin, film extends the photograph's ability to reveal and unveil, "deepening" optical and acoustic perception (583) despite eliminating the aura: "by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera," film for Benjamin "extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives" and "reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject" (584). Whereas the painter maintains a distance from reality, the cameraman "penetrates deeply into its web" (582).[3]

Part of dada's shock effect is its emphasis on exhibition and its explicit destruction of the cult value of the object--thus dada and the mechanical component of film have an important correspondence. Indeed, Benjamin also argues that dada "promoted a demand for the film" by emphasizing art's "uselessness for contemplative immersion." Film replicates dada's shock effect, though in "physical" rather than "moral" terms. Film is an art of "constant, sudden change" when considered as a rapid sequence of individual images: "No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested" (585). Film does not, however, merely produce shock. Because we experience its effect in a distracted fashion, it also fosters a new habit of perception: the film spectator becomes accustomed to perceiving the world as a series of disjunct,

momentary flashes of light.

By this unconscious absorption through technology, assisted by the pleasure associated with the medium, radical habits are fostered by these images that have no aura. As Benjamin puts it, a reactionary attitude to a Picasso is replaced by a progressive reaction to Chaplin. Normally, the "conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion," but film gives the masses the "orientation of the expert" (583). As spectators they are disarmed into appreciating, and subsequently accepting, the radical politics of film because of its appealing, simple pop veneer: "The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations," whereas the moving frame can never be arrested (585). But while the camera turns the masses into critics, it also turns them into distracted spectators:

> Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one. (587)

Pop similarly glosses over its revolutionary intent by seeming uncritical, presenting its proliferation of commodities as merely enjoyable. But pop creates the same kind of duplicity that Benjamin finds in film, and Barthelme follows suit, concealing radical politics through pleasure and humour.

Although Barthelme's art is much more Picasso than Chaplin, his writing nonetheless responds to a specific cultural context: McHale's postmodernity, with its fleeting, expendable and thus easily accepted flow of icons, for example. Insofar as he disrupts and fragments language, form, and convention, Barthelme reproduces the distraction that film evokes through technology, yet he responds specifically to his own, perhaps more highbrow, audience. Because his specialized audience is no less distracted by the spell of commodification--in late capitalism everybody is an absent-minded examiner, even the highbrow reader--Barthelme must rupture form and estrange the quotidian pleasurably enough to sway even them.

Film revitalizes the way we see the world both by destroying the aura of objects that veils their real value, and by placing in its wake something that is both pleasurable and radical. Similarly, Barthelme attacks the aura of literary language, which veils the actual possibilities of language available within postmodernity, through his irony--his answer to technology. Barthelme is able to lead us back

to pop's empirical approach to finding the value in language already exhausted through commerciality. His detachment appears to be an irresponsibly superficial manoeuvre, since he concentrates not on the rich ritual object with presence and uniqueness but the object without aura, but Amaya explains how in the case of pop this is actually the most responsible move: "As a generation fed on 'difficult' art, we can easily feel we are being cheated of a real art experience if the new art looks too 'easy' because of its recognizable forms and its commonly understood symbols and styles." Nonetheless, he argues, pop artists "insist that we are to look at [pop objects] for and by themselves, without any ready reference at hand to explain them away" (71). Though dissatisfied with the world, the pop artist does not turn away from the world but looks at it more closely. Benjamin's film also allows us surreptitiously to see the world more closely by focusing on hidden details that extend our comprehension of it even where he has flattened the object into a series of mechanically produced images. Barthelme's writing, by foregrounding the qualitative particulars by re-arranging meaningless words, similarly unveils the new possibilities of language in an era where words can have no more aura because they reflect the commodified world around them. The main difference between Barthelme's writing and Benjamin's vision of film may be that in Barthelme's fiction it is not the "world" that is being so closely scrutinized

and redeemed through fragmentation and particularization, but the world of commodities.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM POP TO A SENSUAL ECONOMY OF FICTION: THE ONTOLOGY OF LATE CAPITALIST SURFACE

"Going beneath the surface" has all sorts of positive-sounding connotations, as if you were a Cousteau of the heart. I'm not sure there's not just as much to be seen if you remain a student of surfaces.
(Barthelme, "Interview" 43)

Reading between the lines, I understood your critique of my attitude toward capitalism.
(Barthelme, "The Rise of Capitalism," Sadness 143)

Back in 1961, two years before his first fiction appeared in print, Barthelme wrote a commentary in Harper's entitled "The Case of the Vanishing Product." In it, he observes a growing tendency in advertisers to keep the product well in the background, and to place in its stead "the sideshow, the diversion" (30). Institutional ads, which promote whole companies rather than any single product they offer, are the best indicators of the product's absence. Barthelme concludes that although "we are left to infer that General Dynamics is beautiful and important . . . and that we are lucky to have it around," the company's reluctance to foreground any actual products hints at suspicious behaviour. "What's going on over at General Dynamics, anyhow?" Barthelme wonders (31), clearly linking product-less advertising with bad faith and unmistakably preferring what he calls "the dog-biscuit-and-cornflakes of the thing" (32).

Advertisers have become reluctant to feature the object

because to do so would be made at the expense of pleasure, Barthelme claims, and he turns to anthropologist Edmund Carpenter to reveal the insidiousness of such market practice. Carpenter's theory, as Barthelme presents it, is that the main function of ads is to wrap consumers up in myth in order "to increase pleasure in the consumption of the product" (32) both by relieving consumers from the tedium of the product itself and by preventing them from becoming aware of their patterns of over-consumption. I would note in turn that the pop project--Warhol's work in particular--functions in complete contrast to such productless advertising. Pop often has the product (or even a vast array of products) reappear in the *form* of an advertisement, but without advertis*ing*. I would equally argue that Barthelme's project gives us back the object in its tedium, and though he revitalizes it also in the interest of producing pleasure, his is a pleasure unrelated to commerciality.

Barthelme's return to the object reveals itself as a marked affinity for the use of cliched, boring, empty, and outmoded words and expressions, but in his hands these elements of language become sources of freedom and fantasy. Maurice Couturier invokes Barthelme's claimed preference for wrecks over ships to explain the implications of using such language: "You are not free to do what you like with 'a ship that sails' because it has an assigned place and function in the economic system, but you can do whatever comes to your

mind with the worthless wreck" (63). Within the conventions of literature, cliched and empty terms are just such wrecks.

The ship that sails is circumscribed by its own utility: though it can float, travel, and carry passengers and cargo, for as long as it remains operational, it will not really be appreciated for performing any activities other than these. Inefficient and useless compared to the ship, the wreck (and the rock) remain immobile, emphasizing simply their own mass and weight. So doing, however, they become sources of freedom. Analogously, Barthelme's cliched and empty terms undermine normal discursivity (Couturier's "economic system") by becoming "symbols" only in philosopher Susanne K. Langer's broadened definition of the term, which is based on a "presentational" form of logic that she uses to counter the more conventional discursive form.

Recognizing that little of our ordinary communication measures up to the narrowly rationalistic norms proposed by logicians such as Russell and Wittgenstein--those chasteners of "pseudo-propositions"--Langer searches for what she calls the "unexplored possibility of genuine semantic beyond the limits of discursive language" (86). She grounds her argument in sensual experience, using the process of perception as a functional analogue to the "presentational symbol" that she derives. Because humans tend to organize the sensory field into groups and patterns, she explains, the experience of fluidity and complexity is reconceived as the

experience of forms, "of *things* and not mere dissolving sensa" (89). This unconscious transformation of flux into form is the foundation of abstraction and thus of rationality.

From this basis, Langer forms the concept of a non-discursive symbol, which is at once an idealization of raw sensory material, and a self-conception. Such a symbol imitates the circularity of any actual object which, Langer points out, is a form that "is at once an experienced individual thing and a symbol for the concept of it, *for this sort of thing*" (89). Whereas regular verbal symbolism--the regular function of language--has fixed equivalences and a general reference, "in the non-discursive mode that speaks directly to sense . . . there is no intrinsic generality. It is first and foremost a direct presentation of an individual object" (96). This is, of course, precisely how Barthelme's signifiers-as-signifiers function: they "speak directly to sense" because they signify themselves rather than any signified.

In generating the "presentational symbol," however, Langer privileges visual conceptualization over verbal. The drawing of a triangle presents a specific triangle, for example, whereas the written definition of one tends to relate to triangles in general (96). According to Langer, language is unable to operate as a presentational symbol: the generality of language subjects any specific object to

mediation, and therefore to a distortion avoided in the presentational closed-circuit. Barthelme's use of the signifier suggests, however, that straight presentation is also possible in language, just as his practice suggests that language can take part in the same peculiar dialectic of the rational and ineffable that Langer finds in the presentational symbol.

Because she comes out of the logical positivist school, Langer is careful to assure us that the presentational symbol is as rational as the discursive symbol. She even makes the general suggestion that "wherever a symbol operates, there is a meaning" (97). Nonetheless, she depicts the presentational symbol as coming from the unconscious, and as accessing intuitive and ineffable realms. Barthelme's fiction arrives at the same combination of logical positivity and the ineffable by eroding conventional properties of meaning in language, specifically the sign function and discursivity.

Barthelme effectively conveys the expressive potential of the presentational attributes of language when he speaks of how "words have halos, patinas, overhangs, echoes" (121). From another perspective, as Couturier would have it, Barthelme composes fiction "which is so saturated with motley fragments of recognizable discourses that it eventually becomes non-discursive" (14). Molesworth likewise proposes that Barthelme's cliches, lists, brand names, and stock expressions show words "in their least transformative uses,"

and thereby demonstrate "how words and objects are similar" (60). Furthermore, though he begins by suggesting that Barthelme uses a "superfluity of contemporary references" (40) in order to make the contemporary world familiar and safe to his reader, Molesworth also admits that in Barthelme's better stories his "references to contemporary 'junk'" strike the reader instead as "disorienting" (40). I would suggest that such an effect occurs in the majority of the stories, and that it produces not so much a disorientation but an expression of Heidegger's premise that "the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extraordinary" (179). Though Heidegger would be hostile to fiction which is as apparently "non-serious" as Barthelme's, and though Barthelme clearly does not share Heidegger's belief in art's access to "Truth," Barthelme uses language in such a way that he creates the kinds of ontological openings that Heidegger attributes to "great" art.

For Heidegger, according to David Birch, language is "not about representing something," but is rather "a means of understanding what it means to be" (5). We have already seen how Barthelme's irony prevents his fiction from "representing" because it forces language to operate as a play of signifiers, a play that makes language and story lose any referential basis. If Barthelme's fiction is also to express being, it must do so by according with Heidegger's notion that language shows rather than tells: "'Telling,'"

Birch writes, "concentrates on the idea of language as referential; 'showing' concentrates on the idea of language as manifestation'" (6). For language to be referential is to ground signifiers within a signified world, and to produce a representation of the ordinary world; for language to be a "manifestation" is to allow language to look to itself to uncover the extraordinary and thus to foster a re-presentation of the ordinary world.

Most of Barthelme's fiction is governed by a non-sequitur connectivity between passages, words, characters, and ideas, produced first and foremost for the purpose of play and re-presentation. Barthelme's non-sequitur links follow the surrealist/absurdist principle of construction, but because he has adopted pop's accepting approach to objects, his estranging links serve not to make ruptures but to show connections by *being* those connections.[1] By following Langer's circular logic of the object-itself, Barthelme's language becomes presentational rather than negating, and fosters open-ended relationships between words, images, and ideas, thereby providing a greater means of understanding the being-in-the-world of objects. Discursivity, in contrast, *motivates* connections through linguistic logic and the normal rules of syntax. In a sense, normal discursivity is unable to allow us to go beyond the ordinary of language and thereby to serve as a tool for the better understanding of being, because it is anchored first

and foremost in its own rules.

Barthelme himself indicates how he depends upon the presentational opacity of language to "unconceal" the extraordinary of the world, and how this emerges out of the being of words. According to Barthelme, it is the play of signfiers that reveals being:

> 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. ("Not-Knowing" 121-22)

Nonetheless, however much this agility depends on the objecthood of words, and however much signifiers fulfill a logic of objects, these signifiers come to us first and foremost, like the objects of pop art, as works of art.

Barthelme's fictional objects--as aesthetic objects--have always been motivated by a connection to the world, just as pop objects have always been something more than mere objects from pop culture. Both Barthelme and pop artists blur the borders of the object by producing *works*. To be a work is to maintain a certain aesthetic distance and to make explicit the same dialectical relationship between subject and object that phenomenology discovers, a fact about which Barthelme proves to be well aware in "Not-Knowing," when he writes: "Because consciousness, in Husserl's formulation, is always a consciousness *of* something, art thinks ever of the

world [and] could not turn its back on the world even if it wished to" (123). With this statement and with the passing of time, then, Barthelme clearly distances himself from his previously stated affinity for the autonomy and objecthood of literary texts that he proclaimed in "After Joyce."

* * *

Barthelme's fiction is close in spirit to Heidegger's conception of art. For Heidegger, works serve to clarify the links between objects and the world around them because the "work as work, in its essence, is a setting forth" (171). In Heidegger's particular economy, what the work sets forth is the "earth," which is achieved by the setting up of a "world." World is the "ever-nonobjective" to which we are subject within Being (170) that strives to surmount the earth as a self-opening, whereas earth is a "sheltering and concealing" that tends to "draw the world into itself and keep it there" (174). The setting forth occurs in the work rather than in the normal object because the work, however much an object, is non-equipmental. In equipment--the stone of an axe for example--that of which the object consists is used up in use. Because it "disappears into usefulness" (171), the axe is not set forth as world into nonobjectivity; it remains material-bound.

The work is thus in a sense useless--just like Barthelme's fiction, according to traditional standards of meaning--but exactly this uselessness allows the work to

express the extraordinary. For Heidegger, such presentation is also relatively passive: the work simply "lets the earth be the earth" (172), and he demonstrates why with the example of a stone. A stone "presses downward and manifests its heaviness," but if we attempt to penetrate it by breaking it open, the stone will "not display in its fragments anything inward that has been opened up." Earth, by its very nature, "shatters every attempt to penetrate it" (172).

However, a *work* made of stone, such as a temple, sets forth its stone by placing it within a world that it sets up. A temple portrays nothing; it simply rests upon the rocky ground, enclosing a space and gathering elements of the surrounding area, whether actual or metaphysical. The temple-work does not cause the material to disapppear, but causes it rather to come forth: "The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to say" (171). By arraying a range of elements into a composite whole, the temple builder expresses the extraordinary qualities of ordinary being by setting them forth.

In the same manner that pop accepts its objects and displays them as they are, Barthelme takes the products, emotions, and images of contemporary culture and translates them into language. Furthermore, he takes care to avoid taking a "technological" attitude toward them, an attitude which according to Heidegger, as Eric C. LeMay and Jennifer

A. Pitts explain, people adopt to the world when they operate with the assumption that humanity is at the center of the universe, and that all other beings exist not as independent beings, but in relation to, and in the service of, humanity (72-85). Such an attitude obscures humanity's understanding of being, but art provides a potential means "of appreciating the interconnections among beings that technology ignores" (83). As an ironist, Barthelme pointedly allows his signs to operate non-technologically, allowing them to engage without meaning, and hence to express being.

Language thus operates in Barthelme's hands just as Heidegger imagines it, and it is worth noting that in Heidegger's phenomenology, language fulfills a particularly important role. Not only does he dub language the "house of Being," but he also believes, according to LeMay and Pitts, that "through our language we have a way of experiencing our original relationship with the mystery of existence" (87). Barthelme often proceeds by throwing words and paragraphs together like a collagist in order to elicit alogical, spurious, and non-sequitur connections among words and images. His method, then, is surely an attempt to allow language to express and to create its own relations, rather than tendentiously predetermined ones.

For similar reasons, Barthelme uses parody rather than satire; whereas satire has a specific ethical goal that originates in the world, parody originates in language

itself. Indeed, seeing him as a parodist, Molesworth describes Barthelme as "a special sort of ironist, whose focus is less the gap between word and thing . . . but more that of the gap between word and word" (8). Parody, Hutcheon explains, operates differentially; it deviates from but includes within itself the norm being parodied; it incorporates and synthesizes, before it demonstrates a contrast and separation (Parody 53, 44, 96). Because all of this is achieved through the medium of language, parody becomes a self-origination of the world through language that manages nonetheless to comment on the world.

Barthelme demonstrates his own appreciation for the possibilities that language provides when he declares in "Not-Knowing" that it is style that "enables us to speak, to imagine again." Furthermore, he states his belief that "art is always a meditation upon external reality rather than a representation of external reality" (123). Meditation and style thereby become inescapably intertwined; meditation differs from representation, and so requires style's re-imagining of the world to allow it to fulfill its objective. But because one meditates *on* or *upon* something, the world imagined again through style--through language, specifically, because he is a writer--becomes Barthelme's object of meditation. Style thus becomes the object, but style results from Barthelme's subjectivity, and so his writing expresses Husserl's subject/object dialectic uniquely through language.

It is Beckett who taught Barthelme how to use his own subjectivity to open the world to himself. According to Barthelme, Beckett's pessimism served as "the premise necessary to [the] marvelous pedantic high-wire performance" that is his fiction. Nonetheless, Beckett really achieved what he did in his fiction "by allowing language to tell him what it knows" ("Joyce" 16). Barthelme follows in Beckett's footsteps, by allowing language, out of its *being*, to express that which is beyond him. Indeed, when asked how he avoids becoming formulaic (and hence technological) in his use of juxtaposition and construction, Barthelme responded by foregrounding language's own self-revealing tendencies: "I think you stare at the sentence for a long time. The better elements are retained and the worse fall out of the manuscript" ("Interview" 37). Barthelme returns his own subjectivity to the equation when he highlights certain of his own particular affinities: "I look for a particular kind of sentence, perhaps more often awkward than beautiful. . . . A way of backing into a story--of getting past the reader's hardwon armour" (34). Barthelme replaces Beckett's pessimism, a vestige of that modernist anxiety that Alan Wilde discusses, with an ironic, exploratory sensibility; he describes a process that sees him basically fumble about until he comes across an interesting sentence, around which additional material accumulates.

"The Baby," for instance, seems to grow out of a simple

sentence: "The first thing the baby did wrong was to tear pages out of her books" (Forty 244). From the odd suggestiveness of this sentence comes the evocation of a new possibility of relation between parent and child. The story describes how the narrator punishes his child by isolating her in her room four hours for every page that she rips out of her books. She rips out more and more pages until she is only rarely allowed to leave her room, and until the narrator realizes that he has a problem: "she was looking pretty wan. She hadn't been to the park in weeks. We had more or less of an ethical crisis on our hands" (245). He solves the problem by declaring simply that it is all right for her to tear pages out of her books. The story's final line is both unexpected and jubilant: "The baby and I sit happily on the floor, side by side, tearing pages out of books, and sometimes, just for fun, we go out on the street and smash a windshield together" (246).

Conventionally we are tempted to ask: what is the meaning of this story? But the story has meaning only in the manner that the presentational symbol does: wherever such a symbol operates, meaning exists, inherently. This story does not reveal itself through analytical breakdown; to read something more into the story is possible, but beside the point. Against any concern for meaning, though, we can consider Heidegger's understanding of colour: "Colour shines and wants only to shine. When we analyze it in rational

terms by measuring its wavelengths, it is gone. It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained" (172). Likewise, the meaning of "The Baby"--undisclosed and unexplained--shines forth, using language's access to Being to express the extraordinary possibilities of life.

* * *

Beyond its counter-technological implications, Barthelme's language also dispatches parallel counter-economic strategies perhaps even more relevant to his vision of the postmodern world. The use of words, textual fragments, and entire works as objects for meditation provides a number of possible ways of expressing the relationship between people and the real/actual objects that bombard them in capitalist culture, and offers a means of combatting the reified existence that results from their interaction. However much Barthelme evokes an ontological appreciation of the world of objects around him, we must understand the full nature of the object as it stands in capitalist culture before we can have a full sense of his manipulation. Barthelme takes advantage of the world as a world of objects that have been increasingly separated from their meaning and value-in-being as objects, and increasingly linked to their value as signs.

One must account for an object's commodity form when discussing "objecthood" within capitalism, and in the first volume of Capital, Karl Marx describes the commodity form as

a receptacle for the contradictions inherent in capital, and as an object form that veils our true relations to other people and to objects. Marx's analysis hinges on his discussion of the concept of value--which he also terms, more descriptively, "exchange-value"--and how it obscures the basic human and social practices behind objects of labour. In his distinction between "use-value" and "exchange-value," Marx seems to provide an appealingly simple analogue to Barthelme's signification process as I've outlined it, one that would allow us to see his fiction as a move away from the contradictory and alienating forces of capitalism.

Barthelme's use of the immanent and particular attributes of each word or larger literary structure--that is, his focus on their presentational value--would be an expression of language's use-value. Language expressed through its exchange-value--a more discursive relation--would abstract the concrete form of language into a larger meaning structure, exactly the kind of assimilation that Barthelme resists. Yet completely to ally Barthelme's language with use-value is neither adequate nor accurate: use- and exchange-values are better understood dialectically. From such an understanding, we can see not only how Barthelme's writing can affirm, in a sense, the kind of humanist ethos that Marx expresses with the labour theory of value, but also how the sign system that Barthelme uses depends on the concept of exchange that Marx maligns and how Barthelme

nonetheless manipulates the concept to "non-capitalist" ends.

For Marx, the commodity is an external object "whose qualities enable it, in one way or another, to satisfy human wants" (Marx 3). The attribute that would thus seem to be most important to the commodity is its use-value, which Marx defines as "the utility of a thing" (4). But by operating within an economy of exchange, the object experiences a cleavage between being a "useful thing" and a "thing of value" (46), in part because there is no necessary relation between utility and desire--a central premise behind commodity fetishism--and because labour for the purpose of self-sustenance is invalidated under capitalism. Exchange separates an object's use-value from the needs of its producer by turning the thing into a social relation--the commodity: "One who satisfies his wants with the product of his own labour, makes a use-value but does not make a commodity. To produce commodities he must produce, not use-values merely, but use-values for others--social use-values" (9). As commodities, objects lose their inherent value, and instead become purely relational entities. Exchange-value, like language if we accept Ferdinand de Saussure's model, is based on a differential structure: Marx is careful to point out that exchange exists only between unlike use-values.

According to Marx, value produced in exchange is "fortuitous and purely relative," so an exchange-value immanent in commodities is a contradiction in terms (4-5):

chemists, he quips, are after all unable to discover exchange-value in pearls or diamonds (58). But for Marx the commodity manifests itself as a "twofold thing"--having both use-value and exchange-value--only at the moment that "its value has a phenomenal form of its own, the form of exchange-value, differing from the bodily form" (32). This phenomenal form is the money form, which provides an ideal and imaginary supplement to the "palpable and real bodily form" of the object (71). In a smoothly functioning capitalist economy, not only do use-values simply become "the material depositories of exchange-values" (4), but the contradictions between use and exchange also get veiled and sealed by the money form that grows out of exchange and overtakes it.

The marxist ethical system provides a structure through which to draw out the possible implications of Barthelme's abuse of the sign system, an abuse that allows him to return to the concrete and the particular. Marx provides a means of understanding how alienation occurs within the normal teleologies of literature, and how implicit resistance to the logic of capital occurs in Barthelme's writing as a resistance to the logic of literature. Marx anchors his discussion with the labour theory of value which, Leon P. Baradat points out, "is concerned with the *intrinsic worth* of an object" (155, my emphasis)--exactly the kind of worth that Barthelme's work, seen in terms of a Heideggerian "setting forth" or "unconcealment," looks for.

Marx's analysis serves to show how the value creating process occurs apart from and in addition to the labour process that produces the object. Within an economy of exchange (capitalism), the concern is not "with the quality, the nature, the specific character of the labour, but only with its quantity" (183). Emphasis shifts instead to the flow of money, because it is money that leads to wealth and to the accumulation of capital--the teleological end of capitalism. Money, Marx explains, is a "radical leveller" that erodes the most crucial traits: "all the *qualitative* differences between commodities are effaced in money" (113, my emphasis).

Quality--the particular, sensual component of the object--is replaced by a quantification that homogenizes the surfaces of objects. This effacement of qualitative distinctions in turn sets the system up for a totalitarianism of the sign. The money/gold form hides the specific and the particular, holding itself up as the essential yardstick of value: "Since money does not disclose what has been transformed into it, everything, whether a commodity or not, is convertible into gold" (112), Marx argues. By thus obscuring real value, those in control of the means of production can harness excess in the form of profit.

The control of excess is one of the more significant issues in Marx's vision of capitalism. This concern appears in his writing in the form of a discussion of "surplus

value." Though Marx describes the creation of surplus value as "merely the process of creating value prolonged beyond a certain point" (189), this prolongation serves to alienate the creator or the producer of the work, because surplus-value is created by extending the value-creating process beyond the point at which labour power sustains itself. Marx argues that it should require the worker only six hours of labour (for example) to sustain himself for a twenty-four hour period, based on the real exchange value of what he produces. But because money veils true relations of production, there is nothing to prevent the capitalist from having the labourer work a twelve hour day, only to earn subsistence wages. The capitalist thus exploits his workers by providing them with a wage that has nothing to do with the actual value of the labour they produce.

The literary critic, by upholding the laws of meaning and of literature, treats the writer by the same token: capitalism thereby presents an allegory for signification. In literature, larger meaning structures such as literary form and the exigencies of realism subordinate individual expression within agreed conventions, flattening qualitative difference just as does the money form in capitalist economics. "Literature" has a vested interest in limiting the excess and the extraordinary to certain parameters: texts that cannot be explicated cannot be controlled. For critics--the title holders of the means of production of meaning in

the twentieth century--meaning is money, so they have validated literature from an epistemological perspective because analysis, their chief skill, leads only to knowing.

Consequently, the purely qualitative concerns of language--ontological concerns--are not allowed to be freely performed. At best they are framed within a pre-existing epistemology: the modernist symbol, for example. The writer who produces writing as writing, like the labourer who produces merely to feed himself, is alienated: it is not at all uncommon after for the writer to be alienated from what he has written by the often hostile explicatory process of the critic. The simple being of the fiction is devalued, ripped out of the writer's hands, and made to express meaning. Hence Sontag's call for "an erotics of art" in the place of hermeneutics in "Against Interpretation" (14).

Nonetheless, in his use of language and the components of literature as objects, Barthelme subscribes to the logic of the commodity only insofar as the commodity's exchange form is arbitrary and intrinsically non-teleological. His language does not follow the logic of exchange to the extent that it either facilitates the commodity's inevitable development into a "twofold" form that veils one of its components (use-value) just as it reifies the other (exchange-value), or elicits the capitalist's greed by introducing the money form. In its ideal form, after all, exchange encourages freedom, prompting what Marx calls the

continuous "metamorphoses of commodities" (110); indeed, money itself contributes to the "perpetual motion of circulation." But because the capitalist is greedy, the commodity's money form becomes the perfect means for hoarding which, under capitalism, becomes "an end in itself" (111) that takes precedence over the character of the object. Within the capitalist teleology, the arbitrariness of exchange serves finally to distort all value.

Just as capitalism limits exchange-value's freedom so as to determine an object's value insidiously, within a larger continuum of objects, the hermeneutic tradition (of literary interpretation, of scriptural exegesis) absorbs differences and erases surface effects to place individual people, events, relations, and objects within systems, making relations necessary but obscuring this fact with veils of metaphoricity. Additionally, within the teleology of literature, it has always been assumed that the signifier must service a signified or, failing that, produce a metaphoric shift that ties expanded ideation into a still limited signified. This binds the signifier to the signified, and thus replicates the bind between use- and exchange-values that characterizes the commodity, and leads to the hegemonic absorption of use-value (signifier) and exchange-value (signified) within capitalism's metanarrative of power (signification).

Literary excess has conventionally been expressed in the

form of subtext, multiple and unexpected meanings, and the specialized use of sound, syntax, and semantics. Such excess does not subvert the sign structure itself, at either the level of word or story, nor does it occur outside of the sign--otherwise the internal integrity of the sign and the literary logic that holds everything up could be questioned. For Barthelme, in contrast, excess is indeed created outside of the sign, in the form of signifiers freed from signification. By presenting his signifiers as self-contained, non-generalizable occasions that repudiate meaning and hence any part in the teleology of literature, Barthelme re-guarantees the freed relations originally supplied by the arbitrariness of exchange-value. He also re-affirms use value, which according to Marx is "realised in use or consumption" (4): Barthelme loosens the grip of commodity logic on his signifier by forcing his reader to consume his words and his stories as self-contained pleasures and jokes, having first cut off their amenability to an abstraction into literary meaning. Barthelme thus returns use-value to language by first fracturing it.

* * *

Just as dada breaks from traditional interpretation in art by foregrounding the simple, ready-made object, Barthelme foregrounds the simple, ready-made word. Just as pop artists re-eroticize the consumed and commodified images and objects of late capitalist culture by removing all remnants of depth

and meaningfulness in flat, ironic invocations, Barthelme focuses on the surface and *quality* of his signifiers, and distorts the differential structure of exchange to resist its homogenizing force. By placing his signifiers into relation with one another, but by foregrounding their resistance to absorption as abstracted relations, and by improvising with solidly anchored (reified, utilitarian) language, Barthelme overturns the commodity's disconnection with real material conditions. His language produces a new solidity, ironically enabled by his words's disconnection from their supposed signifying apparatus.

Barthelme's language is solidly anchored because capitalism helps to reify language just as it develops the commodity fetish. At the same time, because the commodity fetish emphasizes and reifies the object's sign-value under capitalism, the separate attributes of language and commodities begin to blur. Barthelme turns this homogenization against itself, first by foregrounding the commodification of objects and the reification of words, and then by recycling both, arbitrarily recontextualizing their own arbitrarily developed meaning.

Recycling is an eminently anti-capitalist activity because it replaces consumption with re-adaptation and re-use. Jerome Klinkowitz's chapter on Barthelme in Literary Disruptions is full of such talk of "revitalization" and "redemption": he describes the way that Barthelme "infus[es]

. . . empty forms with the work of vivid imagination" and "presents, within the outward shapes of familiar words, bold, strange, and terrifying ones, which shock us into a new awareness in his fictional world" (66). Like pop artists with their objects, Barthelme does not merely re-fetishize his language. Built into both art forms is an explicit awareness and intentional presentation of commodification. Any attempt to re-animate the world is in part an attempt to shock the audience into recognizing its own part in a discourse of reification, and to demonstrate strategies available for countering its force.

Here it is worth returning to Snow White and Dan's discussion of Klipschorn and the "blanketing" effect in language. It seems that the language that "fills in" between other words, the "stuffing" to which Barthelme pays such close attention, has particular attributes that according to Dan "other parts of verbality do not have" (96). Stuffing has both an "endless" quality and a "sludge" quality that Dan prefers to think of as different aspects of a single quality. The "endless" quality relates both to words, with their multiplicity of possible combinations, and to the detritus of capitalist culture which, in its sheer quantity, provides artists like Rauschenberg with an endlessness of raw material that proves valuable in itself. The "sludge" quality, meanwhile, is a certain kind of heaviness attributable to stuffing, "similar to the heavier motor oils, a kind of

downward pull but still fluid" (96-97). Though he is not sure how, Dan "can't help thinking that this downwardness is valuable" (97); he is also quite certain that there is a connection between verbal "exchanges" and the plastic buffalo humps that the dwarves are producing at the plant. Both are part of the "trash phenomenon."

By way of illustrating the nature of this "phenomenon," Dan explains how the per-capita production of trash in his country (presumably the United States) has been increasing at the rate of about four percent per year:

> Now that rate will probably go up, because it's *been* going up, and 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)

Furthermore, the dwarves produce the buffalo humps, more from a "philosophical point of view" than because they are great moneymakers. About the humps, Dan declares, "They are 'trash,' and what in fact could be more trashlike? It's that we want to be on the leading edge of the trash phenomenon . . . and that's why we pay particular attention, too, to those aspects of language that may be seen as a model of the trash phenomenon" (97-98).

Dan's words are quite clearly metafictional: Barthelme

himself wants to be at the leading edge of the trash phenomenon, but by embracing the trash phenomenon, Barthelme overthrows the signifying process, producing new habits of meaning and reading. Barthelme does not stop with his concern for the trash phenomenon, however. Snow White's narrator extends Dan's discussion of trash, and consequently Barthelme's metafictional revelation, by introducing the homologous notion of "dreck." Dreck amounts to all the irrelevant content in books that, if carefully attended to,

> can supply a sense of what is going on. This "sense" is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there, in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves--looking at them and so arriving at a feeling not of satisfaction exactly, but of having read them, of having "completed" them. (106)

As a matter of illustration, the rest of the paragraph containing this explanation repeats the same sentence with a slight variation eight times, and repeats the word "pajamas" sixteen times within about a dozen lines. The sentences build up to only one key variation, so most of the language is in excess of a single idea, which is that everyone except Bill takes off their pyjamas. Barthelme emphasizes the "having read" as a series of signifiers: "Snow White took off her pajamas. Henry took off his pajamas. Kevin took off his pajamas. Hubert took off his pajamas. . . . Bill refused to take off his pajamas. 'Take off your pajamas Bill,' Snow

White said. 'No. I won't,' Bill said. 'I will not take off my pajamas" (106). By describing all the characters separately as they take off their pyjamas instead of "accumulating" them with a quantitative term such as "everyone," Barthelme foregrounds the qualitative experience of reading the words as they "uneconomically" add up to a statement (and not a particularly "poetic" one at that).

Barthelme's irony resists literature's version of capitalism's greedy use of surplus by establishing a distance between linguistic experience and the evocation of meaning. By providing mere textuality and the "having read" effect, Barthelme reduces the opportunity (for himself, for his reader, and for literary tradition) to hoard the excess that he produces. Thus, textually, he avoids the prime practice of the capitalist. Instead, in a sense, he exposes it. Barthelme differs even from the modernists who, by privileging epistemological rather than ontological dilemmas, would produce tropes such as "unreliable" narrators who can be tapped if not for "answers" then at least for a maximally refined configuration of ambiguity.

The effect of repetition in the passage from Snow White is strange but not analyzable in literary terms, because its irony serves, implicitly, as a Brechtian alienation effect. Its rupture of literary logic and the reader's passive consumption of its illusionist influence is what serves to shock the reader into a critical insight about capitalism's

reifying effect. Barthelme's logic refutes the very idea of textual interrogation, because such investigation leads to a tendentious control of excess. The excess that Barthelme here produces through repetition creates instead a blank tone, and elicits merely the experience of repetition. What he writes is not there quietly to imply certain connections, to shape patterns, or to generate symbolic resonances, all tactics which pander to literariness.

Though the tactic differs, in the following passage from Barthelme's story, "The Rise of Capitalism," his rupture of the normal process of signification, and what he produces from it, is equally as instructive as the passage from Snow White:

> Honore de Balzac went to the movies. He was watching his favorite flick, The Rise of Capitalism, with Simone Simon and Raymond Radiguet. When he had finished viewing the film, he went out and bought a printing plant, for fifty thousand francs. "Henceforth," he said, "I will publish myself, in handsome expensive de-luxe editions, cheap editions, and foreign editions, duodecimo, sextodecimo, octodecimo. I will also publish atlases, stamp albums, collected sermons, volumes of sex education, remarks, memoirs, diaries, railroad timetables, daily newspapers, telephone books, racing forms, manifestos, libretti, abecedaries, works on acupuncture, and cookbooks." And then Honore went out

> and got drunk, and visited his girl friend's house, and, roaring and stomping on the stairs, frightened her husband to death. And the husband was buried, and everyone stood silently around the grave, thinking of where they had been and where they were going, and the last handfuls of wet earth were cast upon the grave, and Honore was sorry. (Sadness 145-46)

Because language operates, like exchange, by placing unlike things together, all that Barthelme does here is to use the significatory possibilities that language makes available to him to create a fantastic situation. By foregrounding qualitative distinctions between words, however, he subverts the economy of language--of commodities--by using its arbitrariness against itself, upsetting a number of the reader's normal expectations in the process.

First, Barthelme uses the names of real people. This sets up expectations of fidelity both to biographical fact and to "realism." Assuming that the events of this passage occur in the twentieth century--most of the story's details point to this time--"Balzac" upsets our expectations by signifying a nineteenth century figure who is nevertheless alive and active. Being a "real" person, furthermore, "Balzac" should at the very least go to a movie that actually exists, even if only at a later date. The Rise of Capitalism, however, is not an actual movie. Incongruities such as these turn the passage's signs into logical

impossibilities; "Honore de Balzac" is not Honore de Balzac, the French writer. Nonetheless "Honore de Balzac" remains, as language and as a failed reference that accrues a meaning that is relational, if not recuperative. Barthelme sets up disjunct relations between factuality/history, which are both random and not so random.

Barthelme creates a macro-logic, a qualitative logic that has the vague form of narrative, even if it contradicts the logic of the details, which are relational. Simone Simon, a real movie star, becomes a reality effect that makes the movie both seem more real and be actually more false. By having her co-star with Raymond Radiguet, a French writer who died in 1923, Barthelme destroys the reality effect again. This relation, though, even if illogical by context, is not meaningless. The names have qualitative significance: both are alliterative, and Simone Simon has the added distinction of repeating the same name. Also, both figures are French, and to Barthelme's American audience they become qualitative references to European highbrow culture, an effect that Barthelme likely fosters quite intentionally.

Additionally, though Balzac did try his hand at publishing in 1826-28, Barthelme's list of books elaborates Balzac's ambitions into a lie, thereby extending reality into an extravagance. By emphatically producing the feeling of "having read" in his reader, Barthelme perhaps may also be alluding to Balzac's long-winded--though "literary"--writing

style. Finally, Barthelme also violates normal metaphoric logic in the passage: when Honore frightens his girlfriend's husband to death, the husband actually dies. Honore's consequent sorrow is somehow both textural and real, purely linguistic but emotive nonetheless. This final joke not only maintains the story's absurdity, but also gives the fragment that I have quoted a normal, satisfying narrative shape.

Barthelme thereby detaches his signifiers from a consistent signified world, creating a sensual play of surface that is useless for the formulation of "meaning" but useful as a fictive experience nonetheless. The sign that no longer refers therefore loses its usual utility, without having its use-value destroyed. In refuting the signified world, Barthelme ironically uses his imagination first to limit the world and then to open it up: thus he enriches the world by first making it manageably limited.

Barthelme, however, is no minimalist; he makes no attempt to reduce the richness of the world--quite the opposite. In "Not-Knowing," he compares the relationship between art and reality to the performance of a jazz "standard," in which it is conventional for the player to offer not the song as written, but something parallel to it. For Barthelme, the artist produces a commentary, exegesis, elaboration, or contradiction of the world; art is first and foremost "a meditation upon external reality rather than a representation of external reality" (123). Meditation itself

connotes a quality of surface; one fixes on the surface and on the qualities of an object in order to understand it in its real, if not its essential, relation to the world. Meditation allows the possibility of extending meaning, rather than of capturing it--to meditate is not necessarily to draw a conclusion. Regular discursive flow can contain too much, so Barthelme's words are extended by first being cut off from the world, and then placed into a new, non-discursive relation to the world.

* * *

By considering the relationship between Barthelme's writing and non-discursivity, use-value, and pop objects, I have been examining how his fiction refutes teleology. As I have also been suggesting all along, however, his stories have a high level of overall shape and purpose nonetheless. At this point, therefore, it becomes imperative that I highlight the limitations to seeing Barthelme's language as purely disseminatory and non-teleological, and here a good foil to my position can be found in Steve McCaffery's discussion of writing as a "general economy," wherein he applies ideas found in Derrida's essay "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve" to the linguistic extremes of Language poetry--the work of a group of poets that includes Ron Silliman, Michael Palmer, and Charles Bernstein. McCaffery contrasts the normal economy of meaning--which he calls "restricted" and which I have related

to the commodity logic that binds the signifier to the signified--with what he calls a "general" economy. Although his vision of a general economy reveals one facet of a non-teleological economy, and can certainly be compared to Barthelme's achievements, in the end it suits Language poetry most persuasively.

McCaffery begins with Georges Bataille's definition of a general economy, which is an economy that produces excesses of energy for the exclusive purpose of loss rather than of recuperation. Although I have been arguing that Barthelme's fiction resists being "recuperated" as meaning, his writing does not produce a complete loss of sense, as we may find in much Language poetry or in the prose of someone like Philip Sollers. Barthelme's work, as I have suggested, more often than not produces meaning at a macroscopic level, thus making sense on some level above and beyond the oscillation of diction that these other writers focus on for meaning. The recuperation that occurs in Barthelme's work is nonetheless of a different order than that of more traditional literary texts, and McCaffery's distinctions help us to decide just what patterns Barthelme uses to constitute his work.

McCaffery calls restricted economy "the economy of Capital, Reason, Philosophy and History" (203); it strives to constrain and control language and to deflect it into meaning. Such an economy is predicated upon the loss of graphic, phonic, and gestural materiality within an

idealization into meaning: meaning is thus "staged as the telos and destination of the de-materialization of writing" (204). The chief concern of the general economy, by contrast, is self-dispersal. Such an economy, "whilst not prohibiting meaning's appearance, would only sanction its profitless emergence in a general expenditure" (203). In McCaffery's vision, the general economy does not offer an alternative to exchange and thus cannot be "counter-valuational," because "it is precisely the operation of value that it explicitly disavows . . . . It will engender neither uses nor exchanges but eruptions without purpose" (203). In other words, McCaffery's general economy of writing, however much it privileges ink and sound, dismisses even the concept of use-value, because his vision of dissipation does not allow for the idea of consumption, however purposeless. McCaffery privileges only the breakdown and discharge of language, and never its accumulation and integration.

In contrast, Barthelme's fiction allows for both breakdown and integration. In "Snap, Snap," for example, Barthelme de-contextualizes language to show how, by repetition, it has become meaningless and unerotic. The story, however, is also framed as an ironic pep talk to this Charles Clitterhouse. Though the narrator warns Clitterhouse of the danger of his becoming a "relic of [the] nineteenth century" (Guilty 36) because of his habit of simply "saying" instead of "snapping," the story is more about language in

media culture than it is about this character. Though the story is not allegorical and its real effect is implicit, elaborated as a sensual and enjoyable yet critical expression of language, it is by re-integrating the "snaps" and "cries" as meaningless and mundane but *in relation* to Clitterhouse that the story produces its effect.

To explain what he sees as the need for pure dissemination in language, McCaffery turns to a discussion of the general economy's relationship to speculation. Taking issue with Hegel's master-slave dialectic, McCaffery concludes that what underpins Hegel's argument is the inviolability and irreducibility of Hegel's own self-consciousness. Consequently, as McCaffery sees it, Hegel's *aufhebung* results from "the action of a subject within restricted economy where nothing is wasted and profit is squeezed out of every negative labour" (211-12). McCaffery consequently favors the idea of pure transgression--Bataille's "sovereign moment," which is "an operation entirely devoid of self-interest" that strives towards the dissolution of categories and boundaries in order to "utterly refuse a line of mastery." Thus, in a general economy, the barrier between terms are to be treated as "targets for dissolution" (213).

As a model for language's emancipation from capitalism, Language poetry's emphasis on waste, discharge, expenditure, and secretion proves interesting. I would argue, however,

that Barthelme's abuse of the commodity form is a more effective tactic, because it is more readable: Barthelme is more successful at being radical than the Language poets because he can still make sense. Furthermore, with his irony--a relationship to objects that is like Duchamp's irony of affirmation--he is able to break down the subject-object relationship that McCaffery complains about in Hegel. As Julian Cowley points out, because Barthelme's use of the list is informed by twentieth-century collage forms, he is freed "from the dictates of a dominant, fixed centre" and is allowed to add elements "for the sheer pleasure of inclusion" (294). Nevertheless, his list form anchors these elements--the clutter of late capitalism, essentially--by serving as an originary frame of reference that both gives them shape, and sets them forth like Heidegger's temple.

Indeed, Barthelme's story "Nothing" provides as much useless information as sound poetry or the examples McCaffery cites from the work of Charles Bernstein or Rochelle Owens, yet the logic of Barthelme's language is less stridently paratactical. He constructs his story with a loose logic that gives it sense enough to be consumed but little enough to be restrictive. "The Rise of Capitalism," similarly, is peppered with a number of seemingly random jokes that nonetheless all operate by reifying capitalism as a concept ("I stroke her buttocks, which are perfection, if you can have perfection under the capitalistic system" (Sadness 144);

"'Capitalism sure is sunny!' cried the unemployed Laredo toolmaker" (146); "Capitalism arose and took off its pajamas. Another day, another dollar" (147)). This story expresses capitalism's problems in a paratactical form--a joke form--that nonetheless accumulates its material as a kind of return of the repressed of capitalism. Though Barthelme veils his critique with an apparent lack of seriousness, as he does with most of his political material, he allows his text, as overtly reified language, to be disseminated as pleasurable consumption. He thereby pushes his reader to recognize the larger patterns of capitalism by undermining them *and* by directly engaging with them. McCaffery's practitioners of general economy, in contrast, turn their backs on the whole process, indulging instead in purist indecipherability.

In "The Rise of Capitalism," there is also a section where Barthelme's narrator speaks of the fact that the "sense of community falls victim" to the capitalist struggle that "places every man in competition with his fellows for a share of the available wealth" (Sadness 144). Against this kind of capitalist attack on community, Barthelme posits an entirely different type of social relation in "The Balloon," the centerpiece of which is an emblem for the intact form that is able to repudiate teleology without fulfilling the logic of dissemination. In "The Balloon," the story's narrator makes a huge balloon appear overnight over a large section of Manhattan, for no apparent reason. The story centrally

concerns the "public warmth" that arises on the part of the citizens toward the balloon, and ends with the narrator's plans to bring it back at "some other time of unhappiness" (Unspeakable 22).

The people admire the balloon because it is "not limited, or defined" (21). Its immediate, apparently meaningless being-there, an attribute of fiction that McCaffery ignores in his emphasis on transgression, is what makes it both socially and radically useful--the fact that there is "only *this balloon*, concrete particular, hanging there." Importantly, the citizens of Manhattan recognize after "a certain amount of initial argumentation about the 'meaning' of the balloon" (16) that such discussion is pointless,

> or at least less purposeful than the activities of those who, for example, hung green and blue paper lanterns from the warm gray underside . . . or seized the occasion to write messages on the surface, announcing their availability for the performance of unnatural acts. (17)

Children jump around on the balloon, its upper surface provides a changing landscape that can be played on, its underside is "a pleasure to look up into" (19), and each citizen expresses a "complex of attitudes" (18) in regard to it. Because it produces real social relations rather than hides them, in the balloon the fetishistic aspect of the

commodity form is replaced with a genuinely interactive one.

Such an object, in its presence, breeds qualitative, social relations, thereby becoming use-value, however functionally useless it may be itself. It does not become the commodity that veils because, just like the pop object, it is disconnected from reality by *being*. Indeed, the narrator himself realizes that had "they" painted "LABORATORY TESTS PROVE" or "18% MORE EFFECTIVE" on the side of the balloon (18), they would have severely limited the activity surrounding the balloon. The balloon would have become just another sign, mere utility consumed as advertising. Apparent purposelessness gives the balloon a richer function: without signage, the balloon creates its own version of the "non-productive consumption" (216) that McCaffery privileges, though at an entirely different level of sense: sound poetry, according to McCaffery, "shatters meaning at the point where language commits its move to idealization" by creating a schism between "traditional semantic purpose" and "the material effects of the phonematic structures" (214-15). The balloon, in contrast, is eminently there and understandable, and thus follows, to an extent, traditional semantic purpose. Nonetheless, it also prevents the totalizing "move to idealization" by fostering phenomenal experience instead. By shattering the easy signifier-to-signified relation that the "Laboratory Tests Prove" insignia would have provided, the balloon expresses the extraordinariness of being itself.

Thus the balloon refutes the move to idealization with its own straightforwardness, a literalness for which McCaffery does not seem to allow, but that appears all over Barthelme's fiction to similarly radical effect. In the end, "The Balloon" as story functions in the same way as does the balloon in the story: it has no transcendent meaning, yet it presents something for consumption. It is *there*, and like the balloon it offers "the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet" (21). "The Balloon" takes the reader away from the "grid" of literature and away from the real world, producing pleasure and entertainment, even psychological well-being. The story is a temporary departure from the world, without exchange value: its value is sensual and qualitative. Not part of a continuum, it is momentary, eminently consumable, non-discursive: it is a *manifestation*, like the mysterious appearance of a balloon overhead.

* * *

Most of Barthelme's stories do not, however, produce a single, dominant image or narrative idea, such as this balloon. More often, his stories present and absorb, without collapsing, a vast number of particulars--particulars in the sense of the specific and actual junk that clutters the postmodern landscape as irrepressible detail. Barthelme's method of collage, his manipulation of fragments and detail,

his wilfully arcane allusions, and his ridiculously thorough descriptions of food preparation are but examples of his fetish for an atomized world and for the atomization of the world. Such atomization, however, is not only a "guilty" act on the part of the author,[2] but also part of a conscious dialectic that is reminiscent of the work of postmodern architect and theorist Robert Venturi. In his writing, Venturi couples a need for what he calls the "messy vitality" of the non-sequitur with an "obligation toward the difficult whole." In his own buildings, he translates these dual impulses into surface effects that on the one hand emphasize new and often quite *obvious* meanings, and that on the other veer aggressively away from traditional architectural syntax.

As I have been discussing, although Barthelme's irony serves as a non-teleological production, his stories maintain an intelligibility at the macroscopic level. This is facilitated by his philosophical links to pop art which, Wilde explains, maintains a sense of order even as it effects "a more genuinely suspensive vision than do chaos-drunk writers like Federman and Suckenick" (148). Wilde criticizes Federman and Suckenick for locking their readers into the limiting confines of their narrators's consciousnesses, even as they create a superficially more fragmented and chaotic fiction than that of their contemporaries and their modernist predecessors (140). Pop, because more accepting of the world around it, is at once less reductive and more relational than

"surfiction," and more consolidating because it proffers positive, unobscuring presence. Imitating pop's positivity allows Barthelme to deal with what Wilde calls "consciousness and what is outside it" (147), thus making his fiction not only more responsive to Husserl's "consciousness-of" dialectic, but also allowing him to produce interactions that shape *themselves* into wholes. His works, as a consequence, express an atomization that is inherent (though sometimes hidden) in the world, and not simply an artistic product.

The "ready-made" meaningfulness of pop images short-circuits the need to translate life into art, since by their very nature these images flatten out the life/art distinction. Pop simultaneously links the weight and substance of the profane world to the lightness and abstraction of the virtual worlds of advertising and the media. Barthelme uses an equally upfront presentation to animate the mundanities of the postmodern world as a means to uncovering positive value. He accepts the "pure circulation" that belongs to the late capitalist scene as an artistic possibility rather than as an inevitably homogenizing factor; indeed, by producing "works" which, because of their readable immediacy, alienate themselves from normal economies of fiction, he is able to "set forth" late capitalism's actual psycho-economic heterogeneity. In a sense, Barthelme has accepted as a premise the same world that a critic like Jean Baudrillard later describes, though in contrast to

Baudrillard, who gets bogged down in his pessimism, Barthelme seeks out the possibilities afforded by such conditions.

In "The Ecstasy of Communication," Baudrillard envisions our cultural environment as saturated with information that is so fluid, regulated, and readable that within this setting human subjectivity is degraded and replaced by a consciousness undifferentiated from the external world. Ecstasy replaces alienation in this postmodern world; despite the conventional connotations of such terms, however, Baudrillard construes the loss of alienation as negative, because for him, alienation actually helps to define the interiority of the subject: the private world is "alienating to the extent that it separate[s] you from others," he explains. Conversely, the ecstasy of communication leaves the subject bombarded by all that "useless information that comes to you from the entire world, like a microscopic pornography of the universe, useless, excessive, just like the sexual close-up in a porno film" (130). In effect, ecstasy alienates the subject from himself.

Such ecstasy, furthermore, results from the perfection of communication. The rise in the functionality and homogeneity of signs leads to a "pornography" of readability, fluidity, availability, regulation, forced signification, and performativity in functions and objects. Such ecstasy, Baudrillard argues, "is the obscenity of what no longer has any secret, of what dissolves completely in information and

communication," and it creates in the postmodern subject "a new form of schizophrenia" (131-33). Mass media and mass communication turn us into networks without subjective interiority by so bombarding us with the "total instanteneity of things" that we can no longer produce the limits of our own being: we become instead mere "switching centers," or screens of pure exteriority.

Barthelme responds to such premises first by accepting them as genuine conditions of existence, and then by turning them against themselves. Where Baudrillard wallows in this world of "ecstasy," Barthelme re-alienates it for us through his irony. Maintaining a fiction of surface, Barthelme presents the world as unreal by finding depth in surface and by re-presenting apparently complete presence as mystery. Where for Baudrillard the postmodern world replaces the "scene of interiority" of the subject with "a non-reflecting surface, an immanent surface" (127), Barthelme takes a deeper look at what "remains within" (*in manere*) by following the pop model. In so doing he pushes the limits of the immediately available in order to find what it may conceal.

Baudrillard laments, as a symptom of the loss of humanity's psychological dimension, that "people no longer project themselves into their objects" with fantasies of possession, loss, and mourning (127). Pop artists, in contrast, celebrate the absence of such projection, while at the same time their objects resist the idea of a world

without interiority; by adding depth to very idea of the screen, they show how the supposedly immediate readability and availability of the objects and functions that turn postmodern subjects into screens is only apparent. Warhol's Campbell's soup can is just such an example. Although Warhol maintains the integrity of the soup can's surface, he also "sets forth" its being by undercutting the image as both advertisement and fine art. The advertisement--a mere image of an object--becomes an object once again, one of contemplation; the piece of fine art--a representation or act of imagination--becomes an already-represented, poorly imagined object belonging to the profane world.

Warhol thus simultaneously involves and distances his viewers from their actual, mundane world; in his work, the art object alienates and becomes cognitive in the Brechtian sense: it is not presented for its aesthetic richness, but rather with a distance that is the product of aestheticization. Baudrillard calls the commodity the "first great medium of the modern world" because its essence, in the form of its price, is always fully available; for him the commodity is "readable," and so he opposes it to the simple object, "which never completely gives up its secret" (131). In Warhol's hands, however, the commodity gets turned back into an object--the object of aesthetics.

Barthelme follows suit, though more in the manner of Rauschenberg and Dine as I have discussed, converting the

multiplicity of world, media, and commodity from pornographic immediacy to non-sequitur estrangement. Barthelme alienates language's readability from itself, but by producing a pleasurable alienation. He thus moves beyond pop and replaces Brecht's cognitive ruptures with what I earlier called a sensual *seduction* that foregrounds the extraordinary being of that same world that Baudrillard dismisses as completely functionalized and homogenized in "pure circulation." Where Brecht strove to make us aware of capitalism and its evils, Barthelme strives to show the positives that erupt underneath and within and despite its veneer.

Baudrillard distrusts pure communication: the total transparency, proximity, and instantaneity of products and information. In contrast, according to Klinkowitz, it is in his lists and litanies that Barthelme best displays his talent for "revitalizing language by carefully selecting it and placing it in strange and insightful forms" ("Donald" 65). The list, however, is perhaps the best example of a purely functional language form, and by using it to estrange and to please, Barthelme replaces what Baudrillard calls the "obscenity" of functionality--where "all secrets, spaces and scenes [are] abolished in a single dimension of information" (131)--with the secrecy of his own idiosyncrasy.

Yet more often than he uses functional language forms, and even more often than he uses functional language--the

source material for his parodies--Barthelme uses language itself, functionally: his language is literal. Instead of serving as information, however, his method fulfills Jean-Francois Lyotard's premise that the postmodern "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (81). "The Glass Mountain" provides a perfect instance of such a paradoxical presentation; indeed, the story in its entirety is emblematic of much of Barthelme's enterprise.

On the surface, the story's purpose is metafictional; arranged as one hundred numbered sentences and fragments, it depicts a narrator climbing a mountain to "disenchant a symbol" (City Life 62). The story ends when the narrator approaches the symbol ("with its layers of meaning"), touches it, and it changes "into only a beautiful princess" (64-65). As in most of Barthelme's stories, however, the tale's metafictional component is a means to another end. In section 71, for instance, while climbing, the narrator refers to A Dictionary of Literary Terms's definition of a "symbol," which uses the nightingale as its example, in contrast to the traffic light, an example of a sign. The next entry returns us to the action, but with a twist: "72. A number of nightingales with traffic lights tied to their legs flew past me" (63).

The dictionary's semiotic distinctions having been discarded, the nightingales and their traffic lights rupture the narrative. Nevertheless, the literal presence of these

nightingales within the tale is actually more significant than any metafictional commentary they may offer; their contribution to the action, or at least to the quality of the narrative, is indisputable, as is also the negatory sentence fragment that ends the story: "100. Nor are eagles plausible, not at all, not for a moment" (65). The nightingales prevail as a positive presence because they exist beyond their role as metafictional short circuits. As logical absurdities, they gain the kind of occult qualities that the narrator's dictionary actually attributes to the symbol: "it presumably arouses deep feelings and is regarded as possessing properties beyond what the eye alone sees" (63).

Through his irony, Barthelme adds a layer of meaning to both the symbol and the sign by combining them and reducing them to signifiers. Similarly, by re-conceiving a numbering system as part of a narrative, Barthelme provides another means by which to show how information, however immediate, available, and readable it may seem, can be divorced from itself. Barthelme reminds us that in language all is possible, and he uncovers this secret by going no further than the surface of language, transforming the "pure communication" value of numbers by adding them to the fractured narrative surface as free-floating signifiers.

This activity of breaking narrative up into signifiers, however, raises a central question that cannot be explained away through a simple analogy to pop art. What Barthelme

achieves through the atomization of language and various larger discourses may be positive in purely aesthetic terms, but it is imperative that we ask, finally, how an aesthetics of fragmentation and un-dialecticized negativity, even if not chiefly disseminatory, relates finally to "truth" (for lack of a better term) in the postmodern world. I would answer that Barthelme's work is peculiarly radical, in the political sense of the term, precisely because it avoids serving up mere negativity even as it erodes the power structures that are supposed to contain it. Where Hegel would counter negativity by reconciling it and incorporating it, Barthelme's mindset is much closer to Lyotard's, who ends his essay, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?", with the anti-Hegelian imperative: "Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable" (82).

* * *

Despite the negative associations that his use of a combat metaphor may yield, Lyotard demonstrates how manoeuvres against totality are the most positive moves available within contemporary epistemology. Indeed, by historicizing knowledge in <u>The Postmodern Condition</u> to demonstrate its radical nature, Lyotard not only exposes the falsification that totalizing visions of knowledge practice, but he also illustrates how an access to "truth" can be achieved through systematic de-stabilization--by what he calls the "little narrative" ("the quintessential form of

imaginative invention" (60)) and "legitimation by paralogy." As a by-product of his study, Lyotard also demonstrates how science provides postmodern aesthetics with an empirical justification for its atomistic tendencies.

Lyotard begins his study by distinguishing between the modern and the postmodern, focusing on what he calls "metanarratives": that is, large systems that serve as "project[s] of totalization" (34). In his analysis, he uses the term "modern" to designate "any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse," or that makes "an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of the Spirit" (xxiii). In contrast, he defines the "postmodern" as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv), an incredulity that he links, notably, to scientific progress.

Lyotard's study is, according to Fredric Jameson, "a thinly veiled polemic" (vii) against Jurgen Habermas's concepts of legitimation and communicative action. According to Habermas, clear communication between those in power and those who are not can lead to the establishment of some kind of consensus about meaning and value for a particular discourse; such consensus in turn legitimates that discourse. Lyotard argues, however, that Habermas really strives for the creation of "a unity of experience" (72) that must be submitted "to that severe reexamination which postmodernity imposes on the thought of Enlightenment, on the idea of a

unitary end of history and of a subject" (73). By way of reexamination, Lyotard provides an analysis of modern science more sympathetic to critics of ideology than to Habermas; in the process, Habermas's concept of legitimation is reconstrued as a "legitimation by power" (47).

For Lyotard, "modern" science demonstrates the danger that unity and consensus pose within metanarrative. Because modern science legitimates technology as its norm, he argues, and because technology emphasizes efficiency--the minimization of input and the maximization of output--modern science comes to validate the commensurability of the system above all else, in order to maintain and improve its performativity. Because doubt and rupture--science's normal source of feedback and innovation--are at odds with performativity, they are suppressed. Consequently, modern science's systemization leads to a self-legitimation that falsifies science itself.

Moreover, the forces of capitalism serve largely to reinforce such a tautology, leading to what Lyotard calls the "mercantilization of knowledge" (51), a drive that compels the scientist to ask "Is it saleable?" or "Is it efficient?" rather than "Is it true?" Because those with wealth and power allocate research funds, and because they tend only to support those who will produce proof amenable to their own needs (whether political or performative), truth is modified in the interests of power, following a simple equation: "No

money, no proof--and that means no verification of statements and no truth" (45). The quest for proof gains the upper hand over the quest for actual knowledge: modern science undermines what Lyotard terms "knowledge based on revelation" (44) because revelation--the product of doubt and rupture--leads to a complexification of knowledge, which itself threatens performativity. As Lyotard explains: "The reduction in complexity is required to maintain the system's power capability" (61).

"Postmodern" science, in contrast, aggressively pursues instability and complexification, and so modifies the meaning of knowledge that it becomes, according to Lyotard, the "produc[tion of] not the known, but the unknown" (60). In effect, what postmodern science does is to perform what Lyotard sees as naturally incumbent upon science itself, and to consolidate such procedures into what philosopher of science Thomas S. Kuhn would call a "paradigm."[3] Pure empirical research, Lyotard points out, focuses after all on rupture: "working on a proof means searching for and 'inventing' counterexamples" (54). Furthermore, new discoveries--the lifeblood of science--are unpredictable, and thus lead to the eternal deferral of consensus (61). Hence Lyotard privileges what he calls paralogy--a term which he does not define, but for which he gives as examples open systems, local determinism, and antimethod (100n.211).

Consensus, the ideal of Habermas's communicative model,

is therefore a false mode of knowledge for Lyotard, who conceives of science itself as "a model of an 'open system,' in which a statement only becomes relevant if it 'generates ideas'"--that is, new statements and new "game rules." In fact, he explains, in pure science a statement is only "deemed worth retaining the moment it marks a difference from what is already known." Consequently, when science becomes systematized (or totalized), "it is a fact of the socioeconomic system and not of the pragmatics of science itself" (64). In a sense, all that is conceivable or worth conceiving in science consist of *departures* from science as a static body of knowledge.

Lyotard's conception of knowledge is, furthermore, directly related to his views on aesthetics, the discussion of which he anchors in "Answering the Question" with his concept of the "sublime." The sublime, he explains, develops as a conflict in the subject between the faculty to conceive and the faculty to present (77). Art is postmodern when it devotes itself "to present[ing] the fact that the unpresentable exists" (78). Modernist art, in contrast, "allows the unpresentable to be put forward only *as the missing contents*" (81, my emphasis). Though both of these visions of art relate to the sublime, Lyotard finally prefers the postmodern version because it provides a positive construction of the unpresentable.

Lyotard discloses this concern for the positive late in

the same essay by lamenting that the sublime is, in fact, a form that does not "effect the last reconciliation between language games," and by turning hopeful immediately upon deciding that it is not only "the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel)" that can totalize language games "into a real unity." Within this same disclosure, Lyotard reveals that on the one hand, he is searching for "real unity," but on the other, he is rather fearful of the kind proposed by Hegel: "the price to pay for [Hegel's transcendental] illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia for the whole and the one" (81). Lyotard nonetheless proves to have previously solved this problem of terror in The Postmodern Condition: "A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games . . . implies a renunciation of terror" (66), he argues, after first having consolidated such "recognition" into a unity in the form of postmodern science.

The modernist tendency in art, because it approximates pure science's approach to knowledge, strives to discover the unpresentable, but such discovery forever forces the modification of its borders. Postmodern science, in contrast, actually systematizes the unpresentable--that is, it learns to *present* it--in order to be able to prove the existence of the unpresentable. Thus where the sublime is conventionally a form of negativity, Lyotard's bias toward

the positive turns him onto the postmodern, which has absorbed the sublime's emphasis on conflict as its paradigmatic construction. In postmodern science, Lyotard is able to find a model of systematization, and through it he can turn paralogy into a tool of legitimation. As a system, however, legitimation by paralogy is peculiarly radical: in contrast to innovation, for instance, which is "under the command of the system," paralogy is a move played both from within and against the pragmatics of knowledge (61). Paralogy is thus able to legitimate itself as self-rupturing, which in turn allows external forces to limit its ability to define all its parameters when it does, in fact, legitimate itself.

Analogously, Barthelme enriches language not by entering into consensus with pre-existing systems of knowledge and meaning, but by generating new ideas out of these systems, as departures. Not to defamiliarize such systems would be simply to increase their performativity, and to produce proof rather than insight. Barthelme foregrounds instead the idiosyncratic and qualitative aspects of the language and form of these systems, in order to open them against themselves and consequently to create a positive presentation by finding within them that which is unpresentable. In "The Sandman," for instance, Barthelme uses parody and tone to allow himself to discover an attitude that materializes only at variance with a Freudian metanarrative. In this story,

paralogy legitimates itself thus by first absorbing an external narrative, and then by discovering through it a new, valid attitude in a sense undiscoverable in and of itself.

"The Sandman" takes the form of a letter by a man writing to his girlfriend's psychiatrist. The man is trying to convince the psychiatrist that his girlfriend's wish to terminate her analysis and to get a piano should be construed as the legitimate expression of her needs. The story presents the letter-writer as a relatively naive character who is nonetheless well versed in Freud, and Barthelme uses his tone to parody Freud's intricate and slippery discursivity, and to rupture aspects of the totalizing Freudian metanarrative that would suggest that Susan's desire is an evasion or a concealment of some deeper issue: "The one thing you cannot consider, by the nature of your training and of the discipline itself," he tells the psychiatrist, "is that she really might want to terminate the analysis and buy the piano" (Sadness 88).

Barthelme is able to produce in his narrator an attitude of acceptance that is clear and possible only as difference against a Freudian framework. The narrator concludes: "What I am saying is that Susan is wonderful. As is" (95). Such a premise is, from within the frame of psycho-pathological discourse, highly unusual: it is indeed a postmodern production as Lyotard would have it, "not in principle governed by the pre-established rules" (81). Whereas the

Freudian analysis has been, we can presume, invasive, this narrator instead keeps everything on the surface. The story, through the stance of its narrator, is a practice of incredulity towards psychoanalytic discourse; it is a "little narrative" that enables the production of one character's startlingly direct and genuine acceptance of another. Furthermore, through the charming absurdity of the letter's tone--"A Steinway is a known quantity, whereas an analysis can succeed or fail" (89)--Barthelme allows the unpresentable to appear not as "missing contents," but materialized in the form of this boyfriend.

Barthelme thus presents Freud chiefly to discover the unpresentable that lurks within his metanarrative. Through his narrator, Barthelme subjects Freud to play, and in the end this letter-writer becomes an emblem quite serious enough even for Huizinga, for whom the play concept is after all "of a higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness" (45). Indeed, "The Sandman" replicates play's inversion of hierarchy: from the series of signifiers that coalesce around his central character, Barthelme produces not only a pleasurable story but also an altogether serious statement of affirmation. He thereby proves that a "little narrative" formulated out of the assumptions of a larger "metanarrative" can in a sense overtake its source. The resulting shifting of the ground forms the basis of the story, and the result is

positive, because the paralogy that legitimates the fictional structure is humour.

CONCLUSION

However accurately postmodern science may describe the world in which we live, the more conventional practice of empirical science--whether it be cancer research or the development of new computer software--is perceived to be more relevant to our lives and thus more important. Though chaos theory adds a crucial, albeit philosophical perspective to our understanding of the world, it does not solve problems such as the depletion of the ozone layer. Analogously, postmodern fiction, with its highly aestheticized vision of the world, seems only to have a tangential relation to the "human condition" as we actually understand it. Moreover, seeing that as a culture we now find ourselves working within an exceedingly political mindset, not only in academia but in society at large as well, critics now more than ever approach literature tactically. Given the play and excess that characterize postmodern literature, it is unsurprising that innumerable critics see such literature as an ineffectual response to a new more political world.

Consequently, Barthelme's work tends also to beg general questions about its own "relevance." Still, his fiction originates in the same decade that gave birth to the political disposition that informs our own time, and although Barthelme brings a mix of intuition and indirection that is at odds with a tactician's vision of the world, his work remains often laudably political. Yet even such politics

have met with objections from various critics. Hutcheon, for one, associates postmodern irony with a largely white, well-educated, and relatively affluent demographic (Irony 195-96). She also speaks of how parody "appears to flourish [as a genre] primarily in 'democratically' culturally sophisticated societies" (Parody 94). Douwe Fokkema concentrates on the link between postmodernism and affluence:

> The Postmodernist preference for nonselection as a principle of text production coincides with an *embarras de choix* originating in favorable material conditions and seemingly unlimited technological potentialities. Secularism and demythologization cleared the way for . . . any selection of register or style, but it is the condition of relative wealth which enabled authors to produce their postmodernist artifacts. (234)

These are valid objections and certainly it is true that a number of Barthelme's preferred writing strategies are prescribed by clear limitations of class, nationality, and wealth. Against these objections, though, it can equally be argued that Barthelme is being *responsive* to his world, however affluent, and that he strives, as Andreas Huyssen puts it, "to develop the revolutionary tendencies of art out of the production relations of capitalism" (153).

Barthelme himself recognizes that his art belongs to a tradition that is more contemplative than active, but nonetheless ethical: "The aim of meditating about the world

is finally to change the world," he writes. "It is this meliorative aspect of literature that provides its ethical dimension" ("Not-Knowing" 124). When Larry McCaffery asks him how he responds to critics who argue that his fiction is not "'relevant' enough" and who criticize him for focusing on minor issues rather than "dealing with 'big issues' in a direct way--the Vietnam war, political scandals, minority rights, violence," Barthelme answers:

> I'd argue that this was a misreading. . . . I think a careful reading of what I've written would disclose that all the things you mention are touched upon, in one way or another--not confronted directly, but there. The Vietnam war colored a lot of pieces. ("Interview" 41).

By way of addressing this same issue, Thomas Pynchon makes a statement both vague enough and directed enough that he is perhaps best able of all the critics to capture the hidden urgency of Barthelme's politics: "Trying to describe Barthelme's politics is as dodgy as trying to label his work, but Watergate sure did get him revved up" (xv).

Pynchon's introduction to <u>The Teachings of Don B.</u> provides, in fact, perhaps the most apt characterization of Barthelme as a writer, because in it he focuses on Barthelme as a person. Pynchon can afford to take such a slant because he is a colleague of Barthelme's, rather than his critic and interpreter; having no personal interest in the control of Barthelme's meaning, Pynchon is able to appreciate those

aspects of Barthelme's work that are actually most important. According to Pynchon, for instance, the reason that Barthelme did not become "a world-class curmudgeon"--or a more overtly political writer, we may add--was due to his "hopeful and unbitter heart" and his "tenderness and geniality." What shines through instead in his writing is an "inescapable sadness," one that manifests itself as what Pynchon calls *melancholy*. Although Barthelme's and Pynchon's postmodernist colleague Italo Calvino, in a different context, suitably portrays melancholy as a "sadness that has taken on lightness" and that "casts doubt on the self, on the world, and on the whole network of relationships that are at stake" (Six Memos 19), Pynchon's choice to borrow the Elizabethan use of the term to depict Barthelme's metaphysical stance to the world is even more appropriate: "melancholy is a far richer and more complex ailment than simple depression. There is a generous amplitude of possibility, chances for productive behavior, even what may be identified as a sense of humor" (xviii).

According to Pynchon, Barthelme's is an "urban melancholy," a weary immunity to joy and surprise seen on the faces of cab drivers, bartenders, and street dealers that fosters an "anti-transcendent" gallows humour, one that "finds high amusement in failure and loss, and [that] celebrates survival one day, one disaster, to the next" (xviii). Since the best way to attack the numbing effects of

the late capitalist world is to survive it, Barthelme's writing thus provides a lesson important to a great many people. Furthermore, by his close consideration of the world and animation of it, Barthelme transforms it into something that is both more trivial and less, and consequently both less threatening and more meaningful.

According to Pynchon, Barthelme's melancholy, along with his published work, is his great gift to the world, "presented, if we will but look, as a praxis and example, *a way to get us through*" (xx, my emphasis). He adds: "If this is not exactly a guide for the perplexed, it is still a good honest push back against the forces that favor tragedy" (xx-xxi). This is a push that Pynchon admires since he, like Barthelme and various pop artists, believes in what Amaya calls a world "where ironies are more meaningful than tragedies" (18). Perhaps, after all, these artists recognize that tragedy, despite its trumped-up air of seriousness, only veils a voyeuristic eroticization of despair and misfortune that is itself more aestheticizing than irony. Indeed, tragedy is backward looking, forever reproducing the same archetypal pattern by guaranteeing the same tragic climax. Instead, Barthelme, Pynchon, and the pop artists all seem to join Huizinga in believing that play will pave the way to new forms of culture and civilization; accordingly, through his melancholy, Barthelme looks forward, not with false hope, but with a playful intent that allows him to transform the

boring, the reified, and the meaningless into that which is serious and meaningful, or at least acceptable.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

1 The work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez is perhaps the best case in point. In One Hundred Years of Solitude, the fantastic occurs for real: the entire population of Macondo, for instance, actually loses its memory and ability to sleep (45-50) and a trickle of blood spreads physically, not metaphorically, throughout the town (135). Incidents occurring in magic realist texts thus differ from those taking place in the more traditional texts because the former refuse "interpretation": Rebeca does not eat earth because it signifies "spiritual hunger," nor does she swallow whitewash to "purify herself"; her actions are instead dictated by her actual state of being and not because of Garcia Marquez's need for metaphor. Moreover, Garcia Marquez's fiction differs from the work of the romantics by its strangely metaphysical affirmation of the ordinariness of the fantastic: Macondo is made to be provincial, whereas the tastes of the romantics are for the exotic.

In "Magicking the Real: Paradoxes of Postmodern Writing," Lori Chamberlain makes a useful comparison between a passage from William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Garcia Marquez's trickle of blood: in the section from Faulkner that she selects, Faulkner demonstrates "the transformation of voice into silence" by depicting it as the "trickle of a stream disappearing through sand." The difference between this trickle and Garcia Marquez's, of course, "is that Faulkner relies on the simile to both separate and confuse the realms of fact and fiction whereas Garcia Marquez has made what might have been a simile . . . into something we are to take as fact, *the truth now stranger than fiction*" (11, my emphasis).

CHAPTER 2

1 In some stories, Barthelme's main aim seems to be to foreground the materiality of the printed text. "His pictures, his typographical effects," Cowley explains, "help fix the text as a composed surface, to be read (seen, contemplated) as such" (294). Cowley gives the impression in his essay, however, that such materiality is one of Barthelme's central focuses, but this is true only in portions of a select number of earlier works. In his later fiction, these effects are incorporated with less overtly metafictional intent, as I have indicated for instance in my analysis of "The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace."

2 Klinkowitz briefly outlines Barthelme's associations in Life of Fiction: "Since his arrival in New York, Barthelme has lived among the painters--in his case, on the Village's

West 11th Street--and has been closely associated with the gallery life which had propelled him from Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum and the University of Houston Forum to New York, Location, and the New Yorker" (73-74).

3 With this argument, Benjamin anticipates the writings of film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, who discusses in his 1960 book, Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality, film's ability to reveal and "redeem" empirical reality both more convincingly and in more depth.

CHAPTER 3

1 As an epigraph to his essay, "Surfiction--Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction," Federman cites part of a letter from Sukenick, whose characterization of fiction coincides in part with Barthelme's practice of it. Sukenick's formulation, however, also emphasizes an important difference: "Rather than serving as a mirror or redoubling on itself," he writes, "fiction adds itself to the world, creating a meaningful 'reality' that did not previously exist" (5). By highlighting the creation of a new reality, Sukenick captures the surfictionists's tendency to *impose* new form on the world, whereas Barthelme simply tends to find possibilities in the world that already exists, by making manifest that which may be more or less hidden.

2 Barthelme clearly suggests that his affinity for fragmentation comes from impulses that are as much personal as they are aesthetic when he notes in his introduction to Guilty Pleasures, partly by way of explaining his title, that a number of his stories are simply "pretexts for the pleasure of cutting up and pasting together pictures, a secret vice gone public" (n. pag.). "Guilty pleasures are the best," he adds.

3 Kuhn's elaboration of the concept of a "paradigm" appears in his landmark study, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, a work that clearly influences Lyotard's discussion in The Postmodern Condition.

WORKS CITED

I. PRIMARY SOURCES

FICTION

Amateurs. New York: Farrar, 1976.

City Life. New York: Farrar, 1970.

The Dead Father. 1975. New York: Penguin, 1986.

Forty Stories. New York: Penguin, 1989.

Great Days. New York: Farrar, 1979.

Guilty Pleasures. New York: Farrar, 1974.

Sadness. New York: Farrar, 1972.

Snow White. 1967. New York: Atheneum, 1972.

The Teachings of Don B.: Satires, Fables, and Illustrated Stories, and Plays of Donald Barthelme. New York: Turtle Bay, 1992.

Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts. New York: Farrar, 1968.

CRITICAL WORKS

"The Case of the Vanishing Product." Harper's Magazine Oct. 1961: 30-32.

"After Joyce." Location 2 (1963): 13-16.

"Not-Knowing." 1985. Major Writers of Short Fiction: Stories and Commentaries. Ed. Ann Charters. Boston: Bedford, 1993. 113-24.

INTERVIEWS

"Donald Barthelme." Interview with Jerome Klinkowitz. The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers. Ed. Joe David Bellamy. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1975. 45-54.

"An Interview with Donald Barthelme." Interview with Larry McCaffery. Anything Can Happen: Interviews With Contemporary American Novelists. Ed. Tom LeClair and Larry McCaffery. Urbana: U Illinois P, 1983. 32-44.

II. SECONDARY SOURCES

Agacinski, Sylviane. "On a Thesis." Soren Kierkegaard. Ed. Harold Bloom. Modern Critical Views. New York: Chelsea House, 1989. 117-48.

Amaya, Mario. Pop as Art: A Survey of the New Super Realism. London: Studio Vista, 1965.

Baradat, Leon P. Political Ideologies: Their Origins and Impact. 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1988.

Barth, John. "The Literature of Exhaustion." 1967. The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction. New York: Putnam, 1984. 62-76.

---. "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction." The Atlantic 245.1 (1980): 65-71.

Barthes, Roland. Image, Music, Text. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill, 1988. 142-48.

Baudrillard, Jean. "The Ecstasy of Communication." Trans. John Johnston. Postmodern Culture. Ed. Hal Foster. London: Pluto, 1990. 126-34.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends. Ed. David H. Richter. New York: St. Martin's, 1989. 571-88.

Birch, David. "Language as Showing." Language, Literature and Critical Practice: Ways of Analysing Text. London: Routledge, 1989. 5-7.

Bishop, Lloyd. Romantic Irony in French Literature From Diderot to Beckett. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1989. 1-19, 185-207.

Booth, Wayne C. A Rhetoric of Irony. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974.

Borges, Jorge Luis. Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings. New York: New Directions, 1964.

Burger, Peter. Theory of the Avant-Garde. 1974. Trans. Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: U of Minnesoata P, 1984.

Calvino, Italo. "Lightness." Six Memos for the Next Millenium. Toronto: Vintage, 1995. 3-29.

Chamberlain, Lori. "Magicking the Real: Paradoxes of Postmodern Writing." Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide. Ed. Larry McCaffery. New York: Greenwood, 1986.

Conrad, Joseph. Heart of Darkness and The Secret Sharer. 1902. New York: Bantam, 1981.

Couturier, Maurice, and Regis Durand. Donald Barthelme. London: Methuen, 1982.

Cowley, Julian. "'weeping map intense activity din': Reading Donald Barthelme." University of Toronto Quarterly 60.2 (1990-91): 292-304.

Derrida, Jacques. "Force and Signification." Writing and Difference. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1978. 3-30.

Docherty, Thomas. After Theory: Postmodernism/Postmarxism. London: Routledge, 1990.

Federman, Raymond. "Surfiction--Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction." Surfiction: Fiction Now...and Tomorrow. Chicago: Swallow, 1975. 5-15.

Finch, Christopher. Pop Art: Object and Image. 1968. London: Studio Vista, 1973.

Fleming, William. Arts & Ideas. New York: Holt, 1986.

Fokkema, Douwe. "Concluding Observations: Is There a Future for Research on Postmodernism?" Exploring Postmodernism. Ed. Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1987. 233-41.

Furst, Lilian R. Fictions of Romantic Irony. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.

Garcia Marquez, Gabriel. One Hundred Years of Solitude. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Harper, 1991.

Hassan, Ihab. "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism." 1982. The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1987. 84-96.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Origin of the Work of Art." Trans. Albert Hofstadter. Basic Writings. Ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper, 1993. 139-212.

Huizinga, Johan. Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture. 1938. Boston: Beacon, 1970.

Husserl, Edmund. The Paris Lectures. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964.

Hutcheon, Linda. Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony. London: Routledge, 1995.

---. A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms. New York: Methuen, 1985.

Huyssen, Andreas. After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986.

Jameson, Fredric. Foreward. Lyotard vii-xxi.

Kierkegaard, Soren. The Concept of Irony, With Continual Reference to Socrates. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989. 241-329.

Klinkowitz, Jerome. "Donald Barthelme." Literary Disruptions: The Making of Post-Contemporary Fiction. Urbana: U Illinois P, 1975. 62-81.

---. The Life of Fiction. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977. 73-83.

Koestenbaum, Peter. Introductory Essay. The Paris Lectures. By Edmund Husserl. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964. ix-lxxvi.

Kracauer, Siegfried. Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality. London: Oxford UP, 1960.

Kuhn, Thomas S. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970.

Langer, Susanne K. "Discursive and Presentational Forms." Philosophy in a New Key. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1942. 79-102.

Larmore, Charles. The Romantic Legacy. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. 76-83.

LeMay, Eric C., and Jennifer A. Pitts. Heidegger For Beginners. Illus. Paul Gordon. New York: Writers and Readers, 1994.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. The Postmodern Condition. 1979. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.

Marx, Karl. Capital. Vol. 1. London: Dent, 1946.

McCaffery, Larry. "Donald Barthelme: The Aesthetics of Trash." The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme and William H. Gass. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1982. 99-150.

McCaffery, Steve. North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973-1986. Toronto: Nightwood Editions, 1986.

McHale, John. "The Plastic Parthenon." 1967. Russell and Gablik 47-53.

Molesworth, Charles. Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved From Drowning. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1982.

Muecke, Douglas C. Irony. London: Methuen, 1970.

Pynchon, Thomas. Introduction. Barthelme, Teachings xv-xxii.

Russell, John, and Suzi Gablik. Pop Art Redefined. London: Thames and Hudson, 1969.

Schlegel, Friedrich. Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments. Trans. Peter Firchow. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1971.

Scholes, Robert. The Fabulators. New York: Oxford UP, 1967.

Sontag, Susan. Against Interpretation, and Other Essays. New York: Anchor, 1990.

Venturi, Robert. Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968.

Whiting, Anthony. The Never-Resting Mind: Wallace Stevens' Romantic Irony. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996. 1-57.

Wilde, Alan. Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Ironic Imagination. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981.

Woolf, Virginia. To the Lighthouse. San Diego: Harcourt, 1989.