

Donald Barthelme and Not-Knowing: 1964-1987

DPhil Thesis

Rachel Abramowitz

Christ Church, Oxford University

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This thesis argues that Barthelme's major 1985 essay "Not-Knowing" contains within its title Barthelme's central artistic idea, and that not-knowing informs both the subject of his fiction and his philosophy of art. This study will be the first critical treatment of Barthelme that positions his work from beginning to end in terms of the dimensions of not-knowing that came out of his own reading in psychology, art theory, philosophy, religion, and education, offering coherent readings of content and suggesting the ways in which content relates to form. The Introduction explores the origins of Barthelme's ideas of not-knowing, paying special attention to the influence of Mallarmé, Joyce, and Beckett on Barthelme's first characterisations of not-knowing, creativity, and reception. The first chapter gives an in-depth reading of *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (1964), Barthelme's first collection of stories. Though Barthelme had not yet begun to formally theorise his ideas of not-knowing, they were already latent in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*'s characterisation of psychological experience, specifically in relation to anxiety, boredom, and interpretation. The second chapter looks at the ways in which Harold Rosenberg's theories of the visual arts, and especially collage, which Barthelme encountered while co-editing *Location* magazine with Rosenberg in the early 1960s, address form and not-knowing, and how Barthelme treats these issues in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), *City Life* (1970), *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine* (1971), *Sadness* (1972), *Guilty Pleasures* (1974), and *Amateurs* (1976). The third chapter shows how Barthelme's university studies in 19th century philosophy, especially Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Irony* (1841) and Kierkegaard's treatment of Schlegel in that treatise, inform his concern with irony, both in theory and practice, in *City Life* (1970), *Great Days* (1979), and *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* (1983). Chapter Four argues that Kierkegaard's theories of education and religion in *Either/Or* (1843) and *The Present Age* (1846), as well as the contemporary incarnation of Dewey's ideas of progressive education, both had a profound influence on Barthelme's ideas about the way a society is educated into knowingness, the artist's aspiration toward not-knowing, and the validity of religion in the postmodern world. The conclusion to the thesis reexamines the Introduction's argument about literary influence through a brief reading of *The Dead Father* (1975).

Barthelme is recognised as one of the most important American postmodernist writers, and yet there has been relatively little critical treatment of his oeuvre. The major books that address Barthelme's work, which include Jerome Klinkowitz's *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction* (1975) and *Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition* (1991), as well as Alan Wilde's *Horizons of Assent* (1981) and Stanley Trachtenberg's *Understanding Donald Barthelme* (1990), belong to a two-decade span of classifying writers such as Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and John Barth using a limited set of ideas about postmodernism that were interesting as theory at the time, but did little to explore the actual literary, philosophical, and aesthetic content and contexts of these writers' works (with the possible exception of Pynchon). This thesis aims to rescue Barthelme from now-hackneyed ways of talking about postmodernism, which include

lumping various aesthetic techniques under the rubric of “metafiction,” claiming that the era’s sole interest is in surface at the expense of depth, and that the dependence upon clichés is a deliberate expression of artistic exhaustion.

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Style and Format

When a primary text is first mentioned, the date or dates of first book publication are indicated in parentheses. The style of this thesis is based upon the 15th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*, as recommended in the Notes for Guidance provided by the Oxford University English Faculty to doctoral students. The *Chicago Manual* states that “if the bibliography includes all works cited in the notes, the note citations—even the citations to a particular work—can be quite concise, since readers can turn to the bibliography for publication details and other information”; this thesis follows these instructions as to the form of citations, i.e. not listing publication details in footnotes.¹

American English spellings are used in direct quotes from American-published sources, while the rest of the thesis adheres to the rules of British English.

¹ *The Chicago Manual of Style*. 15th ed., 594.

References and Abbreviations

Listed below is a series of abbreviations for the references to Barthelme's short story collections, essays, literary journals, and novels, as well as for Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony, Either/Or, Fear and Trembling, The Present Age, and The Sickness Unto Death*. The source and page reference is given in parentheses in the body of the text, as, for example, (CBDC 34).

- A* *Amateurs*. New York: Pocket Books, 1977.
- BZ* *Benjamin Ziff*. Unpublished, undated manuscript. Special Collections, The University of Delaware Library.
- CBDC* *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*. New York: Little, Brown, 1964.
- CI* Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony. The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- CL* *City Life*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970.
- CUP* Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Edited by Alistair Hannay. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- DF* *The Dead Father*. New York: Farrar, Straus, 1975.
- EO* Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin Books, 1992.
- FT* Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin Books, 1985.
- GD* *Great Days*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979.
- GP* *Guilty Pleasures*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974.
- L* *Location* magazine. New York: Longview Foundation, 1963 and 1964.

- NK* *Not-Knowing*. Edited by Kim Herzinger with an Introduction by John Barth. New York: Random House, 1997.
- OMDC* *Overnight to Many Distant Cities*. New York: Putnam, 1983.
- PA* Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*. Translated by A. Dru. London: Fontana Library, 1962.
- S* *Sadness*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974 (1972).
- SIFE* *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine, or The Hithering Thithering Djinn*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971.
- SUD* Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*. trans. H. V. and E. H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- SW* *Snow White*. New York: Scribner, 1996 (1967).
- TDB* *The Teachings of Don B*. Edited by Kim Herzinger with an Introduction by Thomas Pynchon. New York: Turtle Bay Books, 1992.
- UPUA* *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1968.

Introduction: The Origins of Not-Knowing

Near the end of his life, Donald Barthelme wrote an essay that addressed what had been the central theme of his fiction: the vexed relationship between art and knowledge. The title of this essay, “Not-Knowing”,¹ encapsulates Barthelme’s argument that the task of the artist, especially in the mid-twentieth century, is to express the mysteries of life and the self that lie outside the realm of the “known” within which bourgeois culture thrives. In order to approach such mysteries, the artist himself must “not-know”. “Not-knowing”, Barthelme argued, “is crucial to art, is what permits art to be made. Without the scanning process engendered by not-knowing, without the possibility of having the mind move in unanticipated directions, there would be no invention” (NK 12).

“Not-Knowing” was the culmination of a lifetime of Barthelme’s thinking about and practice of what may variably, but not equivalently, be called uncertainty, the unsayable, and of course, not-knowing. While Barthelme would use all of these terms in his explications of not-knowing, there are subtle differences between them which Barthelme strove, with varying degrees of clarity, to address. In an interview with Charles Ruas and Judith Sherman in 1975, for example, Barthelme remarked that one facet of not-knowing, as a subject as well as a practice, is “the effort [...] to reach a realm of meaning that is not quite sayable. You stay away from what can be said and you try to reach what can’t quite be said. Yet it is nevertheless meaningful. And there is such a realm and it is very difficult to talk about. It’s not quite nonverbal, but that comes fairly close” (NK 214). Later in 1975, in a symposium on

¹ “Not-Knowing” has been reprinted a number of times. Barthelme wrote the first version for a lecture he gave for New York University’s Writers at Work series on February 16, 1982. On February 18, *The New York Times* quoted pieces of the essay in an article entitled “Barthelme Takes On Task of Almost Deciphering His Fiction”. The essay appeared in the proceedings of the 10th Alabama Symposium on English and American Literature, “The Autonomous Voice: Encounters With Style in Contemporary Fiction” in 1983. The last, full version of “Not-Knowing” appeared in *The Georgia Review* in 1985.

fiction attended by Barthelme, William Gass, Walker Percy, and Grace Paley,² Barthelme elaborated on this idea of the “not quite sayable”, linking it to artistic truth:

[T]here is a realm of possible knowledge that can be reached by artists, which is not susceptible of mathematical verification but which is true. This is sometimes spoken of as the ineffable. If there is any word I detest in the language, this would be it, but the fact that it exists, the word ineffable, is suspicious in that it suggests that there might be something that is ineffable. And I believe that’s the place artists are trying to go, and I further believe that when they are successful, they reach it[.] (NK 65)

While Barthelme suggests that there is an ineffable “truth” in art, his reluctance to define it beyond “something” gestures towards his own theory and artistic practice. For Barthelme, the avant-garde artist is not interested in what is known—what is “susceptible of mathematical verification”³—or what can be said: “The artist’s effort, always and everywhere, is to attain a fresh mode of cognition. At the same time he struggles to disembarass himself of procedures which force him to say things that are either commonplace or false” (L2 14). To define not-knowing would be to perform these “commonplace”, and therefore certain, procedures, which stifle the mystery of art. Having dispensed with these procedures, the artist is faced with both the anxiety and potential of not-knowing: “It’s appropriate to pause and say that the writer is one who, embarking upon a task, does not know what to do” (NK 11). Here Barthelme aligns himself with his “postmodern” contemporaries who, like Barthelme, find that past artistic strategies are not only no longer adequate, but are complicit in reinforcing the commonplace: “In this century there’s been much stress placed not upon what we know

² Paley, with whom Barthelme formed a close friendship in New York, followed Barthelme’s remark by stating, “I’m trying to understand something which I don’t understand to begin with. I begin by not understanding, and the tension and the excitement for me and the tension that the reader may get also is in that not understanding and that pull away from not knowing to knowing” (NK 71).

³ Beckett’s Molloy, from whom Barthelme derives a number of his characters, is a figure of anxiety-ridden uncertainty who attempts to use this strict mathematical strategy—and is made foolish by the subject of his mathematics—to quell his agitation: “Four farts every fifteen minutes. It’s nothing. Not even one fart every four minutes. It’s unbelievable. [...] Extraordinary how mathematics help you know yourself” (*Molloy. Three Novels by Samuel Beckett*, 30). Even at a basic level of counting—whether farts, stones, or minutes in the day—Molloy is trapped in “unbelievable” “nothing”.

but on knowing that our methods are themselves questionable—our Song of Songs is the Uncertainty Principle.”⁴ While the Uncertainty Principle *is* “susceptible of mathematical verification” in quantum physics, it serves as an apt metaphor for the elusiveness of the “truth” in art. The observer of a work of art will always experience uncertainty, as the moment one element is grasped, another ceases to be comprehensible. In keeping with this “principle”, Barthelme never explicitly defines the “mystery” of art—to do so would not only be antithetical to not-knowing, but would also only be able to “measure” one aspect.

Barthelme employs a number of aesthetic strategies in his fiction in his exploration of not-knowing. One of the most easily discernible is the collage, with which Barthelme experimented both linguistically and graphically. Influenced by visual artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Max Ernst, as well as writers such as James Joyce, Barthelme incorporates everyday objects, unexpected typography, and bits of language both common and specialised into his fiction, evoking the ambiguity inherent in art and the reality it ostensibly represents. Another practical strategy is the dialogue, the “opportunities” of which Barthelme described as “those of poetry without the stern responsibilities” (NK 283). The dialogue form, which Barthelme most admired in Beckett, allowed Barthelme to “empty” fiction of the traditional procedures of plot, character, fact, and action, and focus more on the unanticipated effects of “voices interacting with one another”.⁵

Barthelme’s dedication to not-knowing is not only an aesthetic technique. It is also, perhaps even more importantly, a defense against the tendency of bourgeois culture, ever striving to be “in the know”, to neutralise or “paper over” (SW 12) the mystery inherent in a

⁴ Donald Barthelme and J. D. O’Hara, “The Art of Fiction No. 66”.

⁵ Critic Larry McCaffery noticed this effect particularly in *Great Days* and *The Dead Father*, the latter of which will be discussed in the conclusion to this study (NK 270).

work of art. In a review of *Sadness*, Barthelme's fourth collection, Charles Thomas Samuels gives this bourgeois offensive a name:

Like the parables about art, [the best stories in *Sadness*] yearn for an openness whose best sign is seeing beyond life into mystery. But, like the parables about art, they show the dreadful diffusion of "knowingness."⁶

This "knowingness", identified as the enemy of the mystery that formed Barthelme's lifelong subject, is also, perhaps counterintuitively, a key component of his artistic strategy of not-knowing. While Barthelme does not actually use the term "knowingness", in "Not-Knowing" he refers to the shrewd, jaded view of life that participates in the "ferocious appropriation of high culture by commercial culture" (NK 17) that moves quickly to suppress artistic mystery—not by silencing it, but by absorbing its expressions into the cycles of consumer culture and critical interpretation, both of which first "advertise" and then consume the new with ever-increasing speed in order to "make everyone over in [bourgeois culture's] own image"⁷ as a balm for the discomfort of doubt.

Barthelme also emphasises the role of the reader in fostering, maintaining, and perhaps especially tolerating, the not-knowing in the work of art. In a 1984 profile of the author John Hawkes, Barthelme applauds Hawkes for his "trick" of not-knowing: "It is characteristic of the good reader that he notes and worries about such problems. Not-knowing, most wonderful of our cheap tricks, blinds him into the story as a screw binds wood to wood" (NK 97).⁸ The ideal reader is willing to be "blinded", to not-know, in order to encounter the work of art without knowing what, exactly, blinds/binds him. Barthelme

⁶ Samuels, Charles Thomas. "Sadness", BR27+.

⁷ Bird, "Born 1930: The Unlost Generation", 104+. Excerpted in Mailer, "The White Negro," 1.

⁸ Furthermore, as this thesis will argue, Barthelme's wry, po-faced characterisation of not-knowing as a "cheap trick" is, far from being a straightforward judgement, part of his strategy to combat knowingness through a performance of exactly the kind of knowing indifference exhibited by mass consumer culture.

purposefully aligns this paradoxical position—both tangible and invisible—with a concrete object. As early as “After Joyce”, Barthelme had had his “good” reader in mind, describing the encounter of the not-knowing reader with art as a “reconstitution” of the art object, an “active participation” that involves “approaching the object, tapping it, shaking it, holding it to his ear to hear the roaring within” (*L2* 14). Barthelme’s contemporary and *Location* magazine co-contributor John Ashbery⁹ articulates the potentially distressing (but wholly necessary) experience of writing and reading in a condition of not-knowing in his poem “And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name”:

The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to communicate
Something between breaths, if only for the sake
Of others and their desire to understand you and desert you
For other centers of communication, so that understanding
May begin, and in doing so be undone.¹⁰

Because each of Barthelme’s stories has multiple centres from which it communicates—though even this communication is problematic—there is no one heart of the labyrinth in which one, “Bothered about beauty,” can “Come out into the open, into a clearing, / And rest.” The reader, trailing a thread behind him, finds upon attempting to exit the labyrinth, that his thread has been cut. There may be small clearings in Barthelme’s stories—a recognisable brand name or a famous actor or aphorism—but one cannot linger in them for long. Not-knowing propels the reader deeper into the “lush, Rousseau-like foliage” of his desire to understand, although his understanding, in doing so, will always be “undone” by “other centers of communication” that compete for the reader’s attention. Ashbery’s choice of

⁹ Ashbery’s poem “These Lacustrine Cities” appears directly following Barthelme’s essay “After Joyce” in the second issue of *Location* in 1964. Throughout his teaching career, Barthelme assigned Ashbery’s poems to his creative writing classes at the University of Houston.

¹⁰ From *Houseboat Days*, 45-46.

Henri Rousseau's paintings—the “lush” foliage references Rousseau's jungle paintings, which Rousseau produced without ever leaving France—as a descriptor of the desire to communicate also suggests a kind of simplistic, childlike, lifelong familiarity with this kind of desire and its potential for failure. Ashbery recalls this desire at the centre of art, stating that “My poetry is often criticized for a failure to communicate, but I take issue with this; my intention is to communicate and my feeling is that a poem that communicates something that is already known by the reader is not really communicating anything to him and in fact shows a lack of respect for him.”¹¹ This idea finds a parallel in Barthelme. What must be spoken is the not-yet-spoken; all that is worthy of communication—and can only be communicated through art—not only exists outside the realm of knowledge, but the artist must risk a failure of communication if he or she is to approach the not-yet-spoken.

This thesis argues that not-knowing, in terms of both writing and reading, is Barthelme's leading theme. It is not only the subject of Barthelme's fiction, but also shapes the forms his work takes. The distinctive inscrutability of Barthelme's voice and style—which he described in an interview as “glittering with poverty”¹²—belies the long lineage of his artistic ideas, which goes back to the warring concepts of irony developed by Kierkegaard and the German Romantics, and in the ideas of mystery, doubt, and knowledge that link 19th century French Symbolism, Joyce, and Beckett. By tracing Barthelme's own readings of these writers and thinkers, as well as identifying the influence of contemporary figures such as Robert Rauschenberg and Harold Rosenberg, this thesis will provide a close study of Barthelme's conceptions of not-knowing.

¹¹ Bloom and Losada, “Craft Interview with John Ashbery,” 12.

¹² Barthelme and O'Hara, “The Art of Fiction No. 66”.

While in “After Joyce” Barthelme identified Joyce as a literary watershed, Barthelme found a more contemporary influence in Beckett, whose influence has been more readily identified. In an interview in 1975, Barthelme noted that “The problem is real for the writer in the sense that he has to do something that’s credible after Beckett, as Beckett had to do something that was credible after Joyce. I’m pretty sure Joyce was Beckett’s problem, and Beckett now himself becomes the problem for all the rest of us” (NK 225).¹³ This “problem” began for Barthelme in August of 1956, when he picked up a copy of the magazine *Theatre Arts*. Inside was the full text of “Waiting for Godot”, which Barthelme read through right there at the newsstand. Barthelme then scoured bookstores for other works by Beckett, who showed him that he could “write the fiction he imagined; it would be from an ironical perspective of the world and he could use his wit and intellect in a way that would satisfy himself.”¹⁴ About ten years later, a discussion of Beckett would conclude “After Joyce” as an alternative to Mary McCarthy’s defense of the realist novel:

His art is reductionary in that, like a painter, he throws ideas away. The things he throws away are precisely those Miss McCarthy cherishes: character, social fact, plot, gossip. What is retained as the irreducible minimum is the intent of the artist, in Beckett’s case a search for the meanings to be gleaned from all possible combinations of all words in all languages—a heroic lifework thoughtfully compromised in favour of, and adumbrated in, the researches of *Watt*, *Molloy*, *Murphy*, *Malone Dies*. (L2 16)

Many of Barthelme’s stories, too, experiment with what can be “thrown away”—the commonplace, the false—in favour of the discoveries made by combining familiar words and images in unexpected ways. In particular, Barthelme follows *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* and “Waiting for Godot” in pursuing a kind of not-knowing that operates both by

¹³ Although Barthelme acknowledged that he was “enormously impressed by Beckett. I’m just overwhelmed by Beckett, as Beckett was, I speculate, by Joyce” (“Interview with J. D. O’Hara, 1981” NK 226), elsewhere Barthelme tempered his admiration, claiming that he had “other fish to fry” (NK 283). But this backtracking, taken at face value by critics such as Stanley Trachtenberg, is another evasive tactic that protects the work of art from easy allusion and interpretation.

¹⁴ Helen Moore Barthelme, *Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound*, 46.

“reducing” the art work to the artist’s striving towards mystery and, paradoxically, by generating meaning from what is left after the excisions.

This introduction will show that Barthelme’s “postmodern” strategies are actually deeply rooted within modernist practice. Philip Weinstein’s assessment of modernist fiction, fittingly, aligns with Barthelme’s lifelong project: “The diagnostic charge wrought into the text’s experimental form is meant to release within the reader’s subjectivity. Awaken—this charge insists—from the sleep of knowing into the strangeness of unknowing. ‘You must change your life,’ Rilke’s torso of Apollo demands of its observer: ‘for here there is no place / that does not see you.’”¹⁵

Kierkegaard

In 1956, somewhat adrift academically and professionally, Barthelme had enrolled in Maurice Natanson’s philosophy classes at the University of Houston.¹⁶ Natanson lectured on the problems that philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nietzsche, and Husserl faced when they began to formulate their ideas about the position of the individual in a post-Kantian world. While Barthelme dramatises and even directly quotes Sartre (in “A Shower of Gold” in *Come Back, Doctor Caligari*), Nietzsche (whom Barthelme misquotes in *Overnight to Many Distant City*’s “Lightning” and recalls verbatim in “A Film” in *Sadness*), and Husserl (in his essay “Not-Knowing”), it is Kierkegaard, and especially Kierkegaard’s concept of irony, against which Barthelme tests his own ideas of knowledge, knowingness, and not-knowing. Kierkegaard had become a touchstone in the early twentieth century for

¹⁵ Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*, 7.

¹⁶ Barthelme’s second wife, Helen, actually enrolled in Natanson’s class first. Barthelme had read and admired Natanson, but it was Barthelme’s work on *Forum* magazine and Helen’s prompting that brought him in personal contact with Natanson. Natanson contributed a number of articles to *Forum*, including “Defining the Two Worlds of Man” in September 1956 (Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries). Barthelme did not actually graduate from the University of Houston, though he audited classes until 1957, after his return from the Korean War. (Helen Moore Barthelme, 46.)

existentialist philosophers as diverse as José Ortega y Gasset, Martin Buber, Sartre, and Camus, and later for many of Barthelme's contemporaries, such as Walker Percy and John Updike,¹⁷ who continued to explore the connection between an individual's evolution of knowledge and his relationship to the world. One of Kierkegaard's fundamental ideas, which he introduced in *The Concept of Irony* (1841) and would attract these later thinkers and writers, was his diagnosis of his "present age" as one in which knowingness, born of a superficial, misguided use of irony, threatens to sever the individual's connection to the world.

Kierkegaard's concept of irony begins with Socrates' strategy of questioning the established order to a point at which all preconceived thought is shown to be arbitrary at best and false at worst. While Kierkegaard approves of this early development and even deems it necessary, he notes that it left behind a void, which he argues can only be filled by Christ, who can breach the distance between Man's reality and the divine. Kierkegaard laments that the ironist has abandoned Christ and, having elevated himself above human life, has taken Christ's position as the "greater", rendering Christ the "lesser". In this lofty position, the ironist perpetually creates new ideals of existence that leave him "free from the sorrows of actuality, but also free from its joys, free from its blessing", as only the greater can bless the lesser (*CI* 279-280). One of Kierkegaard's targets in this idea of the moral consequences of irony is Friedrich Schlegel, who (at least in his early career) proposed that the artist creates an

¹⁷ Updike, for example, had felt that Kierkegaard's writing was like "music to my ears, balm to my soul." He recalled that when *Fear and Trembling* came out in 1954, "It cost eighty-five cents, fit easily in the hand, and had a pumpkin-coloured cover designed, as were all the early Anchor books, by Edward Gorey." (John Updike, *Odd Jobs*, 843.) Although Updike misremembers the cost (*Fear and Trembling* was sold for \$1.25), the quality of attention to the details of the literary moment speaks to the deep impression Kierkegaard made upon these mid-century authors. These editions, which included *Selections from the Writings of Kierkegaard*, were inexpensive, which made them widely accessible. (Incidentally, the cover of Barthelme's first collection, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, published by Anchor Books, was also illustrated by Gorey. See <http://www.goreyography.com/west/paper/paper03.htm>)

ironic distance between the ideal and the real that allows him to be creatively free. Kierkegaard argues that this “negative freedom” releases the ironist-artist from adhering to the ethics of the real world, and is therefore socially dangerous and personally alienating.

Barthelme’s conception of not-knowing is founded upon Kierkegaard’s ideas of irony, especially in Barthelme’s own negotiations regarding the ever-oscillating ideal distance between the work of art and the artist and the viewer. While Barthelme does not formally theorise about irony, the majority of his collections dramatise ideas of irony drawn from Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or*. Often Barthelme’s characters play—with varying degrees of success—one or another of Kierkegaard’s theoretical roles, such as the ironic Schlegelian Romantic artist or “A” from *Either/Or*, allowing Barthelme to explore for himself the validity of Kierkegaard’s ideas in a modern context. In “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel”, in fact, Barthelme directly engages with Kierkegaardian irony: upon finding a copy of Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony* in his ski instructor’s home, the narrator is “immediately plunged into difficulties. The situation bristles with difficulties” (CL 94). Even as early as his first collection, Barthelme addressed ideals of aesthetic irony, which Kierkegaard criticises as a preemptor of individual authenticity: “‘You have a very romantic impulse,’ Jean-Claude said. ‘I admire, dimly, the posture. You read too much in the history of art. It estranges you from those possibilities for authentic selfhood that inhere in the present century’” (“A Shower of Gold” CBDC 175). The narrator of “Alice” in Barthelme’s second collection, *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), itemises a number of infinite possible positions (a splintering of the “double-mindedness” that Kierkegaard would write about in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* in 1847), and their resulting alienation, for the Kierkegaardian ironist in literature:

possible attitudes found in books 1) I don't know what's happening to me 2) what does it mean? 3) seized with the deepest sadness, I know not why 4) I am lost, my head whirls, I know not where I am 5) I lose myself 6) I ask you, what have I come to? 7) I no longer know where I am, what is this country? 8) had I fallen from the skies, I could not be more giddy 9) a mixture of pleasure and confusion, that is my state 10) where am I, and when will this end? 11) what shall I do? I do not know where I am (*UPUA* 131)

Sadness (1972), especially in “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne”, “The Genius”, “The Sandman”, and “The Rise of Capitalism” (“Capitalism sure is sunny!” (*S* 144)), explores the consequences of Kierkegaard’s conception of negative freedom, demonstrating the alienation that results from distancing oneself from every previously stable reality. Irony, for Kierkegaard, is the “root system” of the misplaced, rootless efforts to know the world (“we figured that”, “you know what I mean”), which leads—here ironised by Barthelme—to spiritual death.

But Barthelme’s irony is not on the whole this winking sort of empty metafictional trick; rather it speaks to, and acts as, a protection of a deeper emotional core threatened by the painful experiences of everyday life and loss. As the narrator of “Hiding Man” says, “All of life is rooted in contradiction, movement in direction of self, two spaces, diagonally, argues hidden threat, there must be room for irony” (*CBDC* 27). This statement points to Barthelme’s deep understanding of how irony not only operates on an aesthetic level, but also how intrinsic this “movement in direction of self” is to life. D. C. Muecke writes that “General Irony lies in our response to what we see, truly or falsely, as fundamental contradictions and paradoxes in life, contradictions that strike us not simply as puzzles—this would result only in trivial ironies—but as *predicaments* many of which have forced men into a realization of their essential and terrifying loneliness in relation to others or to the universe

at large.”¹⁸ This ironic “predicament” is another of Barthelme’s subjects, which is bound up with not-knowing and absurdity. Barthelme’s reading of Kierkegaard showed him that according to the laws of cosmic irony, no one, not even the artist, can “conquer” or even synthesise the contradiction inherent in being a finite creature striving to access the infinite, or transcend the ironic futility in using a man-made language to achieve silence.

Mallarmé

Along with his lifelong reading of Kierkegaard, Barthelme’s career is bookended by the iconoclasts of French Symbolism: although Barthelme wrote “Not-Knowing” only two years before his death, he alludes in the essay to Marcel Raymond’s *From Baudelaire to Surrealism* (1933), which his father gave him when he was nineteen and beginning to write seriously, and which would inform both his formal and his self-directed studies.¹⁹ *From Baudelaire to Surrealism* examines the succession of poets who share Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* as an aesthetic and conceptual source, and who, like Baudelaire, were determined to leave the known world behind and “plunge into the depths of Heaven or of Hell/ To fathom the Unknown, to find the *new!*”²⁰ In their quest, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé used poetry as a tool to access the powers of the unknown—often located in the subconscious—in order to, as Rimbaud says, “change life”,²¹ and transcend the rupture between the self and the universe brought about by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. What Barthelme

¹⁸ Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, 122.

¹⁹ Barthelme’s second wife, Helen, recalls that Barthelme studied French, and was able to read some French poets and novelists in their original language. (Helen Moore Barthelme, *Genesis of a Cool Sound*, 32.)

²⁰ From “The Voyage,” *Six French Poets of the Nineteenth Century*. 195, lines 137-144.

²¹ Quoted in Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, 1. Mallarmé resurfaces throughout Barthelme’s life: Barthelme’s first wife, Marilyn Marrs, was pursuing a doctorate on Mallarmé during the time she and Barthelme were married, and in the second (and last) issue of *Location*, co-editor Thomas Hess contributed a series of drawings after Mallarmé’s *L’Après-Midi d’un Faune*.

discovered in these poets was an intersection of ideas of the unknown (which he would later contrast with ideas of knowledge and knowingness) and a conception of artistic mystery as a casualty of modernity.

Barthelme would encounter this idea of artistic silence again in his reading of 19th century French Symbolist poetry, guided by Raymond's *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*. Barthelme's friend and *Location* magazine collaborator Harold Rosenberg contributed an introduction to the 1949 edition of the book, which would later solidify Barthelme's connection between poetry and visual art. Rosenberg writes that "The best French poetry since Baudelaire has been enlisted in a siege against the cliché. This has not been by any means merely a question of taste. It has been more a matter of life and death."²² Barthelme, too, would enlist in this "siege", striving throughout his work to equate "verbal substance" with "living substance" as opposed to using overworn, commonplace language that does not discover anything new about the world. Rosenberg argues that in the Marxist-driven literature of the 1930s, the "cliché was restored to a premium". A generation later, even mid-century artists, such as Barthelme, felt obligated to rescue language from cliché and bring it—and readers—"face to face with existence", to "silenc[e ...] the existing rhetoric".

This call to arms infused Barthelme's reading of the rest of Raymond's book and informed the vast majority of Barthelme's fiction. While Raymond argues that Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* stands as one of the "wellsprings of modern poetry", Barthelme turns most often to Mallarmé in his discussions of not-knowing. Fittingly, the poet makes an appearance in "For I'm the Boy Whose Only Joy Is Loving You" and "Will You Tell Me?" and Valéry, his "most fervent disciple,"²³ is mentioned in "The Indian Uprising" and "The Genius," as

²² Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, 87.

²³ Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, 24.

well as Barthelme's essay "After Joyce". In the story that would become "Up, Aloft in the Air", Barthelme changed the name "Helen" to "Hérodiade" at his second wife, Helen's, request.²⁴ In addition, "Not-Knowing" echoes Mallarmé's essay, "Hérésies artistiques: l'art pour tous" ("Art for All"), which appeared in *l'Artiste* on September 15, 1862, and which Barthelme would have discovered via Raymond's book. Over one hundred years before "Not-Knowing", Mallarmé makes the same declaration for the vital mystery of art: "Whatever is sacred, whatever is to remain sacred, must be clothed in mystery. All religions take shelter behind arcana which they unveil only to the predestined. Art has its own mysteries."²⁵ Although, as this thesis argues, Barthelme's concept of not-knowing ultimately differs from Mallarmé's idea of mystery, Mallarmé provides one of the fundamental ideas for Barthelme's notion of the work of art.

Barthelme diverges from Mallarmé in his idea of the endpoint of this mystery. In "Not-Knowing", Barthelme remarks that "Mallarmé shakes words loose from their attachments and bestows new meanings upon them, meanings which point not towards the external world but towards the Absolute, acts of poetic intuition" (NK 16). Far from following Mallarmé into a transcendent Absolute, Barthelme wanted to stay in the world as it is—to make "something that is *there*, like a rock or a refrigerator" (L2 13)—to explore its contours and contradictions, to make out of such contradictions an art that expressed the self and the world. In Barthelme's "Paraguay", Mallarmé's silence becomes a commercial product, a "something that is *there*":

Silence

In larger stores silence (damping materials) is sold in paper sacks like cement. Similarly, the softening of language usually lamented as a falling off from former

²⁴ Helen Moore Barthelme, *Genesis of a Cool Sound*, 148.

²⁵ *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, & Letters*, 9.

practice is in fact a clear response to the proliferation of surfaces and stimuli. Imprecise sentences lessen the strain of close tolerances. (CL 36)

In this imagined Paraguay, which stands as a self-conscious figure for the modern artistic landscape and the art object itself, the “softening of language” speaks to the impossibility of writing in either a “simple, honest, and straightforward” (NK 15) manner or writing outside the world entirely. But of course Barthelme *is* lamenting “a falling off from former practice”, not in a backward-looking, innovation-fearing way, but as a critique of the “proliferation of surfaces and stimuli” that obscure and even damage an artistic reaching towards not-knowing.²⁶ Barthelme follows Mallarmé’s argument in “The Afternoon of A Faun” about the necessity of doubt in artistic creation:

My doubt, night's ancient hoard, pursues its theme
In branching labyrinths, which being still
The veritable woods themselves, alas, reveal
My triumph as the ideal fault of roses.²⁷

For Mallarmé, doubt, in this case akin to not-knowing, is a starting point for the creation of the “ideal” out of nothingness. Unlike Mallarmé, however, Barthelme did not wish to create an ideal work that would somehow rise above that which “thought cannot subject to its rule”; he recognised that such a task is not only doomed to fail, but that it is not the right task for an artist.

In addition to not-knowing, Barthelme shapes his ideas of knowingness in relation to Mallarmé’s theories of the mystery in the work of art. For Mallarmé, as, later, for Barthelme, a bourgeois education, especially one that includes lessons in interpreting poetry, provides

²⁶ In her 1967 essay “The Aesthetics of Silence”, Susan Sontag examines the artist’s choice of silence over artistic speech: “As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a theology of God’s absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the ‘subject’ (the ‘object,’ the ‘image’), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence.” (Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*, 4-5.)

²⁷ Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, 38.

exactly the wrong type of knowledge required to approach art—and even worse, breeds knowingness. As a prophylactic, Mallarmé would excise art from the curriculum altogether:

The educational bases of the multitude need not include art; that is, a mystery accessible only to the very few. The multitude would profit in that they would no longer waste time dozing over Virgil, and could devote that time to action and to a practical purpose. Poetry, on its side, would profit because it would no longer be irritated [...] by the barking sounds of a pursuing pack of creatures who, simply because they are educated and intelligent, think they have the right to judge it or, even worse, dictate to it.²⁸

The “educated” masses are equipped only with knowingness—useful, perhaps, at cocktail parties, but devoid of the not-knowing that would make art’s “mystery accessible”. In “Not-Knowing”, Barthelme offers his own lament for—and implies his own solution to—the deteriorated state of art:

If I want a world of reference to which all possible readers in this country can respond, there is only one universe of discourse available, that in which the [American sitcom] *Love Boat* sails on seas of passion like a Flying Dutchman of passion and the dedicated men in white of *General Hospital* pursue, with evenhanded diligence, triple bypasses and the nursing staff. This limits things somewhat. (NK 17)

Here Barthelme argues that art should not strive to appeal or make sense to a universal audience, as such a goal, in which popular culture “dictate[s] to” art, would “limit” the scope of material available to the artist. Using such a limited palette would preclude not-knowing (the American soap opera *General Hospital*, a type of popular education in itself, falls squarely into the realm of the known), which would mean there would be no invention. Not only do these *Love Boat* multitudes threaten the inventive freedom of art, but their empty poetic “education” actually harms them: according to Barthelme, this set of universal references also “results in a double impoverishment: theft of complexity from the reader, theft of the reader from the writer” (NK 15). While Barthelme echoes Mallarmé’s lament that

²⁸ Ibid., 11-12.

the “multitude” is not the audience for art, he is not so strident as Mallarmé. Barthelme does, as Chapter Four will show in depth, believe an education in not-knowing is at least possible, if not exactly facilitated by the public school system. Stories such as “An Education”, “Me and Miss Mandible”, and “The School” are, as their titles suggest, concerned with the present state and the potential future of an education in not-knowing, both in the classroom and out in the world.

Unlike Mallarmé, Barthelme does not seek to reinvest words with mystical powers that would “eliminate” matter in order to access its essence. Barthelme learned from Raymond that the writer cannot be a Mallarméan mystic whose trajectory is towards absolute silence and away from any relationship to the world of substantial objects: “Only the taste of flesh and a voluptuous attachment to his sensations will enable him to fertilize his memory and to prepare in silence the harvest of images that are to populate his work, while the true mystic strives to die to the world of the senses, to die to himself, and to arouse illuminations in an inner and closed kingdom.”²⁹ Though Barthelme writes about saints and other aspects of religion (“The Catechist” and “On Angels” announce their religious subject, while stories such as “Hiding Man” and “The Photographs” engage in theological parody), they are always grounded in a very real, voluptuously kitschy world: in “The Temptation of St. Anthony,” the citizens of the town are disappointed to see that even St. Anthony eats “more or less normal foods, perhaps a little heavy on the fried foods” (*S* 150).

²⁹ Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, 30.

Joyce

While Joyce is not as direct an influence on Barthelme's writing as Kierkegaard, Mallarmé, or Beckett, Joyce's adaptation of Mallarmé's idea of the artwork as object fundamentally shaped Barthelme's fiction. Joyce—and his connection to Mallarmé—appears occasionally: in “For I'm the Boy Whose Only Joy Is Loving You”, for example, the reader immediately identifies Bloomsbury, Martha, and Pelly as Barthelme's versions of Bloom, Molly, and “The Boarding House”'s Polly. The domestic dissatisfaction in the Bloomsbury-Martha household echoes Bloom's and Molly's worn-out marriage: “Ah Martha coom now to bed there's a darlin' gul. Hump off blatherer I've no yet read me Mallarmé for this evenin'” (*CBDC* 57). (Barthelme's first wife, Marilyn Marrs, was pursuing a doctorate on Mallarmé during the time she and Barthelme were married; shades of Bloom-like marital dissatisfaction permeate “For I'm the Boy”.)

In “After Joyce”, Barthelme's first formal critical essay (1964), Barthelme identifies Joyce (along with Stein) as representative of a sea change in literature. “After Joyce”, as the title suggests, discusses the ways in which literature's relationship to the world, and the reader's relationship to literature, have shifted as a result of Joyce's avant-garde innovations, specifically *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Both of these novels, argues Barthelme, stand not as (or not only as) “commentary upon the world”, but are themselves objects that are “encountered in the same way as other objects in the world” (*L2* 13). Barthelme notes that the criticism leveled at these new literary objects is based on a fundamental misconception of their relationship to the world: far from “creating their own worlds which are thought to have nothing to do with the larger world” (*L2* 13), Barthelme suggests that such objects actually allow the artist to “ask questions of” the world. In fact, Joyce's knowledge is used not to tell

the reader about the world, but, as John Banville suggests, as objects themselves with which to make art:

I think Joyce knew too much for his own good as an artist. Now it is a characteristic of artists, seldom remarked, that they crave cold fact in quantity. They are great chewers of encyclopedias. This secret feasting is not, as might be supposed, a need to find a wholesome antidote to an accustomed soft diet of dreams. It is simply, but mysteriously, a means of feeding and sustaining the imagination. Most artists manage to keep down this rich food. [...] Joyce [...] wants to tell us everything he knows—and he wants to know everything—from the topography of Edwardian Dublin, to the working of advertisements for bile beans. Critics mention as an example of his extraordinary energy the famous question-and-answer sequence in the Ithaca section of *Ulysses*; I believe that here Joyce is not only parodying the science textbook style, he is also, with horrible enjoyment, *telling us things*, for their own sake.³⁰

In “Not-Knowing”, written 18 years later, Barthelme would revise the argument he made in “After Joyce”. While he does not directly link the two, Barthelme’s focus on Joyce in “After Joyce” and Mallarmé in “Not-Knowing” as figures against which to define his evolving ideas of writing suggests that Barthelme was thinking of the philosophical and artistic kinship between the two authors. In an interview with Bobbie Roe in 1988, Barthelme teased out the subtle differences between “After Joyce” and “Not-Knowing”, suggesting that, instead of repelling the world in an effort to remain “there”, the art object must engage with the world if it is to approach “something”, any truth, however mysterious:

The first idea, that the artwork is an object in the world in much the same way a dog biscuit or a mountain is an object in the world, is an effort to deny that the artwork is a rendering or a copy of the world. The second position attempts to be a little clearer about the relation between art and the world, and I ended by saying that art is a meditation about the world rather than a reproduction of some aspect of the world. The two ideas are not directly contradictory. The relevant line is “Art is a true account of the activity of the mind.” I don’t mean to suggest that that’s all art is, merely that this is a place to begin. The statement does take into account the controversy about the truth value of art, does a bit of work there. (NK 316)

³⁰ Banville, “The Dead Father”, 65.

Barthelme's reevaluation begins to illuminate the connection between Joyce and Mallarmé. In fact, both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* owe a significant artistic and philosophical debt to Mallarmé that hinges upon the difference between the art object as "dog biscuit" and "meditation". In his essay "Le Livre of Mallarmé and James Joyce's *Ulysses*", William Carpenter argues that Mallarmé's attempt to create a "literary microcosm of the universe" in his 1897 poem *Un Coup de Des jamais n'abolira le hasard* ("A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance") provided the "design and inspiration" for *Ulysses*.³¹ While Carpenter points out that *Ulysses* is a thousand times as wordy as Mallarmé's poem, Joyce too aspired to construct the "book as world". For all of its comical, ironic mocking of the epic, Joyce's book would embody Mallarmé's vision of a literature that, with its rigorous "architectural" organisation and assignation of metaphysical power to words and even letters,³² would be a pure expression of the world.³³ It is at this point that Joyce picks up on the paradox inherent in Mallarmé's "literary microcosm": for all of its striving towards the Absolute, the work of art must ultimately remain anchored to the world it attempts to transcend.

Barthelme writes in "After Joyce" that with *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce "conceived the reading to be a lifetime project, the book remaining always *there*, like the landscape surrounding the reader's home or the buildings bounding the reader's apartment. The book remains problematic, unexhausted" (L2 14). In the same essay Barthelme reiterates this key

³¹ Published in *Mallarmé in the Twentieth Century*, 187.

³² Carpenter notes that although the reader is invited to laugh at Stephen's early symbolist leanings—"Books you were going to write with letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W" (*Ulysses* 40-41)—Joyce takes both the typographical and phonetic properties and potential of language very seriously, especially in the "Sirens" chapter. (*Mallarmé in the Twentieth Century*, 195-196.)

³³ While Joyce does not explicitly reference *Un Coup de Des* in *Ulysses*, Stephen's recollections and impressions of the world contain traces of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* and *Hérodiade*. *Mallarmé in the Twentieth Century*, 192.

point: no longer is the reader “listening to an authoritative account of the world delivered by an expert (Faulkner on Mississippi, Hemingway on the corrida)”, but is “bumping into something that is *there*” (L2 13). It is upon this point that Barthelme elaborates in “Not-Knowing” and which he attempts to clarify in the above passage. Instead of *Finnegans Wake* simply sitting in the world “much the same way a dog biscuit or a mountain is an object in the world”, Barthelme suggests that after “reading” such an object, the reader is altered by the experience of reading itself which is akin to actively “tapping” or “shaking” the object. Barthelme draws a parallel between the way one experiences visual art and the simultaneous shift in the status and subject of literature: “I do not think it fanciful, for instance, to say that Governor Rockefeller, standing among his Mirós and de Koonings, is worked upon by them, and if they do not make a Democrat or a Socialist of him they at least alter the character of his Republicanism. [...] In the same way, Joyce’s book works its radicalizing will upon all men in all countries, even upon those who have not read it and will never read it” (L2 14).³⁴ Barthelme suggests that although *Finnegans Wake* and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* are both “objects” in a certain ontological sense, Joyce “is aware of and exploits the possibilities of this special placement” (L2 14) as an object which, although the effects may not be outwardly discernible, “works upon” the viewer by revealing to him alternate compositions of the world. This process may in turn reshape his traditional or “conservative” perspective (which then, like a kind of ontological butterfly effect, reverberates throughout the world to “all men in all countries”)—certainly more meditation than dog biscuit. Regarding art as

³⁴ Such “working upon” is not always immediately apparent or socially acceptable: in “Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning,” Kennedy—just called, as in Kafka, “K.”—stands before some “immense, rather theoretical paintings” by a “geometricist” and declares “Well, at least we know he has a ruler” (UPUA 47). In this story Kennedy acts as the embodiment of “the dull skepticism of a man who is not going to have the wool pulled over his eyes” (L2 13-14) when confronted with modern painting. Barthelme seems to have anticipated his critical reception: in 1967 a review of *Snow White* in Washington, D.C.’s *The Sunday Star* bore the title, “It’s Nice But What Is It?”

object, Harold Rosenberg asks, “Is the work of art still a *thing*, or an image of a thing, waiting for the spectator's taste to respond to it? Or is it rather a quantity of energy released into the whole configuration or arena of a contending world?”³⁵ Rosenberg’s inquiries speak to Barthelme’s attempt to describe Joyce’s innovation: like the “event” on the wall, the literary object “releases” its “energy” into the world, not only from its own being but from the opposite and equal reaction it generates from its readers.

In the mid-twentieth century, the idea of the artwork as object splits into two different theories. One, as we have seen, is Barthelme’s idea of the “unexhausted” book which invites the reader’s “active participation”. The other, taken up by French novelists (Barthelme names Butor, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, and Philippe Sollers in “After Joyce” as the most prominent practitioners of this second theory), follows the object to its end point: abstraction. Robbe-Grillet addresses the trend towards objectness in literature in his 1956 essay “A Fresh Start for Fiction”:

The world is neither significant nor absurd. It *is*, quite simply. That, in any case, is the most remarkable thing about it. ... Around us, defying the mob of our animistic or protective adjectives, the things *are there*. Their surfaces are clear and smooth, *intact*, neither dubiously glittering, nor transparent. All our literature has not yet succeeded in penetrating their smallest corner, in softening their slightest curve.

Instead of [...] “signification” (psychological, social, functional), we must try to construct a world both more solid and more immediate. Let it be first of all by their *presence* that objects and gestures impose themselves, and let this presence continue to make itself felt beyond all explanatory theory that might try to enclose it in some system of reference, whether sentimental, sociological, Freudian, or metaphysical. In this future universe of the novel, gestures and objects will be “there” before being “something,” and they will still be there afterward, hard, unalterable, eternally present, mocking their own meaning, which tries in vain to reduce the role of precarious tools. [...] Thus objects will little by little lose their inconsistency and their

³⁵ Quoted in Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, 5.

secrets; will renounce their false mystery, that suspect inferiority which Roland Barthes has called the “romantic heart” of things.³⁶

Barthelme sets Joyce directly against Robbe-Grillet, noting that Joyce’s book is full of the kind of “dubious” “glitter” and “transparency” (L2 14) with which artists conceal the realness, the “thereness” of objects. The logical conclusion of Robbe-Grillet’s argument, however, exposes its limited thinking. Things—objects and language-as-object—are both always themselves and are constantly shifting their meanings and associations throughout time and based on cultural requirements. In “Not-Knowing” Barthelme criticises the French avant-garde literary object for its “deadly earnest”, “humorless” reluctance to play, especially in the sense of Joyce’s free play of associations of words and images, which creates an object so impenetrable that it becomes completely sterile (L2 16) (in their contributions to *Location*, Rosenberg finds this kind of writing “joyless” and its reader “sadistic” (L1 5), while Bellow deems it “humorless” and “boring” (L2 12)). Barthelme thought that such extremes of abstraction were “a problem, since [such abstract texts] get further and further away from the common reader. I understand the impulse—towards the condition of music—but as a common reader I demand this to be done in a masterly fashion or not at all. Mallarmé is perhaps the extreme” (NK 266). Instead of striving for the “extreme” of music or, even further, towards Absolute silence, Barthelme aspires, at least partially, to make an object in the world that remains in touch with not-knowing, the secret—and vital—“romantic heart of things”.

³⁶ Robbe-Grillet, “A Fresh Start for Fiction,” 104. John Updike characterises Robbe-Grillet’s project as a “cleansing” of things of their “anthropomorphizing” impurities: “Metaphor is the villain, weaving a complicity between humanity and the alien world of “things”; metaphor—a concept including all adjectives with moral or anthropocentric coloring—implies a general myth of *depth*, humanising nature, cheating it of its essential otherness. The categories of the “tragic” and the “absurd” are oblique maneuvers of this persistent humanism, this “bridge of souls thrown between man and things.” The task, then, is to “scour” descriptive prose of any “analogical vocabulary” and to restore “things” to “themselves,” cleansed of any hint of profundity or preestablished order.” (Updike, *Picked-Up Pieces*, 344-345.)

Beckett

While critics have for the most part neglected Kierkegaard's and Mallarmé's influences on Barthelme, Beckett's impact upon Barthelme's work has been well documented—and illustrated. Shortly after Tracy Daugherty's *Hiding Man* appeared in 2009, Louis Menand reviewed the biography in *The New Yorker*.³⁷ Accompanying the article is a drawing of Barthelme by Edward Sorel. Sorel's Barthelme, with his cartoonishly large head, iconic 1970s glasses, and equally iconic white beard, types on a floating typewriter while gazing at the reader with drooping eyes and just a hint of a wry smile. Behind the enormous head a shadowy figure emerges: Samuel Beckett, all crags and nose, glares at Barthelme from a theatre poster: "Limited Engagement." In the other half of the landscape behind Barthelme we see two sketchy figures walking either away or towards, their shadows long in the uncanny, de Chirico-like twilight. Didi and Gogo, perhaps, or Barthelme's Edward and Pia? Barthelme's gaze, both calm and enigmatic, hints at a central line in Beckett's *Molloy*: "To know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker."³⁸

In "After Joyce", Barthelme distinguishes between two camps of writers, one of which includes Norman Mailer, Jean Genet, William S. Burroughs, and Hubert Selby, Jr., and the other epitomised (and perhaps solely occupied) by Beckett. While the former is characterised by threat ("The safety of the bourgeois is everywhere menaced by the form" (*L2* 15)), Beckett's position, Barthelme writes, is one of philosophical comedy, rooted in irony:

³⁷ Menand, "Saved From Drowning", 68-76.

³⁸ Beckett, *Three Novels*, 64.

Beckett would seem to belong to this [hostile] camp but is, on the contrary, almost pure comedian. His pessimism is the premise necessary to a marvelous pedantic high-wire performance, the wire itself, supporting a comic turn of endless virtuosity. No one who writes as well as Beckett can be said to be doing anything other than celebrating life. Commanded to swim or drown, he swims where Burroughs chooses to drown. (L2 16)

Even with his mixed metaphors, here Barthelme echoes Schlegel's characterisation of irony as "*transzendente Buffonerie*", a "high-wire" perspective of the world that "surveys everything and rises above all that is limited, even above one's own art, virtue, or genius".³⁹ This consciously melancholy clowning finds one of its best expressions in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot". Echoing a kind of Laurel and Hardy down-and-out, tit-for-tat slapstick, "Waiting for Godot" wavers between despondency and comic buoyancy—in a sense, Didi and Gogo both walk the tightrope and contemplate hanging themselves with it.⁴⁰ The ultimate tragedy of "Godot"'s "seekers" is that they are deeply curious, and yet do not know that they are "beyond knowing anything".

While his characters struggle with and often resist not-knowing, Beckett embraces it as his leading artistic strategy. Addressing the possibilities of art after Joyce, Beckett defined his aesthetic and philosophical method as a contraction of what can be known, rather than a Joycean expansion of observation and fact:

Joyce was a superb manipulator of material—perhaps the greatest. He was making words do the absolute maximum of work. There isn't a syllable that is superfluous. The kind of work I do is one in which I'm not the master of my own material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending towards omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. [...] My little

³⁹ Schlegel, Fragment 42, cited in Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 184.

⁴⁰ Barthelme gently mocks his and his contemporaries' debt to Beckett in "Here in the Village", in which Barthelme responds to a letter from *Writer's Digest* requesting his thoughts on the link between writing and drinking: "'Any favorite hangouts for drinking?' 'Yes, Godot's, but I can't give you the address because you know the place is and I mean we want to keep it that way even though the toppest writers in America 'hang out' as you put it'" (NK 40).

exploration is the whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable—as something by definition incompatible with art.⁴¹

Barthelme, however, sensing the same kind of protective dissembling that he used in his own interviews, does not take Beckett at his word. To return to the essential quotation discussed above, while Barthelme acknowledges that Beckett's art "is reductionary in that, like a painter, he throws ideas away"—namely "character, social fact, plot, gossip" (L2 16)—he argues that the effect of this reduction is less about demonstrating the "incompatibility" of the "ignorant" stance of the artist with art than making an even more diligent investigation into not-knowing:

Beckett himself painstakingly and with the utmost scholarly rigor retraces the rationales of simple operations, achieving comic shocks along the way by allowing language to tell him what it knows. [...] What is retained as the irreducible minimum is the intent of the artist, in Beckett's case a search for the meanings to be gleaned from all possible combinations of all words in all languages[.] (L2 16)

By "reducing" art to "the intent of the artist" to not-knowing, to "allowing language to tell him what it knows", Beckett paradoxically performs his own expansion of meaning, one that, like Joyce's, is a "research" into the mystery of art.

More paradoxically still, this linguistic investigation may in fact look beyond language in an even more extreme performance of not-knowing: in a letter to Axel Kaun in 1937, Beckett wrote of his interest in a "Literatur des Unworts", a "literature of the unword" that, like Gertrude Stein's Logographs, would see beyond the "porous" "fabric of the language" to whatever might be behind it, even if it is nothing ("*Nothing is more real than nothing*"⁴²).⁴³ It is perhaps in *The Unnamable* that Beckett takes the nothingness inherent in

⁴¹ Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters".

⁴² Beckett, *Three Novels*, 192.

⁴³ *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: 1929-1940*, 520.

the “literature of the unword” to its artistic conclusion. While Malone and Murphy certainly do not know the scope of their circumstances, they make up stories that at least allow them temporary (if illusory) equanimity. The Unnamable’s stories and especially his declarations about himself, however, evaporate as quickly as they are composed, exposing a particularly ominous nothingness behind the “fabric of language”: “I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me”.⁴⁴ The acute anxiety that characterises *The Unnamable* suggests that a close examination of language in which not-knowing is the driving force can, instead of “celebrating life”, as Barthelme put it, plunge one into despair.

It is at this potential endpoint of not-knowing—nothingness as despair—that Barthelme begins to negotiate between Kierkegaard’s and Beckett’s ideas of not-knowing. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard writes that the “sin” of despair is the “last thing” before being reborn through death into the light of Christ; while most dwell in this despair, refusing to “rest transparently in God”, the “Christian hero” is one who, in a religious not-knowing (to reframe Kierkegaard’s ideas in terms of Barthelme’s rhetoric), “venture[s]” into a positive nothingness in order “wholly to become oneself”, to unite in faith the disparate spheres of the self (*SUD* 30, 34, 5). While Kierkegaard begins (with a sardonic application of Hegelian terminology and a momentary nod to Idealist principles) to define Man as the “synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity” (*SUD* 13), he is quick to say, however, that this synthesis alone does not constitute the self (the body and soul must also be constituted by relation to each other, themselves, and to the self, etc.). In fact, the divide between this ideal self and Man’s actual experience of himself (in which he “wills” this disunity and finds a kind of negative nothingness) leads to

⁴⁴ Beckett, *Three Novels*, 291.

despair. Beckett's "Waiting for Godot", with its references to Crucifixion and a possibly God-like figure who never appears, stands between the divine and the contemporary human condition, a high wire act in which not-knowing is both celebrated and mocked.

For Beckett, the introspection necessary to become a whole self is in itself an enactment of despair. The Unnamable's inward investigation yields a suffering on the most basic level of existence:

I say what I hear, I hear what I say, I don't know, one or the other, or both [...] if only I knew I lived, I live, if I'll live, that would simplify everything, impossible to find out, that's where you're bugged, I haven't stirred, that's all I know, no, I know something else, it's not I, I always forget that [...]⁴⁵

Far from a "grounding" in the Divine, this exercise in selfhood leads to hysteric dissolution ("I only think, if that is the name for this vertiginous panic as of hornets smoked out of their nest"⁴⁶). And yet, the text is there on the page as at least one index, however problematic, of momentary selfhood.

Barthelme commented upon the obligation of the artist to not-know and nothingness in an interview in 1981:

In the dialogues with Duthuit, Beckett, as you know, rejects what can be accomplished "on the plane of the feasible"—he seems to be asking for an art adequate to the intuition of Nothingness. [...] the problem appears to be not one of announcing truths, or that truths do or do not exist, but of hewing to the intuition, which seems central, and yet getting some work done. Beckett's work is an embarrassment to the Void. (NK 286)

What Barthelme finds in Beckett, then, may not be entirely at odds with Kierkegaard's program. The artist must approach "Nothingness", whether in terms of despair or the divine, using only what he has—as well as what he does not have. The artist, inadequate "to the intuition of Nothingness", "gets some work done" anyway. Here in *Malone Dies*, Beckett sets

⁴⁵ Beckett, *Three Novels*, 412.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 350.

out both the impossibility of, and the obligation to, make art as an acknowledgement of the potential for both despair and transcendence:

Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried. [...] And gravely I struggled to be grave no more, to live, to invent, I know what I mean. [...] I say living without knowing what it is. I have tried to live without knowing what I was trying. Perhaps I have lived after all, without knowing.⁴⁷

Beckett remained a lifelong exemplar for Barthelme, perhaps even more “inexhaustible” even than Joyce. In his creative writing class at the University of Houston, Barthelme distributed an 81-item syllabus; one of the items reads “Beckett entire”.⁴⁸ While the other recommendations on the list include such essential reading as Borges, Cheever, and Ashbery, Beckett’s is the only entry that demands an examination of the full oeuvre. This extensive undertaking echoes, not accidentally, Moran’s exclamation of not-knowing in *Molloy* (1951): “And I said, with rapture, Here is something I can study all my life, and never understand.”⁴⁹

As a contemporary of writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Barth, Barthelme is often lumped into the category of “postmodernism”, the theories of which, as interpretive tools, are useful only to a point. For example, Michael Thomas Hudgens’s book, *Donald Barthelme: Postmodernist American Writer*, does identify a number of important Barthelme techniques, namely a “painterly” incorporation of “accidental material”, but misguidedly deems Barthelme’s “choices in designing this work” as “made randomly,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 194-195.

⁴⁸ A scan of the syllabus can be found here: http://www.believermag.com/issues/200310/?read=barthelme_syllabus

⁴⁹ Beckett, *Three Novels*, 169.

intuitively, impulsively”,⁵⁰ as if there were no leading philosophical or artistic concept. Similarly, Stanley Trachtenberg’s *Understanding Donald Barthelme* uses worn postmodernist, “metafictional” principles such as the “frustrat[ion of] conventional structural expectations” and the “blurring or exchanging [of] the positions held by the antagonists in a conflict, indefinitely postponing a climax” to describe, ultimately, a fiction in which “there is no inward look at what is going on.”⁵¹ Trachtenberg, like many Barthelme critics, makes the fatal mistake of taking Barthelme’s procedures and statements at face value. According to Trachtenberg, Barthelme’s fiction is

invested with little psychological or historical density. Nothing goes on beneath events; little seems to have occurred before they are set in motion. His fiction tends towards the fixed moment rather than the flowing stream. It accords precedence to quantity over quality. It is an acknowledgement rather than a process of discovery—an acknowledgement, above all, that the narrative voice shares the attitudes and anxieties of the characters.⁵²

This assessment, as this thesis aims to show, could not be further from Barthelme’s personal and artistic convictions. While in his first essay, “After Joyce”, Barthelme admired these procedures in Kenneth Koch’s novel *The Red Robins* (excerpts of which appeared in *Location* 1), Barthelme himself, in fact, went beyond simply “dispens[ing] with character, action, plot and fact, [...] by permitting them to proliferate all over the landscape and by resolutely short-circuiting the expected order of things” (*L2* 16). As in Kierkegaard and Beckett, the “inward look at what is going on”, far from being absent, is the subject of Barthelme’s fiction, which takes the form of a qualitative investigation of the battle between knowingness and not-knowing. Barthelme’s “acknowledgement” of his own and his characters’ “attitudes and

⁵⁰ Hudgens, *Donald Barthelme: Postmodernist American Writer*, iii.

⁵¹ Trachtenberg, *Understanding Donald Barthelme*, 6.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.

anxieties”, far from being an end in itself, is a crucial step in the “process of discovery” of not-knowing in art. This “acknowledgment” is, in fact, an enactment of the kind of knowingness that threatens not-knowing, a kind of facile “knowledge” (the word lurks within) that, without further attempts at “discovery”, destroys the mystery of the work of art.

Similarly, critics have often misread Barthelme’s style and tone, remarking that its flatness and simplicity reflect a deadening of emotion or an exhaustion with the traditional strategies of representation. Often they zero in on the abundance of “stuff”—commercial objects, snippets of jingles, advertisements, useless products—in these stories as evidence that Barthelme has surrendered to what he himself calls the “trash phenomenon”, a paradoxical valuation of the rapid accumulation of trash as a locus of meaning.⁵³ As such, a number of critics have used the narrator’s statement in “See the Moon?” in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*—“Fragments are the only form I trust”—to argue, as Tony Tanner does, that Barthelme’s “disarrangings and rearrangings” point to a “distrust of the ‘finished’ objects around him.”⁵⁴ By contrast, Jerome Klinkowitz suggests that Barthelme’s leading aesthetic design is not fragmentation or “nonstructure”, but that “Structure, the stronger the better, is his chief concern.”⁵⁵ Klinkowitz also cites all the “stuff” in Barthelme’s stories (which is certainly an accurate observation), but argues that Barthelme’s “sense of the shape of words themselves”, which Barthelme highlights in his litanies and inventories, is what provides the

⁵³ This phrase first appears in *Snow White*, Barthelme’s second book. The concept of the “trash phenomenon” will be discussed in Chapter Two.

⁵⁴ Tanner, *City of Words: A Study of American Fiction in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, 400. Tanner likens Barthelme’s writing to the Watts Towers in Los Angeles, in which “Items of contemporary detritus are extracted from their habitual contexts or heaps and assembled in such a way that improbable fairy towers arise from the melancholy desolation of the surrounding trash-strewn urban landscape” (400-401).

⁵⁵ Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction*, 64. In an interview with Larry McCaffery in 1980, Barthelme spoke to his concern with form as a “stabilizing” force: “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” (NK 272). Here Barthelme deliberately chooses books as vehicles of structure rather than something like the Watts Towers.

foundation for his structure-making, and that all the “trash” in his fiction is more about language than the actual detritus of modern culture. While both of these analyses are illuminating, again they do not consider how the origins of Barthelme’s aesthetic procedures and philosophical explorations affect their meaning.

Some critics do recognise Barthelme’s modernist influences, as well as his concern with the art work as object. In his *Horizons of Assent* (1981), Alan Wilde approaches a useful interpretation of Barthelme’s work, identifying a number of Barthelme’s stories as “deal[ing] with the odd relationship between the individual mind and the humanized world of things and objects on which that mind has, collectively and precariously, left its imprint.”⁵⁶ Wilde argues that while the modernist artist attempts to “heal” the divide between the self and the world by conferring meaning upon it from a distance, the postmodern artist directly participates in the “world of things and objects”, not only accepting it in all its fragmentation and disjunction, but using this irreparable “heap of broken images”⁵⁷—the trash phenomenon—as both material and philosophical context, an exploration not of the Absolute but of “a more mundane investigation of the man-made world”.⁵⁸ Barthelme himself notes in “After Joyce” that the contemporary artist and viewer or reader must now participate in the “reconstitution” of the work of art (*L2* 14) instead of observing it from an aesthetic distance. In relation to this distance, Wilde also cites Kierkegaard’s theory of irony as a foundation for the postmodern (but not specifically Barthelme’s) relationship to art and the role of the artist, claiming that postmodern artists engage in what he calls “generative irony”, “an effort to comprehend or,

⁵⁶ Wilde, *Horizons of Assent*, 171.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

more accurately, to enter into a relationship with the ordinary”.⁵⁹ Certainly Barthelme’s comparison of the art object to a “rock or a refrigerator” (*L2* 13) falls within range of this idea of irony.

It is in his assessment of Barthelme’s attitude towards the world and the potential of art that Wilde errs in his interpretation. Wilde argues that Barthelme’s work shows “the value of a not too vigorous stand against the largeness of absolute values; the effort to participate in an admittedly confused world; and the acceptance of life, however drab, as the only source of the smaller pleasures.”⁶⁰ Wilde takes as evidence a line from “City Life”, in which Ramona, having been chosen as the vessel of a virgin birth, concludes that this is “an invitation which, if accepted, leads one down many muddy roads. I accepted. What was the alternative?” (*CL* 173). Ramona’s acceptance, Wilde suggests, mirrors Barthelme’s acceptance of or “assent” to a disjunct world “beyond repair”.⁶¹ This acceptance, furthermore, takes the form of a “small-scale effort”⁶² focused on domestic “mixed and modest pleasures”⁶³ rather than on an attempt to discover and create meaning by striving towards not-knowing. In an interview in 1981, however, Barthelme spoke directly to the aspiration towards not-knowing:

I believe that my every sentence trembles with morality in that each attempts to engage the problematic rather than to present a proposition to which all reasonable men must agree. The engagement might be very small, a word modifying another word, the substitution of “mess around” for “covet,” which undresses adultery a bit. I think the paraphrasable content in art is rather slight—“tiny,” as de Kooning puts it. The *way* things are done is crucial, as the inflection of a voice is crucial. The change of emphasis from the *what* to the *how* seems to me to be the major impulse in art

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 183.

since Flaubert, and it's not merely formalism, it's not at all superficial, it's an attempt to reach truth, and a very rigorous one. (NK 284-285)

In "Not-Knowing", Barthelme himself spoke to the refusal to "accept" the state of the world: "I think art's project is fundamentally meliorative. The aim of meditating about the world is finally to change the world. It is this meliorative aspect of literature that provides its ethical dimension" (NK 24). This thesis, therefore, argues that Barthelme's concern with not-knowing refutes Wilde's conclusion.

As Barthelme revisited themes and subjects throughout his career, this thesis adopts a thematic, rather than strictly chronological, approach to Barthelme's work. Regrettably, a study of this length is not nearly sufficient to deal with every one of Barthelme's stories and novels. As such, this thesis does not examine *Paradise* (1986), *Sam's Bar* (1987), an illustrated collaboration with Seymour Chwast, or *The King* (posthumously published in 1990). Nor is there space to discuss the three short plays Barthelme wrote in the early- to mid-1970s, *The Friends of the Family* and *The Conservatory* (both for radio), and *Snow White*, a stage adaptation of the novel, none of which were published in his lifetime.

The first chapter of the thesis looks in depth at Barthelme's first collection of short stories, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, published in 1964. *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* dramatises what Barthelme identifies as the "weakening" of "real ideas" of art, philosophy, and human emotion that takes place in modern life (NK 260). Here Barthelme begins to explore not-knowing and knowingness in terms of the anxiety of interpretation and boredom both in the work of art and in the viewer or reader, as well as the parallel between this artistic anxiety and modern romantic relationships.

The second chapter examines in more detail Barthelme's engagement with the collage practices in both visual art and poetry. Barthelme's subsequent collections, *Unspeakable Practices*, *Unnatural Acts* (1968), *City Life* (1970), *Sadness* (1972), *Guilty Pleasures* (1974), and *Amateurs* (1977), all include stories that look to the art object and the practice of collage for their ideas and form. Barthelme's friendships with Robert Rauschenberg, Harold Rosenberg, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch brought him in contact with contemporary theories of visual art and poetry. As a corollary to these theories, this chapter also discusses Barthelme's children's book, *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine or, The Hithering Thithering Djinn* (1971), which unites visual and linguistic collage in an equally fruitful exploration of the childhood mind and not-knowing.

The third chapter focuses on Barthelme's reading of Kierkegaard, which he had begun in a college philosophy class in 1956. Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* would become a crucial source of Barthelme's ideas about irony and Romanticism, especially in *City Life*. Barthelme's disagreement with Kierkegaard concerning the artistic value of irony and its involvement in not-knowing forms the subject of stories such as "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel", "The Explanation", and "The Glass Mountain", which dramatise Barthelme's struggle with Kierkegaardian irony and his efforts at defining his own concept of irony.

The fourth chapter shows that in addition to influencing Barthelme's conception and use of irony, Kierkegaard also shaped Barthelme's thoughts on teaching and learning, prompting him to read further into theories of education as well as engage with the ideas of American progressive education. Chapter Four shows that alongside his dramatisations of educational processes (school, the army, organised religion), Barthelme also explores how avant-garde art both educates the viewer or reader in not-knowing while simultaneously resisting learning and comprehension. This chapter takes a broader chronological view to

examine Barthelme's ideas of education: "Me and Miss Mandible," "The Party", Barthelme's first novel *Snow White*, "The Genius", "The Temptation of St. Anthony", and "The Catechist" explore different facets of the ways in which knowledge is and is not embodied in social institutions, and the effects of this system of knowledge in other areas of life, including interpersonal relations, religion, politics, and art.

The conclusion to the thesis examines how the theme of each of the previous chapters—anxiety, theories of visual art, irony, and education—come together in Barthelme's novel *The Dead Father* (1975). The conclusion looks back to the opening argument that Barthelme's ideas of not-knowing have their origins in modernism. As Barthelme writes in "Nothing: A Preliminary Account", "But if we cannot finish, we can at least begin" (*GP* 165).

Chapter One: Mystery, Menace, and Malaise in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*

Introduction

Come Back, Dr. Caligari, Barthelme's first collection of short stories, appeared in 1964.¹ Not only do these early stories display Barthelme's developing stylistic range, but they show how Barthelme was beginning to dramatise the ways in which not-knowing in art is "papered over" (*SW* 12) by knowingness that seeks to erase the uncomfortable, and even threatening, problems in art. The title of the collection takes its name from the 1920 silent German Expressionist film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which premiered in New York in 1921 and was shown throughout the 1960s. In 1947, Siegfried Kracauer published a study of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* entitled *From Caligari to Hitler*, which argued that Weimar-era film aesthetics signified a subconscious evolution in the psychology and politics of German society. For Barthelme, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* encapsulated a type of popular art that once did justice to not-knowing, whereas more recent manifestations of art and even psychology and philosophy for the masses had become blunted by knowingness. By adopting a thematic approach to the collection, this chapter will argue that even as early as *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, Barthelme had identified the ways in which certain institutions of mass culture—Hollywood movies, television, creative-writing courses, pop psychology, and sophisticated ennui—domesticate not-knowing, and that by working within these forms, Barthelme is able to elicit from them their inherent mystery.

¹ Many of these stories were published previously in magazines such as *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *New World Writing*, and *Contact*.

Come Back, Dr. Caligari and Not-Knowing in Film

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari offered in film a model of what Barthelme endeavored to do, both formally and theoretically, in fiction.² For one, Barthelme was immediately drawn to the film's painted shadows and purposely unrealistic, flattened sets, which emphasised the superficiality of the medium. Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* argued that far from a trivial exercise, this intentional stylistic flatness is able to access the mysteries of internal experience:

Inner life manifests itself in various elements and conglomerations of external life, especially in those almost imperceptible surface data which form an essential part of screen treatment. In recording the visible world—whether current reality or an imaginary universe—films therefore provide clues to hidden mental processes.³

The ability of film to “cling to the surface of things,” however, as Kracauer wrote in 1960 in *Theory of Film*, was in the early decades of the twentieth century a point of suspicion for artists interested in the inner mysteries of life:

[Films] seem to be the more cinematic, the less they focus directly on inward life, ideology, and spiritual concerns. This explains why many people with strong cultural leanings scorn the cinema. They are afraid lest its undeniable penchant for externals might tempt us to neglect our highest aspirations in the kaleidoscopic sights of ephemeral outward appearances. The cinema, says Valéry, diverts the spectator from the core of his being.⁴

For Kracauer and for Barthelme, however, it was exactly the “penchant for externals” that directed the spectator toward “the core of his being.” Far from being a distraction from inward life, the intrinsic superficiality of the medium actually allows a more profound

² The collection is peppered with references to the film. Conrad Veidt, who played Cesare in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, is referenced twice in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*. In “The Big Broadcast of 1938”, Veidt is the object of fandom, while his portrayal of Gwynplaine in *The Man Who Laughs* was also the inspiration for The Joker in the “Batman” comic book series (Veidt's character's face is scarred in the shape of an eerie smile), which Barthelme parodies in “The Joker's Greatest Triumph.”

³ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, 7.

⁴ Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, xi-xii.

examination of its mysteries, acting as a “gate rather than a dead end or a mere diversion”.⁵

Reflecting upon Valéry’s argument, Kracauer suggests that:

Perhaps our condition is such that we cannot gain access to the elusive essentials of life unless we assimilate the seemingly non-essential? Perhaps the way today leads from, and through, the corporeal to the spiritual? And perhaps the cinema helps us to move from “below” to “above?” It is indeed my contention that film, our contemporary, has a definite bearing on the era into which it is born; that it meets our inmost needs precisely by exposing—for the first time, as it were—outer reality and thus deepening, in Gabriel Marcel’s words, our relation to “this Earth which is our habitat.”⁶

For Kracauer, the preeminence of the “surface of things”, the “non-essential” in the film “amounted to a perfect transformation of material objects into emotional ornaments”,⁷ a move from “below to above”, from the “corporeal to the spiritual”. Kracauer’s use of the word “ornament”, rather than symbol or metaphor, is key to his theory and to Barthelme’s incorporation of the film’s techniques. Unlike other arts, film (and its predecessor, photography) “leaves its raw material more or less intact”. It does not attempt to manipulate images into a “commentary upon the world” (L2 13); rather, it presents these raw materials as emotional objects to be “encountered in the same way as other objects in the world” (L2 13), which, for Barthelme, require that the reader or viewer “actively participate” in the object’s “reconstitution” (L2 14), that he or she pass through the “gate” from knowingness to not-knowing. Kracauer even aligns film and writing, suggesting that “such art as goes into films results from their creators’ capacity to read the book of nature. The film artist has traits of an imaginative reader, or an explorer prompted by insatiable curiosity.”⁸

⁵ Ibid., 287.

⁶ Ibid., xi-xii.

⁷ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, 69.

⁸ Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, xi-xii.

At its best, then, film offers a way for a culture to approach the unresolvable terrors of the psyche without taming them into knowingness as psychoanalysis or religion can. Barthelme takes the psychological function of film to “provide clues to hidden mental processes” even further, suggesting in “Hiding Man”, the third story in the collection, that film has become a system of knowledge much as the church once was: the narrator of “Hiding Man” takes these B-movies, these “visible hieroglyphs of the unseen dynamics of human relations”, very seriously, almost to the point of associating them with religion. This was perhaps not so far off the cultural mark: French director Marcel Camus noted in *Time* magazine in 1960 that “The cinema has replaced the church, and people seek the truth at movies instead of the Mass.”⁹ Klaus Honnef argues about Andy Warhol’s films that “If the cinemagoer really concentrated and became involved in these films, they had an incredibly forceful effect. Offering utterly meaningless trivia, they took an attentive audience out of the real world of purpose and constraint and induced a mood bordering on the ecstatic.”¹⁰ Like oracles, myths, and holy signs, these films are portents, symptoms of cultural and personal malaise brought on by knowingness, examples of art imitating life: “Pay attention to the picture, it is trying to tell you something, revelation is not so frequent in these times that one can afford to diddle it away” (*CBDC* 36) by thinking these things trivial.

In “Hiding Man”, the narrator slips into what he thinks is an empty cinema to hide from some threat, only to discover that there is another man there, a black man in dark glasses sitting in the dark. The narrator of “Hiding Man” “decide[s] after a moment’s thought that if he is hostile, will flee through door marked EXIT (no bulb behind EXIT sign, no certainty that it leads anywhere)” (*CBDC* 25). The other man at first confesses—for this is

⁹ Camus, “Movies Abroad: Orpheus Distending”.

¹⁰ Honnef, *Andy Warhol, 1928-1987: Commerce into Art*, 75.

indeed a horrifyingly Sartrean, profane confessional¹¹—that he, too, is hiding from something, which leads the narrator to confide in the stranger that he is running from I. A. L. Burlingame,¹² a demonic-sounding priest who has been trying to force the narrator back into the religious fold he had escaped as a teenager.

The theatre in “Hiding Man” plays gory B-movies like *She Gods of Shark Reef*, *Night of the Blood Beast*, *Girl on Death Row*, and *Invasion of the Saucer Men*. These films, allegories of the 1950s fear of the atomic bomb and Communism (although, in Barthelme’s hands, they also become parodies of themselves), heighten the feeling of paranoia that surrounds the narrator like a pernicious fume. They are also, according to the narrator, “all superior examples of genre, tending toward suggested offscreen rapes, obscene tortures: man with huge pliers advancing on disheveled beauty, cut to girl’s face, to pliers, to man’s face, to girl, scream, blackout” (CBDC 25).¹³ Although the narrator has not rejected religion, he has been forced out of its structured institutions (for refusing to play for his Catholic school’s basketball team—he believes in “saints, holy water, poor boxes”, but “It was basketball I didn’t believe in” (CBDC 34)). He finds in the films a parallel narrative to that of religion: both involve the powers of good and the reward of salvation (transformed into a “young

¹¹ Sartre’s *No Exit* can also be translated as “In Camera,” or “behind closed doors.” As in the play, a theatre has no mirrors or windows, and the doors here are darkened.

¹² Although it is unclear how Barthelme came up with the name “I. A. L. Burlingame,” there may be a reference to comedy writer I. A. L. Diamond, who worked in Hollywood from the 1940s to the 1980s. Diamond would joke that the initials of his name (not his real one—like Bane-Hipkiss?) stood for “Interscholastic Algebra League”, which stands as a joke about the love of information in American schools and about the way that it becomes the basis for competition and, so, anxiety.

¹³ Though these genre films are decidedly B-grade, there is some suggestion of a parallel with Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s surrealist film *Un chien andalou* (1929), the first scene of which shows a man sharpening a razor, advancing upon a woman, cut to a shot of a cloud passing the moon, woman’s eye slit with razor, blackout. Certainly the pulp films of the 1950s (*Creature from the Black Lagoon* debuted in 1954, *Invasion of the Saucer Men* in 1957) sound as if they could have been made by the Surrealists. Stories with fleshless, empty characters like “Edward and Pia” and “The Piano Player” suggest that, in a sense, the zombies and robots and puppet people have stepped from these horror films to populate Barthelme’s stories, albeit as far milder versions of themselves.

lieutenant” and an “Army nurse (uniform in rags, tasty thigh, lovely breast)” (CBDC 26) being threatened by evil forces (*Attack of the Puppet People*). He himself hovers between the two manifestations of the same narrative (“movement in direction of self, two spaces, diagonally”), in a space that, appropriately, is both a theatre and a confession box (CBDC 33).

In Barthelme’s world, films themselves are theological tracts, books of a B-grade Bible:

But there is more, it was the first ritual which discovered to me the possibility of other rituals, other celebrations, for instance *Blood of Dracula*, *Amazing Colossal Man*, *It Conquered the World*. Can Bane-Hipkiss absorb this nice theological point, that one believes what one can, follows that vision which most brilliantly exalts and vilifies the world? Alone in the dark one surrenders to *Amazing Colossal Man* all hope, all desire[.] (CBDC 34-35)

The discovery of basketball, although as a pursuit it did not stick, gives the narrator a glimpse of other systems outside the church. Why, then, should this series of systems not extend to films, the new opiate of the masses? The film system the narrator mentions here, “*Blood of Dracula*, *Amazing Colossal Man*, *It Conquered the World*”, is also a pop culture narrative of Christ from Crucifixion to Resurrection to the conquering of the world by Christianity (*Bride of Frankenstein*, the narrator points out, is also a resurrection story). If the same story is present everywhere, religion begins to lose some of its privileged luster. One feels the same “surrendering” to, finding all salvation in, *Amazing Colossal Man* as in Christ. Films, made by men of the age as the Bible was written by men of that (approximate) age, take down just as whimsical a story about the present events—couched in the same metaphors and hyperbole—as either Testament.

Although the narrator of “Hiding Man” is trapped in his own nightmarish narrative, the perspective he gains on life from watching these films (“mirrors of the gigantic shadows”—all surface) gives him an advantage over those who are ignorant of the danger lurking in every shadowed doorway:

Most people haven't the wit to be afraid, most view televisions, smoke cigars, fondle wives, have children, vote, plant gladiolus, iris, phlox, never confront *Screaming Skull*, *Teenage Werewolf*, *Beast with a Thousand Eyes*, no conception of what lies beneath the surface, no faith in any manifestation not certified by hierarchy. Who is safe in home [sic] with *Teenage Werewolf* abroad, with streets under sway of *Beast with a Thousand Eyes*? People think these things are jokes, but they are wrong, it is dangerous to ignore a vision, consider Bane-Hipkiss, he has begun to bark. (CBDC 37)

The short hallucination he had earlier ("Odor of sweetness from somewhere, flowers growing in cracks of floor, underneath the seats? Possible verbena, possible gladiolus, iris, phlox" (CBDC 29)), the kind of which often accompanies a "religious" vision, has come back at the end of the story in a condemnation of the passivity in the face of a corrupt system. The mysterious, unsanctioned, and possibly dangerous meanings "beneath the surface" of the flowers, whose sweet odor blows from some inaccessible Eden, and the visionary *Screaming Skull* et. al., are unavailable to those who cling to the known and knowable. Bane-Hipkiss, on the other hand, has shed his banal surface disguise, revealing something more terrifying than a beast with a thousand eyes: a Janus-faced creature with "a cunning smile on face [sic] now revealed as hierarchical", a devouring monster with "hands clasped innocently in front of him to demonstrate purity of intent" (CBDC 36), whose mission is to foster unthinking, uniform belief. Religion may once have been a way of not-knowing, but it has degenerated the way some popular art has "degenerated": into all signs and no substance. But signs (linguistic, religious) are how society communicates itself to itself; "Signs after all mean everyone" (CBDC 26). The narrator saves both his body and soul by imitating the sign-defined actions of a classic B-movie mad scientist and "plunging" a needle into Bane-Hipkiss's neck, transforming him into a mutant dog-human.

Though "Hiding Man" is the most direct treatment of popular film, Barthelme's entire first collection is an attempt to restore Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer's original script of *The*

Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, which described real horrors and an attack against authority, whereas director Robert Wiene revised *Caligari* to “glorify authority and convict its antagonist of madness”.¹⁴ Barthelme names his collection *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* not as a desire for authority, as Dr. Caligari is presented in the revised and produced script, nor as a request for the return of the Doctor as the murderer in the original, but as an exploration of the allure of tyrannical knowingness over chaos and not-knowing that the original script represents. Dr. Caligari actually appears in “Up, Aloft in the Air” as one of a long list of doctors—including Dr. Pepper, Dr. No, and Dr. Fu Manchu—who are present at the consideration of a “resolution of censure” against the poet Constantine Cavity (“the forerunner so to speak of poetry in America”) that aims to put “an end to this badinage and wit!” (CBDC 133-134). These pop-culture doctors do find Cavity guilty of dispensing Love Root, but ultimately decide that “no resolution of censure could possibly...But of course not! What were we thinking?” (CDBC 135), a minor triumph of art (however absurd) over knowledge (however similarly absurd). Similarly, the movies playing in the cinema in “Hiding Man”, with their campy characters and ludicrous situations, are advertised as silly and disposable “jokes”, bits of trivial knowledge easily absorbed and easily forgotten. But, like the writings of prophets or avant-garde artists, they speak to those who can hear them of “absolutely serious” cultural ailments.

Psychoanalysis

Barthelme identified a similar process of domestication occurring in the practice and discourse of psychoanalysis. In a 1975 interview with Charles Ruas and Judith Sherman, Barthelme observed that “one of the strategies of psychoanalysis, for example,” is to

¹⁴ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 67.

look at situations in such a way as to make them dealable with or livable with and the real issues leak out, leak away, are cosmeticized, or ignored, and it does have the virtue of making you able to proceed and live some sort of life. But you're still ignoring fundamental issues, and it's that kind of consideration that's being talked about here. [...] If the game is called life, [one is] going to lose. We know that, and I expect our denial of death is all about this question. How do we perform when we're playing a game, when we know we can't possibly get out alive? And so on and so on and so on. It's this range of questions that is being addressed. (NK 222-223)

Plunging into the unknown of the unconscious, whether through psychoanalysis or by standing in front of a piece of art, is a terrifying prospect. A “cosmeticized” analysis, however, is not a real tackling of the “fundamental issue” of the absurdity of human life and the fact that no one “gets out of life alive”. This kind of diluted psychoanalysis is used in a misguided attempt to master the mind, to apply rational logic to something that is by definition irrational and fundamentally unsolvable. As Barthelme says, “a redefining of the problem in such a way as to make it solvable [...] is often in a situation in which you are deceiving yourself” (NK 222). In the same 1975 interview, Ruas asked, regarding “A Shower of Gold”, “But there’s still a vogue for anguish, isn’t there? But now it’s called ‘depression.’ We’ve gone from existential to psychoanalytic terms.” Barthelme answered, “Discovered depression, sort of legitimized depression. Well, depression is real. The terms in which it’s talked about are very often rather peculiar. [...] [T]he key line [in “A Shower of Gold”, discussed below] is ‘How can you be alienated without first having been connected? Think back and remember how it was.’ The logic there, I think, is sound” (NK 258-259). Barthelme suggests that the jargon of psychoanalysis—“alienation”, “depersonalization”—actually covers up the real problems of life and art which were, at one time, accessible through both popular art and psychoanalysis that “connected” one to, as Barthelme says in “Florence Green is 81”, the “life issue”. Barthelme suggests that existentialism employs these terms to explore mystery, whereas psychoanalysis uses them to “solve” that mystery. In his book *The*

Tradition of the New, Harold Rosenberg, with whom Barthelme co-edited *Forum* magazine, highlights the connection between the contemporary “vogue” for easy knowledge and art with an epigraph from Wallace Stevens: “The American will is easily satisfied in its efforts to realize itself in knowing itself.”¹⁵

One of Barthelme’s strategies to combat the “vogue” for knowingness is the evasion of any attempt to interpret using depth psychology. For one of the covers of *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, Barthelme’s close friend Milton Glaser designed an image of floating dark glasses and a beard that frames a ghost of a smile. These are classic physical disguises, but they also effectively alter the wearer’s psyche, not only hiding his appearance (“Hiding Man”), but turning him into a ghost of himself and becoming the only discernible things about him. There is an eerie parallel here with writing and authorship: the story a writer creates becomes like these glasses and beard, revealing and hiding the author in equal measure. Glaser’s illustration alludes to the physical objectness of words, which can sometimes act as props, disguises, or objects one can use to evade knowingness.

While Barthelme explored anxiety and evasion in his fiction, he also often evaded questions about his own creative process and psychologically-sourced materials in an attempt to defend against an easy interpretation of his work. In an interview in 1980, Larry McCaffery observes that “It’s very obvious in [...] nearly all your fiction that you distrust the impulse to “go beneath the surface” of your characters and events.” Barthelme answers, “If you mean doing psychological studies of some kind, no. I’m not so interested. ‘Going beneath the surface’ has all sorts of positive-sounding associations, 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 the surfaces” (*NK* 272). It is tempting to take this evasion at face value, to determine, as other

¹⁵ Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters”, 23.

critics of postmodernism have, that the era's practitioners are interested in superficiality only insofar as it highlights the artist's recognition of an abandonment of modernist depth, and thus, cements the artist's cultural modishness. In Barthelme's case, however, this evasion is typical of his process of dramatising the ways in which superficiality and evasiveness can be used artistically ("Flight is always available, concealment is always possible" (CBDC 27)). "A Shower of Gold" uses the joke, as this chapter will argue, as a psychological evasion of conscious judgement, while in "Florence Green is 81", Barthelme dramatises the actual psychological anxiety of the artist and the work of art, locating both the source of not-knowing and the problem of interpretation in Freudian psychoanalysis.

Barthelme was not alone in his use of evasion, surface, jokes, and absurdist situations as protection and protest against the "depletion" of "the better class" of emotion—profound sadness, fear, joy, desire—by the "shadow world" of imposed meanings and knowingness. Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, John Updike's *Rabbit* books, and J. D. Salinger's stories "Franny" and "Zooney" (which appeared separately in *The New Yorker* in 1955 and 1957, respectively) were also concerned with the fact that analysis in the 1950s had not only become a treatment of a symptom rather than of a disease, but had devolved into a banal version of itself that actually intensified feelings of alienation. In "Zooney", for example, when Franny's mother considers taking Franny to a psychoanalyst, Zooney responds,

"You just call in some analyst who's experienced in adjusting people to the joys of television, and *Life* magazine every Wednesday, and European travel, and the H-bomb, and Presidential elections, and the front page of the *Times*, and the responsibilities of the Westport and Oyster Bay Parent-Teacher Association, and God knows what else that's gloriously normal—you just *do* that, and I swear to you, in not more than a year Franny'll either be in a *nut* ward or she'll be wandering off into some goddam desert with a burning cross in her hands."¹⁶

¹⁶ Salinger, *Franny and Zooney*, 70-71. "Franny" and "Zooney" were first published together as a book in the U.S. in 1961.

Here Salinger implies that imposed normality—in the form of *Life* magazine, ironically—is the enemy of artistic and psychological health (although Freud would argue that there is no such thing as perfect psychological health). Writers such as Ken Kesey and William S. Burroughs found the profession of psychoanalysis complicit in a smug knowingness that, above all, prevented people from remaining mysterious to themselves. “Remaining a student of surfaces”, then, is neither an avoidance of emotional depth nor a mimetic comment upon the lack of depth in modern life, as critics of postmodernism have suggested. Instead, dramatising the “leaking away” or “cosmeticizing” of a real investigation into the meaning of life was itself a profound, and vital, investigation.

The dilution of psychoanalysis into knowingness was itself a subject upon which those “in the know” could comment without fear of appearing too unfashionably earnest. In *The New Yorker*’s “The Talk of the Town” in the August 23, 1952 issue, for example, there ran a tidbit about an attempt to register “the word “Libido” as a trademark of a line of perfumes and toilet waters” (a literal dilution). The *Official Gazette* (of the United States Patent and Trademark Office) in which this attempt was first printed reports that “The Examiner of Trademarks refused registration of the mark as compromising immoral or scandalous matter on the ground that one of the dictionary definitions of the word refers to sexual desires.” The columnist writes, archly,

Having directed our attention to the item, as requested, we beamed it on our dictionary, where we discovered that the primary meaning of the word in issue is just plain “sexual desire; lust” and that the other meanings to which [the Patent Office Examiner-in-Chief] evidently referred are, as expressed by Webster, “energy, motive force, desire, or striving, either so far as derived from the sex instinct (according to Freud) or as derived from the primal and all-inclusive instinct or urge to live (according to Jung).” It is our intention to familiarize ourselves with the perfume in issue at the earliest opportunity. Then, when we come across a pretty creature

smelling of it, we shall have a question to ask her, as follows: “Freud or simply Jung?”¹⁷

Whether it is true or not that “a reader” has sent *The New Yorker* this page, the insistence upon the origin of this story further distances the magazine—and its likeminded readers—from the implication that such a highbrow publication could ever swallow hook, line, and sinker the same theories that supply unintellectual comfort. While *The New Yorker* adopts a knowing position in regard to psychoanalytic theory and sexuality—an unease concealed by satire—*Come Back, Dr. Caligari* tests the tension between the validity of psychoanalytic theory and practice and its susceptibility to the “general cultural trend toward stereotypy and sterility”¹⁸ in the modern age. As the narrator of “Hiding Man” observes, “even Mars Bars”—and perfumes—“have hidden significance, dangerous to plumb” (*CBDC* 33).

The first story in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, “Florence Green is 81”, encourages the reader to make the analogy between the patient/doctor and text/reader relationships in order to tease out the ways in which psychoanalysis, like art, is counterfeited by knowingness. While Baskerville, the would-be artist narrator of “Florence Green,” is evidently the “patient” (a good Freudian, he remarks that he is “free associating, brilliantly, brilliantly, to put you into the problem” (*CBDC* 4)) he is also a figure for the art object’s anxiety about its audience and status in society. Ironically, Baskerville edits “The Journal of Tension Reduction,” a “very scholarly, very brilliant” “social-psychological” magazine, and although it becomes clear that he has learned nothing useful about the subject by editing the journal, Baskerville’s mental state is signaled by its repeated mention (it should, by all accounts, be called “The Journal of Tension Amplification”). Although the irony is lost on Baskerville, he says, “we

¹⁷ “The Talk of the Town”, *The New Yorker*.

¹⁸ Brown, *Life Against Death*, x. Barthelme briefly mentions Brown at the end of “After Joyce.”

run many useful and sensible pieces [...] portages through the whirlpool-country of the mind” (CBDC 6). This Wallace Stevens-like statement points to the real subject of the majority of Barthelme’s stories: the unique ability of art to stay true to the strange, complex landscape of an individual mind instead of mapping—and therefore mastering—it.¹⁹

By the end of “Florence Green is 81,” Baskerville’s anxiety has thrown him into a state of not-knowing purgatory. He has not quite let go of his need to be recognised, praised and invited back, but he has followed Florence Green at least partially through her journey into the realm of not-knowing:

I know that when I telephone tomorrow, there will be no answer. Iraklion? Samos? Haifa? Kotor Bay? She will be in none of these places but in another place, a place where everything is different. Outside it is raining. In my rain-blue Volkswagen I proceed down the rain-black street thinking, for some simple reason, of the Verdi *Requiem*. I begin to drive my tiny car in idiot circles in the street, I begin to sing the first great *Kyrie*.” (CBDC 16)

Baskerville wishes above all to be taken seriously, which he finds is impossible in a world of sophisticated, dinner-party knowingness. But it is Florence Green, despite her ridiculous fortune, who succeeds in being taken seriously for achieving the impossible: discovering and traveling to a place where everything is different, “A simple, perfect idea” (CBDC 15).²⁰ The most obvious place for an eighty-one-year-old woman to go is into the underworld of death (where, it may be assumed, everything is indeed different), which Verdi’s *Requiem* suggests. But in another sense, Florence has disappeared into a parallel version of this story, to a whirlpool-country of “total otherness” (CBDC 15), of an “as-yet unspoken” corner of Barthelme’s imagination unavailable to the culture of knowingness. Florence’s departure

¹⁹ In an interview, Barthelme touched on the pseudo-mimetic nature of fiction, stating that “In fact, everybody’s a realist offering true accounts of the activity of mind. There are only realists.” (Barthelme and O’Hara, “The Art of Fiction No. 66”.)

²⁰ In fact, Helen Moore Barthelme speculates that it was this desire to “go somewhere where everything is different,” to step into an ideal existence in which one made the ideal art and found ideal love and even the ideal house, that doomed her marriage to Barthelme. (Helen Moore Barthelme, *Genesis of a Cool Sound*, 64-66.)

from this story changes its landscape as well: things are no longer blue or black, they are rain-blue and rain-black. Baskerville's mind and body has been set in motion: other pieces of art come flooding into his head from these other countries of the mind, and he sings a *Kyrie*, a short repeated invocation often sung in response in a litany, which here is the repeated "Iraklion? Samos? Haifa? Kotor Bay?" The *Kyrie* should be a statement in response to another statement. But here the litany is a series of questions, reiterations of not-knowing that are tied up with simultaneously mysterious and dogmatic religion. Baskerville's *Kyrie* may therefore also be a question, perhaps of whether one must escape the "tiny idiot circles" of some psychological or existential purgatory or enter a *Finnegans Wake*-like circular structure of dreaming.

Equally susceptible to the scam of modern psychoanalysis and its attempt to subjugate the subconscious is the romantic relationship. Once again, Barthelme uses evasion, often in the form of humour, to deflect knowingness. Barthelme, of course, was not the first to employ this strategy. In addition to the idea that the joke is an "envelope" for a problematic or threatening subconscious message, Freud noted that for centuries, "Among the institutions which cynical jokes are in the habit of attacking none is more important or more strictly guarded by moral regulations but at the same time more inviting to attack than the institution of marriage, at which, accordingly, the majority of cynical jokes are aimed. There is no more personal claim than that for sexual freedom and at no point has civilization tried to exercise severer suppression than in the sphere of sexuality."²¹ The jokes about marriage depend upon the idea that marriage is the end of sexual freedom. Sexual freedom, with its alluring mysteries, represents a kind of not-knowing that marriage, which Barthelme implies involves

²¹ Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 110.

a nearly complete knowledge of another person, eradicates completely. And yet as a result of all this reading of popular psychology, modern marriage began to demand the individual freedom and fulfillment that psychoanalysis originally promised. Paradoxically, the new banal variations on psychoanalytic theories actually worked to maintain the suppression of sexuality and uphold the civilising force of marriage by making the desire for freedom seem clichéd.

The way to reclaim not-knowing from love and sex and even marriage was, for a number of Barthelme's contemporaries, to participate in the popularisation of psychoanalysis. And yet, as Barthelme suggests, there is no alternative to the constant, treacherous pursuit of sex and love: as the narrator of "Hiding Man" declares, "Man cannot live without placing himself naked before circumstance, as in warfare, under the sea, jet planes, women" (*CBDC* 27).

"For I'm the Boy Whose Only Joy Is Loving You" and "The Big Broadcast of 1938" are both centered around a character named Bloomsbury and the dissolution of his marriage. The former takes its title from the 1937 Bing Crosby song, "Remember Me?", which immediately signals the story's engagement with the not-knowing that could once be found in popular culture. In the story, Bloomsbury and his friends are driving back from what appears to be a divorce ceremony capped off by his ex-wife taking off in an airplane. As they leave the aerodrome, Bloomsbury's friends bombard him with questions about his failed marriage to try to understand "the circumstances surrounding the extinguishment of [Bloomsbury's] union," such as "at what point the situation of living together became untenable, whether she wept when you told her, whether you wept when she told you, [...] whether you kept the television or she kept the television, the disposition of the balance of the furnishings

including tableware, linens, light bulbs, beds and baskets, who got the baby if there was a baby, what food remains in the pantry at this time” and on and on in order to “get the feel of the event” (*CBDC* 59-60). But of course they do not want to get “the feel” of anything; they only want easily assimilated answers that suggest a clear diagnosis and simple solution. At this stage in the “extinguishment,” who gets the television and who gets the baby are decisions of equal importance, flattened by the steamroller of knowingness. Not only can Bloomsbury not produce the answers to these questions, he goes one step further than his friends, suggesting, as a psychoanalyst would, that “The question is not what is the feeling but what is the meaning?” (*CBDC* 62). As in “Hiding Man”, Bloomsbury gets a glimpse of not-knowing at the movies: “Once in a movie house Bloomsbury recalled Tuesday Weld had suddenly turned on the screen, looked him full in the face, and said: You are a good man. You are good, good, good. He had immediately gotten up and walked out of the theater, gratification singing in his heart.” But even that moment of affirmation is not enough for his friends who only want and recognise “feeling” in the context of psychoanalysis. As unobtrusive readers of popular psychology, they submit him to a particularly brutal incarnation of the “talking cure” :

But that situation dear to him as it was helped him not a bit in this situation. And that memory memorable as it was did not prevent the friends of the family from stopping the car under a tree, and beating Bloomsbury in the face first with the brandy bottle, then with the tire iron, until at length the hidden feeling emerged, in the form of salt from his eyes and black blood from his ears, and from his mouth, all sorts of words. (*CBDC* 63)

“The Big Broadcast of 1938”, which comes directly after “For I’m the Boy” in the collection, finds Bloomsbury divorced and in possession of a radio station granted to him during the division of marital assets. As his ex-wife got the house, Bloomsbury is forced to make a home of sorts out of words that may or may not have an audience, thus becoming a

figure for the anxious, Baskerville-like patient who worries his doctor is not listening to him. Bloomsbury gives two kinds of radio talks: in one, he “singl[es] out, for special notice, from among all the others, some particular word in the English language, and repeating it in a monotonous voice for as much as fifteen minutes, or a quarter-hour” (CBDC 67). Bloomsbury’s beating-with-a-tire-iron-style therapy session seems to have done the trick, as now the words “would frequently disclose new properties, unsuspected qualities,” which, as in psychoanalysis, are often “far from [the patient’s] intention” (CBDC 67).

The second kind of talk is the “*commercial announcement*”, which is “chiefly dissimilar” to other commercial announcements in that “they were addressed not to the mass of men but of course to her, she with whom he had lived in the house that was gone (traded for the radio)” (CBDC 68). Instead of jingles or short product promotions, these announcements “of great power and poignancy, and persuasiveness” (CBDC 70) are long anecdotes about Bloomsbury’s marriage. The opening of these announcements generally position Bloomsbury and his ex-wife in inverted doctor/patient roles, he “speaking into a tube”, a suggestion of clinical distance, to her “lying on [her] back most likely, giving an ear” (CBDC 68). Usually it is the patient who lies on his or her back on a couch, mimicking the physical position of sleeping, during which one has the most access to not-knowing. But Bloomsbury is the patient here, exploring the narrative of his marriage and tapping into the “unsuspected qualities” of “The Star-Spangled Banner” “which he had always admired immoderately, on account of its finality” (CBDC 67), while the doctor withholds the kind of personal connection and willingness to explore the unknown upon which the real work of psychology depends.

In one of the announcements, Bloomsbury recalls the time he and his wife went to see a film because “we hadn’t rooms and there were no parks and we hadn’t had automobiles and there were no beaches, for making love or anything else. *Ergo*, if you will condone the anachronism, we were forced into the balcony, from which we had a tilty view of the silver screen” (CBDC 70). Once again, the movie theatre becomes a place of communion and a means of approaching not-knowing (the “tilty” screen suggesting a further departure from a rigid, linear understanding of the world). Here, though, Bloomsbury hopes to access what is hidden beneath his wife’s blouse. During this attempt, however, he becomes transfixed by what is happening in the film, prompting his wife to withdraw both physically and emotionally. At this, Bloomsbury says, “We watched the picture together, and although this was a kind of intimacy, the other kind had been lost” (CBDC 71). While films in “Hiding Man” were a salve for the narrator’s psychological and religious malaise, here they become one of the “trivial diversions” that replaces genuine connection.

Eventually, Bloomsbury’s wife comes home with a new husband and, to Bloomsbury’s dismay, takes him into their bedroom. Bloomsbury stands by the bedroom door all night, listening to “sounds of a curious nature, such as grunts and moans, and sighs.” “Upon hearing these,” he reports, “I immediately rushed to the attic to obtain our copy of *Ideal Marriage*, by Th. H. Van De Velde, M.D., to determine whether this situation was treated of therein. But it was not” (CBDC 78). Bloomsbury’s first impulse in “this situation” is to consult a book that had, in the 1960s, become a popular sex manual (“our copy” hints at the idea that every couple received the book as a wedding gift). Bloomsbury, however, turns to *Ideal Marriage* as one might turn to *Popular Mechanics*, to figure out how to fix the situation—a search for easily-assimilated meaning rather than the feeling of not-knowing.

The story ends with Bloomsbury revealing that the woman who has, by this time, camped out in the studio, is actually his ex-wife in disguise. She tries to rekindle at least the sexual flame, but is turned down by Bloomsbury, who asks, “why can’t you let the old days die? That were then days of anger, passion, and dignity, but are now, in the light of present standards, practices, and attitudes, days that are done?” (*CBDC* 80). Even if Bloomsbury wished to explore the moments of not-knowing in the relationship, such points of access have been “papered over” by diluted theories of how romance should proceed. Bloomsbury thus returns to his broadcasts, although by this point even the electric company has shut down the connection.

The Commercialisation of Art and the Artist

In working within popular forms and using “trivial” fragments of the surface world in order to explore not-knowing, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* analyses the significance of commercialised art in contemporary culture. In “Not-Knowing”, Barthelme writes that “When one adds the ferocious appropriation of high culture by commercial culture—it takes, by my estimate, about forty-five minutes for any given novelty in art to travel from the Mary Boone Gallery on West Broadway to the display windows of Henri Bendel on Fifty-seventh Street—one begins to appreciate the seductions of silence” (*NK* 17). Stories such as “A Shower of Gold” and “Florence Green is 81” exhibit the particular kind of anxiety that the commercialisation of art engenders in the artist. The knowingness of consumer culture erases the necessary anxiety the author feels when venturing into the unknown, replacing it with a profound worry: how can the contemporary writer or artist make a publicly consumed art that is a protest against knowingness and protect himself against the forces that threaten to turn his art into a window display at Henri Bendel? If his work is consumed by the masses, how

will he know if he is a good artist or a bad artist or a celebrity artist, let alone a success or a failure? Even when he feels he has escaped commercialisation, how can he be sure when the very worry about escaping commercialisation is commercialised? How much of himself, then, should the author include in his work, and how much should—or can—he evade the kind of pinning down that is an initial step in the neutralising of that work of art?

Like the psychoanalyst's couch, the Hollywood film, and *The New Yorker*, the art world is susceptible to an analogous effort to try to cover up or empty the work of art of its uncomfortable, un-quippable mystery. The anxiety of the artist begins with the subduing of his art into something knowable and consumable: a transformation from a mystifying object in a museum into an advertisement in a window at Bendel's or a "commercial announcement". Contemporary writers and artists found advertising to be a complex and subtle opponent; it both tells a truth (Dove soap cleans effectively and smells nice) and simultaneously triggers and covers up the deeper anxieties about the acceptability of the self (one 1958 ad featured a woman on the phone declaring to her paramour, "Darling, I'm tickled pink all over—I'm head over heels in new Pink Dove!"). In *Confessions of an Advertising Man* (1963), David Ogilvy specifically advises against "tricky headlines—puns, literary allusions, and other obscurities", which would alienate the "uneducated" ("dove" for "love", it seems, was the upper limit of punning).²² Instead, knowledge is prized above all; rigorous testing, says Ogilvy, is the secret to a successful advertisement: "We prefer the discipline of knowledge to the anarchy of ignorance."²³ If there is to be any not-knowing in an advertisement, it has first been tested to the nth degree, and then is used to ensnare rather than open an inquiry into the mysteries of life:

²² Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, 136, 141.

²³ *Ibid.*, 196.

Dr. Gallup has discovered that the kind of photographs which win awards from camera clubs —sensitive, subtle, and beautifully composed—don't work in advertisements. What do work are photographs which arouse the reader's *curiosity*... He glances at the photograph and says to himself, "What goes on here?" Then he reads your copy to find out. This is the trap to set.²⁴

Although Ogilvy insists upon a difference between art and advertising, he actually identifies a key similarity between them.²⁵ The not-knowing work of art also "arouse[s] the reader's *curiosity*" in a way that prompts him to find out "what is going on here" by "tapping it, shaking it, holding it to his ear to hear the roaring within" (*L2* 14). Like the advertisement, avant-garde art also sets a "trap" in order to be "reconstituted" as an object in the world.

It is in the overlap between advertising and art that Barthelme focuses his effort to elicit not-knowing from popular forms. For example, in "The Piano Player", which Ben Yagoda characterised as "surreal and mystifying and dark, as if Ionesco had set to work animating the suburban characters in a Charles Saxon cartoon",²⁶ the "discipline of knowledge" is subverted back into the kind of threatening not-knowing that the market aims to domesticate. In the story, Brian's wife comes crawling in the door confused and distressed, and although neither she nor Brian can identify the source of her unhappiness, their impulse is to purchase a car:

"I want a Triumph," she said from the floor. "A TR-4. Everyone in Stamford, every single person, has one but me. If you gave me a TR-4 I'd put our ugly children in it and drive away. To Wellfleet. I'd take all the ugliness out of your life."

"A green one?"

"A *red* one," she said menacingly. "Red with red leather seats." (*CBDC* 20)

²⁴ Ibid., 144.

²⁵ Ogilvy warns his reader that by employing such strategies, "you will not endear yourself to connoisseurs of contemporary art. Indeed, you may find yourself pilloried as a yahoo." (Ibid., 158.)

²⁶ Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*, 342-343.

“The Piano Player” exposes the “truth” behind the advertisement, that the acquisition of this or that thing—be it an IBM, an air hammer, or a Pinetop Smith record (*CBDC* 20-22)—will not, in fact, “Triumph” over “the ugliness” of life. One cannot “cure” the ham with penicillin—an advertising pun gone awry—or eat the “Silly Putty in the deepfreeze” (*CBDC* 21); these objects of knowingness offer no nourishment.²⁷ The discipline of knowledge has, unsurprisingly, failed entirely to alleviate the feelings of alienation brought on by that very knowledge. For a brief moment, Brian perceives a glimmer of not-knowing: “Eyes like snow peas, he thought. Tamar dancing. My name in the dictionary, in the back. The Law of Bilateral Good Fortune. Piano bread, perhaps. A nibble of pain running through the Western world. Coriolanus” (*CBDC* 21). This short rush of free-association, though, is not enough to save Brian: by the end, when Brian is tasked with “trundling” the piano (a symbol of artistic not-knowing) out to the grape arbor, it “str[ikes] him dead” (*CBDC* 22).

The journey from the artist’s studio to the department store window or magazine page empties the work of art of the problems, the mystery, the not-knowing that resists immediate understanding. During this process, the art work’s “functions are being clarified in relation to accepted practice in decoration, entertainment and education”,²⁸ not in terms of aesthetic form, subject, or use of materials. The work of art in or as advertising, as John Berger would argue in *Ways of Seeing*, “also suggests a cultural authority, a form of dignity, even of wisdom, which is superior to any vulgar material interest; an oil painting belongs to a cultural

²⁷ In the July 30, 1979 issue of *The New Yorker*, Barthelme published “Languishing, Half-Deep in Summer”, in which the narrator, like Brian and his wife, approaches romantic not-knowing by outfitting himself in brands and even art that project a sophisticated understanding of the world: “Languishing, half-deep in summer, soul-sick and under-friended, I decided to find love. So I zipped over to the new-suit store and bought me a Giorgio Armani rig, unbacked, and a skinny little nothing tie to go with it, and some face bronzer by Daunt. Thinking: O mistress mine, where are you hiding? Are you at the Whitney Museum, cheek to cheek with the George Segal retrospective?” (*TDB* 20).

²⁸ Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object*, 13.

heritage; it is a reminder of what it means to be a cultivated European.”²⁹ Emptied of its mystery, the work of art becomes a symbol of sophistication and a tool for selling that sophistication.

Harold Rosenberg also identifies a transposition from object to practice which occurred after World War I, in which artists themselves began to redefine the work of art not as an object, but “in terms of the intellectual acts of artists”.³⁰ Dada, Surrealism, and Action Painting were among the “vanguard” movements that Rosenberg identified as being “liquidated” into acts rather than understood as objects. Since such acts are divorced from the more mysterious formal and internal workings of the piece, they are susceptible to being easily understood, communicated, and assimilated by its audience in place of the art work itself. What appeared in Henri Bendel, then, was not even a copy of the art object itself, but a shell of a hollowed-out artistic procedure.

According to Rosenberg, such swift incorporation into the mass market first leaves the work of art uncertain about its identity as a work of art and then the artist uncertain of his merit as an artist. The art work, reduced either to a commercially acceptable process or a window display, was faced with a fundamental question: “Am I a masterpiece,” it began to ask itself, “or an assemblage of junk?”³¹ On one hand, according to Harold Rosenberg in his book of essays *The Anxious Object*, success in the marketplace meant that:

Instead of being, as it used to be, an activity of rebellion, despair or self-indulgence on the fringe of society, art is being normalized as a professional activity within society. For the first time, art formerly called vanguard has been accepted *en masse* and its ideals of innovation, experiment, dissent have been institutionalized and made

²⁹ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 135.

³⁰ Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object*, 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

official. [...] the rewards to be won in art by talent and diligence are becoming increasingly predictable.³²

To all appearances, this seems like a positive outcome. If his work is accepted into society, the artist need no longer languish, starving and anxious, on the margins; in fact, “Instead of resigning himself to a life of bohemian disorder and frustration, [the artist] may now look forward to a career in which possibilities are unlimited. [...] painting is no longer a haven for self-defeating contemplatives but a glamorous arena in which performers of talent may rival the celebrity of senators or TV stars”³³ (an analogy Barthelme will satirise in “A Shower of Gold”). As one, apparently paradoxical, defense against institutionalisation, artists such as Andy Warhol embraced this “junk” status and produced (and reproduced) the now-iconic paintings of Campbell’s Soup Cans and Coca-Cola bottles and allowed the masses to transform him into a celebrity, thus making the masses complicit in their own lampooning. Rosenberg asks, in light of this new integration of “junk”, whether it is

permissible still to speak of the work of art as an “anxious object”? Has not the ghost that haunted painting and sculpture in the forties and fifties been laid—perhaps forever? A lonely and doubting spirit can hardly be said to personify the crackling art world of the second half of the sixties. Josef Albers, the master of painting conceived as calculated sheets of color, had the facts on his side when he sent me the message last year that “*Angst* is dead.”³⁴

Albers’s declaration, however flippant, suggested to Rosenberg that now that artists no longer exist on the fringes of society, “anxiety is no longer a reality in art [...] To mention anxiety is to arouse suspicion of nostalgia or of a vested interest in the past, if not a reactionary

³² Ibid., 13.

³³ Ibid., 14.

³⁴ Ibid., 13.

reversion to the middle-class notion of genius suffering in a garret.”³⁵ “Anxiety” of the artist and the work of art had become embarrassingly passé.

On the other hand, instead of a relief from these “self-defeating” anxieties, the (non-Warhol) artist finds that this new entrée into society means that he, like his work, is subject to a process of commercialisation. Trapped inside a golden cage, the artist is “rewarded” for creating unchallenging art for mass consumption. As Rosenberg argues, the “identity” of the work of art was in the past paradoxically anchored in “rebellion, despair or self-indulgence on the fringe of society”; it knew what its subject and motives were, and the distance from society freed art from the need to reflect socially accepted knowledge. The contemporary artist finds that within the boundaries of society he can no longer approach not-knowing and relay back his findings; he is obliged to “perform”, to use his talent to act out what an audience already knows instead of creating anything of not-known, and therefore lasting, value. Where once Action Painting, for example, involved a “catharsis” that “theoretically, at least, it is able to reach the deepest knots of the artist’s personality and to loosen them”, “in the recent cool modes of painting and constructing, process prevails, and the unexcited artist performs the necessary steps without upsetting his normal condition of uneasiness.”³⁶ While “angst” is no longer available, a new anxiety has taken its place as a consequence of such “glamorous” social acceptance.³⁷ In fact, argues Rosenberg, without access to the old anxiety, contemporary artists are *more* anxious than their predecessors, unable to locate meaning

³⁵ Ibid., 14.

³⁶ Ibid., 15.

³⁷ In an interview with J. D. O’Hara in 1981, Barthelme remarked upon the juxtaposition of his fiction and the advertisements in *The New Yorker*: “People read the fiction with after-images of Rolls Royces and Rolexes still sizzling in their eyes. Rare is the reviewer who can resist mentioning the magazine’s ads when talking about the fiction. One is gilded by association” (NK 279-280).

either in previous ideas of mystery and not-knowing or in an attempt to parody bourgeois acceptance.

In the last story in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, entitled “A Shower of Gold”, Barthelme takes as his subject the anxiety surrounding the position of art and the artist in a contemporary society that values only this trivial knowledge. The story follows the travails of a minor artist as he is roped into participating in a quiz show that tests his acceptance of the absurdity of life. In the new commercial art market, here symbolised by the quiz show (which celebrates and rewards trivial, factual knowledge), philosophical truths embedded in the work of art—absurdity, a glimpse of the veiled messages of the unconscious—as well as the figure of the artist himself, are falsified by their interpretation, which converts them from mystery to the known. Barthelme mentioned in an interview that the story was “clearly inspired by all this fake existential language that was around at the time. Existential language was very popular in those days and so it’s a reaction to its spurious appeal. Although it’s philosophically based on very solid matter—not the piece, the existential language—it is also a very cheap means of self-dramatization” (NK 258). The story suggests that the not-knowing integral to art—the kind that leads to new, unexpected forms—is perhaps the highest mode of revolt against a world that elevates the figure of the artist based on a “cheap” simulacrum of profundity.

In “A Shower of Gold”, a broke sculptor named Peterson answers an ad for a television game show called *Who Am I?* that promises to “pay you to be on TV if your opinions are strong enough or your personal experiences have a flavor of the unusual” (CBDC 173). Of course, this offer will turn out to be too good to be true, but the lure of a few hundred dollars is too tempting for Peterson to ignore. Peterson’s decision to appear on television prompts a number of ludicrous episodes, which are “punishments” for

denying the absurdity of existence. A man visits Peterson's apartment, claiming to play the cat-piano, which, as one might imagine, is a piano (or organ, according to Jean-Baptiste Weckerlin in his 1877 book *Musiciana, extraits d'ouvrages rare ou bizarre*) made of cats and is played by pulling their tails and stepping on their paws. A trio of young women from California barge their way into Peterson's apartment, quoting Pascal ("The natural misfortune of our mortal and feeble condition is so wretched that when we consider it closely, nothing can console us" (CBDC 180)) and cooking something called *veal engagé* (a twist on *art engagé*). Each visitor sweeps, sometimes violently, into Peterson's relatively ordered existence, testing his fitness for an absurd revolt.

"A Shower of Gold" makes the problem of not-knowing literally "solvable" in the form of a television quiz show called *Who Am I?* The show is based on a conglomerate of Kierkegaard, Beckett, Kafka, Nietzsche, Milton, Camus, and Sartre, whose notion of "bad faith" is here simultaneously popularised (thus made banal) and philosophically fulfilled:

Who Am I? tries [...] to discover what people *really are*. People today, we feel, are hidden away inside themselves, alienated, desperate, living in anguish, despair and bad faith. Why have we been thrown here, abandoned? That's the question we try to answer, Mr. Peterson. Man stands alone in a featureless, anonymous landscape, in fear and trembling and sickness unto death. God is dead. Nothingness everywhere. Dread. Estrangement. Finitude. (CBDC 174)

Who Am I's appropriation of philosophy by the commercial sphere is also a central idea in Barthelme's fiction, as he states in the 1975 interview with Charles Ruas:

Ruas: The satire always has this underpinning of Pascal and Nietzsche and Sartre, which is not in turn satirized.

Barthelme: Well, no. It is not Sartre that is being satirized here. It is—to call them commentators would be too courteous—exploiters.

Ruas: Which seems to indicate that the satire has a definite sort of commitment.

Barthelme: It would be to Sartre if it could be located anywhere. The story is about the process with which real ideas are weakened, cheapened, wholesaled, diluted, so on and so on. I don't know if you recall, but there was an awful lot of that going around in weak solutions at the time. (NK 260)

Barthelme's "commitment" to Sartre cannot, in an exploitative, erosive culture, be expressed directly, as it, too, may find itself in a window display or quiz show. "Real ideas" like Sartre's must be protected by psychological "envelopes", such as the satire or the joke. According to Freud, the urge to make jokes stems from a need to express what it is forbidden or distressing to express directly.³⁸ When J. D. O'Hara asked Barthelme in an interview in 1981 what Barthelme considered to be "his greatest weakness as a writer", Barthelme answered,

That I don't offer enough emotion. That's one of the things people come to fiction for, and they're not wrong. I mean emotion of the better class, hard to come by. Also, I can't resist making jokes, although that's much more under control than it used to be. And of course these weaknesses have to do with each other—jokes short-circuit emotion. (NK 287)³⁹

In one sense, Barthelme's jokes are a bit like Warhol's soup cans, "short-circuiting" any deeper engagement in order to resist, by paradoxically participating in the process, the "weakening" of real ideas. For example, in Peterson's interview for the show, Miss Arbor asks him questions to determine his psychological and existential fitness for the program: "Mr. Peterson, are you absurd? [...] do you encounter your own existence as gratuitous? Do you feel *de trop*? Is there nausea?" "I have an enlarged liver," Peterson offered. "That's *excellent!*" Miss Arbor exclaimed" (CBDC 174). The irony here is that Barthelme himself has made a rather weak joke, but in Freud's explanation of the joke, the "message" is more serious than the envelope implies. In recalling the opening of Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*: "I am ill...I am full of spleen and repellent. I conceive there is something

³⁸ In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud compares the joke to an envelope that may contain "thoughts of the greatest substance." Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 92.

³⁹ Freud uses the phrase "short-circuit" to describe how pleasure in jokes is created. In the same passage he goes on to reiterate that "jokes are making use of a method of linking things up which is rejected and studiously avoided by serious thought." (Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 120.)

wrong with my liver”,⁴⁰ the joke hints at the “real idea” of emotional distress and existential absurdity, a truth that cannot be accessed without exposing it to people who, like Miss Arbor, will simply exploit it.

Barthelme ironises the sense of revolt Camus outlined in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as the only response to the absurd: what could be less of a revolt than television? Television is the ultimate pacifier, an engine of conformity and simplification. And yet, in the end, it fosters in Peterson an understanding of the absurd to which he would not otherwise have access, even through his own art: “I was wrong, Peterson thought, the world is absurd. The absurdity is punishing me for not believing in it. I affirm the absurdity. On the other hand, absurdity is itself absurd” (CBDC 182). Paradoxically, this television show about the absurd actually contains an illuminating meditation on the word “absurd”, which is at the same time a word indicating disdain, an expression of the trivial, and an element of existentialism. At this point, however, it is unclear whether this moment signals a real understanding of absurdity or is merely a capitulation to the forces behind *Who Am I?*, which, in the end, generates exactly the kind of anxiety that renders the world absurd. As Peterson begins to awaken, either to his existential circumstances or the inescapability of their increasing banality, he realises the part he plays in the absurd world, especially as an artist. Even his “A.I.R.” (“artist in residence”) sign that he has been obliged by the authorities to hang on his door attracts more absurdity-heralding interlopers. Peterson cannot appreciate the absurd in thought alone; trapped in a particularly American drama of the absurd, he must endure the frustrations of a world that

⁴⁰ Dostoevsky, *Notes From Underground*, 3. Later in “A Shower of Gold” the President remarks, “Your liver is diseased? That’s a good sign. You’re making progress. You’re thinking” (CBDC 176). The liver appears throughout Barthelme’s work, for example in “The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace” in which Barthelme includes a picture of an enormous liver on a pedestal, captioned “I put my father in the show, with his cold eyes. His segment was called, My Father Concerned About His Liver” (S 128).

renders thought and communication meaningless in order to turn them into popular entertainment.

In a world in which it takes “about forty-five minutes for any given novelty in art to travel from the Mary Boone Gallery on West Broadway to the display windows of Henri Bendel on Fifty-seventh Street”, it is extremely difficult for any piece of artwork to maintain its resistance for any amount of time, let alone 46 minutes. Peterson’s latest work, in which “three auto radiators, one from a Chevrolet Tudor, one from a Ford pickup, one from a 1932 Essex, with part of a former telephone switchboard and other items” (*CBDC* 176) are welded together, is a fine example of an anxious object unsure of whether it is a Rauschenbergian masterpiece or a pile of worthless junk. Furthermore, as a “minor” sculptor, Peterson is ambivalent about entering the art market, as an interaction with his art dealer (whose French name may hint at a Robbe-Grilletian penchant for extreme objectivity) demonstrates:

“Two little ones would move much, much faster than a single huge big one,” Jean-Claude said, looking away. “To saw it across the middle would be a very simple matter.” “It’s supposed to be a work of art,” Peterson said, as calmly as possible. “You don’t go around sawing works of art across the middle, remember?” “That place where it saws,” Jean-Claude said, “is not very difficult. I can put my two hands around it.” He made a circle with his two hands to demonstrate. “Invariably when I look at that piece I see two pieces. Are you absolutely sure you didn’t conceive it wrongly in the first instance?” (*CBDC* 175)

On one level, what Peterson’s art dealer means by “moving” is selling, but here Barthelme points to the assimilation into the public consciousness that a piece of art inevitably experiences—two smaller pieces would be more easily digested by the cultural boa constrictor than one big piece, which might catch in its throat. There lurks here a third denotation of “to move”, which implies the question of whether an assimilated work of art can still be made to “move” an audience intellectually and emotionally. Like Peterson, Barthelme had had his artist’s vision questioned numerous times by editors, readers, and

reviewers who, when they looked at Barthelme's art, "invariably" saw something other than what it was or, questioning his "postmodern" techniques, argued that this kind of "junk" could not possibly move anyone emotionally. Fittingly, the President, simultaneously the top of the cultural pyramid and the embodiment of the will of the people, takes a "sixteen-pound sledge" to Peterson's work, exposing all three meanings simultaneously: "his first blow cracked the principal weld in *Season's Greetings*, the two halves parting like lovers, clinging for a moment and then rushing off in opposite directions" (CBDC 176).

After this upsetting event, the barber, Kitchen, explains to Peterson his (Peterson's) relationship to the President, for whom Peterson feels admiration and the kind of affection a "good, healthy, mature, fit, trustworthy" leader instills in his people:

"[I]t's essentially a kind of I-Thou relationship, if you know what I mean. You got to handle it with full awareness of the implications. In the end one experiences only oneself, Nietzsche said. When you're angry with the President, what you experience is self-as-angry-with-the-President. When things are okay between you and him, what you experience is self-as-swinging-with-the-President. Well and good. *But* [...] you want the relationship to be such that what you experience is the-President-as-swinging-with-you. You want *his* reality, get it? So you can break out of the hell of solipsism. How about a little more off the sides?" "Everyone knows the language but me," Peterson said irritably. (CBDC 177)

In this cultural climate, "everyone knows the language" of Martin Buber,⁴¹ Nietzsche, Freud, and Sartre, which is blended with American idioms like "If you know what I mean" and "Well and good" and "get it," at dinner and cocktail parties or on pseudo-intellectual talk (or game) shows.⁴² Humourists such as S. J. Perelman and James Thurber, both of whom Barthelme admired, parodied these kinds of conversations in *The New Yorker* (to which

⁴¹ Buber's book *Ich and du* was published in 1923 and translated into English in 1937 as *I and Thou*. It is likely that Barthelme was influenced by Buber's travels around and lectures in the United States in the 1950s and '60s.

⁴² Barthelme contemporary Robert Coover's story "Panel Game" in *Pricksongs and Descants* also describes a television game show that spirals into philosophical and psychological horror. Like Barthelme, Coover parodies American television culture, revealing its foundation of deceit and dependence upon a collective suspension of intelligent inquiry.

Barthelme became a regular contributor). For example, Thurber's "Midnight at Tim's Place", which appeared in the magazine in 1958, capitalised on the humour inherent in popular discussions of philosophy. In "Midnight", a man tells the "sad story" of visiting his philosophy professor—with whom for twenty years he exchanged postcards on Nietzsche's birthday—who wore two hats throughout the visit: "Two hats," Kirkfield repeated. "They were both gray felt hats, one on top of the other. The terrifying thing was that he didn't say anything about them. He just sat there with two hats on, trying to cheer me up." "I always say you can have too much philosophy," Mrs. Kirkfield said. "It isn't good for you. It's disorganizing. Everybody's got to wake up sometime feeling that everything is terrible, because it is."⁴³ The humorous "envelope" of Thurber's story contains within it real feeling. As it happens, by the end of "Midnight" the narrator is the one wearing two hats, for which he is rejected first by a taxi and then by his wife, leaving him to walk back to his hotel alone in the rain.

When Peterson finally appears on television, he witnesses the other contestants blindly stumbling through their lives, unaware of the absurdity that governs them. As an artist, Peterson—and Barthelme—can perceive both the real absurdity of life as well as the absurdity of trying to package and sell it to a mass audience. On stage and under the lights, Peterson genuinely feels that the "divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity", that "A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger."⁴⁴ Peterson turns the television quiz show

⁴³ Thurber, "Midnight at Tim's Place", 47.

⁴⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 4-5.

—in which trivial knowledge is prized—on its head, asking the audience to reject the televised falsification of art and emotion:

“In this kind of world,” Peterson said, “absurd if you will, possibilities nevertheless proliferate and escalate all around us and there are opportunities for beginning again. [...] Don’t be reconciled. Turn off your television sets,” Peterson said, “cash in your life insurance, indulge in mindless optimism. Visit girls at dusk. Play the guitar. How can you be alienated without first having been connected? Think back and remember how it was.” (CBDC 183)

While Peterson desperately declares that “visit[ing] girls at dusk” and “play[ing] the guitar” will free him from the kitsch of the game show, he can only imagine freedom in equally kitschy ways. There is no “how it was”; knowingness, it seems, is now the only right answer.

“Florence Green is 81” is also about the artist’s worry that his art will immediately be eviscerated of its value by being commercialised. Baskerville wants to write (and has been writing for twelve years) a “serious,” “immense novel” (CBDC 6)—presumably along the lines of *War and Peace* (Mary McCarthy would be pleased)—called *The Children’s Army*, and yet he ends up writing the short story he is in. In fact, Baskerville attends the (nonfictional) Famous Writers School in Westport, Connecticut, a sham operation that brings to mind the Masters of Fine Arts creative-writing workshops, modeled after the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, the proliferation of which was gaining momentum in the United States in the 1950s. While many of these workshops fostered good work, they also began to provide a new measure of quality against the mass market to which writers flocked, thirsty for an alternative to the influence of the commercial world. Some, like the real Famous Writers School (founded in 1961 by Random House editor Bennett Cerf, Gordon Carroll, and Albert Drone as a correspondence course) preyed upon the writer’s inability to determine his work’s value in a culture of knowingness, offering fame as an alternative to quality.

The Famous Writers School's dubious practices were eventually excoriated in a 1970 exposé by Jessica Mitford entitled "Let Us Now Appraise Famous Writers".⁴⁵ In her article, Mitford notes the spurious claims found in the School's advertisements: "Here is Bennett Cerf, most famous of them all, his kindly, humorous face aglow with sincerity, speaking to us in the first person from a mini-billboard tucked into our Sunday newspaper: "If you want to write, my colleagues and I would like to test your writing aptitude. We'll help you find out whether you can be trained to become a successful writer."⁴⁶ Baskerville is "beglamoured" by J. D. Ratcliff, one of the "Guiding Faculty" who appeared in the ads for the School. In these ads, Ratcliff declares that the life of a writer is "a wonderful life", prompting Baskerville to scold himself, "Oh Baskerville! you silly son of a bitch, how can you become a famous writer without first having worried about your life, is it the *right kind* of life, does it have the right people in it, is it *going well*?" (CBDC 4). Baskerville's insecurity—here, specifically, a "worry" which both signals and makes fun of genuine artistic anxiety—regarding his status as a writer makes him the perfect mark for such a scam, although he chooses to write a massive novel instead of short pieces for magazines and newspapers like the ironical Barthelme.⁴⁷ Writing seems to stem from having the right kind of life (although very few of Barthelme's characters, especially the writers, can quite figure out what that is) and the right kind of life seems to beckon from beyond that piece of sellable writing. Ensnared by the promise of fame, Baskerville is unaware of the depth of irony of a remark like "This remark

⁴⁵ Mitford, "Let Us Now Appraise Famous Writers", 48.

⁴⁶ A version of the advertisement can be seen here: http://www.infomarketingblog.com/images/Famous_Writers_School.jpg [sic]

⁴⁷ Mitford also notes that "Current enrollment is 65,000, of which three quarters are enrolled in the fiction course, the balance in nonfiction, advertising, business writing. Teaching faculty: 55, or 1181% students per instructor." Baskerville's teacher's comments are as diverse as "'That's a slow boy, that one,' his first teacher said. 'That boy is what you call *real slow*,' his second teacher said. 'That's a *slow son of a bitch*,' his third teacher said," which suggest that he has most certainly been duped by Cerf et al.'s scheme.

pleased her, it was a pleasing remark, on the strength of this remark Baskerville was invited again, on the second occasion he made a second remark, which was ‘Before the flowers of friendship faded friendship faded Gertrude Stein’” (CBDC 9) (In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* Stein had written, “Hemingway, remarks are not literature”⁴⁸). Baskerville’s compulsion to make such remarks points to the lingering sense that short stories, especially experimental ones, are mere trifles, not “real literature”.

Boredom

Even stronger than his desire to be a Famous Writer is Baskerville’s fear of being perceived as “boring”, which on one level reflects the anxiety of the assimilated work of art: if a work of art is pronounced “boring”, it has been fully subsumed into a knowing culture and has been divested of its mystery and novelty, which commercialism craves. For Baskerville, boredom is a horror: “I am a young man but very brilliant, very ingratiating, I adopt this ingratiating tone because I can’t help myself (for fear of boring you)” (CBDC 4).⁴⁹ The work of art outside of society can afford to be “boring” (which, we shall see, is often just another word for “difficult”); it does not need to adhere to bourgeois expectations. As someone who wants to be accepted as a Famous Writer, Baskerville fears the potential for boredom in his readers, his partners in conversation, and his psychoanalyst, so he flatters and dissembles and projects to distract them from his true self (“Florence I have decided is evading the life-issue” (CBDC 13)). He cites from an article in “The Journal of Tension Reduction”: “‘*One source of concern in the classic encounter between patient and psychoanalyst is the patient’s fear of*

⁴⁸ Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, 77.

⁴⁹ Despite his interest in the creative powers of boredom, Barthelme professed a similar fear of boring the reader. In an interview, Judith Sherman says that, after hearing Barthelme read *The Dead Father*, “I feel like every time I’m about to put my foot down, because I know it’s going to happen, the ground moves.” Barthelme replies that “One tries to bore the people as little as possible, and that’s probably what accounts for that” (NK 213).

boring the doctor” (CBDC 4). When the patient fears boring his doctor, he concocts stories about himself, puts on disguises, “fantasticates”—anything to amuse his audience.

For the artistically misguided Baskerville, boredom is indeed a source of intense anxiety. But Barthelme is making an even more subtle argument in “Florence Green is 81”: by making boredom both the subject and the form of this first story, Barthelme suggests that boredom, far from being a state to be avoided at all costs, is actually a way into not-knowing, and a position from which one can approach a new knowledge of the work of art. What makes boredom particularly unique in this respect is, as Heidegger (whom Barthelme studied in Natanson’s philosophy course) suggests, its “existential” quality: “Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals beings as a whole.”⁵⁰ Heidegger argues that everyday life lulls one into a kind of sleep that prevents one from questioning and examining one’s existence. A consciousness of one’s profound boredom (a more complex form of boredom involving boredom with the self rather than with an external situation) “awakens” the self to its “emptiness” in the moment. The self and the world become “indifferent” all at once, forcing one to encounter oneself without the footholds of conventional meaning (such as personality, situation, etc.).⁵¹ While Barthelme does not quite reach Heidegger’s “grand” conclusion (which involves an elaborate discussion of Christian time), Barthelme, like Heidegger, suggests that one must “awaken” boredom in order to gain the kind of knowledge that was unavailable to the diverted—or the knowing—mind. Awakening into not-knowing, the Nothing that bumps into Being, requires the kind of waiting particular to boredom: “Nothing is what keeps us waiting (forever)” (GP 165). As

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, 101.

⁵¹ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, 137.

Nietzsche suggested, artists and writers “do not fear boredom as much as work without pleasure; they actually require a lot of boredom if *their* work is to succeed. For thinkers and all sensitive spirits, boredom is that disagreeable ‘windless calm’ of the soul that precedes a happy voyage and cheerful winds. They have to bear it and must wait for its effect on them. Precisely this is what lesser natures cannot achieve by any means.”⁵² The waiting, the “windless calm” of not-knowing, is precisely what Baskerville (a “lesser nature”) cannot tolerate.

Baskerville’s anxious boredom denotes a broader discussion of boredom in art, which was the source of much controversy in the 1960s. In her 1965 essay “ABC Art”, about the rise of Pop and Minimalist art, Barbara Rose wrote that “If, on seeing some of the new paintings, sculpture, dances or films, you are bored, probably you were intended to be. Boring the public is one way of testing its commitment.”⁵³ However unpleasant this sounds, Rose found boredom to be a positive feature of a work of art, indeed almost an indicator of its quality. In her paradoxical view, the art is boring, and the public was to remain bored and interested by their boredom, which is how they knew that they were correctly appreciating a good work of art. Barthelme parodies this approach in his first story to appear in the *New Yorker* in 1963.⁵⁴ “L’Lapse”, ostensibly a script for a very short movie, is told in dialogue between Anna, “a lengthy, elegant beauty, blond” in the manner of Monica Vitti (if Vitti were a thumb-sucker), and Marcello, “a wealthy film critic who has enriched himself by writing attacks on Akira Kurosawa for the American Legion Magazine”:

Anna: (*removes thumb*): But Marcello, I didn’t *like* the picture. I was bored.

⁵² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 108.

⁵³ Rose, “ABC Art”. Frances Colpitt also writes about boredom and interest in “The Issue of Boredom: Is It Interesting?”, 359-365.

⁵⁴ Reprinted in *The Teachings of Don B.*

Marcello: Look, sweets, it doesn't matter you were bored. The point is, you were bored *in a certain way*. Like brilliantly. (TDB 172)

Although “L’Lapse” is clearly satiric, it signals the reader’s feeling that although he may be interacting with the text intellectually, he is also experiencing feelings of boredom and anxiety about being bored or at least being the “right kind” of bored (“brilliantly”) that would reassure him of his in-the-know sophistication. But these feelings are neither accidental nor faults in the reader or the text; in fact they are instead essential elements of Barthelme’s art. Though Barthelme started out by satirising the aesthetic use of boredom, Barthelme actually made use of the tension between felt boredom and boredom as a subject throughout his career. In *Snow White*, Snow White is also distressed to learn that she has bored her doctor: “‘And the psychiatrist?’ we said. ‘He was unforgivable,’ she said. ‘Unforgivable?’ ‘He said I was uninteresting.’ ‘Uninteresting?’ ‘He said I was a screaming bore’” (SW 27). (Barthelme does play a wry little joke on the figure of the uninterested doctor, who, after taking Snow White to the movies following their aborted session, is determined by Snow White to be “unextraordinary”.) In “See the Moon?”, Barthelme links boredom and the Symbolist (and specifically Baudelairean) project: “I have here a clipping datelined Moscow, four young people apprehended strangling a swan. *That’s boredom*” (UPUA 160). In “Games Are the Enemies of Beauty, Truth, and Sleep, Amanda Said” in *Guilty Pleasures*,⁵⁵ Amanda says that she likes the games “especially because they are so meaningless and boring, and trivial. These qualities, once regarded as less than desirable, are now everywhere enthroned as the key elements in our psychological lives, as reflected in the art of the period”. Unlike Anna in “L’Lapse,” who wants to communicate instead of being brilliantly bored, Amanda, like Rose, sees boredom in art as the natural result of the twentieth century’s “dejection and

⁵⁵ First printed in *Mademoiselle* magazine in November 1966.

disillusionment”, its “decline, degeneracy, entropy, and decay”.⁵⁶ Boredom even provides the basis for “Ennui”, the “easiest” game of all, “the absence of games”, “the modern world at its most vulnerable” (*GP* 134). Again Barthelme takes Eliot’s statement that “[A]ll great art is based on a condition of fundamental boredom—*passionate* boredom”⁵⁷ to a particularly explicit conclusion.

In “L’Lapse”, Marcello pontificates on the aesthetic value of “arty” films—and by extension, “arty” fiction—that everyone praises and no one seems to actually like: “*Of course* it was slow. I mean it had a certain slow beauty. A sort of visual rubato. On the other hand, it was obscure and baffling” (*TDB* 173). Susan Sontag argues that the onus is on the audience to view this art in a new way, as the art *is* “interesting”; it just requires from the audience a higher level of critical sophistication,⁵⁸ which, it may be said, does not sound particularly pleasant either: “There is, in a sense, no such thing as boredom. Boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration. And the new languages which the interesting art of our time speaks are frustrating to the sensibilities of educated people.”⁵⁹ While Sontag correctly identifies the initial frustration one feels upon encountering a new work of art and not being able to understand it (indeed, one may feel this way upon opening a book of Barthelme stories), her collapse of frustration and boredom is misleading. While frustration may lead to boredom, or boredom to frustration, these are not the same thing. Frustration is energetic in its anxiety at not being able to penetrate a problem and reach its answer, and it

⁵⁶ Clark, *The Modern Satiric Grotesque And Its Traditions*, 12.

⁵⁷ Eliot, cited in Powell, *Under Review*, 171.

⁵⁸ Barthelme will pick up the debate about “interesting” art in his story “The Balloon,” first published in 1966 in *The New Yorker*. The “mature” response to the balloon’s overnight appearance over Manhattan—that it is “interesting”—comes after the attempts to assign “meaning” have “subsided,” as if the assignation of meaning were a fever or a bout of hysteria.

⁵⁹ Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 303.

may in fact prevent one from making any headway into that problem. Boredom, however, while it may also be anxious, is a passive, enervated feeling, as in waiting without knowing what one is waiting for.

Chapter Two: “Unavoidable Choices”: Barthelme and Collage

Q: What do you consider the most important tool of the genius of today?

A: Rubber cement.

(Barthelme, “The Genius”)

[S]urface, that is, / [...] not / Superficial but a visible core.

(Ashbery, “Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror”¹)

“We are trustees of Form,” Perpetua said.

(Barthelme, “Perpetua”)

Introduction: “There are Worms in Words!”

At a symposium on fiction in 1985, Barthelme (somewhat self-deprecatingly) remarked, “I have said this too many times to make it interesting even to myself, but the principle of collage is one of the central principles of art in this century and it seems also to me to be one of the central principles of literature” (NK 76). After *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, Barthelme expanded his exploration of knowing and not-knowing to include the kinds of knowledge communicated and obscured by collage in fiction and visual art. In littering his stories with references to art theory, specific art works and poems,² and literary adaptations of visual art techniques, Barthelme looks to the discoveries made by the formal procedures of collage to investigate the practices of fiction, thus placing his work in an art-historical context. What appealed to Barthelme was how fragments of language and image can, through their decontextualisation and recombination, not only escape the knowingness that robs the world

¹ Ashbery, *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 70.

² Two examples include Charles Demuth’s painting *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* hovers, like a pentimento, behind a line of dialogue (“And I saw the figure 5 writ in gold”) in “Our Work and Why We Do It” (A 12), and Barthelme’s “A Hesitation on the Banks of the Delaware” in *Guilty Pleasures*, which recalls both Larry Rivers’s painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware” (1953) and Frank O’Hara’s poem “On Seeing Larry Rivers’ Washington Crossing the Delaware”, written shortly after the painting was finished. Barthelme also collaborated with visual artists such as Jim Love, who, together with Barthelme, created *The Rook’s Progress*, a mixed-media collage, in 1988 (“Twosomes collaborate for One + One”).

of its wonder and surprise, but, by retaining their emotional and philosophical connotations, invent new paths to knowledge and not-knowing.

Barthelme's exposure to the ideas and practices of the collage form began, arguably, in childhood. Barthelme's father, Donald Sr., was a prominent architect in Houston in the 1930s, and the house he built for his growing family was a marvel of various styles, textures, and materials (Barthelme recalled that the house, "something not too dissimilar to Mies's [van der Rohe] Tugendhat house", was "wonderful to live in but strange to see on the Texas prairie" (NK 200)). Donald Sr., ever attuned to innovations in form, followed the careers of contemporary architects: "What was Mies doing, what was Aalto doing, what was Neutra up to, what about Wright?" (NK 200). The house and its contents were under constant revision; as Barthelme's brother Steve wrote in 2000, their father was "prone to handing each of us a hammer and saying, 'Tear out that wall there.'"³ One may assume that the young Barthelme Jr. learned very early not only to pay close attention to form as an immediate concern, but, as the family could not be certain whether a wall or floor would be there tomorrow (in fact, the house was demolished in 2001), to see it as an element in potential flux.

It was perhaps due to this early introduction to the material properties of form (and the understanding of collage from the inside out) that in the 1950s and 1960s Barthelme found himself particularly interested in Robert Rauschenberg's 1950s "Combines", in which Rauschenberg pasted fabric, newspaper clippings, street signs, pillows, dirt, ladders, paint straight from the tube, and other flotsam and jetsam onto his canvases.⁴ Despite the appearance of randomness in pieces such as *Canyon* (1959) (oil, pencil, paper, metal

³ Steven Barthelme, "It Used to Be Right Here", 4.

⁴ The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art catalogue entry for *Untitled* (1954), for example, lists Rauschenberg's materials as "Oil, pencil, crayon, paper, canvas, fabric, newspaper, photographs, wood, glass, mirror, tin, cork, and found painting with a pair of painted leather shoes, dried grass, and Dominique hen on wood structure mounted on five casters". (<http://www.moca.org/pc/viewArtWork.php?id=59>)

photograph, fabric, wood on canvas, button, mirror, stuffed eagle, cardboard box, pillow, paint tube), Rauschenberg maintained that each object in a Combine, though plucked from its usual context, retained its original “associations”:

We have ideas about bricks. A brick just isn't a physical mass of a certain dimension that one builds houses, or chimneys with. The whole world of associations, all the information that we have—the fact that it's made of dirt, that it's been through a kiln, romantic ideas about little brick cottages, or the chimney which is so romantic, or labor—you have to deal with as many of the things as you know about.⁵

But Rauschenberg did not want to simply reproduce conventional knowledge. In 1987 Rauschenberg remarked to Barbara Rose that he would “substitute anything for preconceptions or deliberateness. If that moment can't be as fresh, strange and unpredictable as what's going on around you, then it's false”⁶ (here Rauschenberg echoes Barthelme's claim in “After Joyce” that the artist aims to “attain a fresh mode of cognition” by eschewing “procedures which force him to say things that are either commonplace or false” (L2 14)). In “Not-Knowing”, Barthelme offered a solution to the problem of a “whole world of associations” bound up with the artist's material (language, in the case of the writer): “The prior history of words is one of the aspects of language the world uses to smuggle itself into the work. If words can be contaminated by the world, they can also carry with them into the work trace elements of world which can be used in a positive sense. We must allow ourselves the advantages of our disadvantages” (NK 22). Writing about Rauschenberg in 1985, Barthelme related the story of his 1962 visit to Rauschenberg's studio:

I noticed that the windows overlooking Broadway were dark gray with our good New York grime. Rauschenberg was then working on some of the earliest of his black-and-white silkscreen paintings, and the tonality of the paintings was very much that of the windows. We ran a shot of the windows alongside the photographs [...]—instant art history. New York is a great filthy gift, and its very filthiness has worked to the artist's

⁵ Robert Rauschenberg in an interview with David Sylvester, *BBC*, June 1964.

⁶ Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg*, 58.

advantage, has been tonic. Robert Hughes observes [...] that Manhattan throws away more manufactured goods in a week than eighteenth-century France produced in a year, and the artist's use of these portable stigmata has been richly proportionate. (NK 185)

As this chapter will argue, collage, as practiced by Rauschenberg and Barthelme, uses the “disadvantage” of conventional knowledge and the “great filthiness” of manufactured objects to both interrupt easy interpretation and make art that, in highlighting the thingness of the world, can “ask questions of the world directly” (L2 14).

A second key source of Barthelme's collage practice is Max Ernst. Like Ernst, Barthelme cuts and pastes Victorian-era drawings, creating images that contain a dreamlike internal sense. Unlike Rauschenberg's Combines, in which the parts that make up the whole are, for all their new collaborative meaning, clearly discernible, Ernst's Surrealist collages are characterised by their seamless integration of images. Ernst's Surreal collages, in contrast to Rauschenberg's, access a dreamlike not-knowing, a kind of logic that makes perfect (non)sense to the unconscious mind, while Rauschenberg's Combines depend upon the thingness of the world and the conscious associations and disruptions that occur when unexpected things are combined. Barthelme's collages, then, have one foot in Rauschenberg and one in Ernst: in his introduction to *The Teachings of Don B.*, Thomas Pynchon picks up on an Ernst-like dreamlike mode, noting that although Barthelme works primarily in “daylit mode”, his collages are able to “smuggle [...] nocturnal contraband right past the checkpoints of daylight ‘reality’”:

What he called his “secret vice” of “cutting up and pasting together pictures” bears an analogy, at least, to what is supposed to go on in dreams, where images from the public domain are said likewise to combine in unique, private, with luck spiritually useful, ways [...] The effect each time, at any rate, is to put us in the presence of something already eerily familiar...to remind us that we have lived in these visionary cities and haunted forests, and the ancient faces we gaze into are faces we know... (TDB xvi-xvii)

Although Barthelme uses Rauschenbergian, recognisable worldly things in his linguistic and graphic collages, their combinations—a tyre and a statue of the goddess Venus, for example—access the kind of “eerily familiar”, non-waking reality that appears to the dreamer. Ernst identified the same quality in de Chirico: upon encountering de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings, Ernst wrote: “Looking at them I had the sense of rediscovering something I had always known, just as when some event already seen opens up to us a whole realm of our own dream world, one that we have failed to see or comprehend owing to a kind of censorship.”⁷ As this chapter and thesis argue, by maintaining a circumspect connection with the daylight world, Barthelme’s “secret” practices (he once dubbed an unpublished collage novel in the style of Ernst’s 1934 *Une semaine de bonté* his “Closet Edition” (NK 290)) evade the threat of “censorship”, whether literal or produced by knowing interpretation or analysis, that always hovers over the non-sense of the dream or work of art.

Throughout *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), *City Life* (1970), *Sadness* (1972), and *Amateurs* (1977), Barthelme uses both linguistic and graphic collage and ideas about art to “smuggle” (NK 22) both the “daylit” world and the realm of the subconscious into the work of art and engage with the assumptions about representation embodied in prior forms of art and literature (“There are worms in words!” (UPUA 146)). Barthelme encountered Rauschenberg, for example, during his year-long directorship of Houston’s Contemporary Arts Museum and his subsequent move to New York in 1962 to co-edit *Location* magazine with Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess. Rauschenberg’s work provided Barthelme with the Neo-Dada strategy of assembling particles of knowledge, language, image, and objects to find new ways of not-knowing, while Barthelme’s familiarity with

⁷ Ernst, “Notes pour une biographie,” in Max Ernst, *Écritures*, 30-31. Quoted in *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*, 10.

French Symbolist poetry made for an easy grasp of Ernst's, dream-like, erotic Surrealist collage. Even prior to his work with Rosenberg and Rauschenberg, Barthele's encounters with Susanne K. Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) and *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (1953) showed him that on an even broader level, it is the form of the work of art, as a symbolic index of human emotion, that is most vital to not-knowing.

In addition to his early, rather visceral encounter with form, Barthele made a theoretical exploration of form a lifelong pursuit, beginning with "After Joyce". This essay, and the contemporary ideas with which Barthele contends in it, emerge out of a centuries-long debate about the nature of form. Beginning with Book Ten of *The Republic*, Plato famously posits that form is an external, perfect ideal to which each real object aspires. When imposed upon earthly, "deficient" matter, this transcendental form necessarily loses its perfection.⁸ Where Plato's form is eternally invariable, Aristotle's conception of form, outlined in *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, is eternally variable, as the matter and form of the object continually develop as one toward the fullest manifestation of the object. Form and matter are therefore inextricable.⁹ In her study *On Form* (2007), Angela Leighton argues that after a period of relative dormancy, eighteenth-century Germany, beginning with Kant, saw a resurgence of interest in the nature of form (and a chronic rhetorical haziness surrounding its theorisation).¹⁰ Although in *The Critique of Judgement* Kant does not consider form in itself, he uses it, in conjunction with ideas of beauty, to differentiate "pure" from sensual judgement: "A judgement of taste which is uninfluenced by charm or emotion [...] and

⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, 297-314.

⁹ Lang, *The Order of Nature in Aristotle's Physics: Place and the Elements*, 50-54.

¹⁰ Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*, 4.

whose determining ground, therefore, is simply finality of form, is *a pure judgement of taste*.”¹¹ Form, in its abstract “finality”, is thus a relatively minor, “disinterested” element of the work of art, divorced from matter and the emotion of the artist and viewer. In a response to Kant, Schiller posits that form is a “living”, dynamic, playful element of a work of art, inextricably linked to the artist’s creative drive.¹² No longer a minor component of a theory of aesthetics, form becomes in Schiller the engine of a “consumption” (or, in alternate translations, “obliteration” or “annihilation”¹³) of subject matter.¹⁴ Schiller’s idea of form as an active agent appears as one of Coleridge’s two distinct concepts of form. One, the “forma efformans”, or “forming form”, is a “living” manifestation of form that shapes the imagination (potentially to the poet’s detriment), whereas “formed form”, “as body, i.e. as shape”, is static, dead.¹⁵ In his 1868 review of “Poems by William Morris”, Walter Pater champions “a kind of poetry which, assuming artistic beauty of form to be an end in itself, passes by those truths and the living interests which are connected with them.”¹⁶ As “an end in itself” which is somehow alternatively physical and ephemeral, Leighton notes, Pater’s idea of form both “shuts in beauty and shuts out truth”.¹⁷ In 1917, Clive Bell, working with A. C. Bradley’s 1901 idea of “Significant Form”, highlights the irreconcilable tension between the technical elements of a painting (lines, colours, etc.) and the “aesthetic

¹¹ Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 65.

¹² Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, 101.

¹³ Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*, 6.

¹⁴ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man: In a Series of Letters*, 155-157.

¹⁵ Perry, ed. *Coleridge’s Notebooks: A Selection*, 124.

¹⁶ Pater, “Poems by William Morris”, 309.

¹⁷ Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*, 10.

emotions” that are evoked when form begins to “move”.¹⁸ In 1920, Roger Fry writes in *Vision and Design* that Significant Form goes beyond lines, colours, and patterns to “the effort on the part of the artist to bend our emotional understanding by means of his passionate conviction some intractable material which is alien to our spirit.”¹⁹ Form is here an expression of the artist’s imaginative intentions which is in constant tension with its representational facets. Picasso would later pick up on this opposition in his discussion of Cézanne:

If one occupies oneself with what is full: that is, the object as positive form, the space around it is reduced to almost nothing. If one occupies oneself primarily with the space that surrounds the object, the object is reduced to almost nothing. What interests us most—what is outside or what is inside a form? When you look at Cézanne’s apples, you see that he hasn’t really painted apples, as such. What he did was to paint terribly well the weight of space on that circular form.²⁰

Leighton sums up Picasso’s point that form is “both a container and a deflector. [...] Form, then, is the distribution of space caused by edging one thing against another, so that each calls attention to the other. [...] Apples, as such, are not important. They are weightlifters of the space around them, shapes upholding another shape.”²¹ Picasso emphasises the dynamic relationship between abstract form and representation, the way a circular form represents an apple and the way a representation of an apple is at base an abstract shape. It is the task of the viewer to both distinguish between these moments of form and to shift between them—and to choose what “interests us most”.

Picasso thus opened an inquiry into the viewer’s role in the work of art. Drawing from the Romantic idea of form as activity, Henri Focillon argued in 1934 that “a work of art is

¹⁸ Bell, *Art*, 8.

¹⁹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, 302.

²⁰ Quoted in Rogers, *Painting and Poetry: Form, Metaphor, and the Language of Literature*, 152-153.

²¹ Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*, 16.

motionless only in appearance. It seems to be set fast—arrested, as are the moments of time gone by. But in reality it is born of change, and it leads on to other changes. [... Art's] very immobility sparkles with metamorphoses.”²² Focillon locates the changeability of form, both in itself and as a force acting upon the external, in the inner “emotional life” of the artist, who he says feels in forms: “I do not say that form is the allegory of the symbol of feeling, but, rather, its innermost activity. Form activates feeling.”²³ It is form’s metamorphic energy, the locus of interaction between the artist and the viewer, that prompts interpretation. Barthelme’s central idea in “After Joyce” emerges from this early twentieth century link between human emotion and form.

In the years leading up to “After Joyce”, Barthelme had immersed himself in the contemporary debate around form: during his deployment to Korea in 1954, Barthelme asked his first wife, Marilyn, to send him Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key*, which outlines the history of epistemology through the study of symbols and forms of meaning. Langer argues that while both science and psychology have offered significantly different interpretations of the human “preoccupation with symbolism”, both disciplines agree that “the *human response*” is “a constructive, not a passive thing”,²⁴ an idea that will become central to Barthelme’s concept of the reader’s participation in the “reconstruction” of the literary object in the world (*L2* 14). Two years later, Barthelme and his second wife, Helen, studied Langer’s *Feeling and Form* in Maurice Natanson’s class. In *Feeling and Form*, which was written as a sort of “sequel” to *Philosophy in a New Key*,²⁵ Langer takes Focillon’s concept further,

²² Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁴ Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 24.

²⁵ Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy In a New Key*, vii.

arguing that the forms of feelings *are* the forms of art. By definition, Langer argues that the work of art is “is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling,”²⁶ and it is in form rather than content that meaning is located:

[F]orms are either empty abstractions, or they do have a content; and artistic forms have a very special one, namely their *import*. They are logically expressive, or significant, forms. They are symbols for the articulation of feeling, and convey the elusive and yet familiar pattern of sentience. And as essentially symbolic forms they lie in a different dimension from physical objects as such. They belong to the same category as language, though their logical form is a different one, and as myth and dream, though their function is not the same.²⁷

Just as language is “physically nothing but little buzzing sounds” to which we nonetheless assign real meaning, the form of the work of art “reaches beyond itself”,²⁸ requiring the viewer to similarly reach beyond what is merely represented using the same not-knowing logic found in myth and dream.

Fact, Fiction, Form, Feeling, Fragment

Although only two issues of *Location* were printed, the magazine, as well as Barthelme’s brief tenure as director of Houston’s Contemporary Arts Museum in 1961, seems to have provided Barthelme with a solid theoretical and practical foundation for the formal experiments and dramatisations he would carry out in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*. His essay “After Joyce”, in fact, appeared in the second issue of *Location* directly following Saul Bellow’s discussion of fact in literature and just before John Ashbery’s poem “These Lacustrine Cities”. Although “After Joyce” can stand alone as an aesthetic statement, when seen again in the original context of *Location*, positioned between pieces by Harold Rosenberg, Mary McCarthy, and Saul Bellow, Barthelme’s first critical essay takes on extra

²⁶ Ibid., 40.

²⁷ Ibid., 52.

²⁸ Ibid., 52.

theoretical and historical nuances that illuminate Barthelme's own burgeoning ideas about form and knowledge.

Location was founded in answer to what Harold Rosenberg perceived as a formal crisis in both art and literature. In the inaugural issue, Rosenberg argued in an introduction entitled "The Stockade Syndrome" that

The practice of art as a segregated "discipline" brings to the fore its inherent weaknesses. [...] To oversimplify, painting tends toward empty form, literature toward meaningless fact. When they stand eye to eye, each checks the drift in the other: literature demands that painting achieve emotional and intellectual content; painting shows its impatience with the formal laxity of literature. (L1 4)

As one of the only combined art and literature reviews in circulation (Rosenberg criticises *The Dial*, *transition*, and *View* as three among at least one hundred journals that have "segregated" art and literature), *Location* aimed to survey the state of both media and detect where they overlapped and, increasingly, where they diverged. In addition to "The Stockade Syndrome", Rosenberg's introduction to *Location* 2, gloomily entitled "Form and Despair", in part a response to two of Bellow's essays (1962's *New York Times* article "A Novelist-Critic Discusses the Role of Reality in the Creation of Fiction"²⁹ and 1963's *Encounter* piece "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction"³⁰), Bellow's equally somber answer to Rosenberg, "A Comment on 'Form and Despair'", and Barthelme's "After Joyce", which was printed alongside Bellow's "Comment", attempt to identify the kinds of facts available to the modern artist and what forms are suitable to contain and express them.

In his argument about the "segregation" of art and literature, Rosenberg implies that in contrast to painting's emphasis on form to the detriment of content, the lack of formal innovation in the literature of the late fifties and early sixties (he cites Mary McCarthy's 19th

²⁹ Bellow, "A Novelist-Critic Discusses the Role of Reality in the Creation of Fiction".

³⁰ Bellow, "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction".

century-style abundance of domestic facts on one end of the spectrum, Alain Robbe-Grillet's purge of subjectivity on the other) was a result of writers unthinkingly following the Balzacian model of the novel of detail without adapting the form and focus of that model to address the emotional and philosophical problems of the modern era. Rosenberg is partially responding here to McCarthy's definition of the novel in her essay "The Fact in Fiction" as "A prose book of a certain thickness that tells a story of a real life. [...] The word "prose" and "real" are crucial to my conception of the novel. The distinctive mark of the novel is its concern with the actual world, the world of fact, of the verifiable, of figures, even, and statistics. [...] The staple ingredient present in all novels in various mixtures and proportions but always in fairly heavy dosage is fact."³¹ McCarthy argues that a reader given a Balzacian assortment of facts is meant to derive some meaning about plot, character, "the social", and so on, which then reinforces the sense of a knowable world. Each fact is a signifier of these elements of the novel; the accumulation of facts strengthens the original effect rather than creates new meanings. While infinitely more satiric than McCarthy, Balzac's rich description of Monsieur and Madame Marneffe in *Cousin Bette* is intended to "trigger" (according to Tom Wolfe³²) an understanding not only of the protagonists's status but of their psychic landscape as well:

In the drawing room, the furniture was upholstered in shabby cotton velvet, the plaster statuettes imitated Florentine bronzes, the chandelier, badly carved and merely painted over, had moulded glass sconces, and the cheapness of the carpet was explained after some time by the amount of cotton introduced by the manufacturer which had become visible to the naked eye.³³

³¹ McCarthy, "The Fact in Fiction," *On the Contrary*, 250-251. Some books that do not pass McCarthy's test include *Animal Farm* (for depicting beasts acting like men), *Gulliver's Travels* (too "supernatural"), and *Candide* (the aim of which was to "elude the authorities' grasp" (253), authority built on historical fact).

³² Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 47-48.

³³ Balzac, *Cousin Bette*, 61.

However, in an era of political deception and the nightmarish implementation of scientific progress, there are no such things as solid facts or verifiable figures; even imitation Florentine bronzes were suspect. McCarthy writes that "...it would seem that the novel, with its common sense, is of all forms the least adapted to encompass the modern world, whose leading characteristic is irreality. And that, so far as I can understand, is why the novel is dying."³⁴ (While she outlines the problem in great hang-wringing depth, McCarthy cannot seem to imagine a proper solution.) As a critique of McCarthy's argument, Barthelme writes in "After Joyce":

What is curious is the way Miss McCarthy would limit her medium. She begins by defining the novel in such a way as to include all the great works of the past and render the future doubtful, by defining the novel as a structure of fact and going on to declare the erection of such structures no longer possible because the facts have turned into "irreality." She is not much concerned with how these doomed towers are stuck together, only with the aggregate that forms their substance. [...] Formal innovation, she finds, has crowded out an interest in people, plot, character, the social. (L2 15)

Barthelme's exploration of "how these doomed towers are stuck together", both in his fiction and critical work, comes out of the dialogue between Rosenberg and Bellow. Bellow's initial *Times* article seems to have lit the fuse of this debate. Bellow argues that American Realism, unlike its European counterpart, "is always escaping toward the fact", building novels packed with "external" data. While in the European novel of ordinary life (Zola, Dreiser, Balzac, Flaubert) "realistic externals were intended to lead inward", American Realism stops short at the external, piling up journalistic facts to satisfy the "readers' demand for knowledge." While Bellow cites Whitman, Twain, and Hemingway as writers who, though they are deeply invested in facts, retain their "excitement" with those facts and who therefore do "lead inward", he argues that contemporary American writers have severed the external and the

³⁴ Quoted in "After Joyce", originally printed in Mary McCarthy, "The Fact in Fiction," *On the Contrary*, 267.

internal. Despite this severing, the appetite for knowledge, especially among those who are irritated by the mystery of art, has led to a “confus[ion] about the borders between art and life, between social history and fiction, between gossip and satire, between the journalist’s news and the artist’s discovery.” This confusion is in part due to a development in the kind of facts available to the artist:

Some of our novelists can scarcely help being better fact-bringers than artists. They are turning ground that has never been turned before—the Army, the laboratory, the modern corporation, the anarchic sexual life of “free spirits”: such phenomena in the raw state are not quickly assimilated into art. [...] The novelist, convinced that the novel is the result of his passionate will to suppose that he can know everything about the life of another human being, finds that he must get through the obstacles of the literal to come at his subject. Thus, he is prevented from doing the essential thing. Hard knowledge is demanded of him; to acquire this hard knowledge, he must at least temporarily transform himself into some sort of specialist.³⁵

Bellow laments the ironic state of art in which artists, more concerned with “hard knowledge”, abandon the kind of truth, vital to art and life, that retains its inexhaustible mystery. Barthelme will later parody the tendency to gather specialist knowledge in its “raw state” in stories such as “The Viennese Opera Ball”, in which information piles up, encyclopedic and unassimilated: “sailing, salesmen, salt, sanitation, Santa Claus, saws, scales, schools, screws, sealing wax, secretaries, sects, selling, the Seven Wonders, sewerage, sewing machines, sheep, sheet metal, shells, shipbuilding, shipwrecks [...] surveying, sweat and syphilis!” (*CBDC* 90).

Bellow’s 1963 article in *Encounter* magazine, entitled “Some Notes on Recent American Fiction”, which both Rosenberg and Bellow cite in their dual “Form and Despair” essays, adds another dimension to Bellow’s argument about fact and form. “Recent American Fiction” examines the loss of a “firm outline” of knowable facts: “Public life, vivid and

³⁵ Bellow, “A Novelist-Critic Discusses the Role of Reality in the Creation of Fiction”.

formless turbulence, news, slogans, mysterious crises, and unreal configurations dissolve coherence in all but the most resistant minds, and even to such minds it is not always a confident certainty that resistance can ever have a positive outcome.”³⁶ In answer to the question of this contemporary dissipation of solid fact, Bellow argues that “modern writers have answered poorly”:

They have told us, indignantly or nihilistically or comically, how great our error is, but for the rest they have offered us thin fare. The fact is that the modern writers sin when they suppose that they *know*, as they conceive that physics *knows* or that history *knows*. The subject of the novelist is not knowable in any such way. The mystery increases, it does not grow less as types of literature wear out.³⁷

Unwavering certainty of the reliability of knowledge is the “sin” of novelists like McCarthy who cling to “types of literature” that claim such a solid position. In Bellow’s analysis, one can no longer *know* as McCarthy “supposes” to know, and therefore the forms in which she and her traditionally-minded peers contain this knowledge (the “firm outlines” of these facts) are no longer acceptable to a writer who knows that he cannot know. Fiction would have to invent new forms to accommodate the “not knowable”.

In answer to Bellow’s diagnosis, Rosenberg finds in visual art a formal model for a fiction of the not knowable:

[N]o longer boiled into a single mash by unchallenged conventions, art and fact are constantly exchanging themselves for one another. Under these circumstances it would seem fruitful for writers to follow the example of the painters in adopting an attitude so thoroughly experimental that the question of what is art and what is reality will be decided afresh in each new work. [...] Today, facts new and old, and evaluations of the facts, are attainable only by the mind engaged in pulling apart its own inherited apparatus. (L2 8-9)

Rosenberg seems to agree with McCarthy that the facts of the twentieth and nineteenth centuries are not the same, though he agrees for a different reason. The forms that contained

³⁶ Saul Bellow, “Some Notes on Recent American Fiction”, 23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

nineteenth-century facts were built on “unchallenged conventions” that assumed the veracity of those facts, whereas painting in the twentieth century, most importantly Cubism but all forms of modernist art, had revealed the conventional scaffolding of “reality” and set about “pulling it apart”. Visual art’s novel use of the unreliability of reality as a way to elude the knowingness of convention surpassed even fiction’s capacity not only for representation, but for invention.

Bellow’s second article, and the fifth in the Bellow-Bellow-Rosenberg-Rosenberg-Bellow-Barthelme debate (the first Rosenberg will be discussed below), reframes a factual “culture-history” (*L2* 12) in terms of Rosenberg’s argument in “Form and Despair” (the second Rosenberg piece). Quoting Rosenberg’s thesis that the “doom of the West works automatically to make the expression of any other kind of outlook extraordinarily difficult”, Bellow argues that the “negative view” of modern history has become “easy”, and that anyone can immediately list the ideas—“bureaucracy, alienation, mass media, anomie, privation of instinctual needs, etc.”—that occupy modern intellectual thought (*L2* 10). There have been two reactions to this doom: one has been the instruction to shore up our faith in authority, custom, and hierarchy, and the other has been a depiction of humanity as “born into howling urban wastes”, “estranged, debased, negligible, speaking demotic dialects and blowing cigar smoke over the fabrics of enchantment.” Because these ideas have their origins in such greats as Eliot, Joyce, Pound, and numerous others, contemporary writers have been reluctant (to say the least) to challenge this intellectual pessimism. Bellow claims that despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that these writers were great innovators and pioneers in the discovery of new forms to embody new kinds and protocols of knowledge, the result of this filial piety has been exactly the lack of formal innovation that Bellow, Rosenberg, and

Barthelme identify. This pessimism has become comfortably knowable, absorbed into academe and reinforced with each iteration of the fact-based, cerebral, knowing novel. Bellow notes that Hannah Arendt, writing about Sarraute, quotes the following line from *The Brothers Karamazov*: “‘Master, what must I do to gain eternal life?’ The Staretz comes a little nearer. ‘Above all, do not lie to yourself.’” Bellow asks, then, “must the victories of truth be so small? [...] Can we (‘at a time like this’) expect it to disclose nothing but tiny flowers redeemed from darkness?” (L2 12). While he rejects this small, rigorously factual, “dreary fable of hopelessness and doom” as well as the Rosenbergian “pulling apart” of the mind’s “inherited apparatus”, Bellow does not actually indicate, or even guess at, what a new form might look like. In “After Joyce”, on the next page of *Location*, Barthelme will begin to sketch out the future of form.

In answer to Bellow and Rosenberg, Barthelme aspires, at least partially, to make an “strange object” in the world, “which is then encountered in the same way as other objects in the world” (L2 13). And yet, armed with the French cautionary tale, he is aware of what happens when such a practice loses all touch with human emotion. The ideal “objectness” that Barthelme promotes in “After Joyce” is one that does not shut the viewer or reader out by expunging all subjectivity; in fact one must “participate” in the object, as “in asking it questions you are asking questions of the world directly” (L2 14, 13). What is missing from French avant-garde writing, for example, is exactly the kind of not-knowing that comes from the practices of “looking and listening” (L1 5) that visual artists have developed in service of aesthetic liberation. As suggested in the introduction to this thesis, it is on this point that critics such as Alan Wilde have mischaracterised Barthelme: far from accepting the small truths of fact and finding comfort in the knowledge that one has not “lied” to oneself in the

pursuit of art, Barthelme draws attention to, and uses his innovations of form and fact to counter, this stagnant state of acceptance in modern literature.

While Barthelme gleaned his theoretical ideas about collage from the Bellow-Rosenberg debate, he seems to have found at least an initial practical inspiration in Rauschenberg's manifesto-like *Random Order*, published in *Location 1*. In this spread, Rauschenberg constructs a whole out of bits of text about the aesthetic potential of ordinary objects and photographic images invoking those statements, demonstrating a kind of "hidden" internal order. In the upper left-hand corner of the layout Rauschenberg writes, in all capital letters, "WITH SOUND SCALE AND INSISTENCY TRUCKS MOBILIZE WORDS, AND BROADSIDE OUR CULTURE BY A COMBINATION OF LAW AND LOCAL MOTIVATION WHICH PRODUCES AN EXTREMELY COMPLEX RANDOM ORDER THAT CANNOT BE DESCRIBED AS ACCIDENTAL" (*L1* 28). Breaking away from the "accidental" idealised by the Surrealists, Rauschenberg and Barthelme make purposeful aesthetic choices that cohere, like a goat in a tire or a poem made of the words on the sides of trucks, in an oxymoronic "random order" that "produces an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep". It is important to note that Barthelme's and Rauschenberg's principle is not "orderly randomness", which would function like an exoskeleton holding in chaos, but an internal form, a set of vertebrae, to which adheres a flesh "warm at the edges fade in fade out a tissue of hints whispers glimpses uncertainties, zoom in zoom out" (*UPUA* 38).

While Barthelme's critical essays touch on his ideas about form, his fiction reveals a more visceral participation in this debate. "The Indian Uprising", the first story in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), for example, seems to engage with an idea

and a metaphor Rosenberg had introduced in the first issue of *Location*.³⁸ In this introduction, Rosenberg identifies what he calls the “stockade syndrome”, the tendency of American writers to paradoxically resist innovation in the service of protecting their art against mass cultural forces:

With the vanguard writer surrounded by the Indians of the press and the professoriate?, the impulse to analyze limitations has been checked by the fear of lifting the latch to the enemy. Everything original in American writing has been defended to the death, literally. In their protective huddle around good work, American writers and artists have reacted most strongly to the bad.

[...] While the age of the Indian wars is by no means closed, there are now ample forces to keep the compound reasonably secure. Though it may be inadvisable for them to adopt the Bolshevik slogan, “The main enemy is at home,” it does seem that American art and literature have at last reached a stage where they can have wars of their own. (L1 5)

Tracy Daugherty suggests that Barthelme may also have read Philip Rahv’s 1939 article in *The Kenyon Review* entitled “Paleface and Redskin”, in which Rahv positions the metaphorical “highbrow” paleface (Eliot, James) against the “lowbrow” redskin (Whitman, Hemingway, Faulkner). Both unique to America, the paleface is intellectual, traditional, “estranged from reality”, while the redskin’s “reactions are primarily emotional, spontaneous, and lacking in personal culture.”³⁹ Rahv argues that while the refined, though stagnant palefaces “dominated literature throughout the 19th Century”, the twentieth century had seen this reign “overthrown” by a vivid though at times either materialist or sentimentalist vanguard, much to literature’s detriment.⁴⁰ Though written nearly twenty years earlier, Rahv’s

³⁸ On August 17, 1963, *The New Yorker* published John Updike’s story “The Indian”, in which an unnamed, enigmatic Indian “loiters” around a New England town. Despite the townspeople’s attempts to “discover” him—they note with relish that he “wears a plaid lumberjack shirt with a gray turtleneck sweater underneath, and chino pants olive rather than khaki in color, and remarkably white tennis sneakers”—the narrator writes that “the simplest fact about a person, identity’s very seed, is in his case utterly hidden.” Barthelme’s “The Indian Uprising”, as well as his later story “The Temptation of St. Anthony”, are concerned with this inscrutable outsidership at the margins of the common and knowable.

³⁹ Rahv, “Paleface and Redskin”, 252-253.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.

essay anticipates Bellow's and Rosenberg's bemoaning assessment of contemporary art and provides a metaphorical basis for Barthelme's story.

While it is impossible to know for certain whether Barthelme lifted the metaphor of the Indian attack directly from Rosenberg and/or Rahv, "The Indian Uprising" suggests certain parallels to their analyses of contemporary art. First is the most obvious parallel, both in the title and in the opening lines of the story:

The arrows of the Comanches came in clouds. The war clubs of the Comanches clattered on the soft, yellow pavements. There were earthworks along the Boulevard Mark Clark and the hedges had been laced with sparkling wire. (*UPUA* 10)

Already the "situation" (*UPUA* 13) is aestheticised (earthworks, sparkling wire), even to the point of absurdity ("clattered" and "soft, yellow pavements" seem particularly inapt). In an acknowledgement of Rosenberg's prescription, Barthelme's references are mostly to visual art. The map of the war is a battle between blue and green territories, much like a painting composition, and as in an actual war in which barricades are built of everyday, readily available objects, here the barricades (Rosenberg's "stockades"?) are described with an eye to aesthetic detail:

window dummies, silk, thoughtfully-planned job descriptions (including scales for the orderly progress of other colors), wine in demijohns, and robes. I analyzed the composition of the barricade nearest me and found two ashtrays, ceramic, one dark brown and one dark brown with an orange blur at the lip; a tin frying pan; two-litre bottles of red wine; three-quarter-litre bottles of Black & White, aquavit, cognac, vodka, gin, Fad #6 sherry; a hollow-core door in birch veneer on black wrought-iron legs; a blanket, red-orange with faint blue stripes; a red pillow and a blue pillow; a woven straw wastebasket; two glass jars for flowers; corkscrews and can openers; two plates and two cups, ceramic, dark brown; a yellow-and-purple poster; a Yugoslavian carved flute, wood, dark brown; and other items. (*UPUA* 11-12)

By the end of the story, the city is overrun, both by Comanches and by visual art forms and procedures. In the midst of a gunfight, the narrator notes that a building was "designed by Emery Roth & Sons". Actual art enters the text as well: "large, lighted rooms, whispering

galleries with black-and-white Spanish rugs and problematic sculpture on calm, red catafalques” (*UPUA* 18-19). The aesthetic qualities of death (the catafalques), injury, and torture are what interest the narrator: “I touched your back, the white, raised scars” (*UPUA* 19)—photographic and tactile negatives of Snow White’s (and *Snow White*’s) six dark beauty marks. To the end, the narrator focuses on the aesthetic: “I removed my belt and shoelaces and looked (rain shattering from a great height the prospects of silence and clear, neat rows of houses in the subdivisions) into their savage black eyes, paint, feathers, beads” (*UPUA* 19). Ostensibly, the Comanches (Rahv’s “redskins”) have won, and the prisoners will presumably suffer the same fate as the captured Comanche at the beginning. It makes sense for the narrator to look into the Comanches’ eyes, but the grammatical construction suggests that he is also looking into their paint, feathers, and beads as one looks into a work of art. Even a painting or a sculpture is a “String of language extend[ing] in every direction to bind the world into a rushing, ribald whole” (*UPUA* 18).

“The Indian Uprising” reveals Barthelme’s ambivalence regarding collage’s position in the debate on formalism (““Which side are you on,’ I cried, ‘after all?’” (*UPUA* 16)). On one hand, the paleface “patrician” city constructs a collage as a defence against the “gross, riotous naturalism” of the redskins, an attempt to preserve their fealty to “allegory and to the distillation of symbolism”⁴¹ (suggested by references to composer Gabriel Fauré, swans, and chilling literature on torture “quoting the best modern sources, French, German, and American” (*UPUA* 14)) and to a kind of modernist formal innovation (Eliot’s hyacinths make an appearance). And yet there are multiple clues that Barthelme is considering the possibility that collage may not be an exclusively avant-garde technique, but that it may be a technique

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

that arises at the intersection of the avant-garde and the mainstream, formalism and the chaotic real. For example, the redskins send a letter to the city's inhabitants containing a "flint arrowhead played by Frank Wedekind" (*UPUA* 17), the nineteenth-century, bourgeoisie-criticising German playwright, as well as an "elegant gold chain" that suggests a certain kind of civilised refinement. A captured Comanche gives his name as "Gustave Aschenbach", which is not only a reference to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, but also in German means "pale face".

In "The Indian Uprising", Barthelme takes up Rosenberg's call for a visual-art inspired formal innovation, and, perhaps, begins to reconcile the palefaces and redskins. Speaking about "The Indian Uprising" in 1981, Barthelme expressed his "random ordered" collagist intentions: "None of the references in the story were picked at random, and none are simply used as decor. If they seem random it's probably because the range of reference is rather wide for a short piece—you have Patton and Frank Wedekind and the Seventh Cavalry coexisting on the same plane—but the crowding is part of the design, *is* the design" (*NK* 280). Barthelme commented upon his range of reference in a 1975 interview:

Ruas: Given the collage technique used in the story, one tends to interpret continuously.

Barthelme: One is allowed to, yes. It's a possibility of the story.

Ruas: Such as the time jumps in the personal, very personal, relationship, and the jump of scenes and places. So that to continue to grasp the whole, the reader is forced to impose or create a structure.

Barthelme: Yes, in this story particularly, the reader is being asked to work pretty hard. I don't think it's in any sense at the limit of what a reader can do, but he is asked to do a lot of work. So that the reader's participation is very great, which is a thing I want, and invite. (*NK* 232-233)

In "After Joyce" Barthelme had written of a new literary object placed in the world that the reader would "reconstitute" by "active participation, by approaching the object, tapping it, shaking it, holding it to his ear to hear the roaring within" (*L2* 14). Rahv's complaint about

the redskins was that their fiction had to appeal to the popular tastes and references familiar to “semi-literate audiences”⁴²; here Barthelme incorporates popular references but “asks the reader to work pretty hard” at interpreting them, thus short-circuiting any easy assimilation. Instead of remaining passive to the “mood”⁴³ and cultural facts of the times, the reader must reconstitute the work of art again and again. The object remains inexhaustible.

“The Indian Uprising” also contains Barthelme’s engagement with the idea, drawn from Langer, of form as an emotional construct as much as a physical one, and further, how this concept of form is particularly conducive to not-knowing. For example, even after giving a methodical inventory of the materials available for the defense of the city (which doubles as a description of a particularly complex collage sculpture), the narrator adds, in an echo of *The Waste Land*, “I decided I knew nothing.”⁴⁴ But this, for Barthelme, is not enough. The “hard work” the reader must undertake requires not only that he not-know, but that he participate emotionally in the form of the work of art. Miss R. cooingly chastises the narrator for his misguided, or at least incomplete, manifestation of not-knowing: “‘You know nothing,’ she said, ‘you feel nothing, you are locked in a most savage and terrible ignorance, I despise you, my boy, *mon cher*, my heart’” (*UPUA* 12). This ignorance, specifically born of an incorrect apprehension of form, is the actual weakness in the city’s defenses, as there is a real danger that the “heap of broken images” will not cohere into a meaningful and therefore protective whole. The narrator’s inability to bring together disparate materials—both tangible and emotional—suggests his failure to understand that it is in the acceptance of form as both an

⁴² *Ibid.*, 254.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁴⁴ “I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing.” (Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 30, lines 38-40.) At the end of the story, the narrator, captured by the Comanches and betrayed by Miss R., hints that torture renders one neither living nor dead.

emotional and physical element that mystery and truth can be found: “People were trying to understand. I spoke to Sylvia. ‘Do you think this is a good life?’ The table held apples, books, long-playing records. She looked up. ‘No’” (*UPUA* 10). The narrator clings to the still life of apples and books and long-playing records, even as the emotional form, the “good life” with a lover, gradually dissolves. In his anxiety, the narrator repeatedly insists upon thingness as a way to “fix” the emotional “situation”, both in the sense of repairing and to stabilise the real:

Not believing that your body brilliant as it was and your fat, liquid spirit distinguished and angry as it was were stable quantities to which one could return on wires more than once, twice, or another number of times I said: “See the table?” (*UPUA* 15)

Despite his aesthetic and psychic failures, the narrator can only understand emotion, especially when it comes to women, in terms of the visual and concrete. Here Barthelme expands his range of reference to include other art styles. Miss R., an “unorthodox” teacher (like Korzybski, whom Barthelme mentions in the same paragraph, she is ostensibly a grammarian), wears “a blue dress containing a red figure” in “a large room painted white” (*UPUA* 14), almost like one of de Kooning’s *Woman* paintings, in which figures emerge from swirls of vibrant brushstrokes. However, the narrator is “disappointed by her plainness”, noting that “there [is] nothing exceptional about her”. Although they are equally unfathomable, the aesthetics of Miss R., which sound very much like Abstract Expressionism, are distinguished from Sylvia’s, who is placed among apples, books, and long-playing records, solid objects that are nonetheless inscrutable in their thingness. Block, a character named for a minimalist object, and who speaks in block-like sentences, tells the narrator that “[The girl] is in love with his coat. When she is not wearing it she is huddling

under it. Once I caught it going down the stairs by itself. I looked inside. Sylvia” (*UPUA* 14). Later Sylvia wears a “a yellow ribbon, under a long blue muffler” (*UPUA* 15).⁴⁵

Despite his attempts to pin the girl on the canvas, the narrator still feels adrift, unable to accept the emotional aspect of form. He views the beloved and solidly promising “you” of the story, which refers to both a female lover and an understanding of artistic form (“But it is you I want now, here in the middle of this Uprising” (*UPUA* 13)) as unstable, unfixable—form as erotic longing. Seen in terms of light and liquid, form, manifested as the female body and spirit, moves and changes through space: “you can never touch a girl in the same way more than once, twice, or another number of times” (*UPUA* 17), he laments. The narrator’s panacea, which he has applied before to the unfixability of other women (presumably without success), is to make her a hollow-core door table, an opaque object that prevents the carpet from fading. The table is also so common that the faded carpet around it becomes the recognisable “trace” of its existence, while the play of deep and faded color also suggests abstract painting. The irony is that this seemingly solid, integral object is not at all solid—it is cheap, lightweight, and hollow, which, in a further irony, is a formal reflection of the narrator’s limited capacity not only for emotion but for a fruitful understanding of the very art form he is producing. That the narrator keeps making this type of table, a useful object fashioned from another, unrelated one with a certain degree of democratic ease, actually suggests both romantic and aesthetic unease (as does the childish, pleading “See the

⁴⁵ Although Barthelme cautioned against reading “The Indian Uprising” as autobiographical, there are some personal parallels to be made, especially in the details of the story. For example, Daugherty notes that Birgit wore striking, and rather “odd,” ensembles, which included “handmade necklaces with glass and wooden beads” (like the bear-claw necklace (*UPUA* 13)) and “heavy black mascara” recalls the Indians’ “savage black eyes” and “paint” (Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 258). Barthelme also notes that he and Birgit did in fact see a gravestone carved with the words “*Here lies Anna Pedersen, a good woman*” in Copenhagen, a phrase Barthelme incorporates into the story.

table?”⁴⁶). Whenever the narrator lives with a woman (five and counting), he makes her a hollow-core door table in an attempt to stabilise the woman’s “liquid” “quantities.” (Miss R., with whom the narrator has presumably never been in love, is a contradiction, as she both “run[s] to liquids and colors” and “hold[s] to the hard, brown, nutlike word” (*UPUA* 16).)

Barthelme positions his own work in an effort to resolve, or at least complicate, the problems of modern fact and form. If ordinary objects were somehow either “too real” to be art (“Some things appear to be wonders in the beginning, but when you become familiar with them, they are not wonderful at all” (*S* 137)) or too loaded with biases to be used in “outmoded” traditional literary forms, Barthelme would employ the techniques of the “vivacious” visual artists while maintaining literature’s understanding of “emotional and intellectual content” (*L2* 15). Barthelme answers Rosenberg’s demand for a literature that “question[s] what is art and what is reality”, the answers to which “will be decided afresh in each new work.” Barthelme would not be a writer who, in Rosenberg’s words, had “solved the problem of form by shoving it aside” (*L1* 5). As the narrator in “See the Moon?” muses,

It’s my hope that these...souvenirs...will someday merge, blur—cohere is the word, maybe—into something meaningful. A grand word, meaningful. What do I look for? A work of art, I’ll not accept anything less. (*UPUA* 159)

As a “student of the surfaces”, Barthelme’s collage stories combine fact and form, the aesthetic of the superficial and (despite his protestations) depth, and ideas of objectness and inherited meaning to not do “anything less” than reinvigorate the literary work of art.

⁴⁶ Barthelme commented upon the image of the hollow-core door table in a 1975 interview with Charles Ruas and Judith Sherman, stating that “The story is people all over America have made such tables, and that taking a hollow-core door, making a table out of it, or using it for a bed, [...] is sort of a thing that people did when they were very young, and usually when they first got married and got their first place—because it’s cheap, you know, and you can make furniture out of it. It should evoke a kind of man-woman-youth complex” (*NK* 215-216).

Robert Rauschenberg and the Gap Between Art and Life

About his collage process Rauschenberg remarked, “I actually had a kind of house rule. If I walked completely around the block and didn’t find enough to work with, I could take one other block and walk around it in any direction—but that was it. The works had to be at least as interesting as anything that was going on outside the window.”⁴⁷ In “See the Moon?”, the last story in *Unspeakable Practices*, in which the narrator spends most of his time looking out the window, Barthelme would belie his admiration for such practices by satirising both the critic and the wannabe artist who grumbles that painters

get away with murder in my view; Mr. X. on the *Times* agrees with me. You don’t know how I envy them. They can pick up a Baby Ruth wrapper on the street, glue it to the canvas (in the *right place*, of course, there’s that), and lo! people crowd about and cry, “A real Baby Ruth wrapper, by God, what could be realer than that!” Fantastic metaphysical advantage. You hate them, if you’re ambitious. (*UPUA* 159-160)

This “real Baby Ruth wrapper” should stand as a counterargument to McCarthy’s view that the novel was “dying” of “irreality”: “what”, after all, “could be realer than that!”? By all accounts, the wrapper is not only what is “going on outside the window”, it is, as is all trash, itself a “window” onto the habits and values of society. But the artist no longer uses the wrapper as a McCarthian “fact” to illustrate character or plot. Throughout his fiction Barthelme both acknowledges and satirises the idea that artists have the “metaphysical advantage” of apprehending the “realness” of reality in a way that ordinary people do not, or possess the power to make mysterious what has been packaged as “whole cloth”. In “This Newspaper Here”, Barthelme actually inserts typographical passages into a text that should be *all* fact and no fabrication:

[T]his here and now newspaper I say a thing of great formal beauty. Sometimes on dull days the compositors play which makes paragraphs like re-

⁴⁷ Quoted without citation in Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, 334.

It is perhaps obvious that a stuffed goat and a tire do not “belong together” as do furniture, carpets, and chandeliers, but the shift from facts-as-signifiers to facts-as-themselves (which cannot, despite attempts by the French avant-garde, shake their signification) is key to the evolution of collage. If one “wrenches” the plaster bronzes from the drawing room, Balzac’s work does not “collapse”; a mention of the wallpaper or a side table would do the same metonymic work of describing the Marneffes. The facts in Balzac accumulate to infer a physical or social setting, much like a theatre set, in which the plot and characters can develop. In a Rauschenberg or Barthelme collage, each object may function in service of a total meaning, but this meaning depends not upon the objects’ polished integration, but upon the “mysterious” creative agitation that occurs between them. The “plot” that develops happens between the objects, rather than figuratively in front of them. Wrench one object from another, and that friction disappears.

The choice, then, of what to combine is paramount. In an introduction to a catalogue for “Work From Four Series: A Sesquicentennial Exhibition” by Rauschenberg, which exhibited at Houston’s contemporary arts museum in 1985, Barthelme defined collage in terms of the mysterious process of choice:

If the basic principle of collage is the juxtaposition of unlike things within a visual field [...] [The artist] need in theory only find stranger and stranger things and build not-quite-decipherable rebuses from them. The theory is straightforward enough but, of course, inadequate. It ignores the true source of this artist’s power, which lies in the mystery of particular choices. Charles Mauron, writing of the reception of the early work of Mallarmé, notes that although readers felt rebuffed, they nevertheless also knew it to be magnificently written. Seizure, as it were, is always prior to understanding. (NK 186)

Rauschenberg’s “unavoidable” choices of goat and tire, while they may “rebuff” viewers looking for logic, is where the mystery and magnificence of the work of art is located.

Similarly, while anyone can make a collage story, the art of contemporary collage fiction,

Barthelme says, is the ability to “grab something outside of literature and drag it into literature and renew the writing thereby” (NK 214), not just to string together “stranger and stranger things”. Not even every one of Barthelme’s collage stories is entirely successful: Barthelme admitted in an interview that “Bone Bubbles” was more of a “lab report” than a cohesive work of fiction, an experiment in linguistic collage in which a “grand and exciting world of his fabrication topple out against surface irregularities” (CL 119). Ideally, Barthelme said, he was going for almost “a pointillist technique, where what you get is not adjacent dots of yellow and blue which optically merge to give you green but merged meanings, whether from words placed side by side in a seemingly arbitrary way or phrases similarly arrayed, bushels of them...” Asked for an example, Barthelme replied “‘Petronius mothballs.’ Of course you can do this all day long and the results will be fully as poor as the specimen furnished” (NK 283). In a story like “Bone Bubbles”,⁴⁸ however, one does indeed get the sense that wrenching any “dots” from its canvas would do little to harm its unity. Although the “bones” should hold this structure together, the fizzing “bubbles” of words are too ephemeral to cling as flesh. In contrast to an analysis of a Balzac novel, plucking the rooster off the top of Rauschenberg’s *Odalisk* (1955-1958) or putting *Bed* (1955) on the floor where it “belongs” in order to investigate it is not only the wrong kind of interpretation, it in fact literally destroys the work (“Tear a mystery to tatters and you have tatters, not mystery” (NK 17)). The “unavoidable choices” Rauschenberg makes are only obvious once they are in their combinations—the “cock” standing atop images of nude women, along with the title of the work (which is just as important as any other component) create new meanings regarding gender and sexual punning.

⁴⁸ “Bone Bubbles” first appeared as “Mouth” in *The Paris Review* No. 48 in 1969.

It is his belief in the capacity of collage to restore a sense of mystery to apparently ordinary objects by lifting them out of the continuum of the habitual that defines Barthelme's engagement with form. Only by taking apart and reassembling signs (in the case of Barthelme's typographical experiments) and "information", even and perhaps especially readymade signs and information, can the artist reinvigorate creative not-knowing. In "Paraguay" Barthelme lifts an entire passage from a travel memoir, a genre concerned the intersection of subjective and objective knowledge, using it as a springboard for a series of studies in not-knowing. Immediately after this passage that should orient the reader, Barthelme disrupts the attempt to get one's bearings:

Where Paraguay Is

Thus I found myself in a strange country. This Paraguay is not the Paraguay that exists on our maps. It is not to be found on the continent, South America; it is not a political subdivision of that continent, with a population of 2,161,000 and a capital city named Asunción. This Paraguay exists elsewhere. Now, moving toward the first of the "silver cities," I was tired but also elated and alert. Flights of white meat moved through the sky overhead in the direction of the dim piles of buildings. (CL 30)

The location of this new Paraguay is defined not only by what it is not, but by the specific ways in which it defies the same kind of common knowledge that one might find in a McCarthian novel of facts (location, population, national bird, etc.). One must be "elated and alert" in this country, must acclimatise very quickly to a factless not-knowing. Not-knowing is, in fact, the highest value in "Paraguay" (both the place and the story):

Such is the smoothness of surfaces in Paraguay that anything not smooth is valuable. She explains to me in that demanding (and receiving) explanations you are once more brought to a stop. You have got, really, no farther than you were before. "Therefore we try to keep everything open, go forward avoiding the final explanation. If we inadvertently receive it, we are instructed to 1) pretend that it is just another error, or 2) misunderstand it. Creative misunderstanding is crucial." (CL 37)

Like a mad tour guide, Barthelme first explains, negates his explanations ("She explains to me in that demanding (and receiving) explanations you are once more brought to a stop"),

and opens the passage to “creative misunderstanding” with two choices, like two paths through a jungle. By the end of the story the reader is deep “(into? out of?)” “Paraguay”. But as in virtually all of Barthelme’s stories, there is no Freudian or Proustian secret answer to one of life’s great questions. In an entry titled “*Behind the Wall*”, the narrator reports that “Behind the wall there is a field of red snow. I had expected that to enter it would be forbidden, but Jean said no, walk about in it, as much as you like. [...] The snow rearranged itself into a smooth, red surface without footprints. It had a red glow, as if lighted from beneath. It seemed to proclaim itself a mystery, but one there was no point in solving—an ongoing low-garde mystery” (CL 39). The mystery of the surface remains undisturbed (despite its non-valuable smoothness), as in a “rearrangement” of facts in a collage.

Barthelme’s recombination of language and image “contaminated by the world” (NK 22) is, for Barthelme, the moment where knowingness can be transformed back into mystery: recalling his philosophical studies with Natanson, Barthelme writes, “The combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generation of meaning once they’re allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven’t yet encountered” (NK 21). It seems that Barthelme, like Rauschenberg, had taken to walking around the block collecting language and images: in “A Shower of Gold” Barthelme inserts into his fiction the true story of observing that “Yesterday [...] in the typewriter in front of the Olivetti showroom on Fifth Avenue, I found a recipe for Ten Ingredient Soup that included a stone from a toad’s head.⁴⁹ [...] Coming home I passed a sign that said in ten-foot letters COWARD SHOES and heard a man singing “Golden Earrings” in a horrible voice”. Like Rauschenberg in *Bed*, Barthelme also takes images from the realms of

⁴⁹ Barthelme talks about the Olivetti incident in an interview with J.D. O’Hara in 1981, published in *Not-Knowing*, 306.

dreams, art, and myth, concretising them into consciousness: “and last night I dreamed there was a shoot-out at our house on Meat Street and my mother shoved me in a closet to get me out of the line of fire. [...] My mother was a royal virgin and my father a shower of gold” (*CBDC* 183). Similarly, “The Viennese Opera Ball” contains pieces of language from a range of cultural fields, from the world of glossy magazines to abortion procedures to copperplate printing and tool manufacturing. Like Rauschenberg, Barthelme wants an art that “asks questions of the world”. As Rauschenberg says, “I don’t want a picture to look like something it isn’t. I want it to look like something it is. And I think a picture is more like the real world when it’s made out of the real world.”⁵⁰

A piece like Rauschenberg’s oil and silkscreen *Retroactive I* (1964) illustrates the idea of incorporating a world—and a history—of associations into a work of art. Regarding images such as *Retroactive I*, Rauschenberg said that “I was bombarded with TV sets and magazines, by the refuse, by the excess of the world [...] I thought that if I could paint or make an honest work, it should incorporate all of these elements, which were and are a reality.”⁵¹ To this end, the picture plane is dominated by a silkscreened image of a mid-speech John F. Kennedy (assassinated the year before) whose pointing gesture, framed and repeated, recalls Renaissance paintings of Christ’s admonitions. Like a Renaissance painting, this central figure is surrounded by other panels that evoke religious iconography, such as a photographic print of an astronaut parachuting into an upside-down box of apples (symbols of the proliferation of sin since Man’s post-lapsarian “Fall”). A red panel in the lower right corner contains layers of reference: it is a silkscreen of a portion of *LIFE* magazine photographer Gjon Mili’s 1952 stroboscopic photograph of a live reconstruction of Picasso’s

⁵⁰ Rauschenberg quoted in Hapgood, *Neo-Dada, Redefining Art 1958-1962*, 18.

⁵¹ Quoted without citation in Hughes, *The Shock of the New*, 345.

Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2 (1912), which, in Rauschenberg's rendering, gestures back even further to Masaccio's circa-1432 fresco *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden*. The collage is not only a comment upon the "excess" of the modern world, but also incorporates the inescapable repetition of history.

As a figurative negative image of Rauschenberg's *Retroactive I*, in stories such as *Guilty Pleasures*'s "Down the Line with the Annual" or "That Cosmopolitan Girl", Barthelme depends upon the reader's knowledge of, respectively, the *Consumer Bulletin Annual* and *Cosmopolitan* magazine, as well as works of art such as Balzac's and Jane Austen's novels. Like Rauschenberg, Barthelme "pastes" layers of meaning onto his canvas: in "Down the Line with the Annual", "Herodotus, Saint-Simon, Rilke, and Owen Wister" come up against "aerosol sprays" and "indelible lipsticks" (*GP* 4). Or the ironic "That Cosmopolitan Girl" (printed in Courier font), in which the earnest female protagonist tries to tailor her thoughts and actions to the instructional language of magazines, but finds that her reading of *Cosmopolitan* has been trumped by her rival's familiarity with a slightly more intellectual publication:

Well, I must admit that I was in the most infinitesimal bit of a twit, so I dipped into my Vuitton and brought out my copy of the current issue of the magazine to see if the advice columns anything a propos, if there was any strong, natural, lovable way to deal with this rather hideous situation[. . .]asked her in the nicest possible way what magazine she read, what magazine she identified with, what magazine defined her, because of course I was insanely curious about how she achieved that really phony wholesomeness that she exuded all over Stephen like a web or something. She just looked at me and said, "Scientific American, dearie." (*GP* 19)

The tone here, like Rauschenberg's, is both arch and sincere: this magazine, which provides the narrator (whom the reader is meant to align with the opening picture of a Regency-era

woman—social rules, this image suggests, are timeless) with the vocabulary to learn ostensibly good skills for being “natural and healthy and resilient” (GP 15), has in the end betrayed her, leaving the reader with a sense of pathos.⁵² In Rauschenberg’s case, JFK may have hardly been Christ, but the painting evokes the genuine collective grief that followed his death.

The understanding of a collage, however, is not gained by adding up the meanings of each “real world” component, even those as real as Baby Ruth wrappers and moon landings. Even in their original contexts these pieces of culture were not separate: in *LIFE* magazine and *The New Yorker*, advertisements for coffee, cars, cigarettes, or towels (“Same bathroom—Four ways...You can do it at low cost with CANNON TOWELS!”) were often run alongside reports of the Korean war such as “ROKs hold off enemy; Red assault on White Horse Hill”,⁵³ creating new meanings regarding the consequences of capitalism or the absurdity of war. The placement of ads and copy in magazines, however, were not conscious choices (though one can hope there were some real artists in the layout department). Strangely, even though the advertisements for tires emphasise above all “whether the tire is a B. F. Goodrich or a Uniroyal”, in the “collage” that the magazines unwittingly produce they lose their individual significance. Furthermore, this unintended collaging effect does not only operate upon advertisements and news headlines: responding to a suggestion that in his technique he was like a “jackdaw”, Barthelme said that “the jackdaw business is a function of appearing in *The New Yorker* with some frequency. People read the fiction with after-images of Rolls Royces and Rolexes still sizzling in their eyes. Rare is the reviewer who can resist

⁵² “That Cosmopolitan Girl” also recalls Joyce’s “Nausicaa” chapter, in which Gerty, much like the narrator of Barthelme’s story, puts her faith in women’s trash reading. Barthelme evokes Joyce’s parodic, and yet poignant, tone.

⁵³ *LIFE* magazine, 20 October 1952, 42.

mentioning the magazine's ads when talking about the fiction. One is gilded by association" (NK 279-280).

While "The Balloon", the second story in *Unspeaking Practices, Unnatural Acts*, is not a graphic collage story, it enacts the thingness of collage that Barthelme admires, both inviting and negating the "world of associations" in an effort to resist the knowing interpretive impulse to dismantle the story and examine the parts in isolation. The circumstances of "The Balloon" are wonderfully bizarre: the narrator inflates an enormous balloon over a large swath of Manhattan, where it becomes a source of delight and occasional irritation to the inhabitants. Echoing art theorists, the narrator is quick to differentiate between the thingness of the balloon and the situation of the balloon:

But it is wrong to speak of "situations," implying sets of circumstances leading to some resolution, some escape of tension; there were no situations, simply the balloon hanging there. [...] [A]t that moment there was only this balloon, concrete particular, hanging there. (UPUA 22-23)

The story, too, strives toward the "concrete particular" of a rock or refrigerator; the repetition of "hanging there" paradoxically both reinforces such solidity and highlights the softness of the balloon itself—a "rushing, ribald whole". The story builds a narrative tension that can only be released by the balloon's deflation; the story and the balloon are, in the end, the same object. The balloon is, in a sense, truly popular art: children play on the balloon, lovers hide in its sensuous curves, teenagers write messages on its surface, strangers get directions and natives locate themselves based upon where the balloon dips or flares or touches a building. But the balloon is not Pop Art. Even after the balloon's existence ceases to be a novelty, there remains a sense of uncomfortable mystery about it, a sense that is purposely purged from Pop Art. The balloon's color, for instance, in contrast to Pop Art's bold, identifiable colors, is not easily defined: "muted heavy grays and browns for the most part, contrasting with walnut and

soft yellows” (*UPUA* 23). It is not a coincidence that this passage could describe a de Kooning or a Rauschenberg, as could the balloon’s “deliberate lack of finish, enhanced by skillful installation, [giving] the surface a rough, forgotten quality” (*UPUA* 23). Furthermore, “a certain timidity”, a “lack of trust”, even hostility are stirred due to the balloon’s indeterminate origins as well as its “apparent purposelessness” (*UPUA* 24-25)—a charge that could also be, and at one time was, leveled at a Rauschenberg. Barthelme recognises and satirises the need for reassuring labels such as “LABORATORY TESTS PROVE” or “18% MORE EFFECTIVE” (*UPUA* 25) that place the balloon (or any piece of challenging art) within a structure (in this case, scientific and/or commercial) that is easily assimilated (he ultimately cannot “bear to do so”). On an object so “rough” and “forgotten,” such labels would be incongruous; they belong, rather, either in an advertisement in an earnest, unironic manifestation, or on something like Warhol’s 1964 *Campbell’s Tomato Juice Box*, where such labels and society’s belief in them are satirised.

Although some of the inhabitants grumble about the balloon, most feel a nostalgia in its presence, an “admixture of pleasurable cognition...struggling with the original perception” (*UPUA* 26), which is curious given that this is the first and perhaps only city-wide balloon they will ever see. Barthelme knows that his stories are not easily apprehended. Coming right after “The Indian Uprising,” “The Balloon” soothes the reader, suggesting that he will be “rewarded” with “pleasurable cognition” for “struggling with the original perception” (this pleasure will last only until he gets to “This Newspaper Here,” in which the narrator (and reader) is stabbed repeatedly by a little girl with “her knitting needle steel-blue knitting needle” (*UPUA* 32)). This “struggling” is the right, not-knowing sort, whereas the wrong kind of “struggling” would be to try to dismantle the object, as, Barthelme suggests, a

critic might: aptly, as if in reaction to the heavy solidity of the balloon, any critical consensus on the balloon shatters:

“monstrous pourings”

“harp”

XXXXXXXX “certain contrasts with darker portions”

“inner joy”

“large, square corners”

“conservative eclecticism that has so far governed modern balloon design”

.....: “abnormal vigor” (*UPUA* 27)

Both typographically and semantically disconnected, these “critical opinions” bounce off the object-ness of the balloon itself, unable to stick. But framed as they are by so much white space, set against each other like brushstrokes or, indeed, a collage, they too become part of the art-object landscape. Perhaps Barthelme anticipated his critics’ responses when he wrote that “some people claimed they felt sheltered, warmed, as never before, while enemies of the balloon felt, or reported feeling, constrained, a “heavy” feeling” (*UPUA* 27).

Barthelme’s object is different from the mass-produced objects in Pop Art: what comes to matter in “The Balloon,” is “each intersection,” each “meeting of balloon and building, meeting of balloon and man, meeting of balloon and balloon” (*UPUA* 28), the encounter of art object and world (the balloon even “forms a tight, curving line with the façade of the Gallery of Modern Art” (*UPUA* 27)). The Pop Art object would comment upon art and consumer culture with a sneer. Barthelme’s object is “spontaneous autobiographical disclosure[s]” (*UPUA* 29), transmutable, here like a “fat, liquid spirit” and there like a solid,

hollow-core door table or a soup can.⁵⁴ Its ability to “shift its shape” “offer[s] the possibility, in its randomness, of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet” (*UPUA* 28), which is both a pleasant and a disturbing experience. The relationship between the mysterious, metaphorically pliant balloon and the rigid grid plan of the city recalls the image in “See the Moon?” of the equally metaphorically malleable moon “graphed by the screen wire, if you squint” (*UPUA* 158).

Although the writer “has in fact removed himself from the work, just as Joyce instructed him to do” (*L2* 13), Barthelme’s collage works are far from being autonomous objects purged of reference to the world. Instead they are completed by the viewer, by his self-location and squinting, respectively. As Barthelme wrote in “After Joyce”, “The question so often asked of modern painting, “What is it?,” contains more than the dull skepticism of a man who is not going to have the wool pulled over his eyes. It speaks of a fundamental placement in relation to the work, that of a voyager in the world coming upon a strange object” (*L2* 14). Although the artist is the one who collects the fragments of thoughts in “See the Moon?” and inflates and deflates the balloon, the balloon takes the shape of the city around it, to an extent, just as the moon takes on the “shape” of a collage of memory.

“Visions of Half-Sleep”: Max Ernst and Not-Knowing

In his essay “Nightmare and Deliverance”, Ernst scholar Werner Spies argues that Ernst’s aspiration in his collages was to “describ[e] strangeness beyond comprehension.”⁵⁵ In the 1942 issue of *View*, dedicated to Ernst’s work, Nicolas Calas picked up on the effect of Ernst’s aim: “Reader, when you cross the threshold of Max Ernst’s world, abandon all hope

⁵⁴ More, perhaps, than Warhol, Claes Oldenburg’s “soft sculptures,” such as his *Soft Bathtub* (1966) may serve as a visual art equivalent of the balloon.

⁵⁵ *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*, 3.

of receiving help from the outside...you will have to walk alone".⁵⁶ As the introduction to this thesis argues, the reader of a Barthelme story, too, risks a kind of existential disorientation that obscures easily-grasped meaning. Barthelme's deceptively off-the-cuff remark that his "simple collages" were influenced by "Ernst rather than Schwitters" (NK 268) suggests that a key element of Barthelme's concept of not-knowing owes a debt to Ernst's effort to create for the reader a "strangeness" that evades attempts from the outside rational world to "help" make sense; though he is writing about Ernst's collages, Spies' assessment applies to Barthelme's stories: "knowledge of his sources only blinds us to the poetry of the final image."⁵⁷

Like Barthelme, Ernst had developed an acute understanding of art history and psychoanalysis,⁵⁸ which allowed him to explore in art the imagistic and symbolic relationships that, from an analytic perspective, are "beyond comprehension". Barthelme would also later share Ernst's skepticism of a knowing, academic mastery of the workings of the subconscious, arguing that a systematic study of something as delicate as, for example, dreams, irreparably damages the wisdom to be found within. One of Ernst's precedents for the mistrust of interpretation was a passage in Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* that argued against the destruction of dream content: "But, dear father, why are you so opposed to dreams...? To me the dream is a defense against the routine and ordinariness of life, a chance for the imagination to break free of restrictions, to tumble together all of life's images in childlike play as an escape from the wearying earnestness of adulthood."⁵⁹ Revealingly,

⁵⁶ Calas, "And Her Body Became Enormous Luminous and Splendid", 20.

⁵⁷ *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*, 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁹ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in Novalis, *Werke and Briefe*, 148.

despite Freud's work with dreams, Ernst did not include Freud in his 1922 painting *Rendezvous of Friends*, although he did depict other writers, artists, and thinkers (Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon, Dostoevsky) whose subject or inspiration was the subconscious.

Although Ernst draws from and describes the world of dreams in his work, there exists an inherent negotiation between the subconscious and the "daylit" world, as dream content is gleaned from one's waking reality. In fact, Ernst traced his artistic revelation to an encounter with a rather ordinary document, which Spies notes was "nothing more than was a catalogue issued by a company selling education tools, the pages of which are laid out systematically to present the hardware of teaching: instructional devices, classroom furniture, and other school supplies"⁶⁰:

One rainy day in 1919, finding myself in a village on the Rhine, I was struck by the obsession which held under my gaze the pages of an illustrated catalogue showing objects designed for anthropologic, microscopic, psychologic, mineralogic, and paleontologic demonstration. There I found brought together elements of figuration so remote that the sheer absurdity of that collection provoked a sudden intensification of the visionary faculties in me [...] piling up on each other with the persistence and rapidity which are peculiar to love memories and visions of half-sleep.⁶¹

Some time in the late 1960s, Barthelme, too, seems to have experienced a similar vision: "Adventure" (*Harper's Bazaar* 1970), "Brain Damage" (*The New Yorker* 21 February 1970), "A Nation of Wheels" (*The New Yorker* 13 June 1970), "The Story Thus Far" (*The New Yorker* 1 May 1971), "Natural History" (*Harper's* 1971), "The Inauguration" (*Harper's* 1973), "The Educational Experience" (*Harper's* 1973), "The Dassaud Prize" (*The New Yorker* 12 January 1976), and Barthelme's 1971 children's book, *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine, or, The Hithering Thithering Djinn*, all incorporate graphic text and images taken

⁶⁰ *Max Ernst: A Retrospective*, 9.

⁶¹ Ernst, "Beyond Painting", in *Max Ernst: Beyond Painting and Other Writings by the Artist and His Friends*, 14.

from over twenty clip art books along the lines of Clarence P. Hornung's *Handbook of Early Advertising, Mainly from American Sources* (1956),⁶² a type catalog from which printers could order samples, and *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazar* [sic]: *1867-1898* (1974).⁶³ Cut outs from these books, such as "YEARS ARE BEARING US TO HEAVEN" (*IFE* 5) and "CONTENTMENT / Industry and Frugality" (*IFE* 28) in various elaborate fonts, as well as images along the lines of "The Educational Experience"'s nude figure rising from an elaborate urn next to a small Greek statue atop what may be called a divan, which in turn is accompanied by various Victorian technical, anatomical, and mythological drawings,⁶⁴ supplement the text, which Barthelme noted "was dictated by the pictures"; starting with images rather than story, the "text was written to fit them".⁶⁵ These collages embody a crucial element of the argument Barthelme makes in "After Joyce" and "Not-Knowing", specifically that while postmodern literature does strive toward the "as-yet-unspeakable" (*NK* 15), it does not reject the world:

Art is a true account of the activity of the mind. Because consciousness, in Husserl's formulation, is always consciousness *of* something, art thinks ever of the world, cannot not think of the world, could not turn its back on the world even if it wished to. This does not mean that it's going to be honest as a mailman; it's more likely to appear as a drag queen. (*NK* 23-24)

⁶² Hornung, *Handbook of Early Advertising, Mainly from American Sources*.

⁶³ Blum, *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazar* [sic]: *1867-1898*. The Special Collections department of the University of Houston Libraries has collected not only Barthelme's personal collection of these books, but has also preserved the cut-outs from them. Barthelme also designed fliers for readings and lectures using these clip art materials.

⁶⁴ Though he did not use them, Barthelme also cut out and collected typed phrases such as "HEAVEN'S BLESSING HOME-CONTENTED WOMANKIND", "MURDER OF THE INNOCENTS", "MIDNIGHT THINKINGS", "UPCLIMBING CLOUDS", and "MUSEUM OF THE BEAUTIFUL", among others. (Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries)

⁶⁵ Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 349-350.

What transforms the mailman into the drag queen is the same in art as in dreams: the softening of logical analysis and headlong dive into not-knowing. But of course, the drag queen exists in the world as much as the mailman.

And yet, the artist, unlike the dreamer, is required to make disciplined, daylit choices, so that one of the subjects of the work of art is always the formal rationality of art in tension with the not-knowing that successful form allows. While Ernst's collages are seamless integrations of the domestic and the fantastical, the images in Barthelme's collage stories are pasted with their cut-out borders intact. For example, a spread in *The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine* depicting "Entertainment", complete with "jug-dancers and clowns and elegant fencers and every kind of flawless flourishy footlooseness" (*IFE* 20), sets young Matilda, her image darkened, against a scene of a sword fight on a tightrope made from the yarn of a knitting pirate who seems not at all surprised by the giant pigeon perched on his head. The collage process is obvious, as the "seams" of the images are clearly discernible. The scene's "imperfections" correspond to the actual performance of the mind grappling with the interpretation of these images, in which a seamless, understandable whole is far from the goal. In another deviation from Ernst, Barthelme also includes text, inasmuch images in themselves as a repositories of meaning. Whatever knowledge the reader has about a tire or a Greek statue or the Mona Lisa or an octopus (one of which obscures the painting in "Natural History") is immediately opposed by the collage process, which both "smuggles in" and rejects conventional meaning.

Chapter Three: Irony and the Object: Barthelme's Engagement with Kierkegaard

Introduction

While Kierkegaard's view of irony in theory and practice occupied Barthelme throughout his career, it is in his third collection, entitled *City Life*, that Barthelme most directly negotiates with Kierkegaard. In reading Kierkegaard, Barthelme was able to position and refine his own practice of artistic irony in relation not only to Kierkegaard's case for its detrimental aspects, but also with respect to Schlegel's and Goethe's positive aesthetic uses of irony, which Kierkegaard discusses in *The Concept of Irony* (1841). This chapter will demonstrate the different ways in which Barthelme dramatises his efforts to contend with Kierkegaard's argument in *The Concept of Irony* that irony, despite its "unerring eye for what is crooked, wrong, and vain in existence" (CI 256), ultimately places the ironist in the negative position of knowingness. This chapter will also argue against contemporary interpretations of Barthelme's use of irony in his work that posit that it is not, as critic Alan Wilde contends, a typical postmodern "assent" in the face of a disjointed modern world, and is instead a dedicated effort to reinvigorate not-knowing with regards to the art object.

Kierkegaard's The Concept of Irony

Although we cannot be sure, it is likely that Barthelme encountered *The Concept of Irony* in his studies with Natanson, which he undertook at the beginning of his writing career. He certainly read *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or* with his second wife, Birgit, a Dane. The treatise, presented as a university dissertation, was Kierkegaard's first formal investigation into the history and uses of irony, which has its roots in the Socratic dialogues. Although Kierkegaard ultimately determines that irony is a detrimental force, in its first appearance it

performed a vital function. Kierkegaard argues that Socrates' cultural moment required a systematic questioning and disruption of Sophist conventions:

Early Greek culture had outlived itself, a new principle had to emerge, but before it could appear in its truth, all the prolific weeds of misunderstanding's pernicious anticipations had to be plowed under, destroyed down to the deepest roots. The new principle must contend; world history needs an *accoucheur* [obstetrician]. Socrates fills this place. (CI 211)

Mixed metaphors aside (gardening, obstetrics), Kierkegaard shows that Socrates' rhetorical strategy of questioning and playing the *ignomus* was actually a metaphysical process that systematically dismantled received knowledge. By showing that "there is something more behind the phenomenon than meets the eye" (CI 257), irony frees the subject from his relation with the phenomenological world. The result of this continued revelation is then a radical paradigmatic shift regarding what can be known about the world—namely, nothing:

Irony *sensu eminentiori* [in the eminent sense] is 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, but it is by virtue of this that it destroys in the particular instance. It is not this or that phenomenon but the totality of existence that it contemplates *sub specie ironiae* [under the aspect of irony]. (CI 254)

Although Kierkegaard does not give an explicit definition of irony (he wryly comments that "if we are looking for a clear exposition, we look in vain" (CI 243)), he draws its contours by identifying a "subjective freedom" toward which the ironist strives:

[T]he salient feature of the irony is the subjective freedom that at all times has in its power the possibility of a beginning and is not handicapped by earlier situations. There is something seductive about all beginnings, because the subject is free, and this is the enjoyment the ironist craves. In such moments, actuality loses its validity for him; he is free and above it. (CI 253)

The ironist's every encounter with reality is a "beginning", as everything around the moment or the object he will have already found or will soon find to be invalid. For Socrates, this was

a valid protest against the established order of the Sophists. Continuing his point about early Greek culture, Kierkegaard writes of Socrates that

He himself was not the one who was to bring the new principle in its fullness; in him it was only [cryptically] present; he was to make its advancement possible. But this intermediate stage, which is not the new principle and yet is that *potentia non actu* [potentially, not actually], is precisely irony. (CI 211)

Kierkegaard finds that Socrates' process of negating all "misunderstanding" through irony was necessary to bring about a "new principle" of truth. Although Kierkegaard does not state it explicitly in *The Concept of Irony*, presumably the "new principle" would be Christianity, which would reaffirm the "validity of actuality" (CI 253) (a concept he would elaborate upon in *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* (both 1843)). But Socrates, self-described "midwife" to an individual's "intellectual delivery" (CI 191), does not actually bring truth into the world. Kierkegaard's metaphor, in which he writes that Socrates "cut the umbilical cord of substantiality" in fact goes against his statement above, for then one would be left holding at least something. In fact, one is left holding nothing: again, switching metaphors, "he placed individuals under his dialectical vacuum pump, pumped away the atmospheric air they were accustomed to breathing, and left them standing there" (CI 178). Elsewhere Kierkegaard writes that "Truth demands silence before it will raise its voice, and Socrates was to bring about this silence. For this reason, [Socrates] was purely negative" (CI 210). But nothing could, at this historical moment, fill this silent vacuum; it would not be filled until the birth of Christ, the infant at the end of that metaphorical umbilical cord.

What Socrates does deliver, then, is a nothing, a void, a freedom from reality and accepted truth. In early Greek culture, this was a necessary process. But in contemporary life, irony had continued to flourish to the detriment of individual morality and social ethics:

[Irony] knows it has the power to start all over again if it so pleases; anything that happened before is not binding, and just as irony in infinite freedom enjoys its critical gratification in the theoretical realm, so it enjoys in the realm of practice a similar divine freedom that knows no bonds, no chains, but plays with abandon and unrestraint, gambols like a leviathan in the sea. Irony is indeed free, free from the sorrows of actuality, but also free from its joys, free from its blessing, for inasmuch as it has nothing higher than itself, it can receive no blessing, since it is always the lesser that is blessed by the greater. This is the freedom that irony craves. (CI 279-280)

Because the ironist exists above actuality and is therefore always “the greater”, he can never be blessed, either religiously or ethically (in *Either/Or*, ethics exist on a higher developmental plane than aesthetic ironic distance). But Kierkegaard does not explore what happens when the ironist, free from the restrictions of some greater authority, does “play with abandon and unrestraint”, when he “gambols like a leviathan in the sea”; he focuses instead on the infinite negativity and ultimate alienation of the ironist (“the whole of existence has become alien to the ironic subject and the ironic subject in turn alien to existence, that actuality has lost its validity for the ironic subject, he himself has to a certain degree become unactual” (CI 259)).

Kierkegaard shapes his criticism of the modern, improper use of irony around Friedrich Schlegel, and specifically Schlegel’s unfinished Romantic 1799 novel *Lucinde*. Well into “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” the reader finally encounters Kierkegaard’s—and eventually Barthelme’s—argument about aesthetics and the use of irony. Kierkegaard uses Schlegel’s *Lucinde*—the “obscene” “gospel of Young Germany” (CI 286)—to clarify what he means by “living poetically”, and, in the process, demonstrate (perhaps unfairly) that Schlegel’s use of artistic irony to imagine an idealised existence “is not a way out [...] but a wrong way he strayed into” (CI 287).

Lucinde, written at the height of German Romanticism, is the story of a passionate love affair between Julius and Lucinde, who stand as thinly-masked figures for Schlegel and his mistress-turned-wife Dorothea. The novel is divided into 12 unequal sections, some in the

form of letters or dialogues between the lovers, others such as “A Dithyrambic Fantasy on the Loveliest Situation in the World” and “An Idyll of Idleness” as meditations on the themes of romantic and sexual love as well as on the forms of nature, art, and religion. Taken briefly, Schlegel challenges the conventions of love and marriage in which male activity and authority is paramount, offering instead a vision in which the male is “saved”, in a manner that approaches religion, by female passivity. For Schlegel, passivity is not an absence of power; rather it is the seat of the natural, the truly creative, the mysterious unconscious (as opposed to the active consciousness). Schlegel constantly references images of Woman, the plant that grows according to nature rather than to an imposed plan,¹ and the night (a realm of dreams rather than thought)—Julius even refers to Lucinde as the “priestess of the night”. (Barthelme’s “See the Moon?” prefigures his more explicit discussion of Schlegel, as the narrator keeps Ann “ghostly” and contrasts the moon with the world of “the knowledgeable knowers knowing”—not to mention his echoing of Schlegel’s artistic and rhetorical forms, both in *Lucinde* and especially in Schlegel’s axiomatic work *Fragments* (1797-1800), in his character’s statement that “Fragments are the only forms I trust” (*UPUA* 164, 172, 160).) Although *Lucinde* was criticised at the time for its apparent formlessness, it presents a kind of organic form, closer to a natural (Dionysian, female) process than to Aristotelian (Apollonian, male) logic. As such, the form of *Lucinde* buoys Schlegel’s exploration of the principles of his new, earthly, sensuous religion.

¹ For example, Schlegel compares the artistic process to the wild growth of a tree: “That is how the first germ of that wonderful plant of love and caprice was conceived. And as freely as it sprouted, I thought, should it also grow and run wild; and never, from a base love of order and frugality, will I prune its living fullness of superfluous leaves and branches.” Elsewhere, Schlegel writes of the near-religious ideal of the passive plant which, “of all the forms of nature, this form is the most moral and the most beautiful. And so the highest, most perfect mode of life would actually be nothing more than *pure vegetating*.” (*Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde and the Fragments*, 64, 66.)

Kierkegaard begins his critique of *Lucinde* by acknowledging conventional marriage's tendency toward monotony:

Lest an injustice be done to Schlegel, one must bear in mind the many degradations that have crept into a multitude of life's relationships and have been especially indefatigable in making love as tame, as housebroken, as sluggish, as dull, as useful and usable as any other domestic animal—in short, as unerotic as possible. (*CI* 286)

He goes on to praise Schlegel's intention to use irony to treat the subject of love and marriage, which according to Kierkegaard "is nothing but becomes something only through the intention whereby it is integrated with the pettiness that creates such a furor in the private theaters of families" (*CI* 287) (one thinks of the narrator of Barthelme's "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne": "'Holy hell,' I said. 'Is there to be no end to this *family life*?' " (*S* 7)). Though well-intentioned, Kierkegaard continues, Schlegel's solution to the problem of domestic life—romantic irony—can never truly be realised in the world, as it operates based upon an unattainable ideal:

To that extent, we would be very obligated to Schlegel if he should succeed in finding a way out, but unfortunately the climate he discovered, the only climate in which love can really thrive, is not a more southern climate compared with ours in the north but is an ideal climate nowhere to be found. (*CI* 286)

Schlegel's mistake, in Kierkegaard's view, is twofold: on one hand by definition there is no "climate" or reality (even in the sensuous south) that can support idealised love, and on the other hand the attempt to "poetically compose his environment", that is, distance himself from reality using irony in order to create an ideal existence, leads him "to suspend what is constitutive in actuality, that which orders and supports it: that is, morality and ethics" (*CI* 283). Thus, Kierkegaard claims, the irony used by the Romantics serves to "suspend" or "annul all ethics" (*CI* 289, 290); if one is entirely free of one's environment, one need not play by the moral rules of that reality:

[Irony's] enjoyment is extremely refined, because it not only wishes to enjoy naïvely but in its enjoyment also wants to be conscious of the destruction of the given morality. The point [...] of its enjoyment is to smirk at the morality under which others, so it thinks, are sighing, and herein resides the free play of ironic arbitrariness. By the means of the spirit, Christianity has set flesh and spirit at variance, and either the spirit has to negate the flesh or the flesh has to negate the spirit. Romanticism wants the latter, and its difference from Greek culture is that in its enjoyment of the flesh it also enjoys the negation of the spirit. In so doing, it thinks it is living poetically, but I hope to show that the poetic is the very thing it misses, because true inward infinity comes only through resignation, and only this inner infinity is truly infinite and truly poetic. (CI 288-289)

Kierkegaard takes Schlegel's emphasis upon the romantic and sexual—the “flesh”—instead of the Christian version of “spirit” (which would require a “resignation” of the flesh to the spirit) to mean that Schlegel's worldview does not and cannot adhere to Christian conventions of morality, and as such does harm to humanity. As the narrator of Barthelme's “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” points out, *Lucinde* fails because “What is wanted, Kierkegaard says, is not a victory over the world but a reconciliation with the world. And it is soon discovered that although poetry is a kind of reconciliation, the distance between the new actuality, higher and more perfect than the historical actuality, and the historical actuality, lower and more imperfect than the new actuality, produces not a reconciliation but animosity” (CL 96). Because irony only produces distance from one's environment and eventually from oneself, there can be no “reconciliation” between the self (emptied of selfhood as it is) and actuality. As the narrator recalls, “The true task is reconciliation with actuality and the true reconciliation, Kierkegaard says, is religion” (CL 96). But it is here that one of the ways in which Kierkegaard is “unfair” to Schlegel lies. Operating from a strictly Christian framework, Kierkegaard misinterprets Schlegel's employment of aesthetic strategies of irony. Instead of “negating” the spirit, Romantic irony in Schlegel's view has the

power to re-imagine the spirit on earth through love, creating a religion of sensuality, a spirit of flesh.

As regards the power of irony to create a positive spirit rather than a negative freedom, *Lucinde* is, among other things, a dramatisation of Schlegel's ideas of aesthetics and in particular irony, which he tallied in a series of collected *Fragments*. True to its title, Schlegel's *Fragments*, written between 1797 and 1800, is a collection of fragmentary, aphoristic theories regarding aesthetics, philosophy, and morality. In one of his most famous fragments, Schlegel suggests that instead of opening a void, romantic irony fills the space between "the portrayed and the portrayer", and then the viewer and the object, with art:

[Romantic poetry] alone can become, like the epic, a mirror of the whole circumambient world, an image of the age. And it can also—more than any other form—hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors. It is capable of the highest and most variegated refinement, not only from within outwards, but also from without inwards; [...] The romantic kind of poetry is still in the state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare try to characterize its ideal. [...] The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is, as it were, poetry itself[.]²

In "After Joyce" Barthelme reiterated this idea that art (or at least this new not-knowing kind of art) is always "in a state of becoming": "It is characteristic of the object that it does not declare itself all at once, in a rush of pleasant naïveté. Joyce enforces the way in which *Finnegans Wake* is to be read. He conceived the reading to be a lifetime project, the book remaining always *there* [...] The book remains problematic, unexhausted" (NK 4). While the ironist comes to despair the multiplicity of possibilities for living, the art object holds irony in suspension, both allowing for distance—and thus not-knowing—as well as continually

² Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde and the Fragments* (*Athenaeum Fragment* 116), 175-176.

renewing the possibilities of art. While life for the superficial ironist is emptied of meaning, the art object constantly demands that the ironist re-approach it, ask it questions “of the age” by “tapping it, shaking it, holding it to his ear to hear the roaring within” (NK 4). Schlegel reinforces this infinitely creative, positive view of irony (as opposed to Kierkegaard’s “negative freedom”) in *Lucinde*:

Julius. When I myself still wasn’t aware, and didn’t imagine what this divine quality and struggle in me was, irony already knew where it was tending to and to what end—and irony showed by its actions that it knew. It attached itself profoundly only to what was just and, after a brief experiment, despised all that was unjust; it affirmed itself, expanded, became clear and conscious of its power, became wise, just as everything that is human becomes wise, through action. For surely you don’t want to restrict knowledge to everything that can be said.³

For Schlegel, irony is “affirmative” and “wise”, not “knowing” or alienated. In “Not-Knowing”, Barthelme echoes Julius’s assessment of irony’s relationship with knowledge, arguing that in art, “what we are looking for is the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken” (NK 15).

But even Schlegel’s view of positive, aesthetically crucial irony is not, ultimately, Barthelme’s. Although Barthelme defends Schlegel against Kierkegaard, Barthelme’s work does not take on board Schlegel’s ideas about a “religion of the flesh” or art as a refinement and reflection of the world.

“The Situation Bristles with Difficulties”: Barthelme’s Exploration of Kierkegaardian Irony

As we have seen, it is in Kierkegaard’s judgment of Schlegel’s romantic irony that Barthelme begins to diverge from Kierkegaard: although Barthelme agrees with Kierkegaard that irony can produce alienation (which, for Barthelme, is the condition in which knowingness arises,

³ Friedrich Schlegel’s *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 133.

as knowingness is an attempt to mitigate alienation), Barthelme also demonstrates that irony also gives the ironist the freedom to play, which in “After Joyce” he identified as “one of the great possibilities of art” (NK 10). This play, it is important to note, is not the empty, spirit-denying play that Kierkegaard condemns; instead it is a creative, generative play that engages with the world. As we have seen in the previous chapter on visual art and the literary object, the objectness of a work of art “does not declare itself all at once, in a rush of pleasant naïveté” (NK 4) that the ironist can then invalidate with his irony. The work of art after Joyce is no longer a representation of the world or an “authoritative account of the world delivered by an expert” that is easily dismissed by the ironist as invalid but, as Barthelme writes, instead evades the ironist’s attempt to occupy a position of knowingness: “The question so often asked of modern painting, “What is it?,” contains more than the dull skepticism of a man who is not going to have the wool pulled over his eyes” (NK 4). The negatively free Kierkegaardian ironist displays this “dull skepticism”, while the creative ironist, in asking “What is it?”, is allowed to “gambol”, to play within the possibilities of not-knowing. The object then “remains problematic, unexhausted” (NK 4), distant not through a negative freedom, but now approachable:

It speaks of a fundamental placement in relation to the work, that of a voyager in the world coming upon a strange object. The reader reconstitutes the work by his active participation, by approaching the object, tapping it, shaking it, holding it to his ear to hear the roaring within. (NK 4)

Instead of placing the ironist in an infinitely negative stance toward the world, Barthelme argues that the distance that irony provides actually allows the ironist to not-know, to encounter a world made new. For Barthelme, then, if only peripherally for Kierkegaard, there is a proper use of irony, one that reinvigorates not-knowing and fuels a positive creativity.

Far from being a condemnation of Kierkegaard, Barthelme's disagreement with and ultimate revision of him is actually a statement of admiration and influence. In "The Leap" in *Great Days*, for example, which takes its title from Kierkegaard's "leap of faith", Barthelme writes:

- Is it *permitted* to differ with Kierkegaard?
- Not only permitted but necessary. If you love him. (*GD* 132)

Throughout his career, Barthelme would "differ" with Kierkegaard's assessment of the practical, social, and spiritual consequences of irony, especially the assertion that the ironist does nothing but "destroy" the world by judging as invalid all its claims for truth and actuality (*CI* 262). Barthelme agrees with Kierkegaard that a certain incarnation of irony is destructive, does indeed lead to knowingness as the ironist assumes a superior position over the rest of the world. In stories as early as "Florence Green is 81" and "See the Moon?", Barthelme had presented characters whose ironic stance toward the world precluded their meaningful understanding of it. In "See the Moon?", for example, the narrator asks Cardinal Y ("Why") a series of philosophical questions about the actuality of the world.

- "Upon what does the world rest?" I asked.
- "Upon an elephant," he said.
- "Upon what does the elephant rest?"
- "Upon a tortoise."
- "Upon what does the tortoise rest?"
- "Upon a red lawnmower."
- I wrote in my book, *playful*.
- "Is there any value that has value?" I asked.
- "If there is any value that has value, then it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case, for all that happens and is the case is accidental," he said. He was not serious. I wrote in my book, *knows the drill*. (*UPUA* 170)

In a departure from Barthelme's usual stance on religion (traditional religious doctrines are ineffective at best and dangerous at worst, as demonstrated in "Hiding Man"), the Cardinal,

despite his ecclesiastical authority, engages with non-Christian cosmology⁴ from a standpoint of “playful” not-knowing. “I am thinking of a golden mountain which does not exist,” says the Cardinal (*UPUA* 170), evoking an image used by philosopher Alexius Meinong (1853-1920) to illustrate his theory of ontology. Meinong argued that because it is possible to think about something that does not exist, that thing, even though it has no reality, must belong to some category of being. Although he does not give a traditional account of a Christian world system, the Cardinal’s reference to the golden mountain and his subsequent outline of an absurd cosmos (though in truth no less absurd than a scientific one) suggests an attitude of not-knowing that begins to approach Kierkegaard’s ideal of religion as the paramount unknowable truth that belongs to an entirely other category of being.

Instead it is the narrator who adheres, ironically, to a strict secular doctrine that, again ironically, does not take not-knowing seriously. The narrator also misses the significance of the world’s ultimate resting point, upon which so much depends: a William Carlos Williams-like red lawnmower, an image that carries with it ideas of Imagism and Western consumerism and that, were the narrator alert to the not-knowing inherent in objects, would actually provide the existential comfort (if not the absolute answers) he seeks. In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard had entertained the idea that “irony might seem to be a kind of religious devotion”, but had emphasised that although irony, like religion, “realizes existence has no reality” and “pronounces the same thesis as the pious mentality”, only religion fills the

⁴ The myth of a “World Turtle” that supports the heavens and the Earth is found in native North American, Chinese, and Indian cultures. The dialogue that the narrator and Cardinal Y engage in has a number of origins, from David Hume to Lewis Carroll. As a student of philosophy, Barthelme may have been most familiar with William James’ tale of a conversation he had with an old woman about the origins of the universe, which Robert Anton Wilson recounts in *Prometheus Rising*: when the old woman told James that the Earth rested on the back of a turtle, Professor James asked, ““But my dear lady, [...] what holds up the turtle?” ‘Ah, she said, ‘that’s easy. He is standing on the back on another turtle.’ ‘Oh, I see,’ said Professor James, still being polite. ‘But would you be so good as to tell me what hold up the second turtle?’ ‘It’s no use, Professor,’ said the old lady, realizing he was trying to lead her into a logical trap. ‘It’s turtles-turtles-turtles, all the way!’” (Wilson, *Prometheus Rising*, 25.) Barthelme also cites William James in “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne” in *Sadness*.

negative void left by irony by “affirm[ing]” the world’s “absolute reality” (*CI* 257). The red lawnmower, for Barthelme, is a figure for the absolute reality and mystery of objectness that is accessed through a proper, artistic use of irony. Even in his early stories, Barthelme was testing the limits of Kierkegaard’s thought from an age in which religion, too, was being held up as a subject of ironic questioning, and the acquisition of objects—a misguided, knowing use of the object—was quickly becoming the new opiate of the masses. Although religion does not hold the same redemptive power for Barthelme as a mid-twentieth century American as it did for Kierkegaard, in stories such as “On Angels” and “At the End of the Mechanical Age”, an ironic view of religion is still a vital, if diminished, component of not-knowing (a subject that will be discussed in Chapter Four). But it is “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” and “The Glass Mountain” that most directly address Barthelme’s concern with irony and its positive, generative relationship to the object.

In “Not-Knowing”, Barthelme is uncharacteristically explicit about his vision for art:

I think art’s project is fundamentally meliorative. The aim of meditating about the world is finally to change the world. It is this meliorative aspect of literature that provides its ethical dimension. (*NK* 24)

Irony is the mechanism by which one gains enough distance from the work of art in order to ask it questions, to “meditate about” the world and ultimately to change it. Although they disagree about the use of irony in the effort to reach this melioration, it is the “meliorative aspect” of Barthelme’s work that aligns him with Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard, as we have seen, religion reaffirms the actuality of the world after irony has negated it. For Barthelme, as the following discussion of his stories will suggest, irony, properly employed, actually provides the distance, vital to not-knowing, from the object and thus the world, which is then encountered anew.

The “meliorative aspect” of Barthelme’s fiction has also proved a critical stumbling block for those who would seek to interpret Barthelme’s use of irony. As mentioned in the Introduction to this study, the best example of the mischaracterisation of this meliorative aspect—as well as (despite its limitations) the most closely considered examination of the use of irony in Barthelme’s work—is Alan Wilde’s *Horizons of Assent*⁵, in which Wilde dedicates a chapter to Barthelme’s fiction, entitled “Barthelme Unfair to Kierkegaard” in reference to Barthelme’s story. Wilde argues that Barthelme’s work is an illustration of a new, post-modern incarnation of irony as an “assent” in the face of fragmentation and incompleteness. Wilde’s account is valuable in that it illuminates the subtleties of Barthelme’s use of irony, and shows how easily its employment, and its debt to Kierkegaard, is misunderstood.

Wilde outlines the rise of “assent” in mid-twentieth century literature as stemming from the inadequacy of the modernist attempt to “strive[], however reluctantly, toward a condition of paradox. The ironist, far more basically adrift, confronts a world that appears inherently disconnected and fragmented.” Here the modernist employs what Wilde calls “disjunctive irony”: “At its extreme or “absolute” point [...] disjunctive irony both recognizes the disconnections and seeks to control them (control being [...] one of the chief imperatives of the modernist imagination); and so the confusions of the world are shaped into an equal poise of opposites: the form of an unsolvable paradox”.⁶ According to Wilde, the modernist work seeks not resolution but closure, presenting the disjunction between the world and the individual as an aesthetic end in itself. The post-modernist work also highlights the paradox of the world’s fundamental mystery and Man’s eternal desire to solve it, but

⁵ The chapter on Barthelme’s work, entitled “Barthelme Unfair to Kierkegaard: Some Thoughts on Modern and Postmodern Irony”, also appeared as an article in *boundary 2*, 45-70.

⁶ Wilde, *Horizons of Assent*, 10.

where the modernist struggles to “shape” this paradox into an aesthetic solution, the post-modernist accepts and even exploits the artistic potential in this messy disjunction:

[T]he characteristic movement of ironic art in this century describes a double and seemingly contradictory progression, which, on the one hand, recognizes the increasing disintegration of an already disjunct world and, on the other, not only submits but (again in some cases) assents to it, or to its inherent possibilities.⁷

Wilde calls this post-modern irony “suspensive irony”, which he defines as “an indecision about the meanings or relations of things is matched by a willingness to live with uncertainty, to tolerate and, in some cases, to welcome a world seen as random and multiple, even, at times, absurd.”⁸ While he correctly sees in Barthelme an innovation in terms of this new use of irony, Wilde’s assessment takes Barthelme too much at his ironist’s word. Wilde takes the scale of Barthelme’s subject—the quotidian, the domestic—to mean that Barthelme shows “the value of a not too vigorous stand against the largeness of absolute values; the effort to participate in an admittedly confused world; and the acceptance of life, however drab, as the only source of the smaller pleasures.”⁹ In other words, according to Wilde, Barthelme accepts the smallness of the world, sees the value in the mundane because there is nothing greater.

However, stories such as “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne” and “The Rise of Capitalism”, despite their workaday titles and subjects, are not “assents” or “source[s] of smaller pleasures.” While Wilde sees stories like these as po-faced cultural capitulation, in “The Rise of Capitalism”, for example, the narrator’s dispassionate tone is actually an ironisation of the kind of knowingness that Wilde’s assessment of postmodern irony would, in its “assent” of “inevitability”, allow:

⁷ Ibid., 14-15.

⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹ Ibid., 46.

Smoke, rain, abulia. What can the concerned citizen do to fight the rise of capitalism, in his own community? Study of the tides of conflict and power in a system in which there is structural inequality is an important task. A knowledge of European intellectual history since 1789 provides a useful background. Information theory offers interesting new possibilities. Passion is helpful, especially those types of passion which are non-licit. Doubt is a necessary precondition to meaningful action. (S 146)

It is true that the modernist strategy of finding something absolute and universal within the depths of being in order to try to heal or at least balance out fragmentation is no longer valid, but that does not necessarily mean that the post-modernists must now accept that surface and convention is all there is. Wilde's assessment of post-modernism states that reality is no longer real, there is no possibility for reconciliation or connection. In the face of this modernist "failure" (which Wilde does not necessarily lament), "postmodern ironists, however unlike one another in other respects, are agreed at least in acknowledging the inevitability of their situation in the world they describe."¹⁰ Instead of accepting culture, it is vital to continue to use irony to distance oneself from it, lest one be subsumed into its banality: "The culture that we share, such as it is, makes of us all either machines for assimilating and judging that culture, or uncritical sops who simply sop it up, become it" (*A* 100). Barthelme dramatises the consequences of the acceptance of "inevitability" in "The Sea of Hesitation", in which the narrator muses, "There is no particular point to any of this behavior. Or: this behavior is the only behavior which has point. Or: there is some point to this behavior but this behavior is not the only behavior which has point. Which is true? Truth is greatly overrated, volition where it exists must be protected, wanting itself can be obliterated, some people have forgotten how to want" (*OMDC* 105). But behind Barthelme's banal use of words such as "concerned", "important", "useful", "interesting", "helpful", and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

“meaningful”, as well as the deadpan “truth is greatly overrated”, lies the “Kierkegaardian spirit”, referenced as early as Barthelme’s first collection, which asks, “*Why does it have to be that way?*” (CBDC 116, 118). This question is directed, desperately, provokingly, at the forces (capitalism, banal psychoanalysis, art criticism) that would neutralise the mysteries of art and life:

Because you stick out from the matrix of this culture like a banged thumb, swelling and reddening and otherwise irrupting all over its smooth, eventless surface, our effort must be to contain you, as would, for example, a lead glove. (“What to Do Next”, *A* 100)

It is no wonder that “people have forgotten how to want” properly, that is, from a position of individual agency—the consequences sound incredibly painful.

Wilde identifies Barthelme’s counterstrategy as “generative irony”, which he defines as “The attempt, inspired by the negotiations of self and world, to create, tentatively and provisionally, anironic enclaves of value in the face of—but not in place of—a meaningless universe.”¹¹ (By the “anironic”, Wilde means a complementary vision to that of irony, a vision of wholeness generated by irony that stands with, not against, irony.) This kind of irony uses the disjunction and fragmentation of the world for creative, generative ends by assigning aesthetic meaning to fragments of the world (the Baby Ruth wrapper, for one). Wilde goes on to assert that these fragments of ordinary life, “no longer the familiar cause of horror and paralysis [...] are transformed rather (as they are already in Woolf’s *Between the Acts*) into the source of a continuing activity predicated on the need to choose, to confer meaning: to add to the humility of acceptance (even, or especially, of those gaps in which the future meaning lies latent) the irreducibly human function of assent.”¹² This statement is, to a

¹¹ Ibid., 148.

¹² Ibid., 186.

point, accurate; instead of the modernist “horror” at the ruined shards of life (Eliot would have a very difficult time with a Baby Ruth wrapper), the post-modernist “confers meaning” upon them by gluing them to the canvas and sticking them in stories. But there is no sense in Barthelme’s work of the “humility of acceptance” of a fallen, human world—if anything, the “Fantastic metaphysical advantage” these Baby Ruth-wrapper-using artists have allow them to “get away with murder”: “You hate them, if you’re ambitious” (*UPUA* 159-160).

This effort against humble acceptance forms the basis of Barthelme’s “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” in which “A”, in little more than an aside, cuts right to the heart of Barthelme’s disagreement with Kierkegaard’s view of irony as a necessarily alienating process: “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” (*CL* 96-97). A few lines later, the reader is presented with a big black square in the middle of the text, an object par excellence. This square first makes its appearance in Barthelme’s preceding accompanying story “The Explanation” (there are four such boxes in “The Explanation”, one in “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel”). In “The Explanation”, a “Q” and an “A” conduct a similar dialogue, at one point addressing the black square itself (which is, in all its enigmatic glory, the opening “statement” of the story itself). “Q” refers to it as a “machine” (*CL* 75) and asks “A” to look at it and tell him what he sees:

A: It offers no clues.

Q: It has a certain...reticence.

A: I don’t know what it does. (*CL* 76)

The square is a figure for Barthelme’s disagreement with Kierkegaard: on one hand it is a zero point of representation, an ultimate object that, in the absence of a single reference, contains an infinite fullness of subjectivity. On the other hand it takes the objectness of the

text so far that all reference is obliterated. This situation, like the one the narrator describes in “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel”, “bristles with difficulties” (CL 85). The black square is a moment of the proper kind of irony that forces engagement rather than estrangement, not-knowing rather than assent. Like Kierkegaard, Barthelme does not give up the object’s mysteries “in a rush of pleasant naïveté” (NK 4): “Q: Now that you’ve studied it for a bit, can you explain how it works? A: Of course. (Explanation)” (CL 78). Here, as in “Paraguay”, not-knowing is vital to the meaning of the object: “She explains to me in that demanding (and receiving) explanations you are once more brought to a stop. You have got, really, no farther than you were before. ‘Therefore we try to keep everything open, go forward avoiding the final explanation. If we inadvertently receive it, we are instructed to 1) pretend that it is just another error, or 2) misunderstand it. Creative misunderstanding is crucial’” (CL 37). The reader is left with only the gesture of an argument, Kierkegaardian strategy to compel the reader to “stud[y] it for a bit” before reaching his or her own creative misunderstanding.

Throughout Barthelme’s fiction, the question “*Why does it have to be that way?*” is thus coupled with an aesthetic one: “What is interesting?” Wilde does cite Barthelme’s concern with objectness (he quotes Barthelme’s interview with Jerome Klinkowitz in which Barthelme states, “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” (NK 204)), but he does not explore Barthelme’s fundamental concern with the “meliorative aspect” of the object (despite the “getting away with [figurative] murder”)—which would challenge Wilde’s idea of Barthelme as the paragon of postmodernism—or how this aesthetic and theoretical concern changes Barthelme’s relationship to irony and, ultimately, to the

world. Neither does Wilde investigate, despite his chapter title, Barthelme's close reading and careful consideration of Kierkegaard's view of irony and its consequences for art.

It is Barthelme's constant questioning (in "Porcupines at the University", the citizens of the town look at the porcupines tramping through campus and are forced to ask themselves "What is wonderful? Are these porcupines wonderful? Are they significant? Are they what I need? (*A* 137)) that frees him from Wilde's domesticating characterisation of mid-century art as limited to an acceptance of the "small" and the mundane (porcupines are small, but at a university, they are far from mundane), as this assessment does not allow for Barthelme's insistence upon the "meliorative" aspect of art. In a fitting example of life unwittingly imitating art, here Wilde's (mis)interpretation begins to mirror Barthelme's dramatisation, in "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" in *City Life*, of Kierkegaard's "unfair" analysis of Schlegel in *The Concept of Irony*. The story's context-within-a-context for a philosophical debate regarding the proper use of irony—a rented ranch house in Colorado owned by a ski instructor—is indeed mundane. But Barthelme's choice of the quotidian (as well as the Chinese box-like structure of story-within-story) in which to stage his discussion is itself a Kierkegaardian strategy, not just a post-modern "acceptance" of the world as ordinary. (For one, Kierkegaard insisted upon writing his dissertation in Danish rather than Latin, as he thought that the subject of irony in modern life should be communicated in a civic, contemporary language. *Either/Or* (1843), Kierkegaard's second book, is framed as a series of found diary entries.)

"Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" is constructed as a Q&A which might be a therapy session (although the story's formal and contextual association with the preceding story, "The Explanation", in which a "Q" interrogates an "A" about art, throws the therapist-patient

scenario into question, as does “Q”’s sudden, though likely ironic, declaration, “I’m not your doctor” (CL 99). “A” begins by relating “a very common” masturbation fantasy involving a young girl on “a European train with compartments”, suggesting the traditional Freudian tropes (CL 89). “Q” asks about “A”’s political participation, his thoughts about the government, his family life. “A” displays a certain hostility toward “Q” that is echoed in Barthelme’s other stories involving psychiatrists (“The Sandman”, for one), suggesting that “A”’s answers cannot be taken at face value:

- Q: You’re not cooperating.
 A: I’m not interested.
 Q: I might do an article.
 A: I don’t like to have my picture taken.
 Q: Solipsism plus triumphantism.
 A: It’s possible. (CL 90)

The patient-therapist interrogative relationship, as discussed in Chapter One, parallels the type of knowing inquiry into the art object that seeks to produce easy, textbook answers (the type that might go into an article, for example). However, with “Q”’s slight verbal slip —“triumphantism” instead of “triumphalism”—Barthelme begins to hint at the unreliability of “Q”’s authority, which eventually leads to “Q” showing himself to be far more in tune with the Barthelmean ideal of not-knowing than “A”, even though it is “A” who actually launches into a discussion of *The Concept of Irony*. “A” approaches an understanding of a proper, not-knowing use of irony, but ultimately he cannot transcend its lower-level incarnation (much like Kierkegaard’s Aesthete, also called “A” in *Either/Or*). “Q” models the type of ironic questioning—the kind that leads to creative not-knowing and new perception—that Barthelme tests as a revision of Kierkegaard’s view of irony.

“A” sets up his discussion of *The Concept of Irony* by relating how he found the book while exploring closets “overflowing with all kinds of play equipment” (CL 93). Analysing the situation from an ironic, intellectualised standpoint, he remarks to “Q” that:

Now, suppose I had been of an ironical turn of mind and wanted to make a joke about all this, some sort of joke that would convey that I had noticed the striking degree of boredom implied by the presence of all this impedimenta and one which would also serve to comment upon the particular way of struggling with boredom that these people had chosen. I might have said, for instance, that the remedy is worse than the disease. Or quoted Nietzsche to the effect that the thought of suicide is a great consolation and had helped him through many a bad night. Either of these perfectly good jokes would do to annihilate the situation of being uncomfortable in this house. The shuffleboard sticks, the barbells, balls of all kinds—my joke has, in effect, thrown them out of the world. An amazing magical power! (CL 93-94)

An ironist of this level makes the type of ironic jokes that both free him from the relation to objects and reality that make him “uncomfortable” (“Games are”, after all, “the Enemies of Beauty, Truth, and Sleep” (GP 127)) as well as distance him from the playfulness of irony, here symbolised by these objects of play. “A” remarks that Kierkegaard believes that “Irony is a means of depriving the object of its reality in order that the subject may feel free” (CL 94). The subject, then, is “free both in relation to others and in relation to himself” (CL 94)—truly “an amazing magical power!” “A” goes on:

Now, suppose that I am suddenly curious about this amazing magical power. Suppose I become curious about how my irony actually works—how it functions. I pick up a copy of Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony* (the ski instructor is also a student of Kierkegaard) and I am immediately plunged into difficulties. The situation bristles with difficulties. (CL 94)

For Kierkegaard, this kind of freedom is negative and “annihilative”, as there is nothing to put in place of what has been destroyed by irony. Reading Kierkegaard, “A” realises that his irony places him in this “difficult” position: “disposing” of all the objects of his irony, the ironist becomes “lighter and lighter” (CL 95) as this subjective freedom traps him in an infinitely negative relation to the world—an alienation, ultimately. Far from feeling more

comfortable in this house (as it is a rented house, he is already once removed from it), he is now further estranged from the situation.

Continuing his story, “A” homes in on Kierkegaard’s discussion of Schlegel in *The Concept of Irony*, upon which Barthelme’s conception of irony hinges. Kierkegaard posits that “irony’s great requirement was to live poetically” (CI 280), by which he means that the ironist, free from all actuality, imagines a world higher and more perfect—a world expressed in poetry:

By the phrase “living poetically”, irony not only registered a protest against all the contemptibleness that is nothing but a miserable product of its environment, against all the commonplace people who, sorry to say, populate the world in such numbers, but it wanted something more. (CI 280)

Because the ironist is free from circumscribed reality, he can choose to live however he wishes. To an extent, this is a virtue; Socrates’ irony was a “protest” against the “established order of things, the substantial life of the state” (CI 218). While such a protest was suitable for Socrates’ time, Kierkegaard stresses, in modern life such an ironic, poetic protest is not the bliss it appears to be:

[W]e cannot blame the ironist for finding it so difficult to become something, because when one has such a prodigious multitude of possibilities it is not easy to choose. [...] since for him all such destinies have only the validity of possibility, he can run through the whole scale almost as fast as children do. (CI 282)

Like the ski instructor whose closets are filled with play equipment, allowing the occupants to participate in any number of game scenarios (as well as giving them the freedom to abandon one game for another at any time, like children), the ironist plays at any number of alternate relations to himself and to the world. But of course he cannot choose just one, as choosing one would neutralise the power of his irony. He must only knowingly “watch himself” play and quit each game (CI 284), never to embody any one position.

Even before he picks up *The Concept of Irony*, “A” seizes upon an important problem inherent in both the theory and practice of this kind of irony. As he says in the above passage, “A” notes “the striking degree of boredom implied by the presence of all this impedimenta and one which would also serve to comment upon the particular way of struggling with boredom that these people had chosen. I might have said, for instance, that the remedy is worse than the disease” (*CL* 93). By attempting to multiply his possibilities for living, he has actually doomed himself to a single, invariable mode of existence:

But since there always must be a bond that ties these contrasts together, a unity in which the enormous dissonances of these moods resolve themselves, upon closer inspection one will reveal this unity in the ironist. Boredom is the only continuity the ironist has. Boredom, this eternity devoid of content, this salvation devoid of joy, this superficial profundity, this hungry glut. (*CI* 285)

Similar to Baskerville in “Florence Green is 81”, who is above all terrified of “boring” the listener (*CBDC* 4), the ironist is terrified of the boredom he has brought upon himself and cannot seem to shake. And like Baskerville driving in infinite circles in the rain, the ironist is trapped within a cycle of evasion that is ultimately invalid anyway, as the ironist can never actually evade his own irony. The games the ironist plays are, indeed, the “Enemies of Beauty, Truth, and Sleep” (as Barthelme writes in *Guilty Pleasures*), as they estrange the player from reality, whereas Truth and Beauty (and Sleep, incidentally; rest is impossible in this cycle) require a relationship between an individual and the reality of his existence. Such a position is one of knowingness, a constant vanquishing of the mystery inherent in Truth, Beauty, and Sleep (when considered a gateway to the unconscious). It is no surprise, then, that this kind of knowing boredom once again gives rise to the game of “Ennui,” the “easiest” game which is ultimately no game at all (*GP* 134).

Barthelme also has cause to defend Schlegel from Kierkegaard's "unfairness" based upon their similar use of a kind of irony called "parabasis" and its philosophical and aesthetic ramifications. In *Lucinde*, Schlegel adopted this ancient Greek rhetorical technique whereby a play is interrupted by a speech from the poet. The effect would be one of internal self-awareness of the play as a play; the work of art would acknowledge both its fictional nature and its intimate connection to reality. This distance between art and reality produced by the technique led Schlegel to align parabasis with irony; in his famous Fragment 668, Schlegel writes that "irony is permanent parabasis"¹³, a perpetual self-conscious interruption of text which destabilises any rhetorical foundation.¹⁴ As a consequence, the viewer or reader experiences, simultaneously, both a proximity and distance from reality that Schlegel argued was vital to living. For Kierkegaard, such a distance produced estrangement from both reality and the divine; for Schlegel, ironic distance enabled the individual to verge on the divine. As Peter Firchow writes in his Introduction to the 1971 edition of *Lucinde*, "Only the ironic attitude enabled man to commit himself wholly to finite reality and at the same time made him realize that the finite is trivial when viewed from the perspective of eternity."¹⁵

Although he does not name it as such, Barthelme hints at his future procedures of parabasis in "After Joyce", in which he touches on Joyce's creation of "dissociation and discontinuity" (NK 3-4) within the work of art that "permanently" destabilises any single interpretation. By breaking of the "fourth wall" between art and the viewer through

¹³ Schlegel, "Zur Philosophie" (1797), *Philosophie Lehrjahre I* (1796-1806), *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, 18:85.

¹⁴ Writing about parabasis in the late 1970s, Paul de Man defined the technique as "A sudden revelation of the discontinuity between two rhetorical codes". De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, 300.

¹⁵ *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, 29. An example of Schlegel's use of parabasis finds him wondering about the reception of his book: "If this mad little book should ever be found, perhaps printed and ever read, then it will certainly make more or less the same impression on all happy young men" (Schlegel, *Lucinde*, 60)

“dissociation and discontinuity” in the rhetorical codes of the work of art, the work of art after Joyce draws attention to the work of art’s objectness. While parabasis need not highlight the objectness, per se, of the work of art, it does emphasise its artifice. Similarly, in “Sentence”, for example, the sentence of which the story consists is interrupted multiple times by a self-conscious aside. A discussion of a doctor examining and then thinking about sleeping with a female patient is cut short by a parabolic aside: “(but no, we cannot have that kind of pornographic *merde* in this majestic and high-minded sentence, which will probably end up in the Library of Congress)” (CL 115). Barthelme’s gesture toward this object-making procedure of parabasis suggests that the device, whether he was aware of its definition or lineage, is a key point of departure both formally and philosophically.

Examining Schlegel’s ideas of parabasis sheds light on Barthelme’s own ironic strategy and its objectives. Irony, and especially “permanent parabasis” is, according to Paul de Man, vital to the process of not-knowing: “Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognitions, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off the tropological system, irony enforces the repetition of its aberration.”¹⁶ The paradox inherent in a “permanent parabasis” lies in the fact that parabasis is a local, immediate process; it is nearly impossible to imagine a constant parabasis at any and all points, an infinite interruption of something that is able to simultaneously maintain its original something-ness. What is produced, then, is a constant state of not-knowing. There is no opportunity for knowingness, which is a “closing off” of the “tropological system”, to creep in, as each trope is undone at the moment it is recognised.

¹⁶ De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, 301.

“The Glass Mountain”, also collected in *City Life*, demonstrates exactly this kind of mid-twentieth century use of irony and parabasis in order to interrupt “tropical conditions”, and their ramifications for a modernist search for wholeness and continuity. It also, more directly than “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel”, reassesses the legacy of Romanticism as demonstrated by Schlegel and his Romantic contemporaries. The story is a re-imagining of a Polish fairy tale of the same name, which was collected by Andrew Lang in his 1894 *Yellow Fairy Book*¹⁷ (Barthelme actually quotes a passage from Lang’s book in an explanation of “the conventional means of attaining the castle” (*CL* 72), which is, in a Barthelme story, a good indication of an intention to thwart those conventions). In the original tale, many knights attempt to ascend a glass mountain, on top of which waits a beautiful princess and endless riches. These attempts all end in death, and the base of the mountain is littered with bloodied corpses. As in many fairy stories, a young man, not a knight, takes on the challenge and, through his bravery and cunning, manages to scale the mountain and win the princess. In Barthelme’s version, the narrator climbs a similar glass mountain in the West Village, on the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue in New York (a relocation of the fabulous that Barthelme had written about in “The Balloon”—another strange object wedged into the cityscape—and in his novel *Snow White*, in which Snow White and her seven dwarves live in New York).¹⁸

Following his discussion of Schlegel, Kierkegaard analysed the work of Johann Ludwig Tieck. As opposed to Schlegel’s later misuse of Romanticism (which Kierkegaard

¹⁷ Lang, *The Yellow Fairy Book*.

¹⁸ In 1963, Barthelme actually moved to the fabled Greenwich Village/West Village area of New York, where he found a tiny apartment on West Eleventh Street and Sixth Avenue. Grace Paley, who eventually became good friends with Barthelme, lived with her family across the street from Barthelme’s new apartment. Barthelme biographer Tracy Daugherty writes that Barthelme often walked along Tenth Street and the Avenue of the Americas with his daughter Anne while singing Harry Nilsson’s 1969 “City Life”, from which Barthelme takes the title of his third collection.

said made him “nauseous” (*CI* 301)), Kierkegaard wrote that at first (before Tieck met the Schlegel brothers, that is) Tieck’s Romanticism swept into a stagnant age of certainty, precision, and convention like “a cool breeze, refreshing morning air” (*CI* 304):

The hundred years are over, the spellbound castle bestirs itself, its inhabitants awake again, the forest breathes lightly, the birds sing, the beautiful princess once again attracts suitors, the forest resounds with the reverberations of hunters’ horns and the baying of hounds, the meadows are fragrant, poems and songs break away from nature and flutter about, and no one knows whence they come or whither they go. (*CI* 304)

Of course, although Tieck approached what Kierkegaard thought was a proper use of irony, that is, showing that it ends in despair (especially in “Der blonde Eckbert” (1797), a harrowing supernatural tale of the paranoia that results from idealising the world), Kierkegaard found fault with this aesthetic vision, as it, too, was based upon an ironic view of non-reality that privileges the ideal over the real:

The world is rejuvenated, but [...] it was rejuvenated by romanticism to such a degree that it became a baby again. The tragedy of romanticism is that what it seizes upon is not actuality. Poetry awakens; the powerful longings, the mysterious intimations, the inspiring feelings awaken; nature awakens; the enchanted princess awakens—the romanticist falls asleep. He experiences all this in a dream, and whereas everything was fast asleep around him before, now everything is awakening—but he is sleeping. But dreams do not satisfy. He wakes up tired and torpid, unrefreshed, only to lie down to sleep again, and soon he needs to produce the somnambulant state artificially, but the more art it takes, the more exaggerated also becomes the ideal that that the romanticist evokes. (*CI* 304)

Barthelme’s version of “The Glass Mountain” takes up Kierkegaard’s assessment of Romanticism, exploring the limits of its “refreshing” powers in postmodern life and art as well as the consequences of Romantic irony. Although this story comes closer to Alan Wilde’s view of Barthelme’s work as a “small-scale effort” to “tame the extraordinary”,¹⁹ to find whatever meaning ordinary life can provide instead of yearning for a higher ideal of

¹⁹ Wilde, *Horizons of Assent*, 46, 180.

harmony and wholeness, it is still not a submission to the disintegration of the modern world. Instead, Barthelme continues his investigation of the object as a catalyst of not-knowing and therefore a renewal of the world.

Barthelme describes the mountain by pushing the form of the fairy tale, with its matter-of-fact expository statements, to its logical limit: the numbered list.

16. Touching the side of the mountain, one feels coolness.
17. Peering into the mountain, one sees sparkling blue-white depths.
18. The mountain towers over that part of Eighth Avenue like some splendid, immense office building.
19. The top of the mountain vanishes into the clouds, or on cloudless days, into the sun. (*CL* 68)

This list form emphasises the artificiality of the story, which, like the glass mountain, hovers between the man-made (the office building) and a reflection or window (also made of glass) onto the “natural”. What the climber—and the reader—must contend with if they are to reach the top (which is obscured by the atmosphere anyway) are the surfaces of both mountain and story; although one may perceive depths (all real surfaces, that is, those that exist outside of mathematical theory, have depths), they are sparkingly, sky-reflecting-ly elusive. It is the surface that confounds both the knights’ attempts to reach the peak and the reader’s attempt to find “meaning” in the story. Like a glass office building that reflects its environment and conceals its internal content, the mountain is a “cool”, aloof presence that reveals nothing.

As a demonstration of parabasis, Barthelme’s story is far from subtle. In the midst of a retelling of the fairy tale, the city muscles its way in, violently shifting the tone and register:

48. At the top of the mountain there is a castle of pure gold, and in a room in the castle tower sits...
49. My acquaintances were shouting at me.
50. “Ten bucks you bust your ass in the next four minutes!”
51. ...a beautiful enchanted symbol. (*CL* 69)

The world, for all the creative potential of its fragments, is a hostile place, especially to those who would dare revisit the tropes of the past. But the narrator of “The Glass Mountain” will not be deterred. From his elevated perspective, the ugliness of the world takes on a kind of beauty, both visual and poetic:

30. The sidewalks were full of dogshit in brilliant colors: ocher, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, ivory black, rose madder.

31. And someone had been apprehended cutting down trees, a row of elms broken-backed among the VWs and Valiants. (*CL* 68)

The linguistic clash between “dogshit” and “viridian, ivory black, rose madder”, between “a row of elms broken-backed” and VWs (although the lyrical “Valiants” recall princes of the same name), demonstrates the collision between real and ideal that, for Kierkegaard, led to alienation and despair, but for Barthelme is a source of hesitant beauty. The narrator is not a hero or even a modernist; he does find the world to be covered in “dogshit” and populated by abuse-hurlers. His perception of the world is colored, as it were, by theory’s systematic invalidating of conventions; he can even recite definitions of theoretical terms:

71. “The conventional symbol (such as the nightingale, often associated with melancholy), even though it is recognized only through agreement, is not a sign (like the traffic light) because, again, it presumably arouses deep feelings and is regarded as possessing properties beyond what the eye alone sees.” (*A Dictionary of Literary Terms*) (*CL* 71)

In his assessment of *City Life* Wilde writes that “things being what they are, American culture being what it is, most writers who are in pursuit of otherness or of their relationship to it are constrained to take as their initial project not some Heideggerian discovery of Being but a more mundane investigation of the man-made world”.²⁰ And it would seem, here, that Barthelme is engaged in exactly this “mundane investigation of the man-made world”. After all, the narrator can no longer use lynx claws to climb the mountain as in the original story;

²⁰ Wilde, *Horizons of Assent*, 148-149.

he must use “climbing irons” and a “sturdy plumber’s friend” (*CL* 67) in each hand. But every time the mundane threatens (“11. ‘Shithead.’ 12. ‘Asshole.’” (*CL* 67)), Romantic aestheticism, however oddly literal, reasserts itself:

72. A number of nightingales with traffic lights tied to their legs flew past me. (*CL* 71)

As a kind of artist (and Barthelme is, too, “climbing” this story-mountain), he continues to climb in search of whatever is at the top. Similarly, a glass mountain in the middle of New York City stands, literally, as another figure for the kind of Romantic irony against which Kierkegaard argues. There are few things more Romantically ideal than a beautiful, wealthy princess waiting for a worthy, most likely handsome man to claim her. But in this version of the story, the ideal is, literally, brought down to earth:

97. I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess.

98. I threw the beautiful princess headfirst down the mountain to my acquaintances.

99. Who could be relied upon to deal with her.

100. Nor are eagles plausible, not at all, not for a moment. (*CL* 73-74)

Barthelme’s Ironic Romanticism

Looking back at “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” as the most direct dramatisation of Barthelme’s ideas of irony, one finds the balance between a Kierkegaardian view of irony and a Schlegelian and even Goethean vision of irony that is positive and ethical rather than negative and amoral. In an interview with Heide Ziegler in 1978, Barthelme plays down his involvement with Kierkegaardian irony in the story, stating that in the story “irony is equated with masturbation [...] My conception of what the story says is that irony is, finally, of not much use.”²¹ But it is only a certain type and employment of irony that is “of not much use”; it is “A”’s masturbatory fantasy, “A”’s inadequate irony (the back-and-forth between “Q”

²¹ *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*, 39-59, 46.

and “A” is the same when discussing both masturbation and irony: “Q: Does it give you pleasure? A: A poor...A rather unsatisfactory...” (*CL* 98)). It is “Q”, in fact, who asks the kinds of “imbecile questions leading nowhere” that Socrates, were he a character in a Barthelme story, may have employed in his “deliverance” of Greek culture.

- Q: How is my car?
- Q: How is my nail?
- Q: How is the taste of my potato?
- Q: How is the cook of my potato?
- Q: How is my garb?
- Q: How is my button?
- Q: How is the flower bath?
- Q: How is the shame?
- Q: How is the plan?
- Q: How is the fire?
- Q: How is the flue?
- Q: How is my mad mother?
- Q: How is the aphorism I left with you? (*CL* 92)

While on one hand the types of questions asked by therapists the world over share this syntax (“And how does that make you feel?”, e.g.), on another they serve to expose the nuances in “A”’s ironic view of the world. Although “A” does not recognise it as such, “nowhere”, in the context of these “imbecile questions”, does not mean “an impasse” or “nonsense”, but rather the kind of nothing that is an emptying out of received knowledge. Even Kierkegaard approves, to an extent, of this process:

When it comes to silly, inflated, know-it-all knowledge, it is ironically proper to go along, to be enraptured by all this wisdom, to spur it on with jubilating applause to ever greater lunacy, although the ironist is aware that the whole thing underneath is empty and void of substance. (*CI* 249)

Although this type of irony serves as an “unerring eye for what is crooked, wrong, and vain in existence” (*CI* 256), Kierkegaard goes on to show that the ironist who engages in this type of irony is no more free of “silly, inflated, know-it-all knowledge” than the individual professing it, as the ironist depends upon the other’s foolishness. The truer ironist, “Q”

actually avoids this fate by taking Socratic questioning to an even higher level of not-knowing by asking a series of mysterious, “imbecile” questions unattached to any “know-it-all” and to which no answers are offered.

The “danger” of this process is that it may also lead to incomprehensibility, which may discourage the superficial ironist to dismiss it. But for the advanced ironist, incomprehensibility is the beginning of creative understanding. In his essay “On Incomprehensibility”, Schlegel responds to the charge that his *Fragments* and *Ideas* are “incomprehensible” by making a case for their ironic nature:

I’ve already been forced to admit indirectly that the *Athenaeum* is incomprehensible, and because it happened in the heat of irony, I can hardly take it back without in the process doing violence to that irony.

But is incomprehensibility really something so unmitigatedly contemptible and evil? [...] Only an incredibly minute quantity of it suffices: as long as its truth and purity remain inviolate and no blasphemous rationality dares approach its sacred confines. Yes, even man’s most precious possession, his own inner happiness, depends in the last analysis [...] on some such point of strength that must be left in the dark, but that nonetheless shores up and supports the whole burden and would crumble the moment one subjected it to rational analysis. Verily, it would fare badly for you if, as you demand, the whole world were ever to become wholly comprehensible in earnest. And isn’t this entire, unending world constructed by the understanding out of incomprehensibility and chaos?²²

In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard’s “A” takes up Schlegel’s claim for the value of incomprehensibility:

As regards Mozart’s music, my soul knows no fear, my confidence no bounds. In part this is because what I have understood so far is so very little and there will always be enough left over hiding in the shadows of presentiment; partly because I am convinced that if Mozart ever became wholly comprehensible to me, he would for the first time become wholly incomprehensible to me. (*E/O* 71)²³

²² Friedrich Schlegel’s *Lucinde and the Fragments*, 268.

²³ On this point, at least, Kierkegaard and Schlegel see eye to eye: in his Critical Fragment 20, Schlegel writes that “A classical text must never be comprehensible. But those who are cultivated and cultivate themselves must always want to learn more from it.” (*Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde and the Fragments*, 144-145.)

In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard is not “against” incomprehensibility as such; in fact, he says, the true prophet is one “who spies the new in the distance, in dim and undefined contours. The prophetic individual does not possess the future—he has only a presentiment of it” (CI 260). Properly employed, irony provides the distance and not-knowing needed in order to recognise all that is “foolish” and to begin the process of living an ethical life. Although Kierkegaard finds Schlegel’s mode of irony misguided at best and detrimental at worst, irony is as vital to personal life as doubt—the beginning of not-knowing—is to science.

In this sense irony is also, importantly, the initial step in Kierkegaard’s path of ascendance to the religious state. “The Leap” in *Great Days* takes its title from Kierkegaard’s idea of the ultimate expression of subjective truth: the “leap of faith” into Christianity that he elucidates in *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) and explores further in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* (1847). In “The Leap”, following on from his investigation of Kierkegaard in “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel”, Barthelme continues to refine his own position regarding the use and theory of irony, as well as the validity of religion as a super-ironic—that is, above and beyond an irony directed at the “lower actuality” of the world (CI 257) in a move toward an all-affirming, positive relationship with God—solution to the sense of alienation brought about by irony:

—Purity of heart is to will one thing.

—No. Here I differ with Kierkegaard. Purity of heart is, rather, to will several things, and not know which is the better, truer thing, and to worry about this, forever. (GD 132)

Here Barthelme directly references the first section of the *Upbuilding Discourses*, entitled “The Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing”, in which Kierkegaard passionately discusses the harmful effects of remaining in Man’s natural “double-mindedness” and not choosing to seek

the singularity of the Eternal. Several stories in *Overnight to Many Distant Cities* dramatise this conception of the “purity of heart” as a result of, as Barthelme says, having “lived through and experienced the partial failure of many things proposed to us as ideals”—religion included. The result of this failure is that “there are always mixed feelings—mixed feelings is our condition, our mental set. Not one ideal—mixtures! All of these ideas are useful, but none are absolutes.²⁴ For Kierkegaard, religion was the only absolute, the only thing that could fill the void left by irony. “Purity of heart”, for Barthelme, is instead the commitment to the human world, a commitment to a constant questioning of that world that leads to not-knowing.

Barthelme demonstrates Schlegel’s ideas of a meliorative irony, a not-knowing brought about by irony’s “repetition of its aberration”, in *Amateurs*’s “Rebecca”: “The story ends. It was written for several reasons. Nine of them are secrets. The tenth is that one should never cease considering human love. Which remains as grisly and golden as ever, no matter what is tattooed upon the warm tympanic page” (*A* 162-163). The story may end on the page, but what is opened by the text’s examination of itself as text, as an object in the world that comments upon the world, is nothing less than the “secret reasons” of human life, infinitely “grisly and golden”, organic (the “warm” page is “tattooed” as skin is) rather than fixed. This is the “meliorating” aspect of Barthelme’s irony and ultimately his art. The world may be fragmented, unreconcilable, mundane, but the mystery inherent in the art object preserves what Schlegel identified as “truth and purity”. As the narrator says in “The Educational Experience”,

“The world is everything that was formerly the case,” the group leader said, “and now it is time to get back on the bus.” Then all of the guards rushed up and demanded their

²⁴ *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*, 54.

bribes. We paid them with soluble travelers checks and hoped for rain, and hoped for rodomontade, braggadocio, blare, bray, fanfare, flourish, tucket. (A 145)

Like Flaubert, who Jonathan Culler argues had used irony for both its “negating and affirming qualities”, Barthelme writes stories whose irony “On the one hand [...] strikes indirectly at the general process of organising the world in relation to oneself so as to make sense of it. [...] But on the other hand [...] many of the delights come from the call to interpretation that it issues.” These “vertiginous uncertainties”²⁵—all that “was formerly the case” is clamoring with “rodomontade” and “fanfare” (the archaic meets the urgent)—allow for a constant state of not-knowing that encourages the reader to “meditate” about the world and, through this contemplation, to “finally to change the world” (NK 24).

²⁵ Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty*, 211, 194.

Chapter Four: From Not-Knowing to New Knowledge: Education and Religion in The Present Age

The important thing is the educational experience itself —how to survive it.
(Barthelme, “The Educational Experience”)

Introduction: Art as Instruction

In an unpublished speech to the Texas Institute of Letters in April 1979, Barthelme addressed the critical debate regarding the role of avant-garde art in the education of contemporary society, asking, “What can reasonably be expected of writers in the social world?” Barthelme positioned his argument first against John Gardner’s newly published *On Moral Fiction*, which, he remarked, “has achieved a certain notoriety among the followers of our mystery”:

Mr. Gardner’s thesis seems to be that it is the writer’s task to instruct if not reconstruct the reader—a plea for the writer as parson. “Art instructs,” says Mr. Gardner. [...] Art is good, Mr. Gardner says, only when “it has a clear positive moral effect, presenting valid models for imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue, toward life affirmation as opposed to destruction or indifference.”¹

Barthelme goes on to critique the basis of Gardner’s assessment of writing as moral instruction, arguing that it “rests upon a marvelously narrow conception of art and a no less curious notion of morality. The joinery of one word with another cautiously or incautiously in such a way to release new energy seems to me a very moral thing[.]”² At this point, Barthelme is not objecting to the “writer as parson” equation in theory, just to Gardner’s assumption that a parson will always instruct and “reconstruct” an individual according to a particularly didactic moral program.³ Although he does not mention it directly in the speech,

¹ Address to the Texas Institute of Letters, 7.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ Later, in “Not-Knowing”, Barthelme will expand upon the glossed-over idea of the numinous potential of the “joinery” of words, suggesting that “The combinatorial agility of words, the exponential generation of meaning once they’re allowed to go to bed together, allows the writer to surprise himself, makes art possible, reveals how much of Being we haven’t yet encountered” (NK 21).

Barthelme's analysis is a key part of his larger critique of progressive education, which was resuscitated with particular fervor after World War I. Although this system of education was based on John Dewey's theories of the development of the artistic and emotional aspects of a child's education, Barthelme suggested that in the 1950s this progressive pedagogy had become corrupted by a professionalisation of the system that focused on shaping individuals to a particularly useful social mold rather than encouraging reform.⁴

Elaborating upon his argument regarding the "instructive" aspects of art, Barthelme points out that Gardner's book is a rehashing of Tolstoy's *What is Art?* (1896), which, as Barthelme summarises, argues that "art is that which promotes religious feeling—not any religious impulses but specifically Christian modes of religious feeling—that art is that which tends to bring about a closer relationship between man and God". He continues:

I mention these two rather similar works—Tolstoy's is better, really—because I think what they ask is precisely what art cannot do. It cannot be directed. It cannot be pointed toward a predetermined goal, even the highest. It goes where it will. It is in this regard problematic to the artist, who, very often, would much prefer an intelligible plan to the not-knowing he's confronted with. The avant-garde is not an avant-garde at all, it is much more like the lost patrol, and must be. Art by program is false.⁵

Art, then, is diametrically opposed to the Christian search for knowledge and the understanding of the unknowable; however unpleasant the confrontation with not-knowing may be, it is vital to the creation of art. Even the avant-garde itself cannot filter not-knowing into a "program": its practitioners must wander "lost" if they are to invent.

Barthelme's straightforward rejection of the didactic and directed function of art belies his deeper awareness of the far more intricate explorations of this position in

⁴ In her book *The Troubled Crusade*, Diane Ravitch traces the bastardisation of Dewey's theories into "social efficiency and social utility". Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980*, 46.

⁵ Address to the Texas Institute of Letters, 8.

Kierkegaard, specifically in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) and *Either/Or*. While Chapter Four showed that Barthelme's understanding of irony evolved out of his "disagreements" with Kierkegaard, on the subject of education and education reform, Barthelme aligns himself quite closely with Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's career revolved around the idea of a specifically religious education that would address the problem of being a Christian in Christendom. The fundamental problem, he argued, was that even those who called themselves Christians—and especially the well-educated—had abandoned the difficult work of individual religious inquiry, which requires real personal and spiritual risk, in favour of a facile, collective—and safe—undertaking. In addition to secular education, which churned out members of a crowd rather than individuals, Kierkegaard asserted that Christian institutions had followed this path as well (it is unclear which phenomenon he saw as having occurred first, the chicken of individual resignation or the egg of institutional oversimplification), and had begun to allow the petty concerns of contemporary society dictate their spiritual inculcation. In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard-as-Climacus specifically aligns education with the pursuit of religion:

My main thought was that in our time, due to the quantity of knowledge, one has forgotten what it is to *exist* and what *inwardness* means [...] If one had forgotten what it is to exist religiously, no doubt one had also forgotten what it is to exist humanly; and so this must be brought out. But above all it must not be done didactically, for then the misunderstanding would instantly capitalize on the attempt at explanation by making a new misunderstanding, as if existing consisted in getting to know something about this or that. (*CUP* 203)

Of course Kierkegaard is not against knowledge or learning as such; what he laments here is the proliferation of the same kind of knowingness, a herd mentality of intellectual conformity and passivity, that Barthelme saw (with varying degrees of religiosity, as this chapter will discuss) creeping into his own contemporary society in the form of progressive education.

Throughout his career, Barthelme would strive to discover for himself “what it means to exist as human beings”, careful all the time to adhere to Kierkegaard’s exhortation that “it must not be done didactically” which, due to the authoritarian nature of such education, would only lead to further quest for mastery. This chapter will argue that through his dramatisations of educational processes (school, the army, organised religion), Barthelme explores how avant-garde art, like Kierkegaardian religion, both educates the viewer or reader and resists learning and comprehension. “Me and Miss Mandible,” “The Educational Experience”, “The Party”, Barthelme’s first novel *Snow White*, “The Genius”, “The Temptation of St. Anthony”, “The Photographs”, and “The Catechist” explore the ways in which different kinds of knowledge are fashioned by social institutions.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, in Barthelme’s initial encounter with Kierkegaard in Maurice Natanson’s class, Barthelme found a philosophical articulation of his own burgeoning ideas regarding knowingness, knowledge, and not-knowing, as well as a complex engagement with the question of how one should live. Whether writing about love, marriage, religion, or politics, Kierkegaard’s primary concern was the distinction between truth and knowledge. Although irony protects knowledge from knowingness, it is always at risk of being degraded into mere knowingness. In *The Concept of Irony* he had distinguished between “silly, inflated” knowledge of improperly employed irony and the true inward understanding of the distance between Man and God. In *Either/Or* he characterises the Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious stages of an inner development based upon an evolving relationship to knowledge and ultimately a surrender to divine mystery (which, in Kierkegaard’s formulation, simultaneously negates and synthesises the different stages of knowledge). As early as *Either/Or* in 1843, Kierkegaard observed a pervasive impassivity

and impotence in society that even affected society's capacity for sin: "Let others complain that our age is evil; my complaint is that it is paltry. For it is without passion. People's thoughts are thin and flimsy as lace [...] The thoughts in their hearts are too paltry to be sinful" (*E/O* 48). Both *Either/Or* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, with their pseudonymous authorship, aim to draw the reader away from predetermined, Hegelian knowledge and encourage them to "leap toward faith". As such, Kierkegaard presented himself not as an authority, but as one who, for all of his analysis, is no more knowledgeable than his audience:

Am I then the teacher, the educator? No, not at all; I am he who himself has been educated, or whose authorship expresses what it is to be educated to the point of becoming a Christian. In the fact that education is pressed upon me, and in the measure that it is pressed, I press in turn upon this age; but I am not a teacher, only a fellow student.⁶

For Kierkegaard, authorship—especially the pseudonymous kind—was itself an education in how to develop a subjective, internal relationship to God. Kierkegaard's dialectical approach, modeled after Socrates, purposefully violates the Hegelian "ladder" of logic upon which one (ostensibly) reaches Absolute knowledge.

It is, fittingly, in *The Present Age* (1846) that Kierkegaard tackled directly the problem of knowingness in his contemporary society—and in which Barthelme would find a system of thought against which to critique his own society. Although Kierkegaard criticises his own "present age" in the treatise, part of the potency of the treatise comes from the deliberate omission of temporal or geographical context, which lends both timelessness and universality to the argument that the modern era is one of passionlessness, enervation,

⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as An Author: A Report to History*, 75.

unthinking social agreement, and spiritual and intellectual complacency. In *The Present Age* Kierkegaard identifies the symptoms of the externalisation of one's individual education:

When people's attention is no longer turned inwards, when they are no longer satisfied with their own religious lives, but turn to others and to things outside themselves, where the relation is intellectual, in search of that satisfaction, when nothing important ever happens to gather the threads of life together with the finality of a catastrophe: that is the time for talkativeness. (*PA* 43)

As Barthelme would observe in his own society, Kierkegaard identifies externalised “reflection” as the scourge of the age, a state of existence that is so mired in “deliberation” that no action at all—save for empty, intellectually knowing “talkativeness”—is possible. “Deliberation”, in Kierkegaard's formulation, is closely related to knowingness in its analogous lack of commitment to true understanding and willingness to dwell in not-knowing. Deliberation, although it takes place within an individual mind, is “taught” both in the classroom and in adulthood to bend to the will and desires of the larger society. The individual thus not only ceases to be responsible for his actions, he not need act at all—he can simply default into joining the collective.

While Kierkegaard faults the current state of religion—that is, a passive, easily achieved grace—for “educating” its followers into reflection and deliberation, Barthelme places responsibility not only on the misguided goals of American pedagogy, but on the ways in which contemporary American society continues to “educate” its citizens beyond the classroom to adhere to fully-formed, pre-fabricated institutional ideals of work, consumption, and marriage. Similarly, for Barthelme, the kind of deliberation and reflection taught in and beyond school shapes citizens who value the external signs of sophistication, rather than the creative not-knowing that allows for true understanding. One of Barthelme's combative strategies, discussed in Chapter One, is, like Kierkegaard, to create through nonsense,

boredom, ambiguity, and cliché a sense of formal anxiety in his fiction that, by disallowing easy comprehension, “educates” the reader into not-knowing. While “The Educational Experience” is on one hand about the absurdity and domination of modern education, it simultaneously invokes a vision of a not-knowing, avant-garde education in which one would be encouraged to contemplate a “great deal of movement, flux—unimpaired vitality”:

The two major theories of origin, evolution and creation, were argued by bands of believers who gave away buttons, balloons, bumper stickers, pieces of the True Cross. On the walls, photographs of stocking masks. [...] We made the students add odd figures, things like 453948*23:J and 8799?22MARY. This was part of the educational experience, we told them, and not even the hard part—just one side of a many-sided effort. But what a wonderful time you’ll have, we told them, when the experience is over, done, completed. You will all, we told them, be more beautiful than you are now, and more employable too. You will have a grasp of the total situation; the total situation will have a grasp of you. (*A* 142)

Another strategy, as will be discussed in this chapter, is to dramatise directly the consequences of a learned proficiency in knowingness and easy comprehensibility, to show the emptiness of an education in which “everything is presented as the result of some knowable process” (*CBDC* 110).

Taking the observation of “deliberation” to its absurdist, somewhat tongue-in-cheek extreme, Kierkegaard writes that “nowadays not even a suicide kills himself in desperation. Before taking the step he deliberates so long and so carefully that he literally chokes with thought. It is even questionable whether he ought to be called a suicide, since it is really thought which takes his life. He does not die with deliberation but from deliberation” (*PA* 3). As he had done in “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” and “The Glass Mountain”, Barthelme literalised Kierkegaard’s argument, dramatising this death-by-deliberation in a number of stories, including “The Dragon” in *Guilty Pleasures*, whose titular protagonist wanders into a hospital looking to catch a fatal disease. On his quest to end his life, the dragon conducts the

following conversation with a colonel, who acts equal parts doctor, psychologist, logician, and philosopher:

“Now, what is it, exactly, that is eating you and making you wan? Some order of death wish, I would imagine.”

“That is the case,” said the dragon, “exactly.”

“A question of existence,” said the colonel, “or its opposite.”

“You have put your finger on it,” said the dragon.

“Dragons exist,” said the colonel. “Only a fool would doubt it.”

“If pricked, do I not bleed?”

“You suffer, however, from a sort of general meaninglessness.” (*GP* 79)

While the idea of a “death wish” is played for laughs (and, as we will see, this element of humour is vital to Barthelme’s revision of Kierkegaard’s argument), the fantasticality and absurdism of this dialogue signals a real problem with modern existence. The dragon’s attempt to commit suicide—by walking into a place of knowledge and healing, no less—is met with reflection and deliberation. Although he has his existence confirmed, first by the colonel and then by being classified as an “endangered species”, the dragon will continue to “suffer” from “meaninglessness”, the malady that drove him to suicide in the first place. The achievement of existence, even for a mythical creature (or for a Shakespeare character, whose argument for legitimacy laments, “If you prick us, do we not bleed?”), is not enough in the present age. As we will see in *Snow White*, even fairy tales and imagination are immediately subsumed into knowingness the moment they are reflected upon by way of an interpretation that empties out their mystery.

Although deliberation takes place within an individual mind, it is continuously reinforced by what Kierkegaard calls “the public”, an abstract entity “consisting of unreal individuals who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organisation—and yet are held together in a whole” (*PA* 34), that subsumes the individual into its passionless acquiescence in a culture of knowingness. The public, in order to perpetuate its authority,

educates its members in a kind of unthinking, idle absorption in the external at the expense of inward thought and action. Kierkegaard outlines “the ultimate difference between the modern world and antiquity” in terms of their different methods and purposes of education. In the modern world, the culture of “advertisement and publicity” (PA 6) has created a mere simulacrum of the individual, providing (an ultimately unsatisfying) substitute, a culture of intellectual reflection or deliberation, for the individual’s inherent drive for genuine comprehension. The “public” in antiquity was, in contrast to the present age’s abstraction, a collection of individuals acting enthusiastically as one to achieve their aims. The individual was educated by the community to seek knowledge and understanding insofar as it strengthened the individual’s internal drive to act. Kierkegaard argues that education in antiquity only instructed the individual to a point at which he could think for himself, whereas in the present age the public educates the individual “absolutely”, that is, into its collective passionlessness.

As this chapter will argue, Barthelme, too, takes up this “exhaustion” in the context of progressive education, as both school and the modern incarnation of religion not only foster but veritably require their subjects to “lapse” into a collectively malleable state. In only one example of Barthelme’s many dramatised observations of the public in his own “present age”, in “Down the Line with the Annual” he makes literal a passage that actually appeared in the opening pages of the *Consumer Bulletin Annual*, in which the journal makes rather grandiose claims for its indispensability in modern life:

The Consumer Bulletin is much used in courses in consumer problems, consumer education, economics, home economics, business, civics, marketing, sociology, life science, physics, and other business and science education subjects. Its findings provide valuable material to be used in teaching young consumers in high school and college how to become intelligent and informed buyers of goods and services, and to learn to look for sound qualities in the products they buy. (GP 3)

Again, as Kierkegaard had emphasised in his argument about how irony and reflection become perilous when they are employed improperly, the consumption of goods is not in itself negative (of course, buying one product over another requires a choice, as perpetual deliberation would prevent any purchase at all). It is when, as Barthelme suggests, one is educated only to consume, to maintain the capitalist system by literally buying into it, and by trying to get the best of what is available to show one's own "intelligence"—and to ignore other areas of life—that this kind of group-think becomes dangerous, even physically:

Candace, however, is blameless, racked as she is by irritation of the lungs from overuse of aerosol sprays (page 15), unpleasant dryness 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." (GP 4)

The above passage suggests that this supposedly progressive, "expensive Eastern girls' school" has failed to teach its students how to exist in real life without "overusing" the external world of aerosol sprays and indelible lipsticks in an attempt to alleviate their feelings of "meaninglessness". And yet Barthelme repeatedly satirises the assumption that schools—rather than individuals themselves—are and should be responsible for people's souls. Inwardness, the acceptance of individual responsibility for self-education and action, is neither taught nor, in the world of the *Consumer Bulletin*, is it useful. Barthelme drives the point home:

"Had I not yoyoed away my time in school reading Herodotus, Saint-Simon, Rilke, and Owen Wister, seeking answers to the mystery of personality and the riddle of history, I would not have failed to become an intelligent buyer of goods and services. It's as simple as that." (GP 4)

The double negative here—along with the ironic "simple as that"—recalls Kierkegaard's intricate rhetorical strategies intended to compel the reader to question received information. Similarly, the narrator's satiric lament that in reading Herodotus, Rilke, etc. (Barthelme's

inclusion of the “father” of western fiction, Owen Wister, in this literary firmament is both a validation of and a joke about American “culture”) he had failed to become a good consumer echoes *The Present Age’s* identification of an “age of advertisement and publicity” against which any rebellion, any “expression of strength” or a “profound and prodigious learning”, would seem “ridiculous to the calculating intelligence of our times” (*PA* 6).

Once again, however, Barthelme “disagrees” with the extent to which Kierkegaard laments the passivity of his present age. Barthelme acknowledges that the collective “passionlessness” of society has increased in the last 150 years, but he argues that avant-garde art has also evolved to observe and address the epidemic of passive reflection and inaction. Alan Wilde’s argument that “American culture being what it is, most writers who are in pursuit of otherness or of their relationship to it are constrained to take as their initial project not some Heideggerian discovery of Being but a more mundane investigation of the man-made world”,⁷ while problematic for reasons explained in Chapter Three, correctly identifies as the subject of postmodern art the man-made world of aerosol cans, indelible lipsticks, and packaged snacks. He also finds, as Barthelme and Kierkegaard find, that society at large has been permeated by a “spirit of resignation”. But where Wilde sees artists of Barthelme’s “present age” as resigned to making “mundane investigations” of this world, Barthelme maintains that despite all the knowing interpretation and anxiety and mass-produced unexceptional materials, if the artist is rigorous and dedicated to not-knowing, to allowing the “horizon of memory”, a realm of not-knowing, to “enter in”, he can access something truly new.

⁷ Wilde, *Horizons of Assent*, 148-149.

Barthelme's Present Age

As early as *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, Barthelme had been concerned with the unreliability of the lessons society imparts (even at “expensive Eastern girls’ schools”). The story “Me and Miss Mandible”, for example, concerns the unreliability of social and institutional signs, and especially the deceptiveness of signs about childhood and maturity. In the story, Joseph, a thirty-five-year-old divorced ex-Army insurance adjuster, is re-enrolled in a sixth grade class due to a clerical error. Neither he nor anyone else does anything to remedy the situation; in fact, no one seems to find it odd except the man himself, and even he eventually adjusts to his new circumstances. The opening of the story—“Miss Mandible wants to make love to me but she hesitates because I am officially a child” (*CBDC* 97)—is designed to produce in the reader a pleasant ripple of shock, as well as establish the matter-of-fact absurdity that pervades not only Joseph’s current state of affairs, but his past stints as husband and soldier. In addition to his dithering teacher, Joseph is also pursued by Sue Ann Brownly, an eleven-year-old “fool for love” who does not seem to notice that Joseph is an adult, only that he is different from the other boys in the class (most of whom are preoccupied with cars, fighting, and the particular agony of puberty) and therefore “desirable”. The other boys in the class regard him with a mix of suspicion and awe, but do not seem to notice that he is a grown man.

The story is constructed from the notes Joseph enters in his journal during Geography class, when he can hide his clandestine activities behind a massive textbook. Joseph regards his situation, classmates, and teacher with amusement, noting that his placement in an elementary school class—this particular “life-role”—is no different, really, than his placement in the Army or the insurance company or a marriage. Joseph comes to understand “(only at times)” that

my path was not particularly of my own choosing. My career stretched out in front of me like a paper chase, and my role was to pick up the clues. When I got out of school, the first time, I felt that this estimate was substantially correct, and eagerly entered the hunt. I found clues abundant: diplomas, a marriage license, insurance forms, discharge papers, tax returns, Certificates of Merit. They seemed to prove, at the very least, that I was in the running. (*CBDC* 102)

Here Barthelme presents an alternate strategy to the one he dramatised in “Florence Green is 81”: where Baskerville, the narrator of “Florence Green”, is caught up in knowing and the pursuit of knowledge, in gathering society’s “clues” and reading signs as guarantees (Baskerville does not see any irony in his attending The Famous Writers School), Joseph’s situation—in which he is now “out of the running” and so can observe the race from a distance—allows him to detach himself from the chase. Having been placed back in school (despite already having a diploma), Joseph can now view the type of knowledge provided by schools as the first lessons not in critical or creative thinking, but in instilling respect for and belief in authority, which fosters proper conduct according to social rules (the teacher’s version of the class’s mathematics textbook recommends that “Many interesting and lifelike problems involving the use of fractions should be solved...” (*CBDC* 101)). Joseph nurses a vague sense of having been “betrayed” by various authority figures and institutions: his wife, the Army, the insurance company, and eventually the United States of America, whose promise of a future turns out to have been made up of “signs”:

We read signs as promises. [...]

I myself, in my former existence, read the company motto (“Here to Help in Time of Need”) as a description of the duty of the adjuster, drastically mislocating the company’s deepest concerns. I believed that because I had obtained a wife who was made up of wife-signs (beauty, charm, softness, perfume, cookery) I had found love. [...] All of us, Miss Mandible, Sue Ann, myself, Brenda, Mr. Goodykind, still believe that the American flag betokens a kind of general righteousness.

But I say, looking about me in this incubator of future citizens, that signs are signs, and some of them are lies. This is the great discovery of my time here. (*CBDC* 109)

It is not that Joseph has read the signs incorrectly; it is that these signs have been announced as reliable indicators of truth, which, in truth, they are not. The problem is, of course, that the authority in which Joseph placed his faith, as well as the signs that uphold it, is absurd and ineffective: even in the Army, Joseph says, “much of what we were doing was absolutely pointless, to no purpose” (*CBDC* 99), an unavoidable reference to the civilian attitude towards the Vietnam War. Barthelme finds the grim humour in this kind of absurdity: although Joseph is plainly bigger and taller than the children in the class (and he has “hair in the appropriate places,” an almost always reliable physical sign of maturity), his suggestion that he be given a suitable desk is met with an absurdist reply: since the desks in the classroom “are the correct size for sixth-graders,” “if the desk size is correct, then the pupil size must be incorrect” (*CBDC* 108). There is little difference between this and the orders Joseph and his unit received in the Army to whitewash all the trees in their training area: “Later an off-duty captain sauntered by and watched us, white-splashed and totally weary, strung out among the freakish shapes we had created. [...] I understood the principle (orders are orders), but I wondered: Who decides?” (*CBDC* 99-100).⁸ Joseph’s oddly banal formulation of his insight (“This is the great discovery of my time here”) hammers home the irony not only of Joseph’s particular situation, but of modern progressive education in general.

Even the very act of reading signs contains an inherent consent to the molding of socially useful individuals: as Barthelme writes in “The Educational Experience”, “Transfer of information from the world to the eye is permitted if you have signed oaths of loyalty to the world, to the eye, to *Current Pathology*” (*A* 141-142). In “See the Moon?” Barthelme

⁸ One may also think of Tom Sawyer’s exasperation at the arbitrary, “pointless,” absurd whitewashing the fence as punishment for playing hooky from school.

suggests that adherence to the now-mainstream “pretentious scientism”⁹ of progressive education is strong as ever: “We had trouble with Gregory, we wanted to be scientific. Toys from Procreative Playthings of Princeton. O Gregory, that Princeton crowd got you coming and going. Procreative Playthings at one end and the Educational Testing Service at the other” (*UPUA* 168).

But the other alternative—not reading the signs at all—is no solution either: In “Terminus” in *Overnight to Many Distant Cities*, an unnamed man realises that “No one has told him that he is a husband; he has learned nothing from the gray in his hair; the additional lenses in the lenses of his spectacles have not educated him; the merriment of dental assistants has not brought him the news” (*OMDC* 115). Joseph’s diplomas, marriage certificate, and tax returns have “told him” that he is educated, a husband, and a member of society (despite the flaws in each of these signs), while the husband in “Terminus” remains ignorant even to physical signs of maturity (which in “Me and Miss Mandible” are misleading anyway).

The disconnection between the outside world and the world of the classroom has, as Joseph has discovered, real life consequences. Barthelme may have been echoing McLuhan’s observation that:

There is a world of difference between the modern home environment of integrated electric information and the classroom. Today’s television child is attuned to up-to-the-minute, “adult” news—inflation, rioting, war, taxes, crime, bathing beauties—and is bewildered when he enters the nineteenth-century environment that still characterizes the educational establishment where information is scarce but ordered and structured by fragmented, classified patterns, subjects, and schedules. It is naturally an environment much like any factory set-up with its inventories and assembly lines.¹⁰

⁹ Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980*, 46.

¹⁰ McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*, 18.

However, while McLuhan was an enthusiast for the liberating potential of the electronic galaxy of free information in the modern world, Barthelme's attitude was far less positive. While school textbooks may claim to present "many interesting and lifelike problems" that demonstrate the real-world necessity of education, Joseph's situation proves the inanity of the textbook's representation of real life. A textbook and the classroom in which it is used remain "nineteenth-century environment[s] that still characterises the educational establishment where information is scarce but ordered and structured"—as is, Joseph discovers, the adult world, with all its meaningless certificates and vague rules. Joseph's life has proceeded like an "assembly line", just as education would dictate. And yet, as evidenced by his placement back in sixth grade as well as his failure to "solve" the "problems" of work and marriage—not to mention "inflation, rioting, war, taxes, crime, bathing beauties"—the system is fallible at best and damaging at worst.

The whitewashing of the trees in "Me and Miss Mandible" is also an image of didactic conformity and the "freakish shapes" it inadvertently creates.¹¹ Joseph makes an indirect parallel between these artificial shapes and the advertisements for Maurice de Paree's "Hip Helpers", a device touted as a "real undercover agent that adds appeal to those hips and derriere both!" "Hipless eleven-year-olds" confronted with this image in a gossip magazine are given a lesson in signs and substitutions, as well as ideals and expectations. The white shapes and the padded ones—condoned by the U.S. Army and civil society (even the "Hip Helpers" are "real undercover agents")—are contrasted with Amos Darin's obscene drawing (ostensibly another "freakish shape"), which, although it is "offered not as a sign of something else but as an act of love in itself" (*CBDC* 107), is condemned. Here again

¹¹ Barthelme stint in the Army during the Korean War informs a handful of his stories. Barthelme directly mentions whitewashing stones in "See the Moon?" printed in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*.

Barthelme highlights the absurdity of presenting “interesting and lifelike problems” within the walls of the classroom: the children are taught to draw shapes, but only sanctioned ones; when a shape is itself an “interesting and lifelike problem”, it is unacceptable. Similarly, while Joseph may have just missed the “electric age” of television, the real sixth-graders pass around *Movie-TV Secrets*, a gossip magazine that in the late 1950s and 1960s ran stories about the love triangle between Eddie Fisher, Debbie Reynolds, and Liz Taylor, as well columns about Elvis, Ann-Margaret, and Jackie Kennedy (not a love triangle, although interesting to imagine). The “interesting and lifelike problems” presented to them in their textbooks will hardly prepare them for the adult world (though it may teach them what a triangle is, geometry takes on a markedly different meaning in the *Movie-TV* world). Barthelme ironises McLuhan’s theory that

Today’s child is growing up absurd, because he lives in two worlds, and neither of them inclines him to grow up. Growing up—that is our new work, and it is total. Mere instruction will not suffice.¹²

Joseph’s clerically-forced regression throws into relief the suspended state of development his classmates will continue to experience throughout their lives. The love triangle between Joseph, Miss Mandible, and sixth-grader Sue Ann is a figure for the dissociation between the “two worlds” of adult life and childhood preparation for it, and is thus absurd.

The question “Why does it have to be that way?” (*CBDC* 118) is a thread that can be traced throughout Barthelme’s fiction, and, as we will continue to see, has philosophical, political, and aesthetic consequences. The signs themselves, it seems, are only partially responsible for their flimsiness; it is the “who” that “decides”—the I. A. L. Burlingames and Deans of Famous Writers Schools—who are the enemies of creativity. Even Joseph, calm as

¹² McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage*, 18. McLuhan had published *The Medium is the Message* in *Forum* magazine in 1960. (Vol. 3, No. 4.)

he has been, eventually balks at society's way of perpetuating the status quo through elementary education:

It is the pledges that this place makes to me, pledges that cannot be redeemed, that confuse me later and make me feel I am not getting anywhere. Everything is presented as the result of some knowable process; if I wish to arrive at four I get there by way of two and two. If I wish to burn Moscow the route I must travel has already been marked out by another visitor. [...] All of these goals are equally beautiful in the sight of the Board of Estimate; the proof is all around us, in the no-nonsense ugliness of this steel and glass building, in the straightline matter-of-factness with which Miss Mandible handles some of our less reputable wars. Who points out that arrangements sometimes slip, that errors are made, that signs are misread? (*CBDC* 110)

Joseph is caught between wanting to “get somewhere” and the realisation that, despite all the diplomas and certificates of milestones, there really is nowhere to get in life, let alone anywhere new (invasion of Russia is both old and, in light of the Cold War, current news)—except maybe death (at which time one gets another certificate!). The “who” that “decides” is pitted against the “who” that “points out that arrangements sometimes slip.” This latter “who” is the artist, although sometimes it takes a paranoid to see the cracks in the “steel and glass” rhetoric.

Even the school building is without beauty, as beauty is a quality that evades quantification and definition and so has no use in a place of status quo instruction. Growing up, Barthelme also encountered his architect father's theories on the relationship between environment and knowledge. Donald Sr. redesigned the West Columbia Elementary School in Brazoria County, Texas, which *Architectural Forum* called a “half school half circus.”¹³ Donald Sr.'s architectural vision focused on the flow of light and traffic in order to create a “communal feel”¹⁴ as opposed to the isolation created by traditional “no-nonsense” “glass

¹³ “Wirework School: Simplicity + Ingenuity = Low Cost and High Value,” *Architectural Forum*, October 1952, 103-106.

¹⁴ Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 22.

and steel”. Recalling Dewey’s theory of the edifying effect of engaging with one’s environment, in 1960 Donald Sr. wrote an article in *Architectural Forum* in which he argued that there was a fundamental connection between architecture and education, and that new approaches to both disciplines were desperately needed: “I never understood why it was a good idea to learn things in fragments. Few of us have ever met a past participle socially, or passed a quiet evening curled up with a good algebraic equation. We rarely encounter these things isolated from the particular situations in which they are meaningful. What we use in business, or with the family, or with students, is the whole language.”¹⁵ Donald Sr. suggested that previous ways of structuring knowledge’s physical environment led only to the same ways of thinking, and that this new architecture—which he dubbed the “School of Tomorrow”—would not only be more beautiful, it would actually alter the way both students and teachers approached their own work and their relationships to each other: “Whereas previously it was the teacher’s problem to get the information into the students, it was now the pupil’s problem [...] to get the information out of the teacher.” Even if Miss Mandible could come up with “many interesting and lifelike problems” regarding grammar and mathematics, the physical environment itself, into which Joseph is literally squeezed, severely limits the exchange of information in any direction. In “Sentence”, Barthelme also reproaches the conventional Board of Education for not creating a system in which lessons would, in fact, prepare students for a real, and dangerous, world—and teach them the value of irony:

we are mature enough now to stand the shock of learning that much of what we were taught in our youth was wrong, or improperly understood by those who were teaching it, or perhaps shaded a bit, the shading resulting from the personal needs of the teachers, who as human beings had a tendency to introduce some of their hearts blood

¹⁵ Barthelme (Sr.), “Three Ace Schools for the Trump Plan”, *Architectural Forum*. March 1960, 124.

into their work, and sometimes this may not have been of the first water, this heart's blood, and even if they thought they were moving the "knowledge" out, as the Board of Education had mandated, they could have noticed that their sentences weren't having the knockdown power of the new weapons whose bullets tumble end-over-end (CL 113)

Though Barthelme Jr. developed this sensitivity to the physical and psychological educational environment, his dramatisation of the problem does not end in his father's clear solution. In "The Indian Uprising" (printed in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*), Miss R. is described as "a teacher, unorthodox they said, excellent they said, successful with difficult cases, steel shutters on the windows made the houses safe" (UPUA 12), a sentence which, like his father's theories, conflates the environment with those who work in it. Both Miss R. and Miss Mandible are characterised as "unorthodox," which for both Barthelmes is a positive quality, but the teachers also have a "straightline matter-of-factness" about them, as they do not seem to find anything amiss in the situations around them (an Indian uprising, a school that insists upon reschooling thirty-five-year-old men). While Miss Mandible eventually sees past Joseph's status as an eleven-year-old and pursues him amorously—and is, naturally, "charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor" (CBDC 111)—a *Waste Land*-alluding Miss R. is called in to interrogate and, it is implied, torture the narrator: "'You know nothing,' she said, 'you feel nothing, you are locked in a most savage and terrible ignorance, I despise you, my boy, *mon cher*, my heart'" (UPUA 12). Perhaps most tellingly, while Donald Sr. "never understood why it was a good idea to learn things in fragments", his son based his own art upon them. Although Barthelme Jr. shied away from making blanket aesthetic statements (and from having them made about him), a character in "See the Moon?" continues to repeat that "Fragments are the only forms I trust" (UPUA 160).

The figure of the child underserved by modern education was one that Barthelme turned to a number of times in order to explore how the rise of knowingness had eroded the value of an education based in not-knowing. In an undated, unpublished children's book,¹⁶ Barthelme tells the story of Benjamin Ziff, "twelve years old, a resident of New York City, brown hair, thirty-two teeth", who is "an excellent student in math, reading, writing, geography, music—in everything, in fact, except History." In History class, Benjamin gives the wrong answers to factual questions such as "who invented America?" and "how does the famous Gettysburg Address begin?" (*BZ* 1-2), even though he has read all the books in his house, "including the ones that were too hard" (*BZ* 2). Benjamin's head is so full of facts, in fact, that

the things he knew sort of got in front of each other, when it was time to tell someone else—a teacher, for example—about them. He mostly had the right answer, but the answer was an answer to a question that had not yet been asked, or had been asked last week. (*BZ* 2)

Benjamin is not asked to elaborate upon the meaning of the facts he is expected to memorise; "success" in a educative system like this is defined by parroting "to someone else" what one has been told. Barthelme implies that while "Caesar and Cleopatra" (*BZ* 2) is not, in one sense, the answer to "who invented America?", it is in another sense a legitimate response to a question that has not yet been "invented" or has endured throughout History as an unanswerable puzzle (since at least last week and most likely beyond). Reading about Mozart's first songs and Zeus's difficulties with his fellow gods should prompt an inquiry into human invention and artistic intelligence rather than require a recitation of "names, dates, places, battles, inventions, ideas, accomplishments, findings and foundings of armadas and cantatas and suchlike" (*BZ* 2).

¹⁶ *Benjamin Ziff*. Unpublished, undated manuscript. Special Collections, The University of Delaware Library.

Unlike Joseph, who is trapped in Miss Mandible's geography class, Benjamin is granted a respite from his interrogations when he accidentally substitutes horseradish for peanut butter on his peanut-butter-and-horseradish sandwich. This double dose of horseradish induces a dream in which Benjamin finds himself wandering in a fairy tale-like dark wood, "dark as the inside of a can of soup that hadn't been opened yet" (*BZ* 3). In his attempt to exit the forest, Benjamin bumps into a man who introduces himself as Moby Dick, and claims to have invented electric light. Unlike in class, Benjamin discovers that he knows who really invented electric light and that Moby Dick is a whale. But in the dream forest, this information is useless, especially against the men with harpoons who come running after them. In a fairy tale, leaving the woods and entering the "daylit" world should set things right, but when Benjamin and Moby Dick escape the forest, they encounter a man painting an oil painting of "Abraham Lincoln Crossing the Delaware" (*BZ* 7). Upon being informed that it was George Washington who crossed the Delaware, the painter exclaims that he is George Washington. The mix-ups and misunderstandings continue as various figures from history appear and claim to have done things other than what they are known for. By the end of the story, after Ralph Waldo Emerson, Moby Dick, and Benjamin are set upon by dozens of Queen Victorias demanding tea, Benjamin finds that, like Alice in her Wonderland, by surrendering to the nonsensical, not-knowing of the dream, the knowledge he does have is animated in a way that enriches his understanding of the world: "As one's mind grows larger, History becomes easier to live with" (*BZ* 25).

Awakened from his dream by his teacher, Benjamin begins to answer her question about Queen Victoria accurately, but then follows with an account of his dream adventures. In response, the teacher repeats her admonishment: "Benjamin Ziff, you are very confused!"

said the teacher. “You must go back to your books and study some more!” And yet this time, Benjamin’s experience in the world of not-knowing sends him back to his books with an understanding of the value of confusion and the proper use of knowledge:

And in a way she was right. Because there are always new and wonderful and interesting things to know, and hardly anyone knows it all. (*BZ* 27).

Barthelme continued to use the school itself as a locus of the decline of engaged understanding and the rise of knowingness, finding new absurdities within the university’s ivy-covered, ivory towers. “The Party” is concerned with Kierkegaard’s statement that “because of the great increase of knowledge, we had forgotten what it means to exist, and what inwardness signifies.” Fittingly, the story targets academia. “The Party” opens with King Kong, “now an adjunct professor of art history at Rutgers, co-author of a text on tomb sculpture,” entering a party by climbing “through the window” in an attempt to “make himself interesting” (*S* 58). Right away we find a figure of “primitive” mystery and innocence and not-yet-sublimated aggression, “tamed” (a word also used by Susan Sontag to describe the process of interpretation in “Against Interpretation”¹⁷) by academia, the very apogee of knowingness. Even King Kong’s knowledge of the meaning of ancient cultural images and rites of death, as well as his effort to be “interesting,” cannot save him from being subsumed into the banality of this party; were King Kong to write about the death and entombment of his own original mythical power, he would in effect illustrate this devolution. As such, although “The Party” takes place in an academic setting, the story explores a very different form of not-knowing from the literary, philosophical, Mallarmean not-knowing of “The Educational Experience” or “Me and Miss Mandible”. Instead of esoteric, abstract,

¹⁷ “In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable.” (Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 8.)

cerebral not-knowing, the story is concerned with primordial or animal mystery. The two forms of absence of knowledge may have a kinship, but it is surely a distant one.

Barthelme makes only a passing reference to Kafka in “The Party,” but it is clear that Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy” provides the textual backdrop for Barthelme’s story. In Kafka’s story, an ape is supposed to report to the pillars of the scientific community what it is like to be an ape. The reason he can give a report, of course, actually prevents him from addressing the Academy’s questions, a failure he explains by relating his journey (one can hardly call it an “evolution”) from ape- to human-hood. The ape left his ape nature behind, he says, not because of a desire for freedom, which men do not even truly understand, but simply in order to “get out” of a cage, a contraption designed to hold creatures that act like apes, not those who act like human beings.¹⁸ In a display of compassion that is devastating in its irony, the ape recognises that his “forced career” as a human is not so different from those who are born human; no one can completely eradicate his animality. He says that, as an ape, over the years “the strong wind that blew after me out of my past began to slacken; today it is only a gentle puff of air that plays around my heels;” but he reminds his audience that “your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind that lies behind you, cannot be further removed from you than mine is from me. Yet everyone on earth feels a tickling at the heels; the small chimpanzee and the great Achilles alike.”¹⁹ One gets the sense reading Barthelme’s stories that this “tickling at the heels” is both the source of great misery and the solution to such pain. If the knowingness that comes with accepting one’s “forced career” could smother once and for all that “gentle puff of air,” perhaps no one would feel the existential anguish of yearning for primordial mystery. It is the fact that one can still feel such

¹⁸ Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, 253.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

paradoxically transcendental mystery “tickling at the heels” that so many of Barthelme’s characters have that “insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal” in their eyes that “no one else” besides the artist sees; Barthelme does, and “cannot bear it.”²⁰

Barthelme’s story picks up where Kafka’s ends: what happens to the ape when its performances of humanness are no longer new and exciting, when in fact such a creature then joins the Academy? For Barthelme’s ape, neither walking in the door like a person nor climbing in the window like a film monster are any longer “interesting” moves; the original actions were “used up” as soon as they were performed, and this second parodic enactment of Kong’s cinematic debut elicits only “loud exclamations of fatigue and disgust”—the signs of knowingness—as the guests go about “examining the situation in the light of their own needs and emotions, hoping the ape was real or papier-mâché according to their temperaments, or wondering whether other excitements were possible out in the crisp, white night” (*S* 57-58). This is the answer to the question of what becomes of this creature: as in “The Balloon,” any event or object is apprehended only in terms of the audience’s “own needs and emotions”, not on the basis of the object itself. Even though King Kong is not as indeterminate as the balloon, he is still a surface for the guests’ projected desires and complaints (no one can even muster the emotional energy to escape their knowingness long enough to be afraid). Even those whose “temperaments” would prefer a real Kong and not a papier-mâché simulacrum have long ago “papered over” (*SW* 12) the mystery of the real Kong, and look “out in the crisp, white night” for the next excitement.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 259.

Snow White, Barthelme's first complete novel, is a self-conscious investigation of the ways in which fairy tales, economic and social institutions, linguistic and sexual conventions, and love are arbitrary structures. Much like the textbook's "interesting and lifelike problems", these ridiculous simulacra are willingly accepted as real experience. The Brothers Grimm fairy tale provides only the most basic outline for Barthelme's story: Snow White lives with the seven dwarves who found her in the forest, is under constant threat from the wicked queen, and dreams about her handsome prince. In Barthelme's version, however, Snow White is a college-educated, libidinous, dissatisfied young woman whose domestic arrangement with the dwarves involves regularly having sex with her in the shower. The dwarves, whose names are so ordinary as to border on the ironic (Dan, Clem, Bill, etc.), wash buildings, tend vats full of Chinese baby food, and manufacture plastic buffalo humps. While modern life has done its best to squelch any mystery or magic that comes with a fairy tale, not-knowing, in the form of self-education and art, begins to creep back into the dwarves' once-symbiotic arrangement.

The dwarves fight the invasion of not-knowing tooth and nail. When Bill, for example, begins to feel ill at the thought of physical contact—an allusion, perhaps, to Barthelme's call for a nearly tactile reader participation—the dwarves turn immediately to knowledge to try to nip this mystery in the bud:

Bill is tired of Snow White now. But he cannot tell her. No, that would not be the way. Bill can't bear to be touched. That is new too. To have anyone touch him is unbearable. [...] We speculate that he doesn't want to be involved in human situations any more. A withdrawal. Withdrawal is one of the four modes of dealing with anxiety. We speculate that his reluctance to be touched springs from that. Dan does not go along with the anxiety theory. Dan does not believe in anxiety. Dan speculates that Bill's reluctance to be touched is a physical manifestation of a metaphysical condition that is not anxiety. But he is the only one who speculates that. The rest of us support anxiety. (*SW* 10)

Bill is not allowed simply to feel bad; he must have his condition speculated and commented upon until it is drained of its power. As Barthelme shows in “Florence Green is 81”, one of the enemies of genuine feeling, especially the kind of psychic pain that may lead to a creative breakthrough, is, ironically, the modern tendency to psychologise it away. The nuances of emotion and real distress are smothered by textbook taxonomies (“Withdrawal is one of the four modes of dealing with anxiety”). Such an observation was not new; Kierkegaard wrote in *The Present Age* that “In fact there are handbooks for everything, and very soon education, all the world over, will consist in learning a greater or lesser number of comments by heart, and people will excel according to their capacity for singling out the various facts like a printer singling out the letters, but completely ignorant of the meaning of anything” (*PA* 88-89).

As a modern, ambitious woman, Snow White has attended “Beaver College” (jokes regarding the nature of women’s colleges abound), where she studied:

Modern Woman, Her Privileges and Responsibilities and English Romantic Poets II: Shelley, Byron, Keats. Then she studied Theoretical Foundations of Psychology: mind, consciousness, unconscious mind, personality, the self, interpersonal relations, psychosexual norms, social games, groups, adjustment, conflict, authority, individuation, integration and mental health. Then she studied Oil Painting I bringing to the first class as instructed Cadmium Yellow Light, Cadmium Yellow Medium, Cadmium Red Light, Alizarin Crimson, Ultramarine Blue, Cobalt Blue, Viridian, Ivory Black, Raw Umber, Yellow Ochre, Burnt Sienna, White. [...] Then she studied Personal Resources I and II: self-evaluation, developing the courage to respond to the environment, opening and using the mind, individual experience, training, the use of time, mature redefinition of goals, action projects” (*SW* 31).

The list goes on.²¹ Barthelme’s critique of the liberal arts education echoes Kierkegaard’s complaint that “there are handbooks for everything,” from painting to, as in the quote above,

²¹ Similarly, in “Heliotrope” in *Guilty Pleasures*, Barthelme describes a West coast college at which students can sign up for “Vegetarian and Natural Foods Cooking, Happiness and Freedom, Hypnosis with Color, Outdoor Meditation, Intensive, Tide Pool Life, Two-Stroke Motorcycle Maintenance, Introduction to Gambling, or Stained Glass” (*GP* 99).

“personal resources”; it is no wonder, according to Barthelme, that no one can think or feel anymore. They are too busy “developing the courage to respond to the environment” in a classroom, or studying “interpersonal relations” without having any. This approach to education develops only knowingness—and if there is any hint of not-knowing, it is a paltry, watered-down version: “We can take Basic Astrology, D-20: ‘Instructress is student of the vast harmonious order of the universe.’ And so can we be, if only we can shed our narrow paranoid pale untogether judgmental Valium-popping Eastern ways” (*GP* 98). The art and literature of the past, similarly, exists only as a benchmark against which to measure one’s superiority: “You, dear friend, can teach a course in Paying the Telephone Bill, and I will teach one in Napping, and we will both, at long last, be avenged upon that fancy-Dan Lionel Trilling” (*GP* 99) (Trilling, with whom Barthelme was personally acquainted, taught “Colloquium on Important Books” at Columbia University for 30 years²²). Even the most “natural” of skills devolves into a kind of overeducated unthinkingness. Snow White describes a party at which “the mothers” discuss child-raising by a very dubious book: “‘Spare the bat and the child rots,’ said the mothers. [...] ‘But how do you know when to employ it? The magic moment?’” “We have a book which tells us such things,” the mothers said. “We look it up in the book. On page 331 begins a twelve-page discussion of batting the baby. A well-worn page”” (*SW* 112).

Snow White’s curriculum comes after bold, capitalised, centre-justified statements:

²² Barthelme’s first wife, Marilyn Marrs, gave Barthelme Trilling’s *The Liberal Imagination* in 1954. Barthelme solicited an article for *Forum* from Diana Trilling in 1958, praising her *Partisan Review* pieces (Donald Barthelme Literary Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries). Barthelme and Lionel Trilling met in person in the early 1960s at a party thrown by William Phillips, the co-founder and former editor of *Partisan Review*. In Phillips’ obituary in *The New York Times*, the author mentions that “Mr. Phillips tried several times to recreate the enchanted intellectual world he knew, bringing together warring partisans like Howe, Sontag, Lionel and Diana Trilling, and Norman Podhoretz. But at one soiree, after Donald Barthelme attacked Lionel Trilling’s novel, and Diana Trilling retorted by savaging Barthelme’s work, Mr. Phillips understood his task. ‘It was clear,’ he said, ‘that I was trying to mate lambs and wolves.’” (Berger, “William Phillips, Co-Founder and Soul of Partisan Review, Dies at 94.” *The New York Times*, 14 September 2002.)

THE SECOND GENERATION OF ENGLISH ROMANTICS INHERITED THE PROBLEMS OF THE FIRST, BUT COMPLICATED BY THE EVILS OF INDUSTRIALISM AND POLITICAL REPRESSION. ULTIMATELY THEY FOUND AN ANSWER NOT IN SOCIETY BUT IN VARIOUS FORMS OF INDEPENDENCE FROM SOCIETY:

HEROISM
ART
SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE

(*SW* 30)

It follows that “Cadmium Yellow Light, Cadmium Yellow Medium, Cadmium Red Light” and “opening and using the mind, individual experience”—which, all combined, should create great art but here wither in the classroom—should come after such a textbook-dry prose that nonetheless singles out ideas of heroism, art, and spiritual transcendence. The Romantics were no strangers to the idea of unobtainable love; Snow White should have learned something from her course on Shelley, Byron, and Keats (Barthelme doesn’t specify the contents of the syllabus, but one can imagine a study of *Don Juan* and “Le Belle Dame Sans Merci”), but the modern atmosphere is one in which the attempt to express such sentiments have “a kind of low-grade concrete-block quality,” regardless of how “authentic” the suffering (*SW* 47). In this environment, even a course on English Romantic Poets would “paper over” not-knowing in favour of a kind of understanding more appropriate to cocktail party banter. As Thurber and White point out, the vogue for progressive education infiltrated all aspects of life, as it provided an easily digestible understanding of the world's mysteries:

Sex, which had hitherto been a physical expression, became largely mental. The whole order of things changed. To prepare for marriage, young girls no longer assembled a hope chest—they read books on abnormal psychology. If they finally did marry, they found themselves with a large number of sex books on hand, but almost

no pretty underwear. Most of them, luckily, never married at all—just continued to read.²³

In fact, it is difficult to strike exactly the right tone for one's suffering and even for the relief of it. In "Heliotrope" in *Guilty Pleasures*, Barthelme writes that although "we can take Turkish: 'Mellow low-key course'", "We are sour and high-key; that is part of what ails us—how could we not have known?" (*GP* 98).

What inspires Snow White to take all of these classes is the beginning of a search for not-knowing through knowledge, and it is this search that has disrupted the dwarves' contentment. Again, "Heliotrope" offers Snow White an articulation of her own desire: "We have been frittering. Let us fritter no more. Or we have been seeking answers. That is a mistake. 'When an answer is found, it is not the end but only a beginning.' Why didn't we think of that? The Open University offers us beginnings and beginnings and beginnings, and what do we want more than beginnings?" (*GP* 98). Here the parallel is to Eliot's meditation on writing in *Four Quartets*: "What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make and end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start from."²⁴ Taken properly, then, "beginnings and beginnings and beginnings" could lead to not-knowing, as an answer is never reached, only further explored. On the other hand, as Kierkegaard and to some extent Barthelme suggest is more often the case, each beginning remains only a beginning, another point of quick deliberation and even quicker abandonment. Alas, even though Snow White has begun to write a "dirty great poem four pages long", her (albeit diverse and extensive) education in reflection, rather than in not-knowing, has only prepared her to create something just like Paul's "new thing, a dirty great banality in white, poor-white and off-white, leaned

²³ Thurber and White, *Is Sex Necessary? Or Why You Feel the Way You Do*, 12.

²⁴ Eliot, "Little Gidding". *Four Quartets*, 58 (lines 214-216).

up against the wall” (*SW* 54). Formal education in the present age has transformed the Romantics—some of the first celebrants of mystery as a precondition for art—into salable, banal knowledge.

Although Snow White complains about wanting to hear “some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!” no one in Snow White can keep silent; their banal babbling is superfluous garbage speech. Before he sets out on his (unsuccessful) journey to the monastery to become a monk, for example, Paul sits in his bath (“baff”) “writing” a palinode (there is no mention of actual pen and paper), a poem which undoes a prior beginning. He thinks that ““Perhaps it is wrong to have favorites among the forms [...] But retraction has a special allure for me. I would wish to retract everything, if I could, so that the whole written world would be...’ More hot water fell into the baff. ‘I would retract the green sea, and the brown fish in it, and I would especially retract that long black hair hanging from that window’” (*SW* 19). There are, Barthelme suggests, no modern mystics, at least not here; Paul, after all, on his way to the monastery, becomes distracted by his own princely image. Once again, Barthelme concretises Kierkegaard’s observation in *The Present Age* regarding the “inwardness” of religion and the turn away from this inward silence to the “talkativeness” of external searching (*PA* 43). Paul approaches silence (“...”) and perhaps, eventually, not-knowing; but he simply cannot stop talking, like the bath that cannot stop filling, and he cannot actually retract an expression if he hasn’t made one. For all of his talkativeness, he either cannot finish a thought or his thoughts have little meaning. Eventually he will make the “new thing,” the “great banality in white”, but because it is so new it cannot be a retraction of anything. He could retract Snow White’s hair, insofar as it is a poem (she has actually “written” two poems, one on white paper and one in her black hair), but Paul just sees

domestic “responsibilities” in it—another sign of knowingness—rather than poetry. Paul’s talkativeness, then, is a sign of his turn outward rather than a commitment to the inward study required of a monk.

When confronted with Snow White’s poem, her cry for connection and meaning, the dwarves, “enemis” of not-knowing and estranged from “inward” experience, cannot understand it:

The poem remained between us like an immense, wrecked railroad car. “Touching the poem,” we said, “is it rhymed or free?” “Free,” Snow White said, “free, free, free.” “And the theme?” “One of the great themes,” she said, “that is all I can reveal at this time.” “Could you tell us the first word?” “The first word,” she said, “is ‘bandagedandwounded.’” “But...” “Run together,” she said. We mentally reviewed the great themes in the light of the word or words, “bandagedandwounded.” “How is it that bandage precedes wound?” “A metaphor of the self armoring itself against the gaze of The Other.” “The theme is loss, we take it.” (*SW* 65)

“Bandagedandwounded” is certainly not one of “the words [she] always hear[s]!” (*SW* 12). It is also an attempt to ward off interpretation, a “self-armoring” in incomprehensibility against the wound that knowingness inflicts. If only the dwarves could “hear” instead of “mentally reviewing” the poem, they might be able to access “inward experience.” In a reverse of Snow White’s meaning, for the dwarves, the “wound” of incomprehensibility must be quickly bandaged with knowingness. But of course this prevents them from hearing it and the promise of not-knowing that lives with them every day:

“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, and cleave instead to the towel.” [...] (*SW* 106-107)

Having “got” or “completed” the theme, having “apprehended” and “cleaved” to the towel, they can move on to other matters, like tending the vats. But Snow White has begun to engage with not-knowing, which, to the dwarves, is just “slippery and untrustworthy and expensive effluvia”.

The Idea of Sainthood: Barthelme, Education, and Religion

Barthelme received his first lessons in the relationship between not-knowing, education, and religion growing up in Houston, where he attended the Basilian-run St. Anne’s Elementary and then St. Thomas Catholic High School. Barthelme’s family also went to St. Anne’s Church regularly. One of the Basilian’s fundamental principles, by which both the schools and the church were run, asserts that “Catholic boys cannot be built into staunch Catholic men unless in their school days they are subjected to discipline. It is a religious heresy to hold that a member of a community must be left to work out his own salvation.”²⁵ The juxtaposition between the Basilian Order’s hundred-year-old doctrine and the church and school in which it was taught, which Daugherty describes as “a distinctive collage of styles, with a Spanish exterior and a Byzantine chapel finished with an exposed concrete mosaic”,²⁶ mirrors the amalgamation of Barthelme’s own ideas regarding education, not-knowing, and art, as well as enriched Barthelme’s aesthetic upbringing within the context of his father’s theories of the relationship between architecture and content. Though not pious, Barthelme struggled throughout his artistic life with theological and ethical questions; most of his stories

²⁵ From the archives at www.basilian.org, quoted in Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 28.

²⁶ Daugherty, *Hiding Man*, 29. In “A City of Churches”, Barthelme writes, tongue firmly in cheek: “Both sides of the street were solidly lined with churches, standing shoulder to shoulder in a variety of architectural styles. The Bethel Baptist stood next to the Holy Messiah Free Baptist, St. Paul’s Episcopal next to Grace Evangelical Covenant. Then came the First Christian Science, the Church of God, All Souls, Our Lady of Victory, the Society of Friends, the Assembly of God, and the Church of the Holy Apostles. The spires and steeples of the traditional buildings were jammed in next to the broad imaginative flights of the “contemporary” designs” (S 49). Not only architectural mixtures but religious mixtures characterise the postmodern landscape.

contain at least a passing, but by no means insignificant, reference to religion. In an interview in 1979, Heide Ziegler asked Barthelme about a line in “The Leap”, which came as a response to Kierkegaard’s titular assertion that “Purity of heart is to will one thing” (1848). Barthelme had written that instead, “Purity of heart is, rather, to will several things, and not to know which is the better, truer thing, and to worry about this, forever” (*GD* 132):

Ziegler: Do you believe that today idealism is bound to consist in willing several things and in worrying about the necessary choice? In other words: that, as compared to Kierkegaard, the very concept of the ideal is subject to historical change?

Barthelme: Wouldn’t it also be fair to say that there is no such thing as a single ideal? For example, Communism or Christianity or whatever. Since we have lived through and experienced the partial failure of many things proposed to us as ideals, there are always mixed feelings—mixed feelings is our condition, our mental set. Not one ideal—mixtures! All of these ideas are useful, but none are absolutes.²⁷

As in “Hiding Man”, there is salvation to be found in both *Bride of Frankenstein* and in “The Index, the Last Judgment, / Heaven and Hell” (as well as in various “female parts”) (*CBDC* 33)—in Barthelme’s present age, no one ideal, religious, political, or aesthetic, holds the answer. In “A City of Churches”, when Cecilia is asked her denomination, she replies: “I can will my dreams,” [...] “I can dream whatever I want. If I want to dream that I’ve having a good time, in Paris or some other city, all I have to do is go to sleep and I will dream that dream. I can dream whatever I want” (*S* 53). For Kierkegaard, a certain individual relationship to and practice of Christianity was still a legitimate “one thing”. Christianity, for Barthelme, is still “useful”; the difference is that popular culture, poetry, dreams, love, sex, and art are also in the running for “the better, truer thing”.

“The Catechist”, like “The Photographs” and “Hiding Man”, compares a religious not-knowing to its secular counterpart. “The Catechist”, too, offers love, and especially the

²⁷ Ziegler and Bigsby, *The Radical Imagination and the Liberal Tradition*, 54.

sexual expression of it, as an alternative to Christian belief and doctrine. In the story, two priests, one lapsed, meet daily in a park, where they have the same rather Socratic conversation in which, like the Baltimore Catechism, “No detail changes” (S 119). This catechism, however, vacillates between secular concerns and religious doctrine:

“Would you say, originally, that you had a vocation? Heard a call?”

“I heard many things. Screams. Suites for unaccompanied cello. I did not hear a call.”

“Nevertheless—”

“Nevertheless I went to the clerical-equipment store and purchased a summer cassock and a winter cassock. The summer cassock has short sleeves. I purchased a black hat.”

“And the lady’s husband?”

“He is a psychologist. He works in the limits of sensation. He is attempting to define precisely the two limiting sensations in the sensory continuum, the upper limit and the lower limit. He is often at the lab. He is measuring vanishing points.”

“An irony.” (S 124)

Like the protagonist in “Hiding Man”, the lapsed priest “hears” secular calls to a study of the same not-knowing—accessed through pain and art, for example—that the highest incarnation of religion is meant to address. The irony to which the practicing priest refers—which produces its own irony by escaping the attempt to pin it down—is that the other priest and the husband of the woman with whom he is in love actually share the same profession, just with different names, uniforms, and responsibilities. They are both in the business of measuring the “vanishing points” of human understanding, one from a psychological perspective and one from a religious position. Not-knowing, however, cannot be measured, and so both are doomed to fail. The pairing of the two priests and the lapsed priest and the psychologist recall Kierkegaard’s principle in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* of a Christian “inverted dialectic”, a sort of double vision that is able to see both the worldly and spiritual concurrently, to apprehend at once both redemption and the sin that qualifies it.

“The Catechist” takes up the doubleness of love in both its divine and human expressions:

He says: "Let us discuss love."

I say: "I know nothing about it. Unless of course you refer to Divine love."

"I had in mind love as it is found in the works of Scheler, who holds that love is an aspect of phenomenological knowledge, and Carroll, who holds that 'tis love, 'tis love, that—"

"I know nothing about it." (*S* 121)

Although it is the lapsed priest who is in love with a woman, it is the practicing, presumably celibate priest who is well-versed in the philosophical and literary theories of love. His reference to Max Scheler suggests that he has at least read about Scheler's idea of "an attitude of spiritual seeing...something which otherwise remains hidden...",²⁸ which, in another instance of Barthelmean irony, means that the practicing priest has more insight into not-knowing than the one who has left the fold to explore truths outside of the Christian establishment. And yet the spectre of knowledge and knowingness hovers over the discussion: "The catechist opens his book. He reads: 'How to deal with the educated.'" (*S* 121). Near the end of their conversation, the priest takes from his pocket a button "on which the word LOVE is printed. He pins the button on my cassock, above the belt, below the collar" (*S* 122), between the sign of spiritual devotion and the locus of sexual love.

It is the "strength of the absurd", here reflected in the placement of the LOVE button, that lies at the heart of Barthelme's idea of postmodernism as a set of "mixtures": far from being a "resignation" or "assent" to the ordinariness and smallness of life, as Alan Wilde would have it, Barthelme's fiction is in fact an exploration—and test—of the capabilities of Kierkegaard's knight of faith, and an identification of knights of resignation, within the modern world. The knights of resignation, dedicated as they are to maintaining their devout mien, "are readily recognizable, their gait is gliding, bold" (*FT* 67). Their individuality is obvious and admirable, but it is not complete. The paradox of the knight of faith, by contrast,

²⁸ Scheler, *Selected Philosophical Essays*, 137.

is that he neither says nor does anything to distinguish himself from the crowd. As Kierkegaard says, he could be a tax-gatherer, a pen-pusher, a postman, a capitalist, a sixteen-year-old girl, or even a cheesemonger (*FT* 68): “But those who wear the jewel of faith can easily disappoint, for their exterior bears a remarkable similarity to what infinite resignation itself as much as faith scorns, namely the bourgeois philistine” (*FT* 67). The only known knights of faith have been the Virgin Mary and Abraham, but, says Kierkegaard, as it is the nature of knights of faith to go unrecognised, they may be walking among the general public at this very moment.

“The Photographs” in *Guilty Pleasures* parodies a theoretical encounter with the divine by engaging with Kierkegaard’s ideas regarding objectivity and subjectivity in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In the story, two scientists, Dr. Winston “Winnie” Watnick-Mealie, F. R. S., and Dr. Reginald “Reggie” Hobson, F. R. S., discover photographs of the human soul captured by a space mission to photograph Jupiter. Barthelme even includes the photographs of these human souls, but rather than the ethereal paragons of beauty one might hope they would be, they are decidedly ugly and pedestrian looking. The description of the photographs goes into exhaustive detail: “They were made by Dr. Reginald Hobson, F. R. S., of Britain’s Cavendish Laboratory, using Kodak spectroscopic plates type IIIa-J baked for five hours at 65°C. under dry N₂ before exposure” (*GP* 153). Here Barthelme parodies the scientific effort to categorise, to define, and finally to completely know something that is fundamentally mysterious and belongs to a realm outside of human understanding. In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard distinguishes the objective truth of Christianity, which is determined by critical sources such as the Church and Christian Biblical doctrine,

from the subjective truth, which is ascertained by the individual and appropriated into the individual's life, even at the risk of contradicting the Church:

Faith does not result from straightforward scholarly deliberation, nor does it come directly; on the contrary, in this objectivity one loses that infinite, personal, impassioned interestedness, which is the condition of faith, the *ubique et nusquam* [everywhere and nowhere] in which faith can come into existence. (*CUP* 26)

In contrast to this piling up of objective technical jargon, the actual dialogue between the two scientists is thoroughly idiosyncratic:

“Looks rather like a frying pan.”

“Yes, it does, rather.”

“A heavily, uh, corroded frying pan. You see that handle sort of part, over to the right.”

“Yes, I noticed that. Looks rather like a, ah, handle.”

“A bit used-looking, the whole thing.”

“Quite.”

“And then there's that, ah, knuckle sort of thing there at the top. What d'you make of that, Reggie?”

“Haven't the faintest, Winnie. What you might call an anomaly.” (*GP* 155)

There is a sense here that although Reggie and Winnie's conversation is far from scientific, it actually describes the soul more accurately than Kodak spectroscopic plates type IIIa-Js can. While far from a Socratic dialogue (Plato does not record the banal “uhs”, “ahs” “rathers” and “quites” in his account), this conversation engages in the same kind of continuous questioning, revision, and subjective assessment that Kierkegaard praised in Socrates.

Despite the humorous banality of the scientist's conversation, Barthelme manages to circle back to a fundamental issue in his exploration of religion, love, knowingness, and not-knowing. Shifting rather awkwardly within a potential explanation of why souls are so ugly, namely that “there is sin and all that, of course” (*GP* 156), Winnie confesses that he has been having an affair with Reggie's wife, Dorothea. Fittingly, the affair started in the most banal way possible, at Marks & Spencer, while Dorothea was looking for “a sort of burnt-orange

thread” for tatting a bedspread and Winnie for a thimble for his wife (“I bought two, actually. In case she misplaced one, she’d have the other, you see. Sort of a back-up system.” “Um.” (*GP* 157)). Reggie takes the news with a measure of stoicism mixed with knowingness, steering the conversation back to the photographs and the problem of what to do with them. But of course love, sex, and marriage, as instances of the overlap of human practicality and religious idealism, are exactly the kind of thing that the soul is about and for. While they may not be able to articulate it exactly (they are humans, after all, not spectroscopic plates) they do eventually get to the core of Kierkegaard’s argument in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that all of religious and secular knowledge must address the question of what it means to exist as a human being (*CUP* 203). Responsible now for a kind of knowledge that would forever alter what it means to exist as a human being, they debate the pros and cons of publishing the photographs:

“Well, Reggie, it’s what you might call a nice question. There’s our responsibility to science and truth and all that. But aren’t we sort of in the position of those chaps who made the atom bomb and then were sorry afterward?”

“Yes, I’d say we were, actually. Rather.”

“It seems to me to boil down to this: Are we better off with souls, or just possibly without them?”

“Yes, I see what you mean. You prefer the uncertainty.”

“Exactly. It’s more creative. Take for example my, ah, arrangement with your wife, Dorothea. Stippled with uncertainty. At moments, we are absolutely quaking with nonspecific anxiety. I enjoy it. Dorothea enjoys it. The humdrum is defeated. Momentarily, of course.”

“Yes, I can understand that. Gives the thing a bit of zest.”

“Yes. You’d be taking away people’s zest. They’d all have to go around being good and all that. You’d get the Nobel Prize, and no one, repeat no one, would ever speak to you again. People do like their zest, Reggie.” (*GP* 158-159)

What is key to the meaning of existence, Barthelme and Kierkegaard suggest, is the uncertainty, the not-knowingness, of Man’s existential landscape: if Abraham, for example, had ultimate certainty of God’s intentions for him and Isaac, religious faith (and, as Winnie

points out, creativity) would be neutralised. Winnie likens the knowledge of the existence of the human soul to the invention of the atom bomb, suggesting that the price one pays for such “divine” knowledge is astronomical. And yet, despite this profound responsibility, Reggie and Winnie’s “thoughts are thin and flimsy as lace [...] The thoughts in their hearts are too paltry” (*E/O* 48) to even have a proper affair: rather Winnie and Dorothea have an “arrangement”.

The scientists ultimately decide that the knowledge of the existence of the human soul would extinguish the “zest” that defeats the “humdrum” of quotidian life. Of course, Barthelme brings such lofty philosophy down to earth by equating the question of the existence of a human soul to the “nonspecific anxiety” of a common affair. The irony here is that, as present-age scientists whose jurisdiction should be the realm of human knowledge, Winnie and Reggie do not want the responsibility of Nobel Prize-level knowledge, as such knowledge bumps up against morality and not-knowing.

In his exploration of education and religion, Barthelme takes up the figure of the disguised not-knower in “The Temptation of St. Anthony”. While Kierkegaard informs the foundations of Barthelme’s thinking on education and religion, Barthelme’s artistic commitment to the human world ultimately leads him to once again “disagree” with the philosopher’s absolute religious recommendation. For Barthelme, it is the artist who deals in “la vie quotidienne”—in Baby Ruth wrappers and earthly love (despite the “immanence” (*PA* 67) of both)—who, like the Knight of Faith, at once resigns himself to and continues to see the divine potential in the inescapably human thingness of the world by turning it into art. Faith in a divine, for Barthelme, involves the same kind of investigation into not-knowing that characterised his approach to art: religion requires “approaching the object, tapping it,

shaking it, holding it to his ear to hear the roaring within”. “Asking questions” of religion, it turns out, is equivalent to “asking questions of the world directly” (*NK* 4). This is the kind of education which both Kierkegaard and Barthelme advocate: an active, immediate examination of the world that, ideally, leads into more mystery. For Barthelme, however, unlike for Kierkegaard, the spiritual and artistic investigation of religion leads back to the potential for both knowingness and not-knowing in daily life. As Barthelme writes in “Questions About Angels”, “It is a curiosity of writing about angels that, very often, one turns out to be writing about men. The themes are twinned” (*CL* 131).

In “The Temptation of St. Anthony”, Barthelme transposes Kierkegaard’s knight of faith and Flaubert’s lyrical subject to a modern, ordinary, unnamed American town. When St. Anthony moves in, his presence is met with annoyance on one end of the spectrum and hostility at the other:

Yes, the saint was underrated quite a bit, then, mostly by people who didn’t like things that were ineffable. I think that’s quite understandable—that kind of thing can be extremely irritating, to some people. After all, everything is hard enough without having to deal with something that is not tangible and clear. The higher orders of abstraction are just a nuisance, to some people, although to others, of course, they are quite interesting. (*S* 149)

As in “The Balloon”, this strange object that one day appears divides opinion, revealing at the same time fear, inarticulate interest, and irritation at the inexplicable. Even worse than the balloon, however, which at least was “tangible”, what St. Anthony represents lies beyond even rational thought. The narrator, who the reader may assume is one of the people who finds the saint “interesting”, goes on to try to explain the rationale behind the townspeople’s reactions:

And some were actually angry at the idea of sainthood—not at the saint himself, whom everyone liked, more or less, except for a few, but about the idea he represented, especially since it was not in a book or somewhere, but actually present,

in the community. Of course some people went around saying that he “thought he was better than everybody else,” and that you had to take these people aside and tell them that they had misperceived the problem, that it wasn’t a matter of simple conceit, with which we are all familiar, but rather something pure and mystical, from the realm of the extraordinary, as it were; unearthly. But a lot of people don’t like things that are unearthly, the things of this earth are good enough for them, and they don’t mind telling you so. There is a sort of hatred going around for people who have lifted their sights above the common run. Probably it has always been this way. (*S* 149-150)

Like the balloon, St. Anthony exists on a higher plane (this time figuratively rather than literally). And like the balloon, St. Anthony elicits “a certain timidity” and a “lack of trust” (*UPUA* 24) from people who would prefer their mystery safely contained in books (in this case, the Bible, but the sentiment applies to any work of art) where it can be studied, commented upon, and even used for practical and political purposes. The ineffable, which includes religion and art, is no good for a community based upon knowingness, as it just leads to unpredictable, inexplicable, and above all disruptive thoughts and events. At first, the townspeople attempt to neutralise this new, threateningly mysterious presence:

The first thing to do, then, was to prove that he was a fake. Strange as it may sound in retrospect, that was the original general opinion, because who could believe the reverse was the case? Because it wasn’t easy, in the midst of all the other things you had to think about, to imagine the marvelous. [...] Anyhow, it was pretty savage, in the beginning, the way the local people went around trying to get something on him. (*S* 152)

A member of a society centred around knowingness and cultural oneupmanship would never confess to belief in the “marvelous”—it would come across as embarrassingly naïve. Ironically, once the townspeople—as a group, crucially—grudgingly accept a locus of not-knowing in their midst, they take offense not at his mysticism, but at his “ordinariness”. People ring the bell to his apartment (even more disappointingly “ordinary” than a house) pretending to have the wrong address, just to get a peek inside. When they get a look at St. Anthony’s Kaufman’s-purchased beige wall-to-wall carpeting and coffee table and brown

bedspread, they are “slightly shocked” that such a “pure and mystical” individual should be “like anybody else” (*S* 151). While they do not like to admit it (they claim they are only “slightly” shocked), this kind of disillusionment is more upsetting than had St. Anthony turned out to be the Devil in disguise. Kierkegaard had observed this phenomenon in his own society:

Life’s existential tasks have lost the interest of reality; illusion cannot build a sanctuary for the divine growth of inwardness which ripens to decisions. One man is curious about another, every one is undecided, and their way of escape is to say that some one must come who will do something—and then they will bet on him. (*PA* 54)

At least the Devil would “do something” (and probably choose more exciting decor). A life of passive deliberation and shopping at Kaufman’s (where one is likely to “die” of beige) cannot facilitate “the divine growth of inwardness”; according to Kierkegaard, such growth is only possible with a life of ethical and religious behavior and action. But even the promise of “escape” is too threatening, and must be couched in concerns about the practicalities of one’s daily life.

Like the biblical St. Anthony, Barthelme’s saint eventually moves out into the desert. While the ancient St. Anthony, having exiled himself to an ascetic life, faces allurements of greed, lust, and material comfort, Barthelme’s saint faces a far more mundane, and yet far more insidious, temptation: “St. Anthony’s major temptation, in terms of his living here, was perhaps this: ordinary life” (*S* 152). As Barthelme shows throughout his fiction, ordinary life is both the source of knowingness and alienation and of not-knowing and melioration. The modern world has pushed out Flaubert’s temptress’s “treasures shut up in galleries, where they are lost as in a wood [...] islands round as pieces of silver all covered with mother-of-pearl, whose shores make music with the beating of the liquid waves that roll over the

sand”²⁹; now all the world has to offer are beige carpets and buffalo humps. The temptress’s treasures, paradoxically, require not-knowing to access; these aesthetic delights require an artist’s imagination. Beige carpets require nothing but a desire to conform. The line between the ease of the banal and the difficulty of not-knowing is thin and faint. And yet in taking up Kierkegaard’s idea of the knight of faith, Barthelme makes an implicit case for the not-knowing potential in ordinary life. As the narrator remarks, upon having observed St. Anthony in his eremitic desert dwelling, “I have seen him, however, looking curiously at a transistor radio” (S 154), an image of mysterious and unseen communication.

Like “The Temptation of St. Anthony”, “The Genius” is both a parody of education and of the kitschy cult of genius, and a serious investigation of the isolation of an artist deemed, or rather, doomed, a genius. In addition to a further engagement with Kierkegaard, the story also reflects Kant’s idea of the connections between art, education, and religion: for Kant, the genius is one who “gives the rule to Art”, who forms Nature into the beautiful based upon the genius’s original “concept” that cannot be known in advance of the work being created and, afterward, cannot be extracted from the work of art without destroying the work. Not-knowing, and the impossibility of educating someone into a genius, is fundamental to Kant’s definition: the genius “cannot show how his Ideas, so rich in fancy and yet so full of thought, come together in his head, simply because he does not know and therefore cannot teach others.”³⁰

In “The Genius”, Barthelme takes up several depictions of genius, gathered at first from Natanson’s class and then accumulated over a lifetime of philosophical, art theoretical,

²⁹ Flaubert, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, 40.

³⁰ Kant, *A Critique of Judgement*, 103-104.

and literary investigation.³¹ In regard to Kierkegaard, Barthelme hews to Kierkegaard's short essay, "Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle" (1847). Published in English alongside *The Present Age* since 1940, Kierkegaard's essay makes an emphatic distinction between those whose brilliance is inborn and those who have been divinely inspired. To illustrate his point, Kierkegaard names St. Paul as one who has been mistakenly labeled a genius, claiming that those who praise St. Paul's eloquence and "beautiful similes" (*PA* 66) as evidence that "all is well" in Christianity not only miss the profundity of Paul's position in the Christian system, but actually undermine the vital paradox at the heart of Christianity. This paradox, as Kierkegaard argues, is based upon the relative permanence or ephemerality of the new: while both the genius and the apostle bring something new into the world, what the genius "brings forth" (*PA* 67) from his own inborn vision disappears as it is eventually, inevitably, assimilated. Its newness, as a product of the human intellect rather than the divine, cannot endure, as the human condition is temporal and finite.

While St. Anthony craves solitude, Barthelme's far-from-reclusive genius is an embodiment of Harold Rosenberg's assessment of the artist in the mid-twentieth century:

The roaring solitude of the artist of twenty years ago has been giving way to the solitude of the artist-citizen behind the deadpan with which he plays his social role. This is another way of saying that the solitude of the artist is being normalized; it is becoming no less impure than that of the scientist, the company man, the teacher.³²

³¹ It is never explicitly stated throughout "The Genius" in which field the genius is a genius. At first it does not seem to matter; geniuses are identified and revered whether they excel beyond all others in economics, or science, or mathematics. But something happens when this kind of genius is applied to art; the exact dimensions of artistic genius seems more difficult to specify. This genius may in fact be an artist—he names the "most important tool of the genius of today" as "rubber cement" (*S* 26)—although based on how fantastically accepting this society is of his presence and his work, as well as the degree to which the genius is remunerated (to "console him" for not winning the Nobel Prize, "the National Foundation gives him a new house" (*S* 29)), we can be sure that this story exists firmly in the realm of fiction.

³² *The Anxious Object*, 262-263.

If the genius, like the apostle, wanted to maintain one's "roaring solitude", escaping to the desert used to be a viable option; now, of course, society follows him out there (provided there is any desert left), leaving like holy offerings "electric coffee pots (even though there's no electricity out there), comic books, even bottles of whiskey" (*S* 153-154), creating society anew—a new Promised Land-type civilisation. The genius, for whom escape is impossible—he is "afraid to fly" in an airplane, so "the world comes to him" (*S* 26), must endure the attentions of society. Unlike Europe, where Barthelme implies the people are used to genius and so regard it either with appreciative tolerance or that special European brand of jaded fatigue, to America the concept is relatively new and very compelling; Barthelme suggests that Americans tend to make celebrities of their anointed geniuses and valorise their outsidership to the point of assimilating them into the general culture. It is a testament to Barthelme's capacity for irony that when the genius is asked, "Is America is a good place for genius?" the genius answers, "I have found America most hospitable to genius" (*S* 30). The way in which America is hospitable to genius, Barthelme suggests, is by initially appreciating the work of genius and then, by accepting it, neutering it.

Genius is also inextricable from failure, as failure, for Barthelme, embodies a combination of knowing and not-knowing that is crucial to art. While the failure of realism in art had been the driving force behind the art of the early twentieth century, failure was inherent in the creation of art even before it became a formal aspect of a movement. Rosenberg mentions that Melville, for example, "said that he wished to create a work that would fail. Undertaking such a work is, of course, unprofessional. But going against the profession is in modern art part of the practice of it. Given the situation of art one may ask

whether there is for the artist any other way.”³³ A successful work of art is no longer a success; for Melville it would have been a betrayal of art itself. Balzac, whose *The Unknown Masterpiece* Rosenberg mentions in *The Anxious Object*,³⁴ writes of the fictional artist-genius Frenhofer who fails exquisitely, triumphantly, at painting back to life a woman no longer living. Yet she, in idealised absence, becomes the embodiment of beauty. He shows the painting to two other artists, one of whom is the young Nicolas Poussin, exclaiming, “Aha! You weren’t expecting such perfection, were you? You’re in the presence of a woman, and you’re still looking for a picture. There’s such depth on this canvas, the air is so real you can no longer distinguish it from the air around yourselves. Where’s the art? Gone, vanished! Here’s true form—the very form of a girl.” The two other painters see at first nothing but “colors daubed one on top of the other and contained by a mass of strange lines forming a wall of paint”, but after gazing in bewilderment at the canvas, they find a fragment of realism as a “foot appeared there like the torso of some Parian marble Venus rising out of the ruins of a city burned to ashes.”³⁵ This masterpiece is “unknown” not only because it has never been viewed before, but also because it is, as Arthur C. Danto points out, “unrecognized” (*inconnu*) in the sense that its audience cannot see the genius of avant-garde art (Danto mentions Manet as one such “unknown” genius whose “Olympia” caused an uproar; Picasso’s “*Demoiselles d’Avignon*” initially suffered the same treatment).³⁶ The metaphysical spell is broken when Poussin points out that “sooner or later he’ll notice that there’s nothing on his canvas!”; thus spoken, the artist’s failure will destroy the artist. But

³³ Ibid., 120.

³⁴ Balzac also appears briefly in Barthelme’s “The Rise of Capitalism”.

³⁵ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, 39.

³⁶ Ibid., xxvi.

Poussin also reveals the audience's failure to perceive the divine triumph within this earthly failure. Barthelme's genius, like Frenhofer and Poussin, also has acolytes who worship and ultimately misunderstand him. Like Frenhofer and his canvas, Barthelme's genius "devises hideously difficult problems, or complicates their work with sudden oblique comments that open whole new areas of investigation—yawning chasms under their feet. It is as if he wishes to place them in situations where only failure is possible. But failure, too, is a part of mental life. 'I will make you failure-proof,' he says jokingly. His assistants pale" (S 25).

Yet the artist, aware on some level that what he produces will eventually be subsumed into bourgeois culture, cannot find satisfaction in this magnificence. Consumed by his love and driven to madness by his failure, Balzac's Frenhofer cries, "Oh nature, nature! Who has ever plumbed your secrets? There's no escaping it; too much knowledge, like too much ignorance, leads to a negation. My work is...my doubt!"³⁷ Too much knowledge cripples the genius, robbing him of the mystery that is the fuel of creation and the engine of perpetual newness. But doubt, however painful for the artist to endure, is his saving grace, as it continues to open new mysteries with every new analysis: although he means it as a criticism, Porbus's remark that Frenhofer has "meditated on the nature of color, on the absolute truth of line, but by dint of so much research, he has come to doubt the very object of his investigations"³⁸ actually allows for the possibility of creative not-knowing. Barthelme's genius similarly is caught between knowingness, knowledge, and doubt, as well as a vague awareness of his difference from Kierkegaard's apostle: his "worst moment" comes when "he is in a church, kneeling in a pew near the back. He is gradually made aware of a row of nuns, a half dozen, kneeling twenty feet ahead of him, their heads bent over their beads. One of the

³⁷ Ibid., 24.

³⁸ Ibid., 27.

nuns however has turned her head almost completely around and seems to be staring at him. [...] He places his eyes here, there, on the altar, on the stained glass, but each time they return to the nuns, his nun is still staring. The genius says to himself, This is my worst moment” (*S* 32). Unlike St. Anthony, whose inspired expression is inseparable from religion, religion forces this assimilated genius to encounter his own incapacity for the kind of transcendence and perpetual newness experienced by artists like Frenhofer. Frenhofer’s “sublime” genius, perhaps closer to an apostle than a genius, “vanishes into the heavens”; he declares, “you must have faith, faith in art, and you must live a long time with your work to produce a creation like this.”³⁹

In a twist on Frenhofer’s woman-canvas (or even on de Kooning’s “Woman” series, with which Barthelme was well acquainted), Barthelme’s genius tries to “live a long time with” his work, but finds that, in this modern age, such fidelity is impossible:

I think that this thing, my work, has made me, in a sense, what I am. The work possesses a consciousness which shapes that of the worker. The work flatters the worker. Only the strongest can do this work, the work says. You must be a fine fellow, that you can do this work. But disaffection is also possible. The worker grows careless. The worker pays slight regard to the work, he ignores the work, he flirts with other work, he is unfaithful to the work. The work is insulted. And perhaps it finds little ways of telling the worker...the work slips in the hands of the worker—a little cut on the finger. You understand? The work becomes slow, sulky, consumes more time, becomes more tiring. The gaiety that once existed between the worker and the work has evaporated. (*S* 27-28)

In contrast to the Frenhofer’s near-religious faith in and fidelity to art, Barthelme’s genius’s relationship to his art is domestic and petty; both artist and art, as in a marriage, “sulk”, “insulted” and “disaffected” by a thousand daily hurts. Just as in the knowing *New Yorker* articles about love and sex and marriage, ideas about art had become banal and domesticated

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 16, 42, 41.

—sometimes literally, as in “The Genius”. Frenhofer has lived with his absent-present Catherine Lescault for ten years, and eventually dies with and for her, whereas the genius is tempted by an advertisement to become an interior decorator (*S* 30). “The Genius” is Barthelme’s report on the state of the disaffected genius of today, and as such, it is ambiguous whether or not the genius of “The Genius” sees success or failure when he “gets up and looks at himself in a mirror” after reading in “*The Genius*, a 736-page novel by Theodore Dreiser”, that “Great art dreams welled up into his soul as he viewed the sparkling deeps of space...” (*S* 31). The reference to Dreiser underlines the point that for Barthelme, the very concept of the genius, even as it underpins avant-garde not-knowing, is in the present age the hallmark of middlebrow assimilationism and kitsch. And yet this moment of encounter with not-knowing suggests that there is hope even for those on the verge of a career in interior decorating. These “great art dreams” are and must remain just dreams, inaccessible to the knowing mind. As Barthelme writes in the speech that opened this chapter, “Writers are creatures of great expectations, and perhaps that is what we have to offer—not particular promises, realistic or unrealistic or something in between, but the odd spectacle of people requiring a great deal of themselves and of the world—in a time of dread, asking for the sublime.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Address to the Texas Institute of Letters, 8.

Conclusion: After Beckett: *The Dead Father*

But if we cannot finish, we can at least begin.
(Barthelme, “Nothing: A Preliminary Account”)

Writing about John Hawkes in 1984, Barthelme remarked that “It’s one of the writer’s virtues that his formulations throw us back into the whole corpus of English literature, that doors (or graves) are continually popping open, that dead kings hotfoot once more along disorderly paths, and that our attention is focused, in the same sentence, on first and last things” (NK 98¹). Nearly ten years prior, Barthelme had completed his second novel, *The Dead Father*, in which a speaking, eating, sword-fighting, lusting, nominally dead father is dragged to his grave by his sons and other various attendants. The novel makes literal the contemporary artist’s struggle for a break with his artistic progenitors and the invention of a new voice while simultaneously maintaining his ties to “the whole corpus”—or corpse—of English literature. The introduction to this thesis argued that Barthelme’s formulations of creative not-knowing owed an artistic and philosophical debt to his literary fathers, dead kings all: Kierkegaard and Mallarmé, Freud, Joyce, and Beckett. The paradox for Barthelme lies in the fact that these figures are authorities of not-knowing, which disrupts the core characteristic of not-knowing as authority-less. *The Dead Father*, then, is an attempt to solve, for contemporary literature, the dilemma of literary patricide and homage: “*Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least “turned down” in this generation—by the combined efforts of all of us together*” (DF 180).

Not-knowing paradoxically requires that the writer know profoundly the history of his art. Philip Weinstein writes that, for example, “In modernism [...] the art object looks back.

¹ Barthelme, “The Most Wonderful Trick”, *The New York Times Book Review*, 3.

[...] Modernism is finally about the dead's capacity still to speak: not as contemporaries (as in realism), nor as solipsistic fantasy (as in postmodernism). Instead, the dead speak a language we must learn to "unknow" if we are to hear it."² Unlike his predecessors, whose fathers were fathers of knowing ("Faulkner on the Mississippi" (NK 4)), the postmodern artist of unknowing has himself been fathered by modernist artists and philosophers of unknowing. The paradox lies in knowing acutely the features of modernist unknowing so that the postmodern project becomes one of new not-knowing. *The Dead Father*, then, is Barthelme's attempt to create art out of the anxiety of killing his fathers (modernist and otherwise) in order to hear their language of unknowing and to formulate his own poetics of doubt: "Fathers are the teachers of the true and not-true, and no father ever knowingly teaches what is not true. In a cloud of unknowing, then, the father proceeds with his instruction. [...] Fathers teach much that is of value. Much that is not" (DF 145-146).

Ironically, Barthelme's trope of the dead father being hauled to his grave had been used by Barthelme's own literary fathers, in service of much the same goal. In Beckett's *Endgame*, for example, Hamm cannot rid himself of his father, despite the fact that his father already lives in a dustbin. Stein's *The Making of Americans* opens with an image of Oedipal inevitability similar to Barthelme's: "Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. 'Stop!' cried the groaning old man at last, 'Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree.'"³ Jean-Michel Rabaté has written that while Joyce's *Ulysses* "seems hinged to a careful delimitation of the various functions of fatherhood," every page of *Finnegans Wake* is dedicated to "slander[ing]" the father figure.⁴ In the *Wake*'s "The Ballad

² Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction*, 7.

³ Stein, *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress*, 3.

⁴ Rabaté, *James Joyce, Authorized Reader*, 59.

of Persse O'Reilly", the heroically phallic father is figuratively deflated and buried by a mob who muffle him even in death:

He was one time our King of the Castle
 Now he's kicked about like a rotten old parsnip.
 [...]
 They curse the waves that brought him to their city and want him punished. They
 want him dead
 And we'll bury him down in Oxmanstown
 Along with the Devil and Danes,
 With the deaf and dumb Danes,
 And all their remains.
 And not all the king's men nor his horses
 Will resurrect his corpus
 For there's no true spell in Connacht or hell
 That's able to raise a Cain.⁵

Though the town tries to bury the father so securely that there's no way to raise him, the novel itself *is* a raised "corpus", a zombie "King of the Castle" which continues to hotfoot inexhaustibly through the "disorderly paths" it creates. Kierkegaard's infamously difficult relationship with his austere, deeply religious father informed the majority of his work, though in Kierkegaard's case, his father insisted throughout his 82 years that he would outlive his children (he was right about five of the seven). To a young, adrift Søren he said, "In fact it would be good for you if I were dead; you might then still make something of yourself; that won't happen so long as I'm alive."⁶ Søren, of course, would go on to be one of the most important "Fathers of Existentialism"; when Barthelme's Dead Father, nearly two hundred years later, asks his children what they will do with their lives after he is buried, they are unable to give "a ready and persuasive answer intelligible to all" (*DF* 210).

For the contemporary artist, perhaps, there is no "ready and persuasive answer", and certainly not one that is "intelligible to all." While *The Dead Father* examines the artist's

⁵ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 45-47.

⁶ Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, 127-128.

relationship to his lineage directly, the question of what to do after the artistic triumphs of the fathers of not-knowing—after Kierkegaard, after Joyce, after Beckett—had been “hotfooting” through Barthelme’s fiction for some time. Early on, “Will You Tell Me?” in *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (1964), finds Paul manufacturing bombs out of Schlitz cans and plastic for his peers to, in classic Oedipal fashion, “throw at their fathers” (although the bombs are only meant to “frighten them rather than to harm them” (CBDC 42)). In *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), Barthelme depicts fathers who often find themselves bewildered or disparaged by their children—an impotent, artistically useless not-knowing. Kellerman in “A Picture History of the War”, for example, at first refers to his father as “The Black Knight” (UPUA 146), a priest (also known, ecclesiastically, as a Father), and the “Hammer of Thor”, though now his father is so “reduced” as to be mistaken, like Joyce’s parsnip, for “a bunch of radishes” (UPUA 140)). “See the Moon?” is narrated by an anxious new father: “Too, maybe I was trying on the role. Not for myself. When a child is born, the locus of one’s hopes... shifts, slightly. Not altogether, not all at once. But you feel it, this displacement” (UPUA 172). Edgar in “The Dolt” attempts “to think of a way to badmouth this immense son leaning over him like a large blaring building”, but, cowed by this eight foot tall son wearing “a serape woven out of two hundred transistor radios”, he finds that he “couldn’t think of anything. Thinking of anything was beyond him” (UPUA 73). In each of these instances, the ancient, mythical authority of the father is made small, ousted from a position of power, struck dumb by the new. The sons, however, have no more access to not-knowing and artistic invention than their fathers do; in “A Picture History of the War”, for one, Kellerman fails to carry forward his father’s linguistic legacy:

He was obsessed by a vision of beauty —the shimmering, golden Temple, more fascinating than a woman, more eternal than love. And because he was ugly, evil,

impotent, he determined someday to possess it...by destruction. He had used the word incorrectly. He had mispronounced the word. He had misspelled the word. It was the wrong word. (UPUA 147)

Later stories, such as those in *City Life* (1970), centre around a powerful, often artistically intimidating father figure who retains his authority even in lessened circumstances. In “Views of My Father Weeping”,⁷ it is the narrator who is bewildered, even overwhelmed by his father. Like Camus’s *The Outsider*, the story opens with a disaffected report of a personal tragedy: “An aristocrat was riding down the street in his carriage. He ran over my father. After the ceremony I walked back to the city. I was trying to think of the reason my father had died. Then I remembered: he was run over by a carriage” (CL 11).⁸ Though the narrator knows his father is dead, his father’s presence is so formidable—even in tears—that it continues to rise to the surface of the story that buried it in the first few sentences: “The man sitting in the center of the bed looks very much like my father. He is weeping, tears coursing down his cheeks” (CL 13). Though father might be weeping due to the fact of having been run over, the narrator implies that a more personal, perhaps even psychoanalytical, offense has caused the waterworks. In an echo of Rabaté’s argument about *Finnegans Wake*, the narrator’s attempts to glean the reason for his father’s weeping—a point of not-knowing that only the father can access—indicate that the father has been “slandered”, though this time by *his* artistic or literary fathers, as suggested by the antiquated synonyms for slander:

Why!...there’s my father!...sitting in the bed there!...and he’s *weeping*...as though his heart would burst! [...] Father, please!...look at me, Father...who has insulted you?...are you, then, compromised?...ruined?...a slander is going around?...an

⁷ The story first appeared in *The New Yorker*’s December 6, 1969 issue.

⁸ *The Outsider* begins: “Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don’t know. I had a telegram from the home: ‘Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.’ That doesn’t mean anything. It may have been yesterday.” (Camus, *The Outsider*, 9.)

obloquy?...a traducement?...’sdeath!...I won’t permit it!...I won’t abide it!...I’ll...
move every mountain...climb...every river...etc. (CL 19-20)

Despite his declarations of rescue, the narrator cannot even connect the right verb with its corresponding topographical phenomenon (or imagine further rescue scenarios (“etc.”)). It is the weeping father who rescues himself with a single avant-garde performance of not-knowing that negates slander and even death:

My father throws his ball of knitting up in the air. The orange wool hangs there. (CL 14)

City Life also contains stories featuring particularly draconian fathers. It is no accident that the stories revolve around great literary figures whose work hinges on the tension between knowledge and not-knowing. As the title suggests, “At The Tolstoy Museum” describes a museum dedicated to drawings, etchings, and statues of Tolstoy; even the architecture “relate[s] to Tolstoy’s moral authority” by “suggest[ing] that it is about to fall on you” (CL 53-55). This feeling continues throughout the exhibitions:

Too, those who are caught by Tolstoy’s eyes, in the various portraits, room after room after room, are not unaffected by the experience. It is like, people say, committing a small crime and being discovered at it by your father, who stands in four doorways, looking at you. (CL 54-55)

A father’s gaze, in this instance, transforms crime into knowledge (which is the same process by which, for example, the Oedipus complex emerges). The father is also the subject of an exhibition in a later story, “The Flight of Pigeons from the Palace”, in which the narrator says, “I put my father in the show, with his cold eyes. His segment was called, My Father Concerned About His Liver” (S 128). It is as if by making the father the theme of a work of art, the artist can use for his own ends both not-knowing and the oppressive, Oedipally complex fear of the father’s authority, which dictates morality and understanding of the world.

But, as “Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel” suggests, sublimating this oppression only leads to its resurrection in the subconscious: “Dreamed that my father told me that my work was garbage. Mr. Garbage, he called me in the dream” (CL 98). In an interview, Barthelme mentioned that images and influences were “lurking around in the subconscious” (NK 227) as he wrote *The Dead Father*, specifically the “straight dream material [...] business of being tied up, walking around with a lot of other people, gripping a piece of paper between your teeth, which has a message on it which is about you but which you are not allowed to read, but you try” (NK 260). Even in dreams, the father occupies a paradoxical position of knowledge and not-knowing, coming down on the side of art versus “junk” (“Mr. Garbage”), and simultaneously able to analyse a message emerging from the dreamer’s own artistic unconscious. In *Snow White*, the father gives the dwarves knowledge in the form of recipes for Chinese baby food, but remains “a man about whom nothing was known. Nothing is known about him still” (SW 24). *The Dead Father* suggests that the father need not even be an artist himself: “It was not necessary, said the Dead Father, because I am the Father. All lines are my lines. All figure and all ground mine, out of my head. All colors mine. You take my meaning” (DF 28).

By the time Barthelme had arrived at *The Dead Father*, the strategies employed in his first four collections had failed to provide a “ready and persuasive answer” to the question of how to create art after the not-knowing innovations of his literary fathers. But Barthelme seems to have addressed the problem even before *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*. In “After Joyce”, Barthelme had argued that Joyce and Stein had “removed” themselves from their work, so that the reader is no longer “listening to an authoritative account of the world delivered by an expert” (NK 4), but rather explores and interprets the new literary object for himself. This

break in the Oedipal cycle, whereby the “father” of the art object exits entirely, leaving the “son”, the artist (and, perhaps, the viewer or the reader) opens up a vast scape of possibility—and anxiety. The new art object, Barthelme had argued, requires active participation rather than an acceptance of truth as delivered by an authority. Like Wittgenstein’s reader, however, who is advised to “throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it”,⁹ once the expert is removed from work of art, the reader must stand on his own two feet.

The opening paragraph of *The Dead Father* describes the enormous Dead Father as part severe God, part mechanism, and part fallible human (a “bit of mackerel salad lodged between two of the stained four [teeth]” will humanise anyone), an object akin to Rosenberg’s tire-bridled goat that would collapse if disassembled (or flossed). Already the dead father has lost some authority; as an art object, he is subject to the participation of the viewer, who is able literally to enter the artificial leg (and, one imagines, tap it, shake it, hold it up to his ear to hear the roaring within). When an interviewer pointed out to Barthelme that, unlike Kafka, Barthelme seemed not to believe in God (ignoring the profound religious inquisitiveness of stories such as “On Angels”, “The Temptation of St. Anthony”, and “The Photographs”), Barthelme replied,

Well, actually the Holy Ghost is my main man, as we say. I don’t think I’ve ever had much to say about God except as a locus of complaint, a convention, someone to rail against. *The Dead Father* suggests that the process of becoming has bound up in it the experience of many other consciousnesses, the most important of which are in a law-giving relation to the self. The characters complain about this in what I hope is an interesting fashion. (NK 286)

Though he claims to not have “much to say about God”, like Kierkegaard, Barthelme’s inquiry into the nature of God fueled his artistic output, both as subject and, as he suggests in the interview above, a force against which to “become” an artist. In a satire on the

⁹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, 6.54, 189.

postmodern artist's project of not-knowing, the characters in *The Dead Father* "complain" themselves into existence, a "becoming" into not-knowing which could not exist without the "locus" of modernist, unknowing, patriarchal influence.

In contrast to the God-like aspect of modernist fathers is the very human, earthly part of these father who absolutely do not want to be interred, who instead actively seek to "hotfoot" through contemporary literature. Barthelme's *Dead Father* adopts the strategy of being as ornery, childish, and lecherous as possible. As such, he even temporarily resorts to, one may assume, exhuming the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*:

AndI. EndI. Great endifarce teetereteertertertottering. Willit urt. I reiterate. Don't be cenacle. [...] Mens agitate molem and I wanted to doitwell, doitwell. Elegamente. Ohe! jam satis, AndI. Pathetiquarly the bumgrab night and date through all the heures for the good of all. The Father's Day to end all. AndI understand but list, list, let's go back. To the wetbedding. To the dampdream. AndI a oneohsevenyearold boy, just like the rest of them. Pitterpatter. I reiterate&reiterate&reiterate&reiterate, pitter-patter. Remember some old Papsday when heaped round with gifties, the delegations presenting themselves, the musicking, quantuscumque, I'm a jollygood jollygood, pip of a pap, loved and rererespected by all. Endjoying the endthiasm which your endtente has endgendered. (*DF* 213)

The ever-generative "AndI" has become the "EndI", the end of influence. And yet he keeps speaking, "reiterate&reiterat[ing]" novel of himself, dwelling in memories of his own childhood—in which, fittingly, he was helplessly trapped in his own Joycean, subconscious, recursive Oedipal "dampdream"—and the love and respect and "gifties" of deference he received in fatherhood. Though he ultimately he gives up this impersonation, capitulating to the eventuality of his burial, he continues, as does the narrator of *Finnegans Wake*, to "endgender" the novel.

The dead father's son, Thomas, and Thomas's lover, Julie, accompany the phalanx of men dragging the dead father to his grave, attempting to placate the deceased. In between

picnic lunches of prawns and trysts with Julie, Thomas reads “A Manual for Sons”, in which he learns, under the heading “Patricide”, that

Patricide is a bad idea, first because it is contrary to law and custom and second because it proves, beyond a doubt, that the father’s every fluted accusation against you was correct: you are a thoroughly bad individual, a patricide! [...] It is not necessary to slay your father, time will slay him, that is a virtual certainty. (*DF* 179)

This instruction, for Barthelme, is both “true and not-true”. On one hand, time will erase the monuments built to authority and influence. But, while literal patricide is “contrary to law and custom”, it is essential for the artist to kill his progenitors in order to discover not-knowing for himself. In an age of “improper” irony, knowingness, and banal interpretation, however, the artist must be careful not to announce his involvement in such a timeworn cycle, lest the patricide become a window display in Henri Bendel. Ever aware of the thin line between earnestness and naiveté, Barthelme would beat the critics to the punch, parodying the Oedipal cycle while engaging in it:

Your sword, sir.
 My sword?
 Surrender your sword. Your maulsticker.
 You were being castigatorious, said the Dead Father. Again.
 [...] The sword, said Thomas.
 You are asking me to give up my sword?
 I am.
 Then I shall be swordless. Think what that means.
 I have. Long and hard.
 Must I?
 You must.
 The Dead Father unsheathed his sword and gazed at it.
 Old Stream-of-Anguish! Companion of my finest hours!
 He gazed at Thomas.
 Thomas holding out his hand.
 He surrendered the sword. (*DF* 101)

Acknowledging that authentic Greatness was a thing of the past, Barthelme writes in “A Manual for Sons,” “Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities

touched upon in this manual, but in attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him” (*DF* 179). And yet, as this thesis has attempted to show, Barthelme continued throughout his career to access the same kind of artistic not-knowing with which his predecessors had created their works of art. In making itself an art object that needs no “expert” to interpret it, *The Dead Father* directly addresses the negotiation between the diminished critical and popular landscape and the potential of not-knowing to alter the world. It is the dead father’s son Thomas, fittingly, who summarises the generative dilemma inherent in the exploration of not-knowing:

We want the Dead Father to be dead. We sit with tears in our eyes wanting the Dead Father to be dead—meanwhile doing amazing things with our hands. (DF 11)

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