

Donald Barthelme and the Politics of Metafiction: Radicality and ambivalence towards laying the dead father to rest

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Abstract: In today's media, post-modern forms and techniques have become common, even mainstream in contemporary literature, television shows, and even commercials. However, what seems relatively normal now was radical and highly experimental back in the 1960s. The original purpose of experimental fiction was not to be colorful and entertaining, but to experiment with and change the established rules of literary representation. By bending and breaking the rules of how narrative forms work, authors forced us to reconsider the methods and practices that we consider normal. This genre is generally referred to as "metafiction." In this essay, I go back over some of the roots of metafiction, and then take a closer look at one of its most challenging authors, Donald Barthelme. In particular, I will focus on how his novel *The Dead Father* plays with narrative norms, forcing the reader to face deeper questions about how stories are constructed, how they affect us, and why they are important.

Keywords: metafiction, experimental fiction, social resistance, narrativity

““Oh, I wish there were some words in the world that were not the words I always hear!’ Snow White exclaimed loudly” (Barthelme,1965,12). Perhaps Snow White’s anguished cry is the fundamental urge behind the literary style (movement? revolution? fad?) known as metafiction, a trend that became popular concurrently with what Fredric Jameson has called “the logic of late capitalism,” or the post-modern era which we slid into somewhere in the second half of the 20th century. This is the era in which distances were collapsed both through the ubiquity of mass media like radio, television, and, later, the internet, as well as through the previously unimagined ease of travel. This implosion of space has reshaped the way people conceptualize their communities, society, and even national identity. Closely related, during this time the production, reproduction and marketing of images, and sounds—the wild unrestrained proliferation of signifiers, with or without signifieds, and the commodification of culture for highly profitable mass consumption—became not just an aspect of life, but perhaps the defining essence of our new, post-modern existence. What E.H. Gombrich and others termed the “cult of the new” became not merely a fad, but a necessary approach to the business of production, a machine spewing arts and entertainments at an ever faster pace into the voracious maws of ever more narrow niche markets. The mass-production of culture is operating endlessly, feeding and changing our tastes, the rhythms of our lives, and finally, through endless cannibalism of past fashions, products, and narratives, even our conceptions of history. Our modern world is necessarily messy as a result. As Gatherer points out, “It is usually the case that no individual form of narrative is allowed to “dominate,” rather a dialectic is presented between different forms of narrative and the limits of their reach”. (127)

In the following, we will focus on one aspect of this trend, the field of “post-modern fiction,” or “metafiction.” For those for whom this is a new concept, a quick summary is that it is a “focused confrontation of fictionality

and the conditions through which fiction is brought into being. Critical self-consciousness is not an incidental or minor feature in metafiction: rather, metafiction is...constitutively engaged with its own conditions of existence, its parameters, its complexities, and its paradoxes.(Macrae 2)

First, I will attempt a rough definition of what metafiction is, then talk about what might have caused it to arise when and how it did, and finally look more closely at a famous example, Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*.

In her essay "What is Metafiction and Why are They Saying Such Terrible Things About it?" Patricia Waugh begins with a scattering of excerpts from the writings of various experimental authors, and then makes a list of the things the various quotes have in common. This list, she suggests, can be taken as "a brief description of the basic concerns and characteristics" of metafiction, and runs as follows:

a celebration of the power of creative imagination together with an uncertainty about the validity of its representations; an extreme self-consciousness about language, literary form and the act of writing fictions; a pervasive insecurity about the relationship of fiction to reality; a parodic, playful, excessive or deceptively naïve style of writing. (40)

Waugh's list of metafiction's "concerns" does not include another element that she mentions later in her essay, a notion that is perhaps the most important factor in the definitions of meta-fiction given by theorists such as Hutcheons and McCaffrey—that this new fiction should somehow, directly or indirectly, comment on its own creation, i.e. demonstrate self-reflexivity and have a critical function. Although there is no definitive, authoritative definition of "meta-fiction," (nor even a consensus on what it should be called: "post-modern fiction", the "new fiction," or as Fredric Jameson calls it "para-fiction"), to paraphrase a court justice on another genre which sprung into wide popularity at about the time as metafiction, "we know it when we see it." However, for the sake of clarity, let us try briefly to identify some of the things which separate metafiction from more traditional forms.

The Waugh quote above gives some vague parameters for limning the domain of metafiction, but by extrapolating from her comments, a few key elements can be determined which allow us to peg metafiction a little more neatly: a tendency towards "un-seriousness," form-over-content, an ambiguous relation to (if not total absence of) traditional mimesis, a-traditional uses of language, iconoclasm and irreverence, along with the idea of mind: these elements are not present through chance or sloppiness—nor even as they might be found in simple parody or pastiche—but through a concerted effort to privilege newer forms over older ones. Whether we want to call the tendency towards metafiction a reaction, a movement or only a genre, it did not develop out of a vacuum, but arose from a specific context.

In both Europe and the Americas, the late sixties were a time of truly profound social and political ferment. The causes were many: a growing youth culture separate from the mainstream, backlash against 1950s conservatism, a new feminist movement, radical new thinking and theorizing flowing from Europe, especially France, and perhaps most importantly, anti-governmental sentiments due to the war in Viet-Nam. This "anti-establishment" movement, as it was sometimes referred to, was increased and given momentum by the new power of the disaffected younger generation to influence certain segments of the media (protest in popular rock and folk music, films like *Easy Rider*, buying and even publishing untraditional magazines and books) and an

increased availability and popularity of mind-altering substances. While the latter most likely did not directly “expand” anyone’s mind or teach young people anything meaningful, much less radicalize them to where they could see “hegemonic codes” per se, the mere participation in such activities put millions outside the law, however briefly, and thereby shifted their perspective on “the mainstream,” creating a gap between their tastes and the “culture” created for mass consumption by an older, professional population. This gap in perspective is part of what used to be called the generation gap, and engendered an unprecedentedly large counter-cultural population. Alienation, rejection, disaffection and anomie are some words Marxists, sociologists, and psychologists have used to characterize attitudes at this time. Certainly boredom, a hunger for new sensations, experiences, and ideas—even frustration and anger—were also more widespread during this era than they had been previously.

These social rifts and currents of disaffection were particularly strong in France, and unlike America, where many of these movements were quickly commodified and mainstreamed, the political currents were truly deep, leading to the failed (or bungled) move towards communism in May of 1968. Literary theory, along with other political theory, took a sharp leftward turn during this era, aided largely by the rediscovery through first-time translations of Marxist theorists such as Gramsci, Adorno and Horkheimer, Benjamin, Althusser, Brecht, and others. Ideology and hegemony were key words, and Foucault, Derrida and others were growing concerned about how language and literature were implicated in preventing people’s thought patterns from recognizing inequality, repression, and contradiction in the workings of society. Although early metafiction writers’ work does not reflect a firsthand knowledge of some of these trends of political thought, the ripples of these new ideas were already radiating from academic and intellectual circles around the country, feeding and informing the thinking of the already discontented. New works began to be produced which seemed to fly in the face of everything common sense and custom dictated literature and art could and should be.

And, of course, radical departures from narrative/artistic norms is nothing new. The surrealists, the Dadaists, modern artists, high modernist authors and playwrights were well known, and theories like Brecht’s distanciation and others had been in circulation, creating original, challenging artworks, for decades. Even people unfamiliar with any of these thinkers or philosophies could still be moved in the direction of rejecting traditional forms simply by looking around them. The new, central icon and heart-beat of post-modern reality was already ubiquitous if relatively innocuous. It was (and is) placed like a holy icon in the position of honor, faced by all seats in most every American living room. I am, of course, talking about the television set. Almost every American in the country was already watching hundreds of hours a year of formulaic narratives, the vast majority of which were far less sophisticated than the worst B-movies, grabbing American eyeballs and attempting to keep them endlessly riveted to saccharin, simple stories and insistent advertisements. This seemed to be the final step in frightening predictions made a couple of decades earlier.

Two German intellectuals, part of the Frankfurt School, writing in the 1940s invented the concept of the “culture industries.” Although writing largely about Hollywood cinema, everything they said would apply even more strongly to television. For Adorno and Horkheimer, Hollywood is merely a cold, soulless factory constantly repackaging the same homogenized dreck for the consumption of the duped masses. Their critique, of course, applies not only to Hollywood but to all of the cultural industries, from popular music, magazines, news,

fashions, television, and mass-produced paper back novels. They would no doubt find it an ironic testament to the ultimate accuracy of their work that fifty-some years later even their ideas are still being repackaged and sold in the marketplace of academia. The Adorno/Horkheimer model is a stark vision in which the “masses” are forced to consume merely “mechanically differentiated products [which] prove to be all alike in the end,” which through marketing and the manipulation of false consciousness, the fulfillment-starved are trained to seek their dreams through constantly consuming, yet can never be sated-- “the diner satisfied with the menu.”

The image they paint is so gruesome, the circle so vicious, it is hard not to recoil from its hopelessness. What makes liberation impossible is that we can but only dimly perceive the problem. As is the case in Orwell’s *1984*, (significantly, I think, written in the same era, during the justified paranoia accompanying the rise of European fascism) they argue we are blind to the controlling and manipulating structures because, paradoxically, they are so pervasive and so integral to our “free” capitalist system.

Everyone knows that films, television programs and books are made mainly by large companies seeking large profits, yet somehow we insist on falsely believe that media is “art” made by “artists” with relatively free rein to be creative. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, all of our entertainment products are essentially the same, merely generic formulas with interchangeable characters, settings and storylines. It is the very seamlessness of narrative art, a quality constantly praised in fiction, that is its most dangerous aspect, for it seems to naturalize and make inevitable all the decisions of the characters, as well as the “happy ending” that the vast majority of narratives, be they film, television or literary, end with, thus blinding us to the powerful injustices of our entire social system. Although the following was written about film, it is equally true of television and the vast majority of popular fiction:

The more intensely and flawlessly his techniques duplicate empirical objects, the easier it is today for the illusion to prevail that the outside world is the straightforward continuation of that presented...real life is being taken over... [they] leave no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, which is unable to respond within the structure of the film...[which] hence forces its victims to equate it directly with reality. (Adorno, Horkheimer 7)

It is my belief that the early metafiction writers were, consciously or unconsciously, responding to these same issues and concerns. By rejecting traditional narrative forms, characters, stories, points of view, themes, and moral perspective, the “new” writers force their readers to constantly engage with the text as what it is: a collection of words strung together by an individual. Although perhaps initially only working from whimsy and a position of rejection (*The Poetics of Exhaustion*), merely by having radical form these writers’ texts force readers to consider questions like “What makes a story? Why is this story written as it is?” And therefore, by extension, “why are other stories written as they are?” Thus, by its very nature, radical form can create radical content; although it is important here to point out that it *doesn’t have* to. Brecht himself would have been the first to point out that when surprising, irrational form itself begins to be expected by consumers and generates pleasure, then it has already entered the mainstream and supports rather than exposes hegemonic norms.

One of the first and most engaging of the American metafiction writers is Donald Barthelme. He is a good author to look at because from the beginning there has been some debate whether his novels (especially *Snow White* and *The Dead Father*) are to be read as “a sign of an ethically bankrupt age [or] as a critique of it” (Morace 165). Partly based on the ideas listed above, I would argue that Barthelme’s work is mainly a critique, although I do not think, as many critics apparently do (perhaps this is the cause of all the arguing about metafiction in general and Barthelme’s in particular) that the two categories given (that Barthelme’s work must be seen as *either* “merely” a product of its age *or* as a critique of it) are mutually exclusive: of course metafiction is a product of its time, how could it be otherwise? And by the definition of metafiction we gave earlier, it must to some degree be self-reflexive and critical, and therefore forces us to examine the literature and media which circulates around us.

One can see, however, why critics balk at praising Barthelme. There is something jaded and dispassionate about Barthelme’s writing—even as there is with Brecht’s—and at first glance appears off-hand. However, closer analysis soon reveals it is deceptively simple. But how can one argue that producing alienation in the reader is any kind of moral caving, a weak surrender to the flow of the times? Larry McCaffrey’s analysis of *Snow White* sounds not unlike critical writings on Brecht’s own works: “the book is almost devoid of the sort of details usually provided by novelists to help realize the action.” Character names, descriptions, routines, and backgrounds are elided and thus “mock and defeat our expectations” (157). This sounds much like Brecht’s distanciation and alienation-effect. Both authors refuse to let us simply get lost in the flow of the work as an “escape” into the pure pleasure of a more poetically satisfying reality than our own.

To understand and appreciate it, we must engage and decode Barthelme’s text; we must discriminate and learn to distinguish the signal from the noise. Furthermore, as a product of the post-modern age and post-modern thinking, the age that would give us Derrida and post-structuralism, Barthelme’s work will deal with a critical post-modern issue: the use and effectiveness of language itself. Therefore: “more than anything else, *Snow White* seems to be “about” the current condition of language and the possibilities which exist today for a writer for communicating something meaningful to his readers” (McCafrey 159).

Barthelme is very aware of modern man as a mind afloat in a vast sea of mostly empty, yet attractive, signifiers. His novels attempt to teach us how to navigate in this new post-modern environment. Barthelme himself explicitly acknowledges this fact as well as the strategies we must employ in our new intra- and extra-literary worlds. As a narrative voice in *Snow White* puts it:

We like books that have a lot of dreck in them, matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed, at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can supply a kind of “sense” of what is going on. This “sense” is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there in those white spaces) but by reading the lines themselves.(112)

Even more than *Snow White*, *The Dead Father* is a book which challenges us to examine the nature of our postmodern age, as well as the post-modern tendency to sever all connection with the past other than to see it as a huge grab-bag of free, readily recyclable icons and motifs to be appropriated, decontextualized and reused. Except for the Dead Father himself, all the characters in the story are members of a more contemporary generation, literally and figuratively attempting to bury the past, embodied in the heroically proportioned Dead

Father's frame. Like the past itself, the Dead Father is very much alive, and the novel's other characters' feelings towards him are complex and ambivalent, although their ultimate goal is, literally, to bury him alive and forge a new life out from under his shadow. The Dead Father himself is at various times associated with God, tradition, government, traditional hierarchies, our own fathers, and the great writers of the past—along with all the things that each of these stands for. In other words, the Dead Father is ideology personified.

The central actor in the mission of burying the Dead Father is Thomas, who doubts his own worthiness when compared to the Dead Father, and as a result the justness of the task he has undertaken. The Dead Father himself is extraordinarily large, powerful, childishly selfish, irresponsible and dangerous, although majestic and attractive in many ways, again, like a leftist's view of hegemonic ideology. Thomas and his peers are puny by comparison, and somehow unformed and foolish. In fact, they must wear a fool's cap and bells, and Thomas, the leader, is still nursing at the beginning of the story. He does gradually manage to appropriate many of the Dead Father's iconic possessions, significantly his sword, and graduates to something like sexual intercourse by the end of the novel, although even here he is passive, lying "cruciform" on his back "in position A" and not permitted to move (197-8). These are just a few of the numerous suggestions throughout the book that the younger generation is not really equipped to father a new society without the Dead Father.

At the end of the story the younger generation refuses the Dead Father the golden fleece which, being Julie's pubis, would, after a fashion, "revivify" him and grant him immortality. At the end of the story Thomas himself puts "his hand on the Fleece, outside the skirt" (220), suggesting overtly that, like the Wends, the younger generation will reject The Father and what he represents, choosing to father the future themselves, without the traditions of the past. If the Dead Father represents all I have suggested, then rejecting him is killing and burying him, although of course it is very questionable whether God, history, tradition, etc. can ever really be excised from the world. As a result, the novel's closing is quite ambiguous. We do not actually see the Dead Father buried, although it seems certain to occur. However, like Nietzsche's Dead God, The Dead Father seems quite healthy and active for a corpse, and survival/revival is a likely hypothesis.

Although the novel is not overtly political, I want to reassert that it *is* politicized by a combination of its radicality of form and its overall theme of attempting a rejection of the past. As Josh Toth explains, "Such a work fixates on exposing the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified (between what points to a concept and the concept itself), and thereby contributes to the autonomous hegemony of the "sign" in late twentieth-century thought—and, in turn, our growing sense that we are no longer responsible to anterior referents. (37)

To return to the earlier question which had been posed of whether *The Dead Father* is a critique of its times, or merely a product of them, it seems clear that it is both. *The Dead Father* and *Snow White* were published in 1967 and 1975, bracketing the era of flower children, the climax of the baby boomer's anti-war protests, and the first flourishing of the post-modern era. Although Barthelme thrived in the baby-boomer's midst, and seemed to have championed some of their beliefs, it is important to keep in mind that he was born in the 30s, grew up in the 50s, and was already middle aged by the time these novels were published. I think that is why his writing, like Kurt Vonnegut's, is dark and pessimistic in spite of its playfulness and humor. Barthelme was a social critic, but one writing from the inside, using and criticizing the language and spirit of his times. To dismiss him, as critics like John Gardner and others have, as narcissistic and "immoral," is to demonstrate the critic's own lack

of penetration into the strengths and weaknesses of the manic zeitgeist of that particular era, not Barthelme's failure to constructively portray and critique it.

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ドナルド・バーセルミとメタフィクションの政治学：

死んだ父を休ませるためのラディカリティとアンビヴァレンス

抄録：今日のメディアでは、ポストモダンの形式や手法は、現代の文学、テレビ番組、さらにはコマーシャルにおいて一般的なものとなり、主流となってさえいる。しかし、今では比較的普通に見えることでも、1960年代当時は過激で非常に実験的なものであった。実験小説の本来の目的は、カラフルで面白いことではなく、文学的表現の既成のルールを実験し、変えることだったのである。作家たちは、物語の形式を曲げたり壊したりすることで、私たちが普通だと考えている方法や慣習を再考せざるを得なくなった。このジャンルは、一般に「メタフィクション」と呼ばれている。本論では、メタフィクションのルーツをいくつか振り返り、その最も挑戦的な作家の一人であるドナルド・バーセルミを詳しく見ていく。特に、彼の小説『死んだ父』がいかにも物語の規範と戯れ、読者に物語がいかにも構築され、それが私たちにどのような影響を与え、なぜそれが重要であるかという深い問いに直面させていくことに焦点を当てる。

キーワード：メタフィクション、実験小説、社会的抵抗、物語性