

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN BARTHELME'S SNOW WHITE

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1967-68 is, perhaps, the year that marks the emergence of what has come to be called the postmodern novel. It saw the publication of Kosinski's *Steps*, Sukenick's *Up*, Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association*, Gass's *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country* and Barthelme's *Snow White* - novels questioning the whole mimetic approach of traditional fiction and engaged in a radical disruption of the nature of the genre itself. They seem to argue that there are no explanations to the puzzles of nature and that man, a pattern maker and a pattern-finder, simply infers causal relationships where there are none. They insist that reality is what is seen, that it conceals nothing, and that there is no grand design to be penetrated or represented. The work of fiction is, therefore, simply an artifact added to the world, a product of man's capacity to play with language. The postmodern novel deals specifically with the process of its own construction, striving to become its own subject. It focuses its attention upon the epistemology of knowing, on the systems man creates to help him organise his experience.

Barthelme recognises that experience is both chaotic and digressive and that life offers no well-made plot. Our notions of time and space and our sense of chronological sequence have been radically altered by a whole series of factors that range from the psychology of dreams, the anarchy and futility of contemporary history, the exploration of space, to the ceaseless babble of the media. Postmodern fiction is, of necessity, abstract, opaque, and improvisational. It is, in short, our very sense of being that is now under question. Such an attitude owes much to Heidegger's theory of hermeneutics and in Barthelme's case, since he rarely misses the opportunity to embrace a contradiction, to Derrida's counter-attack in *Grammatology*. Heidegger's argument is that all human inquiry is circular, the very notion of inquiry presupposes it. We must have some prior awareness of what is sought or otherwise we could not question it. «To work out the question of Being adequately» he writes in *Being and Time*, «we must make an entity - an inquirer - transparent in his own Being». Any effort to avoid the hermeneutic circle to achieve the stance of objectivity (so much a part of the traditional novel) is a futile gesture and does violence to the truth by way of concealing that which it is suppo-

sed to reveal. What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way, and the right way, in Heidegger's view, is through existential being. Being resides in the temporal process itself, what it means to be is be-ing. Yet, despite its presuppositions about being, the hermeneutic circle is not a vicious circle since at the end of the temporal process of interpretative disclosure 'the whole' or 'the form' it discovers is quite different from that imagined at the beginning. It turns out that it is 'endless' — historical: not simply a fuller but a more problematic and dynamic experience: the concealing/unconcealing, truth/error process of being. Derrida, however, doubts hermeneutics as a theory of understanding because he feels language often presents us with things that escape the circle. He takes as an example a phrase of Nietzsche's «I have forgotten my umbrella» which he says is completely translatable and unambiguous yet its interpretation is completely indeterminate. It has no decidable meaning:

Barthelme is concerned with the concept of *aletheia* (the Greek word for truth) understood as the disclosure of 'meaning', the process of its emergence from concealment. *Snow White* cannot be read in terms of plot or characters. It refuses to distinguish between beginnings and endings. It rejects linearity. It has no subject but is rather an interchange between two poles. In other words it refuses that obsession with coherency that so tormented Pound in the *Cantos*. It is what he terms a «literature of remarks», a technique that successfully disrupts any expectations of 'meaningful wholes'. He is concerned instead with things extraneous, circumjacent and parametric. His narrative style seems to have as its sole purpose the glossing over of anything resembling a climax in order to dwell exclusively on those lacunae which provide gaps in the original story line. He spurns the contortions of plot in favour of paradoxes whose segments occur next to, rather than follow from, one another. He provides us with parafictions to separate us from the fictions of our daily lives. Segment after segment of *Snow White* picks up these various fictions — politics, existentialism, psychology, pop culture — and shows us how pervasive they've become. «Words» Barthelme notes, «are signs and some signs lie». His parafictions, uncommitted to anything as grandiose as the truth, attempt to tell us how they lie, and how we, so willingly, accept the deception.

Barthelme makes the novel into a play space — a concept clearly related to what the Black Mt. poets, such as Duncan and Olson, have called «open-field» verse — into which almost any element can erupt. His narrative becomes a series of ludic fictions (to use the term Barthelme appropriates from his reading of Huizinga) where all the attention centres on the act of writing, the *écriture*. The fictive language shuffles reality as it wishes. It is freed from any ethical or cultural concern with value, given that it proposes no real change or development in theme or character. Barthelme is able to concentrate on a whole series of technical innovations: the use of «cut-up» techniques, of pictures and blank spaces; the irruption of large capitalized remarks which may or may not be relevant to the text; a fascination with cliché; a constant experimentation with style endlessly undermined by jokes or blagues that throw the whole linguistic enterprise into question. Barthelme's techniques emphasize the surface, the place where language glues the world together.

Barthelme's narrative technique denies memory in favour of discourse. He opts for the repetition of endless beginnings over recollection. It's a typical postmodern preference which once again finds its origins in Heidegger who notes that repetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions; for what is recollection has been, is repeated backwards, whereas repetition properly so called is recollected forwards. Repetition has, therefore, the character of novelty —something that John Cage understood perfectly when he said the repetition of a note was never the same the second time. Barthelme does, in one sense, repeat the story of Snow White but in a post-freudian age of commercial t.v., cynicism, and promiscuity. Can we truly believe in a Snow White of glowing innocence boarded up with seven well-meaning, hard-working, and uncomplicated dwarfs? No we can't, and our fantasies come rolling in over everything. Snow White is seen as a very modern young lady who has exchanged her innocence for the cheap dazzle of Fairy Snow or some other detergent and who commits everything imaginable in the shower room. Her Prince is an equally confused projection who spends most of his time posing against nearby fences in order to attract the attentions of passing Hollywood directors who would recognise the all too evident need to drown him under a Pat Boone soundtrack. The Wicked Witch is a kinky bitch. Everybody conforms to their roles but nobody believes in them any more. Snow White even becomes so muddled that she lets down her hair for the Prince to climb up. But that was in a different story and the Prince walks on by. In any case he's little taste for heroics, little sense of romance, and in a world of indifferent lust he opts for the role of voyeur. He has, however, to save Snow White and although he would have little truck with poisoned combs, apples or mirrors, he does just manage to gulp down her Gibson-on-the-rocks- and die. Barthelme thus repeats the elements in a style that seems to owe something to 'adult comics'. He discloses a new 'meaning' while steadily resisting any form of closure. He apparently offers five alternative endings, or are they in five more beginnings in the guise of new chapter headings?

Yet Barthelme's technique is simply to make these narrative fragments one more element in the discourse of fragments. Fragments, he writes in *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*, are the only form he trusts. They are the way we read the world and technically they permit him to mix languages and styles. He sees no reason why these various elements should fit and harmonize, they simply co-exist like everything else. Indeed he makes the various languages play against each other to prevent any monistic reading. Everything is left open so that the reader remains painfully aware of his condition. Barthelme even introduces a questionnaire to involve him even more directly in the narrative.

Barthelme's use of discourse, fragment, and contrasting languages all stress the fact, as the Dwarfs themselves intuit, that language shapes reality and provides man with a structure for making manifest the self. Barthelme sees «strings of language extending in every direction to bind the world into a rushing whole' but he also knows that these strings represent arrangements that have slipped. He sees that they are increasing in quantity but diminishing in meaning. Advertising or the Academia, politics or any other jaded version of morality or authority, all swamp us with words and drown

us in the ceaseless babble of muzak. They form part of an overwhelming consumerism and they like everything else promise the good life. Barthelme's narrative techniques insist that we live in a linguistic trash phenomenon, or as one of the dwarfs puts it: «I hazard that we may very well soon reach a point where it's a 100 percent. Now at such a point, you will agree, the question turns from a question of disposing of this 'trash' to a question of appreciating its qualities, after all, it's 100 percent, right?». The world has become sludged with trash, described in *City Life* as an incipient form of brain damage. Barthelme exploits these various language codes to show us that much of speech is no longer communication but simply non-semantic sludge used to fill up the sentences. He makes our contemporary discourse into «strange objects covered with fur». Language becomes yet another exhausted form of reconciling ourselves with the world. It's nondescript, anonymous, mediocre, insidious, and, like life itself, it has become reduced to sterility by constant unqualified adaptation. Barthelme's narrative style shows that content is minimal and that form is all. One of the dwarfs tells us what Barthelme means by this collage of unrelated fragments, by his insistence that the 'story' doesn't matter; «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... but by reading the lines themselves — looking at them and so arriving at a feeling not of satisfaction exactly, that is too much to expect, but of having read them, of having 'completed' them.» Yet it is, paradoxically, within this very notion of 'dreck' that Barthelme shows us that the 'self' is a grammatical construct, generated by the play of language and effected by the clash of grammars.

It is precisely this desire for liberation of self that motivates Barthelme's attacks against the traditional devices of fiction. His narrative techniques constantly question their own processes and promises and reject any facile submission to the playing of roles. He recognises that we are entropic systems, that we cannot but go with the trash flow, or as one of the characters in *Snow White* puts it «our becoming is done we are what we are. It's just a question of rocking along with things as they are until we are dead», yet he argues, since language shapes both self and reality its ludic potential becomes a means of escape. His narrative techniques undermine the securities of role-playing or linear development and embrace the liberating force of imaginative play. *Snow White* laments that she wishes there were «some words in the world that were not the words I always hear» and as such she stays a perfect prisoner to her text. However as soon as she starts to write her poem she threatens to break the comfortable order of things and subverts the dwarfs' world. She has begun to imagine something better, to put in motion the dynamism of change, and this for Barthelme is the power and point of the fictive act.