

Names in Donald Barthelme's Short Stories

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In *Sixty Stories* Donald Barthelme has gathered together many of the stories which he originally published primarily in *The New Yorker* and then in various collections of fiction.¹ His stories have attracted the devoted following of readers who relish his original and inventive mind, as well as the harsh criticism of reviewers and conventional readers who find his prose maddening in its eccentricity and who discover that they cannot make ordinary sense out of it.

Whatever his admirers and detractors say about him, it is clear that Barthelme is in the forefront of those contemporary writers of fiction, sometimes called "fictionists," who write stories that are decidedly not in the traditional mode. Eschewing the conventions of storytellers in the past, Barthelme, along with such writers as John Barth and Robert Coover, does not always practice mimetic fiction. Their art is not necessarily an imitation of reality. As Robert Scholes has said, "Realism purports—has always purported—to subordinate words themselves to their referents."² For Barthelme the words themselves may be as important. "The key to Barthelme's new aesthetic for fiction," according to Jerome Klinkowitz, "is that the work may stand for itself, that it need not yield to complete explication of something else in the world but

¹ All the stories used here are from *Sixty Stories* (New York: G.B. Putnam's Sons, 1981). They originally appeared in the following: *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* (1964), *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968), *City Life* (1970), *Sadness* (1972), *Guilty Pleasures* (1974), *The Dead Father* (1975), *Amateurs* (1976), and *Great Days* (1979).

² *The Fabulators* (New York: Oxford, 1967), p. 11.

may exist as an individual object, something beautiful and surprising and deep."³

In the process of concentrating on the words, Barthelme uses names in unconventional ways. A fictional character, we have always believed, must have a name or there should be a good reason why he or she does not. Furthermore, names of places and things are also vital, we have always thought, because they help us to orient ourselves to the outer world represented in our fiction. Without a name a person or a thing barely exists; it becomes part of our consciousness only when it has a name. Barthelme's fiction often ignores these assumptions. In *Sixty Stories* his use of names demonstrates his attitude to the established fictive conventions of characterization, point of view, and setting as well as his outlook on the contemporary world.

I

The most obvious victim of Barthelme's anti-mimetic stance is the concept of character. As readers, we look for characters whose actions bear some resemblance to human behavior we understand. In fact, we often discuss them as though they had a life of their own, as though they had jumped out of the pages and assumed an identity close to ours. And when analyzing them, we employ the standards of plausibility and consistency. The characterization of Huck Finn, for example, has been criticized by many readers because at the end of the novel Huck loses some of the maturity and moral authority he had gained in the course of his voyage down the Mississippi with Jim. In other words, his character has been changed in a way that seems inconsistent and which betrays our expectations. Barthelme's contempt for these established expectations manifests itself in characters whose psychology is difficult to understand in conventional ways. Their actions do not spring from plausible motivation. They are rarely described physically; the reader gets no help in trying to visualize the bodies of his characters. And their conversations with each other seem to have no human context. As one reviewer put it, Barthelme's characters are "mostly voices with names."⁴

Often Barthelme's characters are not given last names, that highly important part of human identity, which carries with it connotations of

³ *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 80.

⁴ Richard Ford, "A Fat Collection of Barthelme at his Satirical Best," *Chicago Tribune Book World*, 27 September 1981, Sec. 3, p. 7, Col. 2.

our ancestry, ethnicity and history. As Elsdon C. Smith, author of *American Surnames*, remarks about last names: "Without them the social and business structure called civilization would drop to a low level, almost come to a standstill."⁵ Characters such as Edward and Carl in "Margins"; Hubert, Charles, Paul, Irene, and Eric in "Will You Tell Me?"; and Alice in "Alice" are bereft of their last names. The elimination of last names is a way of reducing a character's importance and, in a larger sense, of demonstrating that individuals in contemporary society don't matter much. This minimizing of individual character and significance is typical of many contemporary writers. Alain Robbe-Grillet, for example, says that the desire to invest characters with names is a remnant of our older fiction where it represented a bourgeois anthropocentric desire "to have a face in the universe."⁶

The impulse to reduce the importance of individuals is carried to extreme in the bizarre names Barthelme sometimes gives his characters. Some are belittled by such names as Miss Mandible in "Me and Miss Mandible," and Rebecca Lizard in "Rebecca," about a young lady who has a slight reptilian greenishness to her skin. The story with the longest list of strange names is "The Emerald," populated by characters with appellations like Tope, Sallywag, Wide Boy, Toptoe, Sometimes, Wednesday, Soapbox, Cold Cuts, Pro Tem, and Plug. One of these, Soapbox, disparages a character named Dietrich von Dietersdorf with the comment: "Pretty fancy name for such a pissant-looking fellow as you." Soapbox, in other words, disparages conventional names and implies that human beings are insect-like creatures, better identified with absurd names than with traditional ones which bestow dignity and worth on the individual.

Barthelme is celebrated for his use of lists. One of his characters, Miss R. (a further reduction of the dignity of a complete name) in "The Indian Uprising" says: "The only form of discourse of which I approve is the litany." She likes her lists horizontally in paragraphs, separated by commas, or in "vertical organization." In "Will You Tell me?" Rosemarie lists vertically all the people who had not written her a letter that morning:

Peter Elkin
Joan Elkin

⁵ (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1969), p. x.

⁶ "On Several Notions" from *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, reprinted in John Hershey, ed., *The Writer's Craft* (New York: Knopf, 1975), p. 95.

Howard Toff
 Edgar Rich
 Marcy Powers
 Sue Brownly
and many others

And in "The Glass Mountain" we are given a long horizontal list of explorers' names (all apparently fictitious) who have failed to climb the mountain. Barthelme appears to savor the sonorous ring of names of these titled climbers:

Sir Giles Guilford, Sir Henry Lovell, Sir Albert Denny,
 Sir Nicholas Vaux, Sir Patrick Grifford, Sir Gisbourne Gower,
 Sir Thomas Grey, Sir Peter Coleville, Sir John Blunt,
 Sir Richard Vernon, Sir Walter Willoughby, Sir Stephen Spear,
 Sir Roger Faulconbridge, Sir Clarence Vaughan, Sir Hubert Ratcliffe,
 Sir James Tyrrel, Sir Walter Herbert, Sir Robert Brakenbury,
 Sir Lionel Beaufort, and many others.

The arrangement of lists of names in various patterns is also apparent. Ramona, in "City Life," plays with the whimsical possibilities of three unrelated names:

Vercingerotex
 Moonbelly
 Charles

Moonbelly
 Charles
 Vercingerotex

Charles
 Vercingerotex
 Moonbelly

Barthelme's non-traditional use of names extends to historical characters, whose names he treats with abandon as he places them in anachronistic contexts and in absurd situations. In "The Rise of Capitalism," Balzac goes to the movies, where he watches his favorite flick, *The Rise of Capitalism*. Cortes and Montezuma (in "Cortes and Montezuma") stroll hand in hand, go to a concert, and walk with Charles V, Emperor of Spain; and assorted other characters such as Edward Lear, Kierkegaard, Schlegel, and Ignatius Loyola appear in bizarre situations. There is no sense of history in Barthelme's work. Indeed, his tendency is anti-historical and there is no sense of depth, no sense of a traditional, historical past. Famous figures thus again become just names to be manipulated into whatever design Barthelme is creating. His characters

do not move in a recorded world divided into handy historical periods. History "is sensed as a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are obliterated."⁷

Why does Barthelme do such strange things with names? For one thing, they are just names. They have no reference to a flesh and blood person in the author's imagination. They are disembodied creations which can be arranged and rearranged in interesting patterns on the page, much as one might arrange beads on a string or marbles on a Chinese checkerboard. The aesthetic pleasure lies in the pattern and the form, not necessarily in the human being. For another, the listing of names precludes any responsibility for putting them in conventional contexts. In Barthelme's words the rules of fictive cause and effect are suspended, as they are for characterization. The characters act in fantastic situations where normal chains of events do not apply, and logical connections are submerged. All of these explanations become clearer by understanding a basic principle of much contemporary fiction; that is, *literature is words*. Novels and short stories are made out of language; they do not exist referentially. They acquire their own validity when they are arranged on a page in whatever way the author wants to arrange them. In this context names or lists of names need not conform to our conventional vision of what should be real. Apologists for this new fiction argue that writers like Barthelme are practicing a new epistemology, one long overdue and which has come to other arts such as painting. The fragmentary, chaotic, contemporary world which is not comprehensible in traditional ways, requires new ways of seeing or understanding.

Barthelme's interest in proper names as words also extends to the names of things as words. One of his characters in "At the End of the Mechanical Age" sings a song of praise to the wonder of the names of tools. Displaying an almost primitive association between the name and the thing itself, he says:

Let me give you just one instance of Maude's inhuman sagacity. Maude named the tools. It was Maude who thought of calling the rattail file a rattail file... Maude named the rasp. Think of it. What else could a rasp be but a rasp. Maude in her wisdom went right to the point and called it a *rasp*. It was Maude who named the maul. Similarly, the sledge, the wedge, the ball-peen hammer, the adz, the shim, the hone, the strop. The handsaw, the bucksaw, and the fretsaw were named by Maude, peering into each saw and intuiting at once its specialness.

Sometimes Barthelme just seems to like the bizarre litany of words. In

⁷ Joseph Frank quoted in William V. Spanos, "Breaking the Circle: Hermeneutics as Dis-Closure," *Boundary II*, V, No. 2 (1977), p. 41.

"Eugenie Grandet" the word "butter" arranged horizontally in nine lines is repeated eighty-seven times:

Butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter
 butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter
 butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter butter
(87 times).

In Melville's "Bartleby" the narrator says he likes the name of John Jacob Astor which, he says, "I love to repeat; for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it..." "Butter" may not have a rounded and orbicular sound to it, but "balloon" does, and Barthelme repeats this word almost ad nauseam in a story called "The Great Hug."

II

One of the traditional ways of understanding a work of fiction is to examine the narrator closely. Who is telling the story? What does the reader learn about the narrator that is important? In what way is the narrator's voice ultimately important to the total effect? In *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, the fact that Huck, the first person narrator, is a young teenager, somewhat innocent and naive in certain circumstances, is a source of much of the humor. We, as more sophisticated readers, understand what Huck does not understand, and there is an ironic discrepancy in perceptions. In some of Sherwood Anderson's fiction, in "Death in the Woods," for example, the first person narrator becomes ultimately more important than the tragic story he is trying to tell. Barthelme's stories employ the first person "I" and "we" extensively, but in many cases the reader has no understanding of the characters behind the disembodied pronouns. In stories such as "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," "See the Moon?" and "The Indian Uprising" (to mention some of his best know pieces), the "I" floats through the story without helping the reader as to his name, age, physical description, or virtually any clue that gives the reader some understanding of the narrator. Barthelme, however, makes no concession to the traditional reader. Characterization, including that of the narrator, is no longer important. He has, in Allain Robbe-Grillet's words, renounced "the omnipotence of the person."⁸

III

Another traditional concern is for setting. As readers we want names

⁸ "On Several Notions" from *For a New Novel*, p. 95.

of places, we want geographical referents, a desire rooted in our urge to place people in a physical context. One of the first questions we ask someone we have just met is "Where are you from?" The answer, in most cases, instantly tells us a good deal about the person, and we are happy that we have "fixed" him in a place. Barthelme's characters, in contrast, usually have no place of origin, and we don't know where the story takes place. Most of his stories seem to have an urban setting (and sometimes, as in "The Balloon," New York is the location), but on the whole, the settings are as undefined and indistinct as the characters who inhabit them. Indeed place names, like human names, may be used for whatever enjoyment they provide the author as words. In the story "Paraguay" (where the author tells us that "this Paraguay is not the Paraguay that exists on our maps"), we are given a tour through imaginary place names that have a romantic and exotic ring to them. The narrators cross the Burji la, a camp near Sekbachan close to Malik Mar, proceed to the Deosai plains and finally ascend the Sari Sangar Pass. In "The Indian Uprising" the setting is apparently a ghetto, but references also suggest that the activities there are not the ones you might find in a ghetto, but in France, Spain, the American Western frontier, and the battlefields of World War II. It is a pastiche of settings, geographically unrelated and maddening to the reader trying to establish where all this takes place. It also illustrates one of Barthelme's favorite techniques: the collage, the arrangement of fragments (words and images) in whatever form is pleasing to him.

Barthelme's settings tend to suggest the kind of world we inhabit and the people it creates. It has been widely noted that Barthelme's fiction is saturated with collages of dreck, of trash, the detritus of contemporary civilization.⁹ The narrator in "Me and Miss Mandible," formerly a claims adjuster for the Great Northern Insurance Company, describes his job as one which "compelled me to spend my time amid the debris of our civilization: rumped fenders, roofless sheds, gutted warehouses, smashed arms and legs. After ten years of this one has the tendency to see the world as a vast junkyard." The word "junk" extends beyond the palpable into the realm of the cultural climate. As Francis Gillen writes, Barthelme explores "the full impact of mass media pop culture on the consciousness of the individual who is so bombarded by canned happenings, sensations, reactions, and general noise that he can no longer distinguish himself from his surroundings."¹⁰ Thus the schoolchildren

⁹ *Literary Disruptions*, p. 69.

¹⁰ Francis Gillen, "Donald Barthelme's City: A Guide," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 18, (1972), p. 37.

in "Me and Miss Mandible" are shaped by stories about Eddie and Liz in *Movie-TV Secrets*. One girl has seventeen of these magazines, and the narrator gives a sample list which captures the essence of names blown out of proportion by hype and publicity:

- "Debbie's Kids are Crying"
- "Eddie Asks Debbie: Will You...?"
- "The Nightmares Liz Has About Eddie"
- "The Things Debbie Can Tell about Eddie"
- "The Private Life of Eddie and Liz"
- "Debbie Gets Her Man Back"
- "A New Life for Liz"
- "Love is a Tricky Affair"
- "Eddie's Taylor-Made Love Nest"
- "How Liz Made a Man of Eddie"
- "Are They Planning to Live Together?"
- "Isn't it Time to Stop Kicking Debbie Around?"
- "Debbie's Dilemma"
- "Eddie Becomes a Father Again"
- "Is Debbie Planning to Re-Wed?"
- "Can Liz Fulfill Herself?"
- "Why Debbie Is Sick of Hollywood"

In this same story, the narrator experiences the hopelessness that Barthelme's characters often feel about themselves as they try to cope with a grotesque and absurd world. The plot (and it is one of the more sequential plots in Barthelme) concerns a thirty-five-year-old man who inexplicably finds himself classified officially as an eleven-year-old child and is placed in Miss Mandible's grade school class. There he is caught in a jealous tug-of-war between Sue Ann Brownly, the eleven-year-old who owns the seventeen copies of *Movie-TV Secrets*, and Miss Mandible, for whom he has an erotic attraction. The plot is similar to another story ("The Sergeant"), in which a nameless ex-sergeant finds himself, also inexplicably, again a member of another institution, the U.S. Army. Like the narrator in "Me and Miss Mandible," his explanations are to no avail. Enmeshed in bureaucratic phrases and regulations, he cannot extricate himself, and at the end of the story is assigned to monumental K.P. duty. Both the claims adjuster and the sergeant have lost their identities. Both have been assigned designations: schoolchild and sergeant on active duty. In the end their designations, the names given to them by potent modern bureaucracies, become their fate.

IV

Barthelme, then, in many of his short stories demonstrates a con-

temporary outlook on the nature of fiction: that it does not have to be mimetic and that it may have its own aesthetic validity in words themselves, not their referents. Furthermore, in practicing his art, Barthelme often also ignores venerable traditions of fiction. One of these is the notion that writers must create plausible and consistent characters. Barthelme shapes characters of meager identity who do not have last names, whose names are bizarre, and whose names are arranged in various patterns on a page for whatever intrinsic pleasure this pattern may provide. Even historical characters with recognizable names move in vague or illogical contexts. Barthelme's use of names of non-human objects, also, is primarily an exercise in lists and litanies or in the sounds of the names themselves. Another victim of Barthelme's contemporary approach is the concept of point of view; readers often have no clear understanding of the identity of the narrator in the story. Just as vague is setting. The names of places where the action of the stories occur are missing, vague, or confusing. As with characters and objects, their sounds and patterns are more important.

Barthelme is not interested in conventional coherence arising from realistic characters, fully equipped with names, well-developed identities, and the trappings of time and place. By deliberately subverting the traditional power of names in fiction he is presenting his distinctive vision of the modern world: fragmented, chaotic, kaleidoscopic, and basically not understandable. Barthelme has created a fictional world where words have lost much of their old ordering power, their capacity to make sense out of the muddle and disorder of human experience. They have become, instead, part of the litter of contemporary society where, as the narrator of "The Indian Uprising" says, "Strings of language in every direction to bind the world into a rushing, ribald whole."