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Installation, Parody, Father: Barthelme's *The Dead Father*

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Linda Hutcheon would have included Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father* among the works of American sur-fictionists. It is like a work of "abstract art," she argues, with its lack of concern for reality that results from contemporary metafiction's extreme "modernist autotelic self-reflexion" (40). Its purely formalist foregrounding of self-consciously textual play is also what John Gardner in *On Moral Fiction* condemns Barthelme for:

The limitation evident in a writer like Barthelme . . . is . . . a species of Romantic self-love. . . . Barthelme reflects his doubting and anxious age because he is, himself, an extreme representative of it. . . . The modern Narcissus dreams up no large goals for all humanity because he's chiefly interested in his own kinks, pathetic or otherwise. . . . (81)

It is only for being a "writer . . . as historian, holding up the mirror to his age but not changing it" that he is given credit (77). Gardner concludes that the reason Barthelme as historian does no more than "mirror" his age is that he, besides being its "representative," lives in an age when "[c]onfusion and doubt become the primary civilized emotions" (77).

What is most interesting about the two critics' equally negative view of this kind of "narcissistic narrative" is that there is a fundamental but telling contradiction in the way they, especially Gardner, accuse Barthelme of too much

self-reflexivity: how can an autotelic, self-reflexive text (which both Hutcheon and Gardner would have claimed *The Dead Father* to be) at the same time “reflect,” as Gardner argues, the doubting and anxious age? In other words, how can a modern Narcissus be a historian? To examine this contradiction we need to focus, à la Hutcheon, on the novel’s use of parody. But the term “parody,” truth to tell, is too broad in critically reading this particular work of “abstract art.” It is *installation*, a term not confined to literature, that most illuminates the way the novel parodically relates itself to its sources, namely, to its textual “dead fathers.”

This novel parodies a number of familiar myths and legends, and the one that the entire structure of the text depends on is Homer’s major epic, *Odyssey*. The Dead Father’s slaughter is a retelling of Odysseus’s numberless heroic deeds, including his triumph over the Cyclops and the battle with the Suitors, while the women he encounters, such as Tulla, Hilda, and Mother, remind the reader of the women Odysseus himself meets on his way home, like Calypso and Nausicaä, not to mention his final destination, Penelope. Moreover, the Dead Father’s mock *odyssey* destined for his own burying ground parallels Odysseus’s long voyage back to his fatherland, Ithaca. His hauling, besides being an updated rendition of Homeric subject, is a parody of another myth as well. In Barthelme’s version of this long journey, the Dead Father’s funeral procession is originally intended, at least as he himself believes it, to be one in search of what has strong revitalizing properties by means of which he is able to be young again, namely, the Golden Fleece. Whereas the Golden Fleece is generally known as a legendary treasure which Jason and the Argonauts set out to recover and which he, with the aid of

Medea, finally succeeds in getting back, in Barthelme's version it is a "fleece" far different in kind (Julie's pubic hair that is "[q]uite golden" and "[q]uite ample," disclosed as she "lift[s] her skirt" 175). It is not his "mock-epic" journey alone that provides subjects for parody. In his story narrated on his way of his love affair with Tulla, he tells that after her death from overproduction he, "inconsolable and, driven as if by a demon, descended into the underworld seeking to reclaim her" (36-37), just as Orpheus trying in vain to retrieve Eurydice. Also in Barthelme's version of Hades, there is a river of oblivion, "Jelly," whose Greek counterpart is Lethe. As he sat on the riverside "beset by eight hundred myriads of sorrows and sorrowing away," a worm wriggles up to him and suggests a game of pool, a way, according to the worm, to "forget" (37). Thomas also recounts a story that is a remake of a Greek myth. One day he is suddenly kidnapped and brought to the "Great Father Serpent," who "would if [he] answered the riddle correctly grant [him] a boon . . ." (43). When the Great Father Serpent asks him a question, "*What do you really feel?*" which is a reminder of Sphinx's famous riddle eventually solved by Oedipus, he answers, "Like murdering" (46), an aptly Oedipean answer given by a son who is to bury his already dead father.

What exactly, then, is the relation between parody and father as seen in *The Dead Father*, a text fabricated from a number of myths interlinked with each other? William H. Gass's definition of "metafiction" given in his essay, "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction," helps to clarify this:

There are metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to

converse about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don't mean merely those drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those . . . in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. Indeed, many of the so-called antinovels are really metafictions. (24-25)

This formulation perfectly applies to *The Dead Father*. In it a form of fiction, myth, serves as the material upon which a further form of fiction, a novel called *The Dead Father*, can be imposed. This metafiction as Gass defines it could not have been born without the many myths upon which it is built, and in this sense these myths are the father of *The Dead Father*. As to the relation between parody and father in general, therefore, it might be said that what Gass calls the forms of fiction that serve as the material, in other words, the forms of fiction that are parodied, are the father, whose sons, then, newly born, are those further forms of fiction that impose themselves upon, or parody, their literary father. It is possible to recognize this kind of parental or generational relation in any work of fiction that in some fashion or other employs this art technique of parody. (The novel's use of parody, however, is particularly singular in that its parody is self-referential, with its subject matter of father-son relationship dealt with in a text whose parodic structure is itself a product of literary father-son relationship. Its formal framework reflects its own thematic framework; it is not only *about* parental relation but *is* involved in that particular relation itself.) This kind of parodic literary genealogy indicates that in dealing with this novel, a literary son born of his literary father, it is necessary to consider it not only in terms of its misleadingly alleged status as a self-sufficient

literary object, an autonomous organic unity, but in terms of its literary origins, of what kind of parentage, lineage, or background it possesses, of its relation with its context. What is worth paying particular attention to, moreover, is that this literary father is in the form of "text": "Many fathers are . . . texts to be studied, generation after generation, to determine how this idiosyncrasy may be maximized. Text-fathers are usually bound in blue" (122-23). If this fact that the father is textual is taken into account in terms of intertextuality, this means that the "text-fathers" are a sort of intertext: texts that are parodied, pastiched, plagiarized, appropriated, alluded to, cited, collaged, copied, remixed, reproduced, represented, in other words, drawn upon, by other texts. If, what is even more, one thinks of this intertext not only as precursory texts but also as, to be more inclusive, the sum of all the utterances circulating as of its birth as well as the sum of all the dead verbal practices sedimented and accumulated till that time, it is possible to conclude that the father of the text of *The Dead Father* is the entire linguistic landscape that encompasses it, a verbal context of which and into which it is born; that it is what Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* calls the "infinite text" (36).

After examining the relation between father and parody, it is necessary to consider that between son and parody as well. It is natural that *The Dead Father* as a literary son should aspire to be independent, to be on its own as a grown-up literary work. But it is, as the manual says, a virtual impossibility: "At what point do you become yourself? Never, wholly, you are always partly him" (144). Destined thus to be eternally overshadowed by the father, he may want to sever himself from, or kill, him. So Sam II, a case of attempted patricide carried in the manual,

tries to kill his father, Sam, because “he didn’t want [his father] to name him Sam II” (143). His patricide, nevertheless, is only an “attempted” patricide, for, as the manual writes, it is forbidden, is under a taboo:

Patricide: Patricide is a bad idea, first because it is contrary to law and custom. . . . It is all right to feel this hot emotion, but not to act upon it. And it is not necessary. It is not necessary to slay your father, time will slay him, that is a virtual certainty. Your true task lies elsewhere. (145)

Is there, then, if the son is never allowed to kill his father, no way for him to be independent, to establish his own unique identity? Here it is helpful to turn to what Barthelme writes about musical performance in his essay, “Not-Knowing”:

Let us suppose that I am the toughest banjulele player in town and that I have contracted to play “Melancholy Baby” for six hours before an audience. . . . There is one thing of which you may be sure: I am not going to play “Melancholy Baby” as written. Rather I will play something that is parallel, in some sense, to “Melancholy Baby,” based upon the chords of “Melancholy Baby,” made out of “Melancholy Baby,” *having to do with* “Melancholy Baby” — commentary, exegesis, elaboration, contradiction. The interest of my construction, if any, is to be located in the space between the new entity I have constructed and the “real” “Melancholy Baby,” which remains in the mind as the horizon which bounds my efforts. (521)

This is a fine explication of how to do things with parody. *The Dead Father* “plays” many myths, *Odyssey*, *Oedipus*

Rex, and the legends of the Golden Fleece and Orpheus who is a good player himself, not as in an exact word-for-word or, more precisely, "note-for-note" reproduction but in a way that is "parallel" to, "has to do with," their composition. It is based on the "chords" of these myths, and yet it is not a simple repetition but a distanced repetition. "If words can be contaminated by the world," Barthelme writes in the same essay, but this time from a literary perspective, "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" (520). These "contaminated" words, according to him, are "furiously busy" (519). *The Dead Father* is an excellent example of the author's awareness of these advantages of our disadvantages, of his dexterity in using in a positive way these deconstructive trace elements or associations of the contaminated, "busy" words, words such as Oedipus, Odyssey, and Orpheus which are neither fresh nor made anew and which therefore might be in danger of turning out to be simply outworn clichés or stereotypes. What is at stake is the problem of "style": "Style is not much a matter of choice. . . . Rather it is both a response to constraint and a seizing of opportunity. Very often a constraint is an opportunity" ("Not-Knowing" 520). The father, to the son, is a constraint to be conquered and yet at the same time, paradoxically, is an opportunity to be grasped. If there is at all a way for him to establish his own identity, therefore, it is not patricide but, on the contrary and paradoxically, to take advantage of his greatest disadvantage, his father. This is why *The Dead Father* features a dead "father," not "mother": it provides one of the largest contexts or resources with its implications of

phallogocentric patriarchy; it is one of the “furiously busiest” words, charged or “contaminated” with the traces of all the fathers ever written throughout the Western literary history from Homer onward; and it imposes more constraint, is itself more in bondage than any other word and, nevertheless and therefore, is all the more associable with other possible trace elements.

It is here that the term “installation” can be introduced in order to make it more unequivocal how a particular text that parodically makes the best use of the paternal constraint relates itself to its context. It is a technical term in modern art that means not an aesthetic practice aiming at creating a finished art “object,” whether a painting or photograph put in the frame or a sculpture set on the pedestal, but an act of rearranging its own context itself by “installing” something in that context, like a little stone placed on purpose on the floor of the museum so that it, unlike paintings or sculptures that have no intention of affecting the museum’s space itself, might take advantage of its spatial arrangement and make it no longer what it used to be, however slight the effect may be. A “site-specific artwork,” Robert Atkins defines the term, an “installation is created especially for a particular gallery space or outdoor site, and it comprises not just a group of discrete art objects to be viewed as individual works but an entire ensemble or environment.” Oriented not so much toward the “object-ness” of an artwork as toward its relation to its context, it is, rather than a technique for making something, a strategy for “making something happen.”

Hutcheon’s argument, albeit unwittingly, points to the important role installation plays in what she calls the poetics of postmodernism (though *The Dead Father*, according to her, might be late modernist):

[P]ostmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms . . . at once use and abuse, *install* and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past. (23; emphasis added)

That the body of the Dead Father is there in the landscape while being hauled, and that the text of *The Dead Father* that narrates its story is in its turn there in the context of its fathering intertext, thus forming a metafictional *mise-en-abyme* that in many ways characterizes the novel, mean that the "body" of "The Dead Father," whether his dead body or the body text of Barthelme's novel, performs as an installation that, placed in each environment, affects and changes the context itself in such a way as to make it, by the very fact that it is there, no longer what it used to be. Parody, a "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 26), is a form of installation, not only contributing to making a new work of art but in that very process also critically working on the context itself. The term "installation" implies a kind of paradigm shift from the status of both the Dead Father and *The Dead Father* as a self-contained unity, a corpse or a book, to their critically parodic relation with their contexts.

It is after this discussion of installation that we are able to move on to a further problem concerning the notion of the father as context or "horizon." I have said that Barthelme's *The Dead Father* features a dead "father" because the word provides one of the largest contexts or resources, namely, because it is one of the "furiously busiest" words. This fails to take into account, however,

the other equally important aspect in the reading of this particular novel: why is the Dead Father *dead*? Does this fact also imply the death of the textual father? If so, it necessarily means that not only the novel's fathering intertexts, like *Odyssey* and *Oedipus Rex*, but also the entire textual landscape are in fact all dead. This is exactly like the situation Barthes describes in *The Pleasure of the Text*, in which the textual body consisting of all the texts ever spoken or written has become a "corpus," not only in the sense specifically linguistic but — remarkably suitable for this novel — in the sense of a dead body (34). The context of *The Dead Father*, not just referring to its original or originating texts, also includes the state of these fathers' being dead.

Not that they are impotent; paradoxically enough, they are prolific or "seminal" for all their status as being dead. Toward the end of the story when the Dead Father has finally stretched his gigantic body in his grave, his voice resounds: "I'm in it now.... I'm in the hole now" (176-77). The symbolic implications of this final scene of his burial testify to the dead fathers' generative power, their competence in producing offspring, despite the fact that they are dead. His burial has sexual implications, with his last word, the "hole," having the possibility of referring semantically not only to his grave but also to the female sexual organ, and as a result his being "in the hole" symbolically suggests that he is in fact having sexual intercourse for the sake of procreation. The female pubic region, as Julie says while showing him her ample golden fleece, is "where life lives" (175). Lois Gordon aptly views this death and rebirth symbolized in the Dead Father's burial in terms of "womb/tomb" image (165).

This image of death and rebirth self-referentially applies

to the textual fathers of Barthelme's *The Dead Father*. That its fathering intertexts, say *Odyssey*, are dead does not mean their disappearance or nonexistence, for they are "[d]ead, but still with us, still with us, but dead" (3); rather, it means that they have ceased to be *the* father, the legitimate father who is unique and never open to being replaced, that they have become *a* father, and that there is a good possibility that eventually every one of them becomes "the" father of a son, a situation that leaves him eternally suspended over the chasm in terms of lineage. He, like Sam II, may love his father or, if he wishes, even any father, and yet he can never love *the* father. In this way *The Dead Father* has from the start textual fathers in the plural, such as Oedipus, Orpheus, and the myth of the Golden Fleece as well as the infinite text, and Homer's *Odyssey* is not his only textual father. It is, as it were, a born bastard, illegitimately created or "conceived," whose nonlinear family tree are made up of bi-, tri-, or multi-furcating branches spreading like a web in all directions as they intersect each other and almost hiding and nullifying the trunk of the tree. It is placed or "installed" in this sort of promiscuous situation in which it is impossible for it to know which text-father is legitimate or canonical and in which the son, unable to trace his ancestry or rather able to trace any pedigree, is predestined, in order to be born at all, to arbitrarily create his own genealogy all for himself. This kind of context in which *The Dead Father* is situated, a context in which all the dead textual fathers are equally authentic and inauthentic, might be translated, from the point of view of postmodernism, as what Jean-François Lyotard calls the "postmodern condition" in which "incredulity toward metanarratives" is the dominant feeling (xxiv); from that

of postmodernist fiction, as what John Barth terms "the literature of exhaustion" by which he refers to "the usedupness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities" (19); or, from Barthelme's own perspective in *Show White*, as the "trash phenomenon" by which is meant a situation in which "the per-capita production of trash" per day at last reaches "100 percent" (97).

The Dead Father is conscious that the words it installs in this postmodern waste land are directed not at the quick but exclusively at the dead, and that for this reason the installation might not work effectively. Just before the burial, the Dead Father confesses that he has known the aim of the procession from the beginning, that he is all along self-consciously aware of what he is doing as well as of the role the children want him to be playing:

I wasn't really fooled, said the Dead Father. Not for a moment. I knew all along.

We knew you knew, said Thomas.

Of course I had hopes, said the Dead Father. Pale hopes.

We knew that too.

Did I do it well? asked the Dead Father.

Marvelously well, said Julie. Superbly. I will never see it done better.

Thank you, said the Dead Father. Thank you very much. (176)

He has been aware that at the end of the hauling awaits the burial of the dead, and that any revolt against this plot is of no avail. Even so, he accepts the role his children offer him and, assuming ignorance, tries to play the part of a dead father, to "do well," as they want him to. This ironical situation of the Dead Father is an

obvious self-portrait of the novel itself, which has no other ways than to accept and take advantage of the death of the father and then, in the context thus embraced, exerts itself so that its installation of words might somehow work, might somehow make something happen.

But it never works and nothing happens, or at least so do critics like Hutcheon assume. The reason for its failure has to do with the very notion of installation. To be effective it needs, as does parody as Hutcheon defines it, an ironically critical distance, but, as Fredric Jameson says, "distance in general (including 'critical distance' in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism" (48). With the disappearance of critical distance comes the degeneration of parody into what Jameson calls "pastiche" (16). The novel's installation of words in fact functions less as parody than as pastiche. But it is too much to say that there is "no" critical distance available. Barthelme's rendition of the Homeric epic, or "Melancholy Baby" for that matter, is certainly distanced from the original, but the distance gained is by no means sufficient to allow the new version to be critically ironical. It is distant enough only to allow itself to be uncritically playful, and if it is ever to be considered ironical, it is so not in the sense of corrective critique but only in the sense of situational, non-corrective irony.

It is after all this discussion on parody, genealogy, context, installation, the death of the father, and irony that we are able to return to Hutcheon's and Gardner's contradictory criticism that started this essay. First, re Gardner. Granted that his charge is to the point in its own way, it still fails to refer to one major characteristic of this novel, namely, irony. An age that has declared the death of the Father is exactly like what Gardner calls an age suffering

from doubt and confusion, but if a novelist as a pseudo-historian merely describes rather than changes it, he is unable even to do so unless he is self-consciously, or ironically, aware of the role he is playing in the context he is situated in, just as the Dead Father who knew all along that he was to be buried in the end. Installation is possible only for a historian who self-consciously holds up the mirror to his age. Are the words, then, that Barthelme installs in his age a mere narcissistic soliloquy? It might be so, and yet with a slight but crucial qualification, on which he comments in an interview:

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 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. . . . And the attempt is sufficiently skeptical about itself. In this century there’s been much stress placed not upon what we know but on knowing that our methods are themselves questionable—our *Song of Songs* is the Uncertainty Principle. (O’Hara 105)

In an age when the father is no more, “the only certain reality for the metafictionist,” as Mas’ud Zavarzadeh puts it, “is the reality of his own discourse . . .” (39), a “way” things are done, and as a result he is in a way predestined to be a narcissist. Still, what Gardner fails to see when he charges Barthelme as a modern Narcissus is the ironical, or romantic-ironical, shade coloring his voice, which result from his will to accept his “questionable” method, the

novel, that is the only art form available to a novelist; from his recognition that he has no other ways than to "skeptically" embrace his uncertain medium that is language. The installation named *The Dead Father* is an aesthetic act informed with this kind of positive skepticism, and it is contradictory through and through because it is, as Gardner argues, a modern Narcissus who at the same time tries to be a historian, though an ironic one.

Nevertheless, I agree with Hutcheon — though with certain qualifications — that this "late modernist" installation is "ineffective," but this is not due to its contradiction because, as she argues, contradiction is constitutive of the very poetics of postmodernism. It is ineffective, not because its "‘purity’ of material and social critique are," says Hutcheon, "ultimately self-marginalizing because hermetic," (203), but because critical distance is all but unavailable. "All but," because this kind of literary installation surely works on some, if not totally. The problem of Hutcheon's argument is that she conveniently presupposes a totally monolithic readership. It is true that *The Dead Father*, referring almost exclusively to literary tradition, lacks both mimesis and historical reference and that therefore it is hermetically self-marginalizing; that, although it is an installation that intends to critically relate itself to its context (to "install" is not confined to the "poetics of postmodernism"), its discursive context is largely aesthetic and it is therefore open to objections like hers against its autotelic self-reflexivity. But this abstract artwork paradoxically attracts the attention of the "marginalized," of those who read the novel not in the context of the novel genre alone but in the context of art in general, in other words, those who read it as an installation that is interdiscursively directed at the genre as a whole. Only in this

sense can it be called a metafiction, and it challenges the reader, from within the horizon of the literary discourse, to question the conventions of the literary genres themselves, since today it is between discourses, on the possible margin of a discourse, that critical distance is available, if in reality we can only find the trace elements of these discourses.

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