

CHAPTER II

BARTHELME, THE CHEERFUL NIHILIST¹

Barthelme's portrayal of the helpless condition of man in a hostile world reminds us of the works of modernists like Kafka and Camus. He too depicts a society that has lost its significance. His men and women too struggle to overcome their crises, both personal and social; their passivity and helpless condition are complementary to each other. But the striking difference between Barthelme and these modernists is the final effect in the minds of the readers. Though Barthelme too is concerned with the crippling effects of absurdity in life, and the sense of nihilism (that universe as a whole has no rational meaning or purpose and human existence has no significance), his stories do not create a sense of complete despair in the reader. Barthelme does not deny

¹This phrase is borrowed from Richard Hauck's book entitled A Cheerful Nihilism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, c. 1971) in which he talks about the confidence and the absurdity in American Humorous Fiction. The sense of Humour used in depicting the inescapable sense of nihilism of the modern age gives a distinctive character to American fiction. Barthelme can be grouped among the cheerful nihilists' like Melville, Mark Twain and James Thurber whose works imply a note of affirmation inspite of the grim portrayal of human life.

the possibility of some hope in man's life. He suggests that man can overcome the absurdity that is haunting him, with a sense of humour. Unlike Camus who treats the sense of absurdity with seriousness [he has said, "This is no subject for joking"²], Barthelme nudges his reader towards laughter instead of despair. His fiction suggests that with defiance and determination man can overcome the predicament and can create his own meaning and his own self. He endows many of his characters with a sense of humour that overcomes the sense of nihilism. The logical response to nihilism is despair, but there is a power in some of Barthelme's characters "to organize and to laugh inspite of a clear recognition that [life] may mean nothing."³ The implied note in Barthelme's fiction is that laughter can momentarily defeat the pain of reality. This sense of humour, which Richard Hauck calls 'cheerful nihilism', saves one from sinking deep into the sea of pessimism.

²Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Book, 1955), p.6.

³Richard B.Hauck, A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and Absurd In American Humorous Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana university Press, c.1971), p.XI.

Before analyzing Barthelme's themes and the techniques in detail, a brief account of Barthelme's life, and a chronological survey of his works will be of some relevance. This will give an idea about how Barthelme's varied experience is related to his voluminous contribution to American fiction. He was born in Philadelphia in 1931 and when he was about two the family moved to Texas. Even from a very early age he had a liking for writing. He wrote for and edited school publications and won a series of literary awards. Later he studied journalism at the University of Houston and then worked as a reporter for the Houston Post, a journal published from the University. He wrote reviews of films and on cultural events. After a brief service in the army in Korea and Japan he returned to Houston and worked for the Houston Post again. He also joined the Public Relations Department in the University and wrote speeches for the University president.

Barthelme's professional life during the following years is interesting because of his close association with variety of artists, which influenced his writing. He founded the Forum, a literary magazine, exclusively devoted to articles on contemporary literature. He published the works- stories and articles - of leading

authors like Robbe Grillet, Fiedler, Sartre and Joseph Lyons. During this period he read a great deal which helped him publish material in the magazine and also enrich his knowledge in philosophy, psychology, anthropology and history. In addition to editing, he enjoyed doing the layouts and design work for the journal. At the young age of thirty he became the Director of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. In 1961, he moved to New York and became the managing editor of Location, an art and literary magazine founded by Harold Rosenberg and Tom Hess. Barthelme published the articles of Gass, Bellow, McLuhan and Kenneth Koch in this magazine; but it was published for a short period only. The experience he gained as editor helped him much as a fiction writer. He spoke about this rewarding experience thus:

I had to look around quite a bit for material and thus read quite a number of things I wouldn't have otherwise, not only fiction but also pieces in the fields of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history. I read all the learned journals for a while. ... I enjoy editing and enjoy doing layout-problems of design. I could very cheerfully be a typographer.⁴

⁴Jerome Klinkowitz, Donald Barthelme," The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers, ed. David Bellamy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p.47.

The variety of interests, especially his affinity for art and typography played a vital role in shaping his fiction. They greatly influenced his narrative techniques such as the use of collage and illustrations. For nearly three decades (till he died on July 23, 1989) Barthelme remained one of the leading innovative writers in America. He explored new ways to reconnect fiction to experience, realizing the exhaustion and inefficiency of its earlier forms. He was after short fictional forms rather than long novels as he felt that radical innovation was easier in the former.

"L' Lapse" was Barthelme's first story published in the New Yorker in 1963 and since then he contributed regularly to this magazine. These stories were later published in several collections. Come Back, Dr. Caligari (1964) was Barthelme's first collection of short stories. The fourteen stories of this volume contributed much to his reputation and are representative of his entire work. Most of the stories in this collection are minimal narratives, rich and complex pieces of contemporary life. They portray failed marriages in a fragmented society and the spiritually weary contemporary people brainwashed by popular culture and the mass media. Some of the remarkable stories in this collection are

"Florence Green is 81", "The Piano Player", "Me and Miss Mandible", and "A Shower of Gold".

A corroding sense of boredom and yearning to escape to some other place are brought out in "Florence Green is 81". The very title is ironical; Florence Green, inspite of her age, has not gained any maturity in her outlook. Even her material wealth has not brought her any satisfaction in life. She is still 'green' and yearns for thee company of young men to flatter her. The rich spinster expresses her loneliness repeatedly to a group of people who have come to the party hosted by her. "The Piano Player" exposes the hollowness and grotesqueness of the contemporary American family. It presents the "deteriorating absurd conversation, repeated incantation of a key term, ('ugliness' in this case), incongruous and incoherent action, and a chaotic conclusion. The story is fragmented and strained by clashes of images and ideas."⁵ "Me and Miss Mandible" is about the experiences of a grown-up man, who, by the mistake of a computer, is admitted in the fifth grade in a school. This story, with the elements of absurdity,

⁵Gordon Weaver, The American Short Story 1945-1980: A Critical History (Boston: Twayne Publishers, c.1983), p.79.

has echoes of Kafka in the mingling of fantasy and reality. "A Shower of Gold" is a different type of story - a story of search for self-identity. Peterson, a romantic sculptor, encounters many absurd situations and finally realizes how absurd is absurd. Barthelme incorporates the myth of Perseus into this story and suggests a note of optimism which is a rare element in the postmodern fiction.

To overcome the sense of boredom and failure in life people indulge in absurd activities and this is depicted in Barthelme's second collection Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts (1968). The most notable stories are "The Dolt", "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning", "The Indian Uprising", "Edward and Pia" and "The Balloon". "The Dolt" deals with the failure of an artist who is confronted with modern technologies, a recurring theme in many of Barthelme's stories. Edgar, the would be writer, finds that he cannot write a story as his imagination has failed. He tries writing a story but finds that it has no 'middle'. Here, Barthelme uses a metafictional device of story within story. "The Indian Uprising" is a kind of surrealistic story that describes the attack on and the conquest of a modern city by the Comanches. The collage technique adopted in the narration makes the

reader wonder whether he is listening to the narration of the attack, or whether the characters themselves are witnessing a movie or taking part in a film shooting. The multiplicity of narrative, an aspect of postmodernism, makes the reader interpret the story in many ways. In "Edward and Pia", another story from the same collection, Barthelme presents a pair of lovers who keep moving from place to place, country to country to escape the boredom of love and life. "The Balloon" is one of the best known stories of this volume. The sudden appearance of a huge, mysterious balloon in New York city draws various responses and reactions from the onlookers. But no one could understand the real significance of the balloon as it contains no signs. Barthelme makes fun of the people who look for signs to signify the meaning. The balloon in the story also stands for the postmodern fiction which draws different interpretations from the readers.

The chaotic life in cities inhabited by brain damaged people is depicted in City Life, Barthelme's third collection published in 1970. The stories in this collection are generally about the exhaustion of creative power, the disintegration of individual consciousness, the collapse of inner worlds that are now so fragmented.

The people who figure in these stories are "slouching toward 100 percent trash productivity through media and technology."⁶ "City life", "The Glass Mountain", "Brain Damage", "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel", "The Explanation" and "Sentence" are some of the memorable stories of this volume. "The Glass Mountain" is one of Barthelme's remarkable stories and consists of one hundred numbered sentences that enumerate the artist's climb to the top of a glass mountain and his final disappointment. It is an allegory of a romantic hero's quest for excellence in a corrupt society. In "views of My Father Weeping", the narrator's father is run over by a carriage and the son wants to take revenge for that. He traces out the carriage and the owner, an aristocrat, but is unable to take revenge. He often recollects the memories of his late father, especially those moments his father wept. This story recalls Kafka's "On Judgement" where the father-son oedipal conflict is portrayed. The same theme is later elaborated in Barthelme's novel The Dead Father.

Barthelme's next collection is Sadness (1972). As the title suggests, sadness is the predominant mood of

⁶Lois Gordon, Donald Barthelme (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p.106.

this volume. It brings out the male loneliness, and the sheer desolation of unfulfilled marriage and fatherhood. Barthelme depicts people anesthetized by media like movies and television, whose morality is dictated by junk culture. "City of Churches", "Sandman", "Critique de la vie Quotidienne" and "Daumier" are some of the notable stories in this volume.

Guilty Pleasures (1974) is a collection of parodies and political satires and considered to be Barthelme's funniest book. It consists of two parts; part I focusses upon the political satire directed against particular administration - most probably Nixon's. Barthelme's sense of humour and satire are well brought out in this volume. Guilty Pleasures is a lampoon on the American society. Through this collection of 'non-fiction' as he calls it, Barthelme challenges traditional definitions of the form of fiction. In Amateurs (1976) Barthelme brings back the familiar motif - the weary marriage and sex, and the postmodern excremental culture. Some of the stories satirize the trials and tribulations of modern relationships in the age of women's lib and sexual enlightenment. "110 West Sixty-First Street", "Captured Women" and "The End of the Mechanical Age" mainly depict the collapse of family love. "Rebecca", another short

story from this volume, is about a lesbian couple, focussing on the failure of love. This collection also consists of stories satirizing the current system of education, as seen in "Porcupines at the University" and "The School".

Barthelme in his later collections gives more importance to the form of fiction than its content, and experiments with various techniques. Most of the stories in Great Days (1979) are similar to conventional parodies and satires. They depict frustration in love as well as life, loneliness and desolation. But what prevents the monotony of repetition of the themes are the different techniques used in portraying them. The dialogue and the question-answer form, verbal and graphic collages, the suggestive techniques of poetry and musical composition are employed in these stories.

Barthelme's next collection Overnight To Many Distant Cities consists of twenty four pieces of 'stories and not-stories'. Many of the 'non-stories' are characterized by extreme brevity, by the use of 'we' narrator and "a vaguely futuristic, dystopian quality -

a sense of waiting menace."⁷ "They Called for More Structures", "Visitors", "Affection" and "Overnight To Many Distant Cities" are some of the remarkable pieces in this volume. The stories are separated by italicized spoken interludes which serve as a sort of mood or atmosphere for the more formal pieces and "these interludes function as foot notes to the stories, like T.S.Eliot's for The Waste Land."⁸

Besides short stories, Barthelme has written four novels and a book for children The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine. Snow White is his first novel published in 1967. Barthelme retells the fairy tale altering every detail of Grimm Brothers and Walt Disney versions. His Snow White is modern Snow White sharing an apartment with seven dwarfs who are very prosperous, enterprising manufacturers of baby food. She is bored with everything in life and awaits her prince. But the prince does not come to her rescue and she is left alone. Her only success is her attempt to break out of the unfortunate role she has to play. The novella also points out the

⁷Jonathan Penner, "Donald Barthelme's Just not-stories," Book World: The Washington Post, 27 (November, 1983), p.3.

⁸Anatole Broyard, "Overnight To Many Distant Cities," New York Times, 19 December, 1983, p.33.

blanketing effect of language in fiction as well as human life. It parodies the hollowness of American mass culture, and mindless consumption of ideas as well as goods.

The Dead Father (1975) is his second novel. As Frederick R. Karl points out this novel is a "representative American minimal work and an audacious cultural document as well as dynamic and original fiction."⁹ It is a mock epic account of the Dead Father's journey to his grave and his burial by his son and a group of disreputable characters. Barthelme weaves mythological, biblical and literary allusions together to create this story. The Dead Father is only partially dead; he is the archetypal father, symbolizing fathers of all ages. He is the collective hero as a father figure whose authority his son detests but is powerless to resist. The Dead Father is considered to be the most sustained metafiction and a supreme example of verbal collage, written in a surrealistic vein.

⁹Frederick R. Karl, American Fictions 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, c.1983), p.460.

Paradise is the third novel of Barthelme. It is about a middle aged architect, Simon, who leaving his wife, mother and daughter, lives in a small unfurnished apartment. One day he encounters three lovely young models and knowing that they are homeless, brings them to stay with him. Simon lives in a world of male fantasy and the three women become restless and argumentative. Commenting on the novel Elizabeth Jolley says, "Paradise is made up of the collision of brilliant moments... It is a picture of human needs and wishes and fantasies. It is a criticism without judgement on contemporary American life. It is a fantasy of freedom in a world where there is no freedom."¹⁰ It is a funny but disturbing novel built up in fragments of conversation.

Sixty Stories and Forty Stories are two volumes of short stories which contain some of the stories which have not been published earlier and also the popular stories taken from his previous collections. The fourth and the last novel of Barthelme is The King (published posthumously in 1990). Similar to his Snow White this novel is also a retelling of Le Morte d'Arthur. Barthelme brings back King Arthur and his Round Table

¹⁰Elizabeth Jolley, "Is Simon in Hog Heaven?", New York Times Book Review, 26 october, 1986, p.7.

Knights to England during World War II. Barthelme attacks the modern man's concept of war, love and sex in this parody. King Arthur and his men are shocked to see the racial discrimination among the people. One is reminded of Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court where Twain transports a modern yankee to the court of King Arthur and exposes the contemporary social evils through many episodes.

A general survey of Barthelme's fiction reveals that his main focus is on the disappearance of values in the postmodern social institutions. He brings out the sense of boredom that has engulfed the modern man. But at the same time every now and then, Barthelme seems to nudge us to say, 'look, there's another opinion.'

Barthelme is an unconventional writer who takes delight in formal experimentation. Formal diversity is such a salient feature of Barthelme's fiction that it has to be interpreted as part of his artistic vision. The bold and effective use of postmodernist techniques in his fiction to present the fragmented and disjointed contemporary world has won him the acclaim that he is a

"true innovator within the medium of short story."¹¹ He feels that the narrative realism is useless as a means of ordering the chaos of the modern world- "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy, which is contemporary history."¹² Barthelme turns his suspicion in conventional patternings into an aesthetic principle. He prefers the fragmentary form of narration and open-ended fiction with the use of irony and grotesque. He expresses this view through one of his characters in "See the Moon" who says, "Fragments are the only forms I trust."¹³

Barthelme's fiction exhibits a combination of parody, burlesque and irony. It is a kind fiction, largely new, and seems to deny all that is essential to the fictive art. In the words of Philip Stevick:

It [Barthelme's fiction] tells stories in an odd and sketchy way at its best, oft' does not make stories at all, Oft' it masquerades as essay or encyclopedia article or biographical summary, or news magazine report. As such it invited us to mock the forms of factual assertion. Yet it does

¹¹Charles Molesworth, Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved From Drowning (Columbia and London: A Literary Frontiers Edition, University of Missouri Press, 1982), p.4.

¹²Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself, p.207.

¹³Barthelme, "See the Moon?", Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts, p.157.

not exist for the purpose of formal mockery. It signals us at once that it carries no intention of asserting facts.¹⁴

Barthelme's fictional methods can be compared to that of the dramatists of the theatre of the absurd, and metafictionists like Borges, Nabokov and Beckett, and surrealist painters. The various experiments and techniques employed by Barthelme make his fiction self-reflective. He focusses the problem of the artist in a world hostile to the continued vitality of imagination. The irrelevance of traditional fiction in the postmodern context and the artist's frustration and failures and the inadequacy of language as a medium of fiction are discussed in his stories itself. His self-reflective fiction foregrounds the story of writing rather than the writing of story. The method of story telling is more important than the story told and his fiction thus becomes metafiction.

Barthelme is resourceful artist who transforms waste into magic and trash into aesthetic forms. The parodic use of traditional forms of narrative enables him to mock at the ineffective and outdated forms of story telling and at the same time search for new forms. He also

¹⁴Philip Stevick, "Lies, Fictions, and Mock-Facts," Western Humanities Review, (Winter, 1976), p.11.

manipulates the old devices such as fables, myth and allegory to suit the needs of the postmodernist fiction. Barthelme very effectively brings into fiction the devices borrowed from other art forms. Earl Shorris compares him to a poet and a sculptor, saying that "Barthelme is often a poet, and he makes sculpture with words and his work is a kind of junk sculpture."¹⁵ Barthelme is not mere avant garde writer simply indulging in various experimentation in fiction-writing. He is a serious writer with social consciousness; his stories are disarmingly serious and have relevance to the realities of the anxious present.

¹⁵Earl Shorris, "Donald Barthelme's Illustrated Wordy-Gurdy," Harpers, 246 (Jan, 1973), p.92.