

# Uses of Language in Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*<sup>1</sup>

Speech is the twin of my vision.

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass [Song of Myself]*, 1855

Word-work is sublime,... because it is generative;  
it makes meaning that secures our difference, our  
human difference...

We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we *do*  
language. That may be the measure of our lives.

Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature*, 1993

**Carlos Azevedo**

American literature has always reflected the belief that identity is somehow a construct. And a common, perhaps mythical, premise of American culture is freedom, an old assumption which propels the Declaration of Independence and the works of writers - from Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman to Coover, Morrison and DeLillo. The creation of America out of a continental vastness is synonymous in the imagination with the creation of an open space made free, once the wilderness has been tamed and its inhabitants dislodged, for a fulfillment of scriptural prophecy, whose mission was to give history a fresh start, if not to usher in the millenium. Underlying this whole process there is a quest for religious and political freedom, which implies freedom of speech and self-enactment, the search for identity - recognized by Ralph Ellison as "*the American theme*"<sup>2</sup> - that may transcend social restraints and private, inner constraints.

It is hardly surprising that freedom of speech and the projection of one's self are major items of American literature, and that the mythic project of self-making fuels, however variously, the figures of American fiction: Wakefield, Gatsby, Joe Christmas, Coover's Nixon, DeLillo's Oswald. It is hardly surprising that influential critics of American literature - among them Richard Poirier and Tony Tanner - have focused on the drama of individualism in the American scene and on the conflict between the yearning for freedom and the threat of boundaries. For Tanner, "verbal space" is "[the] mediating area in which the writer searches for his freedom and his form";<sup>3</sup> in Poirier's

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**2** Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview", *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) (167-183) 177.

**3** Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 19.

4 Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 5.

5 As Hans Bertens puts it, "A major reason for postmodernism's extraordinary elusiveness, for its resistance to attempts to make it manageable from a conceptual point of view, lies surely in the temptations it has offered to those who were politically inspired to either condemn or welcome the new artistic and - somewhat later - social configurations that were inaugurated in the 1960s... In other words, postmodernism is a term that has served to accommodate a number of critico-political utopias and dystopias, varying from visions of liberation and emancipation (of both the Enlightenment and the anti-Enlightenment varieties) to equally sincere visions of the apocalypse". See his *The Idea of the Postmodern: a History* (London: Routledge, 1995) 12-13.

6 Lawrence Cahoon (ed.), "Introduction", *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) (1-23) 14.

7 "The members of the postmodern family not only express conflicting views, but are interested in barely overlapping subject matters(...) Some of the the most important members of the family refuse to be called by the family name. And there are distant relations who deny that they are related at all". Cahoon, "Introduction" 1.

view, American classic authors try "to create an environment of 'freedom', though as writers their efforts must be wholly in language. American books are often written "as if only language can create the liberated place."<sup>4</sup> In other words, *foreground*, a concept much favoured by Tanner when applied to describe the style of Hawthorne, Melville or James, or to much contemporary American writing, is also an operative notion to highlight a major trend of American literature from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to our own present: a specific use of language which draws attention to itself - by its originality and potential for liberation from cultural patterning that reflects America's self-conception from the very beginning of its formation. Although, paradoxically, it can also be said that this type of resistance has itself become an American cultural pattern of sorts, just as most literary cycles define themselves as resisting definition: postmodernism is a recurrent piece of evidence.<sup>5</sup>

For matters of identification, postmodernism is often discussed as a sweeping international force that has overturned established forms. Although we may agree that "the very idea of a summary is antithetical to postmodernism"<sup>6</sup> - after all, we are considering a, so to speak, *dysfunctional family*<sup>7</sup> - it is still possible to argue that notions of transgression, eclecticism, experimentation, or subversion, are essential to the popular understanding of postmodernism. They help to understand the work of such authors as William Gaddis, Robert Coover, John Barth, or Donald Barthelme, whose work defies any classification and has become the showcase for those self-reflexive fictions about fiction and its strategies which reveal themselves as critical constructions of a newly emerging, iconoclastic fiction.

Displaying a fascination with language itself, much postmodernist writing is foregrounded to a notorious extent, and it is precisely in such foregrounding that writers explore the instability of verbal constructs within the continuum of American literature and the potentialities of their individual consciousness. Critical constructions of postmodernism have increasingly come to focus on the awareness of the role of language in shaping and mediating the world. Through language, collective norms and conventions, as well as prejudices, are communicated and enforced, so that the writer's individual visions and versions can only resist the pull of conventionality by asserting himself through the unconventional use of language. Despite the polemics and divergence about the putative usages of "postmodernist", one can find some common ground focusing on

renunciations, new recognitions and representations. At this juncture, then, two inclinations can be stressed further: "an acceptance of *play* and fictionalization in cultural fields that had earlier sought a serious, realist truth"<sup>8</sup> and the use of *parody* which, "in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and inversion, is repetition with difference."<sup>9</sup>

One of the best practitioners of postmodernist word-play and parodic strategies is Donald Barthelme. Reading *The Dead Father* (1975), we can explore the novelist's awareness of the centrality of language in shaping and mediating the world - a prominent inclination in much postmodern theorization. According to Theo D'haen, "the postmodern *prise de conscience* [is] that man is a linguistically encoded being"<sup>10</sup>; and Jerome Klinkowitz confirms that "[l]anguage, with or without the revivifying force of imagination, is the chief concern (...) in most of Barthelme's fiction."<sup>11</sup> It may be a matter for some dispute whether the linguistic structuring of the self ultimately leads to significance and depth or to *aporia* and the void. In any case it makes us, Barthelme's readers, conscious of the fact there is no escape from the prison-house of language that we all inhabit. Consequently, we cannot but go on making sense of things, realizing, as we stumble along, that we will always fall short of full expression and full understanding.

For Barthelme, however, the artist's goal "always and everywhere, is to attain a fresh mode of cognition (...) [and to] disembarass himself of procedures which force him to say things that are either commonplace or false."<sup>12</sup> This passage reveals the writer's own meditation upon external reality and a fundamentally meliorative project to change the world, seeking ways to re-create value and meaning wherever they may still be found, now that the grand and totalizing dreams of modernism are no longer feasible. Discussing the task facing contemporary writers - to reinvent writing -, Barthelme invokes the private territory of the imagination and of symbolic expression, i.e., the creative combination of the elements of language. Renewal, innovation, and the opening of new narrative possibilities are very much at the core of Barthelme's fictional practice, a literary project which, as he would later reaffirm, is not exempt from obstacles:

First, there is art's own project, since Mallarmé, of restoring freshness to a much-handled language, essentially an effort

**8** Cahoon, "Introduction" 4. Italics mine.

**9** Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985) 32. Italics mine.

**10** Theo D'haen, "Genre Conventions in Postmodern Fiction.", Theo D'haen, Rainer Gröbel and Helmut Lethen (eds.), *Convention and Innovation in Literature* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1989) (405-418) 414.

**11** Jerome Klinkowitz, *Literary Disruptions: The Making of Post-Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) 68.

**12** Donald Barthelme, "After Joyce", *Location 1* (Summer 1964) (13-16) 14.

toward finding a language in which making art is possible at all (...) Second, there is the political and social contamination of language by its use in manipulation of various kinds over time and the effort to find what might be called a "clean" language... Finally, there is the pressure on language from contemporary culture in the broadest sense - I mean our devouring commercial culture - which results in double impoverishment...<sup>13</sup>

All these difficulties have to do with language, brought into the foreground in such a way that what prevails is the importance of the word(s), while the basic elements of fiction - description, narration, plot - are transformed into minimalistic features of the text, a "matter of paring down to a supportable minimum."<sup>14</sup>

Although the plot structure of *The Dead Father* is rather laconic, it is open to conflicting views, depending on the characters' perspectives. A character known as The Dead Father and his son Thomas - the two key figures in the narrative -, embark upon a journey in the company of nineteen other people, among them two women, Emma and Julie. From the very beginning, the purpose of the march underlines what *The Dead Father* turns out to be: a parody of a quest novel or, more adequately, of a double quest. Tom and his cohorts drag the Dead Father across the countryside, persuading him that they are in quest of the Golden Fleece which is supposed to bring him back his youth. The Fleece signifies rebirth, Life, for the eponymous hero of the novel: "When I douse myself in its great yellow electricity, (...), then I will be revived" (35); on the other hand, what the group undertakes is an anti-quest, since they have been journeying to Death all along, to the burial site of the Dead Father. In the last chapter of the book, at the edge of a huge pit, after the Dead Father's complaints that Thomas and the others are killing him, a revealing dialogue takes place:

<sup>13</sup> Donald Barthelme, "Not-knowing". *Voicelust: 8 Contemporary Fiction Writers on Style* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1985) (37-50) 41.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975) 60. Subsequent references will be mentioned in the text.

No Fleece? asked the Dead Father.  
 Thomas looked at Julie.  
 She has it.  
 Julie lifted her skirt.  
 Quite golden, said the Dead Father. Quite ample. That's it?  
 All there is, Julie said.  
 .....  
 Julie moved to the Dead Father, restoring her clothes.  
 My dear, she said, my dearest, lie down in the hole. I'll  
 come and hold your hand.

Will it hurt?  
Yes it will, she said, but I'll come and hold your hand.  
That's all? said the Dead Father. That's the end? (174-175)

The ritual nature of the journey that loosely structures the book suggests the debunking of a climactic revelation. The Dead Father becomes aware of the fact that the Golden Fleece does not exist - at least not in the format or place he has imagined.

Literally a marked man, an *x* (28), the Dead Father is also an allegorical figure. He can "stand for paternal authority that each son must bury before he can become a father himself" (the Freudian Primal Father, against whom the sons rebel), "stand for the idea of God" (the Christian God the Father), "represent the existential faith in man's ability to create order out of chaos", "stand for literary Modernism" (in this case, as we shall see later, his son Thomas may represent Postmodernism trying to bury Modernism).<sup>15</sup> It is also true that the novel evokes (parodies) the memory of tales and myths rooted in literary and cultural tradition: Jason, the Hellenic Zeus, a Norse God, the Indian Great Father Serpent,<sup>16</sup> the medieval Dying God/Fisher King, a Vegetation Deity.<sup>17</sup> But none of this gains upon a certain kind of word-play of which Bartheleme is particularly fond, emphasizing language as a subject - the final effect is to give priority to words over the course of events in the story.

At the outset of *The Dead Father*, chiasmus is established as the master trope for the text, when we are told that the Dead Father is "[d]ead, but still with us, still with us, but dead" (3).<sup>18</sup> He is seen as presence and absence, in the same way that his basic attributes are creating ("fathering") and destroying ("slaying"). Fatherhood is thus the wellspring of the narrative and, on the level of generalization, the father in the novel is the personification of all shapes of order and coherence, including language; he is the embodiment of the meaning to be sought and the control to escape from. Before the "Manual for Sons" spells out one solution - "*Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least 'turned down' in this generation* - by the combined efforts of all of us together" (145) -, it is the father himself who, starting in chapter one, can now only "turn down" people and animals. This compulsion to annihilate can be interpreted, on the symbolic level, as an extreme denial of the old and a search for the new, thus reflecting Bartheleme's feeling that language's existing limits must be radically pushed beyond established boundaries.

<sup>15</sup> Eberhard Alsen, *Romantic Postmodernism in American Fiction* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996) 146-147.

<sup>16</sup> "I like him, said the Dead Father, in that we are both long, very long." (44)

<sup>17</sup> "... the one who keeps the corn popping from the fine green fields..." (92)

<sup>18</sup> Brian McHale quotes this passage to describe the status of the postmodernist author and his "death". See his *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987) 202. I refer to McHale's remarks in my "Funeral Excursions, Posthumous Discourses: Twain, Faulkner, and Postmodernist Writing", *OP. CIT.: A Journal of Anglo-American Studies* 2 (1999) (115-126) 122.

One aspect of the text is the inventory, the attempt to capture "reality" in a network of linguistic nets: the enumeration of the musicians (11) and animals (52-3) slain by the Dead Father; the inventory of the consequences of the Dead Father's involvement with Tulla (36-37); the list of the types of fathers (136-137). Of course, the inventory or catalogue is a deep rooted literary device, and epic poetry comes suitably to mind (or Whitman, for that matter), since the master voice of the novel may stand for a literary father and *The Dead Father* is a parody of the epic as well as of the sexual exploits of legendary heroes - when, for instance, the leading character tells how he "fathered the Pool Table of Ballambangjang" (35). But Barthelme's lists are hardly canonical: "They found the Dead Father standing in a wood, slaying. First he slew a snowshoe rabbit cleaving it in twain with a single blow and then he slew a spiny anteater and then he slew two rusty numbats and then whirling the great blade round and round his head he slew a wallaby and a lemur and a trio of ouakaris and a spider monkey and a common squid" (52). There is no reality here but mainly discourse, an inventory which draws attention to itself as a mere word display, interfering with the narrative transmission.

Related to this device is Barthelme's treatment of fragments as strategies to subvert patterns and undermine continuities. In the dialogues of Julie and Emma we "look at the parts separately" and "get an exploded view" (151), but the action of the story does not move forward. Based on repetition, cliché or mere babble, these dialogues<sup>19</sup> represent a form of countercommunication, "printed circuits reprinting themselves" (147) meant to leave the reader with "a boiled brain and a burnt one" (151). They are an exhibition of a vapid, hollow language, so easily reproducible that it demands a new approach and innovative modes of expression. As Barbara Maloy notes, "with words Barthelme startles the reader into experiencing something out of the ordinary. (...) He also revives old words (...) and by using them in a modern context, forces the reader to really see the words".<sup>20</sup> This is part of the typical Barthelemean strategy: the effort to disenchant or demystify inherited beliefs and imperatives informs all of his work.

Archaic words such as "Varlet", "Ukases" or "Mansuetude" share the verbal space of the novel with modulations of contemporaneity: - "credit cards", "Coke" or "blue jeans" -, linking figuratively what is unconnected on the surface. We encounter at every turn new and unexpected ways of combining words and ideas - "By the Holy Goat", says the Dead Father (163) -, multiple imaginative coinings -

<sup>19</sup> See chapters 3, 8, 13, and 18.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Maloy, "Barthelme's *The Dead Father*: Analysis of an Allegory", *Linguistics in Literature* 2.2 (1977) (43-119) 74.

"castigariou", "cluttersome", "suppositious" -, a new kind of expression in which disruption and displacement rule over a mixed field, fashioning a startling new script: from the Beckettian echoes in "endigmas" and "enshrouded" to the verbal performances around a single word: "Toe. Toe. Toe. Toe. Toe. " A veiny toe. Red lines on toe. Succulent toe. Succulent, succulent toe. Succulent succulent succulent-" (55). Yet at the same time, language *says* that the action of the novel is taking place in the present, in the present, as Barbara Maloy observes about Bartheleme's use of the present participle form of verb at the beginning of most chapters<sup>21</sup>: "Thomas helping haul on the cable. Julie carrying the knapsack. The Dead Father eating a bowl of chocolate pudding" (33). Present participles, outfitted with their imperial "-ing" endings, flaunt the presence, the presentness, of language; to use the present as a vantage point from which to survey the past more accurately is what *The Dead Father* celebrates page after page.

The title of the novel seems to imply a rejection of the past, of figures of authority, or, in terms of American coding, an attempt to escape history. There are no stable historical references in the text, place, space and time are unspecific, and whether or not the burial of the father is successful remains uncertain. Early in the novel we are told that the Dead father is "*Half buried in the ground, half not*" (4), the implication being that the past is not easily disposed of. Thomas expresses this same idea in another context: "Things are not simple. (...) Things are not done right. Right things are not done. There are cases which are not clear. You must be able to tolerate the anxiety" (93). Tolerating the anxiety is an appropriate definition of Bartheleme's stance and, in general terms, of postmodernist sensibility. The writer's presentation of an intergenerational tension reenacts a typical American ambivalence: "American attitudes toward the past, perhaps more sharply polarized than any other, are most vividly expressed in the metaphors of filial conflict. (...) On the one hand, freedom from the encumbering past was a virtual dogma of the Revolution and the new republic; on the other, Americans (...) reverently protected the Founding Fathers' achievements".<sup>22</sup>

The "Manual for Sons" is worth quoting in this context: "Fathers are like blocks of marble, giant cubes, highly polished, with veins and seams, placed squarely in your path. They block your path. They cannot be climbed over, neither can they be slithered past. They are the 'past'..." (129). Bartheleme's portrait of the Dead Father as a relic the

<sup>21</sup> Maloy, "Bartheleme's *The Dead Father*: Analysis of an Allegory" 83.

<sup>22</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 105.

past is the author's modernist myth. There are several places at which the text invites this interpretive mode. The Dead Father embodies Barthelme's immediate modernist predecessors, those masters of meaning whose influence he struggles to overcome and to whom he suffers no small anxiety of influence. And the Dead Father embodies the drive for meaning as well: "You take my meaning. We had no choice, said Julie" (19). But he resists final naming, preferring the pleasure of ambiguity: "Having it both ways is a thing I like" (15). Commanding - "Authority. Fragile, yet present" (67) -, he cherishes organization and order, namely when he asks two of his children: "What purpose? What entelechy? What will you do with yourselves when it is all over?"(168).

The "repetition with difference" of the modernist myth is a postmodernist version of *The Waste Land* which seeks redemption in the death of its Fisher King. The journey across country and the objective of burying the father illustrate the haunting presence of the burden of the past and the latent urgency to find something "new". Though the son oversees the burial, he disclaims responsibility: "Processes are killing you, not we. Inexorable processes" (158). However, as previously mentioned, the Dead Father may never really be fully buried - the past can be mitigated but never eradicated and patricide is no solution: "It is not necessary to slay your father, time will slay him, that is a virtual certainty. Your true task lies elsewhere. Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities touched upon in this manual, but in attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker, version of him....Your contribution will not be a small one, but "small" is one of the concepts you should shoot for..."(145). Earlier, Thomas had stripped his father of one symbol of authority after another - first his watch, then his belt, then his sword, then his passport, and then his keys -, thus paving the way to assume the role of the father and repeat it.

If the Dead Father represents Modernism, it is tempting to assume that his son represents Postmodernism. Seen in this way, like Thomas wants to get rid of the Dead Father, Postmodernism wants to bury Modernism and assert its independence as literary movement. But "a son can never, in the fullest sense, become a father" (33). Allowing, perhaps, for too much "rehearsal" (93), the novel affirms the validity of the provisional and suspensive against the claims of entelechy. What is required seems to be less a "turning down" in the presence of modernism's domineering fatherhood, as the novel

presents it, than a redirection of the modernists' energy to shape a disordered world, not to reform it but to establish some sort of relationship with it. What links the modernist effort with postmodernist attempts is this search for connections, despite a sometimes too easy acceptance of disorder and a reductive experimentalism on the postmodernist side. By embodying modernist energy and by reformulating the idea of crisis (uncertainty, indeterminacies, the void), sons may become fathers, though on a less monumental scale, and open the door to new solutions.

As Ihab Hassan puts it, "postmodernism engages a double view. Sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt. (...) Thus a 'period' is generally not a period at all; it is rather both a diachronic and synchronic construct".<sup>23</sup> *Doing* language, to use Toni Morrison's formulation, is a key part of the process. As we have seen, language for Bartheleme is a tool of renewal ; yet it is a vestige and embodiment of the past. In addition, Bartheleme's experimental idea that freedom is to be gained by overcoming established form is in tandem with an enduring artistic convention in the United States: "American Literature (...) offer[s] the most persistent, the most poignantly heroic example of a recurrent literary compulsion (...) to believe in the possibilities of a new style".<sup>24</sup> Above all it is in his exploration of attitudes to the past that the works of Bartheleme show the marks of distinctive national traditions and cultural values. They also play with predecessors, discovering or (re) inventing traditions, reminding the reader of the founding (dead) fathers of American literature. Focusing on these presuppositions we are well equipped to approach the makers and the making of American literature. And what we approach is the fictional construction of American reality and, more specifically, the literary construction of American literature.

<sup>23</sup> Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism", Thomas Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) (146-156) 149.

<sup>24</sup> Poirier, *A World Elsewhere* 129.

