Postmodernism and Donald Barthelme's metafictional commentary on contemporary philosophy

Timothy Charles Lord
Iowa State University

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Postmodernism and Donald Barthelme's metafictional commentary on contemporary philosophy

by

Timothy Charles Lord

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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**Part II: Donald Barthelme's Metafictional Commentary on Contemporary Philosophy**

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Difficult nowadays to find a point of view kinky enough to call one's own.

"See the Moon?"
Donald Barthelme
INTRODUCTION

Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin.

"The Dolt"
Donald Barthelme

This thesis was originally intended simply to be a discussion about the philosophical implications of some of Donald Barthelme's earlier short fictions ("metafictions," if you will—a term I will define later). However, Barthelme's nebulous status somewhere within the realm of "postmodern" fiction, itself an extremely opaque and indefinable term, leads me to wonder how to go about tackling this whole enterprise. Can Barthelme's fiction be understood if it is divorced from the larger body of postmodern fiction, if a description of the general characteristics of postmodern fiction is ignored? For that matter, can postmodern fiction, with its basic antimimetic presuppositions, really be adequately examined without delving into the past to modernist fiction and investigating how postmodern fiction is both a rejection and a continuation of various conventions and assumptions of modernist fiction?

One important question, then, is where and how to begin, and it could be validly argued that if I actually carry out this proposed contextualizing of Barthelme's fiction, I am doing a very uncontestorary type of "historical criticism." That may be, but my purpose is to perform "practical criticism," an act rarely done in these days of heavy
emphasis on theorizing (and if to do that is to be uncontemporary, so be it). My goal is to help the reader better understand Barthelme's fiction by interpreting it and providing a commentary on some specific stories, yet, since Barthelme is the epitome of the postmodern writer and one of the few to make a permanent impact on American fiction (he has published steadily in the New Yorker for twenty-five years), and since a study of postmodern fiction is profitable in its own right, it seems wise to first carry out an extended treatment of the essential question, "What is postmodern fiction?"

Two other questions are also pertinent. The first asks, "Is it reductionist to view Barthelme's fiction merely in the light of its 'philosophical implications' or for its 'commentary on contemporary philosophy'?" In a way it is, for Barthelme's work has many other cultural implications: sociological, psychological, political, economic, religious, and linguistic. However, it is largely the philosophical connection, and especially his fiction's very contemporary aesthetic, which most links his early fiction (I have chosen it exactly because of this very interesting connection) with postmodernism, and I hope that in specifically investigating this aspect of Barthelme's work, I will also make those other important relationships somewhat clearer.

The third question concerning my methodology relates not to interpretive strategies concerning Barthelme's work, but to an evaluation of it. Postmodern fiction writers are often accused by more traditional
writers and theorists (and often by Marxists) of being nihilistic because of their antimimetic estrangement from the "real world." They defend themselves in various ways. Some claim the old forms and conventions are worn-out or "exhausted," and no longer apply to the postmodern world, possibly a shaky justification if the assumption that literature has no obligation to be mimetic is followed out to its logical conclusion. Others assert their autonomy as artists from the real world, contending their commitment as artists calls only for them to create an independent and self-contained object which is an addition to the world, not a representation of it. I will discuss these thoughts later, but the reader may want to keep this question in mind as he or she reads: "Is the charge of nihilism made against Barthelme and other postmodern writers justified?"

In an article titled "Notes," the French poet and critic Jean Francois Bory states: "Today, the spirit balks at reading a traditional linear text" (288). The interesting thing here is that Bory is not discussing fiction; he is discussing criticism, but it seems unlikely that a nonlinear mode of criticism would be very beneficial to the reader, in this case at least. However, Bory's unconcern for a coherent practical criticism is a movement simultaneous to the postmodern movement in fiction, closely linked to the rise of deconstructive criticism and theory. The fine line between creative and critical forms has been disappearing, and as Gerald Graff quotes in Literature Against Itself (33), Susan Sontag claimed as early as 1967 in Against
levels on which it can be perceived. Then I will look at how his fiction comments on other schools of contemporary philosophy, mainly existentialism and post-structuralism. Throughout Part II I will be interpreting and explicating. In the "Evaluation and Conclusion," I will evaluate Barthelme's metafiction and the larger realm of postmodern fiction in general according to the criteria mentioned earlier.

Christopher Norris states in Deconstruction: Theory and Practice that prefaces (or introductions) are usually written last of all and placed up front as a gesture of authorial command. They claim a summarizing function, a power of abstracted systematic statement, which denies the very process and activity of thought involved in the project of writing (XIII).

This introduction was not written last, nor is it a summary written in stone of what is to come: rather, I hope it is a map of the journey to follow which has helped and will continue to help illuminate the way for both author and reader.
PART I: THE BACKGROUND AND THEORY OF POSTMODERN FICTION

Modernism: What Was It?
If the world were clear, art would not exist.

----Albert Camus
The Myth of Sisyphus

The narrator has narrated himself into a corner, a state of affairs more tsk- tsk than boo- hoo, and because his position is absurd he calls the world absurd.

----"Title"
John Barth

Georg Lukacs's "The Ideology of Modernism" was published in 1958 as the first chapter of The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, which was subsequently released in the United States under the title Realism in Our Time. In those waning days of modernist fiction (and its major subcategory, literary existentialism), Lukacs's study was not only a scathing criticism of modernism very much akin to the abuse of postmodernism by such later critics as Gerald Graff, but also an extremely comprehensive description of the major characteristics of modernist literature. Lukacs profiles the general features of modernist fiction, which began in the years immediately preceding World War I and continued through the post-World War II years and on into the 1950s, as follows:

1) characters who are thrown into existence
2) a hostile, chaotic, incomprehensible, and meaningless world
3) ahistoricity
4) a static view of life and humankind
5) subjective reality and truth as the only reality and truth
6) isolation, alienation, and solitude
7) "Angst," nausea, and despair
8) the negation and unalterability of outward reality
9) the fragmentation of the self and of totality
10) an obsession with psychopathology
11) and ultimately, a nihilistic depiction of nothingness.

The presuppositions behind modernist literature, according to Lukacs, go back to the forerunners of existentialism: Martin Heidegger and Soren Kierkegaard. Heidegger's contribution to modernism is his "description of human existence as a 'thrownness-into-being (Geworfenheit ins Dasein)" (20). This thrownness indicates the individual is thrust into an incomprehensible world for no apparent reason and can therefore only wonder about his or her origins and what meaning there might be for existence. Humankind is thus pastless and futureless, directionless, and, in Lukacs's words, "ahistorical" (21).

Related to Heidegger's notion of thrownness-into-being as a foundational basis for modernism is Kierkegaard's formulation of subjectivity. According to Lukacs, "Kierkegaard first attacked the Hegelian view that the inner and outer world form an objective dialectical unity, that they are indissolubly married in spite of their apparent opposition. Kierkegaard denied any such unity" (27). With Kierkegaard's concept of
the split between the inner self and outer reality comes the subsequent idea that the individual is isolated and alienated both from other people and the material world. Meaningful relationships with other people are no longer possible, and the individual stands alone in a dark void, "solitary" and "asocial" (20). The rupture between humankind and the environment, accentuated by urbanism and technologism, therefore causes a turning inward into subjectivity; internal reality becomes the only reality.

Lukacs claims that the effect ahistoricity and subjectivity have on modernist literature is that the hero (or antihero)

is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is not for him—and apparently not for his creator—any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon by him. Secondly, the hero himself is without personal history (21).

Lukacs goes on to state that consequently there is no movement or "development" (21) in modernist literature. The hero does not change the world, nor does it change the hero, and thus a basically static view of life and man is depicted. This subjective view of reality and time (ahistoricity), then, according to Lukacs, is a "rejection of modern reality" (30). He later asserts that this "flight from the reality of the present day must be a form of nihilism" (66), and he also says that "such a view of life cannot impart a sense of direction" (30).

Lukacs' critique of modernist fiction is, of course, colored by his Marxism, but his description of its basic characteristics and
assumptions is essentially accurate. Although a close look at his critique is unnecessary in this paper (at least at this point), taking note of a couple of aspects of his criticism will help to further illuminate some additional peculiarities of modernism. One of these aspects is related to the terms "abstract and concrete (in Hegel, 'real') potentiality" (21). Lukacs contends that "abstract potentiality belongs wholly to the realm of subjectivity; whereas concrete potentiality is concerned with the dialectic between the individual's subjectivity and objective reality" (23-24). Abstract potentiality is a rather opaque and sketchy point; Lukacs defines it as those "innumerable possibilities for man's development [that] are imaginable, only a small percentage of which will be realized" (22). Thus, abstract potentiality seems to include the many goals and dreams a person has which are so far out of the realm of probability that they seem impossible to attain. 'Real' or concrete potentialities are more realistic possibilities, those which, because of who the person is and what the conditions are, can become reality because they are more likely and down to earth.

The problem for the modernists as Lukacs sees it is that they confuse the two categories, merging them, and "the distinction between abstract and concrete potentiality becomes null and void" (24). Thus, the modernist sees all possibilities as abstract potentialities, and "when the world declines to realize these possibilities....melancholy becomes tinged with contempt" (22), leaving only "Angst," nausea, and despair. These unfulfilled abstract potentialities are perceived as
the world's incomprehensible terrors and hostilities directed at the modern individual, and it seems that what Lukacs later discusses as Franz Kafka's allegories of religious atheism (which are probably the ideal example of modernist fiction) fit into this category: transcendent meaning, when unrealized, leaves life meaningless. One can then only worship the void created by the absence of God.

Likewise, Lukacs condemns the modernist for being occupied only with the individual and lacking a concern for society and the human community as a whole. He says, "Once a commitment to the realities of the age is refused, human content disappears" (66). Relating the modernist's lack of distinction between abstract and concrete potentiality to inwardness, subjectivity, and solitary self-consciousness, Lukacs claims that the "human personality must necessarily disintegrate" (25) as a result. This disintegration of personality is then "matched by a disintegration of the outer world," which is fictionally demonstrated by the "negation of outward reality" that "is present in almost all modernist literature" (25). As a result, modernism exhibits a compulsion with psychopathology (grotesque and perverse characters) and with a reality which is unknowable and inexplicable.

Related to psychopathology and the disintegration or fragmentation of character and reality is the fact that modernist literature "denies the typical" (43). Instead, it illuminates, magnifies, and individualizes until the work of art is larger than life, until the
character or the fictional world presented is more "real" than reality. Thus, in a sense, modernism is reductionist, for it limits totality to a narrow view which is recreated until it is the exaggerated and intensified subjective vision of reality as expressed by that individual artist. Lukacs claims that by doing this, modernism subjectively distorts "perspective" (33), maintaining that its representation of humankind is the reality of existence. However, the very fact that modernism emphasizes subjectivity implies that it realizes the subjectivity inherent within its own structure, for it is aware that no creative work by one individual can reveal the larger totality. Thus, modernism does not pretend to be an objective representation of life and the human condition—it purports to be a subjective recreation of life as the modernist author perceives it.

This last statement demonstrates the first step towards the literature which completely overturns the Aristotelian mimetic theory of fiction: postmodernism. For it was with modernism that fiction first relinquished the notion of representative "realism." In the same way, the eleven characteristics or attributes of modernist fiction mentioned at the beginning of this section are also the foundation upon which postmodern fiction builds its theory, for it rejects almost none of them, but instead accepts each one with a stoic and skeptical endurance, thus handling them in a way different than modernism did. Whereas modernism explored those areas and asked questions like "Why are we here?" "Where are we going?" "What is the world all about?" and
"What is reality and truth?" postmodernism claims fiction cannot help us know the answers to these questions. All it can do, as we shall later see, is help us get along in the world, and any attempt by fiction to search for a meaning or purpose transcending its own fiction-making processes is naive, authoritarian, and artistically redundant. In the end, all we can do is laugh at our futile attempts to make sense of things. Gerald Graff links the two movements by saying

Modernist writing expressed a faith in the constitutive power of the imagination, a confidence in the ability of literature to impose order, value, and meaning on the chaos and fragmentation of industrial society. The conventions of postmodern art systematically invert this modernist intellectuality by parodying its respect for truth and significance (33).

Graff's statement leads nicely into a short commentary on the transitional fiction of Samuel Beckett, for with Beckett's work the ability to communicate meaning is mocked, yet he seems reluctant to completely reject the notion that fiction may uncover a clue to a way out of the labyrinth that imprisons humankind.
Transitional Figures Between Modernism and Postmodernism

Samuel Beckett

I can't go on, I'll go on.

--The Unnamable

Samuel Beckett

For Beckett, at this point in his career, to cease to create altogether would be fairly meaningful; his crowning work, his "last word." What a convenient corner to paint yourself into!

--John Barth

"The Literature of Exhaustion"

Samuel Beckett is probably the last of the great modernist writers. Beyond existentialism, Beckett does not endure life at the edge of the abyss by advocating an existential leap, acts of good faith, or responsibility. Instead, he accepts only the most basic epistemological truths: birth, life, the need to create, and an inevitable death. Nothing else is consented to, and as Beckett, now eighty, grows older, his works (written in French because of the sparse, minimalist aspects of that language) become shorter in length, the characters become more opaque, and the humor evident in his earlier fiction disappears.

Taking modernism as far as it will go, Beckett seems to have nothing to say. There is very little setting, no distinct unchanging character, and no plot in his works; nothing happens and no one knows anything. All we perceive is the narrative voice, the voice of nothingness, and that voice seems to simply be waiting for the end.
Ihab Hassan refers to Beckett's work in *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times*. "Time runs out at an infinitely slow pace....Things become a little worse....The true aim of consciousness is to abolish itself, though in doing so it may take forever" (69).

It may be that for Beckett there is nowhere to go, yet if all truth is rejected and art is essentially devoid of content, why is there still that need to create? One may as well quit writing, but Beckett stops short of extinguishing the narrative even though he must admit there is no justification for it. Hassan says, "The consummation of [Beckett's] art is a work which, remaining art, pretends to abolish itself" (53).

What ties Beckett to the modernist writers, what makes his fiction the logical conclusion of modernist literature, is that not only is his outlook utterly bleak and nihilistic, subjectively representing a world totally absent of any reason for humankind to continue talking, but his characters never give up the hope of stumbling across transcendent meaning. They look for a way out of their predicament or they wait for the end, but they never take the initiative to end it themselves, and through it all, the discourse continues. In Donald Barthelme's *Fiction: The Ironist Saved From Drowning*, Charles Molesworth claims that for Beckett "all systematic explanations will eventually fail. Yet man cannot simply stop trying to explain the world systematically, since such a longing for consistency is as inextinguishable as our appetite and our 'need to know'" (32).
Beckett's fiction, however, is also linked to that of the postmodernist fiction writers, and many of them acknowledge a debt to him. Some of the more academic postmodernists such as Raymond Federman have published scholarly work on Beckett (e.g., "Beckettian Paradox: Who Is Telling the Truth?"); and it is true that even his early novels are anything but conventional fictions. Dominick LaCapra contends in "Intellectual History and Defining the Present as 'Postmodern,'" "By the time one gets to Beckett's writing, the word [novel] seems peculiarly inappropriate or suspiciously conventional" (61).

What the postmodernists latch onto in Beckett's fiction is the new way he handles his characters and their narrations. For these characters language is elusive and disorienting, imposing limits on their ability to convey meaning and even on the knowledge of their own discourse. In "Enter the Frame," Richard Pearce discusses this problem in Beckett's The Unnamable:

Unlike Descartes', the Unnamable's doubting cannot end with the affirmation of a doubter, and hence of his existence. For the Unnamable goes so far as to doubt the very voice with which he speaks and thinks....In breaking from traditional fiction, Beckett creates a new conflict: the conflict between his narrator and the narrative voice, or between his main character and the limits of his medium (57).

Beckett's work therefore demonstrates the meaninglessness and emptiness of words and the subsequent estrangement of the speaker from his or her own discourse. Ultimately, his fiction is a phenomenon which illustrates language's inability to ground itself to anything, a
definitely postmodern condition. It seems, however, that after Beckett's "literature of silence," the "death of the novel" is inevitable—the word will disappear. Thus, content is no longer a pertinent question for literature; only by breaking with the representation of reality and by changing the form of fiction can literature be revitalized.

Jorge Luis Borges

With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another.

——"The Circular Ruins"
Jorge Luis Borges

To carry Beckett's literature of silence any further would lead to a dead-end, but in the late 1950s, an Argentinean writer who challenged the traditional forms of fiction began to be translated and published in various American journals and collections. This author is Jorge Luis Borges, who shared the 1961 Formentor Prize with Beckett. In 1962 Borges' Ficciones was translated into English, and in The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass, Larry McCaffery asserts that this collection of short fictions "may well have had more effect on the direction that American fiction was to take during the 1960s than any other single work" (21).

Whereas Beckett extended modernism to the point where words are meaningless and reality is represented as a vast solitude of incomprehensibility, Borges restores the imaginative qualities of
evocation and the possibility of suggestion to fiction. Both writers' metaphysical views seem to be somewhat similar, yet Borges rejects Beckett's subjectively recreated depiction of reality and instead loosens the bonds of Aristotelian mimeticism by affirming the fantastic and mystical qualities inherent in the human mind which enable his narrators to imaginatively create what might be rather than what is. In the introduction to *Labyrinths*, James E. Irby states,

> Perhaps the most striking characteristics of his writings is their extreme intellectual reaction against all the disorder and contingency of immediate reality, their radial insistence on breaking with the given world and postulating another" (XV-XVI).

As opposed to Beckett, who represents reality in the same manner as the modernists—as the artist subjectively views it—Borges plays with reality and creates it anew, mixing dreams and legends with it, reinterpreting it historically, writing stories within stories, and creating illogical or irrational puzzles. According to Irby, "Borges once claimed that the basic devices of all fantastic literature are only four in number: the work within the work, the contamination of reality by dream, the voyage in time, and the double" (XVIII). With these illusionist mechanisms, and especially with the self-reflexiveness of the first one mentioned, Borges foreshadows many of the techniques of postmodernism.

In his preface to *Labyrinths*, Andre Maurois claims that "Attracted by metaphysics, but accepting no system as true, Borges makes out of all
of them a game for the mind" (XII). However, this assertion is not true; Borges does have a philosophic basis for his fiction which reveals not only why he rejects the basically static quality of modernism and of Beckett's fiction, but why the four devices of fantastic literature that he proclaims crop up so frequently in his work. He believes that history, and that includes literary history, is cyclical; thus, his fictions are full of references to historical figures and continually reflect and comment on the literary works of the past. Nothing is original; everything has been done before, and each work links to all the others in a great intertextual chain, just as every event in time has its counterpart at another point in history. Therefore, life and literature are indissolubly connected for Borges. Irby states, "The world is a book and the book is a world, and both are labyrinthine and enclosed enigmas designed to be understood and participated in by man" (XIX).

Unlike Beckett's labyrinths, which are symbols of the chaotic incomprehensible world that solitary man wanders in aimlessly, unable to escape to transcendent meaning, Borges' labyrinths are labyrinths of thought—intellectual puzzles—yet with these puzzles the answer can be made known, and although it may not always reveal the reality we anticipated, the world uncovered is always one that is unexpectedly marvelous. Thus, Borges' fiction is the last stop on the way to postmodernism; unlike Beckett's fiction, which is anchored to present reality, Borges' work invents a new reality to replace the chaotic,
incomprehensible, and meaningless reality that the modernist writers and Beckett represent in a subjective, yet mimetic fashion.

**Alain Robbe-Grillet**

Since it is chiefly in its presence that the world's reality resides, our task is now to create a literature which takes that presence into account.

The word that contents itself with measuring, locating, limiting, defining indicates a difficult but most likely direction for a new art of the novel.

---Alain Robbe-Grillet

*For a New Novel*

As Borges' works were being translated and consumed by American writers, Alain Robbe-Grillet was also publishing a non-traditional type of fiction and theoretical articles about the nature of a fiction that could also surpass both the literature of Beckett and of the modernists. Robbe-Grillet's *For A New Novel* (1965) advocates an objective literature in which the approach is, as the above quotations suggest, a phenomenological one. In *The Self-Apparent Word: Fiction as Language/Language as Fiction*, Jerome Klinkowitz states,

the *nouveau roman* or French New Novel is, among other things, an attempt to move beyond parody into writing (and reading) as pure activities, innocent of the judgements Beckett's fiction makes. Surrounded by a great library of theory,...the *nouveau roman* is as much a critique of earlier forms of fiction as it is a positive contribution on its own" (46-47).
The laborious phenomenological descriptions of Robbe-Grillet, an ex-agronomic engineer, are, according to Klinkowitz, "precisely empirical." He says,

> These images are to be presented free from metaphor, especially those anthropomorphic suggestions which in their projection of human qualities smother the object and prevent us from seeing what's actually there....No metaphor is innocent,...each one clouds the object in attributes it does not possess; reality is falsified (49).

Thus, by strict adherence to objective description, putatively empty of any subjective or comparative language, Robbe-Grillet hopes to arrive at a literature which reveals the truth about reality, which reveals the "signified object."

Robbe-Grillet's fiction is difficult to read. For example, in Jealousy objects are described meticulously and redescribed from different angles or positions. Events are depicted in the same manner, and there is a constant repetition and variation of descriptions and events until the reader loses all perspective of chronological time.

In "Order and Disorder in Contemporary Fiction," Robbe-Grillet says, "The act of reading has become more difficult....Modern fiction demands from the reader a participation that is akin to creation." To create "order within the apparent disorder of a work is the act of reading" (49). Thus, it is in the act of reading that the reader, by piecing together the many different carefully constructed objective descriptions of reality with the fragmented and disordered views of time, is able to
synthesize details into a signified reality. To whatever extent the reader is forced to dig for it, however, that signified or represented reality is present in the text. Robbe-Grillet says in For a New Novel, "Things are here and they are...nothing but things, each limited to itself" (72).

Robbe-Grillet's fiction exhibits many of the characteristics of modernism, yet it goes beyond modernism in that it emphasizes the role of the reader in the meaning-making process. However, it is still a basically mimetic literature; it describes and represents reality as traditional fiction does rather than create a new reality, and this is why the postmodernist writers reject Robbe-Grillet's theory of fiction and instead accept Borges' work and continue writing in the tradition he began. Barthelme says in "After Joyce" that Robbe-Grillet and the French New Novelists' "work seems leaden, self-conscious in the wrong way. Painfully slow-paced, with no leaps of the imagination" (16). Barthelme's contention that their fiction lacks playfulness and buoyancy is a call for a release from the restrictions of representationalism to the complete imaginative and aesthetic freedom of postmodernism. Thus, the root of postmodern fiction runs from modernism through the work of Beckett and Borges, bounces off the French New Novel of writers such as Robbe-Grillet, and arrives in the 1960s with the work of authors such as John Barth, Raymond Federman, Ronald Sukenick, and Donald Barthelme.
Postmodern Fiction: What is it?

God was not a bad novelist, only he was a realist.

--John Barth

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, a large amount of experimental fiction began to be published in America. This anti-realist, "avant-garde" literature is often termed "metafiction" or "postmodern" fiction. In The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass, Larry McCaffery adds "surfiction," "superfiction," and "parafiction" (X) to this list. He equates all five terms, but usually uses the term "metafiction" to describe this type of fiction. Phillip Stevick also equates postmodernism and metafiction in his essay "Literature," but in "Surfiction--Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction," Raymond Federman uses the term "surfiction" to denote a type of literature which seems similar to metafiction and yet also goes beyond it, embodying an added element, which I will explain shortly.

Thus, noticing a distinct difference between the early and later fiction of Donald Barthelme and many of these other writers, I categorize all of their work together under the term postmodernism, reserving "metafiction" for those texts which are especially fictions about fiction: fictions which refer to other fictions, fictions which comment on the artist's work and on the process of creation, and fictions which comment on all fictional or meaning-making structures. These metafictions, which were usually written during the late 1960s and early 1970s,
are one type of postmodern fiction which was commonly written and published during the early phase of postmodern literature. During the late 1970s and from then until the present, much of the fiction being created has been more "self-apparent." This literature, which I term superfiction, calls attention to itself not so much by its content of meta-commentary, but by its playful use of language and by its emphasis on structure. Of course, these categories are somewhat arbitrary and overlap considerably, but this schematic division between the reflexivity of metafiction and the self-apparency of superfiction is a convenient way to differentiate the various things which at least the American writers of this new type of fiction are doing.

Before delving into the specifics of metafiction and superfiction, it is appropriate to outline some of the theoretical justifications for postmodern fiction in general, looking especially at the apologetics of some of the more academic of the postmodern fiction writers. As stated in the introduction, two overlapping arguments have been constructed to give legitimacy to postmodern fiction. The first line of thought is forwarded mainly by Ronald Sukenick, who proclaims in "The Death of the Novel" that in the world of post-realism, the absolutes presupposed by the conventions of realistic fiction are no longer applicable. A second defense is construed by Raymond Federman, who claims that postmodern fiction is the only real meaningful type of fiction because—like its precursor, the work of Borges— it demonstrates the rejuvenating nature of the creative imagination in the midst of the contemporary wasteland.
Federman has close affinities to the contemporary deconstructionist literary critics in that he believes that language does not represent or imitate reality, but rather, meaning is created in the act of writing; thus, every work of literature is its own autonomous reality added to the world.

Before investigating these two views further, it is appropriate to make a brief comment about their link to deconstruction. Gregory L. Ulmer states in "The Object of Post-Criticism,"

One way of marking the break between the periods and of dating the emergence of postmodernism is precisely to be found...in the movement (the early 1960s, one would think) in which the position of high modernism and its dominant aesthetics became established in the academy and are henceforth felt to be academic by a whole generation of poets, painters, and musicians" (124).

This fact may have been one of several contributors to the rise of postmodern fiction; however, it should be noted that many of the postmodern fiction writers are academics: Federman, Sukenick, and William H. Gass all have earned Ph.D.s, and many other postmodernists are involved in both teaching and writing scholarly criticism. It seems more likely that the rise of postmodern fiction is a direct result of the same cultural crisis which spurred the development of the deconstructive or post-structural philosophies of criticism that have been filtering into the U.S. since Jacques Derrida published De la grammatologie in 1967. Since then, postmodern literature and contemporary criticism have become closely knit disciplines, almost
synthesized, for they operate on essentially identical presuppositions. Gerald Graff claims in *Literature Against Itself* that the postmodern writer's assertion that everything is a fiction has gained strength from structuralist theories of language. Since meaning arises wholly from the play of differences within artificial sign systems, it follows that meanings are arbitrary and that everything we say in language is a fiction (60).

Graff's point leads nicely back to Ronald Sukenick's view that in the postmodern world, traditional conventions are no longer relevant, and because of the relativistic nature of knowledge about life and the lack of epistemological certainty about the world, both life and fiction merge into one entity: fiction. Sukenick says, Realistic fiction presupposed chronological time as the medium of a plotted narrative, an irreducible individual psyche as the subject of its characterization, and, above all, the ultimate, concrete reality of things as the object and rationale of its description. In the world of post-realism, however, all of these absolutes have become absolutely problematic.

The contemporary writer—the writer who is acutely in touch with the life of which he is a part—is forced to start from scratch: Reality doesn't exist, time doesn't exist, personality doesn't exist. God was the omniscient author, but he died; now no one knows the plot and since our reality lacks the sanction of a creator, there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. In view of these annihilations, it should be no surprise that literature, also, does not exist—how could it? There is only reading and writing (41).
This last sentence reveals a presuppositional debt to Derrida and deconstruction. For Sukenick, there is no literature, and there is no writing specific to a certain discipline (as the work of Foucault and Derrida attests). Instead, there is only what Derrida terms "écriture": the primordial status of writing. Thus, the walls separating disciplines are currently being demolished, and this synthesis of disciplines is what allows the metafictionist, as we shall see later, to write fiction which is not only self-reflexive, but is also about other disciplines, which are themselves, as Graff states, merely fictional structures. A comment by Federman is the culmination and logical conclusion of this whole business: "Reality as such does not exist, or rather exists only in its fictionalized version" (8).

Federman therefore claims that the purpose of fiction is to reveal "life as a fiction" (7), for modern theories of language have made the idea of a mimetic or representational literature into a myth. Thus, fiction must be viewed simply as a created product of the imagination, a reality in its own right. He elaborates as follows:

No meaning pre-exists language, but...language creates meaning as it goes along, that is to say as it is used (spoken or written), as it progresses....To write, then, is to produce meaning, and not reproduce a pre-existing meaning....As such, fiction can no longer be a reality, or a representation of reality, or an imitation, or even a recreation of reality; it can only be A REALITY—an autonomous reality whose only relation with the real world is to improve that world. To create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality, and especially to abolish the notion that reality is truth (8).
Here Federman has taken the modernist negation of outward reality to its logical conclusion. Fiction is not merely a subjective recreation of reality, but it is a whole new reality, a positive addition to the world, bound only by the limits of the artist's imagination. Thus, Donald Bartheleme, in his story "The Balloon" from Sixty Stories, creates a balloon which stretches over a city for forty-five blocks north and south and in places as many as twelve east and west. This balloon, because of its unrealistic size, is an example of what Federman calls "the metaphor of fiction's own fraudulence." He claims, "The primary purpose of fiction will be to unmask its own fictionality, to expose the metaphor of its own fraudulence, and not pretend any longer to pass for reality, for truth, or for beauty" (8).

Rather than representing or recreating reality, the fiction Sukenick and Federman advocates is one of complete aesthetic freedom, one which, like Borges' fiction, is in Barthelme's words (and taken out of context, in a way, from the story "See the moon"), "Drunk with possibility once more" (106). Jerome Klinkowitz, in The Life of Fiction, says that postmodern fiction creates a whole life of its own, with all the characteristics of life presented not as an abstraction of something else, as a second-hand reality, but as life itself: with all the energy, playfulness, exuberance, and joy we associate with the best times of living (149).

In this manner, it seems as if the postmodernists have overturned Beckett's nihilistic depiction of nothingness. Freed of representation-alism and the traditional conventions of time, setting, character, and
plot, fiction is loosed to reveal the capabilities and opportunities for a fuller life that are offered by the imagination.

**Metafiction: fiction about fiction**

Literature feeds knowledge into the machine of infinite reflexivity.

--- Roland Barthes

Inaugural Lecture,

Collège de France

Webster defines "meta" as "more comprehensive: transcending...used with the name of a discipline to designate a new but related discipline designed to deal critically with the original one." Thus, metafiction transcends traditional fiction and yet has been created to comment on that type of fiction. In *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass*, Larry McCaffery uses the term "metafiction" to refer to two related fictional forms: first, that type of fiction which either directly examines its own construction as it proceeds or which comments or speculates about the forms and language of previous fictions...A second, more general category refers to books which seek to examine how all fictional systems operate, their methodology, the sources of their appeal, and the dangers of their being dogmatized (16-17).

I divide metafiction into three more specific types, using McCaffery's two categories as a foundation. These three categories are 1) fiction which refers to other fictions, 2) fiction which comments on the artist's work and on the process of creation, and 3) fiction which comments on all fictional or meaning making structures.
In the first type of metafiction, allusions and conventions are used in unexpected ways to parody, play off, and examine earlier genres or specific texts. Thus, "parodic metafiction" is of course, not representational of life or mimetic in the Aristotelian sense, nor is it closely related to everyday experience. Instead, this fiction refers to other fictions, relating to them in a great intertextual chain.

The technique used to parody or allude to an earlier text is often to imitate or borrow from it in some way. In "Views of My Father Weeping," Barthelme parodies detective fiction and the nineteenth-century "big novel" by imitating their plot conventions and settings. He asserts in "The Emerging Figure" that "To steal is to proclaim the value of what is stolen" (24), and it is important to note that this practice of stealing elements from other sources is sometimes related to his art of collage; inserting a marginally known historical or literary figure into an absurdist situation is one of his referential techniques. For instance, Carl Maria von Weber (historically, a nineteenth-century German composer) appears in "Margins" as a black bum wearing a sandwich board. In "The Indian Uprising," the narrator tortures a captured Comanche who claims he is Gustave Aschenbach (protagonist of Thomas Mann's Death in Venice) by attaching electrified wires to his testicles. In "Donald Barthelme: An Interview," Barthelme says,
The point of collage is that unlike things are stuck together to make, in the best case, a new reality. This new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may also be much else. It's an itself, if it's successful (51-52).

Although many of Barthelme's collage stories do not necessarily involve references to other "fictions," many do ("Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" and "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," for instance, both involve discussions of various writers' works). However, in general his stories are full of allusions which, because of their odd and absurd positions, amuse and disorient the readers, causing them to not only reevaluate the story and reflect on the source of the allusion, but also to affirm the story's status simply as a fictional art object.

In The Art of Fiction, John Gardner states that the writers of metafiction

give the reader an experience that assumes the usual experience of fiction as its point of departure, and whatever effect their work may have depends on their conscious violation of the usual fictional effect... what interests us is in their novels is that they are not novels but, instead, artistic comments or art" (32-33).

Gardner's judgment of the status of the metafictional novel can be overlooked at this point in our study, but he is correct in asserting that metafiction plays off of both the reader's expectations of what fiction entails and the reader's knowledge of earlier literature, subverting those expectations or ironically parodying the texts of
literary history to create a new art object with its own unique meaning. Also, the fact that metafiction is an artistic criticism or commentary on art is a point which again demonstrates the disappearing barrier between literature and criticism that has come about with the rise of deconstructive critical theory.

**Fiction which comments on the artist's work and on the process of creation**  
A second type of metafiction concerns itself with its own status as an avant-garde art object or with the processes involved in creating avant-garde art. This type of metafiction (also nonrepresentational) often either becomes a metaphor for the artistic process or contains something which is a metaphor for the art object. McCaffery claims that these metafictions "examine fictional systems, how they are created, and the way in which reality is transformed by and filtered through narrative assumptions and conventions" (5).

Sometimes, however, the metaphor is dispensed with, and the story is simply about the act of writing, as in John Barth's "Title" or Barthelme's "Sentence." These "stories" are not stories per se, but are rather narratives which, simultaneously to their being written or read, constantly question their status, value, and technique, discussing their relationship to traditional literature even as they overturn it. Federman says,

> While pretending to be telling the story of his life, or the story of any life, the fiction writer can at the same time tell the story of the story he is telling, the story of the language he is manipulating, the story of the methods he is
using, the story of the pencil or the typewriter he is using to write his story, the story of the fiction he is inventing, and even the story of the anguish (or joy, or disgust, or exhilaration) he is feeling while telling the story (12).

However, a metafiction in which the purpose is to comment on the process of creation is often much more interesting and captivating if a metaphor is used to represent the art object. William H. Gass says in his doctoral dissertation (quoted by Jermoe Klinkowitz in *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction*), "Metaphors propose a new way of looking at or considering things" (193). For this reason, Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" is a much more readable story than "Title," for "Lost in the Funhouse" tells not only the story of a writer who is lost in the funhouse of language and fiction making, but also the story of a thirteen-year-old boy who is lost in a real funhouse. When the metaphor is employed in this manner, juxtaposing the elements of fiction and theory, the theory takes on an added significance and urgency it lacks when separated from its more human counterpart.

However, since the metafictionist does not attempt to mirror or reflect external reality, but instead explores the process of fiction as a created system, he or she sees no need to depict the work of fiction within any framework of verisimilitude. Rather, the created work calls attention to itself as an unrealistic work, clearly not the "classic realism" which does claim to accurately depict the world. Thus, metafiction is totally aware of its own status as an artificial, created entity and willingly conveys this awareness to the reader.
Often this artifice is more easily conveyed if the metaphors chosen are more ludicrous and outlandish than Barth's in "Lost in the Funhouse." In Barthelme's "The Glass Mountain," the metaphor which represents the artistic process is the narrator's climbing the glass mountain, a blue-white, transparent structure which stands over two hundred feet tall in the middle of a large city. Likewise, the metaphor for the work of art in "The Balloon" is a hot air balloon forty-five blocks long. The function of such an obviously unrealistic metaphor is that the story can never be read as a realistic fiction, thus forcing the reader to a more symbolic interpretation. In *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, William H. Gass says, "In a metaphor that's meant, the descent to the literal can never be made" (76).

In answer to the question, "Why this reflexivity?" or "Why this reference to other literary texts which have come before?" it is sufficient to say that the reflexivity of the metafictionists is a result of their unbelief in an objective reality to imitate in fiction. Thus, as McCaffery states, they "turn inward, to focus not on reality but on the imagination's response to reality—a response which became recognized as the only aspect of reality which could ever be known" (13). Faced with the absence of objective truth, the metafictionist is forced to conclude that the only real "truth" he or she can obtain is that of the fictional world. Although one may not objectively understand the real world, the world of fiction might be understood, and exploring it may therefore allow one to more effectively "organize
[one's] experience so that [one] can deal with the world" (8). The study of fiction by fiction is also inadequate to reveal objective truth, but "by exploring how the writer produces an aesthetic fiction, the metafictionist hopes to suggest the analogous process through which all our meaning systems are generated" (7).

Truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions.

---Friedrich Nietzsche

On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life

Fiction which comments on all fictional or meaning-making structures

The third type of metafiction (and it is possible a metafiction could work on one, two, or all three levels) is about structures which occupy positions of social or cultural importance. These structures may be systems of power or ideology such as current political or intellectual movements, or they may be fictional systems of meaning designed to provide order and coherence to an incomprehensible reality where such ideal concepts are lacking. The establishment and subsequent scrutiny of these latter fictional systems is undertaken in the hope that they may provide the individual a defense mechanism for coping with reality, while the study of systems of power or ideology, often enveloped by a mixture of truth and fiction, is essential to undermining those structures.

Two good examples of metafictions which deal with political and ideological structures, respectively, are Barthelme's "The President" and "Report." "The President" investigates the "strange" (59),
charismatic aura that surrounds an enigmatic political figure, and the public's worshipful attitude towards him brings an almost apocalyptic air to the story. "Report" is a satirical critique of the war machine and the military industrial complex, which has a "moral sense," albeit on "punched cards" (90). Both of these stories reveal structures which are actually fictions—the public (and the reader) do not get the full truth about the motives and actions of either the president or the war machine.

For the metafictionist, obtaining objective truth is impossible, and even the study of fiction by fiction is seen as inadequate to reveal real knowledge of the world. Therefore, humans are reduced to setting up fictional systems of meaning which allow them to cope with the world, and the construction of these systems is another thing the metafictionist explores. McCaffery states.

We can never objectively know the world; rather, we inhabit a world of fictions and are constantly forced to develop a variety of metaphors and subjective systems to help us organize our experience so that we can deal with the world. These fictional systems are useful in that they generate meaning, stabilize our perceptions; such systems can also be appreciated as aesthetic objects apart from their utility functions (8).

Thus, metafictional characters often "decide to create or invent a system of meaning which will help to supply their lives with hope, order, possibly even some measure of beauty" (4).

For this reason, in Robert Coover's The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop., Waugh creates an imaginary
baseball league using a tabletop game, dice, and charts. He names the players and gives them personal histories, manufacturing a whole world in which he eventually becomes so absorbed that the real and more banal world almost ceases to exist. In the same manner, Thomas Pynchon's Oedipa Maas stumbles across the Tristero system in The Crying of Lot 49, and as she continues to investigate and find further clues about the system's full implications, the reader wonders if the Tristero actually exists or if it is merely a figment of paranoia and her imagination.

In both of these novels, the fictional construct is a sort of Nietzschean life-enhancing myth which adds interest and excitement to an existence which is otherwise full of ennui and boredom, and these characters also seem to be searching for truth or a sense of belonging in the fictions they have created. McCaffery says that the metafictionists tend to treat ironically the attempts of their characters to settle on secure systems and truths. As a result, we observe their characters continually seeking answers and assurances, creating their own systems, and then becoming imprisoned within them, finally claiming that they can't go on in such a world and then going on anyway" (14).

Why metafiction? Why now? As McCaffery states, the roots of metafiction can be traced back to Cervantes' Don Quixote (written "in response to the literary traditions of romance" (18)) and Sterne's Tristram Shandy (which parodies the fiction-making process of the "personal history"). Why has it become a strong literary force only
within the last fifteen to twenty years, and why is it one of the main types of postmodern fiction to be published in America to this date? McCaffery believes,

The emergence of metafiction as a major category of postmodern literature is really but one indication that meta-approaches are increasingly influencing nearly all of today's major art forms in ways that are just now growing to be understood. I would even argue that this "meta-sensibility" is evolving into the characteristic sensibility of our age, the inevitable product of our heightened awareness of the subjectivity and artifice inherent in our systems, our growing familiarity with prior forms, our increased access to information of all sorts (255).

What McCaffery terms "our growing familiarity with prior forms" and "our increased access to information of all sorts" can be connected and seen to be a result of our mass media-saturated culture. He states,

One result of this push-button availability is the growing familiarity on the part of audiences with the content and form of these media—a familiarity which contemporary artists can exploit by means of extrapolation, satire, parody, or meta-treatments" (256).

Examples he gives are, among others, segments of the television shows *Saturday Night Live* and *Fridays*, comedy routines by comedians such as Steve Martin, and much of the material from popular magazines such as *Mad* and *National Lampoon*. Overall, the increasing importance of the mass media in the 1960s and the rising influence of solipsist and skeptical philosophies has helped to spur this meta-sensibility, which has then also carried over into more serious art forms.
Superfiction: self-apparent fiction

For anti-representation, self-representation is still too representative.

--Jean Ricardou
"Nouveau Roman, Tel Quel"

Uncoiling my penis, then in the dejected state, I made a long cast across the river, sixty-five meters I would say, where it snagged most conveniently in the cleft of a rock on the farther shore. Thereupon I hauled myself hand-over-hand 'midst excruciating pain as you can imagine through the raging torrent to the other bank.

--The Dead Father
Donald Barthelme

The rest of this thesis will concentrate largely on Barthelme's early stories, his metafictions. However, it is still fitting to quickly scan his later works, which are (characteristic of more recent postmodern literature) less reflexive in content, yet still call attention to themselves by their playful use of language and by their emphasis on structure. This type of postmodern literature, which Klinkowitz calls "self-apparent" fiction in his 1984 study, The Self-Apparent Word: Fiction as Language/Language as Fiction, I dub "superfiction" to differentiate it from its earlier postmodern counterpart, metafiction.

In The Self-Apparent Word, Klinkowitz acknowledges that

If the final outcome of self-reflection is metafiction, this style of novel would indeed by limited and subject to conservative complaints that the great reflective scope of fiction has been narrowed to a contemplation of its own function (84).

He goes on to claim there is a "second wave of innovation,...beyond the one-shot revolutionary gestures of novelistic self-reflection" (85),
and here he seems to be contending that once reflexivity has become a commonly used postmodern literary convention, its status is no higher than that of the traditional realistic conventions which it has subverted. This may be a debatable point if self-reflexive fiction really is a result of the postmodern sensibility and its overturning of fundamental realistic assumptions, but the crux of Klinkowitz's assertion is that self-reflexive fiction is a transition stage to self-apparent fiction: stories which (either literally or symbolically) "do not require the mechanics of an author writing about an author writing a story" (15). His fear is that self-reflexivity, if overused, will simply become a second order Aristotelianism: "the imitation of an imitation of an action" (40). Therefore, the metafictionists have moved beyond self-reflexive literature to a new original and revolutionary form of experimental art which "demands no excuse for language other than its own being: a short story or novel whose every device points the signifying power of words back inward toward the text itself" (40).

The goal of the superfictionists is to keep the reader from being immersed in the story as a vicarious experience. Thus, they use language in such a way that the reader is always outside the text, reading it as a text, rather than inside the text due to any identification with setting or character. But how is the superfictionist able to foreground the artifice of the text, upholding the fictional and imaginative status of the story so that the reader will recognize the work's self-apparency? In The Practice of Fiction
in America: Writers from Hawthorne to the Present, Klinkowitz cites four common strategies. The first he calls

the comically overwrought metaphor, which in the very distance between its tenor and vehicle creates a mimetically unbridgeable gap, closeable only by the reader's imagination which appreciates how ridiculous the implied comparison is" (117).

A second method used "to bring attention to language itself is to make fun of its oddities" (117-118), and a good example of both of these techniques is the quotation from Barthelme's The Dead Father at the beginning of this section. Not only is the comparison of objects playfully preposterous, shocking the reader with a vivid image, but the language used in the description is absurdly funny: "dejected state," "midst excruciating pain," "as you can imagine" (38) (and the humor here is that about half of the novel's readers—women—won't be able to imagine it).

Klinkowitz says, "More elaborate strategies to make language refer to itself involve the larger structure of the novel" (118). The novel he discusses as an example of this procedure is Alphabetical Africa by Walter Abish, in which each word in every chapter must begin with (in chronological order from "A" to "Z," then back to "A") certain letters of the alphabet. All the words of chapter A begin with the letter "a," all the words of chapter B begin with an "a" or "b," all the words of Chapter C begin with an "a," "b," or "c," and so on until chapter Z, after which the process is reversed until chapter A finishes the novel.
Since the novel is narrated in the first person, the narrator is present only in the middle section of the book, and because of the novel's structure, once objects and characters appear, the reader knows when they will disappear. The content of a novel such as this is its form and structure; thus, to see it as a vicarious experience or a representation of life rather than as a text is impossible.

"Graphic design," according to Klinkowitz, "is another favorite device to keep the reader's attention on the page" (119) and out of the realm of identified experience. In Barthelme's fiction, graphic design sometimes takes the form of lists ("Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel"), pictures (Eugenie Grandet" and "A Nation of Wheels"), and unusually divided stories ("The Glass Mountain" and "Daumier"). In this strategy and also with the other three, the goal of self-apparency is achieved partly by the playful willingness to create original objects purely for their own sake, with no need of any further justification.

The obsession with language for the sake of language in Barthelme's fiction becomes especially prevalent in Great Days, published in 1979. Many of the stories in this collection are purely dialogue, using dashes rather than quotation marks to signal the change in speakers. Barthelme had used this technique as early as 1970 in the story "City Life," but in that story he had mixed dialogue with some exposition. In the dialogue stories from Great Days, there is no exposition, but only the free play of language, and consequently, as Klinkowitz says in The Self-Apparent Word,
The quality of language gets more rewarding attention than any search for meaning. Character, action, plot, theme, and even the directive presence of a narrator (there are no "he said"'s) are all removed, in favor of a story whose only active presence is language itself" (73).

Since there are no tags to identify speakers, the voices often merge into a monologue in which the real content is the sound of words. In these "stories" there often seems to be almost no story; the fiction is composed of "pure writing" in which the subject matter is, as Klinkowitz says in *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction*, "The linguistic and even musical properties" (211) of words. Ronald Sukenick asserts in "Twelve Digressions Toward a Theory of Composition," "Subject matter is just one element of composition" (431), and from the early metafictions of Barthelme and the other postmodernists to their later superfictions, one sees theme and content slowly diminish as form, structure, and language play become more important.
PART II: DONALD BARTHELME'S METAFIGTIONAL COMMENTARY ON CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

A Literature Which Demands a Tri-Level Aesthetic:

Donald Barthelme's Metafiction Perceived as Story, Reflexive Criticism, and Aesthetic Commentary

And it is above all to the need for new modes of perception and fictional forms to contain them that I, barber's basin on my head, address these stories.

—Robert Coover

In dealing with Donald Barthelme's work as a commentary on contemporary philosophy, the first question to be discussed is that of the peculiar aesthetic attitude with which one should approach his metafictions if they are to be fully understood. Although some of his stories are not metafictions, many are and can be perceived on at least two, and sometimes three levels: 1) as story, 2) as reflexive criticism, and 3) as aesthetic commentary. To gain a full aesthetic experience from metafiction one must perceive it on all possible levels and realize its aesthetic differences from traditional fiction. Therefore, the structure of this unique fiction calls for a new tri-level aesthetic, one which takes into account these aesthetic differences from traditional fiction. Barthelme's metafictions, then, are not simply a commentary on contemporary aesthetics per se (although that is involved). They are a type of literature which, because of its original and experimental qualities, demands a new mode of perceiving it, and in
calling for a new aesthetic, this fiction is at the same time a commentary on the existing aesthetic. In the following examination I will outline the distinctive aesthetic required by Barthelme's metafiction, enabling me ultimately to demonstrate how metafiction sometimes functions as a commentary on aesthetics and philosophy of art.

**Barthelme's metafiction perceived as story**

First, Barthelme's metafictions can be perceived as stories, as noncomplex aesthetic objects simply to be enjoyed. In "The Balloon," a hot air balloon appears one night over Manhattan, stretching from Fourteenth Street to Central Park. The narrator of "The Glass Mountain," hoping to reach the "castle of pure gold" and the "beautiful enchanted symbol" (180), attempts to climb a huge glass mountain which "stands at the corner of Thirteenth Street and Eighth Avenue" (178). "Views of My Father Weeping" is a detective story in which the narrator attempts to find out who ran his father down with a carriage. Each of these stories has at times an unreal quality about it which gives it an almost fairy-tale aura, and yet the reader can assume what Jerome Stolnitz calls the aesthetic attitude in "The Aesthetic Attitude": "disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone" (19).
Because it is intriguing, original, and unique, the viewer can "accept the object 'on its own terms'" (21). Therefore, "The Glass Mountain," for instance, can be read merely as a story about a person climbing a glass mountain in the middle of a large city, even though such an object with a castle of pure gold at its peak is not a fact of reality. Reading with the aesthetic attitude, the reader is not concerned with analyzing, questioning, or gaining knowledge about the art object. Rather, he or she contemplates it as an "object of awareness" (24) to be experienced and enjoyed. (In *New York Review of Books*, Robert Towers calls Barthelme's *Great Days* "an inconsequential but not unpleasant way of passing the time" (15).) In the same way, the role of the writer is not to represent reality but to create it, just as it is created by the storyteller in children's fairy-tale or fantasy fiction. Philip Stevick states in "Literature": "What needs to be remembered is that the single quality that most firmly unites postmodernist writers is the recovery of the pleasures of telling, cut loose from the canons of probability" (140).

How does Barthelme's metafiction viewed simply as story rate as an aesthetic object when Monroe Beardsley's general canons as outlined in "Reasons in Aesthetic Judgements" are applied to it? Basically, his fiction as story is very unified and builds to a high level of intensity, yet is deficient in complexity. Since the reader does not question or analyze the work, it is merely accepted as a story to be enjoyed; perceived on this level it is noncomplex. However, as I will
demonstrate, the high degree of unity and intensity make up for the lack of complexity, enabling fiction as story to still claim status as a quality aesthetic object.

Although Barthelme often divides his metafictions up in unconventional ways, they achieve unity in the traditional manner: by the individual unity of each part, by an order which cannot be transposed, by mutual modification of parts or reciprocity, by repetition of key thematic concepts, and by a consummation which works itself out to a fulfilling completion. (In this section I am indebted to Aristotle's Poetics, John Dewey's Art as Experience, and Joseph H. Kupfer's Experience as Art.)

"Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" is divided into short biographical snippets, "View of My Father Weeping" is separated into one-paragraph anecdotes, and "The Glass Mountain" is composed of one hundred numbered sentences. Each of these individual parts has a completeness of its own and is thus unified. However, as parts of a whole, their order, even in the seemingly unrelated snippets of "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," cannot be changed without destroying the gradually increasing intensity which leads to the consummatory ending. Each part leads into the next to make the ending probable and necessary, and this close relation of parts to each other also causes reciprocity or mutual modification. Each of the separate anecdotes in "Views of My Father Weeping" is what it is because it is positively influenced by its relation to the others and by its relation to the whole, affecting others as it itself is affected.
One of the major features which unifies Barthelme's metafiction is the repetition of key thematic concepts, and included in this category is the way some stories revolve around the central construct or metaphor. The balloon is the central image of "The Balloon" just as the glass mountain is of "The Glass Mountain." Likewise, in "Views of My Father Weeping" paragraphs describing the narrator's search for his father's murderer are interspersed with the recurring motif of his father crying. "See the Moon" is a collage of images and past events. At both the story's beginning and end two phrases are repeated: "See the moon? It hates us" (97, 107) and "Fragments are the only forms I trust" (98, 107). In "A Shower of Gold" existentialist philosophy is spouted throughout, and in each of the above stories the repetition of these concepts aids in unifying the work.

Barthelme's metafications are also unified in that they work themselves out to a completion which is not merely an incomplete cessation, but a consummation. Often this consummation is directly related to intensity, and the story ends in such a way that the consummation is fulfilling and the buildup of irony which has taken place intensifies to a climax until some satisfying discovery takes place on the part of the reader. When a first person narrator enters "The Balloon," a story largely told in the third person, and reveals that he controls the balloon (as had earlier been implied) and that it is a sublimating device needed because of his absent lover, this peripety is both consummating and the culmination of intensity. The
climber's tossing the princess down the mountain in "The Glass Mountain" and the narrator's realization that he will never learn the truth of his father's death in "Views of My Father Weeping" are peripeties that have the same effect.

However, these peripeties disrupt the perceiver and pose problems for the notion that the aesthetic attitude—reading metafictions simply as noncomplex stories—is enough to obtain a full aesthetic experience from them. Also, one might argue that each of these peripeties does add intensity to the work, but takes away from its unity by fragmenting it. Here Morse Peckham's concepts of "external discontinuity" and "internal discontinuity" from "Art and Disorder" are helpful.

External discontinuity "refers to the violation of the expectations a particular series of works has built up" (110). Internal discontinuity "is the violation of a perceptual form established in that particular work of art" (110). "The Glass Mountain" embodies external discontinuity. When the narrator climbs a glass mountain in the middle of a large city in twentieth-century America and reaches a castle of gold, fairy-tale conventions are being played off and juxtaposed against images of modern life to frustrate and disrupt the reader's expectations and disorganize his or her perception. This "cognitive tension" (102) and intensity culminate at the story's conclusion when the narrator kisses the "beautiful enchanted symbol" (182) and it changes into "only a beautiful princess" (182), which the narrator (contrary to fairy-tale convention) then throws down the mountain.
External discontinuity also plays a large role in "Views of My Father Weeping," in which the genres of modern detective fiction and the nineteenth-century "big novel" are mixed. At the end the reader expects a revelation of the murderer's identity, but it never comes; the work culminates without meeting the perceiver's expectations.

Many of Barthelme's works demonstrate internal discontinuity when a first person narrator finishes narrating a story written for the most part from the third person point of view. When this happens in stories such as "The Balloon," and when external discontinuities appear in stories such as "The Glass Mountain" and "Views of My Father Weeping," cognitive tension forces the reader to rethink the work, and thus the discontinuity and the subsequent rethinking act as keys to unlock the meaning of the story. While discontinuity may seem to fragment the work at a crucial point (the ending), seen on a deeper level it is clear (as I will later show) that it actually unifies the work into a complete and aesthetic whole by expanding perceptions and causing a deeper interaction with the work.

These concepts of external continuity through frustration of genre expectations and internal discontinuity through shifts in narrative perspective are problematic though if the reader perceives metafiction with the aesthetic attitude, simply as story. These peripeties practically force the reader to think about the work as a more complex text than that called for by the aesthetic attitude. Basically, the discontinuities disorient his or her perceptual faculties to the extent
that to fully appreciate the story aesthetically it needs to be perceived as self-reflexive. In a sense, the reader is forced to become a critic: He or she must analyze and synthesize, tying the details up in order to perceive a unified work after external and internal discontinuity have seemingly fragmented it. Thus, to gain a full aesthetic experience from metafiction, one must see it on a more complex level than simply as story.

Barthelme's metafiction perceived as reflexive criticism

Barthelme's metafiction, then, must be seen on a deeper level than merely as story, and that deeper level entails what I call fiction as reflexive criticism: fiction which subtly and complexly criticizes its own status as literature, and in the process gives the reader a "second order" aesthetic experience. Two questions which must therefore be asked are the following: 1) How exactly does metafiction function as reflexive criticism? and 2) How does metafiction perceived as reflexive criticism enhance the aesthetic experience?

Metafiction functions as reflexive criticism in that it uses external discontinuities such as genre mixing and foiling expectations set up by literary conventions in order to raise fundamental questions about literature and, consequently, life and mankind's knowledge of it. (Obviously, then, the larger schema behind fiction as reflexive criticism relates to the notions of relativity and skepticism that are the foundations of metafiction. Rather than representing life and questioning it, metafiction re-presents fiction in a different way and
questions it.) The type of metafiction which best fills the role of reflexive criticism is the first type mentioned earlier in this paper: parodic metafiction.

"The Glass Mountain," which I have already discussed with regard to external discontinuity, is an example of fiction as reflexive criticism. The story is a parody of romantic fairy-tale fiction and possibly even Franz Kafka's The Castle and "The Hunger Artist." The narrator/artist/climber does attain the castle, which has never been reached before; however, he finds not ultimate meaning, but a worn-out fairy-tale convention, (the princess), which, as a creator of avant-garde literature, he must reject.

The aforementioned genre mixing of "Views of My Father Weeping" (modern detective fiction and the nineteenth-century "big novel") gives it a timeless quality and implies that literature (and life) is, but should not be, pigeonholed into categories. The reader becomes so caught up in the anecdotes leading up to the hoped for revelation of the murderer's identity that he or she ignores the interspersed and more human scenes of the weeping father. The story thus parodies mankind's search for absolute truth.

There are countless other examples: "For I'm the Boy" parodies James Joy's Ulysses (itself a commentary on Homer's Odyssey), "A Shower of Gold" spouts bastardized existentialist rhetoric, and "Daumier" exhibits one of Barthelme's favorite pastimes: name dropping. The narrator, who is a writer that creates fictional surrogate selves, has the same name as the French nineteenth century caricaturist and painter.
The point I am trying to make is that metafiction perceived as reflexive criticism is extremely complex due to its intertextuality. One must not only know the conventions and traditions of literature, but must also be aware of current events, historical figures, and intellectual movements to understand its full implications (and to enjoy its humor). Although some might argue that literature should be clear and simple in order to reach the masses, I contend that metafiction can be enjoyed as an aesthetic experience on one level as story and also, but it is not imperative, on a second level as reflexive criticism. If one knows the history and tradition of literature, a greater aesthetic experience can be achieved because of the ability to perceive a more complex and demanding art object. This more complex work broadens the audience by disrupting its present state and showing new relations; it reorganizes them by forcing them to rethink fundamental conceptions, expanding their perspectives so that a deeper aesthetic experience is achieved.

Overall, metafiction perceived as story may be a largely emotional experience due to its high level of intensity, whereas perceived as reflexive criticism it may be a more intellectual experience due to its high level of complexity.

**Barthelme's metafiction perceived as aesthetic commentary**

The third level that Barthelme's metafictions can be perceived on is as aesthetic commentary: works which philosophize about theories of literature and criticism or the artistic processes involved in
creating avant-garde fiction. Fiction perceived as aesthetic commentary, like fiction as reflexive criticism, is not essential to gaining an aesthetic experience from metafiction; however, it does enhance the experience because of the third level of contemplation made available and because of the subsequent added layer of complexity. The second type of metafiction outlined earlier in this paper--metaphorical metafiction--is the one best suited to function as aesthetic commentary.

"The Glass Mountain" is a metaphorical commentary specifically concerned with the problems an avant-garde artist encounters when trying to create original works of art. At the base of the mountain lie all those "knights" who have tried to climb the mountain but failed. The narrator, attempting to achieve what has never before been accomplished, claims, "I was new in the neighborhood yet I had accumulated acquaintances" (179). These acquaintances might be thought of as traditional critics who scorn the narrator's attempts and his rejection of the "conventional means of attaining the castle" (181). (He has strapped climbing irons to his feet and has a plumber's helper in each hand.) Rooted in tradition and prescriptivism, they encourage mimicry. As they stand below the narrator, they criticize his attempt: "Shithead," "Asshole" (178), "Dumb motherfucker," "Fart-faced fool" (179).

When the narrator/artist relinquishes his unconventional method of ascending the mountain and resorts to the "conventional" means of riding
on the legs of an eagle, he finds that on reaching the castle and touching "The beautiful enchanted symbol...with its layers of meaning...it changed into only a beautiful princess (182). What he has created and has hoped would be a nontraditional symbol with an original and concrete meaning is merely a worn-out fairy-tale convention. Therefore, he tosses "the beautiful princess headfirst down the mountain to [his] acquaintances [critical proponents of traditional literature]. Who could be relied upon to deal with her" (182). McCaffery states, "Barthelme depicts man striving to unlock the new only to discover that what he has produced is merely another cliche...The artist/narrator seeks to escape from his ugly, hostile surroundings to the magical realm of art; but what he finds is merely more conventions, more cliches" (108). "The Glass Mountain" thus functions as a metaphor for the artistic process, revealing the self-conscious struggle of the contemporary artist as he or she attempts to create new and original symbols, rejecting in the process the critic who discourages the artist from branching out into experimental forms. The story also illustrates the reciprocal relationship between the imagination and the artist's activity and the changes the artist's imagination goes through as he or she creates.

The processes and problems of creating avant-garde art in a society not receptive to it are also a theme of "The Dolt," a story which seems to have at least an indirect Marxist slant to it. Edgar, attempting to find an adequate middle for a story with which he hopes to pass The
National Writer's Examination, is speechless when faced with "the son manque" wearing "a serape woven out of two hundred transistor radios, all turned on and tuned to different stations" (96). This overdose of modern capitalist mass technology leads the narrator, who appears in the final paragraph, to comment on Edgar's inability to find words for his feelings: "I sympathize," he says, "I myself have these problems. Endings are elusive, middles are nowhere to be found, but worst of all is to begin, to begin, to begin" (96). The juxtaposition of art with the commodity culture implies that artists are alienated as a result of the forces of capitalism, which affect them even if they are financially free. Dewey claims that under capitalism artists are pushed aside because they can't mass produce:

A peculiar esthetic "individualism" results. Artists find it incumbent upon them to betake themselves to their work as an isolated means of "self-expression." In order not to cater to the trend of economic forces, they often feel obliged to exaggerate their separateness to the point of eccentricity. Consequently artistic products take on to a still greater degree the air of something independent and esoteric" (9-10).

Barthelme, the idiosyncratic epitome of Dewey's lament, uses a complex allusion to echo Dewey's thoughts in fictional form in "See the Moon": "Difficult nowadays to find a point of view kinky enough to call one's own, with Sade himself being carried through the streets on the shoulders of sociologists, cheers and shouting, ticker tape unwinding from high windows..." (105). Dewey advocates "recovering the continuity
of esthetic experience with normal processes of living" (10). Barthelme's fiction, however, relates itself more to other literature than everyday life.

Here it is appropriate to discuss the nameless "I" who appears at the end of some of Barthelme's metafictions such as "The Dolt," "The Balloon," and "Rebecca," for this appearance raises questions about authorial intention. Is this nameless I a character, an implied author, or Barthelme? Is the reader bound to accept the interpretation of the story the I gives? The appearance of this narrator and his concern with the story implies that metafiction involves a process of expression or an intention (see "the Intentional Fallacy" by W. K. Winsatt and Monroe Beardsley or "The Concept of Artistic Expression" by John Hospers) in which the author has a specific intended meaning for the art object.

This narrator could actually be Barthelme, and the statements made by him could be accepted as Barthelme's. In fact, Stevick states that in metafiction "the author is not above but 'immersed in'" (146). However, the narrator could also simply be another character or an implied author, but to answer the question of whether the narrator's interpretation should be accepted as valid, I will first need to explore some related issues.

The central metaphor or construct of a metafiction is often depicted as an aesthetic object which either enhances life or allows one to better cope with life. Thus, commentary in the metafiction about the central metaphor becomes philosophizing about art, and the meaning of
the central metaphor is usually open to many interpretations. An extended discussion of "The Balloon," the best example of fiction as aesthetic commentary, is now necessary.

As stated earlier, "The Balloon" is about a hot air balloon that appears one night over Manhattan, stretching from Fourteenth Street to Central Park. From the story's beginning literary terminology is used to describe the balloon as a nontraditional work of literature: "It is wrong to speak of 'situations,' implying sets of circumstances leading to some resolution, some escape of tension [emphasis mine]; there were no situations, simply the balloon hanging there" (53). The balloon here is depicted as a static, avant-garde work of fiction, for it has no conflict, tension, resolution, or denouement --the necessities of traditional fiction.

Throughout the story, the balloon is an object of curiosity and criticism for the public, and therefore it fills the role of an art object, for, as Morse Peckham states in "Art and Disorder," "A work of art may be defined as an occasion for a human being to perform the art-perceiving role" (97). The balloon has many different interpretations, and each one enlarges its perceived meaning for the reader, allowing a plurality of views to be accepted. The narrator says, "There was a certain amount of initial argumentation about the 'meaning' of the balloon" (54). However, "this subsided, because we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena. It
was agreed that since the meaning of the balloon could never be known absolutely, extended discussion was pointless..." (54). The narrator claims here that the public does not discuss the meaning of the balloon, but he also says, "There were reactions" (54), and it seems there are more critical ideas bantered about than the narrator initially claims there are. In fact, there is "hostility" (55) because no one is able to find the hidden pumps or "the point at which the gas was injected" (55), and this itself is a type of criticism. It is an autobiographical type of criticism, behind which is the idea that if knowledge about the source of the work of fiction is found, a door to meaning might be opened.

The narrator later says, contradicting his earlier statement, that "each citizen expressed in the attitude he chose, a complex of attitudes" (55), and he continues to delineate many of the critical theories about the nature of the balloon. Some people "argued that what was important was what you felt when you stood under the balloon" (56), a type of criticism that judges art by its effect on the participant—what W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley term "the affective fallacy" (21) in their article of the same name. This is also what John Dewey terms "impressionist criticism: an assertion that judgment should be replaced by statement of the responses of feeling and imagery the art object evokes" (304). The narrator even says, "Critical opinion was divided" (56), and then he repeats artistic terms he has heard discussed such as "contrasts" (56), "passages," and "unity" (57).
Finally, while discussing people who take a less aesthetic but more practical attitude toward the balloon by meeting friends at certain intersections in relation to it, the narrator says, "It is wrong to speak of 'marginal intersections,' each intersection was crucial, none could be ignored...It was suggested that what was admired about the balloon was finally this: that it was not limited or defined" (57). Here the narrator as artist discusses the role of subjectivity in contemporary art. There is no absolute or restrictive fixed meaning. Rather, the work means whatever each person subjectively thinks it means, and no one interpretation is better than any other. Lois Gordon says in Donald Barthelme, "At 'any intersection' one can react in any number of ways. The participant thus—the reader, like the lover-narrator—becomes the ultimate artist or creator" (91). This postmodern aesthetic criticism is much different from the "sameness of vision...a community of feeling which expresses itself in identical value judgments" (260) that Arnold Isenberg advocates in "Critical Communication," nor is it in any way similar to Leo Tolstoy's even more traditional notion of "infectiousness" (40) which unites all people that he discusses in "What is Art?" "The Balloon" instead puts forward an aesthetic that makes plurality of interpretation and variety of experience the goal of art and criticism.

To many people, the balloon has playful as well as aesthetic and practical implications. They write on it, "announcing their availability for the performance of unnatural acts" (54), they hang
paper lanterns from the underside, the younger ones jump and bounce around on it, and its presence in general gives people something to talk about. Wayne B. Stengel, in The Shape of Art in the Short Stories of Donald Barthelme, makes a statement that links nontraditional art such as metafiction to the idea of art as purposeless and playful freedom from everyday existence:

For the narrator, art must be a source of play as well as inspiring play in those who experience it, and such art defies exact interpretation. The story offers a theory of the appeal of much modern art: its elusiveness and random qualities allow the casual visitor to the gallery as well as the knowledgeable art student to forget momentarily the utilitarian regularity of his own life" (166).

This comment upholds my theory that metafiction is valuable because it can be enjoyed aesthetically on either a simple or complex level.

So, is the narrator's interpretation of "The Balloon" the correct one? He says, "The balloon... is a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure, having to do with the unease I felt at your absence, and with sexual deprivation" (58). Is the reader to accept this interpretation as the truth? From the inner logic of the story, no. The narrator's interpretation is merely another "intersection" which cannot be ignored, and in the end the reader must make the final decision as to the correct interpretation.

In "The Balloon" the first person narrator who appears to finish off the third person narrative seems to clearly not be the author.
However, in other stories that fact cannot be asserted so assuredly. "The Dolt," mentioned earlier, is one example. Another is "Rebecca," which closes with "The story ends. It was written for several reasons. Nine of them are secrets. The tenth is that one should never cease considering human love" (284). So are there ten interpretations to the story, and if so, why is the reader given only one? Is this tenth reason the interpretation, or is the author/narrator playing games with or even lying to the reader?

These metafictions imply that an artist may have a purpose or intention for a certain avant-garde work, but the audience is free to extract many different interpretations. The narrator’s is merely one among many. Thus, knowing the author/narrator’s intention or the process he or she went through while writing the work is irrelevant to interpreting the metafiction, nor is it based, as Tolstoy claims good art is, on the "capacity of men to receive another man’s expression of feeling and to experience those feelings himself" (36).

Metafiction is instead closer to aesthetic play, and it is this relation which allows it to be perceived aesthetically on many levels. It can be perceived on a noncomplex level simply as story, as a playful aesthetic object to be enjoyed; it can be perceived on a second level as reflexive criticism, as subtly but complexly criticizing its own status as literature; and it can also be perceived as aesthetic commentary, as philosophizing about theories of literature and criticism or the artistic processes involved in creating avant-garde fiction.
Although an encounter with metafiction is valuable even on the simplest level, the most rewarding aesthetic experience is always that which is the most encompassing.

Barthelme's Metafiction as a Commentary on Existentialism

You may not be interested in absurdity, but absurdity is interested in you.

—"A Shower of Gold"
Donald Barthelme

In Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved From Drowning, Charles Molesworth argues that Barthelme's stories are highly sophisticated cultural objects. Yet their sophistication often seems in the service of anti-cultural impulses . . . . There is little overt sense that Barthelme wants to engage psychological or social questions of great import in a manner of high seriousness. He is first and last a comic writer (4).

I largely concede the validity of this point; the playful humor of Barthelme's work, even in his most "sophisticated" pieces, is what immediately strikes the reader, but I also do not want to undervalue the very earnest critique of contemporary culture which underlies the surface of his metafiction. In the more specific realm of his critique of contemporary philosophy, one of the schools of thought he scrutinizes closely is existentialism. At least five stories from Sixty Stories refer specifically to either the philosophy of existentialism or its proponents—and whether or not his view is anti-cultural (or
anti-intellectual) is one of the questions I hope to answer in the following study.

"On Angels" is a metafiction which bases its premise on another fiction as much as on fact. The story begins with the following thought, which partly originates in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "The death of God left the angels in a strange position" (135). This line, however, is not so much an agreement with Zarathustra's claim as an imaginative postulation: "What is to become of the angels now that their reason for adoration and existence is gone?"

Parodying the language of Soren Kierkegaard, the grandfather of French existentialism, the narrator says in the paragraph following the opening line, "Unskilled in aloneness, the angels (we assume) fell into despair" (135). However, after "considering their new relation to the cosmos," the angels decided "it was necessary to investigate possible new roles" (137). The narrator conjectures that the first proposal they contemplated was simply to continue in their silent state of lamentation, since because of the death of God, adoration was no longer possible; thus silence was now more appropriate. "A counterproposal," the narrator says, "was that the angels affirm chaos. There were to be five great proofs of the existence of chaos, of which the first was the absence of God" (137). A third suggestion humorously ridicules the self-conscious language of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological works as being esoterically meaningless. The narrator states, "The most serious because most radical proposal
considered by the angels was refusal—that they would remove themselves from being, not be" (137).

However, all of these proposals are rejected. The narrator claims, "It is not in the nature of angels to be silent....there is not much enthusiasm for chaos...Refusal was refused" (137), and hence this story depicts the absence of one of the very things the existentialists advocated: meaningful action. The angels are so "paralyzed by self-consciousness" (229), says Gerald Graff says about many of Barthelme's characters in *Literature Against Itself*, that no role is ever affirmed, no act undertaken. Instead of enabling them to overcome their "despair," the angels' hyperconscious and logical rationalizing causes them to be further overwhelmed by their "existential freedom."

Yet this need for a role takes on an added significance when the narrator reveals his full presence in the last paragraph. At this point the reader realizes that the story is really about the narrator's obsession, not so much with angels, but with the meaning of the death of God and its implications. If, as the angel on television asserts, angels really are "like men in some ways" and the "problem of adoration is felt to be central" (137) to both, then humankind must also be on a quest for a "new principle" (137) worthy of adoration to replace God.

The language used to depict the angels' quest, however, is a parodic language, indicating the absurdity surrounding their endeavors, and thus the story becomes a parody of the search for truth as depicted in modernist fiction and literary existentialism. Also, obtaining truth from fiction is demonstrated as impossible, for although the narrator
is viewed as being obsessed with the need for authority, it must be remembered that the story is a fiction which he has created, spurred by a fragment from another fictional work; therefore, both the polarities of the death of God and the need of a higher principle are in the end depicted as fictions. However, this need for a higher being or principle to adore is also the subject of another Barthelme story, "The Leap," and in that story the character's conclusions are quite different.

"The Leap" is one of Barthelme's later superfections, a dialogue story in which two characters (or could this story be the monologue of a schizophrenic? He claims he is a "double-minded man" (379)) discuss whether to attempt to make the Kierkegaardian "leap of faith." The story is intensely funny because of its malapropian wordplay, its mixture of pretentious high language and earthy low language, and because of its conversational association of ideas. The characters discuss their status as "ravening noodles" (381) and "lapsarian futils" (384) before God, examining the things of life which make it what it is, both good and bad. In the end they decide not to leap, postponing it to another day, because of simple pleasures such as "the working of the creative mind" (381), "the human voice" (381), "a glass of water" (380), and "the blue of the sky" (380), but most of all because of (and they almost forget) human love, in all its "perfections, imperfections" (384)---"Love which allows us to live together male and female in small grubby apartments that would hold only one sane person, normally" (384). "The Leap" is, for Barthelme, mainly a life-affirming story, even though
both humankind's awareness of its place in the world and its limited capabilities to verbalize its situation are mimicked and parodied.

"Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" is also about the leap of faith, though only implicitly, yet it is also a wonderful example of a metafiction which can be perceived aesthetically on all three of the levels explained above. I will for the most part disregard the larger frame of the story and concentrate on the story within the story, which concerns the narrator's (A's) supposed reading of Kierkegaard's The Concept of Irony, which itself contains a critique of Schlegel's novel Lucinde. Thus, the reader receives Schlegel's views thrice removed, via Kierkegaard's critique, A's story, and Barthelme's narration.

A says that according to Kierkegaard, the ironist "is not bound by what he has said. Irony is a means of depriving the object of its reality in order that the subject may feel free" (164). The interesting thing here, of course, is that this quotation also applies to the metafictionist and metafiction. A continues,

Irony is thus destructive and what Kierkegaard worries about a lot is that irony has nothing to put in the place of what it has destroyed. The new actuality—what the ironist has said about the object—is peculiar in that it is a comment upon a former actuality rather than a new actuality" (164).

This quotation is analogous to the criticism a traditional critic might have of metafiction; irony is equal to metafiction, because both, when
"directed against the whole of existence, produce estrangement," yet although they lead to "freedom," they also lead to "absolute negativity" (164).

A says Kierkegaard contends that Schlegel has constructed in his novel an actuality which is superior to the historical actuality and a substitute for it," "negating the historical actuality" and softening "the imperfect into the perfect." However, what is wanted, Kierkegaard says, is...a reconciliation with the world," yet

the distance between the new actuality...and the historical actuality...produces not a reconciliation but animosity...The true task is reconciliation with actuality and the true reconciliation, Kierkegaard says, is religion" (165),

namely, the leap of faith.

All of Kierkegaard's criticisms are often charged against metafiction; it is commonly argued that in creating a superior reality the metafictionists are not benefitting the world but merely escaping from it. The positive results which might be had from their art are lost because of their retreat from the real world. Nevertheless, A defends Schlegel by saying that Kierkegaard "fastens upon Schlegel's novel in its prescriptive aspect--in which it presents itself as a text telling us how to live--and neglects other aspects, its objecthood [emphasis mine] for one" (165). Here A defends himself by saying irony (or metafiction) is not, as Kierkegaard says, a substitute for reality, but it is a created object added to reality. The way to be reconciled
is therefore not, as Kierkegaard would advocate, to take the leap of faith, but to create new objects which are life- affirming in their own right (a more Nietzschean concept).

Within the internal coherence of A's anecdote, this argument sounds pretty tight, but then he undercuts everything he has said by saying, "This is not what I think at all. We have to do here with my own irony. Because of course Kierkegaard was 'fair' to Schlegel" (166). Put in the larger frame of the story, irony is viewed much more negatively, for it is paralleled to A's masturbatory fantasies, and it seems that "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," whether intentionally or not, demonstrates Barthelme's ambivalent attitude towards the type of fiction this story is a prime example of. Is metafiction really an antidote for living in the world or is it merely a masturbatory escapism which is the only thing left after the death of God has taken away all principles of adoration and authority—those principles which give meaning and order to an unreal world? In Donald Barthelme, Lois Gordon says about "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," "One might be able to overcome the disturbing aspects of reality through imagination, but at best, like masturbation, solipsism is a limited pleasure, a poor second for the real thing" (113). In answer to the question of whether irony gives him pleasure, A says, "A poor... a rather unsatisfactory..." (167), unable, as Gordon states, to say the word "substitute" (114). In a sense, then, irony (and parody) becomes the metafictionist's language which replaces the selfconscious language of existentialism; it enables him or her to
protest the absurdity of the world without sounding hyperconsciously self-centered and introspective.

"A Shower of Gold," a story which deals with this type of language, is very possibly one of the funniest short stories Barthelme has ever written, and there are layers and layers of rich thematic material just below the surface. Peterson, the protagonist, is a minor artist who creates an older "romantic" style of sculpture, and because his work is not selling, to make money he signs up to be on a television quiz show called Who Am I? This show, according to a Miss Arbor, attempts to answer the question of "What people really are...Why have we been thrown here, and abandoned" (15)? Using all the catchwords, cliches, and jargon of existentialism, she proclaims to Peterson, "You may not be interested in absurdity,...but absurdity is interested in you" (15). Intellectual language, or its deterioration, is the subject of this story.

Peterson, in contrast, is unfamiliar with the language used by Arbor to describe experience. More down to earth, less pretentious and self-conscious about his situation, he knows only that he has "an enlarged liver" (ironically, the liver is the same organ that causes complications for Dostoevski's Underground Man) and "a lot of problems" (15). Peterson soon finds out, though, that everyone but him is obsessed with existential questions. The art dealer, Jean-Claude (a pun on Jean-Paul Sartre?) spouts off to him about authentic selfhood. His barber, Kitchen, is "the author of four books titled The Decision to Be"
(17), and while cutting his hair discusses Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship and quotes Nietzsche on solipsism and Blaise Pascal on the wretched condition of humankind. The cat piano player that visits accuses him of disclaiming responsibilities for his choices, and the three girls who come to bum a living recognize the Pascal quotation that Peterson reiterates to them. Peterson laments that "Everyone knows the language but me" (17), although he says he is not sure if he even believes in absurdity.

However, once he is actually on the quiz show and Arthur Pick and Wallace E. Rice are caught in "BAD FAITH" (21), Peterson realizes he "was wrong," for "the world is absurd" (22) because the obsession with the language of absurdity is absurd. Peterson then affirms that "absurdity itself is absurd" (22), and Lois Gordon claims Peterson "realizes the contradiction of terms in articulating and embracing" (58) absurdity, that "pursuing through logical discourse the illogical is of course ridiculous," for "absurdity ultimately affirms the meaninglessness of life" (60). The uncontrollable urge to over-intellectualize experience, to rationalize about a philosophy which is in many of its forms irrational, and to be paralyzed by cosmic questions because of a lack of epistemological certainty is itself an absurdity, stifling to living life to its fullest.

Consequently, what Gerald Graff claims in Literature Against Itself about the language used in Barthelme's Snow White also applies to the language of the lay existentialists in "A Shower of Gold:" "The Irony
of this jargon is that the more pretentious it becomes the more it contributes to the disabling self-consciousness and self-estrangement it is supposed to explain and help...overcome" (227). In "A Shower of Gold" esoteric philosophical language has filtered down from intellectual circles to create an over-informed, hyper-educated public which has bastardized this language into formulaic cliches and labels. Although it is meant to help people organize and deal with their experience, it has instead surrounded them with so much meaningless jargon that they cannot come up with a coherent all-encompassing system which enables them to make sense of the specialized information they have been bombarded with. They are able to describe experience, but are unable to understand it, just as the modernist writers and literary existentialists were unable to. Gordon states:

Essentially both hollow and stuffed (starved of real feeling while overindulged in slogans), modern man is the offspring of T. S. Eliot's hollow man and waste lander, buried under the very thing Eliot yearned for—tradition, systems of belief, meaning, and explanation....We have lost our residual roots with humanity and instead become monsters of information, like computers" (22).

Gordon's analogy to computers is a link to another one of the major themes of "A Shower of Gold." Throughout the story the parodied existentialism is linked to technology, a union the actual existentialists rejected. When Miss Arbor initially tells Peterson about Who Am I? he incredulously asks, "On television?" (15) The show also ironically uses a polygraph machine to measure the validity of the
contestants' answers. Thus, it is appropriate that Peterson's concluding monologue on the "possibilities" and "opportunities for beginning again" (22) revolves partly around a pastoral anti-technology. "Don't be reconciled," he says. "Turn off your television sets... indulge in mindless optimism. Play [emphasis mine] the guitar. How can you be alienated without first having been connected? Think back and remember how it was" (22). The antidote to absurdity is not to embrace it, but to disconnect one's self from the estranging effects of the bastardized language of intellectual mass media saturated culture. Seen in this way, it seems Barthelme's impulse is, as Molesworth's quotation at the beginning of this section claims, an anti-cultural or anti-intellectual one. To presently be alienated, one must at one time have been at home in the world, and for Peterson (and Barthelme?) this sense of community with the world can be rekindled with the past's creative sense of play, its optimistic view that life is here and now and is meaningful, even though this outlook may be a naive one.

On the other hand, as in "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," the narrative's conclusion undermines this interpretation: "Peterson went on and on although he was, in a sense, lying, in a sense he was not" (23). Gordon contends that words "never truly reflect the texture of reality and one's experience... one cannot verbalize 'mindless optimism'" (61), so for this reason Peterson is unable to tell the truth of either his past experience or his hope for future regeneration. She also asserts that the closing monologue "lacks Barthelme's typical irony"
(58), but here, at the crux of the story, she is off target. Is Peterson's speech a parody of any theory which claims we can return to a pastoral and pre-technological age? It seems that it is, for not only is it impossible to return to the past, but the nostalgic notion that the past (be it pre-technological or otherwise) was somehow a better time than the present, is a myth. It is in this way that Peterson is lying, for it is especially when discussing his childhood that his language is self-parodic. It is doubtful his childhood was so idyllic, yet to say it was affirms hope, disabling the absurdity.

Another one of the themes in "A Shower of Gold" revolves around Peterson's affirmation of his own art, and this theme also culminates in the conclusion. Though the world may be absurd, he contends that "possibilities nevertheless proliferate and escalate all around us...I am a minor artist...but minor is as minor does and lightning may strike even yet" (22). Graff says,

"A Shower of Gold" inverts the conventional conflict between a struggling young artist and an unsympathetic public....It is the public which burns for discussion of the Existential Crisis of Modern Man and the artist who must flee from it in order to save his sanity as well as his art (227).

Peterson, therefore, has a solace that the other characters of "A Shower of Gold" do not, and the worth of the artist's creative activity is especially difficult to articulate in any meaningful language to a non-artist.
Barthelme's Metafiction as a Commentary on Post-Structuralism

Signs are signs, and some of them lies.

—"Me and Miss Mandible"
Donald Barthelme

Throughout this thesis I have made occasional references to the similarities between postmodern fiction and post-structuralism or deconstruction. The parallels that link postmodernism to this type of contemporary criticism and philosophy are, among others, its playfulness with language and its rhetorical word games; its emphasis on the work and the words within the work as objects in their own right which cannot and are not intended to mirror or refer to external reality or to external objects, but are instead themselves a newly constructed reality; its "intertextuality"—an abundance of references to previous works and previous fictions—demonstrating that the only reality it acknowledges is the reality of the text; and its affirmation of its own fictional status, rejecting any metanarrative or ultimate signified within itself which could possibly stand as a claim of absolute or universal truth. Related to this last point is the fact that postmodern fiction's elusive and ambiguous qualities often allow it to resist interpretation and normalization. In many cases, this type of fiction, as John Gardner contends in *The Art of Fiction*, deconstructs itself, continually deferring meaning by undercutting any information which might lead to a single clear-cut interpretation. Two of Barthelme's
metafictions which exhibit this characteristic will be discussed in this section. These stories are illustrations of deconstruction as much as they are a comment on it, although, of course, the very act of doing is a comment.

"Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" and "Views of My Father Weeping" are prime examples of deconstructive metafiction. In both stories, meaning is continually deferred, in "Views of My Father Weeping" to such an extent that the last line of the story reads, "Etc." (126), indicating that deferment goes on infinitely. Lois Gordon says in Donald Barthelme, "Barthelme's technique is to intentionally expand and dissolve meaning by contradictions, retractions, and any number of other means" (23). Information is often revealed which serves as a vehicle to "undermine, or contradict, or logically dissolve, the preceding material" (24). Like the narrator of "Views of My Father Weeping," the reader is constantly given contradictory clues as to the real meaning or truth, or in some cases information is given, then later retracted or modified, demonstrating that no truth or meaning is unqualified and absolute.

"Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" works on two intertwining levels: as a deconstructive fiction which constantly defers meaning and as a metafiction which depicts Kennedy as an avant-garde art object. The story is composed of a collage of segments, each delineating some aspect of Kennedy's (referred to as K.) personal or public life. However, like the newspaper articles he clips and saves, this random
collage of fragments does not add up to anything meaningful; they are only pieces of information which, when added together, reveal no "real" or unchanging personality. Similar to his interpretation of Poulet's description of the Marivaudian being (another text within a text within a text), K. is "a pastless futureless man, born anew at every instant.... The Marivaudian being has in a sense no history. Nothing follows from what has gone before" (85).

Throughout the story, Kennedy is depicted as a hodgepodge of contradictions. Different people rarely see him in the same way, and his responses to similar situations are often arbitrary. For instance, the first segment, "K. at His Desk" begins, "He is neither abrupt with nor excessively kind to associates, or he is both abrupt and kind" (76). In "K. Reading the Newspaper," the narrator comments on K.'s different reactions to international news: "On the other hand, these two kinds of responses may be, on a given day, inexplicably reversed" (77).

Overall, the reader finds that after ten pages of a story in which Kennedy is the major character, he or she has very little objective knowledge about him. In The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass, Larry McCalley says of the story's last segment, "K. Saved from Drowning," in which the narrator saves K.'s life by throwing him a line and hauling him out of the water:

Because of the story's title and because of the dramatic nature of the events, we surely expect a revelation into
Kennedy's character at last. But even here Kennedy 'retains his mask' and when he emerges from the water, he offers a noncomittal and very unrevealing cliche (112).

"Thank you" (85), he says, but does this reply indicate "breathlessness and dazzlement" (85) or "abruptness" (76)?

As K.'s friend says in "A Friend Comments: K.'s Aloneness," at the story's conclusion "you realize that all along you didn't know him at all" (80). Gordon states that the story is a "portrait of a man who is ultimately unknowable" (92), and this is true. Meaning is completely deferred, Kennedy has been deconstructed, and by the end of the story, the reader realizes there is no signified referred to by the individual segments, which function as signifiers. Instead, there is simply the endless play of the signifier, relaying signs, clues, and messages in which the meaning is arbitrary. As K. says, "Some of the messages are important. Others are not" (76). The reader, however, has no method with which to determine which messages are important and which are not. There is no authority which gives a meaning that is outside language's inability to accurately depict the full truth of reality.

Not only is "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" an example of fiction which deconstructs its own meaning, it is also a metafiction about nontraditional art, but seen in this manner, the fact that Kennedy is deconstructed is still very important. The collage of information which composes Kennedy allows him to function as an art object in much the same way as the balloon functions in "The Balloon"; he is not
limited or defined by set characteristics. As an art object, he can only be seen subjectively, and any arbitrary interpretation of meaning or character is as good as any other. In *The Shape of Art in the Short Stories of Donald Barthelme*, Wayne Stengel claims "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" defers "to the endless mystery of the human personality and the power of modern art to create a wide range of responses in its audience" (172).

"Views of My Father Weeping" is another collage story which deconstructs itself, and, undermining its own meaning at every twist of the plot, it is ultimately relegated to a jumble of clues which lead to no conclusion. Revolving around the narrator's father, who was run down by an aristocrat's carriage, the story is on the surface merely a search for the truth of the father's death. After a closer look, though, it is evident that, not only are the details surrounding the "accident" unclear, but both the narrator's relation to his father and the setting of the story are also vague. Overall, this story deconstructs not only signified meaning, but also time, place, and character.

"Views of My Father Weeping," as I stated in the section about aesthetics, is a classic case of genre mixing, for the story exhibits elements of both the nineteenth-century "big novel" (those of Dickens, Trollope, Hardy, etc.) and modern detective fiction. This practice is not overly disorienting, but it sets the stage for the revelation of further epistemological uncertainties which are extremely unsettling to the reader. For instance, contradictory signs are unleashed which make
the reader unsure of the story's setting in time—throughout the story modern objects such as a telephone (115), automobiles (a Mustang, 117), and drugs (a joint, 121) are juxtaposed to much older things such as the carriage, the aristocrat, and the coachman (Lars Bang) etc., to "deconstruct" any coherent sense of reality in the story. In addition to these elements from different time periods, there are also various contradictory signs concerning the story's location. The form of currency is British (the crown, 120), yet the narrator's father has scenes of "God Blessing America" (119) painted on his toes, they shoot "peccadillos on a ranch in the west, and Lars Bang's address is French --17 rue du Bac"). When these disruptions of time and place are added to the disordered collage of paragraphs which make up the story's structure, traditional concepts of setting are completely relinquished.

Not only is the reader unable to get a clear conception of the setting—time or place—but neither can he or she understand the narrator's relationship to his father and exactly what motivates him to search for the truth of his father's death. The interspersed paragraphs depicting his father weeping imply that the narrator is obsessed with the memory of his father, but for the first part of the story his uncertainty of the weeping man's identity is somehow paralleled by the fact that he is for an unknown reason either reluctant to attempt to find out the truth about his father's death or is so absentminded he forgets about it. Passages such as "Yet it is possible that it is not my father who sits there in the center of the bed weeping" follow ones
like the following: "I wondered if I should attempt to trace the aristocrat whose carriage had run him down," or "I was trying to think of the reason my father died. Then I remembered: He was run over by a carriage" (115). The narrator later says, "It was not until several days later that the idea of seeking the aristocrat came to me" (118), and when he does begin to question people about the event, he says, "Perhaps [the aristocrat] would offer me a purse full of money" (116). On these same pages he wonders, "But perhaps it is not my father weeping there, but another father" (117). These passages lead one to wonder if the elusive identity of his father is in some way also central to the part of the story about the man run down by the carriage, not just the part about the weeping father. Was the man who was run down by the carriage really his father? Questions like the above demonstrate just how far meaning can be deferred in fiction such as this.

On the other hand, nearer the story's conclusion and after the narrator's efforts have brought about some positive results, he seems much more confident that the weeping figure is his father. "Why!...there's my father!...sitting in the bed there!" he says just after considering, "But if it is not my father sitting there in the bed weeping, why am I standing before the bed, in an attitude of supplication?" (121) The narrator senses his own loyalty to his father, even though theirs seems to have been far from a close relationship (They once went hunting out west and, getting bored, they "hunkered down behind some rocks" and "commenced to shooting at each other" (123).),
but does he really grieve for his father? What is the narrator's reason for wanting to find out the truth? Lois Gordon says, "A final irony undercuts everything. Perhaps the son does grieve after all, his words a mask for his deepest feelings....All signs can lie. Otherwise, why would he bother to track down the truth?" (107-108)

Nevertheless, there is a "final irony" beyond the one Gordon mentions. If all signs can lie, then the fact that the narrator attempts to find out the truth could be a false sign, a signifier with an empty signified. By the end of the story his motivation is no more clear to the reader than at the beginning. The conventional notion of clear character motivation has thus been eradicated.

The truth surrounding the death of the narrator's father is the major subject of "Views of My Father Weeping." Like the truth about K., the subject of "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," the truth of this event is unknowable; meaning is constantly deferred as testimony is contradicted, qualified, and subverted. First of all, evidence about the father's sobriety is conflictual. The clerk in the draper's shop argues that the narrator's father was "clumsy" and "drunk" while another man says, "It was the fault of the driver....He could have stopped them if he had cared to" (117). The narrator claims he "smelled no liquor" (118) on his father's breath, yet later he admits that his father was "subject to certain weaknesses, including a love of the bottle" (122). Lars Bang, the coachman of the carriage which ran the narrator's father down, adds to the mishmash of contradictory information when he later
argues that not only was the narrator's father drunk, but he was also cutting at the horses' legs "with a switch in the most vicious manner imaginable" (125).

Another question concerns the actions of the coachman after the event. The witnesses at the scene of the accident maintain that the driver "whipped up the horses and went off down the street" (111), while Lars Bang says the horses "jerked the reins from my hands...I was attempting, with all my might, merely to hang on to the box" (125). He says that when the carriage reached King's New Square, "they stopped and allowed me to quiet them. I wanted to go back and see what had become of the madman, your father...My master, vastly angry and shaken up, forbade it" (126).

Everything Bang has said is then undermined by the testimony of the dark-haired girl. "Bang is an absolute bloody liar" (126), she says, but where is he lying and to what extent? Her declaration is no more revealing than the other witnesses' highly tenuous contentions, and as all truth claims are subject to doubt, to accept her testimony instead of Bang's is an arbitrary decision. In the end, anything which claims to be a final interpretation or explanation has been overturned. The signifiers endlessly play off each other, revealing not a signified meaning, but knowledge which is only a nebulous aura, always subject to reformulation and qualification.

The quotation given at the beginning of this section—"Signs are signs, and some of them are lies"—is a statement that sums up "Me and Miss Mandible" very nicely. Unlike "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning"
and "Views of My Father Weeping," "Me and Miss Mandible" is less of a deconstructive text itself and more of an overt "commentary" on the arbitrary nature of the sign. The story, broken up into dated diary entries (and it is interesting that if matched up with a calendar, it can be demonstrated that the narrator sometimes goes to school on Saturdays and Sundays), is about a thirty-five year old man, Joseph, who, due to some type of "conspiracy" (27) or "whimsy of authority" (32), finds himself assigned to study in an elementary class full of eleven year olds.

Lois Gordon says that "Me and Miss Mandible" is ultimately about the arbitrariness of "the 'authority' both behind and presumably inherent within the word, the interpreted act, the relationship, perhaps life itself" (49). Realizing that he has misread these signs is what Joseph learns during his "reeducation" (32) process. He says about grammar school, "All of the mysteries of life that perplexed me as an adult have their origins here" (34). He then concludes that the whole education and socialization process is a sham which leads people to unrealistic expectations about life. "We read signs as promises" (33), he says, but "Signs are signs, and some of them are lies" (34). Larry McCaffery summarizes the story as follows: "The great discovery of Joseph's reeducation process" is "a discovery which underlines the sense of betrayal, by words, by women, by society at large, that exists in all of Barthelme's work" (132).
Joseph realizes that his fellow students are being brought up in the same manner he was: to accept signs as indications of what the future holds for them. For instance, he says Sue Ann Brownly (who also appears in "Will You Tell Me?" for no apparent reason—an empty sign?) studies Movie-TV Secrets and the history of Debbie, Eddie, Liz "as a guide to what she can expect when she is freed from this drab, flat classroom" (31). Joseph, older, more experienced in the ways of the world, and growing wiser with his reeducation, now understands how he misread the motto of the insurance company he worked for, how he misread the signs which made up his former wife, how she, Sue Ann, and Miss Mandible have all misread him, and how for all of them the flag is a false sign of "general righteousness" (33).

Disgusted at first with Sue Ann and her naive belief in the elusive dreams of Movie-TV Secrets, Joseph acknowledges in retrospect, "She is not responsible, I know, for what she reads, for the models proposed to her by a venal publishing industry" (32). Related to the dream of sexual freedom as promoted by the American mass media is the dream of economic prosperity advanced by the educational system. The idea that "if it is money itself that I desire, I have only to make it" (34) is a statement that this system declares as fact, and Joseph sees these signs as titillations which can only lead to "disillusionment" (35) (and for Sue Ann, that is what happens). McCaffery says,

Barthelme's fiction constantly demonstrates the enormous power that the media, and popular movies and books in
particular, have in establishing a culture's sexual roles, stereotypes, sublimations, and even its language. Barthelme is also aware of the feelings of frustration and anxiety that are generated when the reality of sexual contact cannot meet the expectations created by these cultural stereotypes....More sensitive than his classmates to the disparity between media produced promises and their fulfillment, Joseph also understands that the sexual anxieties produced in our culture are symptomatic of the larger pattern of dissatisfaction generated by the American Dream, a phrase which is itself a media slogan" (130-131).

The only way to resist the mass media's onslaught is to sublimate one's urges. As Joseph reads an advertisement in *Movie-TV Secrets* for "Hip Helpers," which add "appeal to those hips and derriere, both," in order to "drive him frantic" (30), he concludes, "This explains Bobby Vanderbilt's preoccupation with Lancias and Maseratis; it is a defense against being driven frantic" (30).

As a whole, "Me and Miss Mandible" is a story about expectations and actuality, about the arbitrary nature of authority and how signs can be confusing because of the way they often fail to hook up with the external world in an easily recognized way. Thus, even minor details in the story demonstrate the arbitrary nature of the sign. For instance, Frankie Randolf, the girl who first gives Joseph a copy of *Movie-TV Secrets*, has a masculine name, and Henry Goodykind, the district manager of the insurance company Joseph worked for and the man who chastizes him for his role in a generous claim, has a name which clearly mocks his character. In the same manner, Joseph states, "Sue Ann reminds me of the wife I had in my former role, while Miss Mandible
seems to be a child" (26). Just as the roles of these two females are reversed in Joseph's mind, neither is Miss Mandible sure about which role (elementary student or grown man) he occupies. Joseph says, and maybe this is as much the meaning of this story as any other, "The distinction between children and adults...is at bottom a specious one, I feel. There are only individual egos, crazy for love" (33).
EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

—Revelation 4:11

"Me and Miss Mandible," a story about the whimsical nature of authority, the unrealistic expectations created by the education and socialization process, and the craving for love in a world saturated with the anxiety and frustration produced by a titillating mass media, can hardly be called nihilistic. Yet to adequately answer the question of whether Barthelme's fiction and postmodern literature are nihilistic is a monumental enterprise, probably large enough for a thesis itself. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to make some sort of evaluation, and I originally considered approaching that undertaking in a socio-cultural way: to demonstrate that Barthelme's work does indeed comment on and critique not only philosophy, but also society and culture. I think, though, that if the reader has kept this question in mind throughout this thesis, he or she probably already agrees that this point is true, at least about many of the non-art stories—"A Shower of Gold" and "On Angels," mimicking and ridiculing the paralyzing nature of esoteric intellectual jargon, are about the deterioration of language and man's quest for truth and meaning. "Views of My Father Weeping" reveals the strange and obsessive emotional tie that binds a man to his dead father, "The Leap" is about two men who decide life on earth is really rather nice after all, "The Dolt" is, among other things, a critique of
capitalist mass technology, and "Report" and "The President" are political satires.

What about the art stories, though? Are these stories nihilistic intellectual puzzles, simply a commentary on their own processes, symptomatic of the inability of art to create anything anymore that hooks up with the external world in a meaningful way? And what about the rest of postmodern fiction: the works of Sukenick and Federman, Abish's Alphabetical Africa, Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49, Coover's The Universal Baseball Association? The ultimate question behind this inquiry is "Does the artist have a social responsibility to be a critic and reformer, to point out the negative aspects of society and ways to bring about the necessary changes?" I think Barthelme does, in fact, do these two things in many stories: he is, possibly unlike some of the other postmodern writers, a moral satirist, and his fiction is playful, yet it is not merely play. My answer to the posed question, however, is "NO," the artist is not obliged to be a social critic, and, using a rather unorthodox approach, I will defend the postmodernists, and especially those writing in the "metafictional" style, against the accusation of nihilism.

First of all, though, I feel compelled to admit that I am a theist, and a rather traditional one at that, possibly a rather bizarre and unusual concession coming from someone who likes to read postmodern literature. But the correlation between the two is not so contradictory and schizophrenic as one might expect. As the epigraph at the beginning
of this section declares, I believe the world was created mainly to be a "plaything" for the divine being. Like Robert Coover's J. Henry Waugh (Jehovah) in The Universal Baseball Association, God created, "saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). For humans, made "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27), the urge to create is one of the most basic urges, and we are most like God when we create purely for the sake of creating, with no utilitarian purpose. Thus, as God needed no justification to create the world, art needs no justification. Both are the result of play, and another person's enjoyment of an artist's work is as incidental as humankind's enjoyment of God's creation.

Realism, of course, has not always been the accepted mode of literature, and often theists have led the way in artistic innovation (examples are Dante, Milton, Dostoevski, and T. S. Eliot). This seems appropriate, since especially for the theist, the idea that reality is as it appears is a highly problematic assumption; any belief system which postulates a divine being can hardly be expected to foster representational art, for it is obvious to the theist that there is more to reality than the eye perceives. Also, once a divine being is conceived, no matter how objective one may think one's interpretation of that being's revelation is, many of the details of what the "real" world consists of are still left to conjecture and the imagination. The way to get closer to the reality of the noumenal world, then, is not through Robbe-Grillet's empirical phenomenological reduction, but by elaborating with the imagination on the sensory objects of experience.
The most basic presuppositions of the theistic writer and the postmodernist are, in most cases, antithetical, but self-reflexivity is not contradictory to either position because of each view's emphasis on the primary act of creation and a world which is in actuality "unreal." Therefore, both of the major defenses constructed by the postmodernists are valid: 1) The artist's only obligation is to create, and any coincidental social relevance (no one creates from a vacuum. A view of life will emerge even if only subconsciously) is possibly an enhancement, but by no means mandatory. 2) The old conventions of representationalism and mimeticism are unacceptable to both the theist and the postmodernist. An artist can only create a vision of reality which is consistent with that artist's world view. Whether one is a theist or a skeptic voicing the views of Federman and Sukenick, it is not inconsistent with the assumptions of either to call for a new mode of perceiving reality, one which, released from the bonds of describing this world, will allow freedom of the imagination to depict another.

Since creating is one of the most central and fundamental activities of humankind, Barthelme's self-reflexive art stories and the gamut of metafiction in general are as essential and basic to life and the pleasures of living as fiction about love, work, play, religion, and philosophizing: those things which compose what life in the world is all about and which often make it worth living. Stories like "The Balloon," "The Glass Mountain," "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning," and "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel," stories about the joy, heartache, vitality, ambivalence, and consolation involved with both creating and
participating in artistic creation, are therefore no different from a story about a close relationship between two people in which those same emotions are involved. It seems hardly likely that, were such a story lacking in social commentary, it would be proclaimed by traditional critics to be nihilistic.

On the other hand, storytelling has always, in a way, been a "negation of reality," and the pleasure of storytelling is exactly what the metafictionists attempt to restore to literature. As we enjoy life in the world as it is created by God, the reader of metafiction enjoys not only the story he or she reads, but, as in novels such as The Universal Baseball Association or The Crying of Lot 49, also the fictional creation of the character. Although the characters' search for truth within their creation may be mocked, the fact is that they continue their quest, just as the metafictionist continues his or her investigation. Like the fiction of Beckett, which, though "nihilistic," is still worth reading for its view of the world, the explorations of the metafictionists reveal that they have not given up the hope of uncovering a meaningful relationship with the world. In the end, metafiction is, like Beckett's work, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" (Matthew 1:3).
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