Zuzanna Ładyga

Faking the Artificial in Donald Barthelme's *Paradise*

Donald Barthelme's penultimate novel, *Paradise*, left his critics in a peculiar position. The long-awaited successor of *The Dead Father* lacked most elements of the postmodernist poetics they had learned to admire in Barthelme's fiction, and thus seemed to deserve the infamous status of a failure. The critical reception was harsh. Barthelme tells the story of a middle-aged architect who, while sharing his apartment and bed with three young women, tries to project a unified vision of everyday reality. Critics complained that it was not only the least experimental and least innovative, but also the most emotional of his texts. Given Barthelme's reputation of *the* avant-garde postmodernist, a certain degree of repetitiveness in terms of his technique could hardly be judged a weakness, let alone a signal of some mutinous departure from the paradigm of postmodern writing. What frustrated the critical expectations was that in a seemingly very non-postmodern way *Paradise* exhibited a "greater warmth and direct engagement with emotion" (Patteson 6) than its author's earlier novelistic attempts.

Before I formulate the aim of this essay, let me provide some background for the discussion of realist and emotional overtones in Barthelme's fiction. Its engagement with reality was extensively discussed by Alan Wilde, one of his most dedicated critics, in a comparative study of postmodern writers entitled *Middle Grounds*. As suggested by the book's title, Wilde locates Barthelme in the middle realm between the extremes of metafiction and mimetism, where it remains clearly referential without representing the reality it refers to. In his analysis of "Basil from her Garden," a founding story of *Paradise*, the critic argues that Barthelme's writing

> seeks to reveal extraordinariness of the ordinary, frequently and paradoxically by trafficking in limit situations—thereby subjecting to interrogation the very foundations of the writer's (and the reader's) beliefs. (...) It invites us not *through* but *in* the relationships and actions of its characters—and by way of some strategic *ecart* in its fabric—to perceive, obliquely and ironically, the moral perplexities of inhabiting a world that is itself, as "text," ontologically contingent and problematic. (34)

Supporting his argument with Barthelme's own motto: "Art is a true account of the activity of the mind" ("Not-Knowing" 522), Wilde pursues his phenomenological

reading of the writer's work as concerned with ordinary things and the ways in which they "impinge on consciousness" (168), and ends by hinting at a connection between the non-mimetic referentiality he detects in Barthelme's texts and their emotional content. According to Wilde, these texts do not attempt to paraphrase reality, but instead construct the knowledge of "the morphology of feelings" (165) involved in experiencing the real world. Considering that this process implies testing "the very foundation of the writer's (and the reader's) beliefs" (34), the term "morphology of feeling" requires a more detailed scrutiny than Wilde is willing to provide; the idea of a "feeling" seems to refer more to the reader's experience in interpreting a text, than to the text's intrinsic feature, and thus becomes evidence for the text's mimetism.

The issue is addressed by Patrick O'Donnell, another of Barthelme's commentators who is baffled by *Paradise*'s apparent mimetism and emotional load. He argues that the book's realism is "ironic" (213) in the sense that it reflects the main character's attachment to form and structure, his desire for authorial control, and his profound fear of routine and repetition in his career and life history. According to O'Donnell, with the abundance of autobiographical elements in the novel, the reality effect it achieves is not so much the result of Barthelme's failed attempt at a more traditional style, but rather his most ironic and "most extensive reflection on the state of art and the artist in postmodern culture" ("Living Arrangements" 216).

Given the context of the two approaches to the reality effect in Barthelme's fiction, the aim of this essay is to combine them in order to demonstrate—by examining the mechanics of *Paradise*'s non-mimetic referentiality—how the novel projects its author's assessment of the situation of art and the artist in postmodern culture. The mode of this projection is what I refer to as *faking of the artificial*, by which I understand a specifically Barthelmean method of referring to external reality. I find this method most promisingly accounted for by means of Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory of transitional phenomena. Winnicott uses this term to denote the intermediary area of experiences, crucial in the early stages of the subject's psychogenesis, when the child semi-autonomously "creates" mother-substitute objects that mediate its passage from symbiosis to autonomy. Although the objects are external to the child, and their repertoire depends on the cultural context, they acquire transitional status once the child uses them in play, in the illusory space between the I and the not-I, between "the primary unawareness of indebtedness and the acknowledgement of indebtedness" (2). Winnicott emphasizes that the creative aspect of playing, which characterizes these early transitional experiences, is crucial to the subject's development, since it establishes the basis for the individual's aesthetic experiences later in life. Playing, understood here as creative communication with the Other achieved by manipulating elements of culture, serves as the model for artistic creation in

general (Winnicott 95-103). An artist is always, on the one hand, bound to use the already existing cultural material such as the available discourse, dominant concepts, artistic and literary conventions; on the other hand, he can always enter a playful dialogue with the tools of his craft.

Winnicott's theory seems applicable to Barthelme's fiction, and to postmodern fiction in general, for several reasons. First, with its emphasis on the creative use of cultural artifacts it offers an interesting perspective on the phenomenon of intertextuality. As literary works become transitional spaces for the dialogue between various texts and discourses, the idea of creative transgression of boundaries bridges the gap between the concepts of the diachronic intertextual dependence and the synchronic intertextual exchange. Not only does it embrace both modes of intertextual exchange, but it also offers a psychoanalytic model for intertextually inclined criticism. Second, as the theory sees every creative activity as drawing on the primary processes, it may, as Gabrielle Schwab suggests in *Subjects without Selves*, assist critical readings that aim to construe literary subjectivities (37). Finally, and this is of interest for this essay, Winnicott's concept of transitional objects opens the door for a psychoanalytic discussion of these elements of literary language which pass under the name of "referential" or "mimetic," as well as of certain irresolvable issues concerning the relation between text and its reader.

Paradise engages the problematics of play and transitionality in several ways and on several levels at once. The main character of the novel, Simon, is a recently divorced architect, currently on sabbatical. He uses his free time to reminisce about his past and re-define himself as an artist, father, man, and member of society. His memories and dreams are dominated by allusions to art and architecture, by means of which he structures his vision of reality. Significantly, the passages where Simon is rethinking his views on architecture or determining his aesthetic preferences coincide with memories of his daughter's childhood games.

> When she was a child, Sarah would occasionally stick a 9D battery in Simon's ear and he would then make a sound like a fire engine, or alternately, a garbage truck. (35)

At first, the passage seems to describe nothing but Sarah's well-developed creative ability to playfully manipulate a technological item in order to communicate with her father. However, the text acquires further significance as it continues:

> Bridges should not be painted blue, Simon thought, the horrible Izod blue of the Ben Franklin bridge in Philadelphia ever in his mind. Concrete, he felt, wonderfully useful and wonderfully ugly, should never be seen in public unless covered with ivy, or, better still, wallpaper. Steel was pretty, he did not know why. Brick was good and wood best for all purposes under the sun. (36)

Simon's associations of Sarah's play with technological solutions in architecture are neither accidental nor arbitrary; his success in defining his personal artistic

preferences depends on the creative potential he is capable of employing in the process of formulating his views. What he says and how he says it reveals the extent of his entanglement in the network of cultural codes. However, when he realizes that he is bound to define himself exclusively by means of ready-made concepts, he discovers the pleasure of juggling clichéd expressions such as "architecture is *frozen*," "music and art is *a source of life*" (Barthelme 43), and in imagining paradise in "shades of rose and terracotta," as if designed by Edward Durell Stone (Barthelme 186). Set against the backdrop of his personal failures and disappointments, these phrases take on the significance of emotionally charged confessions, while the fact that they never lose their status of stereotypes reinforces the sense of their having been received, to use a Bakhtinian phrase, from an alien voice. In other words, the repetition of extremely conventionalized, *artificial* phrases paradoxically produces the effect of *naturalness*, albeit illusory. The clichéd expressions in Simon's thoughts do not deconstruct his personality except on the level of conscious, intellectual reflection. To put it differently, if what is emphasized as a construct of language is the *content* of Simon's thoughts and not the narrative *form* in which they are presented, then the question arises whether *Paradise* is simply rather traditional in its technique of characterization, or whether its style is a deliberate faking of traditional narration, a style that the author meant to be deconstructed by the reader. Before addressing the question, let us look at another instance of the main character's transitional use of cultural objects.

Simon's process of artistic self-definition is continuously haunted by the thought of Louis Kahn and echoes of his artistic agenda. Yet, although he constantly uses Kahn's phrases such as "no building should be taller than a ship" (68), his struggle with Kahn's influence is never stated directly. Rather, it surfaces in the memory of finding a bomb under his Volvo, the planting of which Simon blames on the ghost of the great architect, or in the detailed technical descriptions of his Kahn-inspired projects:

> He'd done a building in 1981 that had pleased him. (...) The church was a bare-bones steel building with insets of glass block as its only design flourish, these however stacked eighteen feet high in twelve bays on either side of the sanctuary—the glass block was the light-giving element, and resisted thievery, too. It has been popular in the 30s, considered a design cliché in the 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s, and presented itself again in the 80s, fresh as a new dung. (41-42)

At their most personal, Simon's memories receive the most impersonal forms, as in the passage where he thinks back to his college days, and all he manages to recall is that:

> [t]he walls of architecture lab at Penn had been covered with graffiti. "This is hell, nor are we out of it." "Hell is other architects." "The road to hell is paved with naugahyde." (80)

The reality effect of these two passages derives from reproducing cultural clichés as the only available objects of culture with which the main character can define his subjectivity. Crucially, Barthelme's referential method intensifies in the instances when his main character faces a difficult moment in his life, that is, when he, an aging architect, tries to make sense of his artistic influences in order to organize his past into a coherent narrative. Similarly, when Simon first recognizes his fear that the young women will soon abandon him, he hears a voice from a Christian Rock radio station, singing:

> Cause you know that in the end, you gonna be victorious. That don't mean you ain't gonna cry. That don't mean you ain't gonna feel pain. But in the end, you will prevail, in His name. (31)

Such intensification of stereotyped discourse in descriptions of limit-experiences serves to underline its formative role in establishing the main character's subjectivity. At the same time, it should be emphasized that Barthelme's method of amplifying referentiality highlights the creative use Simon makes of cultural objects. His creativity is largely facilitated by the temporariness of his life situation—the sabbatical serves the function of a transitional period, during which his memories, dreams, and opinions can be freely manipulated in order for a new reformulated subjectivity to emerge.

On the other hand, the traditional mode of introducing the main character's fearful confrontation with his past seems conspicuous in as much as it permits radically different readings. It can either lead the reader into adopting an emotional position *vis-à-vis* the text, which thus appears rather "writerly," or it can incite her/him into viewing the conventional style of Simon's confessions as a provocation, encouraging a deconstructive, "readerly" approach to the novel's form, and to the issue of creativity as such. The ambiguity cannot, of course, be solved without inquiring into the still more ambiguous issue of authorial intentions, the discussion of which deserves a separate examination. However, it seems tempting to extend the conceptual applicability of transitional objects from the level of plain narrative to the sphere of the reader's interaction with the text, in the course of which the reader might creatively misread the apparently traditional narrative form of *Paradise* in order to establish his identity as a reading subject. Winnicott's theory seems to support such an extension with the assertion that "it is only in playing [that] the child or adult is free to be creative" and that "only in playing is communication possible" (*Playing* 53-54). In view of Winnicott's proposition, *Paradise* may be said to emphasize its invitation to a deconstructive play with its discourse, since the ability to use language in a transitional way is by no means restricted to the protagonist's language and his trifling with architectural clichés.

Nonetheless, as can be demonstrated by Barthelme's characterization of the three models who, for a short while, live with Simon in his New York apartment,

the novel renders the communicative potential of creative interaction—both between characters in the novel, and between the text and its readers—as paradoxically uncreative and imitative. The women's transient status as guests, combined with the fact that their host is older and better educated, provides them with time and space to re-fashion their identities. As Simon himself acknowledges, the women are initially in "an in-between state" (28), which is "a ragout of Spinoza and Cindy Lauper with a William Buckley sherbet floating in the middle of it" (59). They express themselves mostly by means of T-shirt inscriptions such as "Arm the Unemployed" and "Ally Sheedy Lives." However, as they pass the time reading feminist books, Dickens, Mallarmé, business journals, and listening to jazz, they become ready to rebel against their present situation. They paint their legs red, cut their hair short, and, scattering their books all over the place, talk in a less colloquial but still absurdly stereotypical language of quotations:

> "It's the fault of men. As a group."
> "Trying to keep all the prosperity for a few selected individuals. Men."
> "I've endured it on every side."
> "Whole societies have taken glee and satisfaction from heckling, humiliating and scourging me." (...)
> "They are tearing me apart with their defamations that whole worlds chuckle about."
> "I think we should buy some cars or something, Firebirds and Cutlasses."
> "The inconsequence of your thought is a burden to me." (197)

The creative force of this conversation obviously lies not in its ingenuity, but in its performative potential. The girls may be talking in the language of books and magazines but eventually they do fulfill their need to leave Simon, with the farewell exclamation: "I gots to make mah mark in the whirl" (206).

As if to underline the creative potential of the girls' interactions with elements of culture, the passages where Simon talks with or about the women are often interrupted by descriptions of his daughter's childhood games. There is, however, an important difference between the nature of these interludes and those that interrupt his architectural deliberations: this time, the memories concern exclusively the child's play with language. Just before Simon recalls the women's first doubts about whether they should stay or leave, he remembers Sarah's first sentence: "You're making me angry" (89), and her first performance on the kitchen table, singing "I'm pretty/ I'm pretty/ And I don't care" (90). Another memory, invoked in a conversation with Q, after wondering about why the women left, is when Simon thinks "about a day many years before when his wife was taking the baby to the park: 'Goodbye, you dirty rat,' his wife said [to him]...'Goodbye, you dirty rat,' the baby said" (32). The regularity with which these memories coincide with passages devoted to Dore, Anne, and Veronica suggests that Sarah's way of constructing her first utterances out of the echoes of what Barthelme calls the "household's sentence hoard" (89) mirrors the three women's double entanglement in the existing discourse: it shows how they enter language, and

simultaneously communicates their anger at the fact that this language is male dominated. In other words, the anger of Sarah's first sentences is the same anger that motivates the eventual decision of the three women, announced in their final conversation with Simon.

The girls not only speak clichéd language but also behave in highly stereotypical ways, adopting the roles of mistresses, muses, or cooks (O'Donnell 210). It is significant that they do so especially in moments of crisis, as the amplified artificiality of passages that narrate these moments serves to emphasize the violent intrusion of the institutionalized and conventionalized elements of reality into the process of each girl's constructing or restructuring her autonomous subjectivity. At the same time, however, such a mode of the novel's referentiality highlights the creative dimension of this process. After all, the girls do manage to act and leave Simon, with a decision to free themselves from conventional female roles. From yet another perspective, the characterization of their gesture as ingenuous draws attention to its imitative nature. The girls' eventual independence turns out to be less a result of their innovative use of cultural and ideological material, than of a certain redundancy with regard to what they do and what they have read. Or, to be more accurate, it is both; as Barthelme suggests, echoing the basic psychoanalytic tenet, creativity is primarily an exercise in simulation. Such a rephrasing of Winnicott's idea of transitionality brings it closer to Lacan's rendition of the Imaginary relationship between the subject and the world, and perhaps develops the concept's capacity to reflect the pattern of the reader's interaction with the text of Barthelme's novel. The possibility of deconstructing the novel's form is the only opportunity for the reader to enter the reading process as a subject, but for this to happen s/he must go on reproducing the critical procedures laid bare in Barthelme's earlier, more experimental texts.

To conclude the discussion, let us return to the problem of how the writer's method of referentiality relates to the idea that *Paradise* is its author's most extensive comment on the state of art and the artist in postmodern culture. While on one level the artistic jargon and phrases from *Progressive Architecture* magazine provide cultural material for Simon's definition of himself as an artist, on another level the fact that the narrative abounds in detailed references to external reality suggests the novel's transitional role in Barthelme's process of re-defining himself as a writer—especially since *Paradise*, apart from playing with the 80s language, repeats many of the writer's earlier ideas such as the overexploited metaphor of Michelangelo's knife, the narrative technique of the Q & A exchanges, or even entire "recycled" stories: "Basil from Her Garden" and "Paradise Before the Egg." Retrieved and highlighted, these old motifs and techniques serve the function of cultural objects by means of which Barthelme structures his authorial subjectivity in the novel. This process follows the pattern of the characters' use of stereotyped language in order to establish their

subjectivities. Consequently, just as the ratio of clichés increases in the descriptions of the characters' struggle for self-definition, Barthelme resorts to his old techniques to mark the moments when the narrative of his novel is about to break down. The instances of traditional narration are repeatedly interrupted by one remark: "*That boy has no talent*, muttered Manet to Monet one afternoon in the garden, about Renoir" (60). In a similar manner, the narrative continuity is broken by Q & A dialogues, the subject of which is either A's or Q's self re-definition in terms of profession, ethical standards, religious and political views. This is perhaps why O'Donnell interprets Simon's penchant for compulsive juggling of brand names and artistic styles as an expression of his "fear of history" (210), a fear of losing authorial control, and a recognition of the imitative and repetitive nature of his artistic endeavors. At its most repetitive, however, *Paradise* reveals the creative potential of Barthelme's referential method, since it narrates the author's process of developing as an artist by manipulating objects of contemporary culture. The artistic subjectivity, whose emergence the novel thematizes is, of course, an intricately stylized construct, yet through Barthelme's method it acquires all the characteristics of a natural process.

The interpretation of *Paradise* as a commentary on the process of creation is incomplete without an important piece of biographical information about Barthelme, namely that he wrote this novel during the last years of his life, the last years of his long-term struggle with cancer. The context of the writer's terminal illness puts into perspective the presented reading of *Paradise* as his reflection on the state of art and the artist in postmodern world, as it amplifies the "ironic"—to recall O'Donnell's formulation—quality of this vision. Similarly, Barthelme's use of cultural artifacts, autobiographical themes, and previously used techniques appears to be not merely an exercise in structuring his artistic subjectivity, but rather an attempt completing its mercilessly detailed epitaph.[1]

Barthelme's novel is indeed different from his earlier works. It is an instance of non-mimetic referential narrative, which consistently employs culturally codified elements of reality as transitional objects for the construction of its characters' subjectivities. This mode of referentiality is mirrored on the meta-narrative plane, where the book, by exploiting exterior cultural and literary elements, projects its author's assessment of the situation of an artist in the postmodern world, and by the same token provokes readings that instead of passively receiving this assessment at face value, use the transitional space of the Barthelme's novel to enter a deconstructionist dialogue with its discourse.

[1] The significance of the autobiographical elements in *Paradise* was suggested to me by Tomasz Basiuk, who hinted at a possibility of reading Barthelme's novel as an autobiography, in the context of Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1977).

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