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THE PHENOMENON OF DRECK IN DONALD BARTHELME

1. Dreck and its Social-Cultural Context

In his study *Understanding Donald Barthelme* Stanley Trachtenberg warns the reader that in order to appreciate the American writer's "renewal of language" it becomes necessary to look, not at the material world for some presumptive source of meaning but to the context established by the words themselves¹ (Trachtenberg 1990:7). These guidelines have generated critical engagements with Barthelme's texts which have generally preoccupied themselves with their formal possibilities and achievements. A case in point is Gerhard Hoffmann's evaluation of Barthelme's "labyrinthine linguistic convolutions" which, according to him, foreground the system of language but simultaneously offer a theatre of possibilities for multiple language games. Availing himself of the opportunities lying between these two points, Barthelme's project can be described in the following terms: "By wallowing in waste and making use of the transformative energy of linguistic play, the imagination frees itself from the tensions and coercions of the socio-linguistic system" (Hoffman 1996:132). Hoffman's description of Barthelme's narrative strategies relies on a number of ways that language can be thought of as waste and as such heeds the context established by the words themselves, to use Trachtenberg's phrasing. I would contend that this is just one approach to Barthelme's writing and that other aspects of his work have to be targeted if one intends, as I hope to do in the following, to put it within its cultural-historical context and explore what it yields within a specific cross-cultural reading.

Back in 1970 William Gass recognised that the "principal materials" Barthelme operates with are "dreck, trash and stuffing"². In the course of the argument Gass's pronouncement turns into a critical judgement:

He renders everything as meaningless as it appears to be in ordinary modern life by abolishing distinctions and putting everything in the present. He constructs a single plane of truth, of relevance, of style, of value - a flatland junkyard - since anything dropped in the dreck is dreck, at once, as an uneaten porkchop mislaid in the garbage (Gass 1970:101).

The very title of Philip Stevick's 1981 study *Prolegomena to the Study of Fictional Dreck* tellingly summarises the central interest of his approach to Barthelme's texts which, he observes, create 'a fictional world that registers a kind of phenomenology of mass culture' (Stevick 1981:126). In a homage he wrote for Barthelme, Jerome Klinkowitz makes note of how 'the author allows a certain incrementality to his junco stock of data' (Klinkowitz 1991). These verdicts and many other could be mustered go some way in explaining why Susan Wood ordained Barthelme 'the high priest of trash and flesh' (Wood 1979).

Approaching our subject matter from a different angle, it should be noted that the conspicuousness of the said phenomenon in Barthelme has led some authors to address his writings as repositories and exemplifications of broader extra-textual social and cultural developments. For instance, discussing the relationship between high art and popular culture in Joyce, Ihab Hassan wonders about dreck and, not surprisingly, quotes from *Snow White* (1968) to give resonance to his concerns (Hassan 1975:80-2). To take one final example, in concluding his review of Michael Thompson's book *Rubbish Theory*, Jonathan Culler speaks of Barthelme's work as a 'gold mine for the serious student of rubbish' (Culler 1988:180). The proximity of the words <gold= and <rubbish= in Culler's assessment provides proof of the ambivalence attendant on the chore of mining Barthelme's writings.

The spectrum of meanings covered by the word dreck and, in particular, its euphemistic quality is factors explaining why I privilege it amongst its numerous synonyms on the present occasion. Hugh Rawson in his witty compilation *Wicked Words* writes that dreck derives from the Yiddish term <dreck= and has the 'same set of filthy, basically ex-cremental meanings', but when used in an all-English conversation the term has some of the qualities of an euphemism (Rawson 1989:126). The semantic field covered by the Yiddish word - ranging from excrement to tasteless commodities - and a fluctuating ambivalence of affective investment that surrounds it correspond to a number

of themes and authorial positionings that I intend to target in Bartheleme.

To underline the centrality of the phenomenon under discussion to American culture and society one can think of the ubiquity of its nearest English synonym <junk= in a number of socio-cultural practices. Let me list a number of these: American homes are swamped by a certain kind of marketing (<junk mail=), its inhabitants gorge themselves on a plenitude of foodstuffs (<junk food=), were bamboozled during the 80ies by a method of risky financing (<junk bonds=) and are captivated by a kind of writing (<junk fiction=). However, if we agree that space and landscape have always played a prominent part in constructing the American identity, the evidence of this phenomenon is mounting to stupendous proportions.

In their book *RUBBISH. The Archaeology of Garbage*, William Rathje and Cullen Murphy give an account of a largely unnoticed geographical change which has been taking place on the American eastern shoreline. What they are referring to is Fresh Kills, the largest active landfill on Station Island in New York City, a repository of garbage which when shut down in the year 2005 will have reached the height of 505 feet above sea level, making it the highest geographic feature along the 15,000 mile stretch of the Atlantic seaboard. In order to bring across the immensity and significance of this sort of <landscaping= the authors use a comparison. Citing the Australian archaeologist Rowland Fletcher=s concept of the largest monuments that a society builds as its Monstrous Visual Symbols (MVS), Rathje and Murphy reckon that the largest MVSes in American society today are its garbage repositories@ (Rathje and Murphy 1992:82). Their claim is substantiated by statistics. Archaeologists believe the biggest prehistoric MVS in the Americas is the Pyramid of the Sun, at Teotihuacan, whose volume is 75 million cubic feet. Today=s garbage dumps in Meadowlands exceed that volume many times over. The Durham Road landfill in the San Francisco Bay area has already reached 150 million cubic feet; Fresh Kills is, of course, many times larger. Such astonishing figures needed to be dealt with and it comes as no surprise that a scholarly endeavour, <garbology=, got under way in 1971 at the University of Arizona whose premise is that ?landfills represent valuable lodes of information that may, when mined and interpreted, produce valuable insights@ (ib: 4).

Other observers have engaged this issue. Richard Farmer, for

example, perceives the United States as "a trash generating system" which has spawned a culture drowning in its own refuse (Farmer 1973:28). The matter of junk provokes two insights: both a recognition that it is flooding and submerging American spaces and an evaluation that it is something shoddy and inauthentic. Readers of Barthelme will recognise the extent his texts are positioned amidst the detritus of American material culture and that it is precisely this aspect of his prose, which situates it within a specific writing practice. As Philip Stevick has observed, there is a centre to "the comedy of experimental fiction":

This shared characteristic derives from certain attitudes toward, and treatment of, the shared mass-cultural objects of our world, especially the ephemeral objects, the floating junk, the jingles and slogans of advertising, the clichés of our common cant, the songs of forgotten hit parades, the faded movies, the throw-away plastic things, the receding but still talking faces of the TV screen, the disconnected items of schlock merchandise bought and unused, the mounting trash - in a word, the dreck of our lives (Stevick 1981:123).

My reading of Barthelme problematizes the "shared" characteristics implied in Stevick's roll-call by drawing attention to an attitude I find in his work which goes against the grain of the above statement.

2. Dreck in Barthelme's Writings

One of the conspicuous ways Barthelme's prose displays its embeddedness in contemporary American culture and society is through the brand names dispersed throughout its pages. Incorporating these labels into his writings, Barthelme is making offerings *of and*, at the same time, *to* the iconography of modern America. At times the reader feels he is in the very midst of, as the author himself put it, "the primeval ooze of the nation's department stores" (Herzinger 1992:61).

Using the "protocols" of garbology, we can assemble a roster of consumer goods to be found in Barthelme: foodstuffs, pharmaceutical products, sanitation materials, amusement utensils, educational tools, communication-related implements, pet and garden products, etc. These and many others can be substantiated by brand names. Let me list a few specimens. At the end of *Snow White* the

accomplishment of Dan the new leader is measured by his ability to proliferate a new line of products: "He is a brute perhaps but an efficient brute. He is good at tending the vats. Dan has taken charge with a fine aggressiveness. He has added three new varieties to the line: Baby Water Chestnuts, Baby Kimchi, Baby Bean Thread" (Barthelme 1972:180). Even if in this particular case the three brand names might be fictive, elsewhere in his first novel *Bartheleme* treats the reader to all-American products: a Pontiac convertible (p.127), a Golden Prell shampoo (p.131), Old Gold cigarettes (p.35). The combination of celebratory entrepreneurship and the cornucopia of consumer goods in these passages anticipates the main thrust of my argument.

The opening sentence of *The Dead Father* (1975) strikes a promising note for the inquiry at hand and illustrates the etaphoric use of brand names Barthelme at times resorts to: "The Dead father=s head. The main thing is, his eyes are open. Standing up into the sky. The eyes a two-valued blue, the blues of the Gitanes cigarette pack" (Bartheleme 1986:3).

I draw attention to the relish for the commodity manifest in the urgency with which he hopes to make the metaphoric identification and the market connotations of the phrase "two-valued". But, in comparison with other texts, the novel does not deliver the goods that the reader is inclined to expect on the evidence of the opening sentence. However, evidence of ad-produced abundance and variety are present as in the following: "Kool-Aid or the equivalent things change their names so fast these days I=m not sure it=s still called Kool-Aid maybe just grape juice with little something added to zip it up" (Barthelme 1986:101).

Paradise (1986) whose story line of Simon on "a male fantasy in hog heaven" (Barthelme 1987:80), surrounded by New York City where one has everything, is the text most relevant to the thematic of Barthelme=s relationship to consumerist society. Its insistent roll call of brand names underlines and augments the condition of opulence evoked by the narrative. In a passage characteristic of the novel, Tim recalls an earlier paradisiac state in the following manner: "(he) had everything, projection television, walk-around no-hands telephones, stereo, a Nautilus Machine, whirlpool bath, two BMWs, two dogs, PC with printer..." (Barthelme 1987:115). Human experience, as rendered within the network of American material culture, is quantified, embodied in and presented through an appetising assemblage of commodities.

However, the spectacle of opulence has its other side. To remain with Barthelme, it can be said that if his writings process the products of American consumer culture than there seemingly comes a moment when they are no longer able to do so, when a point of saturation has been reached. The final pages of *Paradise* confirm that Barthelme was aware of the consequences of unbridled consumption. The scene finds Simon in his plane seat gazing at streaks of garbage floats over the surface of the ocean: "Over the Atlantic on the long approach to Kennedy Simon saw a hundred miles of garbage in the water, from the air white floating scruff. The water became agitated at points as fish attacked the garbage and Simon turned his mind to compaction" (Barthelme 1987:295). One way of explaining this vision is to see it as issuing out of a change of perspective. In other words, as long as Simon is bodily in "hog heaven", as long as he indulges his cravings, he is blind to the consequences produced by ravenous human desire for ever newer and larger products and thrills. At a distance, disconnected from their addictive, debilitating tug, he is able to catch a glimpse of the dire effects of human rapacity and overindulgence.

Barthelme is here acknowledging the less appealing side of consumerism. The scene from *Paradise* reminds the reader of the inevitable loss and devastation that have accompanied American plenitude and uncurtailed growth and encapsulates what one can consider, borrowing a phrase from James Twitchell, the "thrashing" of America (Twitchell 1992:38). However, I feel unease in assigning to Barthelme the critical thrust implied here. As a matter of fact, the emphasis my reading places on Barthelme's affective relation to the dreck phenomenon is primarily aimed at questioning the oppositional stance that we all too readily ascribe to literary discourse.

In order to show how this set of problems is manifested in the text itself I will look into one of the most often quoted passages from *Snow White*. After his reflections upon language as "stuffing and filling", Dan makes a statement about the accrual of trash:

Now you're probably familiar with the fact that the per-capita production of trash in this country is up from 2.75 pounds per day in 1920 to 4.5 pounds per day in 1965, the last year for which we have figures, and is increasing at the rate of about four percent a year. Now that rate will probably go up, because it's been going up, and I hazard that we may very well soon reach a point of where it's 100 percent

(Barthelme 1972:97).

At first glance Barthelme is doing no more than making a hyperbolic observation about the growing amount of refuse produced by American society and voicing a fear for a future that will become saturated with it. However, this straightforward assessment is complicated by the different connotations of the final percentage which can, for example, imply a sort of sterling quality to the mounting trash. The reader becomes more convinced of the possibility of this slippage of meaning after he has gone on and read the next sentences:

Now at such a point, you will agree, the question turns from a question of disposing of this <trash= to a question of appreciating its qualities, because, after all, it=s 100 percent, right? And there can no longer be any question of <disposing= of it, because it=s all there is, and we will simply have to learn how to <dig= it – that’s slang, but peculiarly appropriate here (Barthelme 1972:97).

Words like ?appreciate@ and ?dig@ obviously signal a positive relationship to the said phenomenon. To say the least, they weaken the charge of its negativity and compromise the critical stance we might have prematurely ascribed to Barthelme=s recognition of the dire consequences of unbounded consumption. As far as my argument goes, the above passage from *Snow White* encapsulates an attitudinal and emotional investment in American culture which I judge central to Barthelme=s writing.

To further illustrate this investment I make note of two additional examples. The following is the closing paragraph of the short piece ?The Three Meals@, a sort of flaunting display of American brand name foodstuffs:

For other excellent recipes involving American canned goods, my 64-page leaflet is available upon request. But I am not trying o sell the leaflet, only to stress an appropriate respect and love for the American canned good, which is not, and never will be, Japanese (Herzinger 1992:19).

The narrative voice, here overtly cultural-specific in demarcating itself from its threatening other (Japan in this case) unabashedly identifies with the chore of promoting American plenitude. The choice of words like ?respect@ and ?love@ attribute to consumer goods a value and aura far above what they are usually endowed with.

One final example will suffice. In the piece ?Down with the

Annual@ the reader meets the following: ?You give me touchstones with which to protect myself against the deceptive pricing, false gift offers, spurious claims, bait advertising, and general rascality of the American economy@ (Herzinger 1992:234). In addition to the fact that the title indicates a motion of tearing away the protection which the *Consumer Bulletin Annual* provides to the unwary American consumer in the market arena and therefore gestures toward a headlong immersion into the space of commodities, the above sentence enacts a rhetorical movement which could be described as one from denigration to absolvment. If we attend closely to the vocabulary it becomes clear that the negative evaluation implied in the words ?deceptive@, ?false@, ?spurious@ and ?bait@ is overshadowed and ultimately discharged by the mellow and only mildly admonishing connotations of the syntagm ?general rascality@. The meaning of the word ?rascality@ hangs suspended in a sort of ambivalence to the point where it intrudes upon, coincides and covers its opposite semantic field. Barthelme=s statement exemplifies such a usage. Although, if we look it up in the *Webster Dictionary*, it does refer to things dishonest and tricky, when applied it is ?often in humorous disparagement without serious implications@. Putting this in another way, the playfulness that English speakers associate with the word ?rascality@ signals in Barthelme=s use of the word an affective investment the writer has in the material culture of his society.

3. How to Understand the Presence of Dreck in Barthelme

Jerome Klinkowitz alludes to something resembling this ambivalence in Barthelme when he cites fellow critics who see the author as ?using his position as a *New Yorker* regular to fashion bright and witty barbs directed at the foibles of a culture the writer actually lives in - and is nourished by - all too comfortably@. Obviously, the meaning of ?foibles@ as ?small weakness@ or ?slight frailty@ is semantically close to the connotations of Barthelme=s use of ?rascality@ in the earlier-quoted passage. However, I find it hard to accept Klinkowitz=s conclusion that those holding such a view ignore ?Barthelme=s adversarial stance towards the basis if what his fiction ironizes@ (Klinkowitz 1991:66). On one level my reading problematizes the presence of irony in these texts.

I would contend that those critics who read Bartheleme=s texts as absurdist exercises targeted at the shoddy and dehumanising realities of consumer society ascribe to the writer a critical engagement

which is suspect. Barthelme=s fictions reflect upon his society but they are hardly appalled by what is refracted in the mirror. Not only does Barthelme not take an unequivocal critical position towards the phenomenon of what we have designated as dreck but textual evidence shows that he indulges its banality, at times, coming dangerously close to being a part of it. Those who would have it otherwise are reading their own political positions into the literary texts. The common thread running through their appraisals is a negativistic, moralistic critique of the commodification of culture, mass society and consumer capitalism. Barthelme turns out to be an interesting source because he has strewn throughout his texts the mass-produced icons that have swamped the American polity.

The question I am addressing here, namely how is Barthelme aligned with his socio-cultural scene, delineates a site where one is able to rehearse the theoretical discussions of late capitalism, commodity excess, the post-modern scene itself. One approach could implement the insights of neo-Marxist analysis as it pertains to the study of the commodity in late capitalism. In that conceptual framework Barthelme=s fictions could divulge ample evidence of how exchange value has gained the upper hand over use value in consumer societies. Such an approach would attempt to show how the saturation of his fictional world by commodities enacts a development which Guy Debord succinctly describes as a condition where "social space is continually being blanketed by stratum after stratum of commodities" (Debord 1994:220). But, to reiterate, references to Barthelme=s texts have shown him lacking the critical incision implied in pronouncements on consumer society made by critics who like Debord ground their observations in a vision of human authenticity.

Wary of assigning undue significance to a comment Barthelme made on the American advertisement business back in 1961, I mention it here because it registers the intrusion of what Debord would have named the "spectacle": "But the fact that there are institutional ads at all is itself an instance of the disappearance of the product, of the prominence of the side-show, the diversion" (Barthelme 1961:30). What is retrospectively of interest to me in this early review is not only the fact that Barthelme had recognised the process but, even more so, that he did not voice disapproval of, to paraphrase him, the diversionary tactics of the side-show. In line with my scepticism in regards to the adversarial charge of Barthelme=s work I take this early review as just

another of his manifold, what David Bennett has termed, "moments of complicity" (Milner 1990:32) with the allure of American consumer culture.

Jean Baudrillard's observations seem to be more to the point when discussing Barthelme than positions espoused by neo-Marxist critics. A passage from Baudrillard's article "Consumer Society" could serve as an apt comment on the kind of affective attachment Barthelme's work establishes to a culture of plenitude. Baudrillard writes: in today's world "we are everywhere surrounded by the remarkable conspicuousness of consumption and affluence, established by the multiplication of objects, services, and material goods". In a rhapsodic moment he speaks the praises of abundance: streets with overcrowded and glittering store windows (lighting being the last rare commodity without which merchandise would merely be what it is) the displays of delicacies, and all the scenes of alimentary and vestimentary festivity, stimulate a magical salivatio (Baudrillard 1988:29).

No longer produced to merely cater to a particular need or to absolve a particular problem, the world of commodities turns into an arena of signifiers whose primary purpose is to incite desire. This point is elaborated by Wolfgang Fritz Haug in the following manner:

ultimately the aestheticization of commodities means that they tend to dissolve into enjoyable experiences, or into the appearance of those experiences, detached from the commodity itself. The tendency to sell these processes as material-immaterial types of commodities leaves no time to consider their use-value. By selling the commodity in the forms of absolute consumption, the market remains unsatiated (Haug 1986:72).

Judith Williamson generalises the relevance of this phenomenon: "Every society has some kind of map, a grid of the terms available to think in at any given time. In ours consumer goods are just some of the chief landmarks which define the <natural= categories we are accustomed to" (Williamson 1986:227). Following through this argument we could say that the phenomenon of dreck in Barthelme is naturalised and with this formulation we have added another possible meaning to the its hundred percent growth in the passage from *Snow*

White quoted earlier.

Instead of denigration and a shunning of the boggling abundance on display in American culture Bartheleme=s work offers plenty of evidence that he is infatuated with its products. It is a mistake to envisage him as repulsing these temptations, standing free from the gravitational pull of these incitements to desire and harbouring a nostalgic craving for or a utopian project of authenticity. One way of explaining this is to see the affective investment in the spectacle of opulence as partaking of his general affirmativity of outlook. The author was once asked in an interview what did he deem the proper response to the world. Tellingly, Bartheleme responded that one should embrace it. On another occasion, questioned about satire Bartheleme responded as follows:

I have to think back and try to remember what satire is used for. It=s a destructive attack on the object...These pieces aren=t satirical in that way, although they could be construed as satirical. I think they are an accurate picture of how things are; but with little satirical intent, little satirical effect. They do try to capture extreme states, but my feeling is that these extreme states are now more or less normal. What would formerly have been considered an aberration has now become extremely common (quoted in Hoffman 1996:129).

Such a disavowal of the satirical charge of his writing ought to make us cautious in ascribing to it a negative (?attacking@) potential. Stanley Trachtenberg, who refers to the first-cited interview, holds that the Simon character in *Paradise embodies* ?an inclusive, nondiscriminatory contentment with the ordinary and so imperfect@ (Trachtenberg 1990:213). Going by my reading this assessment could be broadened with the contention that this is an attitude which permeates the whole of Bartheleme=s writings.

4. Conclusion: Cross-cultural implications

My concluding remarks will not only underline the cross-cultural nature of this reading but note how these transactions across cultures can yield interesting insights. It is a widely accepted fact that, because of various factors, mass-produced and mass-consumed American popular culture is encircling the globe. Attempting an answer for this

process, James Twitchell suggests that "popular culture resembles a secular religion promising release, not in the next world, but in this one. Wishes are fulfilled, not later, but Now, Gratification is instant because for the first time it can be. There is so much to look at, so much to see" (Twitchell 1992:38). This globalisation of a popular culture which can be subsumed under the dreck phenomenon has appalled many and, like those Bartheleme critics who project an adversarial engagement with consumer society into his work, many have taken up a negative stance towards its spread. However, as Rob Kroes notes, the targeting of America as the epitome of all that has gone wrong with capitalism does not tell the whole story. Alongside the critique "there was always a repressed pleasure principle in the most rabid anti-American intellectual, ready to indulge in the temptations of American culture" (Kroes 1991:236). The duplicity of this critique was particularly risible when it was mounted by a Marxist denigration of consumerism stemming from politics which could barely satisfy the elementary needs of their populace.

The cravings, saturations and desires figuring in Bartheleme could serve as a kind of barometer which registers the range of responses his non-American readers have not only to the fictions but to the temptations of American plenitude embodied there. Could one say that the "stimulation of a magical salvatio" created by the circulation of commodities, to return to Baudrillard's phrasing, whets the appetite of those excluded from its field of gravity proportionally to the distance between their needs and what those commodities hold in promise. Like all critical pronouncements the present one is located within a specific frame of reference. The latter, as a sort of counter-site, is alluded to and exoticised in Bartheleme's own text. I am referring to an exchange in his last novel *The King* (1990):

"Croats for example. I never knew there was such a thing as a Croat before this war."

"Are they on our side?"

"As I understand it, they are being held in reserve for a possible uprising in the event that the Serbs fail to live up to some agreement or other."

"What's a Serb, mum?"

"I stand before you in the most perfect ignorance," said the queen. "All I know is that they share territory with the Croats. Uneasily, I gather."

And then we have to worry about the Bulgarians and Rumanians and Hungarians and Albanians and God knows what all. It=s enough to brast one=s pate@ (Barthelme 1990:5).

Although, in the decade that has elapsed since these words were published many of the proper names have become household items in the Western world there is an important lesson in positionality to be learned from this sort of cross-cultural reading. Simply put, approaching Barthelme from a specific geo-political context has not only influenced the purchase on his writing I have been arguing for in this reading but has made me suspect the first person plural used, I think, so brashly in some of the pronouncements both on Barthelme and on the contemporary world. For instance, when Williamson speaks of consumer goods as defining ?our@ @natural categories@ or when Baudrillard sees ?every where@ @a conspicuosness of consumption@ I cannot but feel excluded from Williamson=s possessive and inclined to designate, in contradistinction to Baudrillard=s everywhere, the map Barthelme=s character is struggling with in the above passage as a nowhere. My hope was that a voice from that nowhere could contribute some insights to ways of reading a particular text and in so doing caution about the pitfalls of overhasty generalisations.

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Abstract

In the paper the author addresses the multifaceted presence and the distinctive cultural relevance of dreck or waste in the writings of the Donald Bartheleme. In his reading he takes issue with those critics who advance the notion that there is an adversarial stance in Bartheleme=s work. The author looks at what can be called Bartheleme=s moments of complicity with the consumerist nature of American society. In conclusion the author draws attention to the cross-cultural nature of his reading which he hoped enabled him to contribute some insights to ways of reading a particular text and to caution about the pitfalls of overhasty generalizations.