Barthelme reconsidered

In the spring of 1983, Donald Barthelme invited about twenty people to dinner at a restaurant in SoHo. The guest list included Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, William Gaddis, Robert Coover, John Hawkes, William Gass, Kurt Vonnegut, Walter Abish, and Susan Sontag. All of them turned up except Pynchon, who was out of the state and sent his regrets, and the writers made short speeches about their work and toasted their friendship. The affair became known as the Postmodernists Dinner.

As with many occasions organized to celebrate accomplishment, the mood was valedictory. In the nineteen-sixties, most of those writers had been turning the world of American fiction on its head; in the nineteen-eighties, they were the subjects of doctoral dissertations. They had become aldermen of the towns they once set out to burn down. They had also fallen out of step. The action in American fiction after 1975 no longer involved experimentalism and mixed media; it involved minimalism and a kind of straightforward realism that many of the people in the room probably thought they had left for dead long before. Barthelme himself, though he was only fifty-two, had already begun to withdraw from the literary scene. No one has a richer appreciation of the way the big wheel keeps on turning than a postmodernist, but some of the writers may have wondered, while the glasses were being refilled, what it had all been about.

Postmodernism is the Swiss Army knife of critical concepts. It’s definitionally overloaded, and it can do almost any job you need done. This is partly because, like many terms that begin with "post," it is fundamentally ambidextrous. Postmodernism can mean, "We’re all modernists now. Modernism has won." Or it can mean, "No one can be a modernist anymore. Modernism is over." People who use "postmodernism" in the first, "mission accomplished," sense believe that modernism - the art and literature associated with figures like Picasso and Joyce - changed the game completely, and that everyone is still working through the consequences. Modernism is the song that never ends. Being postmodernist just means that we can never be pre-modernist again. People who use it in the second sense, as the epitaph for modernism, think that, somewhere along the line, there was a break with the assumptions, practices, and ambitions of modernist art and literature, and that everyone since then is (or ought to be) on to something very different. Being postmodernist means that we can never be modernist again.

How (in the first account) did people like Picasso and Joyce change the game? They did it by shifting interest from the what to the how of art, from the things
represented in a painting or a novel to the business of representation itself. Modern art didn't abandon the world, but it made art-making part of the subject matter of art. When (in the second account) did a break occur? It happened when artists and intellectuals stopped respecting a bright-line distinction between high art and commercial culture. Modernist art and literature, in this version of the story, depended on that distinction to give its products critical authority. Modernism was formally difficult and intellectually challenging. Its thrills were not cheap. But there were cheap thrills out there, a vast and growing mass of products manufactured to stroke the senses and flatter the self-images of their consumers. This bubble-gum culture wasn't just averse to the spirit of high art. It was high art's reason for being.

It's sometimes said that the distinction between high and commercial culture collapsed when artists and intellectuals discovered aesthetic merit in things like jazz and the movies. But this can't have been the case, because the idea of aesthetic merit - the belief that some works, for assignable reasons, have it and some works do not - is what kept the distinction alive in the first place. If you propose to admire a popular movie because it's formally interesting or morally exigent, you aren't changing the system of appreciation at all. There may be some new stuff above the line, but there is still a line. What killed the distinction wasn't defining pop art up. It was defining high art down. It was the recognition that serious art, too, is produced and consumed in a marketplace. The point of Warhol's Campbell's soup-can paintings was not that a soup can is like a work of art. It was that a work of art is like a soup can: they are both commodities.

This calling into question, problematizing, deconstructing - whatever you want to call it - of the status of art is what makes a lot of people uncomfortable with postmodernism in the second sense. They don't see that sort of postmodernism as demystifying; they see it as debunking. High art and literature have always been stimulated by popular sources (and have given stimulus back); and anti-art, art that thumbs its nose at aesthetic decorum, has an honored place in the modernist tradition. Duchamp and the Dadaists were making anti-art almost a hundred years ago. But you can make anti-art - Duchamp's "Fountain," for example - only when everyone still has some conception of authentic, stand-alone, for-its-own-sake art. Warhol's work is not anti-art. Finding no quality on which to hang a distinction between authentic art and everything else, it simply drops the whole question.

Donald Barthelme moved to New York City in 1962, the year that Warhol first showed the soup-can paintings. He came in order to take a job as the managing editor of an avant-garde arts magazine called Location, and, soon after he arrived, he published a story, in the literary magazine Contact, called "The Viennese Opera Ball." The story ends as follows:

The judicial form contemplated in the agreement is that of a free trade zone to be transformed gradually into a customs union. As Emile Myerson has said, "L'homme fait de la métaphysique comme il respire, sans le vouloir et surtout sans s'en douter la plupart du temps." No woman is worth more than 24 cattle, Pamela Odede B. A.'s
father said. With this album Abbey Lincoln's stature as one of the great jazz singers of our time is confirmed, Laura La Plante said. Widely used for motors, power tools, lighting, TV, etc. Generator output: 3500 watts, 115/230 volt, 60 cy., AC, continuous duty. Max 230 V capacitor motor, loaded on starting - 1/2 hp; unloaded on starting - 2 hp.

Control box mounts starting switch, duplex 115 V receptacle for standard or 3-conductor grounding plugs, tandem 230 V grounding receptacles, and wing nut battery terminals. More than six hundred different kinds of forceps have been invented. Let's not talk about the lion, she said. Wilson looked over at her without smiling and now she smiled at him. This process uses a Lincoln submerged arc welding head to run both inside and outside beads automatically. The rate of progress during the first stage will determine the program to be followed in the second stage. The Glamour editor whose name was Tutti Beale "moved in." What's your name girl? she said coolly. Carola Mitt, Carola Mitt said. The Viennese Opera Ball continued.

Undoubtedly postmodernism of some kind, but which kind is it?

One of the aims of Tracy Daugherty's excellent biography of Barthelme, "Hiding Man" (St. Martin's; $35), is to establish that, despite what might seem compelling appearances to the contrary, Barthelme was emphatically a postmodernist in the first sense. (Daugherty doesn't much like the term "postmodernist," but Barthelme thought it was a fair one.) He argues that Barthelme believed himself to be working in the tradition of Joyce and Samuel Beckett, and that his appropriation of popular, commercial, and other sub-artistic elements (instruction manuals, travel guides, advertisements, sentences from newspaper articles, and so on) in his writing was done as a means of making literature, not subverting it or announcing its obsolescence. Daugherty thinks that many people have got Barthelme wrong.

It's not hard to see why they might have. Barthelme's first short-story collection, "Come Back, Dr. Caligari" (1964), includes "The Joker's Greatest Triumph," which is based on characters from the Batman comics. His first novel, "Snow White," which came out in 1967, is what they used to call, on the nineteen-sixties show "Rocky and Bullwinkle," a fractured fairy tale - a modernized and mildly surrealized adult version of an already Disney-ized story. His second collection, "Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts" (1968), includes a story, "The Dolt," about a man preparing to take the National Writers' Examination. In 1969, he published, in Esquire, "And Now Let's Hear It for the 'Ed Sullivan Show!,' " a scene-by-scene report of one of the programs in the manner of an agitated lover of the show. Many of the stories in his third collection, "City Life" (1970), are illustrated with images clipped from old books and magazines. Some of the stories are in Q. & A. form:

Q: What replaces it?
A: I should think that it is replaced by what existed before it was
invented.
Q: The same thing?
A: The same sort of thing.
Q: Is the bicycle dead?

-- "The Explanation"

In one story, the sentences are numbered, 1 through 100. Sections of another are in the form of headlines. And the story entitled "Sentence" is a single (unfinished) sentence that takes up eight pages.

Barthelme incorporates bits from other people's texts into his stories, and a good deal of his writing sounds like (and some of it plainly is) pastiche, as though it had been composed in the style, or spoken in the voice, of someone else:

Curiously, in some of the most successful projects the design has been swung upon small collections of rare animals spaced (on the lost-horse principle) on a lack of grid. Carefully calculated mixes: mambas, the black wrasse, the giselle. Electrolytic jelly exhibiting a capture ratio far in excess of standard is used to fix the animals in place.

-- "Paraguay" (1969)

Songs are always composed of both traditional and new elements. This means that you can rely on the tradition to give your song "legs" while also putting in your own experience or particular way of looking at things for the new.

-- "How I Write My Songs" (1978)

Even when there is straightforward narration or dialogue, the prose typically has a flat, disjointed, deliberately unliterary delivery. The writer seems to be having trouble maintaining his concentration - even the business of telling a story is treated ironically. And the humor is deadpan, as though the sentences were daring you to think they're funny. (Are you supposed to stare at the soup-can paintings, or are you just supposed to laugh? Which would be the wrong reaction?)

Edward looked at his red beard in the tableknife. Then Edward and Pia went to Sweden, to the farm. In the mailbox Pia found a check for Willie from the government of Sweden. It was for twenty-three hundred crowns and had a rained-on look. Pia put the check in the pocket of her brown coat. Pia was pregnant. In London she had been sick every day. In London Pia and Edward had seen the Marat / Sade at the Aldwych Theatre.

-- "Edward and Pia" (1965)

The city looked new with tall buildings raised while my back was turned. I rushed here and there visiting friends. They were burning beef in their backyards, brown burly men with beer cans. The beef black on the outside, red on the inside. My friend Horace had fidelity. "Listen to that bass. That's sixty watts of bass, boy."
I spoke to my father. "How is business?" "If Alaska makes it," he said, "I can buy a Hasselblad. And we're keeping an eye on Hawaii." Then he photographed my veteran face, f.6 at 300. My father once a cheerleader at a great Eastern school. Jumping in the air and making fierce angry down-the-field gestures at the top of his leap.

That's not a criticism. We have to have cheerleaders.
-- "See the Moon?" (1966)

It can certainly look, in short, as though Barthelme, like Warhol, were simply dropping the question of whether something counts as literature or not, since markers of the literary are impossible to find in his writing. The high-art traditionalist has no place to hang his beret. Daugherty's purpose is to convince us that this was not Barthelme's intention.

Daugherty has another motive as well, and this one is more personal. Barthelme spent the last eight years of his life - he died, of throat cancer, in 1989, at the age of fifty-eight - teaching creative writing at the University of Houston, and Daugherty was one of his students there. The biography is therefore partly homage to a teacher, and although one does not suspect that a lot of warts have been omitted from the portrait, the book gazes upon its subject with consistent admiration and affection. Daugherty is plainly loyal to his teacher. But this seems right, since, on most of the evidence, Barthelme was the kind of person whom people feel loyal to.

He was not uncomplicated. As Daugherty suggests by his title (which is also the title of an early Barthelme story), he was an adept of irony and deflection in person as well as on the page, a lonely and, at some level, unhappy man who needed humor and companionship. But he had, his friend Pynchon told Daugherty, "a hopeful and unbitter heart." Women seem to have found him easy to like. He married four times and had at least two long-term relationships between the marriages. He was dependent on alcohol, and he was dependent on work. He wrote every morning and had his first drink around noon. In less than thirty years, he published more than a hundred and fifty stories, four novels, a book for children, and two volumes' worth of essays, reviews, and occasional pieces. He also taught creative writing, at Boston University, the City College of New York, and Houston; lent a hand in literary-magazine ventures and conferences; and was active in the American branch of PEN. The combination of melancholia, compulsive typing, and too much alcohol might describe a lot of writers.

Before he was a New Yorker, Barthelme was a Texan. He grew up in Houston, where his father, also named Donald, was a prominent local architect. Donald the writer was the first of five children. Four were boys, and three of them became professional writers. Daugherty gives us a picture of the dynamics of this unusual and self-absorbed family, though not quite as sharp a picture as we get from the memoir written by Donald's brothers Frederick and Steven, "Double Down" (1999), which is
the story of a gambling spree they went on after Donald, Sr., died, in 1996. (Frederick and Steven Barthelme lost more than a quarter of a million dollars, which included almost all their inheritance; the binge ended after they were indicted for cheating at blackjack. They were exonerated at the end of a hellish experience.) The Barthelme family "was pretty much a nonstop you-blinked game played by seven people," the brothers write. "Appearing to be blasé - indifferent, relaxed, casual, unconcerned - was essential protective coloration." (Even the business of telling a story is treated ironically.)

The one who kept them all on guard was the father, and he seems to have been a piece of work. Donald, Sr., had studied architecture at Penn, and he was a committed modernist, an acolyte of Mies, Le Corbusier, Aalto, and Saarinen. He designed his own home, including the interiors, and if he couldn't find something that suited his taste - a rug or a piece of furniture - he manufactured it himself. The children participated in this continuous redecoration of their house with enthusiasm, but at the price of being exposed to a lot of ridicule. "Our father was very good at ridicule," Frederick and Steven report; and it was worst, they say, for Donald and their sister, Joan, who were the oldest, and who "often alluded to the terror of our father's attention in their childhoods, a kind of vague, best-left-unsaid eyebrow-raising that effectively communicated the terrifying things they had once been subjected to."

An uncompromising temper appears to have limited the father's career as an architect. The brothers describe a scene in which their father picks up an LP record that says "unbreakable" on the label and breaks it in two. "Not unbreakable," he says. That might be a little scary for kids to watch. Frederick and Steven thought that he was an ingenious man, but they found him fascinatingly difficult to care for in his old age; their memoir is an attempt to understand their gambling obsession as a way of coping with guilt over his death. ("The addiction to gambling, with the unsuccessful struggles to break the habit and the opportunities it affords for self-punishment, is a repetition of the compulsion to masturbate," Freud says in "Dostoevsky and Parricide"; "the relation between efforts to suppress it and fear of the father are too well known to need more than a mention." No one believes Freud anymore, of course.)

Donald, Jr., therefore was brought up in an avant-garde environment not typical of the average middle-class Houston boy. He went to St. Thomas Catholic High School (the Barthelmes were Catholics; some lapsed, some not) and then to the University of Houston, where his father was a professor in the architecture department, but from which he dropped out. He worked as a reporter on the night desk at the Houston Post, got married, and was drafted into the Army and sent to Korea. (An armistice was signed the day he arrived.) Even in the Army, he kept reading and working on his writing: he had a remarkable self-education in modern literature and philosophy. Not long after he returned to Houston, in 1955, he divorced and married again, and started up a journal at the university called Forum, for which he sought out and published many of the writers who were, or would become, big names in the world of literary intellectuals, including Norman Mailer, Walker Percy, and Marshall
McLuhan. Members of the editorial board, distressed by an essay by William Gass that they found impenetrable, finally suggested that Barthelme was assuming "too much interest, background, and mental acuteness on the part of Forum's readers," and he resigned.

In 1960, he joined the board of Houston's Contemporary Arts Association, and in 1961 became the director of its museum. Through these offices, he brought contemporary arts and letters to Houston: he arranged performances of Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape" and Edward Albee's "Zoo Story"; poetry readings by Kenneth Koch, W. D. Snodgrass, and Robert Bly; and art exhibitions that included paintings by Willem de Kooning and Richard Diebenkorn. One of the luminaries he attracted was the art critic Harold Rosenberg, first to the pages of Forum and later to the museum, where he lectured before an audience of modest size. Rosenberg, along with his friend Thomas Hess, the editor of Art News, was launching Location, and he invited Barthelme to come to New York City to be the magazine's managing editor. Barthelme must have felt that his taste was too advanced for Houston, and he wasted no time making a decision. The move ended his marriage, but it established his career.

He found an apartment on West Eleventh Street, off Sixth Avenue, across the street from Grace Paley, whose short-story collection "The Little Disturbances of Man," which Barthelme admired, had come out in 1959. They became good friends. (Paley was a prototypical Village activist; she and Barthelme later had a falling-out over her behavior at a PEN conference.) A couple of years after Barthelme took the apartment, the writer Kirkpatrick Sale and his wife, Faith, an editor, moved in downstairs and became close friends. They had been students at Cornell with Pynchon, and Pynchon would write part of "Gravity's Rainbow" (1973) in their apartment. Soon after arriving in New York, Barthelme hired an agent and by 1963 had pieces accepted by Harper's Bazaar and The New Yorker. He went on to publish the remarkable run of books from "Come Back, Dr. Caligari" to "City Life."

"Nobody in the world had seen writing like this," Roger Angell, who was Barthelme's editor and champion at The New Yorker, said to Daugherty. The New Yorker was Barthelme's chief venue, and there was something astonishing about the stories of his that appeared there in the nineteen-sixties, and about the novel "Snow White," which the magazine ran in its entirety. There was a lot of talk in those years about how art and literature needed to reflect the craziness of the times, and Barthelme's work really seemed to. In some uncanny way, where he was at was where his readers were at, though they didn't quite realize it until they read him. People looked for his name in the magazine every week, and they read his stories as though they were catching up on the news.

What was he doing? Daugherty is right to claim that Barthelme conceived of himself as an heir of the modernist tradition - in particular, of Beckett. He encountered Beckett's work for the first time in 1956, when he picked up a copy of Theatre Arts at Guy's Newsstand, in Houston, and read the text of "Waiting for Godot." "It seemed
that from the day he discovered 'Godot,' Don believed he could write the fiction he imagined," the woman who was his wife at the time, Helen Moore Barthelme, says in her memoir, "Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound" (2001). "It would be from an ironical perspective of the world and he could use his wit and intellect in a way that would satisfy himself." Beckett was the writer who made Barthelme feel that it was all right to write like Donald Barthelme, and he acknowledged the debt all his life. "I'm just overwhelmed by Beckett," he told two radio interviewers in 1975.

The "anxiety of influence" situation that resulted was perfectly obvious to Barthelme. He undoubtedly already knew something about that kind of anxiety from his uncomfortable relationship with Donald Barthelme, Sr., and a great deal of his writing is, at one level of explicitness or another, about the authority of fathers and the struggle for autonomy. (And Barthelme was a close reader of Freud.)

My father regards the tray of pink cupcakes. Then he jams his thumb into each cupcake, into the top. Cupcake by cupcake. A thick smile spreads over the face of each cupcake.
-- "Views of My Father Weeping" (1969)

"Not unbreakable."

But Barthelme felt that American fiction had abandoned what modernists called "the revolution of the word." "Fiction after Joyce seems to have devoted itself to propaganda, to novels of social relationships, to short stories constructed mousetrap-like to supply, at the finish, a tiny insight typically having to do with innocence violated, or to works written as vehicles for saying no! in thunder," he wrote in 1964, in the second issue (there would be only two) of Location. That journal was all about reinvigorating American poetry and fiction, but it was run by two men, Rosenberg and Hess, who were identified with an artistic movement that had flourished more than ten years earlier, Abstract Expressionism. Barthelme admired the Abstract Expressionists, and particularly de Kooning, who was Rosenberg's great modernist hero, but he felt that the magazine was out of touch. "We are heavily committed to the leading figures of an achieved revolution," he complained in a memo to his bosses. "We are not defending a stockade" - that was how Rosenberg had defined the situation of the avant-garde in an editorial statement - "but guarding a bank. . . . We have to take a radical position with regard to American literature, admit its minor virtues and announce that it lacks necessity and point out its immense shortcomings."

Having worked at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, and then in New York for two art-world figures at a magazine covering the arts, Barthelme naturally looked to what was going on in painting for a way to get back to the spirit of Joyce and Beckett without merely copying Joyce and Beckett. The method he struck on was collage, and the easiest way to understand what he was doing with it is to
compare his work with the work of another Texan in New York, Robert Rauschenberg.

Rauschenberg was six years older than Barthelme, and his background was completely different. His father had no schooling beyond the third grade; he was an employee of the Gulf States Utilities, in Port Arthur, and his main interests were fishing and hunting. Rauschenberg's parents didn't pay much attention to him. Though he loved to draw as a child, he didn't realize that there was such a thing as "an artist" until he visited the Huntington Art Gallery, in San Marino, California, while he was on furlough from the Navy, and saw some portrait paintings. He recognized two of the images: he had seen them on the backs of playing cards. After his discharge, and with the help of the G.I. Bill, he pursued a peripatetic arts education, at the Kansas City Art Institute; the Académie Julian, in Paris; Black Mountain College, in North Carolina; and the Art Students League, in New York City.

He had his first show, at the Betty Parsons Gallery, in New York, in 1951. No pieces were sold (though Rauschenberg gave one to the composer John Cage, who was a friend). Interest did not build quickly. Even after he began his creative relationship with Jasper Johns, in 1954, Johns was the artist whose work - he was just beginning the American-flag paintings - people were excited about. But when Barthelme arrived Rauschenberg was at the center of the New York art world; he would win the Grand Prize in painting at the Venice Biennale in 1964.

Rauschenberg had a radical approach to materials: he made art out of anything. This was, in part, a consequence of his training at Black Mountain under Josef Albers, an ex-Bauhaus disciplinarian who apparently disliked Rauschenberg when Rauschenberg was his student and later claimed not to remember him. Albers sometimes made his students work with found objects, and Rauschenberg took that part of the lesson to heart. His promiscuity when it came to materials was also the consequence of sometimes having no money for paint or canvas. But he made do with whatever was around as a way of pushing the limits of painting. He would buy paint cans whose labels had come off, so that he wouldn't know the color before he used it, in order to let the materials dictate the product.

Rauschenberg's signature early works, the combines, were begun in 1954, before he started silk-screening images onto the canvas, a technique he learned from Warhol. The best-known is the stuffed goat with an automobile tire around its middle, "Monogram," which Rauschenberg started in 1955, after finding the goat at a secondhand office-furniture store, and finished in 1959, when he figured out what to do with the tire and painted a wooden "pasture" for the piece to stand on. "Coca Cola Plan" (1958) includes two cast-metal wings and three Coke bottles; "Bed" (1955) is made from an old quilt, a sheet, and a pillow; and so on.

Duchamp used found objects to make art - the urinal, the bicycle wheel, the snow shovel. But selection is an important feature of those works: there is a certain fastidiousness at the heart of the Duchampian aesthetic. The heart of the
Rauschenberg aesthetic is messiness. Combining found materials in collages was not new with Rauschenberg, either. But traditional collage arranges fragments into a form, and Rauschenberg’s collages are not organized in any ordinarily legible manner. "Rebus" (1955) is a little more than ten feet long; it includes part of an election poster, a photograph of two runners, a page of newspaper comic strips, a reproduction of Botticelli’s "Birth of Venus," a pinup shot, a self-portrait by Dürer, another photograph of the runners, and a child’s drawing of a woman. The title is a joke: you cannot read the piece in any direction. Like most of Rauschenberg’s work, it has no center. Form, in the conventional sense of a hierarchical order, is one of the things that he is trying to eliminate.

"The principle of collage is one of the central principles of art in this century and it seems also to me to be one of the central principles of literature," Barthelme said at a symposium on fiction in 1975. He loved the messy - "that wonderful category," he called it in a catalogue essay for an exhibition of Rauschenberg’s work in Houston, in 1985 - and he was fascinated by the artistic possibilities of the ugly. He once called his own stories "slumgullions," and he tried to create a certain amount of extraneous noise in them, on the theory that the distraction helped the reader. "The confusing signals, the impurity of the signal, gives you verisimilitude," he explained. "As when you attend a funeral and notice, against your will, that it's being poorly done." One of his favorite accomplishments as a museum director was a show called "New American Artifacts: The Ugly Show," which he mounted in 1960, and for which he collected, from junk shops and pawnshops, a baby-blue Styrofoam chrysanthemum, a hubcap, a jukebox, an unpainted paint-by-numbers picture of lambs, three bad reproductions of Gainsborough's "The Blue Boy," a copy of Ricky Nelson Magazine, and similar detritus.

In the production of found-material art, the painter has an obvious advantage, and Barthelme was aware of the problem.

Yes I know it's shatteringly ingenuous but I wanted to be a painter. They get away with murder in my view; Mr. X. on the Times agrees with me. You don't know how I envy them. They can pick up a Baby Ruth wrapper on the street, glue it to the canvas (in the right place, of course, there's that), and lo! People crowd about and cry, "A real Baby Ruth wrapper, by God, what could be realer than that!" Fantastic metaphysical advantage. You hate them, if you're ambitious.
-- "See the Moon?" (1966)

The visual artist can deal with almost every kind of material, even sound, but the writer deals with only one kind of material: sentences. The solution, therefore, was to treat sentences as though they were found objects.

We rarely experience sentences this way, because we're trying to look through them to the things they represent, just as, in traditional easel painting, we look through the canvas, as though it were a window, onto the world it represents. That's the kind of looking and reading that modernism was committed to disrupting. When
Barthelme incorporates into "The Viennese Opera Ball" the two sentences from "The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber,"

Let's not talk about the lion, she said. Wilson looked over at her without smiling and now she smiled at him,

what matters to the effect is not the characters in Hemingway's story but that these sentences have the look of Hemingway sentences. It also matters that they are followed by a sentence with which they have no logical relation:

This process uses a Lincoln submerged arc welding head to run both inside and outside beads automatically.

It's the juxtaposition that brings out the "thingness" of the Hemingway sentences. Most readers are likely to recognize, and thus to "fill in," the context for those sentences, but almost no one will recognize the sentence about the Lincoln submerged arc welding head, or even have a very clear understanding of what it means. It is a harder sentence to "see through."

Q: What do you consider the most important tool of the genius of today?

A: Rubber cement.
   -- "The Genius" (1971)

Barthelme learned this technique from the surrealists, whose work he was introduced to by his father. The illogic, the apparent absurdity, of a Rauschenberg collage or a Barthelme story makes people impatient, because it seems to violate ordinary habits of perception and understanding. But we experience the arbitrary juxtaposition of radically disparate materials every day, when we look at the front page of a newspaper. A story like Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising" (1965), one of the great literary responses to the Vietnam War, is an effort to make you really see what's on the front page, as though for the first time.

Barthelme wrote the story in Copenhagen, where he met the woman who would become his third wife, Birgit. The setting is the uprising of the title, but the story includes Sylvia, of whom the narrator is enamored and who plays Fauré on the piano; a teacher, Miss R., who says that the litany is the only form of discourse of which she approves; Kenneth, who wants to be Jean-Luc Godard; Jane, beaten up by a dwarf in a bar on Tenerife; heroin in the ghetto; barricades composed of detritus; and a captured Comanche who, under torture, gives his name as Gustave Aschenbach, born at L - , in the province of Silesia.

Strings of language extend in every direction to bind the world into a rushing, ribald whole.
The babble of discursive registers mimics the incoherence of war against guerrillas, a war in which the two sides are always in danger of becoming morally indistinguishable.

Barthelme shared the surrealists' faith that, by an intuition operating below the threshold of consciousness - he called this the faculty of "not-knowing" - the juxtaposition of unlike to unlike could trigger a new kind of awareness, one that is normally buried under the predictability of conventional usage. "To reclaim a sight from a museum . . . is a struggle because of the torrent of blague (of whatever quality) that surrounds even the most modest cultural manifestation," he wrote in 1987, in a catalogue essay for a gallery exhibition that included Sherrie Levine's photographs of famous photographs. "Unmediated experience is hard to come by . . . . Levine, having been original in negating originality, is now free to be original."

Irony is a means of depriving the object of its reality in order that the subject may feel free.
-- "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" (1968)

Barthelme believed just what Mallarmé believed, that the purpose of literature is to renew the language of the tribe.

He also believed that one of the things deadening our responses was mass culture. He used hackneyed prose in his pieces all the time, and he was a connoisseur of the linguistically tired and poor. "Any sentence that begins with the phrase, 'It is not clear that . . . .' is clearly clumsy but preparing itself for greatness of a kind," he explained in an interview in Partisan Review. "A way of backing into a story - of getting past the reader's hardwon armor." But he detested writing whose badness was unself-conscious, without irony. He complained that book publishers "publish an enormous number of things which look like books, sort of feel like books, but in reality are buckets of peanut butter with a layer of whipped cream on top." He warned about "the ferocious appropriation of high culture by commercial culture," and he complained about being compared with the Pop artists - he called the association "dismaying." He had no patience for conceptual art. "Had I decided to go into the conceptual-art business," he said in an interview, "I could turn out railroad cars full of that stuff every day."

He thought that the goal of writing was access to the ineffable. "If there is any word I detest in the language, this would be it," he said at the fiction symposium in 1975, but "I believe that's the place artists are trying to get to, and I further believe that when they are successful, they reach it . . . an area somewhere probably between mathematics and religion, in which what may fairly be called truth exists." He was an enemy of television. He was a serious jazz buff. It took him a while to become interested in rock. Daugherty is right. He was a postmodernist in the first sense.

There is another piece to Barthelme, and this has to do with The New Yorker. Barthelme decided that he wanted to be a New Yorker writer when he was a teen-
ager, and what drew him to the magazine was the humor writing. He loved James Thurber and Dorothy Parker; he thought S. J. Perelman was a genius. "Perelman was the first true American surrealist," he says in the Partisan Review interview, "of a rank in the world surrealist movement with the best." (Daugherty tells us that Perelman, sadly, did not think much of Barthelme's work.) Barthelme's first piece for the magazine was a parody of an Antonioni screenplay, "L'Lapse" (Antonioni released "L'Eclisse" in 1962), and he wrote many more casuals (most of which are collected in "The Teachings of Don B."). The humorist is the hiding man in Barthelme's stories, the reassurance that we are in the company of a friendly spirit, someone who knows about more than just collecting rubbish and tearing things up.

Gass disliked what many people consider Barthelme's greatest story, "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning." "The idea is to use dreck, not write about it," he said. William Shawn had trouble with the story as well, and, when he asked Barthelme to substitute a fictitious name for Kennedy's, Barthelme gave the piece to Ted Solotaroff, the editor of New American Review, where it was published in 1968, two months before Kennedy was assassinated. The story is composed of vignettes - "K. at His Desk," "Described by Secretaries," "Childhood of K. as Recalled by a Former Teacher," "With Young People," and so on. The pastiche of the slick-magazine political profile is pitch-perfect - Barthelme had begun the story but put it aside, and Daugherty thinks that he finished it because he had heard that Saul Bellow was writing a profile of Kennedy for Life - but only one of the vignettes, about Kennedy visiting an art gallery, is based on something that really happened. The ending, in which the narrator pulls Kennedy - dressed as Zorro, his cape and sword on the shore but still wearing his mask - from the water, is the one obvious fantasy. But the accumulation of faux reportage casts a weird light of realism on it, as in a dream that you know is a dream but from which you cannot wake. It is as though the story said, "You believed all that. Why shouldn't you believe this?"

"The aim of literature," says a character in "Florence Green Is 81," one of Barthelme's first published stories, "is the creation of a strange object covered with fur which breaks your heart." Helen Moore Barthelme says that the line was inspired by an object he saw at a Contemporary Arts Museum exhibit; Daugherty assumes it was that classic work of surrealism Meret Oppenheim's "Object" (1936) - the fur-lined teacup. Barthelme once suggested that the main weakness of his writing was a lack of emotion, but in this he was plainly wrong. His stories were too wild to be emotional mousetraps, it's true, but he was a master of the ending. There is always a little tug, in all the mess, a melody we recognize. He could catch you unexpectedly.

After "City Life," Barthelme published his children's book, "The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine; or, The Hithering Thithering Djinn" (1971), which won a National Book Award; two more collections, "Sadness" (1972) and "Guilty Pleasures" (1974); and his second novel, "The Dead Father" (1975). That book is so nakedly a struggle to make a dark comedy of the author's relationship with his two fathers, Beckett and Donald, Sr., that it is painful to read. Even a Freudian might wince:
At that moment the Dead Father approached Thomas, holding a small box.

A present, he said, for you.

Thank you, said Thomas, what is it?

Open it, said the Dead Father. Open the box.

Thomas opened the box and found a knife.

Thank you, he said, what is it for?

Use it, said the Dead Father. Cut something. Cut something off.

Barthelme continued to write assiduously, and he produced, along with his other fiction, some sublime parodies:

September 1, 1824

Today Goethe inveighed against certain critics who had, he said, completely misunderstood Lessing. He spoke movingly about how such obtuseness had partially embittered Lessing’s last years, and speculated that it was because Lessing was both critic and dramatist that the attacks had been of more than usual ferocity. Critics, Goethe said, are the cracked mirror in the grand ballroom of the creative spirit. No, I said, they were, rather, the extra baggage on the great cabriolet of conceptual progress. "Eckermann," said Goethe, "shut up."

--- "Conversations with Goethe" (1980)

Barthelme oversaw two major collections of his work, "Sixty Stories," published in 1981, and "Forty Stories," which came out in 1987, two years before he died. His writing became less experimental, but after 1975 the interest in literary experiment, like the interest in most of the cultural excitement of the nineteen-sixties, was no longer the fashion. Ann Beattie and Raymond Carver were the new voices in short fiction. The interest in experiment would come back, of course. The big wheel does turn. Daugherty is right that the world seems ready for another look at what Barthelme accomplished for American fiction.

By Louis Menand