

The Postmodern object: commodities, fetishes and signifiers in Donald Barthelme's writing

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Opsomming

Daar word algemeen aanvaar dat realisme afhang van 'n besonder hegte verhouding tussen tekens en die voorwerpe wat hulle veronderstel is om weer te gee. Tog oorheers voorwerpe al hoe meer postmoderne kuns: beteken dit dan 'n terugkeer na "realisme"? 'n Ontleding van voorwerpe in die skryfwerk van Donald Barthelme dui aan dat die teenoor-gestelde waar is. Die verhouding tussen woord en ding is omvorm, sodat woorde in Barthelme se tekste dinge kan skep of selfs dinge kan word, terwyl dinge op hul beurt leë tekens word. Sodoende word die hiërargie waarop realisme berus, omgekeer. So 'n omkering kenmerk nie alleen postmoderne kuns nie, maar die hele postmoderne toestand, volgens Jean Baudrillard. Hy beweer dat semiologie nou die rol speel wat politieke ekonomie vroeër gespeel het. Om voorwerpe in postmoderne kuns as uitbeeldings van iets buite hulself te beskou, is foutief. 'n Ooreenkomst bestaan tussen voorwerp en teken in Barthelme se werk, wat tog nie die resultaat is van tekstuele realisme nie, maar eerder die effek is van 'n werklikheid wat self teks geword het.

Summary

It is commonly assumed that realism depends on a particularly close relation between signs and the objects they claim to represent. Yet objects have increasingly dominated postmodernist art: does this indicate a return to "realism"? A survey of objects in the writing of Donald Barthelme indicates the opposite. The relation between word and thing has mutated so that words in Barthelme's texts create or even become things, while things in their turn become empty signs. The hierarchy on which realism rests (that the object precedes its representation) is reversed. Such a reversal characterises not only postmodern art, but the entire postmodern condition, according to Jean Baudrillard, who argues that semiology now plays the role that political economy did in the past. It is a mistake to consider objects in postmodernist art as representations of something outside themselves. The correlation that exists between word and thing in Barthelme's work is not the result of textual realism, but is the effect of a reality that has itself become a text.

Nowhere does the connection between word and thing seem more secure than in the verbal description of an object. Roland Barthes, in "L'effet de réel", gives pride of place to gratuitous details in realist fiction: he argues that they, alone, create the reality effect. And although he includes depictions of "slight gestures, transitory attitudes" and "unnecessary words", "insignificant objects" occupy a very important position among these details: so much so that descriptions of *objects* seem to be largely responsible for the reality effect (Barthes, 1982: 86). Barthes cites some of them – Mme Aubain's old piano, with its boxes, as well as her barometer, in Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple*, or the little back door in Michelet's version of the execution of Charlotte Corday (Barthes, 1982: 81–82). Moreover, if Barthes is to be believed, what makes these fictional objects so unquestionably "realistic", is that they are signifiers "[colluding] directly" with a referent, that is, signifiers without signifieds, attaching themselves immediately to a referent (1982: 88). The word "ba-

rometer" in *Un Coeur Simple* does not evoke reality by means of the indirection of a symbol; instead, the word *names*, without apparent mediation, the thing in the world outside language. If these word-objects have any connotation at all, it is to say, as Barthes has them say: "nous sommes le réel" (1982: 89).

Can one wonder then, that sociologists of literature have so often turned to realist fiction if what makes fiction realist is precisely the solidity of its objects? For it must seem that realist fiction offers a privileged place from which to read the way in which an object is embedded in its society, inserted into a system of exchange, or derived from a mode of production. Even fictional forms which appear to challenge the realist mode – the *nouveau roman*, for example – often accord the "thing" a primacy. Barthes himself, hardly an apologist for realism, suggested that what was novel in the *nouveau roman* was a new and more "realistic" representation of the object which drew its force from the apparent withdrawal of language in front of the thing it represented (Barthes, 1964: 31).

To return to my earlier claim that literary sociologists are particularly fascinated by objects in literature, an influential Marxist critic like Lucien Goldmann insists that the *nouveau roman* operates representationally. He deduces the universality of reification under late capitalism from the dominance of objects in the novels of Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet. For Goldmann, a universe of commodities is most "realistically" depicted by a fiction of things (Goldmann, 1975: 135). It is not too difficult to reinstate the most enigmatic fictional object in an extra-discursive reality. Apparently, no description, no matter how farfetched, can avoid becoming the index of a social world: when it deals with objects, language ineluctably *represents*.

But what is one to make of things in the work of a postmodern writer like Donald Barthelme? Do they still give way to an immediate reality on the other side of words? Do they still encapsulate the structures of the society that has produced them? Let us begin by enumerating some of the objects in Barthelme's writing.

His pages are crowded with objects which lack context and use. A random selection of these objects includes "purple plywood spectacles" (Barthelme, 1967: 51), "buttons, balloons, bumper stickers, pieces of the True Cross" (1976: 126), "a blue Death of Beethoven printed dress" (1968: 25), "*an asbestos tuxedo*" (1983: 69), "photographs of the human soul" (1974: 153), "beautiful shoes, black as black marble" (1983: 171), a "fifty-five pound reinforced-concrete pork chop" (1979: 95), a wire which consists of "a string of quotations, Tacitus, Herodotus, Pindar" (1976: 126), "*tiaras of red kidney beans, polished to the fierceness of carnelians*" (1983: 64), "a mirror pie, a splendid thing the size of a poker table . . . in which reflections from the kitchen chandelier exploded when the crew rolled it from the oven" (1983: 154), a "toothpick scale model of Heinrich von Kleist in blue velvet" (1968: 30), "toenails painted with tiny scenes representing God blessing America" (1970: 7, a "*pistol-grip spring-loaded flyswatter*" (1983: 148), "electric flowers" (1970: 134), "*two young men, wrapped as gifts, . . . codpieces stuffed with credit cards*" (1983: 68), a "new machine for printing smoke on smoked

hams" and a "new machine for printing underground poles" (1976: 9), the balloon of "The Balloon" (1968: 13-23), a "vault designed by Caspar David Friedrich, German romantic painter of the last century" (1983: 35), and a "genuine Weegee, car crash with prostrate forms, long female hair in a pool of blood shot through booted cop legs. In a rope-moulded frame" (1976: 17). Even otherwise repellent things can suddenly become invested with desire in Barthelme's world, so that a figure in "The Wound" can say: "I want this wound. *This one*. It is mine" (1976: 17).

Food, often touted as evidence of "universal" human need, does not remain untouched by these transmogrifications, so that it becomes extremely desirable and nauseatingly inedible, simultaneously. The Seven Dwarfs produce "baby food, Chinese baby food" and observe that "it is amazing how many mothers will spring for an attractively packaged jar of Baby Dim Sum, a tasty-looking potlet of Baby Jing Shar Shew Bow" (1967: 18). There are "four welded-steel artichokes" (1979: 91), a "glass of chicken livers flambe" (1976: 112), "dangerous drugs, but only for dessert" (1976: 126), "Blue Whale stuffed with Ford Pinto" (1974: 98), "Moholy-Nagy cocktails" (1970: 134), "a pornographic pastry" (1967: 35), "giant [boiling] eggs, seated in plush chairs" (1983: 70), and a "special-together drink, nitroglycerin and soda" (1974: 16).

In addition, objects assume a life of their own altogether beyond the confines of the pathetic fallacy: a thick smile spreads over the face of each cupcake" (1970: 5), and objects even retaliate: "after a slight hesitation [the piano strikes] him dead" (1964: 22). On the other hand, commodification can occur in utterly unexpected areas: "Hubert gave Charles and Irene a nice baby for Christmas" (1964: 41).

Distinctions between "abstract" and "concrete" are suspended, so that even the intangible can be reified. A balloon can be a "spontaneous autobiographical disclosure" ("The Balloon", 1968: 22), *sins* can be "preserved in amber in the vaults of the Library of Congress, under the management of the Registrar of Copyrights" (1968: 139), and there are "novels in which the final chapter is a plastic bag filled with water, which you can touch, but not drink" (1970: 109). Barthelme is particularly fond of similes which forcibly connect abstract and concrete elements. Snow White says, "Like the long-sleeping stock certificate suddenly alive in its green safety-deposit box because of new investor interest, my imagination is stirring" (1967: 59-60). Barthelme's Goethe produces metaphor after metaphor on the following lines: "Music . . . is the frozen tapioca in the ice chest of History", and "Art is the four percent interest on the municipal bond of life" ("Conversations with Goethe", 1983: 74-75).

Objects, foodstuffs, machines, even analogies, all are disconnected, divorced from any conceivable context. Each phantasmic "thing" lights up in isolation: it does not signify a larger social entity as did possessions and objects in the classic realist text. Charles Molesworth, one of the most perceptive commentators on Barthelme's work, can only sense a duplicity in Barthelme's objects: "Barthelme uses enough of the realist mode to imply that physical details are a trustworthy guide to psychological experience, but he also misuses the details in such a way as to imply that there is no trustwor-

thy scheme of interpretation" (Molesworth, 1982: 53). But a few pages later Molesworth reads things straightforwardly as psychological and social indices: "... objects themselves become registers of their owners' (or would-be owners') anxiety ..." (1982: 60). Which is it? One has to concede that Barthelme's "things" are neither satirical distortions of real objects nor tongue-in-cheek figurations of actual social tendencies. What can one say about Chinese baby foods or "baffs" (1967: 55)? Listing objects does not dispel their strangeness, because phantasmagorical taxonomies cannot restore a stable referential function to language. Molesworth admits that "the stories often resort to lists, which can be seen as attempts to 'add up' or point to some overriding significance, but always end up as merely a collection of things" (1982: 59). But these "things" are more than "merely" that: if a realist fiction, in Barthes's view, treats words as labels stuck on phenomena that are unquestionably real, then constructing blatantly non-existent artefacts must cast some shadow on the putative ability of words to *name* pre-existent things. In Barthelme's case, language produces its own purely semiotic world, and the gap between things and words becomes ever wider.

The speaker of "See the Moon?" pronounces what many critics have read as Barthelme's manifesto: "Fragments are the only forms I trust" (1970: 169), an appropriate comment on the destruction of organic form in postmodern art. When Régis Durand and Maurice Couturier account for the *omnipresence* of fragmentation in Barthelme's work (and, indeed, also in postmodern culture), they cite, very perceptively, the following observations by Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot is trying to articulate a new concept of the fragment which is particularly apt for Barthelme, according to Couturier and Durand:

To speak of the fragment must not be solely in reference to the fragmentation of an already existing reality, nor a moment of a totality which is to come. This is difficult to consider because of the exigency of our comprehension, according to which there can only be a knowledge of the whole, just as a view is always comprehensive; according to this comprehension, there should be, where there is a fragment, an implicit designation of something whole, whether it is going to become so in the future – the cut-off finger refers to the hand, just as the first atom prefigures the universe and contains it within itself (Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien Infini*, 1969: 451, in Couturier and Durand, 1982: 25).

One could even argue that objects in Barthelme's multiverse perform in exactly the same way as the fragments Blanchot envisages: like the fragments, these objects do not allude to any exterior or original or future whole; like the fragments, these objects should be metonymies of a larger context, but speak stubbornly only of themselves. They resemble nothing so much as Melanie Klein's "part-objects", which Elizabeth Wright describes as "what an adult would perceive as parts of other things or persons but which the child invests with powerful fantasies both pleasing and frightening" (Wright, 1984: 80). So intense is the appearance of objects in these texts, and so keen the detail with which they are presented, that a clear psychic investment or cathexis is signalled, which steeps Barthelme's part-objects in affect even as it singles them out.

In a well-known story, "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning", there is the following digression, which rephrases what the critic Georges Poulet wrote about figures in Marivaux's work. These are not entirely Barthelme's "own" words, and their status as a mesh of critical quotations should not escape us:

The Marivaudian being is, according to Poulet, a pastless futureless man, born anew at each instant. The instants are points which organise themselves into a line, but what is important is the instant, not the line. The Marivaudian being has in a sense no history. Nothing follows from what has gone before. He is constantly being *overtaken* by events. A condition of breathlessness and dazzlement surrounds him. In consequence he exists in a certain freshness which seems, if I may say so, very desirable. This freshness Poulet, quoting Marivaux, describes very well (Barthelme, 1970: 46).

Many commentators see this passage as a description of the postmodern condition according to Barthelme (via Poulet and Marivaux). But what is true of *human* existence is also highly applicable to the situation of Barthelmean or postmodern *objects*: substitute "object" for "being" or "man" and "it" for "he", and the passage becomes a wonderfully appropriate comment on the objects we have seen. The ease with which "object" can replace "being" is very telling, and does suggest the kind of reification that Goldmann detects in contemporary literature. Molesworth writes of "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" that "K. [the central 'character'] himself becomes an 'anxious object' . . ." (1982: 69). Yet Molesworth finally re-affirms quite traditional concepts of "character" in this particular story, for he claims that "the character is not simply an object among other objects, for in some sense he reflects, even epitomises his environment. This reflection is one of the main characteristics of the realist hero" (1982: 70). Perhaps Molesworth is too ready to see simple continuity where a radical rupture in the depiction of both character and object has occurred.

Molesworth suggests that "people [in Barthelme's texts] are . . . dominated by a neurotic relation to objects" (1982: 61). Re-working his diagnosis in less traditional terms, one could say that objects, fragments and part-objects in Barthelme's work are invested with an intense desire, a cathexis that emanates neither from the "characters" nor from the author. It is necessary to rephrase the credo of "See the Moon?": "Fragments are the only forms I *desire*". Fragment becomes part-object, which becomes fetish in its turn.

But at the same time, part-objects, as one finds them in Barthelme, are invariably also commodities. An early text, "To London and Rome", is almost a shopping-list, a record of purchases punctuated by silences: a "sewing-machine . . . with buttonhole-making attachments", "a purple Rolls", "a handsome race horse", "a large hospital", and so on, until the story climaxes with a "Viscount jet", bought for "an undisclosed sum" (1964: 161-169). In fact all the objects from Barthelme's fiction listed earlier are fantastic commodities.

Having noted the sheer insistence of these verbal objects, the reader may demand some significance from them, asking in bewilderment like the general in "A Picture History of the War": "Why are objects preferable to parables?" (1970: 139). If these objects are indeed commodities, may they not be interpreted *parabolically*, as signifiers of what Frederic Jameson somewhat heavily-handedly calls the "cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson, 1984: 53)? In his useful summary of what makes postmodernism different from modernism, Jameson contrasts Van Gogh's *Bauernschuhe* (*Peasant Shoes*) with Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*. He decides that while Van Gogh's painting resists commodification, Warhol's *Shoes*, as artefacts and as footgear, have "clearly [become] fetishes both in the Freudian and in the Marxian sense" (1984: 59–60). (We may recall, in this context, those "beautiful shoes" from one of Barthelme's stories, 1983: 171.) Fetishism is the postmodern perversion *par excellence*. For Roland Barthes, the text itself is a fetish (Barthes, 1975: 27). Gregory Ulmer finds an exemplary fetishism in Jacques Derrida's "post-criticism":

A review of Derrida's texts turns up a small collection of . . . borrowed theoretical objects, including, besides the umbrella [from Nietzsche], a pair of shoes (from Van Gogh) [the already-encountered *Bauernschuhe*], a fan (from Mallarmé), a matchbox (from Genet), a postcard (from Freud) . . . each of these objects occurs in a discussion of fetishism. Let it suffice to say that the "example" in post-criticism functions in the manner of a "fetish object" . . . (Ulmer, 1985: 99).

We must note that Derrida does not originate his own fetishes, he "borrows" objects from other writers, which he then puts to a perverse critical use. Even more importantly, Derrida's borrowing results in a plethora of fetishes, unlike the dominant and determining object (or paradigm of objects) which characterises mundane fetishism. For early psychological theory, the solitary fetishist is bound to a single object, which makes the fetishist both "individual" – he is eccentric – and "case history" – he is typical. In Barthelme's "A Picture History of the War" we read that *sins* are "preserved in amber . . . under the management of the Registrar of Copyrights" (1968: 139). Psychological theory, too, in its dealings with fetishists, tries to reify their "sins" or "perversions" in the preservative of theoretical classification. Moreover, rigid delineation of "types" maintains a kind of copyright over each perversion, so the quotation from "A Picture History of the War" seems a particularly apt resumé of the position of fetishists in psychological thought.

Not only is Derrida a copycat fetishist, he has explicitly mocked copy-right in one of his essays: he sees the existence of copyright as an indication of some uneasiness about the status of truth; he "[reflects] upon the truth of copyright and the copyright of truth" (Derrida, 1977: 164). Copyright, in Derrida's view, ensures uniqueness, establishes origins, and guards the legitimate owners of property. Each "sin" seems unique and jealously guarded. But Derrida's own easy-going appropriation of fetish-objects and Barthelme's playful multiplication of verbal commodities deny any supposed uniqueness. Postmo-

dern fetishes are not indivisible, matchless and protected by copyright; they are borrowed objects, part-objects, instants in an endless series.

The following utterance by one of Barthelme's speakers demonstrates what a difference exists between objects that are solidly *there*, and postmodern fetishes: "Went to the grocery store and Xeroxed a box of English muffins, two pounds of ground veal and an apple. In flagrant violation of the Copyright Act" (1979: 21). The "flagrant violation of the Copyright Act" can perhaps be viewed as a disruption of literary mimesis – "the *Copy Write Act*" – but there is more to the "violation" than that. The unauthorised duplication of "things", objects and words infringes copyright: Derrida borrows the fetishes of others; Barthelme's speaker Xeroxes mundane groceries, and, doing so, lifts them out of the realm of usefulness. The act of reproduction becomes scandalous and the humdrum groceries become *traces* of objects, photocopied fetishes, desirable goods at second hand.

Jameson argues that under capitalism proper the function of technology is production, but in late capitalism, technology is directed at reproduction (1984: 79). Such proliferating reproduction is embodied in the Xerox machine. As the catalogue of objects from Barthelme's writings indicates, reproduction and dissemination define postmodernism and its commodity fetishes. No one item is singled out for fixation; Barthelme's work abounds in objects that hold one's attention for a moment before they are replaced and effaced by others. Verbally, Barthelme's objects are immediately disposable.

Whatever else it might have, the postmodern fetish lacks the originality of a "classic" fetish. Sometimes the latter is a borrowed object, often it is an *object trouvé* like the whole text of "The Question Party". A footnote to that story reveals it to have been written by "Hickory Broom" for *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1850 (Barthelme, 1979: 71). Like the photocopied muffins, the postmodern fetish is a copy, or more precisely a *simulacrum*, which Jameson defines as an "identical copy for which no original has ever existed" (1984: 66).

The simulacrum has enjoyed considerable prominence in theories of postmodernism, reaching its zenith in the writings of Jean Baudrillard, who summarises the whole of contemporary experience as follows: "... it is nothing more than a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, which is to say that it does not exchange itself for what is real, but exchanges itself within itself, in an uninterrupted circuit of which both reference and circumference are lost" (Baudrillard, 1981: 16, my translation). Baudrillard even lists the ways in which "reality" has become a simulacrum, some of which recall aspects of Barthelme's writing, such as fragmentation and repetition:

1. The deconstruction of the real into details – closed paradigmatic declension of the object – flattening, linearity and seriality of the partial objects.
2. The endlessly reflected vision: all the games of duplication and reduplication of the object in detail ... this indefinite refraction is only another type of seriality ...
3. The properly serial form (Andy Warhol). Here not only the syntagmatic dimension is abolished, but the paradigmatic as well (Baudrillard, 1983: 144).

Echoing the proliferation of signs and objects discussed earlier, Baudrillard states: "For the sign to be pure, it has to duplicate itself: it is the duplication of the sign which destroys its meaning. This is what Andy Warhol demonstrates also: the minute replicas of Marilyn's face are there to show at the same time the death of the original and the end of representation" (1983: 36). Michel Foucault also discusses the simulacrum in terms of an endlessly ongoing series. He draws a distinction between what he calls "resemblance", a representation which stands for a reality, and "similitude", the disseminating (re)production of simulacra:

Resemblance has a "model", an original element that orders and hierarchises the increasingly less faithful copies that can be struck from it. Resemblance presupposes a primary reference that prescribes and classes. The similar develops in series that have neither beginning nor end, that can be followed in one direction as easily as in another, that obey no hierarchy, but propagate themselves from small differences among small differences. Resemblance serves representation, which rules over it; similitude serves repetition, which ranges across it. Resemblance predicates itself upon a model it must return to and reveal; similitude circulates the simulacrum as an indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar. (Foucault, 1983: 44)

What could be more repetitive than the endlessly reiterated image of a soup can? What could be a more perfect illustration of the postmodern fetish, of the disseminated simulacrum? Like Baudrillard, Foucault alludes to Warhol: "A day will come when, by means of similitude relayed indefinitely along the length of a series, the image itself, along with the name it bears, will lose its identity. Campbell, Campbell, Campbell, Campbell" (1983: 54). Repetition marks the simulacrum, just as it characterises postmodern art.

From Warhol's soup can to Barthelme's purple plywood spectacles to Derrida's borrowed umbrella, there is an endless swarming of things in circuits that have neither origin nor goal nor point of reference. And the movement of the simulacrum is not confined just to literary texts: in obedience to Derrida's dictum that nothing falls outside the text (Derrida, 1976: 73), the simulacrum also becomes the sign of postmodern political economy.

Here a brief digression on Marx and exchange may be necessary to pin down exactly what differentiates postmodernism as a political economy from preceding forms of capitalism. Marx asserts that in general the capitalist system of exchange is deeply unfair, because it is not based on exact equivalence: surplus value can only be produced if exchanges are unequal. A commodity may be worth nothing, yet may sell for a considerable price. The exchange value of commodities, or their salability, masks the "intrinsic" use value of things (Laing, *The Marxist Theory of Art*, 1978: 52). But the social formation of postmodernism, late capitalism, goes even further than the capitalism described by Marx. It does not simply obscure use value with exchange value; it performs the trick of making any consideration of value disappear altogether. How can a simulacrum have value? What is the value of an asbestos tuxedo, a Xeroxed muffin, a mirror pie, a tiara of kidney beans?

As Foucault argues the simulacrum floats in a ceaseless exchange, devoid of value.

In *The Mirror of Production* Baudrillard admirably summarises the difference between high capitalism and late capitalism. In the former, the commodity and its price have a function similar to that of the sign, which signals a referent. For the nineteenth century bourgeois, value, of whatever kind, still referred to a fixed system of meaning. Describing this situation, Baudrillard states that:

the finalities of prestige and distinction still corresponded to a traditional status of the sign, in which a signifier referred back to a signified, in which a formal difference, a distinctive opposition (the cut of a piece of clothing, the style of an object) still referred back to what one could call the use value of the sign, to a differential profit, to a lived distinction (a signified value) . . . (Baudrillard, 1975: 127).

On the other hand, what Baudrillard calls the “form sign”, or floating signifier, dominates postmodernism:

The form sign describes an entirely different organisation: the signified and the referent are now abolished to the sole profit of the play of signifiers, of a generalised formalisation in which the code no longer refers back to any subjective or objective “reality”, but to its own logic. The signifier becomes its own referent and the use value of the sign disappears to the benefit of its commutation and exchange value alone (1975: 127–128).

Baudrillard suggests something quite radical, namely that the political economy of postmodernism is best understood in terms of semiology, and *not* in terms of political economy. In fact, the political economy of postmodernism may well be indistinguishable from semiology. One can then propose an unconventional resolution to the dispute about the differences, if any, between capitalism and late capitalism. For Daniel Bell, the postindustrial society breaks with capitalism proper; for Frederic Jameson and Ernest Mandel, late capitalism simply intensifies capitalism (Jameson summarises the arguments of both parties, 1984: 53–54). The resolution takes an appropriately textual form: postmodernism *parodies* capitalism by pushing it to such an excess that capitalism is voided of meaning. This is precisely the point of Barthelme’s text “The Rise of Capitalism”, a text which wittily empties its title of any content:

Capitalism arose and took off its pyjamas. Another day, another dollar. Each man is valued at what he will bring in the marketplace. Meaning has been drained from work and assigned to remuneration. Unemployment obliterates the world of the unemployed individual. Cultural underemployment of the worker, as a technique of domination, is found everywhere under late capitalism. Authentic self-determination by individuals is thwarted. The false consciousness created and catered to by mass culture perpetuates ignorance and powerlessness. Strands of raven hair floating on the surface of the Ganges . . . Why can’t they clean up the Ganges? If the wealthy capitalists who operate the Ganges wig factories could

be forced to install sieves, at the mouths of their plants ... (1972: 147, Barthelme's ellipses).

Evidently, in the course of the quoted paragraph, a slippage occurs in which capitalism and its discontents lose any referential value. Take the opening of the text:

The first thing I did was make a mistake. I thought I had understood capitalism, but what I had done was assume an attitude – melancholy sadness – toward it. This attitude is not correct. Fortunately your letter came, at that instant. "Dear Rupert, I love you every day. You are the world, which is life. I love you I adore you I am crazy about you. Love, Marta". Reading between the lines, I understood your critique of my attitude toward capitalism. Always mindful that the critic must "*studiare da un punto di vista formalistico e semiologico il rapporto fra lingua di un testo e codificazione di un ...*" But here a big thumb smudges the text – the thumb of capitalism, which we are all under. (1972: 143)

Although the excerpt begins with a cause, "capitalism", and its effect, namely, the attitude adopted towards it, "melancholy sadness" (and here one detects an echo of the title of the collection, *Sadness*, as well as a hint of the reason for this emotion, "capitalism"), questions of political determination are rapidly transformed into matters of semiotics: the letter, reading between the lines, a "formalist and semiological point of view", "codification", another language, the thumbprints which interrupt the text. Odd, therefore, that Molesworth should insist that in "The Rise of Capitalism" "the narrator tries to comprehend how social forces and individual identity are related" (1982: 33). This sociological assumption is based on his reading that "many of Barthelme's bizarre formulations can be traced back to some recognisable, even plausible, mimetic referent" (1982: 34). The opposite of this is true, for both Barthelme and the political economy of postmodernism do away with referents, whether verbal or economic. Late capitalism reifies value as something to be exchanged, not used, and postmodernism makes an absent object a fetish, a simulacrum, which can only be exchanged or disseminated.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that the objects in or of Barthelme's writing do not represent or mime a particular political economy. I have already claimed that one cannot think of these partial objects as pointing to any totality, therefore it would be unfortunate to try and think of them as signs of the "relations of production". Barthelme's texts do not figure a "truth" of the base structure. To suggest simply that Barthelme's objects are distortions of the commodities that assail us in everyday life will not take us very far. (See Molesworth, 1982: 64.)

Words, discourses, in Barthelme's texts are as much fetish objects as the commodities which those words present, and the discourses are as widely exchanged as any commodity. Despite his referential bias, even Molesworth can intuit this process: "But it is not only material objects that make up the saving remnants of Barthelme's world. Words are also used in the collage techniques, and they often bear the marks of their status as things" (1982: 60). He adds that Barthelme "shows how words and things are similar". The

dialogues between Julie and Emma which punctuate *The Dead Father* demonstrate exactly how fragmentary units of language are recycled. Here is one such dialogue:

Break your thumbs for you.

That's your opinion.

Take a walk.

Snowflakes, by echoes, by tumbleweed.

Right in the mouth with a four by four.

His basket bulging.

I know that.

Hunger for perfection indomitable spirit reminds me of Lord Baden-Powell at times (1975: 147).

(Elements of this dialogue are repeated at length *four* more times in the novel – see also 23–27, 60–64, 85–90, 147–155. Given the stress Foucault and Baudrillard place on the repetition of the postmodern object, one should not be surprised that the object-word is also reiterated until it is emptied of all value.) In the dialogue above, one finds not so much “communication” as an outbidding, a game in which an utterance, regardless of meaning, calls forth a counter-utterance, again, with no respect for meaning. Each particular enunciation has become a counter which repays, or is exchanged for another enunciation. The actual content of the statements is irrelevant; what matters is that the exchange continues.

For Régis Durand, in his essay “On Conversing: In/On Writing” the replacement of textual use value with exchange value unites such ostensibly disparate postmodernists as William Gaddis, Truman Capote, Barthelme and Andy Warhol (whose name crops up in every discussion of postmodernism). Durand writes: “Use value has been drained out of all objects and signs, to be replaced by pure exchangeability and circulation as value” (Durand, 1980: 49). In other words, the postmodern text itself can no longer claim exemption from the businesses of exchange which circumscribe the postmodern condition. Both Baudrillard, and following him, Durand, argue that the empty but exchangeable signifier is the foundation, as far as such a concept has any weight for postmodernism, on which all other transactions are predicated. Such an argument reverses the conventional Marxist stress on the economic base as an ultimately determining instance of which writing could never be more than a reflection. But this reversal of what is traditionally viewed as the base or the superstructure is already visible in the post-Althusserian insistence on the productivity of language, which implies that language, the sign, must be what finally determines a social reality. (Both Easthope, 1983: 19–24 and Heath, 1974: 67–74, give useful if polemical accounts of this shift in Marxist theory.)

Postmodernism refuses to discriminate between signifier and commodity. No wonder that in Barthelme's fiction the ideal text is an *objet trouvé*, a recycled commodity, a “Babe Ruth Wrapper” (Barthelme, 1968: 157), described as a potentially perfect work of art, an unacknowledged borrowing, a fetishised quotation. Barthelme's texts are packed with discursive simulacra.

For example, a speaker in "Great Days" describes another's discourse as "nonculminating kind of ultimately affectless activity" (1979: 159): the statement has been lifted from Susan Sontag's well-known essay, "The Pornographic Imagination" in which it is offered as a definition of sex in pornographic texts (Sontag, 1979: 99).

All the enunciations in a Barthelme text have this uncanny quality of some not immediately localisable *déjà vu*. They may well all be quotations. Recall the web of quotations and borrowings: Barthelme takes statements from Poulet, which describe aspects of Marivaux's writing, and these words are then applied to Barthelme's own work by other critics. In *The Dead Father* Peter Scatterpatter's *Manual for Sons* is "translated from the English" (1975: 111) – any postmodern discourse is always-already a translation, a quotation, a copy, an exchanged sign:

The confessions are taped, scrambled, recomposed, dramatised, and then appear in the city's theatres, a new feature-length film every Friday. One can recognise moments of one's own, sometimes (1975: 4).

And even this description recalls William Burroughs's "scrambling technique" (Burroughs, 1984: 180) as well as the procedures of Laurie Anderson's performance piece *Americans on the Move* (discussed in Owens, 1985: 60–61 and 78).

Language can only be recycled or reiterated – Molesworth observes that "one of the effects of the texture in a Barthelme story comes from this recycling of clichés and conventional wisdom" (1982: 35) and he calls this process a "salvaging" (29). The postmodernist "trash aesthetic" has often been associated with Barthelme. (See William Gass, "The Leading Edge of the Trash Phenomenon", 1970, Larry McCaffery, "Barthelme's *Snow White*: The Aesthetics of Trash", 1975, and Philip Stevick, 1981, among many others.) The assertion by one of the dwarfs in *Snow White* – "we like books with a lot of *dreck* in them" (Barthelme, 1967: 106) – certainly seems a fair statement of a great deal of postmodernist taste, but what is even more important is that the trash aesthetic may represent the *ne plus ultra* of devaluation, as it promiscuously confuses art and junk.

The most important effect of such a shift in the relation between signs and things is that word and commodity, and even text and economy are now adjacent: neither term enjoys priority over the other as political economy and textuality become indistinguishable. The relationship here is truly what Foucault calls "similitude", for word and commodity are *like* each other, but do not *resemble* each other in a hierarchical way: the utterance does not represent the commodity. Warhol wittily exemplifies the inscription of the text in ever-accelerating circuits of exchange. In his autobiography he remembers:

When Picasso died I read in a magazine that he had made four thousand masterpieces in his lifetime and I thought, "Gee, I could do that in a day". So I started. And then I found out, "Gee, it takes more than a day to do four thousand pictures". You see, the way I do them, with my technique, I really thought I could do four thousand in a day. And they'd all be masterpieces because they'd

all be the same painting. And then I started and I got up to about five hundred and then I stopped. But it took more than a day, I think it took a month. So at five hundred a month, it would have taken me about eight months to do four thousand masterpieces . . . It was disillusioning for me to realise it would take me that long. (Warhol, 1975: 134)

Picasso's prolificacy is a sign of his artistic stature and his individual "greatness"; Warhol, in a typically postmodern fashion, emulates or pastiches Picasso's productivity by an active *reproductivity*, which strips the "masterpiece" of its uniqueness by multiplying it. To assume that "they'd all be masterpieces because they'd all be the same painting" is to pose an unanswerable challenge to the bases of modernist High Art. Four thousand identical masterpieces would be four thousand simulacra, while the masterpiece is announced by its presence, its individuality, its singular authority as a *masterpiece*. Can a photocopied Picasso be a masterpiece? Once again, postmodernism's "flagrant violation of the Copyright Act" confounds us. (The striking similarities between Warhol's art and Walter Benjamin's vision of "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction" have been noted by John Noyes in a paper that makes fascinating reading. Noyes, 1987.)

Terry Eagleton brings a political commentary to bear on the differences between modernism and postmodernism which we have just seen so engagingly demonstrated in the encounter between Warhol and Picasso. Eagleton's summary of the modernist project is useful, because it encapsulates the modernist position, while pointing out its latent contradictions: "Modernism is among other things a strategy whereby the work of art resists commodification, holds out by the skin of its teeth against those social forces which would degrade it to an exchangeable object". The modernist work of art does everything in its power "to forestall instant consumability", so that it becomes a self-contained, self-sufficient and self-referential artefact. But there is an ironic price to pay for this status: "If [the modernist work] avoids the humiliation of becoming an abstract, serialised, instantly exchangeable thing, it does so only by reproducing the other side of the commodity which is its fetishism" (Eagleton, 1985: 67).

Eagleton's diction betrays his nostalgia for modernism, as well as his tacit identification with its values, evident in the way he describes exchange as "degradation" and "humiliation". He distinguishes fetish from exchange object as far as the work of art is concerned, but, as we have seen, postmodernism makes any distinction between artefact and commodity difficult.

On the other hand, Eagleton characterises postmodernism in terms that echo Benjamin: "the commodity as mechanically reproducible exchange ousts the commodity as magical aura [the masterpiece of modernism]" (1985: 68). Postmodern technology (re)produces circuits of exchange in which empty signifiers move without interruption. So Warhol talks about his "technique" instead of his "style", for technology replaces unique stylistic "handwriting". Warhol is identified chiefly with silkscreening as a medium, which evidently enables "mechanically reproducible exchange", something that could equally describe Warhol's works and Barthelme's words.

Barthelme's "Paraguay" produces a Warholian glut of masterpieces that is also an apotheosis of the trash aesthetic: "The rationalised art is despatched from central art dumps to regional art dumps and from there into the life-streams of the cities. Each citizen is given as much art as his system can tolerate" (1970: 23). The section entitled "*Rationalisation*" in "Paraguay" deals with a streamlining of "problems of art" (1970: 23): "Production is up. Quality-control devices have been installed at those points where the interests of artists and audience intersect. Shipping and distribution have been improved out of all recognition" (1970: 22–23). The result is the following:

Rationalisation produces simpler circuits and, therefore, a saving in hardware. Each artist's product is then translated into a statement in symbolic logic. The statement is then "minimised" by various clever methods. The simpler statement is translated back into the design of a simpler circuit. Foamed by a number of techniques, the art is then run through heavy steel rollers. Flip-flop switches control its further development. Sheet art is generally dried in smoke and is dark brown in colour. Bulk art is air-dried, and changes colour in particular historical epochs (1970: 230).

In his autobiography Warhol extends the idea of recycling to its absolute limit, giving us a vision of a world in which every thing is "bulk art" and everything can be sold in a global supermarket. He writes:

There should be supermarkets that sell things and supermarkets that buy things back, and until everything equalises, there'll be more waste than there should be. Everybody would always have something to sell back, so everybody would have money, because everybody would have something to sell . . . People should be able to sell their old cans, their old chicken bones, their old shampoo bottles, their old magazines . . . I think about people eating and going to the bathroom all the time, and I wonder why they don't have a tube up their behind that takes all the stuff they eat and recycles it back into their mouths, regenerating it . . . And they wouldn't even have to see it – it wouldn't even be dirty. If they wanted to, they could artificially colour it on the way in. Pink (Warhol, 1975: 68).

Regional art dumps which fuse art and junk, recycled excrement dyed pink, as much art and as much selling as one's constitution can bear – such is the postmodern condition.

Note

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