

ABOUT THE POINTLESSNESS OF PATRICIDE: A LACANIAN
READING OF DONALD BARTHELME'S *THE DEAD FATHER*

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*La mort du Père enlèvera à la littérature
beaucoup de ses plaisirs. S'il n'y a plus de
Père, à quoi bon raconter des histoires?
Tout récit ne se ramène-t-il pas à l'Œdipe?*
(75).

*Le texte est (devrait être) cette personne
désinvolte qui montre son derrière au Père
Politique* (84).

Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*

The Dead Father, like many other contemporary works, belongs to a metafictional trend in which literary and critical discourses mirror each other.¹ In these books the characters, and the texts themselves, reflect upon language and the problems of representation. Chinese-box structures problematize the relationship between reality and fiction and the narrative is conceived as a multi-vocal crossing point of intertextual dialogue.² Barthelme's novel describes with caustic humor the journey of a half-dead giant (the Dead Father) who is searching for the Golden Fleece. In his quest (a hilarious parody of the traditional epic journeys and the *rites de passage*) he is hauled across a dream-like landscape by his nineteen children, who are actually leading him to his grave. Throughout the novel, and especially in the interpolated "Manual for Sons", Barthelme discusses the father and son relationship in a way that echoes the Hegelian Master/Slave opposition and thematizes some of the most remarkable Freudian and Lacanian postulates (the "death instinct", the "Oedipal complex", the relationship between the "Imaginary" and the "Symbolic" axes of the self, etc.). Even though parodies of various discourses pervade the novel (psychoanalysis being one of its targets), *The Dead Father* coincides substantially with Lacan's theory of Language and the Arts.³

In this paper I trace the path of the Dead Father as a metaphor for the Lacanian discussion of the function of Language.⁴ I do not view Barthelme's novel as an up-to-date morality play in which plot and characters mechanically respond to a previously set structure, to a "pre-text".⁵ On the contrary, *The Dead Father*, like other examples of postmodernist fiction, resists classification and explicitly mocks the taxonomic spirit of science. My reading of the novel is thus one of the eventually infinite number of possibilities opened to the audience. Lacan's theory of knowledge and Barthelme's narrative show a common sensibility in portraying a multifaceted reality which can only be approached by rethinking those concepts inherited from Western tradition, without excluding other perspectives.⁶

After a general overview of Lacan's linguistic theory, I will focus on some of the most significant moments in the text, presenting them chronologically. Although the novel breaks with the traditional linear account by means of postmodernist devices such as digressions, repetitions, interpolations or nonsensical dialogues, the narrative generally dramatizes the different stages in the formation of the self and in the father-son relationship.

I

As its name implies, Lacan's structural psychoanalysis attempts to unify Freudian psychoanalysis and the discoveries of anthropological structuralism and linguistics. His materialistic theory of the subject is thus expressed in linguistic terms. According to Lacan, individuals enter a preexisting system of signifiers which only acquire significance within a particular language system. Cultural and linguistic structures, therefore, precede and shape the subject's entrance into the "Symbolic" order. Before that entry the subject, as a child, has been living in what Lacan calls the world of the "Imaginary". In this world there is no difference between subject and object.⁷ Since the self is not yet formed, the child cannot distinguish his own form from that of others. Its only possible identification is with the Mother. To express the strength of this liaison and dependence Lacan uses another of his trademark ambivalent expressions: *Désir de la mère*, implying the desire for the Mother and, at the same time, the desire to be what the Mother desires. The child wants to complete all the Mother lacks-in psychoanalysis the "phallus".⁸ This identification will be progressively displaced to the Father as the child enters the world of the Symbolic.

The Symbolic order is dominated by the repressive figure of the Father. We enter the Symbolic order by accepting his name and prohibitions. Among these prohibitions, incest provides the structure underlying the organization of society as culture.⁹ The dual opposition characteristic of the Imaginary order is, therefore, transformed into the triangular relationship which gives place to the Oedipal crisis. A symbolic castration occurs when the Father restores the phallus as the Mother's primary desire, no longer the child's complement to what is lacking in her. The child finally overcomes this crisis when it comes to terms with the patriarchal law. The Father's prohibition projects the child into the world of differences (masculine/feminine, father/son, absent/present), allowing it to distinguish itself from the others and to approach a self of its own. But Lacan goes beyond Freud's discussion of the Oedipal complex and transforms it into a linguistic phenomenon. Though Lacan's idea stems from Saussure's view of the sign as split into two parts (signifier and signified, sound and concept), he stresses the arbitrariness of their connection. For Lacan the signified slides beneath a signifier which floats. In learning the inner workings of language, the child apprehends the grammatical category of the "I" and, in doing so, enters the Symbolic order of singularities.

Lacan illustrates the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic

order through his mirror metaphor. The child's first articulation of the "I" occurs at what Lacan calls the mirror stage. When it is still living in a pre-linguistic phase the child starts to project unity into the fragmented image of a mirror, producing a fictional ideal ego. This specular image is still imaginary but helps the child to recognize himself as a different being. Once the subject has entered the Symbolic the imaginary will not be obliterated but kept in check. It will come out occasionally in the form of condensations and displacements of significance (the metaphoric and metonymic movements which characterize the world of the unconscious).¹⁰

A third dominion of the self studied by Lacan is the "Real", the most problematic of the three orders. For Lacan, "the Real is the given field of brute existence over which the Imaginary and Symbolic range in their rival attempts to control" (Wright 1984:110). The Real is conceived as that which resists symbolization. It lies beyond language and therefore can never be apprehended by either the Imaginary or the Symbolic.

In short, Lacan interprets psyche in textual terms. Since the unconscious is identified with an unstable signifier reality cannot ever be fully grasped, but only approached by the subject's appropriation of its constitutional principle: the Father's Law, that is, the order of Language.

II

The introductory chapter in *The Dead Father* establishes the role of both Father and children as questers in their allegorical pilgrimage. The Father is described as a gigantic figure of anachronistic appearance: the severe features corresponding to the honorable father of the Western tradition (the "broad" and "noble" brows, serenity, gray hair, etc.) contrast with ridiculous details (the "bit of mackerel salad lodged between" his teeth).¹¹ He is portrayed as half-God and a half-automaton, with omniscient powers over his children: "Controls what Thomas is thinking, what Thomas has always thought, what Thomas will ever think, with exceptions" (4).¹² Through a series of clues, the reader becomes aware that the figure of the Dead Father is a metaphor for Language, or more specifically, for the cultural and linguistic structures preceding the child's entry into the Symbolic order. The Lacanian idea that knowledge of the world, of others and of ourselves is determined by Language is implicit in the Father's control over Thomas's thought, a control which nevertheless cannot be absolute because of the very instability of the linguistic sign. This imperfection of the linguistic Father is stressed by the narrator's commentary (probably Thomas's): "He is not perfect, thank God for that". A few lines later another narrative statement points to a concept which turns out to be recurrent in both Barthelme and Lacan, i.e. Language as the presence of an absence (Lacan 1977:65): "Dead, but still with us, still with us but dead" (3).¹³

There are further indications of the Father's omniscient nature in the Barthelme's description of his mechanical leg as "the administrative cen-

ter of his operations". The leg includes "facilities for confession" in the form of a series of "small booths" where "people are noticeably freer in confession to the Dead Father than to any priest" (4). These confessions are subsequently taped and dramatized, and are finally performed on stage in public theaters. This comic and surrealistic idea inaugurates a Kafkaesque atmosphere which pervades some of the most intense moments in the novel. The semi-mechanical nature of the Father suggests the semimechanical workings of linguistic structures, but also the mechanization of culture, a culture where private life is of public dominion. Privacy in post-modern societies vanishes as a consequence of the obscene traffic with the other's self.

By the end of this introduction the children openly express their hatred for the Father: "We want the Dead Father to be dead. We sit with tears in our eyes wanting the Dead Father to be dead..." (5). The Oedipal structure of the conflict is thus set in unquestionable terms. Facing the Law of the Father, his offspring react with contradictory emotions: hate in one case, disgust, fear, or respect in other situations.¹⁴ But aggressivity is the dominant feeling in the book at this initial stage of Thomas's self-formation. For Lacan this aggressivity "is the correlative tendency of a mode of identification, that we call narcissistic" (1977:16). The aggression stems from the subject's awareness of his dependence on the Father, and his frustrated attempts to overcome it. One of the roles of the symbolic is the normalization of the subject's aggressive instincts, which is exemplified by "A Manual for Sons" and by the end of the novel itself.

The subject's linguistic apprenticeship is dramatized by Hilda and Lars, the young couple who explains to the Dead Father and his convoy how they are taught through Language "from which there is no way to escape" (15): "We are invigorated with the sweet sensuality of language. We learn to make sentences" (16). What comes next is a series of unconnected sentences which only have in common the mechanical repetition of the verb "to come". The texture of the discourse itself refers back to the father's words opening the chapter, when he elaborated a panegyric of "machines", which connects, as well, with his half-mechanical nature. The chapter ends with the Father confirming his role as cultural origin and source of all texts. Responding to Julie's question about the possibility of having become an artist in his youth, the Dead Father answers: "It wasn't necessary,... because I am the Father. All lines my line. All colors mine. You take my meaning" (19).¹⁵ Barthelme makes the Dead Father into the archetypal intertext, a point of juxtaposition where other texts encounter and interact, a monument to literary paternity which is permanently actualized by its influence upon new lines, upon new texts. This permanent revival of the ancient is also deduced from the Dead Father's ambiguity towards his own age. In answering Hilda's question about it (she guesses he must be nearly a hundred years old), the father says: "Wrong, but close. Even older than that, but also younger. Having it both ways is a thing I like" (15).

Thomas's individuation progresses in the first three chapters. His ten-

dency to adopt positions of leadership in the group and his repressive attitude towards the other members of the expedition show that he is gradually learning the father's rules.¹⁶ The way this learning is described is closely associated with the act of writing. At a given moment Thomas starts to write with lipstick on Julie's stomach. This action, along with a series of sexual approaches performed as though on stage, provoke the irritation of the others, who want to share Thomas's sexual play. The latter's act of inscription represents an appropriation of the desired object which obliterates the others' possibility of participating in a communal rite. A triangular relationship is thus established between Thomas, Julie and the rest of the members, evoking the Oedipal triangle in which Thomas had previously played the role of the neglected child.¹⁷

However, everything in Barthelme's novel indicates that Thomas is a learner who has not yet been able to "manufacture whole". He seems to be trapped in the initial phase of the mirror stage (the analogue of Freud's oral phase) in which the subject begins to project a certain unity into the fragmented self-image in the mirror, though is not able to grasp the totality. Thomas's condition is dramatized in his dialogue with the Dead Father: "My criticism was that you never understood the larger picture, said the Dead Father. Young men never understand the larger picture" (32). Thomas's answer expresses his self-consciousness about the process of his self-formation: "I don't understand it *now*. I do understand the frame, the limits" (32) [my emphasis]. The conversation reveals Thomas's hope for a future understanding of "the larger picture", in other words, the whole, instead of the fragments. But, on the other hand, his previously acquired understanding of the limits implies an evolution from the shapelessness characteristic of *l'hommelette* (the pre-verbal subject). Furthermore, the dialogue can also be understood as a new discussion on the struggle between the avant-garde text—Thomas's aesthetics of the fragment—and its literary paternity, embodied by the Dead Father. What is thus being represented is an opposition between the obsessive longing for "wholeness" characteristic of all Western literature until modernism, and the interest of postmodernism in foregrounding (and ultimately breaking) the narrative frames. By focusing on the limits of the work, postmodernist fiction exercises a defamiliarizing effect upon the reader, making him aware of the novel's condition of artifact.¹⁸

Chapters 5 and 6 have parallel structures. In both chapters the novel becomes a parody of initiation journeys and *rites de passage*.¹⁹ The "hero", however, is different in each situation. In chapter 5, the Dead Father narrates his descent to the underworld and his overcoming of difficult trials. His goal is to rescue Tulla, his "raven-haired" maiden for whom he turned himself into a "hair cut". Related in the style of Greek, Scandinavian and Eastern mythologies, the Dead Father's ludicrous story describes his quest for the principle of Fatherhood. This primordial Fatherhood is achieved at the end through the figure of Tulla, who, we are told, died after having mothered thousands of children. The Father's account ends with the asser-

of his paternal role: "I am doing this for you, essentially, the Dead Father said. For the general good and thus, for you...But you never *knew*. In the fullest sense. Because you are not a father...A son can never in the fullest sense become a father"(33).

Together with "A Manual for Sons", chapter 6 is the thematic center of the novel. Here Thomas undertakes a quest, but unlike his father, who searches for the principle of Fatherhood, he suffers "tests" which become an allegory for the understanding of his inner feelings (his repressed desires for patricide) and his final coming to terms with the Law of the Father.²⁰ The opening words of the chapter establish a switch in the father-son relation, a new inversion of the master and slave opposition: "Tell me a story, said the Dead Father. Certainly, said Thomas"(40). The listener becomes now the speaker. From the very beginning Thomas's telling does not merely evoke, but exactly reproduces, the discourse of dreams, as explained by Lacan. Thomas's Kafkaesque story works on two different levels: paradigmatically, his verbalized unconscious tends to condense in metaphors expressing his pathetic search for identity; and syntagmatically, the signifiers slide in a chain that never seems to close.

In one of the most disturbing scenes of his dream-like story, Thomas tells how he is taken by four men in dark suits "to a large room or ring with sand on the floor" and given a piece of paper he has to grasp in his mouth: "Then I was pushed into the ring where wandered a dozen others similarly bound gripping between their teeth similar pieces of paper with things written on them..."(4).²¹ We never learn what is written on those papers; neither do the characters who wander around in the ring trying to read each others' messages, and reacts aggressively to anybody's approach. The scene, like all others in Thomas's story, is left unended, only to be replaced by another nightmarish situation. In a hospital room Thomas faces a corpse whose hands are "erect in the air clutching"(42). A significant detail in the description of the corpse's hands is that its fingers are "missing"; this introduces the theme of amputation—evocative of the castration that is characteristic at this phase of Thomas's formation of the self. The next scene is set at the top of a building, where he encounters "a man with a mask", another image of the father who pushes him to accept his submission and to embrace the simulacrum on which the Symbolic world is built up: "The man in the mask said that I was wrong and had always been wrong and would always be wrong and that he was not going to hurt me. Then he hurt me, with documents"(43). Thus the son is punished in a textual way, alluded to in the scene of writing. Only after Thomas's painful initiation into the mechanisms of language in chapter 6 do his guardians agree that he is "maturing" and "growing older".

Just after damaged "with harsh words", Thomas is taken to the Great Father Serpent, in whose presence he is required to solve "the great riddle": "What do you really feel?"(46), the Serpent asks. As Gordon points out, the situation is "a parody of both Freudianism and the Oedipus riddle asked by a monster" (1981:46).²² Though he cannot think of any answer, Thomas manages to read the right answer in a sheet in the serpent's

mouth: "Like murdering", he stutters. In doing so, he "wonders" and "marvels" as he discovers his most hidden and lost feelings, that is, his wish to kill the father. The Serpent's response states explicitly for the first time the futility of patricide: "...having the power is often enough. You don't have to actually do it"(46). As Thomas demonstrates he has learned the lesson, he is released, concluding the story. The riddle's resolution proves to be satisfactory also for the Dead Father, who accepts the son's demand for the Father's attractive belt buckle. The Father's reward has a broader metaphoric meaning: by accepting one of his Father's emblems of power, the son initiates his progressive identification with him.

In the intermediate chapters of the book Barthelme emphasizes the various character's difficulty in communicating with each other. The Dead Father's "Papsday Speech" proves to be a digressive and meaningless discourse about the silence of words.²³ Though he continues talking using a sophisticated jargon borrowed from science and philosophy, the only answer he can give Emma when she asks him about the meaning of the speech is "It meant I made a speech"(51). Similarly, the conversations between Julie and Emma show a disconnected syntax in which question and answer, statement and response, do not follow each other in a logical order. This throws into question the validity of the cause-effect relationship, leading the reader's attention to the mere play of the signifiers.²⁴

As stated earlier, if syntax seems to flow according to the horizontal axis of metonymy, the semantics of the text tend to condense following the vertical organization provided by metaphors. Through one of these metaphors, the novel provides an explanation for some of its main topics: the formation of the self, the workings of language, and the act of representation, of which the novel is just one example. In discussing the nature of fatherhood, Julie concentrates in a few lines the whole discourse of the novel: "The fucked mother conceives, Julie said. The whelping is, after agonies I shall not describe, whelped. Then the dialogue begins. The father speaks to it. The "it" in a paroxysm of not understanding. The "it" whirling as in a centrifuge. Looking for something to tie to. Like a boat in a storm. What is there? The father"(77).

Julie's epiphany retells the child's first encounter with the Father, its surprise and lack of understanding. But this description of conception and birth also refers to the process by means of which significance is created. As Gordon suggests, the "it" could be understood as "the sign looking for signification" (1981:171). This signification can only be hinted at through mastery of the Symbolic code. Finally, Julie's dream of Genesis can be interpreted as a fantasy of how the novel is produced, how it cannot avoid the legacy of literary tradition, how it can only overcome "the anxiety of influences" by accepting the presence of the "text-father".²⁵

"A Manual for Sons" was originally published as a kind of short story or extravaganza in the *New Yorker*.²⁶ But even though it seems to be an independent book, it is closely connected with the thematics of the whole novel. Moreover, it is the central part of the work where all the elements

hinted at by Barthelme in the previous sections find their systematic organization. This book within a book is not Barthelme's exclusive device, nor is it unique to postmodernist fiction. The device goes back to the origins of literature itself, and its most illustrious example is in *Don Quijote*.²⁷ In fact, the situation described in Chapter 17 of *The Dead Father* bear a close resemblance to the one narrated by Cervantes in Book I, Chapter 32 of his masterpiece. After arriving at a *venta* (country inn) the characters in Cervantes's novel find a mysterious book in one of the rooms ("La novela del Curioso impertinente). The book turns out to be a parody of the psychological and sentimental novel, which was still in fashion during Cervantes' time. When *Don Quijote* was first published, it was criticized for including interpolated novels and stories which interrupted the linear account of the plot. Cervantes incorporated these critiques into the second book of the novel (Ch. 3) with some self-deconstructive ironic commentaries in which Don Quijote blamed his narrator for his stylistic incompetence. Likewise, in Chapter 17 of Barthelme's novel Father and children arrive at a town and decide to shelter in a bad "flophouse". While Thomas and Julie are in their room a bizarre character named Peter Scatterpatter gives them a book, "A Manual for Sons", that he has translated from the English (sic). The interpolation of the Manual within the novel and the conversion of the characters into readers produces one of those Chinese-box-structures or Russian-doll-effects so precious to metafiction. As a result, the structural frames are broken and the borderline between fiction and reality becomes blurred.

But the interpolation of the Manual within Barthelme's novel goes beyond pure metafictional play; it compiles, summarizes and mocks the actions and events which have taken place in the novel so far. If the interpolated stories in *Don Quijote* served Cervantes as a vehicle to parody the literary genres of his times, "A Manual for Sons" parodies Barthelme's novel, which in turn is a reflection on various contemporary discourses. The self-reflective quality of the text is thus maximized and foregrounded, becoming one of its major motifs.

The organization of the Manual follows a rational and taxonomic pattern which contrasts with the seeming absurdity of its contents and chapter titles ("mad fathers", "the leaping father", "the falling father", "lost fathers", etc.). Since the characteristics of the father listed by Scatterpatter (or Barthelme) seem to be inexhaustible—very often they have just the healthy intention of provoking the reader's hilarity—I will focus on some of the features described by the Manual in light of Bethelme's and Lacan's insights into language and the self.

In subchapter 8 of the Manual fathers appear as texts. Their exegesis aims to increase their prestige on the basis of sacralization: "Many fathers are blameless in all ways, and these fathers are either sacred relics people are touched with to heal incurable illnesses, or texts to be studied generation after generation, to determine how this idiosyncrasy may be maximized. Text-fathers are usually bounded in blue" (123). The last commentary

mocks the bourgeois tendency to make the book into an object of fetishistic worship, or into a mere adornment on a shelf for private enjoyment. Having established the textual nature of the father, the narrator provides three different examples of his voice. In all three cases the father is portrayed as a tyrant who uses education (conceived as the repressive teaching of rules) as the most effective instrument for his "terrible pertinaciousness".

Most paternal figures in the *Manual* are described in the same fashion as the Dead Father was in the previous chapters—a gigantic construct staying always in his children's way: "Fathers are like blocks of marble, giant cubes, highly polished, with veins and seams, placed squarely in your path. They block your path. They cannot be climbed over, neither can they be slithered past. They are the 'past,'..."(129). The father-son relation is thus expressed as inescapable. The son cannot avoid the presence of the Father. If the former wants to achieve his individuality it has to do so by coping with the latter's impositions and rules.

Even after the Father's death, his presence continues to be felt (as in the case of the Dead Father). Through the son's identification with the paternal figure, he becomes part of him, but this identification also has its shortcomings: self-knowledge cannot be wholly achieved. In this sense Barthelme's text proves again to be closer to Lacanian than to Freudian postulates. Freud's concept of the "harmony of the ego" (the result of the subject's identification with parental figures) is doubted by Lacan, who regards the ego as illusory. Barthelme/Scatterpatter summarizes this conflict in the following way:

Fatherless now, you must deal with the memory of a father. Often that memory is more potent than the living presence of a father, is a inner voice commanding, haranguing, yes-ing and no-ing—a binary code, yes no yes no yes no yes no, governing your every, your slightest movement, mental or physical. At what point do you become yourself? Never, wholly, you are always partly him (144).

The *Manual's* allusion to the impossibility of a true self outside the sphere of the father's domination echoes Lacanian notions about the "infinity of reflection" and "the dialectic of recognition." Lacan insists that knowledge of ourselves is always built up on the foundations of the others' relations to us.²⁸ There are no isolated selves or stable egos. The self is only approached through representation—ruled by the Father's Law—and, as we have proved, representation can never capture us completely. In Lacan's view, representation is an imperfect mediator between the self and the Other, between the subject and the object.

Patricide, which could seem to be an alternative, is discussed in the last section of the *Manual*. Nevertheless, as was shown in the episode of the Great Father Serpent's riddle, the *Manual* proves the uselessness of the literal act. It provides three basic and conclusive reasons: first, "it is contrary to law and custom," i.e. it is illegal; second, it would demonstrate that the

father's accusations against the son were correct; third, it is unnecessary to slay the father since "time will slay him" (145). The Manual's conclusion points to reconciliation as the only possibility of leaving behind the overwhelming pressure of the paternal figure.

When Thomas and Julie finish reading the Manual, Julie throws the book into the fire, with a pejorative commentary: "I hate relativists" (146). However, the rest of the novel will allegorize the message of reconciliation Scatterpatter outlines in his psychoanalytic extravaganza. The penultimate chapter (22) is shaped in the tradition of Beckett's and Joyce's interior monologues, being in addition a parody of them. The novel at this point assumes a tragic humor. On the eve of his death the Dead Father recalls different moments of his life from adolescence to maturity, stammering about his human condition, lack of freedom, and fear of death.²⁹ The Dead Father's physical decadence is mirrored in a discourse in which the syntax does not conform any more to grammatical rules, whereas the semantics achieve a maximum degree of concentration.³⁰

A new Kafkaesque scenario sets the background for the Dead Father's burial: "They came then to a large gap in the earth surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of people holding black umbrellas" (174). As he is invited to lie down in the hole that will be his grave, he recognizes having known about the end of their journey from the outset. His last wish is to grab the Golden Fleece, which turns out to be Julie's public hair. The wish is denied. Thomas places his hand on the Fleece and the Father admits being covered with admiration. But ironically, what covers him is not admiration, but the load of earth shoved on him by the bulldozers. In the last moment both Thomas and Julie express their wonder at the Father's voice.³¹

The death of the Father corresponds with an increase in Thomas's awareness of and compromise with what Fatherhood represents. As Maire Jaanus points out in relation to Lacan, "Death, the sepulchre, is the first symbol in every awareness. In a sense, all that we retain of nature in consciousness is the awareness of its death, the knowledge that it has been put aside, murdered, lost. The symbol is "the murder of the thing" (1979: 243). In Barthelme's novel this suggestive idea acquires a high degree of complexity, since what seems to be murdered is the Father—the embodiment of the privileged signifier, the symbol through which all other signifiers gain significance. The novel itself provides the solution to this riddle, the same riddle Thomas is required to answer in the presence of the Great Father Serpent. And the answer in this case is identical: "Murdering": the murder of the murder which is not literal, but metaphorical. (The Dead Father cannot be murdered since he is already dead).³²

Thomas's acceptance of Name of the Father—the order of Language—is confirmed in the last scene. Through he will never achieve self-knowledge and the Real will remain out of his reach, Thomas has endured the required "tests" and overcome the "trials" to enter the territory of the Symbolic, where identity can be approached through the discourse of the

Other. Language (the Father) proves to be the source and vehicle of the socially given, cultural prohibitions and laws, but, at the same time, it is also the precondition for the act of becoming aware of ourselves as distinct identities. Knowledge of the world, of others and of ourselves is determined by Language, and the unity of the self, in turn, is approached only after identification with the Father. The most relevant conclusion of Barthelme's novel is thus enhanced in light of Lacan's linguistic interpretation of human psyche: subjects are produced by learning the mechanisms of textual discourse.

In *The Dead Father* signifiers seem to follow one another in a carnival-esque verbal play, without hinting at a clear referent. The novel in its own texture mirrors Lacan's description of the metaphoric condensations and the metonymic displacements of significance. Barthelme's constant emphasis on the linguistic nature of the novelistic discourse and everyday world leads to the notion of literature and reality itself as constructs—cultural artifacts—explored through textual self-reference. If communication is going to take place, nevertheless, it has to be verbalized. We cannot get rid of the Father as we cannot get rid of language or the literary heritage. As "A Manual for Sons" argues patricide is not only impossible but also pointless: "Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least 'turned down' in this generation" (145). That is the challenge taken up by Barthelme's generation, that is the challenge of postmodernist fiction.

Notes

- (1) Metafiction and Postmodernism are two terms which have become commonplace in contemporary fiction studies. They are frequently used indiscriminately together with a constellation of similar concepts ("fabulation", "surfiction," "literature of exhaustion," "narcissistic narrative," etc.) Patricia Waugh offers one of the most comprehensive definitions of this mode: "Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literally fictional text" (1984:2). The tendency among critics is to consider metafiction as one of the many characteristic manifestations of literary postmodernist (Hutcheon 1980:xiii).
- (2) In addition to this concept first named by Bakhtin, some other postmodernist elements which can be found in Barthelme's novel include: self-reflexivity (every novelistic enterprise ends by becoming a reflection upon language and the narrative form), the substitution of perspectival coherence by a conglomerate of dispersed voices, the shift in language from the referential to the phatic or metalinguistic function, the transgression of the traditional limits assigned to each of the genres, and the conception of the book not as a piece of museum, but as a game, as a ludic expression which has been liberated from the truth and coherence of empirical thought (Coy Ferrer & Garcia Diez 1986:5-10)
- (3) In discussing Lacanian theses I will explore in depth the English anthology of his writings (*Ecrits* 1977) and Anika Lamaire's introduction to Lacan's work (1977). Other useful essays that I have consulted are Gallop (1985), and Kerrigan & Smith (1983).
- (4) Although my reading of *The Dead Father* follows in general the schema provided by Lacanian analysis, I will occasionally use some expressions characteristic of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel. Terms such as dialogism, carnivalization, alterity, and inter-

textuality are now widely used in literary criticism, going in most cases beyond the specific frontiers of the Bakhtinian approach. Unfortunately, as a consequence of the usual division and isolation among schools of criticism, the maintaining of connections between different fields has become increasingly difficult. In the case of Lacan and Bakhtin this is especially surprising and regrettable, since these two theoreticians have many common concerns. David Patterson's collection of essays on Bakhtin and his contemporaries is the only notable exception to this tendency. Patterson's collection of essays on Bakhtin and his contemporaries is the only notable exception to this tendency. Patterson writes: "Like Bakhtin, Lacan approaches the self in terms of a discourse between the self and the other" (1988:68). Both critics conceive language and reality as socially-constructed systems.

- (5) Henceforth I may occasionally refer to Barthelme's novel as an allegory, but the concept of allegory that I have in mind is remote from the naive traditional works of the genre (*Everyman*, *Pilgrim Progress*, *Piers Plowman*, etc.). It originates instead in Linda Hutcheon's (1980) and Brian McHale's (1987) studies of postmodernist fiction. For Linda Hutcheon, there is a tendency among "overtly narcissistic texts" to reveal their "self-awareness in explicit thematizations or allegorizations of their diegetic or linguistic identity within the text themselves." (1980:7). Hutcheon also analyzes examples in which texts mirror extratextual materials, and especially, contemporary literary theories dealing with the acts of writing and reading. The resulting effect is an overlapping of literary and critical discourses and an emergence of what she calls a "composite identity" formed by the reader, the writer, and the critic. Likewise, McHale sees in contemporary writing a resurgence of allegory. He specifically subscribes *The Dead Father* in this trend, along with John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy*, Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Günter Grass's *The Flounder*, Robert Coover's *The Public Burden*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. In McHale's view the founders of the dominant mode in postmodernist allegory are Kafka, Beckett and Joyce. The complexity of this new version of the genre stems from the fact that a work such as *Finnegans Wake*, *The Castle* or *Waiting for Godot* "invites us to read allegorically but refuses to satisfy our drive" (1987:141). What these novels do is to expand the scope of their exegesis *ad infinitum*. They offer themselves "as a tool for exploring ontological themes" (1987:141).
- (6) As deconstruction has attempted to demonstrate, the hermeneutic activity itself can be regarded as allegorical. For Paul de Man (1979) every critical writing is ruled by the literary figure we call allegory (a sequence of signs which stands for and displaces another sequence of signs). Since language is contaminated by figurality, both the act of writing and the act of reading are mediated and distorted by tropes. Every reading will therefore be a misreading. De Man, however, distinguishes between correct and incorrect misreadings, the former being the ones which do not preclude all other possible interpretations.
- (7) In this phase of its formation, the child's psyche is still something amorphous. For that reason Lacan calls the pre-verbal subject *l'hommelette*, a pun meaning both "little man" (*homme-lette*) and "shapeless mass" (*omelette*) (Lacan 1977:197; qtd. in Wright 1984:107-8).
- (8) As Anika Lemaire notes, "the term 'Phallus,' as used by Lacan, is not to be confused with the real, biological sex, with what is called the penis" (1970:87). In the Lacanian system, the "Phallus" has basically two different meanings: on the one hand, it is the privileged signifier restoring the lost unit between all other signifiers and their signifieds; and on the other, it is a symbol for the cultural structures of domination within a patriarchal society. For a discussion of the role of the phallus as "the privileged signifier" see chapter 8 of *Écrits* (Lacan 1977:280-291).
- (9) Lacan draws his idea that language reflects the taboos and laws of society (and particularly the prohibition of incest) from Freud (1913) and Lévi-Strauss (1949). According to Lévi-Strauss, access to culture, and therefore to the Symbolic, is originally determined by the "Forbidden" (the coincidence between relationships of kinship and relationships of alliance).
- (10) As early as the 1920's, Bakhtin used the mirror as the archetype of deluded self-perception. For Bakhtin, as for Lacan, individual consciousness can only be explained through the mediating role of the Other. Specular images are incomplete, since we cannot perceive

ourselves as a whole: "...the *other* is necessary to accomplish, even if temporarily, a perception of the self that the individual can achieve only partially with respect to himself" (Todorov 1984:95). For more information on Lacan's use of the mirror metaphor, see *Écrits*, Ch. 1.

- (11) Robert Con Davis sees in this "cryptic caricature" of the father the most recent in a long genealogy of Anglo-American fictional fathers, which includes the "stern but ultimately benevolent" Squire Allworthy, John Jarndyce and Edward Overton, and also such "child haters" as Mr. Murdstone, Mr. M'Choakumchild, Sir Austen Feverel, Huck Finn's Pap, and Thomas Sutpen (1981:169-70). In his analysis of Barthelme's description of the father's great body, Davis emphasizes the symbolic magnitude of the character.
- (12) All Barthelme quotations are taken from *The Dead Father* (New York: Penguin, 1986).
- (13) In Lacan's view words indicate the absence of the concept they stand for. But, as we have seen, there is no such thing as a sound-concept stable relationship. Signifiers only gain significance within the chain of all other signifiers. For example, the meaning of a word is not apprehended till the whole sentence has been completed, but its meaning will also depend on the particular context in which the sentence is uttered. There is always the fading presence of something which is irremediably missing. Language, like identity, is thus defined not only by what is, but also by what is not. The role of negativity in Lacan's psychoanalysis has been studied by Marie Jaanus in *Literature and Negation*: "Language for Lacan is always doubly negative: a presence made of an absence and the symbolic forever lacking the real" (1979:65). Barthelme's allusion to the Dead Father's being dead-but-still-alive makes the latter into an embodiment of the symbol as "the murder of the thing."

Other post-structuralist critics, such as Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida, also construct their respective theories on the concept of a "metaphysics of absence."

- (14) Chapter 1 ends with Julie in awe of the father: "I have the greatest possible respect for him and for what he represents" (12). (Julie's declaration is ironic, since just before she has called the father "an old fart"). This love-hate relationship and the previous portrayal of the father as a totem-like figure sets in motion a humorous analogy between Barthelme's novel and Freud's description of patricide in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), chapter 4. According to Freud, the ritual and communal slaughter of the totem animal by the clansmen in primitive societies is the repetition and commemoration of an original patricide. The act of killing the father began the process of initiation of tribal communities social organization, moral restrictions, and religion. The feelings of remorse and guilt at the murderous act led the clan to establish the two taboos of totemism: patricide and incest—the first two prohibitions, which became the foundations of all cultural systems.
- (15) As Verschuren points out, "in naming himself as such, the Dead Father pronounces himself as being before figuration, before language (*pro-nomem*)" (1984:127)
- (16) An example of Thomas's drive to repress in the other "children" is his interruption of a porno movie, which causes a general protest (including the Father's). But Thomas does not censor the film for moral reasons. He stops the film because "it does not represent the parameters of human love" (22). Thomas's reaction to the movie is emblematic of his progressive assimilation of the Father's Law, since one of the powers of this Law is to rule over the act of representation. On the other hand, the switch in the leading roles point to a continuous reversal of the Master-Slave opposition.
- (17) The readers may wonder whether there is a mother in the Oedipal conflict dramatized in the novel. As if anticipating this doubt, Barthelme makes the characters ask the very same question:

Where is the mother? asked Emma.

The mother hath not the postlike quality of the father. She is more like a grime.

A grime?

Overall presence distributed in discrete small black particles all over everything, said Julie (77).

At the same time the Oedipal structure of the story is outlined in the novel when the mother appears for the first time. She is described as a horseman who follows the group "discretely" from a distance. Just as Julie describes her, the mother becomes a recurrent and "overall presence", but her identity is not revealed till the end of the novel.

- (18) The whole novel could be interpreted as a reflection on the limits of representation: "the nature of details given the Dead Father...is such that one comes to realize that Barthelme's subject is language—or any frame of reference or creative activity—as a necessary and yet inadequate index of reality" (Gordon 1981:162).
- (19) The longing for the origin, manifested in its myths—such as the initiation rites parodied by Barthelme, assumes increased importance in those societies in which the reality concept has come into crisis. As Baudrillard points out, "Lorsque le réel n'est plus ce qu'il était, la nostalgie prend tout son sens. Surenchère de vérité, d'objectivité et d'authenticité secondes. Escalade du vrai, du vécu, réurrection du figuratif là où l'objet et la substance ont disparu. Production affolée de réel et de référentiel, parallèle et supérieure à l'affolement de la production matérielle: telle apparaît la simulation dans la phase qui nous concerne—une stratégie du réel, de néo-réel et d'hyperréel, que double partout une stratégie de dissuasion" (1970:17).
- (20) Unlike the Father's story, which is a search for assertion, Thomas's is one of constant victimization. The allusions to physical punishments recur throughout this chapter.
- (21) The arena into which the character is thrown is reminiscent of the settings of primitive sacrificial rites of initiation, the kind of symbolic scenario that can be found nowadays in bullfights. The fact that all this action takes place within (or behind) a car wash suggests ironically the degeneration of myth and ritual in postmodern society.
- (22) For Régis Durand, this Oedipal scene is one of Barthelme's many demonstrations that he is "thoroughly familiar with the catchwords of psychoanalysis and determined to beat it at its own game" (1986:163).
- (23) "Papsday Speech" certainly serves Barthelme to disclose the meaninglessness of contemporary public discourses, but paradoxically it has also a therapeutical value: it both fills up and hides the existential emptiness that Barthelme's characters fear so intensely, saving them from falling into their wrath. As Josephine Hendin points out, "anything that produces enough boredom to blow out feeling and ward off the emotions that "damage" the mind stabilizes the collapsing personalities Barthelme loves" (1978:62). The Dead Father's children may not understand a word of what the god-like figure says but they automatically respond with a "prolonged and fervent applause. Whistles. Stamping of feet. Waving of handkerchiefs (the women)" (51). Thomas, July and the other "pilgrims" remain ignorant of the father's code but their potential anger (a tendency Hendin considers inherent to most of Barthelme's characters) is momentarily kept in check.
- (24) Barthelme in his fiction exhibits recurrent tendency to disrupt the linear rendering of the plot. The dialogues in *The Dead Father* produce, as well, a dispersion of the point of view, a multiplication of the narrative voices. As Barthelme himself has stated, "the dialogues in *The Dead Father* are really collections of *non sequiturs*, intended to give the novel another kind of voices, to provide a kind of counter-narration to the main narration" (Brans 1982:134). Robert Con Davis interprets the function of the dialogues between Julie and Emma in relation to the mother's enigmatic participation in the novel. The daughter's language of free association ("a language of the oppressed," according to Davis) and the mother's erratic wandering "suggest an a-linear model of behaviour foreign to the rational economies associated with paternal authority" (1981:174).
- (25) Harold Bloom argues that since Milton all poets have suffered what he calls "the anxiety of influences" (1973), a poetic interpretation of Freudian Oedipus complex according to which literary influence is seen as paternity. No text can stand on its own, but it refers inevitably to a previous one. The role of the new poet is to kill (or castrate) symbolically the father in order to make room for himself in literary history. He does so by misreading his predecessors.
- (26) *New Yorker* 51 (12 May 1975):40-50. Some small changes were added to the final version as it appears in *The Dead Father*.
- (27) As Brian Stonehill has noted: "The history of the novel begins and ends in self-consciousness" (1988:32). In tracing the history of metafiction, Stone agrees with Robert Alter (1975:3) in considering *Don Quixote* as the first example of "the novel as a self-conscious genre." As both critics comment, self-consciousness is thus an innate characteristic of the novel and not the exclusive privilege of a particular national literature. Robert Con Davis's analysis of *The Dead Father* in the light of the English tradition seems to neglect

other powerful influences, such as those of Cervantes or Kafka. In his Lacanian approach to *The Dead Father*, Davis says: "Both of these conventional literary devices, the quest and the book-within-a-book, create a picture, and an accurate one, of a novel solidly ensconced in the English tradition"(1981:172). But it should be obvious that these two *Motifs* are actually universal and as old as literature itself.

- (28) This brings us back to Bakhtin's theory of alterity, since, according to the Russian formalist, "...it is impossible to conceive of any being outside of the relations that link it to the other" (Todorov 1984:94).
- (29) Barthelme hints at an irreverent parody of Christ's meditations at Gethsemane in this passage. We should not forget that the Dead Father is frequently described as a Messianic figure, and the analogy with Christ has been occasionally insinuated since the introductory chapter.
- (30) In the father's final monologue we witness not just the character's agony but the agony of language itself. His approaching his death seems to plunge the father into a regressive process of decomposition. Different tongues (English, Latin, Spanish etc.) are introduced into the father's chaotic discourse, evoking a Babel of the mind: "Andl. Endl. Great endifarce teetereteerteterottering. Willit irt. I reiterate. Don't be cenacle. Conscientia mille testes. And having mad them where now? what now? Mens agitat molem and I wanted to doitwell, doitwell. Elegantemente. Ohe! jam satis, Andl" (171). The father's regression is thus manifested in the regression of language to that primordial state that Lacan calls *Lalangue* and Jacques Alain-Miller interprets as a "pregrammatical" and "pre-written level of language" (1990). *Lalangue*, as Lacan notes, works at the level of the sound. It is that kind of shapeless verbal mass upon which grammar is constructed: "*Lalangue*, as one word (without an article or with the article soldered onto the substantive, instead of *la langue*): general equivocation, universal babble, or 'Babelonian'" (Lacan 1990:6).
- (31) The solemnity of the scene—occasionally interrupted by puns and jokes—and the children's mutually opposed feelings evoke Freud's description of the ritual celebration of patricide. According to Freud, the clansmen "rejoice over the killing of the totem and mourn over it as well" (1952:140). At this point the Father-Christ identification is invested with new meaning in the light of Freudian analysis. By means of Christ's sacrifice, Christianity provided a way of redemption for an original sin committed against God the Father, which Freud interprets as just another version of the primordial patricide. Julia Kristeva goes beyond Freud in her reading of Christ's passion myth. In connecting that event with the process of acquisition of language, she offers a connection between Freud and Lacan for the interpretation of the event in Barthelme's novel. The mourning quality which permeates the last scene of *The Dead Father* mirrors the sadness that Kristeva cites as characteristic in young children before their acquisition of language: "If it is true that language begins in mourning inherent in the evolution of subjectivity, the abandonment by the father—the symbolic 'other'—triggers melancholy anguish..." (1987:41)
- (32) In French "le Nom-du-Père" is punningly pronounced as "the no-of-the-father," being language the first of these negations and subjections which will affect Thomas in the domain of the Symbolic.

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