

[Hiding Man: A Biography of Donald Barthelme by Tracy Daugherty]

Postmodern Fogey

Maintaining traditionalist ties can be the ultimate countercultural act.

By Andrew McKie

FEW THINGS ARE MORE difficult to predict than the posthumous security of an artistic reputation. When, 20 years ago, Donald Barthelme died at the early age of 58, there seemed to be a solid foundation for enduring literary acclamation. He had been described by Salman Rushdie as “one of the essential figures of American literature” and by Malcolm Bradbury as “the best of the contemporary American short story writers.” In *The New Fiction*, he was called “the most imitated fictionist in the United States today.”

That word “fictionist” is a giveaway, as Gore Vidal noted in “American Plastic,” his celebrated attack on Roland Barthes, John Barth, and Barthelme in the *New York Review of Books* in 1976. But Barthelme’s appeal was never restricted to a narrow band of academic postmodernists. Despite his formal experimentalism, in his heyday he enjoyed a much wider audience than Barthes or Barth thanks to his regular appearances in *The New Yorker*. During the late 1970s, Fran Lebowitz, in a satirical piece imagining a writers’ strike, thought that any group holding back copies of the magazine would immediately find itself “fire-bombed by a radical organization that believes that Donald Barthelme belongs to the people.” Small wonder that Lisa Zeidner, who had been one of Barthelme’s colleagues when he taught at the University of Houston, could later write in the *New York Times*

Book Review that at the time of his death she had thought, “At least his literary reputation was assured. Or so I assumed.”

True, in the last decade of his life, Barthelme’s high-octane surrealist miniatures had become rather less fashionable. The flat, naturalistic, or hyper-realistic, minimalism of writers such as Raymond Carver began to supplant him in the billets he had previously occupied, notably *The New Yorker*. But Barthelme has had an evident influence on many writers now in vogue, as figures such as Dave Eggers, Jonathan Lethem, and the late David Foster Wallace have acknowledged. Nor is it just what one might call the McSweeney’s gang; Barthelme is still a frequent subject of scholarly papers. Comparison of his work with that of Borges, Calvino, and García Márquez is routine among academic critics, and Harold Bloom included *The Dead Father* and the collection *Forty Stories* (though, oddly, not *Sixty Stories*) in *The Western Canon*. Even so, Professor Zeidner was compelled to admit, “Among civilian readers, however, he does not seem to be much in circulation.”

“Civilian readers” is another telling phrase. Zeidner added, “I’ve been surprised by the number of literate people who have simply never read him, or confuse him with his brother Frederick. Even readers old enough to have worn bell-bottoms on the first go-round seem

to dismiss him as someone who was counterculture-cool in a quaint bygone era.”

In fact, as early as 1976, Hilton Kramer had launched a scathing attack on Barthelme’s work in the pages of *Commentary*, arguing, inter alia, that it was “the most sophisticated, because the most calculated and refined, expression of that hatred of the family that was a hallmark of the ideology of the counterculture of the 60s, and distinguished from other such expressions by allying itself with art, rather than with nature, in its search for innocence and escape.”

Hiding Man, Tracy Daugherty’s substantial new biography, unsurprisingly takes issue with this view and makes the case for the importance and value of Barthelme’s work, arguing with some success that it is more than an emblem of the 1960s. But only with some success because Daugherty can hardly pretend that his subject was not concerned with experimental forms—Barthelme’s work incorporated illustrations, graphics, collages made of pictures cut from 19th-century magazines—or that, notwithstanding his long relationship with *The New Yorker*, Barthelme was ever happy with the idea that he was part of the middle-class literary establishment.

The truth is that Barthelme, though he may now have fallen from fashion, was a modernist, even a revolutionary. But he had little to do with the “let it all hang

out” ethos of the counterculture. If there was anything in which he believed devoutly, it was culture, and high culture at that. His modernism was of the same sort as Eliot’s, Joyce’s, and Beckett’s, rooted—as Kramer had spotted—in tradition and art.

Daugherty, whose research into Barthelme’s childhood and early life is particularly impressive, makes much of the influence of his father, a modernist architect in Houston who believed in the transformative power of art to enrich the community. Donald Barthelme Sr. was also a perfectionist, and along with his idealism, he passed on to his son a tendency to be disappointed with results. What some took as nihilism or hatred of the established order in Barthelme’s stories is thus more accurately understood as an ingrained dissatisfaction with the world and with the ability of literature to find forms with which to understand and describe it.

In the opening lines of “The Rise of Capitalism,” Barthelme declares, “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.” For “capitalism,” one could substitute “the human condition.” In “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne,” the same air of romantic regret persists. “Our evenings lack promise,” the narrator declares. “The world in the

evening seems fraught with the lack of promise, if you are a married man. There is nothing to do but go home and drink your nine drinks and forget about it.” Yet the dominant note in many of Barthelme’s stories is not quite hopelessness. Many, perhaps most, of them conclude with an upbeat note, a determination to carry on even if, as in that particular story, the consolation is inadequate or illusory: “And I, I have my J&B. The J&B company keeps manufacturing it, case after case, year in year out, and there is, I am told, no immediate danger of a dearth.”

This is not a cry for perpetual revolution or for the demolition of sexual norms. It is the authentic voice of the world-weary, middle-class, cultured, averagely sensual man who features in a hundred *New Yorker* cartoons, perched at the bar or slumped in his armchair at home with a martini at his elbow. I think of one such cartoon showing the latter image, with a young boy standing next to his father. The caption reads, “Not now, Matthew. This is Daddy’s quiet desperation time.”

On the publication of Barthelme’s first collection, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, in 1964, Granville Hicks in the *Saturday Review* declared, “Barthelme is a member of the advance guard, and he is very far out indeed.” That remained true of his style, but Barthelme was far from “far out” in the 1960s sense. “The body

of his work,” observes Daugherty, “with its humor, its delight in the everyday, suggests we’ll carry on—like angels, like Snow White’s little men, like the ordinary men and women we are—in search of new principles, with ‘the best will in the world!’” Or as Barthelme himself put it in an interview in the *Paris Review*, “The function of the advance guard in military terms is exactly that of the rear guard, to protect the main body, which translates as the status quo.” J.D. O’Hara countered, “Well, you’ve established yourself as an old fogey.” “So be it,” Barthelme replied.

Daugherty makes no bones about the fact that Barthelme’s personal life was messy: he was an alcoholic—though a highly functional one—and several marriages and affairs fell to pieces. There is, however, no evidence of the “hatred of the family” that Kramer identified in his work. At times, Barthelme conveys a feeling of constraint and disappointment reminiscent of Cyril Connolly’s remark about “the pram in the hall,” but he also gives remarkably tender portraits of family life, notably in stories such as “Chablis” and “The Baby.” Barthelme seems to have taken great delight in his own children and to have remained on remarkably good terms with all the women in his life. “His demeanor, especially with women, was polite and attentive,” Daugherty quotes Barthelme’s second wife as saying. “And he was a good listener.” His relations with his father, though marked with the occasional, unexceptional, degree of friction, seem to have been amiable, even tending toward hero-worship at times. Barthelme’s repeated examinations of the relationships between fathers and sons are a meditation on what is learned from the past and the obstacles our inheritance poses to forging our way in life, not a call for a metaphorical patricide of Western cultural norms.

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation (All Periodicals Publications Except Requester Publications). Publication Title: The American Conservative. 2. Publication Number: 1540966X. 3. Filing Date: 9/28/09. 4. Issue Frequency: Monthly. 5. Number of Issues Published Annually: 12. 6. Annual Subscription Price: \$49.97. 7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Not printer): 1300 Wilson Blvd., Suite 120, Arlington, VA, 22209; Contact Person, Ronald Burr; Telephone, 703-875-7600. 8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: 1300 Wilson Blvd., Suite 120, Arlington, VA, 22209. 9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor: Publisher, Ron Unz, The American Conservative, 1300 Wilson Blvd., Suite 120, Arlington, VA, 22209; Editor, Scott McConnell, The American Conservative, 1300 Wilson Blvd., Suite 120, Arlington, VA, 22209; Managing Editor, Kara Hopkins, The American Conservative, 1300 Wilson Blvd., Suite 120, Arlington, VA, 22209. 10. Owner: The American Conservative, LLC, 1300 Wilson Blvd., Suite 120, Arlington, VA, 22209; Ron Unz, 1300 Wilson Blvd., Suite 120, Arlington, VA, 22209; Scott McConnell, 1300 Wilson Blvd., Suite 120, Arlington, VA, 22209. 11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities. If none, check box: None. 12. Tax Status (For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at nonprofit rates): Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months. 13. Publication Title: The American Conservative. 14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: 9/01/09. 15. Extent and Nature of Circulation: Educational; a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run): Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months, 14,246; No. Copies Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date, 12,010; b. Paid Circulation (By mail and outside mail): (1). Mailed Outside-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser’s proof copies, and exchange copies): Avg., 8,529; Last Issue, 7,384; (2) Mailed In-County Paid Subscriptions Stated on PS Form 3541 (include paid distribution above nominal rate, advertiser’s proof copies, and exchange copies): Avg., 0; Last Issue, 0; (3) Paid Distribution Outside the Mails Including Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS: Avg., 728; Last Issue, 729; (4) Paid Distribution by Other Classes of Mail Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail): Avg., 0; Last Issue, 0; c. Total Paid Distribution (Sum of 15b 1, 2, 3, and 4): Avg., 9,257; Last Issue, 8,113; d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (By mail and outside the mail): (1) Free or Nominal Rate Outside County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: Avg., 220; Last Issue, 6; (2) Free or Nominal Rate In-County Copies Included on PS Form 3541: Avg., 0; Last Issue, 0; (3) Free or Nominal Rate Copies Mailed at Other Classes Through the USPS (e.g. First-Class Mail): Avg., 0; Last Issue, 0; (4) Free or Nominal Rate Distribution Outside the Mail (Carriers or other means): Avg., 1,234; Last Issue, 1,148; e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (Sum of 15d 1, 2, 3, and 4): Avg., 1,454; Last Issue, 1,154; f. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and e): Avg., 10,711; Last Issue, 9,267; g. Copies Not Distributed (See instructions to publishers #4, page 3): Avg., 3,535; Last Issue, 2,743; h. Total (Sum of 15f and g): Avg., 14,246; Last Issue, 12,010; i. Percent Paid (15c divided by 15f times 100): Avg., 86; Last Issue, 88. 16. Publication of Statement of Ownership: Will be printed in the 12/01/09 issue of this publication. 17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner: Daniel McCarthy, Senior Editor; Date: 09/29/2009.

The best case for Barthelme's greatness as a writer, however, is that he provides that quality that so many obscurantist modernists conspicuously and, one suspects deliberately, avoid: pleasure for the reader. Even Gore Vidal, condemning his mannerisms and "infantile chic," admitted that he "does have a talent for, of all things in this era, writing." At the level of the sentence, there is a sureness of touch, a precision and elegance, a care for grammar, sense, effect and tone that make him, in particular, an extraordinary fluent parodist. He is also very funny.

Whence do these virtues spring? Daugherty spends much of his time describing the importance of Kierkegaard, Beckett, Freud, Kafka, modern art, and all the usual suspects. (As a teacher of creative writing, Barthelme drew up a famously intimidating reading list for his students, composed almost entirely of 20th-century modernists.) Yet he admitted, "style is not much a matter of choice" and maintained that the thrill of childhood reading never fades.

The best service of this biography is perhaps to have listed the influences of Barthelme's childhood education and reading: a traditional Catholic schooling that emphasized learning, discipline, and service, and a steady diet of S.J. Perelman, James Thurber, Damon Runyon, the Captain Blood stories of Raphael Sabatini, and the Rover Boys Series for Young Americans. Barthelme may be the dead father of many of today's literary young turks, but for all his cut-ups, surrealism, and devotion to modernism and high culture, his writing and sensibility were informed just as much by nostalgia, however melancholy, for altogether cheerier, homelier, and more innocent models. ■

Andrew McKie is a former editor of The Daily Telegraph's obituaries page.

Perpetual Feast

Hemingway's final book showcases his mastery.

By Taki Theodoracopulos

THIS SUMMER, Scribner released a "restored edition" of Hemingway's *Moveable Feast*. His grandson claims to have created "a truer representation of the book my grandfather intended to publish." He succeeds only in demonstrating that meddlesome heirs make lousy editors.

Young Sean Hemingway was piqued that the original version didn't cast his grandmother, Papa's second wife Pauline, in brightest light. He claims that Mary, Hemingway's fourth and final wife, spun the story to her own advantage after the great man's death. So he cut ten chapters and stitched scraps from other sources into a kinder conclusion.

"The more you read it, the more there will be," Papa promised. But this edition couldn't have been what he had in mind. For *A Moveable Feast*, with its merciless jabs and fond digressions, was very much the book he intended to publish. "If the reader prefers," Papa wrote in his preface, "this book may be regarded as fiction," but he didn't suggest that it was unfinished. According to Hemingway's close friend A.E. Hotchner, "The manuscript was not left in shards but was ready for publication. ... When I visited him in the Mayo Clinic a few months before his dementia led to his suicide, he was very concerned about his Paris book, and worried that it needed a final sentence, which it didn't." He says that there was no extra chapter created by Mary, as the vandals claimed in conferring their

own literary license.

I had been living in Paris for six years when *A Moveable Feast* was first published in 1964. I was 27 and in love with Hemingway's favorite city—"a mistress who always has new lovers." Reading his obituaries three years before, I had decided to follow the writing life, though I had failed English in school and, according to my father, was incapable of writing a coherent letter asking for money. Obituaries have a tendency to concentrate the mind. Here was a man who traveled the globe, covered wars, wrote about whatever captured his fancy, pursued women in the flesh spots of the Western world, hunted big game in Africa—and had a ten-page obituary in *Time* after he had blown his brains out. It was time to forget about tennis and hit the typewriter.

Well, as some of you may surmise, I never rivaled the master. But one thing is certain: Hemingway's prose and personal heroics have inspired more young people to try their hands at writing than the Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Elvis got callow types to try making a living at rock and roll. Hemingway was the first literary superstar, and I include Lord Byron, more infamous for his sexual shenanigans than his romantic poetry, the latter only read by a few elite.

A Moveable Feast, his ode to the community of expat writers making their home in 1920s Paris, was an instant bestseller. It was as good as anything Hemingway produced—and he knew it. "After writing a story I was