

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

REPRESENTATIONS OF LEO TOLSTOY IN
DONALD BARTHELME'S 'AT THE TOLSTOY MUSEUM'

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by

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Käsillä oleva tutkielma on tulos mielenkiinnosta postmodernistiseksi kutsuttua kirjallisuuden suuntausta kohtaan. Viimeisen viidenkymmenen vuoden ajan esillä ollutta kokeellista kirjallisuutta on yleisessä diskurssissa määritelty ennen kaikkea sotaisin metaforin. Postmodernistinen fiktio toisin sanoen tuhoaa, purkaa, rikkoo ja haastaa. Tämän kaltaiset kuvaukset tyypittävät postmodernin kirjallisuuden ennen kaikkea reaktiiviseksi toiminnaksi. Kuitenkin postmoderni fiktio on ilmiönä moniselitteisempi ja laaja-alaisempi kuin yksinkertaistavat luonnehdinnat antavat ymmärtää. Kandidaatintutkielmassani lähestyin ko. ilmiötä tutkimalla yksittäistä, postmoderniksi luonnehdittavaa tekstiä.

Amerikkalaiskirjailija Donald Barthelme on yksi postmodernistisen kirjallisuuden pioneereista. Tämä tutkielma on analyysi hänen vuonna 1970 julkaisemastaan novellista 'At the Tolstoy Museum'. Tekstissä Barthelme parodioi venäläisen klassikkokirjailija Leo Tolstoin kirjallista ja kulttuurista perintöä. Tarkastelemalla Tolstoin representaatioita Barthelmen tekstissä tutkielma kartoitti Barthelmen suhdetta aikaisemman kirjallisuuden perinteeseen. Taustana tutkielmalle toimi joukko aikaisempia kirjoituksia Donald Barthelmen metodeista ja tendensseistä. Jotta kandidaatintutkielma olisi riittävä formaatti perusteelliseen analyysiin, valittiin tarkastelun kohteeksi tarkoituksella lyhyt teksti; Barthelmen novelli on vain kymmenen sivun mittainen, ja sisältää kirjoitetun sanan lisäksi suuren joukon kuvamateriaalia.

Tutkielma terävöitti kuvaa Barthelmen kritiikin kohteista, ja toi esille hänen tekstinsä uutta luovat, rakentavat elementit. Tämän lisäksi tutkimustyö herätti lukuisia kysymyksiä, jotka jäivät tilanpuutteen vuoksi käsittelemättä. Mahdollisuudet lisätutkimukselle ovatkin Barthelmen tekstien kohdalla lukuisat. Esimerkiksi kirjallisten perinteiden, eritoten modernismin, rooli kirjailijan tuotannossa on aihepiiri, josta on tehty verrattain vähän tutkimusta.

Asiasanat: Barthelme, postmodernism, literary criticism

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1. Introduction

The postmodern founders' patricidal work was great, but patricide produces orphans, and no amount of revelry can make up for the fact that writers my age have been literary orphans throughout our formative years. (Wallace in McCaffery 1993: 150).

The above quotation from American novelist David Foster Wallace paints a startling picture of the condition of literature today. Several of the points raised in his interview conducted in 1993 by Larry McCaffery motivated me to consider the inception of postmodern fiction in detail. Here was a leading author of contemporary fiction criticising the founders of postmodernism precisely for the reason they are usually lauded as highly innovative writers. The radical search for new forms of expression that postmodern writers engaged in, Wallace seems to suggest, has carried the price of literary rootlessness. In his view this is particularly true for the contemporary followers of the postmodern founders.

The present study originates from a desire to better understand the condition of contemporary fiction. For this reason, I turned to one of the pre-eminent forebears of contemporary fiction. American author Donald Barthelme (1931–1989) is often considered the pioneer of postmodernism (Cronquist 2008: 119; Klinkowitz 1994: 13). The present study is an analysis of a Barthelme story from 1970 titled 'At the Tolstoy Museum.' I deliberately chose a text which openly signals — or at least appears to signal — an irreverent attitude toward literary conventions and institutions. My rationale was that an analysis of a deconstructive text would provide me with tangible and easily identifiable results concerning Barthelme's method and philosophy.

I consider it important to examine the fictions of Donald Barthelme for a multitude of reasons. In spite of his importance to postmodernist literature he remains an obscure author in Finland. Barthelme is rarely discussed at an academic level in the country, and there have been but few studies of his works in the Finnish academia. Furthermore, the story that is

the topic of the present study has not been examined from the perspective with which I have approached it.

The opening quote by David Foster Wallace poses several questions to the critical reader. For example, is it feasible to argue that the postmodern founders' work was 'patricidal'? Furthermore, if we consider Wallace's portrayal of the condition of current literature as accurate, what are the implications of the notion that contemporary authors are literary orphans? It should be stressed that although these questions were at the back of my mind during the writing process of the present study, the topic of my thesis is too narrow and its scope too small for it to be able to provide the questions with answers. It would be inadvisable to generalise Barthelme's tendencies, let alone the tendencies of postmodern fiction in general, on the basis of an examination of a single short story. However, I hope that my study is a small step toward answering the above questions in addition to establishing a better appreciation of the text analysed.

Further research into individual texts from Barthelme is necessary for a more accurate presentation of the author's views on literature as portrayed in his stories. Given Barthelme's large body of work, and the fact that the author has moved through several styles since his first collection of stories was published, there is a wealth of material to study (Domini 1990: 2).

2. Background for the present study

The following sections provide general background information regarding the topic of the present study. Section 2.1. is a brief outline of the tendencies and features of the phenomenon commonly described as postmodern literature. Section 2.2. consists of an introduction to the life and works of Donald Barthelme. Finally, section 2.3. will detail the method of the present study and the literature employed during the writing process.

2.1. The postmodern turn

Postmodernism in literature is arguably the greatest and most decisive change that has taken place in contemporary writing in the past fifty years (Bradbury & Bigsby in Couturier & Durand 1982: 6). Postmodern tendencies in fiction began in the 1960s as a response to the stagnation of literary modernism. The modernist impulse of the early years of the twentieth century had exhausted itself, and after the Second World War it appeared as if the post-war arts would consist of recessiveness and imitation rather than innovation and invention (*ibid.*). Postmodernism was essentially a reaction to this intellectual fatigue.

It would be inaccurate to describe postmodern literature as a unified movement. Postmodernism is essentially an umbrella term for several responses to the works of previous generations, and is composed of a multitude of perspectives and approaches to writing fiction. However, there are nevertheless cogent ways of analysing the tendencies and background of postmodernism in literature (McCaffery 1986: xii). Opposition to the tendencies of literary modernism naturally one unifying feature. In addition, the influences of absurdist theatre, jazz and rock and roll, pop art, and other developments in the avant-garde art scene of the early 1960s must be considered when one examines the foundations of postmodern fiction (*ibid.*: xix).

The postmodern turn is arguably a turn towards language itself. Until the middle of the twentieth century, Couturier and Durand argue (1982: 54), Western writers generally considered language as a vehicle by which to convey their unique ideas. However, it has since then become apparent that language cannot be used as a mere instrument; not only does language have a logic of its own, but it is constantly punctured by the writer's unconscious processes. Thus postmodern fiction blends dark humour, literary parody and surrealism in a variety of styles that constantly call attention to themselves (McCaffery 1986: xix). In other words, the language of postmodern fiction is self-conscious; hence the term *metafiction*. For this reason, postmodern fiction often requires the audience to read and to understand in new ways (Bradbury & Bigsby in Couturier & Durand 1982: 6).

The consciousness and confidence of postmodern fiction grew slowly, but what eventually emerged was a 'radical inquiry into contemporary forms' (ibid.). Since postmodernism in literature constitutes what is primarily a response to modernist tendencies, it is not uncommon for texts which exhibit a postmodern disposition to be openly critical of the conventions of modernism and older forms of literature. This challenge to traditional forms of expression is, as the present study attempts to show, particularly evident in the works of Donald Barthelme.

2.2. Donald Barthelme: a biography

Donald Barthelme was born in April 1931 in Philadelphia (Barthelme 2001: 7). As noted in Section 1, Barthelme is considered one of the pioneers of a style of fiction commonly described as postmodern. In spite of this, however, he is not a widely read author. As Helen Moore Barthelme observes (2001: xv), the difficulty of reading Donald Barthelme's work sometimes overshadows its significance.

Barthelme's fictive style was the product of years of development and critical inquiry. After

an encounter with the play *Waiting for Godot* by the Irish dramatist Samuel Beckett in 1956, Barthelme began to search for a new style of literary fiction (Barthelme 2001: 46). He published his first collection of short stories, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, in 1964. Most critics were astonished by the style exhibited in the collection. While several of the responses were either confused or openly negative, a number of critics were excited by the young author's accomplishment; the *Saturday Review*, for instance, suggested that 'Barthelme's kind of controlled craziness may be showing literature a new path to follow' (ibid.: 152).

By the time of Barthelme's second collection of stories, *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1986), the author had established himself as an up-and-coming practitioner of a new literary style. In his review of the book, American novelist William Gass remarked (in Domini 1990: 1) that through Barthelme's fictive style the author had managed to place himself in the center of modern consciousness. Barthelme would go on to further develop and perfect his literary style in the years to follow, emphasising the more creative elements of his early work and discarding the 'sometimes facile post-modernist chic' occasionally exhibited in the earlier collections (Couturier & Durand 1982: 49).

Donald Barthelme died in 1989 (Barthelme 2001: xiii). His final work is the novel *The King*, published posthumously in 1990 (ibid.: 191).

2.3. Background and method of the present study

A number of studies concern themselves with a critical appreciation of Barthelme's methodology and general philosophy on literary fiction. The primary reference of the present study is Couturier and Durand's collection of essays titled simply *Donald Barthelme* (1982). In the book the researchers approach their subject from multiple perspectives, pursuing 'both a measure of unity and a multiple impression, criticism as dialogue' (Couturier & Durand 1982: 10). I have approached my topic with a similar general philosophy.

In the following pages I shall examine a single Barthelme story, 'At the Tolstoy Museum,' primarily through the portrayal of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy in the text. I have divided the main portion of my analysis into three different but complementary sections; these are identified and explained further in Section 4.1. The research question of the present study is as follows:

- 1) How is the character and literary legacy of Leo Tolstoy portrayed in Barthelme's text?
- 2) What attitudes toward literary conventions are signalled by the portrayal?

Thus, my purpose is not only to examine Tolstoy as presented in the story, but to find out whether the treatment of the topic implies criticism of the forms of literature from which Barthelme's fictive style seeks to distance itself. My intention is not to arrive at a definite interpretation of the text; Barthelme's works are essentially inexhaustible when it comes to interpretation. As Couturier and Durand suggest (1982: 60), any interpretation of Barthelme's fictions is bound to reflect the interpreter as much as the interpreted. My interest is in finding out whether the text reflects Barthelme's attitudes concerning his literary forebears as documented in the works written about him.

In addition to Couturier and Durand's literary criticism, other texts important for this study include Jerome Klinkowitz's *Donald Barthelme: An Exhibition* (1991) and John Domini's essay *Donald Barthelme: The Modernist Uprising* (1990). Donald Barthelme's second wife, Helen Moore Barthelme, is the author of memoirs titled *Donald Barthelme: The Genesis of a Cool Sound* (2001). This text provided me with the necessary biographical information and insight into Donald Barthelme's personal life and thoughts. In addition, several texts detailed in the bibliography supplied the study with further background.

A brief note concerning the structure of the present study is in order. Section 3 is an introduction to the textual and pictorial features of 'At the Tolstoy Museum.' The preamble is followed by the primary content of my study; Section 4 is an analysis of the story and its

representations of the character of Leo Tolstoy. The section is based on a close reading of the text, as well as the previous studies enumerated above. The analysis and its implications are discussed in further detail in Section 5, which also concludes the present study.

3. Features of 'At the Tolstoy Museum'

The sections below consist of brief descriptions of the textual and pictorial content of 'At the Tolstoy Museum.' In order to give the reader a sense of the types of pictures featured in Barthelme's short story, an appendix at the end of the present study provides examples of the images.

3.1. Textual features

First published in 1970 in Donald Barthelme's third collection of fictions entitled *City Life*, 'At the Tolstoy Museum' consists of 4 pages of text. The majority of the text is arranged on the page according to the normal conventions of literary fiction. However, the story also includes brief fragments of text which are arranged out of sequence with the rest of the words; these snippets serve as captions for pictorial material that is also featured in the story. The images and their relations to the text will be discussed further in Sections 3.2. and 4.

It can be argued that it is actually misleading to call 'At the Tolstoy Museum' a story. The text features a distinct lack of narrative cohesion that would unite the pages with one another; each text fragment is, for all intents and purposes, a self-contained narrative. In fact, as Cronquist notes (2008: 129), it is possible to consider almost every paragraph as a separate *diegesis* (i.e. narrative description). This radical dislocation of narrative coherence is a feature that runs through Donald Barthelme's fictions (Couturier & Durand 1982: 24).

Thus, 'At the Tolstoy Museum' becomes more like an art gallery than a conventional story, 'each page being as it were a surrealistic composition' (ibid.: 59). In fact, one would not be misguided if one were to approach the story as an art object rather than a description of

anything. Like a surrealist painting, Barthelme's text induces the reader to evolve private interpretations, no matter how extravagant (ibid.: 16-17). For this reason, Couturier and Durand compare (ibid.: 60) the landscape of Barthelme's fictions to a surrealistic world which has little to do with our own.

3.2. Features of the images

The text of 'At the Tolstoy Museum' is interspersed with 9 pictures of various size and shape. A number of pictures are reproductions of nineteenth-century engravings; the captions for several of them suggest that the images portray Leo Tolstoy at various stages of his life; as a youth, at Starogladkovskaya, at a tiger hunt, and so forth (Barthelme 1975: 44-46). However, as Couturier and Durand point out (1982: 59), Tolstoy as a youth looks 'strangely like a baby-faced Napoleon, with his unruly lock of hair,' and it is doubtful the bicycle pictured in the image supposedly representing Tolstoy at Starogladkovskaya existed in Russia in 1852, unlike the caption would suggest (see Appendix 1.2.).

Thus, the interplay of images and text in Barthelme's story has a mock *ekphrastic* effect (Cronquist 2008: 120). Ekphrasis is a literary device in which one medium of art describes the form and content of art from another medium. For example, an accurate textual description of the features of a painting would constitute ekphrasis. In Barthelme's text, however, the relations between an image and its textual representation are deliberately disjointed. By blurring together fact and fiction, Barthelme creates a uniquely surrealistic ambience. In addition, the collagist tendencies of the story make visual commentary on Barthelme's text (Fallon et al 2001: 59). In Section 4.3. I shall consider this idea in further detail.

According to Couturier and Durand (1982: 60), two of the remaining images are derived 'from a treatise by Brunelleschi or Ucello' [sic]. The pictures in question are fifteenth-cen-

tury studies in perspective, and are combined with cuttings and pastings of nineteenth-century engravings similar to those employed elsewhere in the story. For example, in the final image on page 10 of the text, a negative image of Leo Tolstoy's portrait is pasted directly on top of the point of infinity where the multiple lines of the perspective study meet. I will return to the implications of this image in Section 4.2.

4. Analysis of 'At the Tolstoy Museum'

In the following sections I will approach 'At the Tolstoy Museum' from three different yet complementary points of view. The primary focus of my analysis is, as stated in Section 2.3., the character of Leo Tolstoy. I will begin with an examination of Tolstoy as an institution. In other words, I shall look at how Barthelme's text represents the eponymous museum and what types of discourse are employed in support of the institution. The analysis will thereafter be complemented with an examination of Tolstoy's identity as portrayed by Barthelme. In his texts the concept of identity is closely associated with the theme of fragmentation, which I will also consider in detail. Finally, the present section will finish with a look at the character of Tolstoy from a psychological perspective. The starting point of this subsection is the idea that the father is an important and reoccurring element in Donald Barthelme's fictions (Couturier & Durand 1982: 39). I shall therefore consider the theme of the father in relation to the character of Tolstoy as depicted in 'At the Tolstoy Museum.'

4.1. Tolstoy as institution

In 'At the Tolstoy Museum,' the titular author is literally presented as an institution. The text consists of a collage of fragments in which the narrator or narrators contemplate the existence of an imaginary museum dedicated to the great Russian writer. These miniature narratives are interspersed with images that portray the institution's collection, i.e. pictures on the walls of the museum, and the architectural features of the museum building.

The building erected for Count Leo Tolstoy stands first and foremost as an absurdly colossal and overpowering structure. Its architecture emphasises the monumentality of the building. The narrator relates that the museum 'has the aspect of three stacked boxes: the first, second, and third levels' (Barthelme 1975a: 45). The upper levels of the building are of

increasing size; the suggestion is that the Tolstoy Museum has the appearance of a reversed pyramid. 'The entire building, viewed from the street, suggests that it is about to fall on you,' the text continues (ibid.). The punchline of Barthelme's ironic description is delivered immediately afterwards: 'This the architects relate to Tolstoy's moral authority' (ibid.). The grave importance of the artist is as inescapable as the museum dedicated to him.

Tolstoy's presence is equally impossible to escape inside the building. The reader is told that the 'holdings of the Tolstoy Museum consist principally of some thirty thousand pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy' (ibid.: 43). These images confront not only the visitors inside the imaginary museum; in addition, several engravings of the author stare at the reader of the fictional work. Indeed, the entire story begins with a five-inch reproduction of an engraving of the Russian novelist as bearded prophet (Gurewitch 1994: 44; see Appendix 1.1.). Thus, even before the first paragraph of the text the reader is forced to contemplate the title character 'in all his mystic glory' (Klinkowitz 1991: 63). The fact that Tolstoy's portrait is the first image in *City Life* only emphasises the surprise of finding oneself face to face with the great Russian author. The placement of the picture in the middle of humorous satires produces a comic effect; we are not prepared to take the novelist's frown seriously.

The impossibility of escape is only emphasised when, turning the page, the reader is confronted with another, *identical* Tolstoy of similar proportions (Barthelme 1975a: 41-42). Klinkowitz (1991: 63) draws attention to the one detail that differs from the previous page, that of a 'one-and-a-quarter-inch cutout of a tiny Napoleon in profile, staring up from the lower left margin to contemplate Tolstoy's awesome visage' (see Appendix 1.1.). The Napoleon figure begins a series of pictorial and textual jokes that emphasise Tolstoy's size. The Count is literally a giant; his overcoat alone is pictured as being three times as large than the museum's visitors (Barthelme 1975a: 43). In addition, the staff of the Tolstoy Museum has ensured that the novelist dwarfs not only the visitors but other great Russian

authors and poets. 'People stared at tiny pictures of Turgenev, Nekrasov, and Fet. These and other small pictures hung alongside extremely large pictures of Count Leo Tolstoy' (ibid.: 49). The only function the portraits of other artists appear to have is to heighten their insignificance in comparison with Tolstoy.

The out-of-proportion scale is not limited to pictures alone. In the public consciousness Leo Tolstoy is first and foremost the author of novels of great length and scope. Barthelme has fun with this notion when he has his narrator contemplate the '640,086 pages (Jubilee Edition) of the author's published work' (Barthelme 1975a: 49). The Soviet edition of Tolstoy's works the text alludes to factually consists of no less than 90 volumes, and, one would assume, several hundred thousand pages of text (Tolstoy 1998: xxix). However, in the middle of a story where an absurd sense of scale is the norm, the page count of Tolstoy's oeuvre comes across as vastly inflated.

Pages 8 and 10 of 'At the Tolstoy Museum' grant the reader a glimpse of the architecture of the fictional museum. On page 10 a negative reproduction of Tolstoy's now familiar face looms at the point of infinity in one of these studies. The caption below reads: 'Museum plaza with monumental head (Closed Mondays)' (Barthelme 1975a: 50). Couturier and Durand (1982: 59) consider this and similar images interspersed throughout Barthelme's fictions to be 'maddening eye-traps' with good reason. In the picture in question, everything seems to originate from and lead to a ghostly Tolstoy who looms impossibly huge in the distance, as if the Russian novelist were the alpha and omega of human culture.

Here the obvious target of Barthelme's irony is, to use Gurewitch's (1994: 44) phrase, 'per-versely inept cultural custodianship.' The Tolstoy Museum has elevated its subject to the point where Tolstoy himself is no longer discernible; a great artist's missionary urges have been transformed into nothing but titanic self-aggrandisement (ibid.). There are important and serious questions of power behind Barthelme's farcical treatment of his subject. Who

decides, for example, what artists and types of art are favoured over others in popular discourse? What is achieved with the institutionalisation of culture? Indeed, it can be argued that the entire Tolstoy Museum as presented in Barthelme's text is nothing but a colossal display of economic and socio-cultural power.

4.2. Tolstoy and identity

Identities are unstable and precarious in Donald Barthelme's fictions (Couturier & Durand 1982: 33). Section 4.1. already demonstrated that for the narrator or narrators of the 'At the Tolstoy Museum,' Tolstoy's identity as an artist is all but eclipsed by the extravagance of the institution itself.

However, because of Barthelme's radically anti-narrative prose style, the text itself manages to represent a facet of Tolstoy without the burden of tradition and convention. Consider, for example, the entirety of the third paragraph of the story; from a series of *non sequuntur* emerges an extremely unconventional portrait of Count Leo Tolstoy. Klinkowitz notes (1991: 63) that Barthelme's collage technique frees the subject of his prose from any didactic or even conceptual order:

Tolstoy means "fat" in Russian. His grandfather sent his linen to Holland to be washed. His mother *did not know* any bad words. As a youth he shaved off his eyebrows, hoping they would grow back bushier. He first contracted gonorrhoea in 1847. He was once bitten on the face by a bear. He became a vegetarian in 1885. To make himself interesting, he occasionally bowed backward (Barthelme 1975a: 43).

Klinkowitz (1991: 63) continues by drawing attention to the fact that 'as exceptional as these facts are, they can probably be found in any biography of Tolstoy.' However, within a conventional biography each anecdote would be surrounded by a traditional narrative

structure that would soften the impact of each curious fact. Without context, Klinkowitz argues (*ibid.*), the exceptional nature of the anecdotes is better appreciated.

Regardless, it is obvious that any portrait Barthelme's collagist method produces is at best ghostly and blurred. What seems to be implicated in the above extract is that Tolstoy, as an author and individual, is too complex a phenomenon for an accurate fictional representation. Couturier and Durand rightfully point out (1982: 59) that it would be difficult to read 'At the Tolstoy Museum' as a lecture of any kind on Tolstoy. The text purposefully combines fact and fiction into a surrealist collage, and engenders a sense of epistemological suspicion in the reader; fact and fiction become difficult, if not impossible, to separate from each other.

Even texts from Leo Tolstoy himself are suitable material for Barthelme's collagist tendencies. Thus, page 7 of 'At the Tolstoy Museum' is a complete synopsis of a Tolstoy short story entitled 'The Three Hermits' (Tolstoy 2008: 281-292). Barthelme painlessly summarises a narrative of over 2500 words in just two paragraphs. If there is humour in the passage, it is found only in the sudden absence of jokes; the melancholy summary of Tolstoy's story is as serious as the portrait of the novelist that first confronts the reader of Barthelme's text. The sudden shifts in register highlight the fact that the text fragments of 'At the Tolstoy Museum' are deliberately incongruous with one another. Nowhere else in the story is Barthelme's method brought into such sharp contrast with the conventions of older forms of literature.

One might at first assume that Barthelme is simply having a laugh at the expense of story-based fiction. However, through a semantic and textual analysis of 'At the Tolstoy Museum' and other select texts Cronquist (2008: 134) has demonstrated that, as a whole, Barthelme's narrators are, in Cronquist's words, 'interested in telling 'good stories' around the campfire.' To put it another way, Barthelme is not hostile toward the notion of story; he is, however, sceptical of the importance of narrative structure in literature. Couturier and

Durand assert (1982: 25) that we as readers have been trained to value narrative as the foremost component of fiction. In contrast, 'At the Tolstoy Museum' is essentially a collage of miniature narratives conceptually related to one another only by the common topic of the fictional museum of the title. It would be extremely difficult to summarise 'At the Tolstoy Museum' without doing violence to the text.

The process of fragmentation is at the heart of Donald Barthelme's aesthetics (ibid.: 24). Fragmentation should not be understood simply as a technique, but a signal of deep-seated epistemological uncertainty. In Barthelme's texts, feelings of doubt, melancholia and anxiety are everywhere, and fragmentation is one reflection of this psychic imbalance. In Couturier and Durand's words (ibid.: 33), if it is 'impossible to connect, to string sentences and narratives together, then the self is locked in anguish and panic.' Barthelme's texts can be seen as depictions of this process.

For Couturier and Durand (ibid.: 38), tears are one referent of epistemological uncertainty in Barthelme's fictions. It is no surprise, then, that tears abound in 'At the Tolstoy Museum.' To the visitors the museum is, more than anything, a place of unrestrained human emotion. 'Even the bare title of a Tolstoy work, with its burden of love, can induce weeping,' one of the narrators confesses (Barthelme 1975a: 45). Moreover, the guards of the Tolstoy Museum carry buckets full of clean handkerchiefs in case the visitors should find themselves overcome with emotion (ibid.). Even human emotion is thus institutionalised and internalised at the Tolstoy Museum. The sadness the institution induces in the visitors renders them emotionally and intellectually passive. When a series of lectures is held at the Tolstoy Museum, a narrator laconically comments that the visitors 'were made sad by these eloquent speakers, who were *probably* right' (ibid.: 49, my emphasis). The veracity of the claims of the speakers is never questioned; their supposed erudition guarantees that they are correct.

Dysfunction is not, however, only psychological in Donald Barthelme's texts. Disasters of

various types are a constant element in his work. Couturier and Durand describe (1982: 34) how the landscape of Barthelme's fictions resembles 'the aftermath of some unidentified traumatic event, of which we may know only the symptoms, the signs.' An unexplained catastrophe of this type is present in 'At the Tolstoy Museum' as well. In a small image on page 9 of the text, the Russian novelist is supposedly identified as present 'at the disaster' — yet the reader is never given information concerning the calamity (see Appendix 1.3.). The picture in question is reminiscent of post-war imagery, with tiny, featureless humans gazing at the ruins of a ravaged building. According to the caption, Tolstoy is indicated in the picture with an arrow, but the figures are too small for factual identification.

It is as if Barthelme is suggesting that Tolstoy as an individual is essentially unknowable; all we have left of the person is the literary institution relentlessly parodied in the story. Identities slip away while man-made constructs prevail, albeit in ruined forms. In light of the disaster image it is not difficult to interpret the Tolstoy Museum as the ruins of the very artist glorified within.

4.3. Tolstoy as father

As was argued in Section 4.1., the father is a central theme in Donald Barthelme's fictions. Ever since *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*, the father has remained as 'a stubborn image' in his texts (Domini 1990: 35). The present section will detail how the father is also implicit in Barthelme's depiction of the great Russian novelist in 'At the Tolstoy Museum.'

For Domini, the omnipresence of the father in Barthelme signals the author's competitive attitude toward his literary predecessors. Domini comments (ibid.) that 'bright youth has always had to deny its forebears.' However, as I have shown in Sections 4.2. and 4.3., Barthelme is not parodying Tolstoy so much as what Gurewitsch (1991: 44) calls 'mad hero-worship.' In other words, the primary target of Barthelme's irony is the canonisation of any

given artist. Tolstoy is not set up in the text so that he might be challenged and eventually deconstructed; instead, his authority is inflated to such a degree that it becomes ludicrous to even consider questioning him.

Couturier and Durand (1982: 33-41) approach the figure of the father in Barthelme's fictions from the perspective of Freudian psychology. Barthelme himself was versed in psychoanalysis, and had undertaken self-analysis under a psychiatrist for a period of one year (Barthelme 2001: 65-66). The experience is reflected in his writings thereafter; for example, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* contains commentary upon psychoanalytic procedures. Several passages in the collection mimic typical exchanges between the analyst and the analysand (e.g. Barthelme 1964: 4-5).

Thus, the epistemological uncertainty in Barthelme's fictions that was considered in Section 4.3. can be explicated in psychiatric terms. To this end, Couturier and Durand (1982: 38) turn to what in Freudian psychology is called the 'primal repression.' A brief summary of the theoretical construct is as follows. In the development of the infant's language skills, the symbolic level of language (the world of ordered signification) is accessed through repression. In a primitive state, the son desires to occupy the position of the real father. This schism is resolved by repressing the desire and a engendering a symbolic identification with the father. Couturier and Durand observe (*ibid.*) that the outcome of this operation 'is to make possible the emergence of meaning and of further symbolic operations,' such as articulate speech.

When the operation is not successful (such as with psychotic subjects), it becomes impossible to distinguish between the symbol and the referent (*ibid.*: 38). Couturier and Durand suggest that Donald Barthelme's fictions depict the failure of the symbolic process. 'It is as if some stabilizing, regulative element had been lost, and as if in consequence significance and feelings were floating around, unanchored by the 'normal' symbolic process' (*ibid.*). In other words, Barthelme's texts problematise the normal relations between the

signifier and the referent. Couturier and Durand emphasise (ibid.: 39) that what is at stake behind Barthelme's essentially comic fictions concerns the symbolic itself, examined primarily through the figure of the father.

The titanic authority of the institution that is Tolstoy in 'At the Tolstoy Museum' echoes the authority of the father, as well as the hopelessness of attempts to struggle against paternal authority. The museum visitors who are caught by Tolstoy's eyes in the 30,000 pictures of the Count make the connection explicit — to them the experience is like 'committing a small crime and being discovered at it by your father, who stands in four doorways, looking at you' (Barthelme 1975a: 45). In the Tolstoy Museum the Russian novelist is canonised and institutionalised to the point where he is portrayed as the father of all Western literature. His images linger in the story as stubbornly as the father in Barthelme's other texts, 'in spite of all the times the author has denied the old man or left him in fragments' (Domini 1990: 35).

The impossibility of attempts to challenge the father is a theme that is encountered time and again in Barthelme's fictions. 'A son can never, in the fullest sense, become a father', declares the Dead Father of the 1975 novel by the same name, and continues: 'Some amount of amateur effort is possible. A son may after honest endeavour produce what some people might call, technically, children. But he remains a son. In the fullest sense' (Barthelme 1975b: 33). Similarly, as was shown in section 4.1., in the Tolstoy Museum the artistic achievements of other writers are forever dwarfed by the grandiosity of Count Leo Tolstoy.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Donald Barthelme may be regarded with good reason as a highly philosophical writer. As I have shown in the present study, the themes of his fictions are complex and his attitudes toward literary conventions multifaceted. It goes without saying that 'At the Tolstoy Museum' alone could be approached from a number of perspectives that I have not covered within the scope of this study. The same notion applies even more emphatically to the rest of Barthelme's voluminous body of work.

We have seen how Barthelme's fictions actively deconstruct literary conventions of past generations. He ridicules canonisation; he eschews narrative cohesion in favour of fragmentation; he is distrustful of language in general; he satirises the conventions of literary traditions. Couturier and Durand (1982: 38) assert that 'the deconstructive impulse of post-modernist texts has little in common with the confident irony of modernism, which never stops believing in its own power, even when at its grimmest.' In contrast, Barthelme's irony is a vehicle for exploring areas of symbolic and epistemological uncertainty (ibid.: 39). Barthelme's stories can thus be seen 'as allegorical presentations of the writer attempting to make fictions in an age of literary and linguistic suspicion' (McCaffery in Domini 1990: 1).

According to Klinkowitz (1994: 14), Barthelme's critics have argued that all he does is use the conventional forms of parody to ridicule literary conventions, particularly those of modernism. 'At the Tolstoy Museum,' for example, has been described as an 'irresponsible, anarchic, infantile, logic-bashing, normality-destroying farce' (Gurewitch 1994: 44). In addition, Clark (1991: 199) relates the argument of one early reviewer that 'virtually all Barthelme produces as a writer [...] constitutes the imitation of modern trashiness, trashiness recycled.' Such descriptions of Barthelme's work place the emphasis entirely on the deconstructive elements of his fictive style.

As we have seen, however, the above arguments are a simplification of what the author aims to achieve with his fictions. Barthelme's criticism of literary conventions is targeted at the level of form, not content (Klinkowitz 1991: 14). In other words, the object of the author's critique is the dominance of narrative cohesion and linguistic naivety. The author is not out to ridicule the past, but rather to revitalise it. In other words, Barthelme's style of deconstruction is a challenge; his writings suggest a call for new emotions and understandings (Couturier & Durand 1982: 33). The institutionalised excesses of the Tolstoy Museum can be seen as the epitomisation of literary stagnation, a series of 'easily caricatured sacred cows with which the text has unabashed fun' (Klinkowitz 1994: 14).

In order to arrive at a complete picture of the common themes in Barthelme's body of work, it is important to consider not only the deconstructive, but also the constructive elements in the author's fictions. Domini (1990: 34), for example, views Barthelme as a replenisher of modernism. He argues that for Barthelme, modernism offers a 'bedrock ideological seriousness which, while it may be applied in different ways for different stories, cannot be robbed of its ethical force, not even by his otherwise devastating irony' (ibid.). Domini identifies several instances in Barthelme's fictions in which the author, rather than ridiculing his predecessors, is engaged in serious dialogue with them.

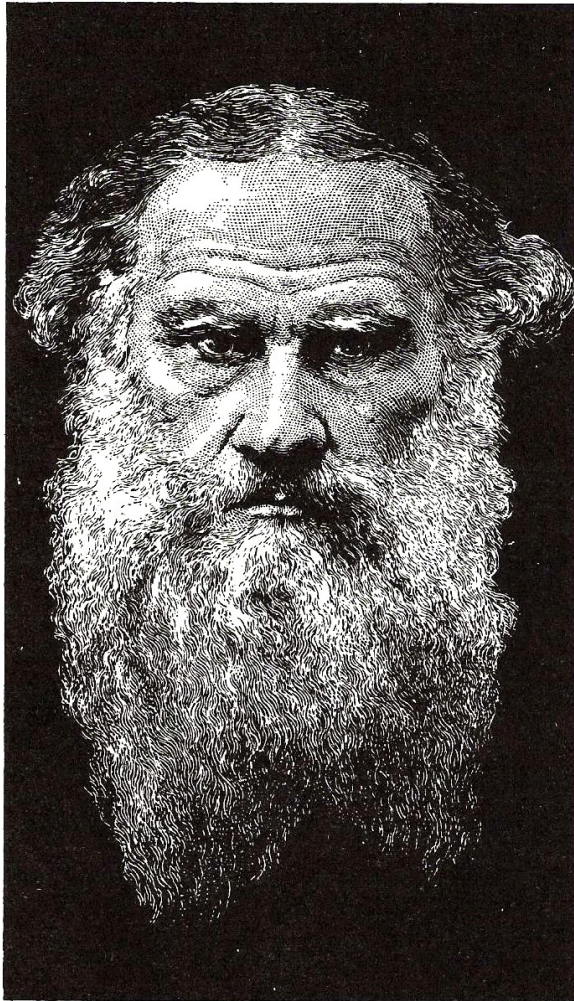
However, the topic requires further research into Barthelme's texts than is possible within the scope of the present study. As I have attempted to show, Barthelme's representations of Leo Tolstoy in 'At the Tolstoy Museum' are as multifaceted as the text itself. There is an acute need for more studies which concentrate on a textual analysis of individual stories in order to make explicit the general tendencies of Barthelme's work. As Domini notes (1990: 7), Barthelme's reliance on his literary forebears remains largely undiscussed. It is my hope that the present study is a gesture toward rectifying this condition.

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Appendix 1. Images of 'At the Tolstoy Museum'

1.1. Barthelme 1975a: 42

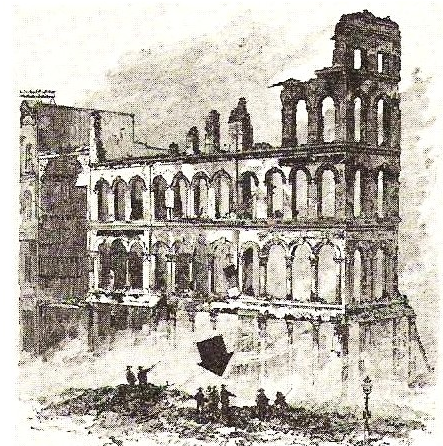


1.2. Barthelme 1975a: 46



At Starogladkovskaya,
about 1852

1.3. Barthelme 1975a: 49



At the disaster (arrow indicates Tolstoy)