THE ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS

DONALD BARTHELME

NOT-KNOWING

EDITED BY KIM HERZINGER

INTRODUCTION BY JOHN BARTH

Not-Knowing

The Essays and Interviews of Donald Barthelme

Edited by

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With an Introduction by

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Random House
New York

Published in the United States by Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously
in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Original publication information for the essays
and interviews contained within may be found in
the "Notes" section beginning on p. 321.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barthelme, Donald.
Not-knowing : the essays and interviews of Donald Barthelme / edited by Kim
Herzinger ; with a foreword by John Barth. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-679-40983-1
I. Herzinger, Kim A., 1946– . II. Title.
PS3552.A76A6 1997
814'.54—dc21 97-9170

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3
First Edition

PREFACE

This book, like *The Teachings of Don B.*, provides readers with a number of Donald Barthelme's shorter works, which until now have been almost impossible to come by. Gathered from the sometimes elusive magazines and journals that offered their first publication, only the most dedicated enthusiast of *Barthelmismo*, to use Thomas Pynchon's useful word, will have had the opportunity to read these pieces before now.

Toward the end of his life Barthelme was considering putting together a new book, comprised mainly of the pieces that are now collected here for the first time. His working title was *Pleasantries*, and it was to include "Being Bad," "On the Level of Desire," "Nudes" (his introduction to *Exquisite Creatures*), and "Worrying about women . . ." (from *Here in the Village*) from among his writings on art; the six movie reviews he did for *The New Yorker*, as well as "Earth Angel," his review of *Superman III*; "After Joyce" and "Not-Knowing"; and, finally, four pieces that appeared in *The Teachings of Don B.*: "Return," "The Art of Baseball," "Challenge," and "More Zero."

Pleasantries, then, was going to contain parodies, satires, and fables, as well as essays. All were written with different motives and for different purposes than the fictions. Nonfiction, especially the essay, is usually generated by an idea that precedes the writing; fiction, especially Barthelme's fiction, often discovers the ideas it is interested in even as it is being written. As we might expect, however, the writing in these essays is as richly textured and brilliantly

realized as that of the fiction. And, as always, any attempt by an editor to firmly and definitively categorize these slumgullions—as Barthelme once called them—runs directly into his refusal to play within the accepted boundaries of literary genres.

Despite Barthelme's characteristic unclassifiability, decisions about what to put in and what to leave out of this book were relatively simple. The essays, though they often contain features we frequently associate with fiction or parody or satire, are distinguishable from Barthelme's other work by the degree to which they put themselves in service to their subjects. They tend to be more topical, more insistent, more accessible, and their "subjects"—the generating ideas—have a greater and more obvious centrality.

Critic Jerome Klinkowitz has suggested that Barthelme's "Notes and Comment" pieces (there were thirty-one of them, and with this book we will have reprinted all but three) came as close as he ever would to "pure writing, a practice where discrimination between fact and fantasy was not an issue." Klinkowitz argues that Barthelme's fondness for these pieces, evidenced by his collecting eleven of them in *Here in the Village* (published in a limited edition in 1978 and reprinted in full here), was the result of a developing interest in the "location of himself as a writer in his world—not just among Barth, Vonnegut, and the others (although *Here in the Village* plays with that as well)—but on the street, in front of the store windows, and in the shops and service establishments themselves where life, in the form of readable texts and plottable narratives, is going on" ("Barthelme's Canonical Village," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction,* XI, 2, Summer 1991).

Klinkowitz's case for the importance of *Here in the Village* is an interesting one, and I think rightly made, but the suggestion that Barthelme was ever dislocated from "his world" is one that this collection of essays and interviews will go some distance in discouraging. Barthelme's "world" always included street and store window, art gallery and bar, daughters and banned books, embarrassing presidential behavior, hollow-core doors, baked clams, sweetly speaking architects, Nondiscernible Microbioinoculators, sunlight roaring through new green leaves, and all the rest of those things that populate *our* world, too. As William H. Gass says, "Barthelme has managed to place himself in the center of modern consciousness. Nothing surrealist about him, his dislocations are real, his material quite actual" ("The Leading Edge of the Trash Phenomenon," in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*). Or, as Barthelme himself says in "Not-Knowing," "Art thinks ever of the world,

cannot not think of the world, could not turn its back on the world even if it wished to."

Barthelme was not one to habitually confuse realism with reality. As is usually the case with writers known for their fabulism, he was acutely aware that many people actually like reality, and very often choose to live in it. He was fond of saying, in fact, that however agitated its surface might be, his work was always a meditation on reality. The novels, stories, parodies, satires, and essays always situate themselves where life is "going on." Barthelme's meditations on the reality of city life in *Here in the Village* may be said to approach the subject somewhat more straightforwardly than the stories in, say, *City Life,* but in both we are witness on every page to people colliding with the reality of the city—its tensions, noise, jarring confusions, juxtapositions, adventures, sadnesses, and delights. He was able to give us his meditations on reality from different angles of vision and by doing so produce different species of insight and pleasure.

It is, of course, tempting to declare that with the publication of *Not-Knowing, The Teachings of Don B.,* and the next volume—which will contain all the Barthelme stories that were uncollected, all those not collected in *60 Stories* or *40 Stories,* and a few unpublished pieces—that we will have been busy establishing Barthelme's canon. But alas, not so. What we will have, in fact, established is the full range of his work. From this, finally, Barthelme's canon will eventually be configured.

We have chosen to publish the full range of Barthelme's work for rather simple reasons. As a character in one of his stories says, "Our reputation for excellence is unexcelled, in every part of the world. And will be maintained until the destruction of our art by some other art which is just as good but which, I am happy to say, has not yet been invented." These are Barthelme's words (from "Our Work and Why We Do It") although he, of course, would never have used them to describe himself and his work. But others would. He was one of the "great citizens of contemporary world letters" (Robert Coover); he was "one of our greatest of all comic writers" (John Hawkes); he was able to convey in his work something of "the clarity and sweep, the intensity of emotion, the transcendent *weirdness* of the primary experience" (Thomas Pynchon). Simply put, he was without question one of the most important and influential writers of his time. Any procedure that would leave significant portions of his work sequestered and out of print, the quarry of

researchers and Barthelme specialists, would be a disservice not only to Barthelme, but to readers of contemporary literature, who ought to have the opportunity to poke and rummage through the whole of his work without having to spar with an unseen editor bent on scissoring whatever might be thought to be unworthy of them. Readers deserve to read the work, all of it, and the work deserves to be read.

The interviews, perhaps, require some special mention. In recent years, interviews have become a primary source of information about writers, a circumstance that is likely to continue as long as writers—like the rest of us—continue to conduct most of their correspondence by telephone and e-mail. The days of the great collections of letters are probably over, and although it is unlikely that the interview form will entirely replace the function once served by such collections, at least we no longer have to wait for decades to acquire the kind of understanding about a writer and a writer's work that, once, only letters provided.

Barthelme agreed to a number of interviews during his writing life, and although he was disinclined to talk about himself and even more disinclined to talk about other writers—except to praise what he thought praiseworthy in their work—the interviews included here offer something of what might reasonably be understood to be Barthelme's thoughts about writing as well as his thoughts about a great many other things having to do with "his world." The interviews range over the last eighteen years of Barthelme's life, and readers will have the opportunity to watch his notions as they expand, change, and settle. Two of the interviews have never been published, and I am particularly pleased to be able to provide the full text of the Pacifica Radio interview of 1975, which is, whatever its insufficiencies, the most sustained series of public statements Barthelme ever made.

Interviews, like letters, sometimes encourage readers and critics to invest them with an authority they do not rightly have. Although interviews promise an opportunity to get a glimpse of a writer's thoughts at something like ground level—seemingly intimate responses made more consequential by the false authority of apparent spontaneity—so also do they tend to force a writer into direct statements about matters that simply cannot be answered with direct statements. Barthelme spent a lifetime defamiliarizing the familiar, and sometimes the effect of an interview is to reverse that process. After reading the interviews, readers may well have

the same feeling that Dr. Watson has after Sherlock Holmes takes him step by step through one of his astounding deductions. We are surprised at how easy it all seems, at least until we remember once again that he is Holmes, and we are only Watson.

This is not hard to remember once we return to Barthelme's more fully accomplished works—the novels, the short fiction, the satires, the parodies, the fables, and the essays—to which the interviews can, finally, only be useful adjuncts. The reader is asked always to return to them, for they are where the magic is.

In this book, as in *The Teachings of Don B.*, the editorial apparatus has been kept to a minimum, although certain crucial information—the likely dates of composition for unpublished work, the dates of publication for published work, and so forth—is included in the "Notes" at the back of the book. As before, in cases where a work originally appeared untitled, we have supplied a first-line short title as a convenient, but not definitive, way of identifying it.

—Kim Herzinger

INTRODUCTION

"How come you write the way you do?" an apprentice writer in my Johns Hopkins workshop once disingenuously asked Donald Barthelme, who was visiting. Without missing a beat, Donald replied, "Because Samuel Beckett was already writing the way *he* does."

Asked another, likewise disingenuously, "How can we become better writers than we are?"

"For starters," DB advised, "read through the whole history of philosophy, from the pre-Socratics up through last semester. That might help."

"But Coach Barth has already advised us to read all of *literature,* from Gilgamesh up through last semester. . . ."

"That, too," Donald affirmed, and turned on that shrewd Amish-farmer-from-West-Eleventh-Street twinkle of his. "You're probably wasting time on things like eating and sleeping. Cease that, and read all of philosophy and all of literature. Also art. Plus politics and a few other things. The history of everything."

Although I count myself among the ideal auditors of my late comrade—invariably delighted, over the too-few decades of his career, by his short stories, his novels, his infrequent but soundly argued essays into aesthetics, and his miscellaneous nonfiction pieces (not to mention his live conversation, as above)—I normally see *The New Yorker,* in which so much of his writing was first published, only in the waiting rooms of doctor and dentist. I have therefore

grown used to DB-ing in happy binges once every few years, when a new collection of the wondrous stuff appears (originally from Farrar, Straus & Giroux; anon from Putnam; later from Harper & Row; finally from Random House) and I set other reading aside to go straight through it, savoring the wit, the bite, the exactitude and flair, inspired whimsy, aw-shucks urbanity, irreal realism and real irreality, wired tersitude, and suchlike Barthelmanic pleasures.

Finally, it says up in that parenthesis of his publishers. The adverb constricts my spirit; I feel again what I felt when word came of Donald's illness and death in 1989, at age merely fifty-eight, in the fullness of his life and happy artistry: my maiden experience of survivor-guilt, for we were virtual coevals often assigned to the same team or angel-choir or Hell-pit by critics friendly and not, who require such categories—Fabulist, Postmodernist, what have they. We ourselves, and the shifting roster of our team-/choir-/pit-mates, were perhaps more impressed by our *differences* than by any similarities, but there was most certainly fellow-feeling among us—and was I to go on breathing air, enjoying health and wine and food, work and play and love and language, and Donald not? Go on spinning out my sometimes hefty fabrications (which, alphabetically cheek by jowl to his on bookshelves, he professed to fear might topple onto and crush their stage-right neighbor), and Donald not his sparer ones, that we both knew to be in no such danger?

Well. One adds the next sentence to its predecessors, and over the ensuing years, as bound volumes of mine have continued to forthcome together with those of his other team-/choir-/pit-mates, it has been some balm to see (impossibly posthumous!) Donald's appearing as before, right along with them, as if by some benign necromancy: first his comic-elegaic Arthurian novel *The King* (1990); then *The Teachings of Don B.* (1992), a rich miscellany eloquently foreworded by TCP-mate Thomas Pynchon; now *Not-Knowing;* and still to come, a collection of hitherto unpublished and/or uncollected short stories.

Benign it is, but no necromancy. We owe these last fruits not only to Donald's far-ranging muse but to the dedication of his literary executors and the editorial enterprise of Professor Kim Herzinger of the University of Southern Mississippi. Thanks to that dedication and enterprise, we shall have the print-part of our fellow whole, or all but whole. Never enough, and too soon cut off—like Carver, like Calvino, all at their peak—but what a feast it is.

* * *

Its course in hand displays most directly the high intelligence behind the author's audacious, irrepressible fancy. The complementary opening essays, "After Joyce" and "Not-Knowing" (that title-piece was for years required reading in the aforementioned fiction-writing seminar at Johns Hopkins); the assorted reviews and pungent "comments" on literature, film, politics; the pieces "On Art," never far from the center of Donald's concerns; the seven flat-out interviews (meticulously edited after the fact by the interviewee)—again and again I find myself once again nodding yes, yes to their insights, obiter dicta, and mini-manifestos, delivered with unfailing tact and zing. See, e.g., "Not-Knowing" 's jim-dandy cadenza upon the rendering of "Melancholy Baby" on jazz banjolele: as astute (and hilarious) a statement as I know of about the place of "aboutness" in art. Bravo, maestro banjolelist: Encore!

Here is a booksworth of encores, to be followed by one more: the story-volume yet to come, a final serving of the high literary art for which that high intelligence existed.

And then?

Then there it is, alas, and for encores we will go back and back again to the feast whereof these are end-courses: back to *Come Back, Dr. Caligari,* to *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts,* to *Snow White* and *City Life* and the rest. Permanent pleasures of American "Postmodernist" writing, they are. Permanent literary pleasures, period.

—John Barth

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Charles Ruas; Judith Sherman; The Wylie Agency; Susanna Porter; Julie Grau; Wayne Alpern; Rie Fortenberry; Derek Bridges for his skills and dedication as editor and transcriber; and Angela Ball—who waited this out.

And special thanks once again to Marion, Frederick, and Steven Barthelme for their help and patience.

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On Writing

AFTER JOYCE

Writing about revolutionary art in an early essay titled "The Calling of the Tune," Kenneth Burke says:

> For the greater the dissociation and discontinuity developed by the artist in an otherworldly art that leaves the things of Caesar to take care of themselves, the greater becomes the artist's dependence upon some ruler who will accept the responsibility for doing the world's "dirty work."

This description of the artist turning his back on the community to pursue his "otherworldly" projects (whereupon the community promptly falls apart) is a familiar one, accepted even by some artists. Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and the writers of the *transition* school (Burke mentions them specifically) are seen as deserters, creating their own worlds which are thought to have nothing to do with the larger world. The picture is, I think, entirely incorrect, but I want to talk not about Burke's alleged wrongness on this point but about something else.

Burke's strictures raise the sticky question of what art is "about" and the mysterious shift that takes place as soon as one says that art is not about something but *is* something. In saying that the writer creates "dissociation and discontinuity" rather than merely describing a previously existing dissociation and discontinuity (the key word is "developed"), Burke notices that with Stein and Joyce the literary work becomes an object in the world rather than a text or