

POSTMODERN WORLD, POSTMODERN RELATIONSHIPS: THE ARTIST AND SOCIETY RELATIONSHIP IN BARTHELME'S FICTION

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Abstract: In this article, postmodern American fictionist Donald Barthelme's three short stories *The Glass Mountain*, *The Balloon*, and *Daumier* are analysed in terms of the artist and society relationship in today's mass society where the only criterion is money and the only escape from it is art.

Key Words: *Postmodernism, mass society, fiction, alienation, surrogate, art, artist*

Özet: Bu makalede Amerikalı postmodern roman ve öykü yazarı Donald Barthelme'nin *Sırça Dağ*, *Balon*, ve *Daumier* isimli kısa öyküleri tek ölçünün para olduğu günümüz kitle toplumundaki sanatçı toplum ilişkileri açısından incelenmiş ve bu sistemden tek kaçışın sanat olduğu vurgulanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Postmodernizm, kitle toplum, kurmaca, yabancılaşma, vekil, sanat, sanatçı*

In today's postmodern world where neither God nor man can be the center that defines reality, where to accept any institutions based on a center, a source and universality is not possible and to produce questions which demand definite and informative answers is meaningless, naturally relationships are no more the mutual, symbiotic relationships based on feelings, companionship, compatibility and affection of the modern times. Inevitably, this reflects to the fiction of the present which breaks away from the illusions of realism and conventional narration.

Barthelme, who was one of the typical postmodern fictionists dealing with the relationships in the postmodern mass society, wrote the stories *The Glass Mountain*, *The Balloon*, and *Daumier* indicating the relationship of the artist and society, all permeating by overwhelming sense that life is not as good as we expected it to be especially for the artist who is both alienated and envied by the discontented people of the mass society.

In his stories, the anxieties of the ordinary man are somewhat parallel to the anxieties of the artist. There is an overt relationship between the struggles of ordinary man to stay alive, to make sense of his life and the struggles of the artist to survive and to make sense of his life with his art. Barthelme as an artist himself, conscious of the struggles and the boredom of ordinary man tries to reflect this mood 'in new revitalized literary forms, with new methods such as verbal fragmentation and free association to break down the familiar sense of order and to stay on the surface refusing to explain the deep meanings' (McCaffery, 1982: 101) as seen in *The Glass Mountain* when the artist touches the symbol that turns into a beautiful princess.

To reflect the lack of communication among people which causes frustration and disappointment, his characters mostly use short, seemingly meaningless sentences that make sense only when regarded as a whole in the surrounding context. His characters' inability to change their conditions prevent them from spontaneous, liberating activities. Only the artist who has the ability and the courage can change the conditions and only the artist who has the initiation can choose his own response to life.

The Glass Mountain

The Glass Mountain like most of Barthelme's other stories has a surreal, symbolic setting. Symbols and signs play an important role to show how they operate in today's mass society and in the artists' world where symbols have different meanings and signs have different functions. 'Barthelme's own evident artistic anxieties are reflected within his stories some of whose main characters are artist figures' (McCaffery, 1982: 100). The artist who tries to climb to the top of the glass mountain is one of them. The difficulties of expressing oneself as an artist and sustaining relationships with others in the society, the failure of today's social system and the trash that the masses have produced are the anxieties and terrors which the artist wants to escape from by climbing the mountain, leaving them behind.

The story consists of hundred numbered sentences and 'Barthelme tells us about the predicament of the artist, envied, hated and alienated from his society for having dedicated himself to his art--- a task as precarious and unrewarding as climbing a glass mountain' (Araz, 1999: 88) in the story. The artist-- narrator seeks to escape from his ugly, hostile surroundings to the realm of art but what he finds is just more conventions, more cliches, for when he reaches the top- the end of his quest, he tells us:

I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess (SS,65).

But only then, he has the chance, the liberty to choose and realise what he wants above all the cliches of the society, and he chooses to throw the beautiful princess head first down the mountain to his acquaintances 'who could be relied upon to deal with her' (SS, 65).

The masses below whom the artist calls 'my acquaintances' are savage, aggressive blood-suckers who greedily wait for the fall of the artist to rob him, to get his apartment, to see if he makes a splash when he falls and to dip their handkerchiefs in his blood as they did to the ones who have fallen before. Here, we see the panorama of contemporary mass society of today and of the present system and Barthelme focuses on the artist who tries to escape from this society and system.

The Balloon

Barthelme's story *The Balloon* presents an allegory about the status of an art object's relationship to both its creator and his public. The narrator of *The Balloon* opens his story by describing his creation and then reminding us of his control over it:

The Balloon, beginning at a point at Fourteenth Street, the exact location of which I cannot reveal, expanded northward all one night, while people were sleeping, until it reached the park. There I stopped it (SS, 15).

We discover only in the very last paragraph of the story that this balloon had a specific meaning and served a specific purpose for the narrator. He tells his girlfriend on her return from a journey:

The balloon, I said, is a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure, having to do with the unease I felt at your absence, and with sexual deprivation, but now that your visit to Bergen has been terminated, it is no longer necessary or appropriate (SS, 21).

The narrator does not intend this private meaning to be apprehended by his audience at the outset. Indeed, his main interest seems to be simply to add an interesting object to the landscape of Manhattan. As he explains:

But it is wrong to speak of situations, implying sets of circumstances leading to some resolutions, some escape of tension; there were no situations, simply the balloon hanging there..... at that moment there was only this balloon, concrete particular, hanging there (SS, 15-16).

Naturally, the public experiences some difficulties in analysing the balloon, but eventually, people take a more practical approach to its presence since practicality is the order of the day.

There was a certain amount of initial argumentation about the ‘meaning’ of the balloon; this subsided, because we have learned not to insist on meanings, and they are rarely even looked for now, except in cases involving the simplest, safest phenomena (SS, 16).

Instead of seeking its meanings, ‘because mysteries are undesirable, threatening to security and composure’ (Araz, 1999: 86), the public soon starts to use the balloon for their own uses. They agree that the meaning of the balloon could never be known absolutely, therefore, some hang green and blue lanterns and some write messages on its surface. Soon, the balloon is used like any other object to help people in orienting themselves.

People began in a curious way, to locate themselves in relation to aspects of the balloon: “I’ll be at the place where it dips down into Forty-seventh Street almost to the sidewalk, near the Alamo Chile House (SS, 20).”

The balloon-the art object- also provides a sense of freedom and a moment of distraction from the routine, the suppressing realities of the world since it is something that they can play with or interpret freely. As is seen in Barthelme’s other stories whose subject is art and/or the artist, art offers people the limitless freedom of imagination and choice.

Daumier

One of Barthelme’s complex stories Daumier like *The Glass Mountain* and *The Balloon* deals with the artist and his relationship with his society which limits and closes every opening for the artist to breathe. In Daumier there are stories within stories. The first story is the story of the writer—narrator who explains that if we want reconciliation with life, we should create our own surrogates, for the surrogate is designed and therefore be satiable unlike us who are neutral and can never be fully satisfied. Daumier who is a writer and also the narrator of the story pictures this with the characters that he creates for his fiction. As his fiction moves on, his characters; that is, his surrogates alter his reality and provide him a temporary satiety.

The story also shows us how fictional characters have a life of their own. They have their own lives and dictate their own plot. It is no more the writer who writes but the characters that act. Different from his other fictions, Barthelme’s Daumier—the writer, falls in love with his own creation Celeste and she alters his reality. There are two other Daumiers apart from the writer Daumier in the story since there are different stories and different plots within the same story.

The story begins with two hired men; Bellows and Hawkins and a scout also called Daumier like the writer himself. Their task is to make sure that the au-pair girls

arrive safely 'both in mind and body' (SS,217) at the railway station. The reader cannot be sure whether Bellows, Hawkins and Daumier are thieves or rescuers. The writer introduces them as though they are part of the picture that he draws with words just like the other objects in the plain. He tells the landscape in detail but encloses it in a frame like a picture:

The plain presented in its foreground a heavy yellow oblong salt lick rendered sculptural by the attentions over a period of time of sheep or other salt-loving animals. Two horses in the situations upper lefthand corner watched the men with nervous horse-gaze (SS,116).

However Bellows who knows the limits steps out of the frame because he has his own scenario to follow. The surrogate Daumier is also distracted from the script by a message from the queen regarding her stolen jewels.

A band of hard-riding fanatical Jesuits race toward the scene to release the girls from the toils of the traffic for a life in the convent. In the middle of this, the writer Daumier describes the flow of reality about himself and gives a long list of books to consult for his fiction. Some of the names of the books are Self-Abuse, The Effected Self, The Sordid Self, which are all apt to feed the greedy, insatiable mouth of the self. What Barthelme tries to show the reader here is that, with the digestion of such materials we might be able to produce art, a story with a satiable surrogate. We need the surrogates because the authentic self is 'a dirty great villain', a big mouth always open, ready to swallow everything in front of him but never satisfied and closed.

In the au-pair story, we are introduced to Celeste who acts as though she had a life of her own, independent of her creator like Bellows who would pick up blue-bonnets which is not in the writer's script.

The second Daumier makes a plan to distract the Jesuits but his plan fails when he himself is distracted by the beauty of Celeste and sinks into swoon because most of the girls are kidnapped meanwhile. From this point on, their fate created by their creator—the writer Daumier is altered. The life of the second Daumier is changed by his own fantasy of Celeste. He creates his own reality different from the writer's and his role as a scout gives way to a new identity who is not responsible for the protection of the girls:

Then Daumier looked at Celeste and saw that the legs on her were as long and slim as his hope of Heaven and the thighs on her were as strong and sweet-shaped as ampersands and the buttocks on her were as pretty as two pictures and the waist on her was as neat and incurved as the waist of a fiddle and the shoulders on her were as tempting as sex crimes and the hair on her was as long and black as Lent and the movement of the whole was honey, and he sank into a swoon'(SS, 221).

Another character, a musketeer to solve the queen-necklace problem, enters the story as the writer Daumier argues that one should rather concentrate on his surrogates rather than himself since surrogates distract one from his problems

because for the artist ‘art is the reaction to one’s lifelong sense of personal worthlessness, inculcated in him through years of paternal irony’ (McCaffery, 1982:107).

Then Daumier’s stories end and he admits his fondness for his own creation Celeste. He becomes obsessed with his own creation and wishes to alter his own reality through his fiction:

I began to wonder how I could get her out of his life and into my own (SS, 225).

He leaves Amelia, the woman in his real life, to get Celeste into his life. Yet he knows that he needs two Celestes to make him completely happy. His solution is to give a ‘trial run’ to the third Daumier who has failed at having long emotional experiences. But still he might succeed, both as an artist and a man because ‘there are always openings’ for us. But he fails and Celeste runs away from the other plot to the writer’s plot. At that point, the writer’s self and the third Daumier are absorbed in each other and become one. Celeste remains fictional and the writer celebrates himself by preparing a spiritual meal for Celeste.

At the end, happy with his life the writer wraps up his fictional characters; Hawkins, Bellows, and his Daumier surrogates in tissue paper and puts them all away in a drawer for another time. He concludes:

The self cannot be escaped but it can be, with ingenuity and hard work, distracted. There are always openings, you can find them, there is always something to do (SS, 230).

As indicated in the story, for Barthelme art has a special meaning for the artist. He is nourished by his surrogates, his characters and fiction as a whole. His art is his opening to breathe.

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