

RHETORIC AND UNCERTAINTY IN READING
DONALD BARTHELME'S *ME AND MISS MANDIBLE*

This essay addresses the narrative strategies present in Donald Barthelme's short story: *Me and Miss Mandible*. I am most interested in the way the special techniques of narration employed by the narrator contribute to the subject-constituting strategies used by the narrator and the reader of the text. When addressing such a question one should take into consideration the eminent rhetoric features of, and the reading and interpreting strategies preferred by the text. The objective of my paper is to discuss the rhetoric features of this particular short story, but on the course of my paper I will refer to other characteristics of Donald Barthelme's works too. I will propose an outline of the central experiences of reading such a text. I will focus on the role of memory, the subject-constituting strategies, and the place of reality/reference without trying to build up a coherent interpretation of this controversial work. I will focus on the problem of temporality, and its effect on understanding, and I will try to show that the subject's confrontation with his temporality is inscribed in the structure and language-use of the text. Trying to position the rhetoric features in any horizon but the text's own is well beyond the scope of my paper. Being aware of the fact that an approach of this kind has certain necessary blind spots I will not attempt to draw a complete picture of the text, instead, I will outline the most eminent rhetoric characteristics of the short story paying close attention only to the topics mentioned above. The main focus of attention will be laid on the way subjectivity is reflected in the rhetoric of the short story.

Underlying what Molesworth called Barthelme's three key subjects — "the futility of work in a post-industrial society, the emotional disorientation of divorce (in both literal and metaphoric terms), and the impotent double-mindedness of the artist" — many critics perceive fascination with cultural disintegration: advertising slogans, facts from the public media, objects arrayed like trash on a junkpile, and opinions and actions unmoored from any system of belief that might give them meaning. Barthelme's contradictory attitude toward the cultural debris, which his work both celebrates and deplores is best revealed in his short-stories.

In *Me and Miss Mandible*, Barthelme concentrates on certain cultural pieces and their range of implications. Molesworth says that "Barthelme's work can be read as an attack on the false consciousness generated by meretricious sources of information that are accepted as commonplace in the modern, technologized, urban society of mass man." In *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass*, Larry McCaffery writes: "If there is a sense of optimism in [Barthelme's] work, it does not derive from the familiar modernist belief that art offers the possibility of escape from the disorders of the modern world or that art can change existing conditions; Barthelme overtly mocks these beliefs along with most other modern credos. Instead, Barthelme posits a less lofty function for art with his suggestion that it is valuable simply because it gives man a chance to create a space in which the deadening effects of ordinary living can be momentarily defied." The meaning of these signs depends upon the context providing the text with temporal dimensions, their functions are rooted in their contextualization. This exterminates the presence of the work as a closed entity, and establishes it as a Text.

Memory becomes part of the short story's textual structure and functions in the self-understanding of the I. The tradition being a characteristic index of temporality: self-identification of the reader and the narrator can be carried out only with regard to the preceding texts, that is, the always-already interpreted tradition. This fact has far-reaching poetic and rhetoric consequences in the text. The most apparent features of which are that these characteristics divide the text into autonomous pictures: their connection becomes the main task of the interpreter. The narrator repeatedly looks to the story of his past/future for evidence of himself. He, in his "former role[s]," fails to read the appropriate sign-systems correctly, "mislocating" himself as Adjuster, husband, and cadet. The "clue[s]" created to guide him through his roles only cloud his self-awareness and problematise his position to the recommended 'standards' imposed by the larger signifying structures of the text.

7 October

Once I tiptoed up to Miss Mandible's desk (when there was no one else in the room) and examined its surface. Miss Mandible is a clean-desk teacher, I discovered. There was nothing except her gradebook (the one in which I exist as a sixth grader) and a text, which was open at a page headed Making the Processes Meaningful.

The purpose of his "re-education" is to resituate him, stabilise him again in the world of readable signs and stories, to permit him to create a "promis[ing]" version of himself. However, versions of the narrator are everywhere in the text: in Miss Mandible's "gradebook," the principal's "card index," the narrator's personal journal (our framing text), Sue Ann's *Movie-Tv Secrets* ("[she was] certain now which of us was Debbie, which Eddie, which Liz"), in the Army serial codes. These traces make up the narrator as we see him: shifting, shapeless, unregenerate, unstable: a product which, in many ways, resists being read. The narrator is not in control of his subject-constituting strategies any more and this leads to the establishment of a structure in which there is a wide gap between the I remembering and the I remembered, submitted to the forces of textualization which, in turn, is governed by memory. The uncontrollability undermines any attempt to re-structure the events represented in his memories, thus any relation with the text poses a threat to the reader's identity. The reader's task is to analyse the textual conditions of such a deconstruction, the process of reading being, in fact, the maintenance of this deconstruction. Narration takes the past-present-future relation as its context leading to the contradiction of the interpretative directions.

23 September

Every morning the roll is called: Bestvina, Bokenfohr, Broan, Brownly, Cone, Coyle, Crecelius, Darin, Durbin, Geiger, Guiswite, Heckler, Jacobs, Kleinschmidt, Lay, Logan, Masei, Mitgang, Pfeilsticker. It is like the litany chanted in the dim miserable dawns of Texas by the cadre sergeant of our basic training company.

This constitutes ground for the reading subject to interpret the signs of self understanding and subject-constituting problematically: the thematization of temporality underlies the I's relation to context and meaning. This is the result of the narrator's attempts to create textual integration and successive linearity by taking diary as the text's frame.

The personal yet calm tone and the overwhelming presence of memories are the roots of the excess of self-reflexive signification: "I am being solicited for the volleyball team. I decline, refusing to take unfair profit of my height." The I's relation to its divided subjectivity results in an ambivalence present in the rhetoric structure too, that is, in the citation-like characteristics of the short story. *Me and Miss Mandible* attempts to achieve

but still lacks a diachronic plot structure, and reads, as so many of Barthelme's works do (*The Glass Mountain, Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning*), like a "collage fiction[.]," a "text[.] constructed from shards" (Olson 13). It is written in the epistolary mode, suggesting an "attachment" to the fictional subject, a perpetual nearness to what is being said and who in the story is saying it. The dated entries look as if they're pasted on the page, assembled sections of text containing historical evidence, introspective thoughts, and school-room folklore, each pointing to the story's supposed centre: a thirty-five year old sixth grader. Maurice Couturier notes in *Donald Barthelme*, that the writer's idiom is marked by a "high degree of impersonality." Lois Gordon suggests that Barthelme's most eminent formal technique is a "shifting from one voice of authority to another, or manipulation or literalization of metaphor or cliché, or creation of open-ended or seemingly non-fixed situations" that "is noticeably *dislocating* (or disorienting)." Molesworth writes, "For Barthelme the highest success is not if the story strikes us as true, but rather if it shows us how it works." Which is exactly the case in the rhetoric of the text. The rhetoric features might be interpreted as an attempt to approach impersonality, while the pathetic, tragic modalities are overcome by a self-reflexive, ironic voice.

11 November

A ruined marriage, a ruined adjusting career, a grim interlude in the Army when I was almost not a person. This is the sum of my existence to date, a dismal total. Small wonder that the re-education seemed my only hope. It is clear even to me that I need reworking in some fundamental way. How efficient is the society that provides thus for the salvage of its clinkers!

Plucked from my unexamined life among other pleasant, desperate, money-making young Americans, thrown backwards in space and time, I am beginning to understand how I went wrong, how we all go wrong. (Although this was far from the intention of those who sent me here; they require only that I get right.)

Intertextuality in the short stories of Donald Barthelme is presented in its ambiguity as the unavoidable instance of the textual tradition constituting a potential self-understanding horizon for the I and the text. Unexpected changes might occur in the process of signification, thus no absolute presence is established for the subject of speaking.

The protagonist's urge to establish a pattern for life originates in his wish to understand what he is and to define the position of his being in the world. The narrator, Miss Mandible, Sue Ann, and Bobby Vanderbilt, actively construct their identities, their narrative "roles" from existing texts, from selected cultural sign-systems, by reading and reproducing in their actions and attitudes a network of values readily pre-packaged for consumption. The speaking I has no discrete discourse, and its self identifying processes are being deconstructed within and by the text. As texts/signs (*Road and Track*, *Movie-Tv Secrets*, the American flag, the Great Northern Insurance Company) give up meaning products, meaning effects, Barthelme's characters seek them out and use them as paradigms for carrying out and making sense of their own lives.

The theorists fail to realize that everything that is either interesting or lifelike in the class room proceeds from what they would probably call interpersonal relations: Sue Ann kicking me in the ankle.

Sue Ann's ongoing exchange with the gloss magazine *Movie-Tv Secrets* warrants a brief look: "...[I]t is obvious she has been studying their history as a guide to what she may expect when she is suddenly freed from this drab, flat classroom". Charles Molesworth, writing in *Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved from Drowning*, states: "For the typical Barthelme character, it is just the variousness of the world that spells defeat, since the variety is both a form of plenitude and the sign of its absence. The realm of historical allusions, current events and fashionable topics exists in a world whose fullness results from the absence of any strong hierarchical sense of values, and the causal randomness of such things both blurs and signals how any appeal to a rigorous, ordering value system would be futile."

The text serves as a pretext for the interpretation of the reader's understanding. The interpreter confides fragments of the text to the signs that exist within his/her mental horizon. These signs have few in common with the author's intentions or the semantic unity of the text, but help create and reinterpret the systems of signification. The language used by narrator while speaking to himself problematises time that holds him captive in the here and now. In doing so it opens up the past, the future, and time in general, a dimension with a consistency of its own. By the creation and use

of language, he inhabits a space, a temporal flux, which is being taken as a whole.

The emphasis laid on this dialectic ambiguity seems important: the ability to differentiate between sign and meaning enables the reader to unleash a significant textual potential. This tension is not so much of an exclusion, rather an ability to be on both sides of the border at the same time. This technique is similar to the synchronicity of the connection and separation of the texts consisting of the non-identical repetition or iterability of signs. That means the assuring of a duality that is not intended to solve the controversy entirely on either side of the opposition.

Barthelme's technique is to use the ambiguities of time and reality to make and assess moral points and issues about man's attitudes towards life. The sudden and unexpected change in the features of time and place is rooted in the semantic plurality of the text and is the basis of the reinterpretation of the short story. In the system of time and space the time vector narrows and the space vector gets undermined. This results in the fact that the signifiers that used to be central elements in the structure of the text become deconstructed and remain only a function. Their previous symbolic position is replaced by their metaphoric role, exposing them to the interpretation interested in deconstruction the order mentioned above. The other characteristic of this economy is, however, that it covers, hides those levels of meaningfulness that would be problematic for the reader to unfold. These layers would urge the reader to rethink the basic notions of his horizon in the reading process to be able to interact with the text. Such a notion is the hierarchic and functional differentiation between the reader and the author. It is the border between the primer and secondary reading that carries out the deconstruction of this opposition. The role of the author is suddenly and radically taken over by the reader whose role is to restructure the signifying system, while he/she is still responsible for the meaning generating processes as far as his/her self-identifying practises are concerned.

The creation of the narrative position does not enable the narrator to look in the mirror, thus there is no objective description or characterisation of him. The speaker analyses himself in the net of his emotions, reactions, relations to other characters or to himself. Memory and desire are central notions of the structure, the flow of consciousness determines the narrative and gives ironic modality to the text: the impossibility of the desires of memories and the impossibility of self-identification rule the narrative

structure.

There are isolated challenges to my largeness, to my dimly realized position in the class as Gulliver. Most of my classmates are polite about this matter, as they would be if I had only one eye, or wasted, metal-wrapped legs. I am viewed as a mutation of some sort but essentially a peer.

The question of reliable/unreliable narrator is central from the aspect of the reading strategies to be applied. The narrator's behaviour is rather misleading since on the one hand the self-reflexive fragments reveal uncertainty in the competence of recalling the past, on the other hand his story-telling strategies are those of a reliable narrator. This enables him to create linearity (through not a temporal linearity) in the events told. This is destabilised by the fact that the self-reflexive, introspective narrative strategy might seem unreliable because it shows the events from a biased, subjective perspective positioning the speaker in the focus. Attempting to naturalise the narrator is a difficult task for the interpreter to perform. The reader fights with the notion of the narrator's doubleness: he is sometimes unable to decide whether he is eleven or thirty-five years old. The interpreter cannot fix him in any preferable time frame or shiftless textual space thus it seems impossible to "pin [him] down" and freeze him in a "manageable framework." But such a move is in itself ineffectual, and the product of deictic trauma. Lending a conventional "realist" framework to Barthelme mutes the probing nature of his work. Acceptance and tolerance of the narrator's undecidability allows us to ask questions on how the narrator perceives and makes sense of himself. The narrator shares the reader's initial anxiety when confronted with his problematic situation at Horace Greeley Elementary:

There is a misconception here, one that I haven't quite managed to get cleared up yet...It may be that Miss Mandible also knows this, at some level, but for reasons not fully understood by me she is going along with the game.

A ready-made uncertainty is built into the text. Here the textual objects call attention to themselves as language products, as fictionalised items, which purport to be nothing, as far as they can be seen, but another story among

the infinite number of stories revolving in and around and from them. We see the narrator mostly in fragments: diary entries detailing partial accounts of past episodes and former "life-roles", chunks of thoughts about "[his] situation and [his] fellows," about Sue Ann and Miss Mandible, and those sweeping comments on the socio-cultural phenomena of "mislocating" signs. The fragmentary narrative and pastiche-like character construction add to the destabilizing/stabilizing effect of *Me and Miss Mandible* and has affect on the reader, and this impact speaks to readers particularly conscious of their role as producers and consumers of textual meaning(s). The narrative strategies thus outline an autocratic text-generating function that focuses its perspective on itself, yet leaves most of the things recalled uncertain. This creates an ambiguous, asymmetric narrative position, which can not cover up the unstable state of the subjectivity on the level of énonciation.

The short-story is structured by the absolute viewpoint of its narration. Fragmented as it may be, narration recalls the memories of the unity of the classical modernity characterised by the great narratives. This is undermined by the fact that the short story does not have a closed frame structure, which invalidates the linearity of narration, as any form of teleology becomes incomprehensible. Miller supports the idea that meaning is generated from the difference that the repetition creates between the two versions of a story. Repetition produces some meaning in the gap of difference, in the empty space emerging from the opaque similarity.¹

Iser considers the structural empty spaces and necessary uncertainties of the literary work to be the most important dimension of the playground for the reader to create an interpretative position following the instructions and directions of the text.² This way the attempt to create consistent meanings and to find bases for identification are the most important aspects of the reading process. Temporal as it may seem, the hermeneutic gap created by the rhetoric of the text is a permanent one.³ Its filling is carried out only in subsequent re-readings that do affect the primer text but do not form the stable base of a coherent interpretation: the blank is a

¹ J. H. Miller, *Fiction and Repetition. Seven English Novels* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 9-11.

² Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens* (München: Sinkferlag, 1976), 249-250.

³ Shlomith Rimmon Kenan's categories. Shlomith Rimmon Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1983),

paradigmatic structure in fiction, Iser says⁴, and this holds for the fictional texts of the interpretation too.

The access to the past is gained through a dialectic relation to the self-reflexive points of the text, which also characterises the attempts toward self-identification and understanding the tradition. The first person singular narrator limits the choices of the reader in identifying himself/herself and in relating to roles in the text. The reader is introduced to a world of memories, which enables him/her to form and create new worlds in the gaps of the text by his imagination. This interpretation is based upon the fact that the need for constructing consistent meanings seems to be the central expectation while reading an epic text,⁵ because it is precisely this technique that allows the reader to enter the structure of the text.⁶ A pronounced feeling of uneasiness seems to mark our reception of Barthelme, a range of anxiety expressed mainly in our responses to the story's narrator. Questions concerning his reliability and authenticity, and why Barthelme chooses to construct him in the manner he does become paramount, serving as pivotal gauges from which we read and critique his character.

Identification has crucial functions in the action-structure of the interpretation carried out by the implicit reader. Since it is evident that the characters appear only through the inner perspective of the I speaking, the text's offers for identification regard mostly the narrator's position, which is of overwhelming importance.

Miss Mandible wants to make love to me but she hesitates because I am officially a child; I am, according to the records, according to the gradebook on her desk, according to the card index in the principal's office, eleven years old. There is a misconception here, one that I haven't quite managed to get cleared up yet. I am in fact thirty-five, I've been in the Army, I am six feet one, I have hair in the appropriate places, my voice is baritone, I know very well what to do with Miss Mandible if she ever makes up her mind.

⁴ Wolfgang Iser, "Interaction between Text and Reader," in Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman eds., *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 119.

⁵ Peter Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), 16-20.

⁶ Wolfgang Iser 1976, 61-62.

The role of the implicit reader might be interpreted as follows: the need for creating consistency urges the reader to construct stories, generate meanings, create teleology, and to eventually reinterpret and change his/her mental map of the text. The implicit reader continuously reinterprets the past and changes his/her preconceptions and expectations regarding the future while creating consistency in the act of reading, using ever-changing sources of information. The need for creating consistency comes from the non-static nature of the short story, as it urges the reader to correct and readjust his/her expectations when filling the gaps of the text in the hermeneutic situation.

I am not irritated by the feeling of having been through all this before.
Things are done differently now.

If we suppose that reflexive reading is in contradistinction to primary understanding we consider both as intact, monolith, mental phenomena. In this case the notion of reading forms a hypothetical entity, which can be attached to various textual structures. This seems to be a misinterpretation even if we know that interpretation is a mental activity carried out according to the features of the text, and it is led by lingual strategies beyond the subject's capacity to control. It seems that it is more logical to consider both interpretative processes to be the results of the application of language games always already at work and as such they cannot be detached from thinking proper or from each other. The salient structures⁷ of the secondary interpretation impeding linear readings are present within the primer interpretation and have no distinctive markers. This does not make the differentiation between the two impossible but makes the attempt to differentiate between them problematic for two reasons: the secondary reading is part of the primary reading, and the existence of the primary reading is considered from within the secondary one. From this aspect the differentiation between the two seems difficult because their relation is very complex. It would be interesting, however, to define the characteristics of the secondary reading from the aspect of primary understanding. Such an

⁷ For a detailed discussion of this concept see: T. G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge/London: Harvard UP, 1986), 43-71.

analysis would result in interesting answers for edifying questions concerning the obstacles to the successive linearity of the interpretative process.

Reality is represented in a dual effect concerning the free-play of the signifiers. On the one hand there are certain dead-ends for particular sign-series because they have a central role in the interpretative process as monolith units and shortcut the free-play. Reality is the guarantee and base of the subject's belief in the controllability of the meaning-generating processes on micro and macro levels alike. The possibility of signifying and grasping reality suggests that the play is not endless and this has far-reaching consequences on the praxis and theory of interpretation. I am referring here to the question of intention, that is, to the desire or imperative that connects the meaningfulness of the text to the possibility of finishing the narrative and the meaning-generating processes.

The rhetoric re-interpreting of the text assures a multiply marked position for self-reflection. The rhetoric of the text signs not only the border but also a modified repetition that structures the text again and again in the reading process. The notion of the border does not mean ultimate closure since the formal markers of the structure of the text serve only as signs for the processes of thinking, and they can never actually lead the latter ones. However, the marked nature of the rhetoric is evident, since it is the most important point of reference for the secondary text of interpretation. The comparison is marked mostly formally, and even if it has an interpretative role it usually does not alter the directions of the reading process. The last sentences do not only make the information gathered by that point obsolete but also put the primer text in quotation and emphasises the need for, and the possibility of the prevalence of the meaning-generating processes of the interpretative praxis instead, without providing the reader with any practical information concerning the text to be written. The reason for the reader's ambiguous and unstable relation to the action is the shift of the grounds of reality within the short story.⁸ The data appearing in the text constantly reinterpret the things already interpreted in a conventional, realistic way.

Only I, at times (only at times), understand that somehow a

⁸ See: Wolfgang Iser "Az irodalom funkciótörténeti szövegmodellje." *Helikon* 26 (1980): 44.

mistake has been made, that I am in a place where I don't belong. It may be that Miss Mandible also knows this, at some level, but for reasons not fully understood by me she is going along with the game. When I was first assigned to this room I wanted to protest, the error seemed obvious, the stupidest principal could have seen it; but I have come to believe it was deliberate, that I have been betrayed again.

Fiction is a modal structure and like reality, the narrative consists of a multiplicity of plural worlds. This plurality provides the narrative with various, coexistent, yet incompatible levels of reference.⁹ Thus the short story itself is not so much of a pretext for the interpretations rather an intertext that has a crucial part in the signifying practice without being true or false in itself. Barthelme provides a system of expectations against which the reader constructs a different reality. The most important question here concerns the rhetoric of the text generated by negation and contradiction.

It is an interesting phenomenon that the reader tries to substitute the secondary text generated in the reading process for the primer text. As I have suggested, the aim is the filling of a gap that is present on the one hand between the énoncé and the énonciation of the text, and on the other hand between former and latter states of the interpretative horizon. The fact that this self-reflexive point is present almost everywhere in the text has an important role, since it makes the attempts for a dialogue between the text and the interpretation futile. The dialogue ceases to exist right when the interpretation would need it the most, and a sudden information gap is created. To fill this gap the reader needs a text, and this urges him/her to reinterpret his/her previous reading and to problematise the meanings of the text. This procedure has certain obstacles though, for the text is exceptionally well-structured and fits into traditional narrative structures.

In the metaphoric interpretation the ontological level of meaning appears through the epistemological level of the existential problem posed by the text. Such an interpretation refers to a very important aspect of the text, which — besides being inexplicable on the ontological level — might have far reaching consequences concerning the epistemology of the short

⁹ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Possible Worlds in Recent Literary Theory," *Style* 26 (1992): 528, 540-542.

story. This interpretation is fuelled and limited by the economy of the primary reading at the same time. The economy comes from the fact that the fusion of the horizon of the text with the horizon of the reader is powered by the energy gained from the effective-historical consciousness. It seems that this short story follows the most important patterns of the traditional narrative texts and thus it does not make the reader radically reinterpret his horizon of expectations. The historical nature of understanding is the base of the pre-structured features of interpretation and it is the presence of the effective-historical consciousness that enables the reader to achieve a fusion of his horizon with the horizon of the short story. This does not mean that such an interpretation could not succeed in analysing the epistemological problems posed by the text.

Characteristically the criteria of reality are always already determined by the structures of signification covering the places of reality. The reader (and the speaker), however, can not learn about the lack of reality, since signification conceals and creates it, referring to the non-existence of extralingual "objective" reality. Hiding the origin and denying reference leads to excess in the signifying structure of the text, namely the presence of the structure centre in the free-play of signifiers. However, when speaking about the reality of the text we should consider the following: reality as a reference of a text is not the experience of the actual world, because the process of signifying does not obey the rules of referential, metonymic strategies, since its base is simulation as a signifying practice and as an ontological category. This signs the successful self-deconstruction of these readings, as far as the successful interpretation is always self-reflexive even though the forming of an extralingual point of view is impossible. This extra-textual point of reference would mean the viewpoint of another reading that can never get out of the structure because it is coded in the language of the effective-history of the text read. Having a crucial function in constituting the reading subject, the interpretative strategies offered in the interpellation of the text are created through the figurativity of language. This can be considered as an ultimate lingual experience, and it is for this reason that the rhetoric elements play a central role in determining the reading positions, rhetoric being the characteristic of the hermeneutic situation of reading the text.