

# DONALD BARTHELME



A N E X H I B I T I O N

Jerome Klinkowitz

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**Jerome Klinkowitz**



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for Ihab Hassan



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## Acknowledgments and

### a Note on the Texts

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**D**onald Barthelme: *An Exhibition* was begun as a lively, contemporaneous affair in May 1989, as part of my preparation for a lecture to Professor Ihab Hassan's seminar on postmodernism at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Center for Twentieth Century Studies. The lecture and subsequent discussions took place on July 20, after which I returned home for more work on the book. At which point Richard Kostelanetz phoned from New York with the news of my subject's death.

As will be apparent from my approach to his works, which has taken the form of a retrospective exhibition meant to highlight the centrality of *The Dead Father* to his canon, Donald Barthelme was exceptionally generous, letting me poke in and around his personal and professional life far beyond the conventions of customary interviews. In another context, his and my friend Kurt Vonnegut described this style of scholarship as "therapeutic vivisection," something most contemporary authors have to suffer now and then. Don's patience with these probings and slicings, however, was nothing short of remarkable. In heaven there is no beer—nor J. & B. scotch, fax machines, phones, or even mail deliveries. We have God to thank for that, and Donald Barthelme to thank for sharing so much information while he was alive.

In the long haul of working on Barthelme's writing I must thank Asa Pieratt and Robert Murray Davis for collaborating with me on the first Barthelme bibliography in 1977 and Julie Huffman-klinkowitz for keeping it updated since. I'm grateful to Ihab Hassan for getting me interested in *The Dead Father* as a central text, and to the University of Northern Iowa for believing in my work; once again, the university has been my sole source of

support for this project, in this case a direct grant from the office of President Constantine W. Curris followed by a Summer Research Fellowship from our Graduate College.

All quotations are taken from the first editions of Donald Barthelme's novels, essays, and short story collections (which are referred to by page reference and abbreviated title as keyed in my concluding bibliography), or from individual magazines and books edited by others in cases where the material had not yet been collected by Barthelme (with full citations in the bibliography). Special thanks are due to *The New Yorker* for identifying unsigned contributions to the "Comment" section of the magazine's "Talk of the Town" pages.

Donald Barthelme



## Prologue:

### With Don in the Village

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**I**t was a leafy and still bright early evening, in the mid-October season that makes New York City a most attractively livable place. For years, when writing Don Barthelme at his West Eleventh Street address, I'd pictured it like the other areas of Greenwich Village known from previous trips: the bustling street life around Washington Square, the lofts along Crosby and Spring streets, or even the broad openness and commercial desolation I'd seen down Hudson Street. That's where I'd found Clarence Major, Steve Katz, Michael Stephens, and Gil Sorrentino, and their apartments had each seemed in turn the ideal place from which to launch a literary revolution. But West Eleventh was something surprisingly new. No tall buildings—just a row on each side of semi-detached town houses and flats two or at the most three stories high, with front steps leading down into well-kept, neatly fenced little front yards. One could barely hear the traffic swishing along Sixth Avenue to the east, and after a few steps from the Seventh Avenue subway its urban rumble faded away, replaced by bird-song in the trees and the soft conversation of residents out walking their dogs, heading off to dinner, or lounging on their front steps as casual and secure as any Midwestern small town dwellers.

It was a side of New York I'd never seen, and hadn't associated with Donald Barthelme. Yet it was part of his textual identity, albeit unsigned—he'd been writing informal pieces within the anonymity of the "Comment" section from *The New Yorker's* introductory "Talk of the Town" pages for years, and just about this time the ambience of life in and around West Eleventh Street had begun taking a prominent part in these ruminations and descriptions. My bibliography work would reveal their authorship,

and Barthelme himself seemed sufficiently pleased with their quality to collect them a few years later in a small press edition, *Here in the Village*. But on this early October evening of 1975, that side of him was something I'd yet to uncover and appreciate.

Finding his address near mid-block, I opened the yard's wrought iron gate and headed toward the stairs. Inside the vestibule were several mailboxes and doorbells, one of which bore a punched plastic label reading "Barthelme/Knox." But below it was another message, a torn scrap of type-written bond paper advising "doorbell broken, stand at window and yell."

I'd noticed the tall window overlooking the yard, and so hurried back down the stairs to do as bidden. And now the pleasant environs of this quiet, shady street became a stage for some Barthelme-scripted histrionics, as I positioned myself beneath the glass and called out, "Don! Oh Don! Hey, Don!"

Barthelme's text, of course, had turned me into a character in his fiction, a thirty-one-year-old professor and literary critic made to feel like a little kid calling from the front yard for his friend. It was the tactic of "Me and Miss Mandible," Barthelme's first published story, dating back to 1961 and stamping *Come Back, Dr. Caligari* as a collection uncommonly taken with social signs and their deliberative use in contemporary life. In that piece the narrator finds himself, as a grown man, thrust back into a sixth-grade classroom, where he must suffer the growing pains and tribulations of pubescent youth from the awkward position of superior knowledge and experience. The character feels ridiculous, of course, as I did out underneath Don's window. Whether intended or not, the exercise put me at the author's advantage; I was firmly inside his text.

Working my way out of that transcription became the evening's challenge, and in Barthelme's new wife—Marion Knox—I found a helpful ally. A dozen or so years younger than Don, she was about my age, and firmly on my side of the generation gap that being born in 1943 as opposed to 1931 can create. After introductions, a scotch on ice, and small talk we walked down to Hopper's on Sixth Avenue, a recently opened but already trendy Village restaurant. Another drink or two put Barthelme in fine social fettle, and to my and Marion's discomfort he began a bit of fictive play with the waiter. The young man had no sooner given his pro forma introduction—

"Good evening, my name is William. I'll be your waiter . . . have you seen the menu?"—when Don interrupted him with a sharpness that startled us all.

"No you're not!" Barthelme snapped, his try at mock stuffiness coming off much harsher than he'd meant.

"Sir?" the waiter stuttered, as taken aback as Marion and I.

"You are not a waiter," Don insisted, and began weaving a necessary fiction for the young man. "You're an actor, or a musician. Or a painter. A sculptor perhaps? But not really a waiter! This is Greenwich Village, after all. You're a struggling artist, waiting tables while waiting for a break. So please don't say you're a waiter!"

Rustling his napkin, Don drew himself toward the table as if the matter were settled. But it wasn't, for William was not about to be caught for the next hour within Barthelme's text.

"I'm sorry, sir," he stated with the firmness Don had sought for but misplayed at the start. "I am a waiter, and a damn good one. May I please have your order?"

With William now generating the narrative, Don sulkily dropped out. I ordered lamb, Marion chose the same, and ordered a chicken Kiev for her husband, who kept silent until the waiter had left. Only after the meal had been served and eaten did Barthelme resume the little narrative begun so badly long before. "I tell you, the young man really is an actor or some such," he murmured quite audibly to me as William reached for the check. But now Don felt in control, for lying atop the bill was his American Express credit card, its raised letters shouting out the legend "Donald Barthelme" for poor William to take in. Forgotten was the arrangement that I was treating Don and Marion to dinner, so important was it for the author to sign his story.

Back at Barthelme's apartment, the evening was filled with literary talk and scotches. As the hour drew toward midnight, Don reached behind him for a copy of my *Literary Disruptions* and ran down its table of contents, checking off who belonged in this study of the decade's innovators and who didn't. "Now if you want to be the top dog critic," he advised, "you're going to have to be right more often than you're wrong." His appraisal of my book was generous, but gave my choices only the slightest winning



edge. "Five out of eight isn't bad," I said. "That's hitting .625, an amazing stat for any league." "No it isn't," Don replied abruptly, with the same awkwardly feigned sharpness he'd blundered in the restaurant. "I'm the hitter. You're the fielder. And you're going to have to stop dropping three balls for every five you catch!"

At this point Marion came to my rescue. Don's occasional shows of pomp and bluster had driven her away earlier, to take refuge in her study down the hall. Now she had returned, standing behind Don's chair where he could hear but not see her. And what she had to say was startling indeed.

"Why Donald!" she announced in a tone of mock dismay. Smiling at what wonder of his she was about to admire, he reached for his drink and took a long satisfied sip as she continued: "Your father's is bigger than yours!"

With a hideous choke Don spit out his scotch and leaned forward, gasping for breath. In a moment he was OK, and Marion met my worried glance with a broad smile. In her hand was the latest edition of *Who's Who in America*, opened apparently to the page where Donald Barthelme, Junior and Senior, were biographically profiled. Turning around, her flushed and shaking husband could now see that. But for her little trick and the awareness it prompted he didn't have a word.

And so the ultimate text, on which he'd been laboring for all his life with his life, had done him in—by being less than his father's. The narrative could not have been better or more revealing, even if drawn out by Sigmund Freud or analyzed by Jacques Lacan. Completing this textually generated story was something I'd saved for the night's end—an advance copy of Don's new novel which I'd pried loose from a friend at the Strand Book Store just hours before. It was, of course, *The Dead Father*, and getting Don's inscription turned out to be the most appropriate coda imaginable to this fiction-filled evening.

Marion's little trick, of course, was more than just a deflatingly satirical comment on her husband's behavior that night. It was funny according to the terms of the awkward games he'd been playing, but its brilliance derived from its ability to seize upon so many themes and attitudes Don himself had been exploiting in his work. The rivalry (and inevitable perception of inferiority) with his father was a natural link between Marion's