

Mythological, Biblical, and Literary Allusions in Donald Barthelme's *The Dead Father*

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In *Contemporary Novelists*, Myron Taylor states that "Barthelme's stories produce their effect precisely because they elude satisfactory interpretation. Barthelme's works, like those of Edgar Allan Poe, seem to spring from a genuine doubt that any solution does in fact exist to the mysteries and miseries of the human condition."¹ Even though Barthelme's works may actually "produce their effect" precisely because "they elude satisfactory interpretation," the human-god-mechanical Dead Father character of Barthelme's most recent and "different" novel offers a multi-faceted study in ambiguity. The Dead Father is "dead but still with us, still with us, but dead. . . . a sleeper in troubled sleep, the whole great expanse of him running from the Avenue Pommard to the Boulevard Grist. Overall length, 3,200 cubits."² The Dead Father is a part of the landscape "from the Avenue Pommard to the Boulevard Grist," just as the Irish giant Finn MacCool is a part of Joyce's Irish landscape in *Finnegans Wake*, as noted by Anthony Burgess in *Re Joyce*: "Dead Finnegan, really sleeping Finnegan is mourned by twelve citizens, but the feast is to be no mere matter of fish and ale and bread, though these are spread on the table: it is the flesh of the god himself that is to be sacramentally devoured. But before this can happen, we are made to see the body of Finnegan as part of the Irish landscape. He is the giant Finn MacCool asleep. His head is the Hill of Howth, his feet are near Earwicker's pub at Chapelizod (or Iseult's chapel). In the great dream he is, inevitably, transmuted from a mere drunken brick-layer to an archetypal builder of ancient civilizations, whose fall is so loud that it becomes *Vico's* thunderclap (always easily recognizable as a word of exactly one hundred letters), who is identifiable with Ibsen's Masterbuilder (*Bygmester* in Dano-Norwegian), with the legendary Irish giant Finn MacCool who was fifteen cubits high, and with Joyce's own mythical hero, HCE."³

The close relationship of *The Dead Father* to *Finnegans Wake* is obvious from an overt parody of Barthelme's main source for this novel, *Finnegans Wake*: "AndI. EndI. Great endifarce teeterteetertottering. Willit urt. I reiterate. . . . Pathetically the bumgrab night and day through all the heures for the good of all. The Father's Day to end all. AndI understand but list, list, let's go back. To the wetbedding. To the daydream. AndI a oneohsevenyearold boy, just like the rest of them. Pitterpatter. I reiterate& reiterate&reiterate&reiterate, pitterpatter" (p. 171).

Just as Joyce's abbreviation for his mythical Earwicker hero, HCE, is an acronym for Here Comes Everybody or Everyman, Barthelme makes the Dead Father the all-inclusive embodiment of Everybody's idols. Barthelme accomplishes

¹Myron Taylor, "Donald Barthelme" in *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. James Vincent (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 104.

²Donald Barthelme, *The Dead Father* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 4-5. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

³Anthony Burgess, *Re Joyce* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), pp. 200, 196.

the "cosmopolitanization" or global application of the Dead Father figure by comparing him to the Judeo-Christian concept of God; the Greco-Roman concepts of Zeus, Orpheus, and Jason; the Serpent-god of Indian mythology; the All-Father, Odin of Norse mythology, and the Norse pessimism expressed in the belief in the Day of Ragnarok or "Twilight of the Gods"; the German "voivode" (voevode) or "devil"; and the medieval English vegetation myths of the dying god and the Fisher King. The Dead Father is a superman or "overman" figure mentioned by Freud as the leader of the "primal horde": ". . . from the first there were two kinds of psychologies, that of the individual members of the group and that of the father, chief, or leader. . . . He, at the very beginning of the history of mankind, was the *Superman* whom Nietzsche only expected from the future. . . . The uncanny and coercive characteristics of group formations, which are shown in their suggestion phenomena, may with justice be traced back to the fact of their origin from the primal horde. The leader of the group is still the dreaded primal father; the group still wishes to be governed by unrestricted force; it has an extreme passion for authority . . . a thirst for obedience. The primal father is the group ideal, which governs the ego in the place of the ego ideal."⁴ At the conclusion of the novel, Barthelme buries the Dead Father in a huge grave; the last word of the novel is "Bulldozers." Barthelme has put an end to the Darwinian concept of the primal horde as described in Freud's "Totem and Taboo": "One day the . . . brothers joined forces, slew and ate the father, and thus put an end to the father horde. Together they dared and accomplished what would have remained impossible for them singly. Perhaps some advance in culture, like the use of a new weapon, had given them the feeling of superiority."⁵ But the "civilized" Barthelme asserts that our task is not to slay the Father, but to let time slay him and then repudiate "Fatherhood": "Patricide is a bad idea, first because it is contrary to law and custom and second because it proves, beyond a doubt, that the father's every fluted accusation against you was correct: you are a thoroughly bad individual, a patricide!—member of a class of persons universally ill-regarded. It is all right to feel this hot emotion . . . the original jealousy . . . but not to act upon it. And it is not necessary. It is not necessary to slay your father, time will slay him, that is a virtual certainty. Your true task lies elsewhere. Your true task, as a son, is to reproduce every one of the enormities touched upon in this manual, but in attenuated form. You must become your father, but a paler, weaker version of him. . . . *Fatherhood can be, if not conquered, at least 'turned down' in this generation*—by the combined efforts of all of us together" (pp. 144-45).

Barthelme achieves an effective "cosmopolitanization" or world application of the Dead Father figure by taking him from the narrow confines of the Avenue Pommard and the Boulevard Grist and making him the embodiment of world idols through the use of a wealth of allusions, discussed in the following order:

- (1) Mythological allusions
- (2) Biblical allusions
- (3) Literary allusions.

⁴John Rickman, ed., *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), p. 198.

⁵Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo" in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 915.

The Dead Father's journey is the Quest of the Golden Fleece: "When we are there, and when I wrap myself in its warm yellowness, then I will be young again, said the Dead Father. I shall once more be wiry" (p. 9). But the Golden Fleece is beneath Julie's skirt:

No Fleece? asked the Dead Father.

Thomas looked at Julie.

She has it?

Julie lifted her skirt.

Quite golden, said the Dead Father. Quite ample. That's it?

All there is, Julie said. Unfortunately. But this much. This where life lives. A pretty problem. As mine as yours. I'm sorry.

Quite golden, said the Dead Father. Quite ample. That's it?

He moved to touch it.

No, said Thomas.

No, said Julie.

I'm not even to touch it?

No. (pp. 174-75)

This is a perversion of the story of Jason and the Quest of the Golden Fleece, narrated in detail in Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*.⁶ The Golden Fleece has become a kind of sex commodity in *The Dead Father*, some sort of idol or fetish.

The Dead Father reminisces about his past glories with the "delectable Tulla," on whom he fathered many useful machines: ". . . I sent her many presents . . . Well, she accepted the presents, no difficulty there, but me she spurned. So I turned myself into a haircut . . . and positioned myself upon the head of a member of my retinue, quite a handsome young man, younger than I . . . I sent him cantering off in the direction of the delectable Tulla . . . At the crux I turned myself back into myself (vanishing the varlet) and we two she and I looked at each other and were content. We spent many nights together all roaratorious and filled with furious joy. I fathered upon her in those nights the poker chip, the cash register, the juice extractor, the kazoo . . ." (pp. 35-36). This shows the Dead Father to be a "shape-shifter," a character common in Medieval stories such as "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." The ability to change one's shape is also a characteristic of Zeus, who came to Danaë as a shower of gold. Zeus came to Semele in his full glory, which caused Semele's death.⁷ Tulla died of "having mothered all this abundance uncomplainingly," and the Dead Father "descended into the underworld seeking to reclaim her" (pp. 36-37). This echoes the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The Dead Father felt that he was out of his own jurisdiction when he was in the underworld. While there, he met "the worm . . . Evil himself appeared, he-of-the-greater-magic, terrible in aspect, I don't want to talk about it, let me say only that I realized instantly that I was on the wrong side of the Styx" (p. 38). That evil could be more powerful than the good represented by the Dead Father is contrary to Judeo-Christian doctrine. It is reminiscent of the pessimism expressed in Norse mythology—the inevitable "Ragnarok or Day of Doom when heaven and earth would be destroyed."⁸ In Norse mythology, there were three levels to the universe, supported by Yggdrasil, "the wondrous ash tree that struck its roots through the worlds."

⁶Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York: New American Library, 1969), pp. 117-30.

⁷Hamilton, pp. 54-55, 142.

⁸Hamilton, p. 308.

A serpent and his brood continually gnawed at the roots of Yggdrasil, which would some day fall, destroying the three worlds. This is Ragnarok or "Twilight of the Gods"—evil forces overcome good and the rule of Odin (the All-Father) is at an end.⁹ Peter Scatterpatter's "translation," *A Manual for Sons*, describes the death of fathers in this way: "When a father dies, his fatherhood is returned to the All-Father, who is the sum of all dead fathers taken together. (This is not a definition of the All-Father, only an aspect of his being.) The fatherhood is returned to the All-Father, first because that is where it belongs and second in order that it may be denied to you" (p. 144). The term "All-Father" refers to Odin, chief and ruler of Asgard in Norse mythology. Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* states of Odin: "He was the All-Father, supreme among gods and men."¹⁰

In *The Dead Father*, Thomas (one of the Dead Father's many sons) tells a fantastic story about going to see the Great Father Serpent: "We were going to see the Great Father Serpent . . . in the distance I could hear a roaring . . . The roaring they told me was the voice of the Great Father Serpent calling for the foreskins of the uninitiated but I was safe, my foreskin had been surrendered long ago, to a surgeon in a hospital. As we drew near through the tangling vines I perceived the outlines of a serpent of huge bigness which held in its mouth a sheet of tin on which something was written, the roars rattled the tin and I was unable to make out the message" (pp. 45-46). The Great Father Serpent reflects Indian mythology as expressed in Arthur Avalon's study, *The Serpent Power*: "The two Sanskrit words *Shat-chakranrupana* and *Paduka-Panchaka* deal with the *Kundalini Shakti*, or Supreme Power in the human body by the arousing of which Yoga is achieved. The Power is . . . (Devi) Kundalini, or that which is coiled . . . a coiled and sleeping serpent in the lowest bodily center or Lotus."¹¹

Thomas progressively strips the Dead Father of his symbols of authority—his sword, his passport, his keys. The sword is universally recognized as a phallic symbol. That the Dead Father recognizes it as a phallic symbol is obvious from his vindictiveness toward Thomas:

The sword, said Thomas
 You are asking me to give up my sword?
 I am.
 Then I shall be swordless. Think what that means.
 I have. Long and hard.
 Must I?
 You must.
 The Dead Father unsheathed his sword and gazed at it.
 Old Stream-of-Anguish! Companion of my finest hours!
 He gazed at Thomas.
 Thomas holding out his hand.
 He surrendered the sword (p. 79).

At that moment the Dead Father approached Thomas, holding a small box.
 A present, he said, for you.
 Thank you, said Thomas, what is it?
 Open it, said the Dead Father. Open the box.

⁹Hamilton, p. 313.

¹⁰Hamilton, p. 308.

¹¹Arthur Avalon, *The Serpent Power* (Adyar, India: Ganesh, 1950), p. 1.

Thomas opened the box and found the knife.
 Thank you, he said, what is it for?
 Use it, said the Dead Father. Cut something. Cut something off.
 I spoke too soon, Thomas said, he is not reconciled.
 I will never be reconciled, the Dead Father said, never (p. 82).

Kingship is tightly interwoven with the idea of a large penis, represented by a scepter, as related in Freud's *Dreams in Folklore*:

Last night I dreamt
 I was King of the land,
 And how jolly I was
 With a prick in my hand.

. . . Remember, my boy, said Napoleon,
 The Emperor of renown,
 So long as the prick is the scepter
 The cunt will be the crown.¹²

In Chapter 14 of *The Dead Father*, Alexander, Sam, and Edmund emerge from the collective body of "troops" who have been dragging the Dead Father's cable and request permission to discuss their terrible working conditions. Alexander calls the Dead Father by some very allusive names, which show unquestionably that the Dead Father is regarded as a supernatural being: ". . . the principal stadtholder the voivode . . . a Being of the highest anthropocentric interest, as well as the one who keeps the corn popping from the green fields . . ." (p. 92). "Stadtholder" and "voivode" come from German, "city father" and "devil," respectively. The Dead Father is also the one who makes corn "pop" from "the green fields." This is very similar to the vegetation deity in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," and takes its origin from what James Frazer terms, in *The Golden Bough*, the Corn Spirit in his human representation. The slaying of the Corn Spirit was a ritual death that insured the return of spring to the earth and the regrowth of crops.¹³

The cutting off of the Dead Father's leg (which occurs on p. 74) as a condition to gaining passage through the country of the Wends harkens back to the infirmities of the *Roi Mehaigné* or Maimed King of the Grail legends, who is incapacitated by the effects of a wound. Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* deals with the archetypal fertility myth of the Fisher King, whose death, infirmity, or impotence (there are many forms of the myth) brought drought and desolation to the land and failure of the power to reproduce themselves in both man and beast.¹⁴ The *Diù Crône* version is startlingly similar to the story line of *The Dead Father*: the King is an old and infirm man; after Gawain has asked the restorative question we learn that the old King is really dead, only compelled to retain the semblance of life until the task of the Quester be achieved.¹⁵

¹²Sigmund Freud and D. E. Oppenheim, *Dreams in Folklore* (New York: International Universities Press, 1958), p. 27.

¹³Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 508-09.

¹⁴Jessie Laidlay Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), p. 119.

¹⁵Weston, p. 115.

Various characters in *The Dead Father* seem to expect "godlike" conduct from him, obvious from their refusal to listen to him curse or to allow him to watch a pornographic movie (pp. 9, 52, 66-67, 85). This echoes the various taboos to which primitive priest-king figures were made to adhere, as described in Freud's essay, "Totem and Taboo": "It is hardly astonishing that the need was felt to isolate dangerous persons like chiefs and priests, by building a wall around them which . . . was constructed out of taboo rules. . . . A king of this sort lives hedged in by ceremonious etiquette, a network of prohibitions and observances, of which the intention is not to contribute to his dignity, much less to his comfort, but to restrain him from conduct which, by disturbing the harmony of nature, might involve himself, his people, and the universe in one common catastrophe."¹⁸

The overall length of the Dead Father's body is measured in cubits; he measures 3,200 cubits. This, of course, is the unit of measurement used in Genesis 6:14-15 for the building of Noah's Ark. The Dead Father is repeatedly involved in "slaying," a Biblical term for "killing." On page 11, "The Dead Father was slaying, in a grove of music and musicians." On page 52, "They found the Dead Father standing in a wood, slaying." Barthelme seems afraid that we might miss the Biblical reference here, which he strengthens by saying, "Then the Dead Father resumed his sword work in earnest slaying divers small animals of every kind" (p. 53). "Divers," of course, is an often-used Biblical modifier. The following Biblical references are to "slaying" on the part of God and of man: Samuel 17:36, 29:5; II Kings 10:9; Daniel 5:18; Romans 7:11; Lamentations 2:4-5.

There is a horseman who continually follows the Dead Father's party:

Look there, he said. He pointed.
A horseman on the hill.
I think he's following us, said Alexander.
You've seen him before?
Yesterday. Always keeps the same distance.
Not one of those we passed back up the road?
No. Those were black, this is a bay.
I wonder who he is, Thomas said. (p. 32)

Who are those people over there?
I don't know they may be the horseman who has been following us or some of his friends. Attracted by the music probably.
No they're not they're new. The horseman who has been following us is not new. (p. 99)

A horse is often used in the Bible as a portent, as shown in Revelation 6:2, 4, 5 and 8.

On page 157, Thomas serenades the Dead Father with the Lord's Prayer. On page 163, the Dead Father learns of the dismissal of Luke, his trusted steward (the Biblical beloved physician). The name Thomas is, obviously, the name of the Doubting Disciple. In chapter 2 the Dead Father meets "two children. One male. One female. Not too big. Not too small. Holding hands" (p. 12). When questioned, the little girl replies, "We are twenty" (p. 12). This, of course, harkens back to the reply Christ received when questioning the Gadarene Demoniac, Mark 5:9: "And he asked him, What is

¹⁸Freud, "Totem and Taboo," pp. 840-41.

thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many." The Dead Father picks the most unlikely person in the world as beneficiary of his will, the chronic drunkard, Edmund:

I care not a whit, said Thomas, pick someone. Or something.
Edmund, said the Dead Father.
Edmund?
He is the last, said the Dead Father, and the last shall be first.
(p. 166)

The reference to first-last is that of Matthew 20:16: "The last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen."

The jumpy conversation between Julie and the Dead Father as they dance together is very similar to that between the married couple in T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*:

Why do you keep looking around?
Looking for somebody new.
Who sent out the invitations?
Who hired the band?
Who laid on the champagne?
Who hung the crepe paper?
Who lit the bonfires?
Wish they'd play something else.
What do you want to hear?
Something new.
Anything new?
How about "Midnight in Moscow"?
That's not new.
I know but it's pretty
Can't dance to it it's too slow.
You're a little picky.
What?
I am a little picky. I know that. Tell me something new.
Don't know anything new.
I know that.
What?
Who are those people over there? (p. 99)

"My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak. What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? I never know what you are thinking. Think."
I think we are in rats' alley where the dead men lost their bones.
"What is that noise?"
The wind under the door.
"What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"
Nothing again nothing.
"Do you know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember nothing?"¹⁷

Page 20 of *The Dead Father* illustrates an abbreviated writing style similar to the stage-direction dramatics of Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*:

¹⁷T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland* in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume II, Third Edition*, Gen. Ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: Norton, 1974), p. 2177.

A halt. The men lay down the cable. The men regard Julie from a distance. The men standing about. Pemmican measured out in great dark whacks from the pemmican-whacking knife. Edmund lifts flask to lips. Thomas removes flask. Protest by Edmund. Reproof from Thomas. Julie gives Edmund a chaw of bhang. Gratitude of Edmund. Julie wipes Edmund's forehead with white handkerchief. The cable relaxed in the road. The blue of the kerchief. Trees leant against. Bird stutter and the whisper of grasses. The Dead Father playing his guitar. Thomas performing leadership functions.

Estragon: I'm tired breathing.

Vladimir: You're right (Pause.) Let's just do the tree, for the balance.

Estragon: The tree?

(Vladimir does the tree, staggering about on one leg.)

Vladimir: (stopping). Your turn.

(Estragon does the tree, staggers.)

Estragon: Do you think God sees me?

Vladimir: You must close your eyes.

(Estragon closes his eyes, staggers worse.)

Estragon: (stopping, brandishing his fists, at the top of his voice). God have pity on me!

Vladimir: (vexed). And me?

Estragon: On me! On me! Pity! On me!

(Enter Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo is blind. Lucky burdened as before. Rope as before, but much shorter, so that Pozzo may follow more easily. Lucky wearing a different hat. At the sight of Vladimir and Estragon he stops short. Pozzo, continuing on his way, bumps into him.)¹⁸

Peter Scatterpatter's English-to-English translation of *A Manual for Sons* is similar in anecdotal form to Robert Mannyng's translation of *Manuel de Péchés*, literally *Manual of Sins*, but translated *Handling Sin*: "Caroles, wrestlings, or summer games, whosoever frequenteth such shameful sports in church or churchyard, he should dread lest he do sacrilege. . . . In order that ye may avoid dancing in church I will tell you, a great misfortune, and most of what befell is I believe as true as the gospel. It happened in this land of England, as I understand; in the time of a King called Edward this hard calamity befell. It was on a Christmas night that twelve fools danced a carole. They had come in their madness to a village called Colbek."¹⁹

In addition to the worldwide mythological, Biblical, and literary allusions that Barthelme used, he "globalized" the Dead Father by using, inconspicuously throughout the novel, words that have foreign (other than English) origin: *pemmican*, North American Cree Indian; *ukase*, Russian; *piroque*, French, especially Cajun French. On page 54, Barthelme uses the names of animals and heroes from the world over: Frithjof, Lancelot, Paracelsus, Rogero, Artegal, Otuel, Ogier the Dane, Rinaldo, Oliver, Koll the Thrall, Haco I, the Chevalier Bayard, the Spider Monkey, the Squid, the Grebe, the Piglet, the Young Goat, the Wood Pidgeon, the Sheep, the Numbat, the Warthog, and the Etc. Emma and Julie mention that their sources of information (often *misinformation*) are newspapers: *Die Welt* (The World), German; and *Le Monde* (The World), French (pp. 64, 149).

¹⁸Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 49.

¹⁹Robert Mannyng, trans., "Handling Sin" in *Medieval English Verse and Prose*, eds. Roger Sherman Loomis and Rudolph Willard (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Educational Division, 1948), p. 107.

The previously discussed mythological, Biblical, and literary allusions have the effect of making the Dead Father character a world symbol. At the conclusion of the novel when Barthelme calls for "Bulldozers" to fill in the Dead Father's crater-sized grave, he is (in the mythological-Biblical-literary framework that he has established) calling for the interment of all world idols, huddled together at the bottom of the grave, awaiting the final clod-thunder, a true "Ragnarok" of *total darkness* for the gods rather than just a "Twilight of the Gods."